

Groton Daily Independent

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Graduation Balloons

Order your graduation balloons now while the supply is good. Go to 397news.com, click on graduation on the left hand side.

UpComing Events

Saturday, April 2

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

Sunday, April 3

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

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

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

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

Monday, April 4

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

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Cheese sticks, marinara sauce, corn.

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

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



Tuesday, April 5

7 p.m.: City Council Meeting

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

School Breakfast: French toast sticks.

School Lunch: Tangereine chicken, rice.

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

Wednesday, April 6

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

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

School Breakfast: Egg omelets.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.

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

Truss Pros Help Wanted

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

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

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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EPA Authorizes Use of Enlist Products in all South Dakota Counties

PIERRE, S.D. – This week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved the use of Enlist One and Enlist Duo in all South Dakota counties.

Earlier this year, EPA issued a 7-year registration that prohibited the use of these products in eight South Dakota counties because of potential impacts to the endangered American Burying Beetle. After considering additional studies and stakeholder input, EPA announced these products will likely not jeopardize the American Burying Beetle due to label requirements in place to mitigate spray drift and pesticide runoff.

“We appreciate EPA’s commitment to making science-based regulatory decisions,” said DANR Secretary Hunter Roberts. “Our producers need regulatory certainty and access to these proven products to run their operations successfully”

Enlist One and Enlist Duo are herbicides used to control weeds on genetically modified corn and soybeans.

To learn more about Enlist products, read EPA’s Q&A. To view registration documents, go to docket EPA-HQ-OPP-2021-0957.

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Webster Area held its junior-senior prom Friday night. On the left, Seth Johnson escorting Calli Bearman. The right photo features Julianna Kosel being escorted by Isaac Hubsch.

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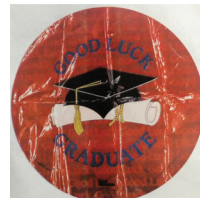
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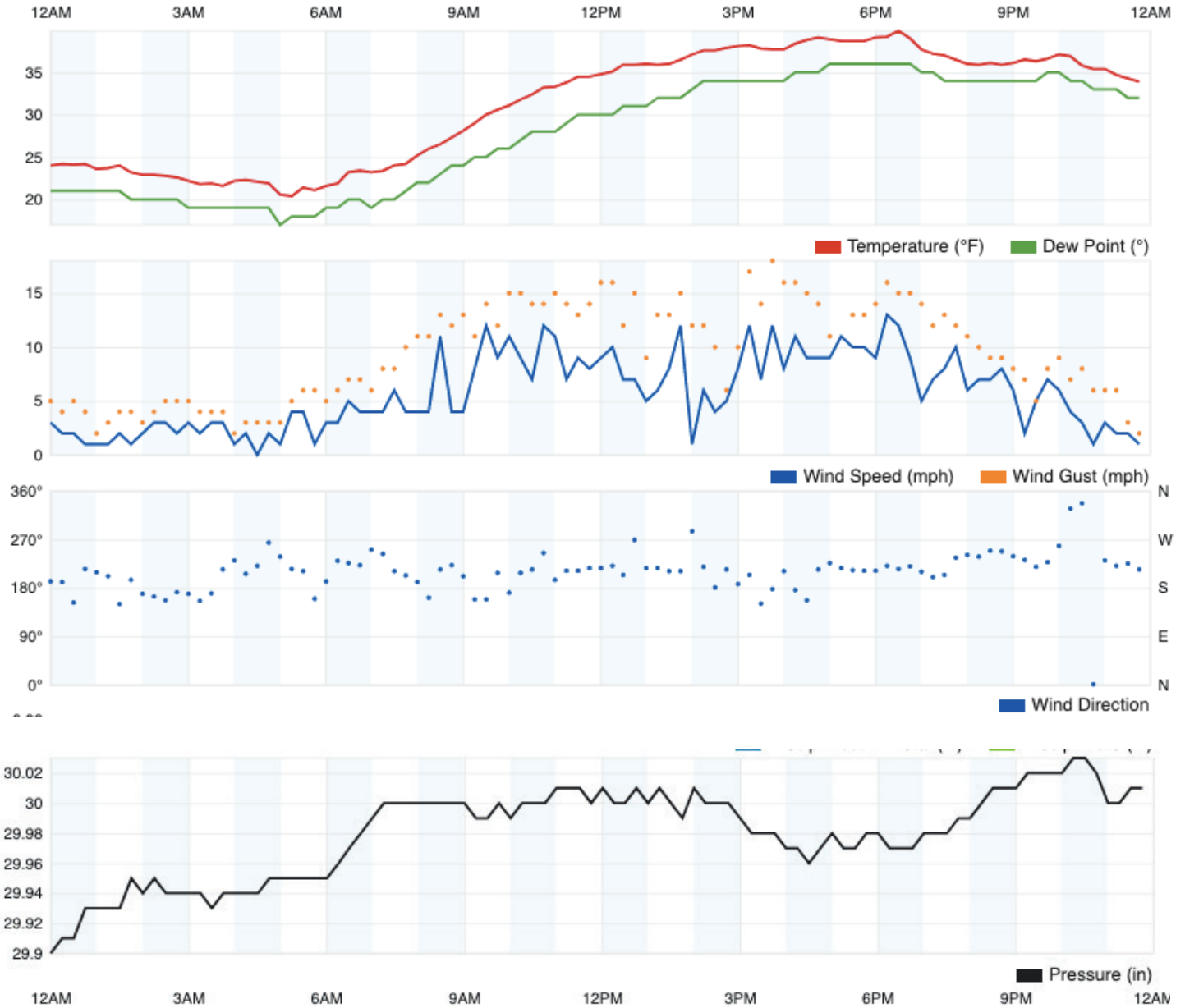
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We have many other balloons available as well. We now offer locker pickup in the laundromat so you can pick up your order ANY TIME once the order is completed!

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




Groton Daily Independent

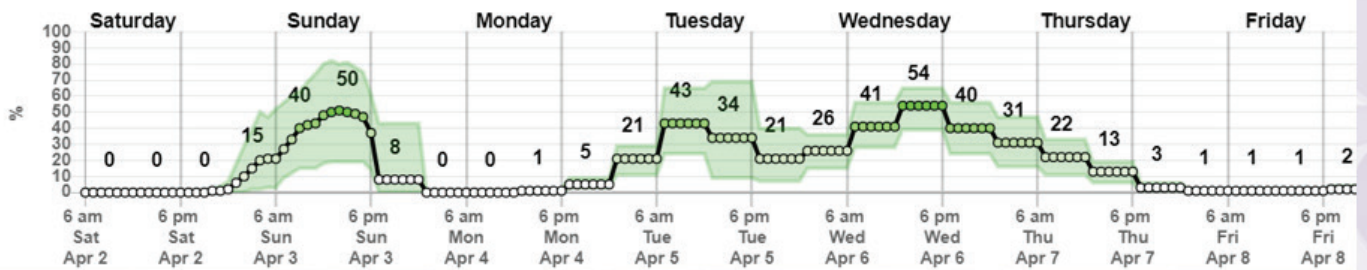
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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Chance Snow	Rain/Snow Likely then Rain Likely	Chance Rain then Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Breezy
High: 52 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 44 °F	Low: 25 °F	High: 54 °F

 Dry and Warmer Today!

 Unsettled Weather Returns
Sunday & Tuesday into Thursday

Area Probability of Precipitation Forecast



 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD
Updated: 4/2/2022 3:27 AM Central

Dry high pressure will remain in control today, with temperatures rising into the upper 40s to upper 50s. Wet weather will return overnight into Sunday, especially over north central to northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota. After another dry day Monday, unsettled weather will return Tuesday into Thursday. Rain during the afternoon hours may mix with or change over to snow each night. Any snow accumulations are expected to remain light.

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Today in Weather History

April 2, 1998: The James River began to flood in early April from Columbia to Stratford. The James rose to around 1.5 feet above flood stage at Columbia and Stratford through April into May. The James River mainly flooded farmland, pastureland, and a few roads in the vicinity of the channel.

April 2, 2010: In South Dakota, a band of heavy snow set up across Corson and Dewey counties during the early morning hours of April 2nd. Along with heavy wet snow, northwest winds gusting up to 40 mph developed. By the time the storm ended in the late morning hours, 6 to 8 inches of snow had fallen. The heavy snow, combined with the strong winds, downed many power poles across the region along with making travel treacherous. Some snowfall amounts included; 4 inches at Eagle Butte; 6 inches at Timber Lake, McLaughlin, and 14 miles north of Isabel; 7 inches at Isabel and 6 miles southeast of McIntosh; 8 inches southwest of Keldron. More than 400 poles were lost to the heavy snow leaving approximately 800 people without power. Eighty linemen worked through the Easter weekend in the snow and mud. McLaughlin and Keldron were the hardest hit. Several hundred people were still without power on April 5th.

1936: An estimated F4 tornado cut a 15-mile path through Crisp County, GA. The hardest hit area was the town of Cordele, where 276 homes were destroyed in a five-block swath through the town. The storm was on a course that would have missed the center of town, but it made a left turn towards the end of its path. 23 people were killed and 500 injured. Total damage was \$3 million.

1957: An F3 tornado tore through Dallas, TX. 10 people were killed, and 216 were injured. Total damage was \$1.5 million. This tornado was among the most photographed and studied in history.

1975 - The biggest snowstorm of record for so late in the season paralyzed Chicago, IL. Up to 20 inches of snow fell in extreme northeastern Illinois, and 10.9 inches of snow closed Chicago's O'Hare Airport. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - Severe thunderstorms spawned fifty-six tornadoes in the central U.S., including seventeen in the Red River Region of Texas and Oklahoma. The tornadoes claimed thirty lives, and injured 383 other persons. A violent tornado near Messer OK left only the carpet tack strips on the slab of a house it destroyed, and carried a motel sign thirty miles. (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1987 - Eleven cities in Florida reported record low temperatures for the date, including Tallahassee with a reading of 31 degrees. The low of 48 degrees at Key West smashed their previous record for the date by 13 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced up to nine inches of rain around New Orleans LA causing 18 million dollars damage. A tornado caused three million dollars damage at Slidell LA. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong and gusty winds prevailed from California to Colorado and Wyoming. Winds gusted to 50 mph at Lancaster CA, and reached 85 mph at Berthoud Pass CO. Snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in the Colorado Rockies. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in North Carolina and Virginia during the afternoon and evening. Thunderstorms produced golf ball size hail, and spawned a tornado near Chester VA which caused half a million dollars damage. A storm system produced snow and gale force winds across northern Michigan, with 8.3 inches of snow reported at Marquette. Temperatures in the north central U.S. soared from morning lows in the 20s and 30s to afternoon highs in the 60s and 70s. Eight cities reported record highs for the date, including Havre MT with a reading of 77 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2005 - Heavy rainfall in the Northeast produced flooding in parts of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Severe flooding along the Delaware River forced the evacuation of 6,000 residents in New Jersey and over 5,700 in Pennsylvania during the weekend of the 2nd-3rd. Around 3,200 homes in New Jersey were damaged, while one fatality was reported in New York (Associated Press).

2006 - Tornadoes and hail as big as softballs ripped through eight Midwestern states, killing at least 27 people, injuring scores and destroying hundreds of homes. In Tennessee, tornadoes killed 23 people, including an infant and a family of four. Severe thunderstorms, many producing tornadoes, also struck parts of Iowa, Kentucky, Arkansas, Missouri, Ohio, Illinois and Indiana. Strong wind was blamed for at least three deaths in Missouri. The weather service's Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Okla., said it had preliminary reports of 63 tornadoes. The worst damage occurred throughout the Tennessee Valley.

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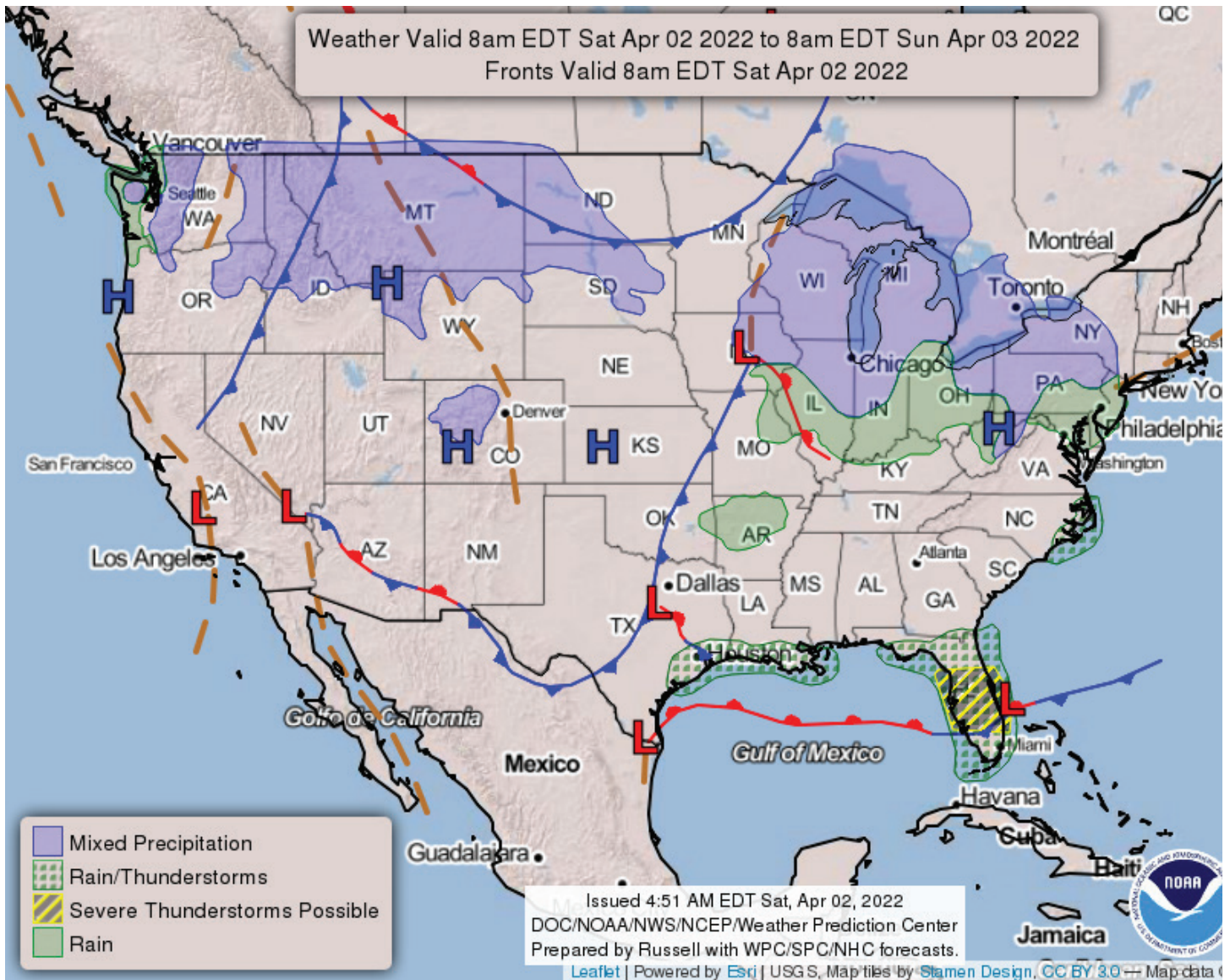
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 40 °F at 6:33 PM
Low Temp: 20 °F at 5:08 AM
Wind: 21 mph at 6:33 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 54 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 84 in 1921
Record Low: 3 in 1975
Average High: 51°F
Average Low: 26°F
Average Precip in April.: 0.08
Precip to date in April.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 2.14
Precip Year to Date: 1.80
Sunset Tonight: 8:03:09 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:06:43 AM



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WATCHING OUR WORDS

Years ago, while serving as a Navy chaplain, I was ordered to "park my car" in a specially designated area and stand beside it. I was rather amazed that a chaplain and an officer would be subjected to such scrutiny. I had my uniform on with the proper "symbols" to announce my status. "Why, of all people, am I being searched?" I asked. Looking at me as he would have looked at any other person, a shore patrolman said in a quiet, yet stern voice, "Just a routine matter, Sir." Only later was I told that a critical item was missing from the armory. He was ordered to carefully guard against anything leaving the installation without the commanding officer's approval.

David went to God with an unusual request: "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep a watch over the door of my lips." David knew that he might say something that could be dangerous and destructive to others. But he had a solution: He asked God for "a guard" to control his speech. He did not want any evil words to exit his mouth that could harm others. No doubt he had been harmed by the words of others and knew how painful and harmful words could be.

Jesus said, "Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean...it is from within, out of a man's heart, come evil thoughts (that) make a man 'unclean.'" Jesus knew how to stop "harmful words and deeds." Keep them away from me and me away from them!

David knew about harmful words. So, he also asked God for something else that was very important: "Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil." Why? Evil in - evil out.

Prayer: Lord, Your advice is so practical and purposeful. Let it "take over" our hearts and keep us from evil. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep a watch over the door of my lips. Psalm 141:3

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2022 Community Events

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

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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 Friday:

Mega Millions

26-42-47-48-63, Mega Ball: 21, Megaplier: 5

(twenty-six, forty-two, forty-seven, forty-eight, sixty-three; Mega Ball: twenty-one; Megaplier: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$70 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$222 million

Sioux Falls officer kills person armed with knife

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — State investigators are probing a fatal police shooting in Sioux Falls.

The Argus Leader reported that an officer shot and killed a person armed with a knife on Thursday morning.

Police Chief Jon Thum told the newspaper that officers were called to check on the person. The chief said the person confronted officers with a knife. Officers used de-escalation tactics including verbal warnings, a stun gun and shooting the person with a foam projectile but a “physical altercation” still took place and one officer fired at the person, Thum said.

Thum wouldn’t disclose the person’s age or gender. He said two officers sustained superficial cuts during the altercation.

He said he case has been turned over to the South Dakota Department of Criminal Investigation, which will determine if the shooting was justified.

No Democrats running for SD congressional seat, again

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Democrats have failed to produce a candidate for the state’s U.S. House seat for the second consecutive election cycle.

Rep. Dusty Johnson however, will face a Republican primary challenger. The winner of the contest between Johnson and state Rep. Taffy Howard will likely represent South Dakota in the U.S. House. Although independents could still enter the general election race at a later date.

Democrat Ryan Ryder dropped out of the House race earlier this month when his tweets surfaced that contained several disturbing jokes about Republican politicians in South Dakota. Those tweets were sent before Ryder announced his congressional candidacy.

Box Elder Air Force veteran said the tweets were a poor attempt at sarcasm.

State Democratic Party chairman Randy Seiler says a number of candidates considered a run for the office, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

“Ultimately, for a lot of different reasons, the decision was made that they elected not to run,” he said. “We’re still hopeful. Our focus, now, will be on the U.S. Senate and the gubernatorial race.”

In the governor’s race, Democrat Jamie Smith, who’s minority leader of the state House, will face the primary election winner between Gov. Kristi Noem and former House Speaker Steve Haugaard.

In the U.S. Senate, several Republicans have shown interest in challenging Sen. John Thune in the primary, but no candidate has been certified. Brian Bengs is running for the seat as a Democrat.

The South Dakota primary election is June 7. The deadline for members of political parties to file nominating petitions was Tuesday. The deadline for independents is April 26.

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Most of South Dakota in a moderate to severe drought

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Some South Dakota ranchers and farmers are dealing with a third straight year of drought conditions.

This week's U.S. Drought Monitor map shows most of the state is in a moderate to severe drought.

Grass stockpiles are dwindling and some ranchers are expecting only half of normal grass production this year.

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition has launched a special project called "Pray for Rain. Plan for Drought," which is designed to provide resources to help ranchers mitigate the impact of long-term drought conditions.

Alexander Smart is the agriculture and natural resources program leader with South Dakota State University Extension at Brookings. He says early planning is key.

"I'd calculate stocking rates based on that and start to make culling decisions," Smart said. "It's clear to me that if you don't make changes, you're going to get caught off guard."

The Grassland Coalition offers a mentoring network as a way to help farmers and ranchers, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

"They have a road map to follow rather than just waiting for things to come," Smart said. "Talk to them, reach out and say, 'Hey, I need help. How do I put one of those things together?'"

SDSU is working on an estimator that uses satellite imagery to show how much forage is currently available, and its quality, with the capability to predict how much forage will be available later in the season.

Live updates | Ukrainian journalist killed in combat zone

By The Associated Press undefined

KYIV, Ukraine — A prominent Ukrainian photojournalist who went missing last month in a combat zone near the capital has been found dead.

Ukraine's Prosecutor General's office said in a statement Saturday that Maks Levin was killed with two gunshots, fired allegedly by the Russian military. Levin's body was found in the Huta Mezhyhirska village on Friday.

Levin, 40, worked as a photojournalist and videographer for many Ukrainian and international publications.

Levin has been missing since March 13, when he contacted his friend from Vyshhorod near Kyiv to report on the fighting in the region.

An investigation into his death has been launched.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

- Zelenskyy says the mines Russia has planted are creating a 'complete disaster'
- What's next for Europe's natural gas amid the war?
- Russia aims Ukraine disinformation at Spanish speakers
- Ukraine volunteer fighters from near and far: a photo gallery
- Go to <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine> for more coverage

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

LVIV, Ukraine -- A series of blasts has torn through the Ukrainian city of Enerhodar nearby the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Ukraine's state nuclear agency reported about Saturday's attacks on its official Telegram channel.

Both the city and the plant, which generates over a fifth of Ukraine's electricity and is one of the largest nuclear facilities in Europe, have been under Russian control since March 4, according to Interfax Ukraine.

A video clip accompanying the Telegram post by Ukraine's Energoatom appeared to feature loud blasts and flying debris.

A second post on the state enterprise's channel claimed that explosions and mortar bursts could be heard in the vicinity of the Sovremennik cultural center, where residents held a rally in support of Ukraine.

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"As protesters began to disperse, the invaders arrived in police vehicles, and began to force local residents into them," the post read. "A few minutes later, the city was rocked by massive explosions and shelling."

The agency said that four people were injured and received medical assistance.

Energoatom also claimed that Russian forces began to jam phone and internet communications throughout Enerhodar. The agency's claims could not be immediately verified.

HELSINKI — Finland's prime minister says her country should make a decision on NATO membership "during this spring" after the government and lawmakers have carefully assessed the pros and cons of joining the military alliance - a topical issue in the Nordic nation after Russia's invasion to Ukraine.

Prime Minister Sanna Marin said Saturday that "both joining (NATO) and not joining are choices that have consequences. We need to assess both the short-term and long-term effects. At the same time, we must keep in mind our goal: ensuring the security of Finland and Finns in all situations."

Marin said Finland's relationship with neighboring Russia has changed irreversibly after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last month, and "it takes a lot of time and work for confidence to be restored."

Finland shares a 1,340-kilometer (830-mile) border with Russia, the longest by any European Union member.

WARSAW, Poland --Poland's government says it has issued over 625,000 national identification numbers to Ukrainian refugees since Russia launched its invasion.

The ID number, something all Polish citizens have, gives people the right to access health care, schooling or other state services. Poland, the country that has accepted the largest numbers of Ukrainian refugees, decided recently to extend those rights to Ukrainians fleeing war.

More than 4 million Ukrainians have so far fled, and more than 2.4 of them have crossed into Poland. Others have fled into Romania, Moldova, Slovakia and Hungary.

It is not clear, however, exactly how many of them stay in the countries they first arrive in, and how many move on to other places, such as Germany, Italy and Spain.

Paweł Szefernaker, a deputy interior minister who was appointed Saturday as a special plenipotentiary to handle Ukrainian war refugees, said at a news conference that 625,000 Ukrainian refugees had received the Polish ID number, known as a PESEL.

That is an indication that at least that many intend to remain in Poland, at least until the war ends. The number is likely higher as people continue to submit applications and people keep fleeing the war.

ROME — Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, visiting Azerbaijan, has described his talks there as laying the bases for even stronger cooperation on energy, as Italy seeks to quickly reduce its heavy reliance on Russian gas.

In comments to reporters in Baku on Saturday, Di Maio described Azerbaijan, which is Italy's largest supplier of oil and third-largest supplier of gas, as a "priority partner" in Italy's quest to diversify its sources of energy.

Di Maio arrived in the South Caucasus country on Friday, following previous energy-focused missions to Algeria, Qatar, Angola and Congo. Italy is eyeing the possibility of increasing the supply of natural gas from Azerbaijan through the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, or TAP, which transported its first gas in 2020.

GENEVA —The former chief prosecutor of the UN war crimes tribunals has called for an international arrest warrant to be issued for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Putin is a war criminal," Carla Del Ponte told Swiss newspaper Le Temps in an interview published Saturday.

In interviews given to Swiss media to mark the release of her latest book, the Swiss lawyer who oversaw U.N. investigations in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, said there were clear war crimes being committed in Ukraine.

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She said she was particularly shocked by the use of mass graves, which recalls the worst of the wars in former Yugoslavia.

"I hoped never to see mass graves again," she told the newspaper *Blick*. "These dead people have loved ones who don't even know what's become of them. That is unacceptable."

Other war crimes she identified in Ukraine included attacks on civilians, the destruction of civilian buildings and even that of entire towns.

This item has been corrected to say that Del Ponte was chief prosecutor of UN war crimes tribunals, not the International Criminal Court.

BERLIN — The International Committee of the Red Cross says a team of nine staffers is trying to get to the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol again after it had to abandon an earlier attempt when conditions on the ground made it impossible to proceed.

The humanitarian group said the team with three vehicles was on the way to help facilitate the safe passage of civilians on Saturday after a failed attempt Friday.

The group said in a statement late Friday it would try to accompany a convoy of civilians out from Mariupol to another city in Ukraine.

It said that, "our presence will put a humanitarian marker on this planned movement of people, giving the convoy additional protection and reminding all sides of the civilian, humanitarian nature of the operation."

Mariupol, which was surrounded by Russian forces a month ago, has been the scene of some of the war's worst attacks, including on a maternity hospital and a theater sheltering civilians. Around 100,000 people are believed to remain in the city, down from a prewar population of 430,000, and facing dire shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine.

City officials said some 2,000 made it out of Mariupol on Friday, some on buses and some in their own vehicles.

LVIV, Ukraine -- At least 33 people have been killed and 34 injured in a Russian rocket strike on the regional government building in the southern Ukrainian port city of Mykolaiv. Ukrainian officials gave the latest death toll in a statement Saturday, updating the numbers of the deadly strike that hit Mykolaiv on Tuesday.

Rescuers sent by the State Emergency Service have been searching the wreckage for survivors since Russian forces struck the building, which housed the office of regional governor Vitaliy Kim. The governor, who was not on the premises at the time of the attack, later posted social media images showing a gaping hole in the nine-story structure.

The confirmed death toll has risen steadily as the search and rescue operation continues.

Mykolaiv, a strategically important city en route to Ukraine's largest port of Odesa, has withstood weeks of shelling by the Russian forces.

MOSCOW — Russia's top space official says the future of the International Space Station hangs in the balance after the United States, the European Union, and Canadian space agencies missed a deadline to meet Russian demands for the lifting of sanctions on Russian enterprises and hardware.

The head of Russia's Roscosmos state agency told reporters on Saturday morning that the agency was preparing a report on the prospects of international cooperation at the station, to be presented to federal authorities "after Roscosmos has completed its analysis."

Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin implied on Russian state TV that the Western sanctions, some of which predate Russia's military action in Ukraine, could disrupt the operation of Russian spacecraft servicing the ISS.

He stressed that the Western partners need the ISS and "cannot manage without Russia, because no one but us can deliver fuel to the station."

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Rogozin added that "only the engines of our cargo craft are able to correct the ISS's orbit, keeping it safe from space debris."

Later on Saturday, Rogozin wrote on his Telegram channel that he received responses from his Western counterparts vowing to promote "further cooperation on the ISS and its operations."

He reiterated his view that "the restoration of normal relations between partners in the ISS and other joint (space) projects is possible only with the complete and unconditional lifting" of sanctions, which he referred to as illegal.

Responding to Western sanctions on Telegram last month, Rogozin warned at the time that without Russia's help, the ISS could "fall down into the sea or onto land," and claimed that the crash site was unlikely to be in Russia.

Space is one of the last remaining areas of cooperation between Moscow and Western nations. U.S.-Russian negotiations on the resumption of joint flights to the ISS were underway when Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine last month, prompting unprecedented sanctions on Russian state-linked entities.

ISTANBUL – Turkey has offered to help evacuate civilians from the besieged Ukrainian port city of Mariupol by ship. The Turkish defense minister said Saturday that "we can provide ship support for the evacuation of civilians and injured Turkish and other countries' citizens in Mariupol from the sea."

State-run Anadolu Agency reported that Hulusi Akar said Turkey was coordinating possible evacuations with the authorities of the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

Mariupol, on the Sea of Azov, has seen some of the worst suffering of the war. The International Committee for the Red Cross is attempting to remove some of the 100,000 people are believed to remain in the city.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Friday that some 30 Turkish nationals were still in the city.

VALLETTA, Malta — Pope Francis says he is studying a possible visit to Kyiv and he blasted Russian President Vladimir Putin for launching a "savage" war, as he arrived in Malta and delivered his most pointed and personalized denunciation yet of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Francis didn't cite Putin by name, but the reference was clear when he said that "some potentate" had unleashed the threat of nuclear war on the world in an "infantile and destructive aggression" under the guise of "anachronist claims of nationalistic interests."

Speaking to Maltese authorities Saturday, Francis said: "We had thought that invasions of other countries, savage street fighting and atomic threats were grim memories of a distant past." Francis has to date avoided referring to Russia or Putin by name. But Saturday's personalization of the powerful figure responsible marked a new level of outrage for the pope.

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — The Dutch government has launched a campaign urging people to turn down their central warming and take showers to save energy amid spiraling energy costs and reduce the country's dependence on Russian imports.

The government took the lead, announcing Saturday that it will turn down the temperature in 200 of its office blocks from 21 to 19 degrees Celsius (70-66 degrees Fahrenheit) in the winter and use less air conditioning in the summer.

Minister for Climate and Energy Rob Jetten says that saving energy "is good for your wallet, for the climate and it helps us to become less dependent on gas from Russia."

The government also is setting aside 4 billion euros (\$4.4 billion) to help fund moves by home owners, social housing corporations and municipalities to improve insulation of houses in coming years.

Ramadan kicks off in much of Middle East amid soaring prices

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The Muslim holy month of Ramadan — when the faithful fast from dawn to dusk — began at sunrise Saturday in much of the Middle East, where Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sent energy and food prices soaring.

The conflict cast a pall over Ramadan, when large gatherings over meals and family celebrations are a tradition. Many in the Southeast Asian nation of Indonesia planned to start observing Sunday, and some Shiites in Lebanon, Iran and Iraq were also marking the start of Ramadan a day later.

Muslims follow a lunar calendar and a moon-sighting methodology can lead to different countries declaring the start of Ramadan a day or two apart.

Muslim-majority nations including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates had declared the month would begin Saturday morning.

A Saudi statement Friday was broadcast on the kingdom's state-run Saudi TV and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto leader of the United Arab Emirates, congratulated Muslims on Ramadan's arrival.

Jordan, a predominantly Sunni country, also said the first day of Ramadan would be on Sunday, in a break from following Saudi Arabia. The kingdom said the Islamic religious authority was unable to spot the crescent moon indicating the beginning of the month.

Indonesia's second-largest Islamic group, Muhammadiyah, which counts more than 60 million members, said that according to its astronomical calculations Ramadan begins Saturday. But the country's religious affairs minister had announced Friday that Ramadan would start on Sunday, after Islamic astronomers in the country failed to sight the new moon.

It wasn't the first time the Muhammadiyah has offered a differing opinion on the matter, but most Indonesians — Muslims comprise nearly 90% of the country's 270 million people — are expected to follow the government's official date.

Many had hoped for a more cheerful Ramadan after the coronavirus pandemic blocked the world's 2 billion Muslims from many rituals the past two years.

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, millions of people in the Middle East are now wondering where their next meals will come from. The skyrocketing prices are affecting people whose lives were already upended by conflict, displacement and poverty from Lebanon, Iraq and Syria to Sudan and Yemen.

Ukraine and Russia account for a third of global wheat and barley exports, which Middle East countries rely on to feed millions of people who subsist on subsidized bread and bargain noodles. They are also top exporters of other grains and sunflower seed oil used for cooking.

Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, has received most of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine in recent years. Its currency has now also taken a dive, adding to other pressures driving up prices.

Shoppers in the capital Cairo turned out earlier this week to stock up on groceries and festive decorations, but many had to buy less than last year because of the soaring prices.

Ramadan tradition calls for colorful lanterns and lights strung throughout Cairo's narrow alleys and around mosques. Some people with the means to do so set up tables on the streets to dish up free post-fast Iftar meals for the poor. The practice is known in the Islamic world as "Tables of the Compassionate."

"This could help in this situation," said Rabei Hassan, the muezzin of a mosque in Giza as he bought vegetables and other food from a nearby market. "People are tired of the prices."

Worshippers attended mosque for hours of evening prayers, or "tarawih." On Friday evening, thousands of people packed the al-Azhar mosque after attendance was banned for the past two years to stem the pandemic.

"They were difficult (times) ... Ramadan without tarawih at the mosque is not Ramadan," said Saeed Abdel-Rahman, a 64-year-old retired teacher as he entered al-Azhar for prayers.

Soaring prices also exacerbated the woes of Lebanese already facing a major economic crisis. Over the past two years, the currency collapsed and the country's middle class was plunged into poverty. The

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meltdown has also brought on severe shortages in electricity, fuel and medicine.

In the Gaza Strip, few people were shopping Friday in markets usually packed at this time of year. Merchants said Russia's war on Ukraine has sent prices skyrocketing, alongside the usual challenges, putting a damper on the festive atmosphere that Ramadan usually creates.

The living conditions of the 2.3 million Palestinians in the impoverished coastal territory are tough, compounded by a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since 2007.

Toward the end of Ramadan last year, a deadly 11-day war between Gaza's Hamas rulers and Israel cast a cloud over festivities, including the Eid al-Fitr holiday that follows the holy month. It was the fourth bruising war with Israel in just over a decade.

In Iraq, the start of Ramadan highlighted widespread frustration over a meteoric rise in food prices, exacerbated in the past month by the war in Ukraine.

Suhaila Assam, a 62-year-old retired teacher and women's rights activist, said she and her retired husband are struggling to survive on their combined pension of \$1,000 a month, with prices of cooking oil, flour and other essentials having more than doubled.

"We, as Iraqis, use cooking oil and flour a lot. Almost in every meal. So how can a family of five members survive?" she asked.

Akeel Sabah, 38, is a flour distributor in the Jamila wholesale market, which supplies all of Baghdad's Rasafa district on the eastern side of the Tigris River with food. He said flour and almost all other foodstuffs are imported, which means distributors have to pay for them in dollars. A ton of flour used to cost \$390. "Today I bought the ton for \$625," he said.

"The currency devaluation a year ago already led to an increase in prices, but with the ongoing (Ukraine) crisis, prices are skyrocketing. Distributors lost millions," he said.

In Istanbul, Muslims held the first Ramadan prayers in 88 years in the Hagia Sophia, nearly two years after the iconic former cathedral was converted into a mosque.

Worshippers filled the 6th-century building and the square outside Friday night for tarawih prayers led by Ali Erbas, the government head of religious affairs. Although converted for Islamic use and renamed the Grand Hagia Sophia Mosque in July 2020, COVID-19 restrictions had limited worship at the site.

"After 88 years of separation, the Hagia Sophia Mosque has regained the tarawih prayer," Erbas said, according to the state-run Anadolu Agency.

NY bail law fight emblematic of Democrats' debate on crime

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It's hard to find anyone on board with New York Gov. Kathy Hochul's plan to toughen the state's bail laws, two years after they were retooled to keep people from being jailed because they are poor.

Reform advocates say the system should be left alone. Police leaders and even some of the governor's fellow Democrats say the proposal doesn't go far enough to roll back what they consider soft treatment of criminals.

The debate over bail in New York is emblematic of a fight taking place elsewhere in the U.S.

A spike in violence during the COVID-19 pandemic has Democrats eager to show they're tough on crime ahead of this year's midterm elections, from the White House on down, but the party is struggling to find a common message with progressives pushing the need for police reform and moderates focusing instead on rising crime rates.

Hochul's attempt to stake out a middle ground has provoked criticism from all points of the political spectrum.

"I think that's a sign that you're in the right place," she said of her plan in March. The proposal would continue to limit instances in which people would be required to post bail, but make more crimes eligible for detention and give judges more discretion to consider a defendant's criminal history.

New York changed its bail laws in response to public outcry over prisoners accused of minor crimes being

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held in jail for extended periods while awaiting trial because they couldn't afford to pay bail — a system where a person puts up cash as a guarantee that they will return to court.

The state's answer was to eliminate cash bail for many nonviolent offenses — a reform that frustrated some law enforcement officials who warned that people released back to the streets would commit new crimes.

But with violent crime up across America, crime rates have been an easy target and longstanding bogeyman for Republicans, who have wasted no opportunity to make it a campaign issue in races around the U.S., including governor's races in Illinois, Pennsylvania and elsewhere.

Democrats, bracing for tough midterm elections, are striving to prove they're responding, in some cases emphasizing efforts to provide more money to police departments while making scant mention of reforms they embraced a few years ago.

In Minnesota, Gov. Tim Walz is up for reelection and has been touring the state promoting his \$300 million public safety plan. He has not focused on the reform measures he signed after police killed George Floyd in the state almost two years ago.

Wisconsin's Democratic Gov. Tony Evers, who is also running for reelection this year, has been hammered by Republicans over crime and like Hochul, is facing bipartisan pressure to toughen bail laws.

A record-setting spate of homicides in Albuquerque has ratcheted up pressure on New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, including from some fellow Democrats. The first-term governor has joined efforts to ban pretrial release for certain violent crimes, though some legislators in her own party have balked at rolling back reforms that largely ended money bail.

President Joe Biden in his budget this week highlighted funding for police — for body cameras, crime prevention strategies, drug treatment, mental health and criminal justice reform.

This winter, he made a trip to New York City to stand with the city's new mayor, Eric Adams, a former police captain.

"The answer is not to defund the police," Biden said. "It is to give you the tools, the training, the funding to be partners, to be protectors and know the community."

In comparison, while campaigning for president, Biden instead spoke more about criminal justice reforms and the need to reverse some of the toughest measures of the 1994 crime bill he helped write.

In New York, the fierce debate over bail has been one factor that caused legislators to miss an April 1 deadline to pass a new state budget.

Hochul initially said she didn't want to touch the state's bail laws until she saw data indicating the reforms were responsible for a crime spike. Democrats who control the state Legislature likewise said they were uninterested in unwinding reforms.

A recent report from New York City's fiscal watchdog found that the percentage of people who committed new crimes after being released from jail hasn't budged since the bail reform measure passed.

But now, some Democrats have joined Republicans in calling for a repeal. They include U.S. Rep. Tom Suozzi of Long Island, who is challenging Hochul in the governor's race; Adams, who has made cracking down on crime in New York City a top priority; and former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who has started criticizing the bail reforms he signed as he contemplates running for office again.

At some point in recent weeks, Hochul changed her mind and drafted a plan to tweak the law. She avoided talking about it publicly, though, for days after it leaked to the media.

Nearly a week later, Hochul defended the plan in an op-ed, saying that while the state's bail laws were not the main cause of a rise in shootings during the pandemic, they needed to be changed.

Democrat Jumaane Williams, New York City's public advocate who is also challenging Hochul in the governor's race, said the governor "should show courage and leadership on this issue, or at the very least pick a side between fearmongering and facts."

It's unclear if Democrats controlling the statehouse will meet the governor somewhere in the middle as they continue negotiating, but the pressure has ratcheted up in recent days.

New York City's police commissioner visited Albany to press for reforms. Defenders of the current law were arrested for demonstrating outside the governor's office and one lawmaker, Democratic Assembly

Member Latrice Walker of Brooklyn, was on day nine Thursday of a hunger strike to protest any rollbacks as negotiations continued.

Black Democrats try to revive party in Trump territory

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

PINE BLUFF, Ark. (AP) — Chris Jones would seem to have an ideal biography to run for governor, a job that's wide open in Arkansas for the first time in eight years.

He's both an ordained Baptist minister and a nuclear engineer who can talk about his faith as easily as scientific concepts. He's upbeat and personable, as evidenced by his announcement video that quickly went viral nationwide.

There's a catch, though. Jones is a Democrat in a state that has gone from red to extremely red in recent years. Donald Trump carried it in 2020 with 62% of the vote. And he's Black, where Black people account for only 16.5% of the population and where no African American has ever won statewide office.

What's more, if he wins his party's nomination he'll probably have to face a nationally known figure: Sarah Sanders, the former press secretary for Trump and daughter of former Gov. Mike Huckabee. She's already raised more than \$13.6 million.

Most experienced pols consider the race beyond a long shot, but it represents a change in thinking about how the Democratic Party can rebuild in heartland states where it has become almost extinct as white rural voters migrated en masse to the GOP.

In years past, Democrats in the region usually tried to win over independent and moderate voters by running white establishment candidates. That approach produced little. Now they're hoping to mobilize voters who haven't been involved in the process, especially Black, Latino and younger people.

"It's clear to me folks are ready," Jones said during an interview in his hometown of Pine Bluff, a predominantly Black city an hour south of Little Rock. "There's a moment where folks are saying of all the barriers and the ceilings to be broken, here's one we want to break."

This year dozens of Black Democrats are running for office in places that Trump won easily. Many are political newcomers who were motivated by the protests over police tactics following the killing of George Floyd, or advances by Black Democratic candidates in once solidly red states like Georgia.

"The ball is moving down the field in terms of more progress being made," said Tolulope Kevin Olasanoye with the Collective PAC, which recruits and supports Black candidates.

Jones is one of two Black candidates running for Arkansas governor in the May Democratic primary, which also includes an Asian American woman. Two Black Democrats are also running for the Senate seat held by Republican John Boozman.

African Americans are among the leading Democratic challengers for several Republican-held Senate seats, such as Cheri Beasley in North Carolina and Val Demings in Florida. In Kentucky, Charles Booker is making an uphill bid to unseat Republican Sen. Rand Paul. Iowa's Deidre DeJear is the only Democrat challenging Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds.

Black voters and officeholders already hold considerable sway in the Democratic Party in blue states, but some say it's time for African American candidates to take the lead in attracting new voters elsewhere and elevating top social issues.

In Oklahoma, where the party has a long losing streak, many Democrats hailed the decision by the state's popular education commissioner, lifelong Republican Joy Hofmeister, to switch parties and challenge GOP Gov. Kevin Stitt as a Democrat. Even though it probably improved the party's chances, many African American activists were aggravated that Hofmeister, who is white, drew support away from Black candidate Connie Johnson.

Hofmeister "is not coming to any Black Lives Matter protests," said Joshua Harris-Till, a Black party organizer and candidate for a U.S. House seat. "We're probably not going to see her veto legislation like some of these insane gun bills. We're not going to see her championing the right of women to choose."

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In Arkansas, Jones, who had never run for office, launched his bid for governor with a video highlighting his roots in the state and drew contrasts with Sanders' frequent broadsides against the "radical left," criticism of President Joe Biden and echoes of Trump.

He dubbed his platform "PB&J," which he says stands for preschool, broadband and jobs.

Sanders, he charged, is engaging in "the kind of politics that fans the flames of an angry mob willing to mow down police officers in order to attack school kids at Little Rock Central High," a reference to the 1957 desegregation crisis.

Sanders' campaign didn't respond to a request for comment on Jones' remark, and has essentially ignored him and her other rivals for governor.

Jones' announcement video featured him walking into a church and using his minister's stole to tell his family's story. Jones, the son of two preachers, attended Morehouse College on a scholarship from NASA and later went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Before jumping into the governor's race, Jones headed the Arkansas Regional Innovation Hub, a nonprofit that helps entrepreneurs.

The notion that Jones' candidacy will boost Democrats is met with skepticism in Arkansas. The state's last Democratic governor, Mike Beebe, won all 75 counties in 2010, but the party's last nominee won less than a third of the vote.

"Generally speaking, the team that starts talking about voter turnout and even more so voter registration is the team that's already guaranteed a loss," said University of Arkansas political science professor Janine Parry. White people make up 73% of the state's voting age population, compared with about 64% nationally.

Parry, however, noted that such races could help build a bench of candidates and expand the electorate as the state's demographics change.

Jones faces a huge fundraising gap. Sanders has been shattering fundraising records while Jones reported less than \$200,000 on hand in his latest filings.

But he is campaigning actively, holding voter registration drives and even venturing into seemingly hostile territory like Harrison, a town in the Ozarks that has struggled with racism and white supremacy over the years.

Win or lose, he insists the effort is worth it.

"Anytime you can bring candidates who can lift up the voice of those who haven't been part of the process before — whether it's Black, Latinx, disabled, veterans, you name it — who have been locked out of the process, it's going to be helpful," Jones said.

Zelenskyy: Mines in wake of Russian retreat keep Kyiv unsafe

By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — As Russian forces pull back from Ukraine's capital region, retreating troops are creating a "catastrophic" situation for civilians by leaving mines around homes, abandoned equipment and "even the bodies of those killed," President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned Saturday.

Ukraine and its Western allies reported mounting evidence of Russia withdrawing its forces from around Kyiv and building up troop strength in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian fighters reclaimed several areas near the capital after forcing the Russians out or moving in after them, officials said.

The visible shift did not mean the country faced a reprieve from more than five weeks of war or that the more than 4 million refugees who have fled Ukraine will return soon. Zelenskyy said he expects departed towns to endure missile strikes and rocket strikes from afar and for the battle in the east to be intense.

"It's still not possible to return to normal life, as it used to be, even at the territories that we are taking back after the fighting," the president told his nation in a nightly video message. "We need wait until our land is demined, wait till we are able to assure you that there won't be new shelling."

Moscow's focus on eastern Ukraine also kept the besieged southern city of Mariupol in the crosshairs. The port city on the Sea of Azov is located in the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas region, where Russia-backed separatists have fought Ukrainian troops for eight years and military analysts think Russian Presi-

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dent Vladimir Putin is determined to capture after his forces failed to secure Kyiv and other major cities.

The International Committee of the Red Cross planned to try Saturday to get into Mariupol to evacuate residents. The Red Cross said it could not carry out the operation Friday because it did not receive assurances the route was safe. City authorities said the Russians blocked access to the city.

The humanitarian group said a team with three vehicles and nine Red Cross staff members was on the way to help facilitate the safe passage of civilians on Saturday after the failed attempt the previous day. In a statement late Friday, the group said its team planned to accompany a convoy of civilians out from Mariupol to another city.

"Our presence will put a humanitarian marker on this planned movement of people, giving the convoy additional protection and reminding all sides of the civilian, humanitarian nature of the operation," the statement said.

The Mariupol city council said Saturday that 10 empty buses were headed to Berdyansk, a city 84 kilometers (52.2 miles) west of Mariupol, to pick up people who can get there on their own. Some 2,000 made it out of Mariupol on Friday, some on buses and some in their own vehicles, city officials said.

Evacuees boarded about 25 buses in Berdyansk and arrived around midnight to Zaporizhzhia, a city still under Ukrainian control that has served as the destination under previous cease-fires announced - and then broken - to get civilians out and aid into Mariupol.

Among them was Tamila Mazurenko, who said she fled Mariupol on Monday and made it to Berdyansk the same night. Mazurenko said she waited for a bus until Friday, spending one night sleeping in a field.

"I have only one question: Why?" she said of her city's ordeal. "We only lived as normal people. And our normal life was destroyed. And we lost everything. I don't have any job, I can't find my son."

Mariupol, which was surrounded by Russian forces a month ago, has been the scene of some of the war's worst attacks, including on a maternity hospital and a theater sheltering civilians. Around 100,000 people are believed to remain in the city, down from a prewar population of 430,000, and facing dire shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine.

The city's capture would give Moscow an unbroken land bridge from Russia to Crimea, which it seized from Ukraine in 2014, but also has taken on symbolic significance during Russia's invasion, said Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Ukrainian think-tank Penta.

"Mariupol has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance, and without its conquest, Putin cannot sit down at the negotiating table," Fesenko said.

An adviser to Zelenskyy, Oleksiy Arestovych, said in an interview with a Russian lawyer and activist, Mark Feygin, that Russia and Ukraine had reached an agreement to allow 45 buses to drive to Mariupol to evacuate residents "in coming days."

Such agreements have been reached before, only to be breached. On Thursday, Russian forces blocked a 45-bus convoy attempting to evacuate people from Mariupol and seized 14 tons of food and medical supplies bound for the city, Ukrainian authorities said.

Turkey's defense minister said his country had offered to help take civilians by sea from Mariupol, where Turkish authorities estimated some 30 of their citizens remained trapped by the siege.

About 500 refugees from eastern Ukraine, including 99 children and 12 people with disabilities, arrived in the Russian city of Kazan by train overnight. Asked if he saw a chance to return home, Mariupol resident Artur Kirillov answered, "That's unlikely, there is no city anymore."

Meanwhile, Pope Francis on Saturday blasted Russia for launching a "savagely" war in Ukraine and said he was considering a trip to Kyiv. Francis, who was visiting Malta, said "some potentate" had unleashed the threat of nuclear war on the world in an "infantile and destructive aggression" under the guise of "anachronist claims of nationalistic interests."

The pope didn't mention Putin by name Saturday, but his subject was clear enough.

On the outskirts of Kyiv, signs of fierce fighting were everywhere in the wake of the Russian redeployment. Destroyed armored vehicles from both armies left in streets and fields and scattered military gear covered the ground next to an abandoned Russian tank.

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Ukrainian forces recaptured the city of Brovary, 20 kilometers east of the capital, Mayor Ihor Sapozhko said in a televised Friday night address. Shops were reopening and residents were returning but "still stand ready to defend" their city, he added.

"Russian occupants have now left practically all of the Brovary district," Sapozhko said. "Tonight, (Ukrainian) armed forces will work to clear settlements of (remaining) occupants, military hardware, and possibly from mines."

Elsewhere, at least three Russian ballistic missiles were fired late Friday at the Odesa region on the Black Sea, regional leader Maksim Marchenko said. The Ukrainian military said the Iskander missiles did not hit the critical infrastructure they targeted in Odesa, Ukraine's largest port and the headquarters of its navy.

Ukrainian officials reported that the death toll from a Russian rocket strike Tuesday on a government building in Mykolaiv, a port city east of Odesa, had risen to 33, with a further 34 people wounded. The confirmed death toll has risen steadily as the search and rescue operation continues.

As the war dragged on, the U.S. Defense Department said Friday night it is providing an additional \$300 million in arms to Ukrainian forces, including laser-guided rocket systems, unmanned aircraft, armored vehicles, night vision devices and ammunition. Also included are medical supplies, field equipment and spare parts.

There was no immediate word Saturday on the latest round of talks between Russian and Ukrainian negotiators, which took place Friday by video. During a round of talks earlier in the week, Ukraine said it would be willing to abandon a bid to join NATO and declare itself neutral — Moscow's chief demand — in return for security guarantees from several other countries.

On Friday, the Kremlin accused Ukraine of launching a helicopter attack on a fuel depot on Russian soil. Ukraine denied responsibility for the fiery blast at the civilian oil storage facility on the outskirts of the city of Belgorod, about 25 kilometers (16 miles) from the Ukraine border. If Moscow's claim is confirmed, it would be the war's first known attack in which Ukrainian aircraft penetrated Russian airspace.

Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's national security council, said on Ukrainian television: "For some reason they say that we did it, but in fact this does not correspond with reality." Later, in an interview with American TV channel Fox News, Zelenskyy refused to say whether Ukraine was behind the attack.

UK hits record COVID-19 levels; nearly 5 million infected

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The prevalence of COVID-19 in the U.K. has reached record levels, with about 1 in 13 people estimated to be infected with the virus in the past week, according to the latest figures from Britain's official statistics agency.

Some 4.9 million people were estimated to have the coronavirus in the week ending March 26, up from 4.3 million recorded in the previous week, the Office for National Statistics said Friday. The latest surge is driven by the more transmissible omicron variant BA.2, which is the dominant variant across the U.K.

Hospitalizations and death rates are again rising, although the number of people dying with COVID-19 is still relatively low compared with earlier this year. Nonetheless, the latest estimates suggest that the steep climb in new infections since late February, when British Prime Minister Boris Johnson scrapped all remaining coronavirus restrictions in England, has continued well into March.

The figures came on the same day the government ended free rapid COVID-19 tests for most people in England, under Johnson's "living with COVID" plan. People who do not have health conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus now need to pay for tests to find out if they are infected.

"The government's 'living with COVID' strategy of removing any mitigations, isolation, free testing and a considerable slice of our surveillance amounts to nothing more than ignoring this virus going forwards," said Stephen Griffin, associate professor at the University of Leeds' medical school.

"Such unchecked prevalence endangers the protection afforded by our vaccines," he said. "Our vaccines are excellent, but they are not silver bullets and ought not to be left to bear the brunt of COVID in isolation."

More than 67% of people 12 years old and above in the U.K. have been vaccinated and had their booster

or a third dose of the coronavirus vaccine. Beginning Saturday, parents can also book a low-dose vaccine for children between 5 to 12 years old in England.

James Naismith, a biology professor at the University of Oxford, said he believed that except for those who are completely shielded or not susceptible to the virus, most people in the country would likely be infected with the BA.2 variant by the summer.

"This is literally living with the virus by being infected with it," he said.

Video contrasts police depiction of stun gun on Black man

By JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A Tennessee police officer who used his stun gun on a DoorDash driver wrote an arrest report saying the man had become argumentative while denying he was speeding, refused to hand over identifying information, demanded to see a supervisor and stayed in his car when ordered to get out.

The driver — who faces charges of speeding, resisting arrest and disorderly conduct based on the officer's sworn affidavit — pressed record on his phone after he was pulled over. That recording, made public by the driver's attorney, tells a different story.

It shows Delane Gordon holding his driver's license as Collegedale Police Officer Evan Driskill stands with his taser in a firing position. "He said he pulled me over for a traffic violation and he's gonna Tase me. You can't do that officer because I called for your supervisor," Gordon says.

The white officer repeatedly shouts "get out!" at Gordon, who is Black.

"I have my license. What is the reason?" Gordon asks.

"You refused to give your information. I told you to get out of the car. Now you're resisting. Get out!" the officer says, pointing the stun gun closer to Gordon's body.

"Sir, I feel uncomfortable, please get your supervisor," Gordon pleads, at which point Driskill holsters the Taser and grabs him with both hands, trying to pull him down through the open door. "I don't give a (expletive) what you feel like. I said get out," the officer says.

"Why are you being like this," Gordon asks while being grabbed. "Is this how y'all really are?"

The officer then steps back and fires his stun gun. "Oh my God, that's not lawful sir. That's not lawful," Gordon says after crying out as he felt the jolt. The video released by his lawyer ends as Gordon reaches for the phone and his left leg swings toward the open door.

The exchange between Gordon and Driskill never escalated to the tragic level of higher-profile police encounters like the killing of George Floyd with an officer's knee on his neck in Minneapolis in 2020. But it demonstrated once again that in an era of ubiquitous recording devices, the accounts of police officers sometimes present an incomplete or distorted version of their engagement with the public.

Citing ongoing investigations, authorities have declined, for now, to release police video that could fill in the blanks where Gordon's camera wasn't recording. The police department says it plans to release its video once the investigations are closed.

Rashawn Ray, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution, said the officer's behavior and sworn affidavit aren't surprising, given how police are trained.

"The way that officers interpret resistance, the way that officers interpret not listening or following their commands, shapes how they then proceed throughout the interaction, where oftentimes instead of continuing in a conversation, they escalate it with force," Ray said.

Video recordings, Ray said, are the "most powerful tool that people have used to show police use of force and racial bias in policing."

In the affidavit, Driskill described what happened before Gordon's video started recording, from his perspective as an officer. He wrote that he clocked Gordon driving 49 miles per hour in a 35 mph zone. Gordon demanded to see the radar; he told him he'd have to go to court for that. And when Gordon wouldn't get out of the car, Driskill said he asked a police chaplain who happened to be in his cruiser to call for backup, because his portable radio wouldn't work.

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Gordon's attorney, Ryan Wheeler, said Gordon "did respectfully question the officer on exactly why he was pulled over" down the block from where he was delivering food for DoorDash, and the "given reason" was speeding.

The affidavit also describes what happened after Gordon's video ends. The officer wrote that Gordon again refused to leave his car, this time after being stun gunned, and that once the 28-year-old did get out, Driskill held him to the ground and handcuffed him behind his back.

Three days before Gordon's attorney released the video, the Hamilton County district attorney's office announced that it asked the county sheriff's office to investigate a March 10 traffic stop by the Collegedale Police Department in which the driver was charged with speeding, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. It provided no reason for the request and did not name anyone involved.

The police department said it would be "cooperating fully" with the sheriff's probe while conducting its own investigation. It released the affidavit, as required by Tennessee law, in response to a public records request.

Driskill, whose personnel files shows he was sworn as a Collegedale officer in October, remains on regular duty, according to Lt. Jamie Heath.

Wheeler said Gordon has no prior criminal record, never posed a threat to the officer and was respectful throughout the exchange. He said their goal is to raise awareness and clear Gordon of the charges, and he said he's confident this will happen.

Parkland shooter's lawyers face tough task in jury selection

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Attorneys for Parkland, Florida, school shooter Nikolas Cruz will have one goal when jury selection starts Monday: to identify candidates who might give Cruz the single vote he needs to get a life sentence instead of death for the 2018 murders of 17 students and staff members. The process will involve a lot of educated guesses.

Court officials said perhaps 1,500 or more potential jurors could file through Circuit Judge Elizabeth Scherer's courtroom over several weeks as she, prosecutors and Cruz's public defenders select 12 panelists, plus eight alternates, for his penalty trial. Those chosen must say they can put aside their animosity toward Cruz for the 2018 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and judge the case fairly. The potential jurors must also be available through September.

Cruz's attorneys "should not even try to get a jury or juror who doesn't know about the case because that is ignorance; you would have to be living under a rock," said Orlando defense attorney Mark O'Mara. O'Mara came to national prominence after his successful 2013 defense of George Zimmerman, who was acquitted of murdering Black teenager Trayvon Martin. He is not involved in the Cruz case.

Jury candidates who declare that they can be objective will complete a questionnaire that dives into their backgrounds and asks whether they can handle viewing graphic evidence. They will then return in a few weeks for courtroom interviews, where they must declare that they are able to vote for the death penalty but also don't believe it should be mandatory for murder.

Cruz, 23, pleaded guilty in October to 17 first-degree murders, 17 attempted murders and a jail assault, leaving the jury to decide only whether the former Stoneman Douglas student gets death or life without parole.

Instead of deciding whether someone is guilty based upon objective evidence, jurors sitting at this death penalty trial must answer a subjective question: Have prosecutors shown that aggravating factors — the number of deaths, the weeks of planning and the cruelty and horror of Cruz's actions — outweigh mitigating factors such as his lifelong mental illness and the death of his parents? For Cruz to get death, the jurors must all answer, "yes."

To get at least one "no" vote, Cruz's attorneys must show that his path to the murders wasn't "pure 100% personal-created intent," said O'Mara, who has defended about a dozen capital cases that ended with no death sentences imposed. "It is going to be difficult. ... Death is the default sentence in this case."

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The fact that no one who opposes capital punishment on principle can be selected for the jury eliminates some female, minority, religious and liberal candidates who could potentially be sympathetic toward Cruz, Miami jury consultant and lawyer Geri Fischman said.

White people strongly support the death penalty, a Gallup poll last year showed, while most Black and Hispanic people oppose it. The survey also showed that more women oppose capital punishment than men, and that only a quarter of liberals support the death penalty compared with 70% of conservatives. Broward County is 2-to-1 Democratic.

Catholic Church leaders, some Protestant denominations and Judaism's major rabbinical organizations also oppose the death penalty on theological grounds, although many individual members support it in practice.

"Death-qualified juries are skewed in favor of the prosecution," Fischman said.

This won't be the first time Scherer, prosecutors and Cruz's attorneys begin picking a jury for him. In October, Cruz faced trial for assaulting a jail guard nine months after the shooting. Prosecutors wanted a conviction to use as an aggravating factor in their argument for the death penalty.

Almost 300 prospective jurors were screened, 10 times what is typical in a Florida assault case. About half said they couldn't judge Cruz fairly, and three women cried just seeing him. The other half said they could be just, but the process ended with Cruz's sudden guilty plea.

Until 2016, a Florida judge could impose the death penalty if a majority of jurors agreed. But after the U.S. and Florida supreme courts mandated a higher bar, the Republican-majority Legislature amended the law to require unanimity. This is the system used in 18 of the 26 other states with capital punishment.

That change gives Cruz a chance, but the jury's composition is key, O'Mara and Fischman note.

Both prosecutors and defense attorneys can strike a potential juror if they are able to persuade Scherer that the person's background or answers demonstrates unfairness. Cruz's attorneys might challenge school employees, for example, or someone with a relative who died at the hands of another.

Both sides receive 10 peremptory strikes for any reason except race or gender. Scherer has indicated she might add more, given the case's high profile.

Fischman said that if she were advising the defense, she wouldn't preclude any occupations, ages or economic groups. Instead, she said she would look closely for "stealth jurors": candidates who skew answers to be picked so they can vote for death.

"Anyone who tells you repeatedly they are going to be fair, that they have no biases, that they have no preexisting views on this case, is likely hiding something," she said. "Someone who says they have no views on a shooting where innocent children were killed is not being ... forthright."

O'Mara said he might seek racial minorities and jurors with relatives who have been criminal defendants because they might be "more sensitized to the inconsistencies and biases of the judicial system."

He said he would avoid accountants, engineers and others whose occupations require "very precise" answers. Such professionals use a mental scale to precisely weigh the aggravating and mitigating factors — a battle Cruz cannot win with 17 dead victims, he said.

"When you get to that kind of analysis, you get away from what the defense wants: the humanity" of the jurors and the defendant, he said.

The bottom line: A case like Cruz's has no certainties for the defense.

"You are, in effect, playing to one juror — you just don't know which," O'Mara said.

UConn-South Carolina title tilt packs plenty of star power

By DAVE CAMPBELL AP Sports Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The South Carolina Gamecocks held the top spot in the Associated Press Top 25 women's poll all season about as tightly as they play defense every night.

The last test for the No. 1 overall seed in this year's NCAA Tournament will be the Connecticut Huskies, who produced a lockdown defensive performance of their own against Stanford to reach the national championship.

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Aliyah Boston showing who's the boss in the paint, and Paige Bueckers slithering around the perimeter. Dawn Staley on one bench, and Geno Auriemma on the other. South against North.

Women's college basketball gets the greats of the game together on the biggest stage as consistently as any sport, and this South Carolina-UConn matchup will be no different.

The Gamecocks (34-2) toppled Louisville 72-59 in the first semifinal at Target Center on Friday night, behind 23 points and 18 rebounds from Boston, the newly minted AP Player of the Year.

"With the awards, I'm really blessed, but my main focus is bringing home a national championship," Boston said. "I'm just really locked in on that."

After missing a close-range putback at the buzzer in a one-point loss to Stanford in the Final Four last season, Boston bounced right back this year.

"We knew this was a new team," Boston said. "We have a lot more depth."

The Gamecocks have been a team on a mission.

"It's a relief right now, and it feels great. But we're going to take in this moment, and we're not done yet, so we still have unfinished business," said Destanni Henderson, who hit three 3-pointers on Friday.

UConn (30-5) took care of the defending champion Cardinal, outlasting Stanford 63-58 in the second game. Bueckers had 14 points, five assists and two steals in her hometown to help get Auriemma back to the title game for the first time since 2016.

"Points are hard to come by in this tournament, and today was certainly no different," Auriemma said. "We're going to have to win some other way."

Bueckers and her teammates huddled at midcourt in celebration once the buzzer sounded, most of them holding up index fingers as they shouted, "One more!" at each other in anticipation of the next — and last game — of this nothing-comes-easy season. Eight UConn players had to miss at least two games this season with injury or illness.

These Huskies, the only No. 2 seed in this Final Four, might have overachieved a little, as strange as that sounds for such a dynastic program.

"Coming in, I don't think we're the best team there. I don't think we can win even if we play our 'A' game. We need help. We need Stanford to not play their best game. We need them to miss shots they normally make," Auriemma said.

UConn has never lost in the NCAA final, sporting a staggering 11-0 record in national championships. The four straight titles the Huskies won from 2013-16 was a streak interrupted by none other than South Carolina in 2017, when UConn lost to Mississippi State on an overtime buzzer-beater in the Final Four.

The Gamecocks' only championship came five years ago.

However, South Carolina beat UConn in the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament in the Bahamas in November, pulling away from the Huskies in the fourth quarter with that stifling defense.

And nobody will have more of the spotlight Sunday than Bueckers, the smooth-shooting, lightning-quick sophomore guard. She grew up in a first-ring suburb of Minneapolis and grew her game at Hopkins High School, just 10 miles west of the arena that's sold out this weekend with crowds of more than 18,000.

"It doesn't really matter the location," said Bueckers, who missed nearly three months this season to a left knee injury. "We're just trying to win and keep playing with this team."

For Bueckers, who last year became the first freshman to win the Player of the Year award, this stretch run has been all about getting back up to speed after a long layoff. Twice in the fourth quarter, she grimaced and gingerly walked around after hard landings, but there's no way that knee — even if it's not 100% — will keep her from going all out for the title.

"Everybody is going to lay it on the line," Bueckers said, "and that's just basketball."

Border asylum limits ending, but not Biden's migrant woes

By COLLEEN LONG and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The ban on asylum-seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border on public health grounds was imposed by a president who wanted to restrict immigration entirely. It will soon be ended by a president

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who is facing increasing pressure from within his own party to welcome immigrants.

The path ahead for President Joe Biden looks far from smooth. With the end of the ban on May 23, he faces an expected increase in migration at the border under a system incapable of managing such large migrant flows and buckling under a backlog of more than 1.7 million asylum cases.

Republicans are already eager to assign Biden blame for the expected images of thousands of people likely to be crammed into temporary border facilities.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Friday that it would lift the asylum ban, known as Title 42, next month. The ban had become increasingly hard to justify as pandemic restrictions ended around the country.

Many Democrats and immigration advocates viewed it as nothing more than an excuse for the United States to avoid its moral and legal obligation to offer safe haven to asylum-seekers at the border.

By delaying the end of Title 42 for nearly two months, Biden appeared to be seeking a political balance between liberals who want the policy scrapped and moderates who have joined Republicans in supporting continued restrictions. He may end up satisfying neither.

The expected influx of migrants could create a political damaging crisis for Biden with the the November midterm elections approaching. That debate will probably hinge more on partisanship than facts.

American attitudes on immigration are based on perception, not reality, said René D. Flores, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago who studies public opinion and immigration.

"It's not about deciding what is the most sensible immigration policy," he said. "It's about managing public perception."

The president has already faced withering criticism from both Democrats and Republicans over how he has managed immigration. Republicans say his push to repeal Trump-era restrictions has led to an increase in illegal crossings. Democrats have criticized the administration's continued use of a policy that forces migrants back to Mexico to wait out their claims, even though that policy was reinstated by the Supreme Court.

An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll last year found that most Americans disapproved of how Biden had handled a sharp increase in migrant children and an influx of Haitian migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. Approval of his other efforts on larger immigration policy fell short of other top issues.

Ryan Enos, a professor of government at Harvard University, doubted that the end of Title 42 would shift public opinion much, especially when views about immigration have become so polarized.

"Any issue besides the economy is going to be a marginal issue," he said.

The seven-week gap between Friday's order and the expiration of the asylum ban late next month is meant to allow officials time to increase staffing at the border, including erecting tents for an expected influx of asylum-seekers. It also allows for government officials to vaccinate more migrants at the border.

But in the interim, it creates a policy muddle. Nearly all migrants seeking to cross into the U.S. will be turned away under a health authority that American officials say is no longer necessary. It also gives opponents of ending Title 42 plenty of time to sue.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas said Biden was refusing to listen to Americans and had "chosen to jeopardize the safety and security of those very Americans he swore to protect and defend by ending Title 42 expulsions."

He said Texas must now "take even more unprecedented action to keep our communities safe by using any and all constitutional powers to protect its own territory."

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said the decision "confirms that President Biden has abdicated his responsibilities and is actively working to make the border crisis worse. From Day One of his administration, he has failed to protect our nation's security and to secure the border."

From the other side, Biden faces criticism for waiting so long to act.

"The continued use of this policy — even for the next two months — is indefensible and unjustified," said Efrén Olivares, the deputy legal director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Immigrant Justice Project.

The Title 42 restrictions went into place in March 2020 under the Trump administration as coronavirus

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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 that Trump did not want to let in anyway.

It was perhaps the broadest of President Donald Trump's actions to restrict crossings and crack down on migrants, and he instituted the policy over the objections of CDC officials, the AP reported. 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.

Biden came into office promising a return to more "humane" immigration policies after the Trump administration, which separated thousands of children from their parents at the border. But Trump dramatically changed how the U.S. system functions, shrinking the number of asylum-seekers allowed into the U.S. and adding restrictions that caused the backlog of immigration court cases to explode.

Biden undid many of Trump's policies and raised asylum caps, but some of his attempts have been stopped by courts, including the effort to end the "Remain in Mexico" policy, which forces migrants to wait in Mexico for their asylum cases to play out. The Supreme Court reinstated that policy, and there are thousands of people now in Mexico waiting for a chance to seek asylum.

Administration officials acknowledge there is likely to be a large influx at the border when the ban lifts, including Ukrainians displaced by the war with Russia. The U.S. government is erecting tents, bolstering agents, hiring more civilians and working to reduce the existing case backlog.

Jessica Bolter, an associate policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, estimates the hardest hit spots could be Del Rio, Texas and Yuma, Arizona — locations that are already overwhelmed.

"We were always going to see a significant spike in border crossings," she said. "To some degree, the administration doesn't have a ton of options."

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Friday that a long-term solution "can only come from comprehensive legislation that brings lasting reform to a fundamentally broken system."

Biden knows prospects for Democrats and Republicans to come together on such a deal are remote.

Westward Ho! Maine potatoes travel far after western drought

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Maine's potato growers had such a bumper crop this past season that they stepped in to help their big brothers out west who were short on spuds.

Farmers from Maine shipped potatoes by rail for the first time in four decades this winter thanks to a strong harvest in the state and heat and dry weather that stymied farmers in renowned potato-growing states like Idaho and Washington. The potatoes made their way more than 2,500 miles (4,000 kilometers) for processing, riding in climate-controlled rail cars.

All told, 21 million pounds (9.5 million kilograms) of potatoes, virtually all from growers in northern Maine, flowed through a rail-connected warehouse owned by LaJoie Growers LLC. That equates to more than 530 truckloads of potatoes, said co-owner Jay LaJoie.

"It's a good chunk of potatoes," said Don Flannery, executive director of the Maine Potato Board.

Most of the Maine potatoes went to processors in Washington state, where much of the french fries and other products are exported. The shipments to Idaho were seed potatoes, including Maine's Caribou russet, that'll be planted this spring.

Chris Voigt from the Washington State Potato Commission said processors were grateful for the potato shipments, but they're hopeful Maine growers' services aren't required in the future.

The shipments came to an early end about two weeks ago, partly because of economic disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine. But it was good while it lasted, helping out potato processors in western states while reducing an oversupply of Maine spuds.

It also proved the value of rail lines for agriculture, especially during a shortage of trucks in the pandemic, LaJoie said.

There's no way growers could have sourced enough tractor-trailers to haul the potatoes, but there hap-

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pened to be an available rail line that connects to a LaJoie-owned warehouse in Van Buren.

The shortage of truck drivers has contributed to supply-chain problems during the pandemic.

"I don't see transportation getting better anytime soon," LaJoie said.

While Maine is known for its famous lobsters, the state was indeed once the nation's potato capital through World War II. Other states later stepped up production in the 1950s. Idaho and Washington State are currently Nos. 1 and 2 while Maine ranks ninth, according to the USDA.

The unusual shortage of potatoes out west is a result of weird summer weather.

A heat wave with temperatures soaring above 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) hit the Pacific Northwest in June, just as potatoes were starting to grow. The result was reduced yields, and lower quality, Voigt said.

"The plants sort of shut down," he said.

The extreme heat reduced yields by nearly 10% for potato growers in Idaho and Washington, while Maine potato yields grew more than 30% thanks to good weather, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In northern Maine, the harvest was so big that growers scrambled to find storage. Some buildings at the former Loring Air Force Base were enlisted for a last-minute home for the abundant tubers.

In the end, it proved to be a successful pilot program for rail delivery that could be used again if unusual weather patterns persist, LaJoie said. Plus Maine enjoyed getting some attention for its potato industry thanks to the irony of David rendering aid to the potato Goliaths.

Pope blasts Russia's 'infantile' war, EU-Libya deal in Malta

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VALLETTA, Malta (AP) — Pope Francis said Saturday he is studying a possible visit to Kyiv and he blasted Russian President Vladimir Putin for launching a "savage" war. Speaking after his arrival in Malta, he delivered his most pointed and personalized denunciation yet of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Francis didn't cite Russian President Vladimir Putin by name, but the reference was clear when he said that "some potentate" had unleashed the threat of nuclear war on the world in an "infantile and destructive aggression" under the guise of "anachronist claims of nationalistic interests."

"We had thought that invasions of other countries, savage street fighting and atomic threats were grim memories of a distant past," Francis told Maltese officials and diplomats on the Mediterranean island nation at the start of a weekend visit.

Francis has to date avoided referring to Russia or Putin by name. But Saturday's personalization of the powerful figure responsible marked a new level of outrage for the pope.

"Once again, some potentate, sadly caught up in anachronistic claims of nationalist interest, is provoking and fomenting conflicts, whereas ordinary people sense the need to build a future that will either be shared or not be at all," he said.

The Vatican tends to not call out aggressors in hopes of keeping open options for dialogue. The Vatican, which in recent years has forged unprecedented new relations with the Putin-allied Russian Orthodox Church, had offered itself as a potential mediator but to date has been largely left on the diplomatic sidelines.

Francis told reporters en route to Malta that a possible visit to Kyiv was "on the table," but no dates have been set or trip confirmed. The mayor of the Ukrainian capital had invited Francis to come as a messenger of peace along with other religious figures.

Francis also said that the war had pained his heart so much that he sometimes forgets about the pain in his knees. Francis has been suffering for months from a strained ligament in his right knee. The inflammation got so bad that the Vatican arranged for a tarmac elevator to get him onto and off the plane for Saturday's flight to Malta.

The visit, originally scheduled for May 2020, was always supposed to focus on migration, given Malta's role at the heart of Europe's migration debate.

Speaking with Malta's president by his side, Francis denounced the "sordid agreements" the European

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Union has made with Libya to turn back migrants and said Europe must show humanity in welcoming them. He called for the Mediterranean to be a "theater of solidarity, not the harbinger of a tragic shipwreck of civilization."

Francis was referring to the seven-year-old EU program to train Libya's coast guard, which patrols the North African country's Mediterranean coast for migrant smuggling operations and brings the would-be refugees back to shore. The program was adopted and strongly backed by Italy and other front-line Mediterranean countries to try to stem the flow of hundreds of thousands of desperate migrants who pay Libyan-based smugglers to cross the Mediterranean to Europe.

Human rights groups have condemned the EU-funded program as a violation of the migrants' rights and documented gross abuses in the detention camps where returned migrants are then held. Just this past week, German said its military would no longer provide training to the Libyan coast guard given its "unacceptable," and in some cases illegal, treatment of migrants.

Francis has condemned the Libyan detention facilities as concentration camps, but he went further on Saturday in shaming the EU for its complicity in the abuses committed.

"Civilized countries cannot approve for their own interest sordid agreements with criminals who enslave other human beings," he said. "Unfortunately, this is happening."

"Today, when those who cross the Mediterranean in search of salvation are met with fear and the narrative of 'invasion,' and safeguarding one's own security at any price seems to be the primary goal, let us help one another not to view the migrant as a threat and not to yield to the temptation of raising drawbridges and erecting walls," he said.

"Other people are not a virus from which we need to be protected, but persons to be accepted," he said.

Malta, the European Union's smallest country with a half-million people, has long been on the front lines of the flow of migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean. It has frequently called upon its bigger European neighbors to shoulder more of the burden receiving would-be refugees.

Francis has frequently echoed that call, and linked it on Saturday to the welcome the Maltese once gave the Apostle Paul, who according to the biblical account was shipwrecked off Malta in around A.D. 60 while en route to Rome and was shown unusual kindness by the islanders.

Macron's reelection push troubled by 'McKinsey Affair'

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — As French President Emmanuel Macron prepares to hold his first big rally Saturday in his race for reelection, his campaign has hit a roadbump.

It's been dubbed "the McKinsey Affair," named after an American consulting company hired to advise the French government on its COVID-19 vaccination campaign and other policy. A new French Senate report questions the government's use of private consultants, and accuses McKinsey of tax dodging. The issue is mobilizing Macron's rivals and dogging him at campaign stops ahead of the April 10 first-round vote.

His supporters hope he can rev up his campaign and drown out his detractors at Saturday's rally in a huge arena west of Paris. Macron, a centrist who has been in the forefront of diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine, has a comfortable lead in polls so far over far-right leader Marine Le Pen and other challengers.

But the word "McKinsey" is becoming a rallying cry for those trying to unseat him. Critics describe the government's 1 billion euros in spending on consulting firms like McKinsey last year as a sort of privatization and Americanization of French politics, and are demanding more transparency.

The French Senate, where opposition conservatives hold a majority, published a report last month investigating the government's use of private consulting firms. The report found that state spending on such contracts has doubled in the past three years despite mixed results, and warned they could pose conflicts of interest. Dozens of private companies are involved in the consulting activities, including giants like Ireland-based multinational Accenture and French group Capgemini.

Most damningly, the report says McKinsey hasn't paid corporate profit taxes in France since at least 2011,

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but instead used a system of "tax optimization" through its Delaware-based parent company.

McKinsey issued a statement saying it "respects French tax rules that apply to it" and defending its work in France, but didn't elaborate.

McKinsey notably advised the French government on its COVID vaccination campaign, which got off to a halting start but eventually became among the world's most comprehensive. Outside consultants have also advised Macron's government on housing reform, asylum policy and other measures.

The Senate report found that such firms earn smaller revenues in France than in Britain or Germany, and noted that spending on outside consultants was higher under conservative former President Nicolas Sarkozy than under Macron.

Budget Minister Olivier Dussopt said the state money spent on McKinsey was about 0.3% of what the government spent on public servants' salaries last year, and that McKinsey earned only a tiny fraction of it. He accused campaign rivals of inflating the affair to boost their own ratings.

"We have nothing to hide," said Amelie Montchalin, the government's minister for public service.

The affair is hurting Macron nonetheless.

A former investment banker once accused of being "president of the rich," Macron saw his ratings resurge when his government spent massively to protect workers and businesses early in the pandemic, vowing to do "whatever it takes" to cushion the blow. But his rivals say the McKinsey affair rekindles concerns that Macron and his government are beholden to private interests and out of touch with the concerns of ordinary voters.

Everywhere Macron goes now, he's asked about it.

"The campaign should be about purchasing power, how to settle security problems, how to end the war (in Ukraine)," he told voters Thursday. "Don't make it about a false issue."

On a talk show last Sunday, he said defensively, "If there is proof of manipulation, let them take it to court."

A woman who lost her father to COVID-19 filed a lawsuit Friday accusing McKinsey and other consulting companies of misusing public money when they were hired to advise the government on mask and vaccine supplies. Julie Grasset now runs a support group for people who lost loved ones in the pandemic.

"It's a serious issue. We are talking about public health," Grasset told The Associated Press.

The financial prosecutor's office did not comment. It could take weeks for prosecutors to decide whether to take up the case, one of several Grasset and others have filed involving the government's handling of the pandemic.

Hong Kong urges testing, Shanghai struggles under lockdown

BEIJING (AP) — Hong Kong authorities on Saturday asked the entire population of more than 7.4 million people to voluntarily test themselves for COVID-19 at home for three days in a row starting next week.

The announcement by Chief Executive Carrie Lam came as the southern Chinese city is struggling to contain its worst outbreak with authorities sending mixed signals about testing and lockdowns.

Lam said a "compulsory, universal test" of the whole population is still essential, but did not say when that might happen. Authorities shelved the idea after a previous announcement caused panic buying.

The prospect of further school closures and other disruptions has the government caught between calls for loosening restrictions and Beijing's demand for an extreme "zero-COVID" approach mandating lockdowns and mass testing.

Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous territory, on Friday lifted a ban on residents returning aboard flights from nine countries where COVID-19 cases have surged, including Britain and the U.S.

Hong Kong reported another 5,820 cases Friday as the latest surge begins to taper off.

Meanwhile, in Shanghai to the north, authorities are struggling to meet requirements for a lockdown on many of the city's 26 million residents — the largest such undertaking by China since the virus was first detected in the central city of Wuhan in late 2019.

Shanghai is implementing a two-stage, eight-day lockdown, but many of those on the eastern, or Pudong,

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side of the city who should have been free to leave their compounds on Friday have remained in isolation.

Authorities have meanwhile placed the other half of the city, Puxi, under isolation with non-essential businesses and public transport brought to a stop and roads cleared of cars and people. A total of 14 million Puxi residents were tested on Friday, according to state media.

Residents under isolation complained of difficulty obtaining food, household items and medications, while beds and staff at isolation centers were reportedly insufficient for the number of asymptomatic patients and others being brought there for observation.

China detected another 2,086 confirmed cases on Saturday, including 260 in Shanghai, and 7,789 asymptomatic cases, of which 6,051 were in Shanghai. Total numbers of new cases have been near record highs for several days, but no new deaths have been reported since March 20, leaving China's total at 4,638. China has recorded a total of 153,232 cases, according to the National Health Commission.

Compared to Wuhan in 2020, Shanghai has benefited from China's experience and is better prepared, even though the outbreak is wider in scale, Chen Erzhen, commander of the third contingent of medical teams dispatched to the city, was quoted as saying by the official Xinhua Daily newspaper.

That's because the omicron BA.2 variant is more infectious though less virulent, leading to the large number of asymptomatic cases, which China has categorized separately from "confirmed" cases.

"There is more pressure because the larger number of patients increases the task of controlling the outbreak," Chen said. "But at present, Shanghai's situation is under control and we'll continue to treat and isolate as necessary."

Indian scholars, activists criticize school hijab ban ruling

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — A recent court ruling upholding a ban on Muslim students wearing head coverings in schools has sparked criticism from constitutional scholars and rights activists who say that judicial overreach threatens religious freedoms in officially secular India.

Even though the ban is only imposed in the southern state of Karnataka, critics worry it could be used as a basis for wider curbs on Islamic expression in a country already witnessing a surge of Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governing Bharatiya Janata Party.

"With this judgment, the rule you are making can restrict the religious freedom of every religion," said Faizan Mustafa, a scholar of freedom of religion and vice chancellor at the Hyderabad-based Nalsar University of Law. "Courts should not decide what is essential to any religion. By doing so, you are privileging certain practices over others."

Supporters of the decision say it's an affirmation of schools' authority to determine dress codes and govern student conduct, and that takes precedence over any religious practice.

"Institutional discipline must prevail over individual choices. Otherwise, it will result in chaos," said Karnataka Advocate General Prabhuling Navadgi, who argued the state's case in court.

Before the verdict, more than 700 signatories including senior lawyers and rights advocates had expressed opposition to the ban in an open letter to the chief justice, saying that "the imposition of an absolute uniformity contrary to the autonomy, privacy and dignity of Muslim women is unconstitutional."

The dispute began in January when a government-run school in the city of Udupi, in Karnataka, barred students wearing hijabs from entering classrooms. Staffers said the Muslim headscarves contravened the campus' dress code, and that it had to be strictly enforced.

Muslims protested, and Hindus staged counter demonstrations. Soon more schools imposed their own restrictions, prompting the Karnataka government to issue a statewide ban.

A group of female Muslim students sued on the grounds that their fundamental rights to education and religion were being violated.

But a three-judge panel, which included a female Muslim judge, ruled last month that the Quran does not establish the hijab as an essential Islamic practice and it may therefore be restricted in classrooms. The court also said the state government has the power to prescribe uniform guidelines for students as

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a "reasonable restriction on fundamental rights."

"What is not religiously made obligatory therefore cannot be made a quintessential aspect of the religion through public agitations or by the passionate arguments in courts," the panel wrote.

The verdict relied on what's known as the essentiality test — basically, whether a religious practice is or is not obligatory under that faith. India's constitution does not draw such a distinction, but courts have used it since the 1950s to resolve disputes over religion.

In 2016, the high court in the southern state of Kerala ruled that head coverings were a religious duty for Muslims and therefore essential to Islam under the test. Two years later, India's Supreme Court again used the test to overturn historical restrictions on Hindu women of certain ages entering a temple in the same state, saying it was not an "essential religious practice."

Critics say the essentiality test gives courts broad authority over theological matters where they have little expertise and where clergy would be more appropriate arbiters of faith.

India's Supreme Court is itself in doubt about the test. In 2019 it set up a nine-judge panel to reevaluate it, calling its legitimacy regarding matters of faith "questionable." The matter is still under consideration.

The lawsuit in Karnataka cited the 2016 Kerala ruling, but this time the justices came to the opposite conclusion — baffling some observers.

"That's why judges make for not-so-great interpreters of religious texts," said Anup Surendranath, a professor of constitutional law at the Delhi-based National Law University.

Surendranath said the most sensible avenue for the court would have been to apply a test of what Muslim women hold to be true from a faith perspective: "If wearing hijab is a genuinely held belief of Muslim girls, then why ... interfere with that belief at all?"

The ruling has been welcomed by Bharatiya Janata Party officials including Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, the federal minister of minority affairs, and B. C. Nagesh, Karnataka's education minister.

Satya Muley, a lawyer at the Bombay High Court, said it's perfectly reasonable for the judiciary to place some limits on religious freedoms if they clash with dress codes, and the verdict will "help maintain order and uniformity in educational institutions."

"It is a question of whether it is the constitution, or does religion take precedence," Muley said. "And the court's verdict has answered just that by upholding the state's power to put restrictions on certain freedoms that are guaranteed under the constitution."

Surendranath countered that the verdict was flawed because it failed to invoke the three "reasonable restrictions" under the constitution that let the state interfere with freedom of religion — for reasons of public order, morality or health.

"The court didn't refer to these restrictions, even though none of them are justifiable to ban hijabs in schools," Surendranath said. "Rather, it emphasized homogeneity in schools, which is opposite of diversity and multiculturalism that our constitution upholds."

The Karnataka ruling has been appealed to India's Supreme Court. Plaintiffs requested an expedited hearing on the grounds that a continued ban on the hijab threatens to cause Muslim students to lose an entire academic year. The court declined to hold an early hearing, however.

Muslims make up just 14% of India's 1.4 billion people, but nonetheless constitute the world's second-largest Muslim population for a nation. The hijab has historically not been prohibited or restricted in public spheres, and women donning the headscarf — like other outward expressions of faith, across religions — is common across the country.

The dispute has further deepened sectarian fault lines, and many Muslims worry hijab bans could embolden Hindu nationalists and pave the way for more restrictions targeting Islam.

"What if the ban goes national?" said Ayesha Hajeera Almas, one of the women who challenged the ban in the Karnataka courts. "Millions of Muslim women will suffer."

Mustafa agreed.

"Hijab for many girls is liberating. It is a kind of bargain girls make with conservative families as a way for them to go out and participate in public life," he said. "The court completely ignored this perspective."

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Including young kids likely to sink Kansas trans sports ban

By JOHN HANNA AP Political Writer

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Kansas appears unlikely to join other states this year in keeping transgender athletes from competing in girls' and women's school sports, partly because conservative state lawmakers want the ban to apply to elementary school students.

The Republican-controlled Legislature approved a proposed ban early Saturday with solid majorities in both chambers — but not the two-thirds needed to override an almost-certain veto from Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly. She rejected a similar bill last year, saying it would send “a devastating message that Kansas is not welcoming to all children and their families.”

Republicans nationwide have pushed the issue to appeal to a broad swath of voters, framing it as fairness in competition and access to scholarships. At least 12 other states have enacted such laws, including Arizona and Oklahoma this week. Supporters in Kansas believe the issue grew even more compelling for athletes and their families with the University of Pennsylvania's Lia Thomas recently becoming the NCAA's first transgender champion in women's swimming.

But enough GOP lawmakers in Kansas keep breaking with Republican colleagues that LGBTQ-rights advocates probably will prevail for a second consecutive year. Several of those dissident Republicans said having a ban apply as early as kindergarten is a problem for them. State Sen. John Doll, a western Kansas Republican, has voted both ways and was a “no” early Saturday because he wasn't able to persuade colleagues last month to exempt elementary school students from the ban.

“To be honest, I don't know where I'm at with it,” he said Saturday of a ban overall. “When it comes to a veto, I can't say that I would vote to override the veto.”

The vote Friday night in the House was 74-39, leaving supporters 10 votes short of a two-thirds majority. While a dozen of the House's 125 members were absent, at least five were likely to vote “no.”

The state Senate's vote early Saturday was 25-13 and sent the bill to Kelly. But supporters were two votes short of a two-thirds majority, and the Republicans who were absent have split over the proposal in the past.

“The focus now on, again, the very, very young kids who have no concept of ‘transgender’ — it just didn't feel appropriate,” said state Sen. Brenda Dietrich, a Topeka Republican and a former local school district superintendent who has consistently voted “no.”

Besides attacking proposed bans as anti-LGBTQ discrimination, critics across the U.S. have noted there have been relatively few transgender athletes. In Kansas, the state association overseeing extracurricular activities for grades 7 through 12 says it has been notified of only six or seven transgender athletes in those grades.

Kansas opponents of a ban have accused backers of picking on young children and suggested that schools could be forced to inspect children's genitals to settle disputes about their participation.

State Rep. Heather Meyer, an Overland Park Democrat, said Friday the bill told transgender children that “they are not valid.” After speaking about her transgender 12-year-old son in sixth grade and their transgender best friend, she wiped her eyes with a tissue as the debate continued.

“This is my child, and I'm going to stand up for them. I'm going to stand up for their friends. I'm going to stand up for their peers,” Meyer said. “This is just wrong.”

Supporters of the bill argued during debates Friday night and into early Saturday that schools could rely on birth certificates and other language to settle disputes.

They also argued that children are entering puberty at younger ages, making the unfair advantages of transgender girls appear earlier.

“It needs to be taken care so things don't go out of hand,” said Rep. Barbara Wasinger, another Republican from western Kansas.

The bill's supporters said they are showing support for young girls who want to play sports and older girls who strive for college scholarships. Supporters of a proposed ban often refer to transgender athletes as “biological” boys, men or males.

“It makes me sad that the women in the room don't realize that we biological women are being bullied,”

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said Republican Rep. Tatum Lee, also from western Kansas. "We do everything we can to protect those being bullied, and I feel bullied."

But Democratic state Rep. Stephanie Byers, of Wichita, the state's first and only elected transgender lawmaker, said that when she returns home, "There will be families that come to my porch and look at me and say, 'Can you tell us that this is going to be OK?'"

"I promise you, your constituents will write ME, and those letters start with, 'I would tell my representative, but they won't listen,'" she added.

Generations sing to Joni Mitchell in pre-Grammys tribute

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — An 81-year-old jazz giant and a 15-year-old rock singer were the first to perform tributes to Joni Mitchell on Friday night.

Such was the diversity of artists honoring a most diverse artist, Mitchell, a Canadian-turned-Californian, folkie-turned-rocker-turned-jazz explorer who was honored as the 2022 MusiCares Person of the year by the Recording Academy two days before the Grammy Awards.

Herbie Hancock played a jazz piano rendition of music from Mitchell's 1976 album "Hejira" that was followed by a rocking version of 1974's "Help Me" from Violet Grohl, the teenage daughter of Foo Fighters frontman Dave Grohl, to open the tribute concert in a ballroom at the MGM Grand Las Vegas.

Mitchell, sitting at the front table, brought out the teenager in many of the older entertainers.

"When I first heard Joni Mitchell it was 1968 and I was 15 years old," Cyndi Lauper, now 68, said. "I had never heard anyone sing so intimately about what it was like to be a young woman navigating this world."

Lauper recited several of Mitchell's lines that moved her most, before launching into "Magdalene Laundry" while playing mountain dulcimer.

"I don't know how you do what you do, I just know I need it like food," Meryl Streep said in a video message played for Mitchell and the crowd. "Ever since we were both young girls. We didn't know each other, but you sang me into being. You sang my life."

Seven years after a brain aneurysm that left her temporarily unable to walk or speak, Mitchell, 78, was delighted to be in Las Vegas and out at a major public event for the first time since the pandemic began.

"I had the best margarita that I've ever had at our hotel," she told The Associated Press as she walked into the gala.

Mitchell is a presenter and a nominee for best historical album at Sunday's Grammys. She says she's always found herself in the genres and categories that don't make the Grammy telecast.

"I usually win the behind-the-curtain awards," she said with a laugh.

Inside, sitting a table with Hancock and director Cameron Crowe, Mitchell often appeared near tears as a parade of artists praised her before giving their takes on her songs.

"Not unlike people who lived in the time of Shakespeare, and of Beethoven, we are living in the time of Joni Mitchell, and it shows tonight," said Brandi Carlile, who sang a version of "Woodstock" that began as a quiet ballad before the house band kicked in and Stephen Stills — who played on the most famous version of the 1970 song with Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young — joined her for an electric guitar solo.

In a new approach to this year's MusiCares tribute, organizers appointed Carlile, who is up for five Grammys on Sunday, and Jon Batiste, who is up for 11, as music directors to coordinate the artists and their approaches to the difficult, genre-bending songs of Mitchell's five-decade career.

"We helped shepherd artists to their Joni songs, the ones that their souls connected to," Carlile told the AP. "This isn't easy music. This is complicated, brilliant music that is really hard to interpret."

Before singing one of those esoteric songs, "The Jungle Line" from 1975's "The Hissing of the Summer Lawns," Beck said "preparing for this event I feel like I've been in Joni school."

John Legend gave a surprise performance, singing and playing solo piano on Mitchell's "River" on a spinning stage in the middle of the room as the crowd of 2,400 was finishing their spinning dessert, an edible Grammy trophy on a turntable.

"Everybody was splendid, it just kept getting better and better and better," Mitchell said in a brief ac-

ceptance speech near the concert's end. "I can retire now and just let other people do it."

But she showed she's not quite done yet.

Carlile and Batiste brought most of the night's performers back to the stage for a sing-along of "The Circle Game" and "Big Yellow Taxi."

Mitchell eventually made her way to the mic to join them, delivering the famous baritone ending of the latter song.

"Put up a parking lot," she sang, to laughs and whoops from the crowd.

The MusiCares Person of the Year is a career achievement award handed out for a combination of inspiring artistic accomplishments and philanthropy. The gala handing it out raises funds for the programs of MusiCares, the Recording Academy charity that provides health and welfare services to musicians in need.

Past honorees include Quincy Jones, Stevie Wonder, Elton John, Bruce Springsteen, Aretha Franklin, Dolly Parton and Aerosmith.

EXPLAINER: What's next for Europe's natural gas during war?

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian President Vladimir Putin is demanding payment in rubles for natural gas — or else. Germany is talking about gas rationing in case of a cutoff. Prices for the fuel used to heat homes, generate electricity and power industry are through the roof.

There's a lot of discussion around natural gas in Europe against the background of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to say the least.

Here are key things to know:

WHAT IS PUTIN PROPOSING?

Putin has said importers of Russian gas must now pay in rubles. European leaders said no dice — the contracts say euros or dollars and one side can't abruptly change that.

Changing currency would normally follow extended negotiations, analysts say, with customers demanding something in return for being exposed to fluctuations that would come with paying in the less-stable ruble.

The open questions about what the change could mean have sent shudders through energy markets, raising uncertainty about whether Europe's natural gas could be cut off and cause a major hit to the economy. But Russia also relies on oil and sales to fund its government as sanctions have squeezed its financial system.

The Kremlin offered what could be seen as a loophole. Importers would simply have to establish an account in dollars or euros at a designated bank, then a second account in rubles. The importer would pay the gas bill in euros or dollars and direct the bank to exchange the money for rubles.

In any case, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday that the change won't happen immediately: "Payments on shipments in progress right now must be made not this very day, but somewhere in late April, or even early May."

European leaders have rejected the proposal as "blackmail" and say payments will continue in dollars and euros.

German officials wouldn't discuss the impact of Putin's decree other than to say they were examining it. Economy Ministry spokeswoman Beate Baron noted that Russia's Gazprombank has been given 10 days to explain the procedure, "and of course we will in turn look carefully at that."

A top European Commission energy official tweeted that the European Union was coordinating "to establish a common approach."

WHAT IS PUTIN AFTER?

The Kremlin says the change is necessary because Western sanctions have frozen its reserves of foreign currency. Because the measure targets importers in "unfriendly countries," it can be seen as retaliation for the sanctions that have cut many Russian banks off from international financial transactions and led some Western companies to abandon their businesses in Russia.

The economic advantages for Russia aren't clear. In theory, payment in rubles would increase demand

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for the currency and help the Kremlin prop up its exchange rate, which has regained ground from its initial plunge after the invasion. But gas exporter Gazprom already has to sell 80% of its foreign earnings for rubles, so the boost to the currency could be minimal.

The Kremlin indicates it also wants to extend ruble payments to other commodities, such as metals.

One motive may be political, said Stefan Meister, head of the program on international order and democracy at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

"Russia is not interested in stopping gas, but it wants a kind of political victory," Meister said. "It wants to show that Putin dictates the conditions under which it exports gas."

The move is partly aimed at Russia's domestic audience, Meister said, with Putin telling his people: "Look, these are enemy states and now they have to pay under a different scheme."

"So I think that this is also about getting support inside the country, defining who are the enemies," Meister said.

Another motive could be to protect the designated bank, Gazprombank, from being hit by sanctions because it would be the conduit for the payments that keep gas flowing, Meister said. It is the third-largest bank in Russia, and like Sberbank, the largest, it has not been cut off from the international SWIFT payment system.

WHAT'S THE STATE OF GAS SUPPLY TO EUROPE?

Coordinated U.S. and European Union sanctions exempt payments for oil and gas. That is a White House concession to European allies who are much more dependent on energy from Russia, which provides 40% of Europe's gas and 25% of its oil.

Gas continued to flow Friday into the European pipeline system from Russia, according to pipeline operators' websites.

Many aren't happy that European utilities are still buying energy from Russia, which on average got 43% of its annual government revenue from oil and gas sales between 2011 and 2020, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

That helped pay for the tanks and missiles used in the invasion. But it also means Russia has strong reasons not to cut off natural gas.

COULD EUROPE SURVIVE A GAS CUTOFF?

Europe's economy would struggle without Russian gas, although the impact would vary based on how much countries use.

Germany, the continent's largest economy, "is heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies," said Monika Schnitzer, professor of economics at the University of Munich and member of the country's government-appointed council of economic experts.

"A suspension of these supplies entails the risk that the German economy slides into a recession with significantly higher inflation rates," she said.

Inflation is already at record highs, making everything from groceries to raw materials more expensive. It's driven by soaring energy prices, with Europe facing an energy crunch even before the war broke out.

The crisis has left governments and companies scrambling to round up supplies from other sources, but it would not be enough to cover what's used now if Russian gas suddenly stopped.

The Bruegel think tank estimated that Europe would be 10% to 15% short of normal demand to get through the next winter heating season, meaning exceptional measures would have to be taken to reduce gas use.

European leaders have said they can't afford the consequences of an immediate boycott. Instead, they plan to reduce Russian gas use as fast as possible. They're ordering more liquefied natural gas, which comes by ship; seeking more gas from pipelines from Norway and Azerbaijan; accelerating deployment of wind and solar energy; and pushing conservation measures.

The aim is to cut use of Russian gas by two-thirds by the end of the year and completely by 2027.

The situation is serious enough that Germany has declared an early warning of an energy emergency, the first of three stages.

In a full-blown emergency, government regulators must decide which companies would have their gas shut off to spare homes and hospitals. Makers of chemicals, glass, ceramics and galvanized metals use lots of gas.

Rationing would hit a European economy already suffering from the fallout from the war and high energy prices that have boosted inflation to a record 7.5%.

New radio station helps Ukrainian refugees adapt in Prague

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

PRAGUE (AP) — This is Radio Ukraine calling.

A new Prague-based internet radio station has started to broadcast news, information and music tailored to the day-to-day concerns of some 300,000 refugees who have arrived in the Czech Republic since Russia launched its military assault against Ukraine.

In a studio at the heart of the Czech capital, radio veterans work together with absolute beginners to provide the refugees with what they need to know to settle as smoothly as possible in a new country.

The staff of 10 combines people who have fled Ukraine in recent weeks with those who have been living abroad for years. No matter who they are, their common goal is to help fellow Ukrainians and their homeland facing the brutal Russian invasion.

Natalia Churikova, an experienced journalist with Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty said she couldn't say no to an offer to become the broadcaster's editor-in-chief.

"It was for my people, for people who really needed help, who really needed support, something that would help them start a new life or restart their lives here after they have lived through very bad things trying to escape from Ukraine," Churikova said.

Staffer Sofia Tatomyr is one of those who left to escape the war.

The 22-year-old from the western town of Kalush was making plans to move to another city in Ukraine when a friend called one morning: "Sofia, the war has just begun."

Her parents and older brother opted to stay home, but they wanted her to join her aunt in Prague.

"It happened all of a sudden," she said. She boarded a bus alone in Cherniutsi and arrived 28 hours later in the Czech capital, a city she'd never visited.

"When I was already abroad, I remember the moment that I was crying and I was trying to buy a ticket and I couldn't spell what ticket I need. It was really difficult," she said.

Tatomyr worked as graphic designer and singer in Ukraine after getting a degree as a publisher and media editor. Radio broadcasting was part of her courses at the university. To her surprise, her aunt's brother found an announcement about jobs for a new Ukrainian radio station.

She said she needed "some time to understand that not everybody can be at the frontline at the war and everybody has to do what he or she can do the best."

"So this is how I'm cheering myself up that I'm doing my profession, that I'm doing what I can do the best, and this is the best way I can help our people, I can help Ukraine. This is how I'm thinking about it," she said.

Safe in Prague, she was still trying to come to terms with the invasion of her homeland.

"It's horrible," she said. "I can't still find any logical explanation for what they're doing and why they're doing it. In the 21st century, a war? Why? We were a peaceful nation living just our lives."

Another announcer, Marharyta Golobrodska, was working as a copywriter for a software company when she received a call from Churikova, whom she knew from an internship at Radio Free Europe.

"I used to consider those who get up early to be ready to work from 6 a.m. crazy, but that's what I do now and I thoroughly enjoy it," Golobrodska said. "That's what I always wanted to do, to be helpful for my country, even though I live so far away."

For 12 hours each weekday — and 11 hours on weekends — Radio Ukraine plays Ukrainian and western music while presenting news of Ukraine and the Czech Republic together with information for refugees every 15 minutes. It includes details about where they can get the documents they need from local au-

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thorities, how to get a job or medical treatment, or how to find a place for children at schools. Children can listen to Ukrainian fairy tales.

A native of the southern city of Mykolaiv, Golobrodska has lived in the Czech Republic for eight-and-a-half years. After the invasion, she traveled to western Ukraine to meet her mother and 9-year-old sister and drive them to safety. In Prague, she got them involved in her broadcast.

"My mum, for example, told me she'd like to hear what she's not supposed to do here. For example, that she can't park the car anywhere she wants to like in Ukraine," she said.

Bohemia Media, which operates several radio stations in the Czech Republic, came up with the idea to launch the station. It provided a studio and its people cooperated with the Ukrainian embassy, the local Ukrainian community and others to make it reality in three weeks. It also covers the salaries.

Lukas Nadvornik, the owner of the Mediapark, a company that represents Bohemia Media, said the plan is for the station to remain on air as long as it's needed. The key task for now is to let know as many potential listeners as possible about its existence.

One of them is Sophia Medvedeva. The 23-year old web designer couldn't hold back tears as she talked about the recent six-day drive with her mother and younger brother from Mykolaiv to Krakow, Poland.

But in Prague, she joined her fiancé and Radio Ukraine helped her adapt to a new life.

"I'm so amazed about the chance to listen to Ukrainian music when I'm not in my homeland. I feel that I'm not alone," she said. Her only recommendation for it is to invite a psychologist to "advise the Ukrainian refugees about how to fight the survivor syndrome and how to fight depression."

Russia aims Ukraine disinformation at Spanish speakers

By DAVID KLEPPER and AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

Washington (AP) — Though Russia is the country that invaded its neighbor Ukraine, the Kremlin's version relentlessly warns social media users across Latin America that the U.S. is the bigger problem.

"Never forget who is the real threat to the world," reads a headline, translated here from Spanish. The article, originally posted in late February on Twitter by RT en Español, is intended for an audience half a world away from the fighting in Kyiv and Mariupol.

As that war rages, Russia is launching falsehoods into the feeds of Spanish-speaking social media users in nations that already have long records of distrusting the U.S. The aim is to gain support in those countries for the Kremlin's war and stoke opposition against America's response.

Though many of the claims have been discredited, they're spreading widely in Latin America and helping to make Kremlin-controlled outlets some of the top Spanish-language sources for information about the war. Russian outlet RT en Español is now the third most shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Russia's invasion.

"RT's success should be concerning to anyone worried about the success of democracy," said Samuel Woolley, a University of Texas professor who researches disinformation. "RT is geared toward authoritarian control and, depending on the context, nationalism and xenophobia. What we risk is Russia gaining control of an increasingly large market share of eyeballs."

U.S.-based tech companies have tried to rein in Russian outlets' ability to spread propaganda following the invasion, by banning apps linked to the outlets, demoting the content and labeling state-run media outlets. The European Union has banned RT and Russian state-owned Sputnik,

Yet the content thrives on Spanish-language websites, message boards and social media pages. While Russia also creates propaganda in languages including English, Arabic, French and German, it's found particular success with Spanish-speaking users, according to recent research by Esteban Ponce de Leon, a Bogota, Colombia-based analyst with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, a Washington think tank that receives funding from the U.S. and other governments.

Russia's discredited claims about Ukraine and the U.S. include allegations that the invasion was necessary to confront neo-Nazis, or that the U.S. has secretly backed biological warfare research in Ukraine. In fact, the U.S. has long publicly provided funding for biological labs in Ukraine that research pathogens

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with the hope of curbing dangerous disease outbreaks.

That type of disinformation can easily flow from Latin America into other countries — including the U.S. — that have large Spanish-speaking communities. Sometimes it's passed between relatives who might be sharing the claims across continents with one another. It's another potential entry point for Russia, and a reminder of the sophistication of the Russians' efforts.

"There's different avenues where RT is actively engaging communities across Latin America and the United States," said Jacobo Licona, a researcher at the Democratic firm, Equis Labs. "That's part of the reason RT has been so effective, they've been building this network or community ahead of time."

As one of the world's most-spoken languages, Spanish is of obvious interest to any government or organization intent on shaping global public opinion. But Russia's focus on the Spanish language goes further, reflecting the historic and strategic importance of Central and South America during the Cold War, said analyst Ponce de Leon of the Atlantic Council.

For decades, the Soviet Union sought to exploit historic tensions between the U.S. and Latin America by supporting communist factions and larger allies including Cuba. Russia has sought to portray the U.S. as a colonizing empire, even as the Kremlin has worked to strengthen its own ties to the hemisphere.

RT's Spanish language service began in 2009, four years after its English language version. It has rapidly gained ground, and is now far more popular than its English counterpart. RT en Español has more than 16 million followers on its Facebook page, nearly triple the number of its English site.

High profile names in Latin America have in some cases given RT a hand. Ex-Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa began hosting a weekly political talk show for RT in 2018, less than a year after he left office. Since then he's been convicted of corruption charges that forced him to flee Ecuador for Europe. Authorities in Ecuador have also accused him of trying to destabilize his successor's government.

In March, RT en Español's Facebook page experienced a boost in interactions, generating roughly 75,000 likes, reactions and comments on its pages daily, according to an analysis by the Equis Institute, a Democratic research and polling firm. The bump in engagement continued even after tech company Meta said it was demoting Russian-state media pages across its platforms, which include Facebook and Instagram.

On Twitter, RT and Sputnik get help from Russian diplomats and a network of other accounts that researchers say artificially boost the popularity of the posts. That has helped RT become the third-most shared site for Spanish-language information on the Ukraine war on Twitter, outperforming local news sources as well as international outlets like the BBC and CNN.

Ponce de Leon tracked thousands of accounts that posted or reposted content from RT and Sputnik on Twitter and found that 171 accounts were responsible for 11% of the overall engagement with the posts. During one eight-day period in March, those accounts posted more than 200,000 times, or an average of 155 tweets per day for each account — significantly more than a normal user.

The suspect accounts helped spread the content to authentic users, Ponce de Leon said, in an effort to grow RT's already impressive audience in Latin America.

"Russia is seeking to maintain its popularity in Latin America," he said. "RT and Sputnik already have a big audience in the region. Should we be concerned? The answer would be yes."

Jan. 6 panel puts Garland in 'precarious' spot, ups pressure

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol are increasingly going public with critical statements, court filings and more to deliver a blunt message to Attorney General Merrick Garland and the Department of Justice.

President Donald Trump and his allies likely committed crimes, they say. And it's up to you to do something about it.

"Attorney General Garland, do your job so we can do ours," prodded Rep. Elaine Luria of Virginia.

"We are upholding our responsibility. The Department of Justice must do the same," echoed Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif.

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Their rhetoric, focused this week on two contempt of Congress referrals approved by the committee, is just the latest example of the pressure campaign the lawmakers are waging. It reflects a stark reality: While they can investigate Jan. 6 and issue subpoenas to gather information, only the Justice Department can bring criminal charges.

Committee members see the case they are building against Trump and his allies as a once-in-a-generation circumstance. If it's not fully prosecuted, they say, it could set a dangerous precedent that threatens the foundations of American democracy.

The lawmakers seem nearly certain to send a criminal referral to the Justice Department once their work is through.

It all puts Garland, who has spent his tenure trying to shield the Justice Department from political pressure, in a precarious spot. Any criminal charges related to Jan. 6 would trigger a firestorm, thrusting prosecutors back into the partisan crossfire that proved so damaging during the Trump-Russia influence investigation and an email probe of Hillary Clinton.

Garland has given no public indication about whether prosecutors might be considering a case against the former president. He has, though, vowed to hold accountable "all January 6th perpetrators, at any level" and has said that would include those who were "present that day or were otherwise criminally responsible for the assault on our democracy."

It's already the largest criminal prosecution in the department's history — for rioters who entered the Capitol building on Jan. 6 as well as members of extremist groups who are accused of planning the attack. More than 750 people have been charged with federal crimes. Over 220 riot defendants have pleaded guilty, more than 100 have been sentenced and at least 90 others have trial dates.

Parts of the department's investigation have overlapped with the committee's. One example is in late January when Justice announced it had opened a probe into a fake slate of electors who falsely tried to declare Trump the winner of the 2020 election in seven swing states that Joe Biden won. Three days later, lawmakers subpoenaed more than a dozen people involved in the effort.

But the Jan. 6 committee wants more. Their message was amplified this week when a federal judge in California — District Judge David Carter, a Bill Clinton appointee — wrote that it is "more likely than not" that Trump himself committed crimes in his attempt to stop the certification of the 2020 election.

The practical effect of that ruling was to order the release of more than 100 emails from Trump adviser John Eastman to the Jan. 6 Committee. But lawmakers zeroed in on a particular passage in the judge's opinion that characterized Jan. 6 as a "coup."

"Dr. Eastman and President Trump launched a campaign to overturn a democratic election, an action unprecedented in American history. Their campaign was not confined to the ivory tower—it was a coup in search of a legal theory," Carter wrote.

But experts caution that Carter's opinion was only in a civil case and does not meet the longstanding charging policy the Justice Department is required to meet. Justin Danilewitz, a Philadelphia-based attorney and former federal prosecutor, noted the department faces a higher burden of proof in court to show that presidential immunity should not apply. And he said the legal advice Trump received from Eastman "undermines an inference of corrupt or deceitful intent."

The department will be guided by the evidence and law, he said, "but the social and political ramifications of a decision of this kind will not be far from the minds of Attorney General Garland and his staff."

"A decision to bring or not bring criminal charges will have significant ripple effects," he added.

Taylor Budowich, a Trump spokesperson, called the judge's ruling an "absurd and baseless ruling by a Clinton-appointed Judge in California." He called the House committee's investigation a "circus of partisanship."

Another point of friction with the Justice Department is the effort to enforce subpoenas through contempt of Congress charges.

The House approved a contempt referral against former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows in December after he ceased cooperating with the Jan. 6 panel. While an earlier contempt referral against

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former Trump adviser Steve Bannon resulted in an indictment, the Department of Justice has been slower to decide whether to prosecute Meadows.

"The Department of Justice is entrusted with defending our Constitution," Rep. Liz Cheney, the Republican committee chair, said at a hearing this week. "Department leadership should not apply any doctrine of immunity that might block Congress from fully uncovering and addressing the causes of the January 6 attack."

A decision to pursue the contempt charges against Meadows would have to come from career prosecutors in the U.S. attorney's office in Washington before senior Justice Department officials would weigh in and decide how to proceed.

Bringing a case against Meadows would be more challenging for prosecutors than the case against Bannon, in large part because Bannon wasn't a White House official during the insurrection.

The Justice Department has long maintained that senior aides generally cannot be forced to testify if a president invokes executive privilege, as Trump has done. And bringing charges could risk undermining the longstanding principle that lets the executive branch of the government keep most discussions private.

While the majority of committee members have turned up the pressure on Garland, one member, Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, has not gone as far.

"I feel strongly that we restore the tradition of respect for the independence of the law enforcement function," Raskin told reporters this week. "That was one of the things that got trashed during the Trump period. And so I think that Congress and the president should let the Department of Justice and attorney general do their job."

"Attorney General Garland is my constituent," Raskin added, "and I don't beat up on my constituents."

Palin joins 50 others in running for Alaska US House seat

By BECKY BOHRER Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — Sarah Palin on Friday shook up an already unpredictable race for Alaska's lone U.S. House seat, joining a field of 50 other candidates seeking to fill the seat held for decades by the late-U.S. Rep. Don Young, who died last month.

Palin filed paperwork Friday with a state Division of Elections office in Wasilla, said Tiffany Montemayor, a division spokesperson.

Palin, a former Alaska governor who was the 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee, has the biggest national political profile in the packed field that includes current and former state legislators and a North Pole city council member named Santa Claus.

"Public service is a calling, and I would be honored to represent the men and women of Alaska in Congress, just as Rep. Young did for 49 years," Palin said in a statement on social media.

Young, a Republican, had held Alaska's House seat since 1973 and was seeking reelection at the time of his death last month at age 88.

Others in the flurry of filings before Friday's deadline were state Sen. Josh Revak and Tara Sweeney, who are both Republicans and were the statewide co-chairs of Young's reelection campaign.

Palin resigned as governor in 2009, partway through her term, and said she could make a difference outside the governor's office. She also had expressed outrage over ethics complaints she felt had frivolously targeted her.

Palin has kept a low profile in Alaska politics since then but maintained a presence nationally, including through speaking engagements, appearances with conservative outlets and on reality TV. She also was an early supporter of now-former President Donald Trump.

She has hinted at possible runs for office in the past but never took the plunge. In her statement Friday, she said America is "at a tipping point" and that she's in the race to "win it and join the fight for freedom alongside other patriots willing to sacrifice all to save our country."

A special primary is set for June 11. The top four vote-getters will advance to an Aug. 16 special election in which ranked choice voting will be used, a process in line with a new elections system approved

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by voters in 2020.

The winner, targeted to be certified by Sept. 2, will serve the remainder of Young's term, which expires in January.

The special election will coincide with the regular primary. The regular primary and November general election will determine who represents Alaska in the House for a two-year term starting in January.

Others who filed Friday include Democratic state Rep. Adam Wool; independent Al Gross, an orthopedic surgeon who unsuccessfully ran for U.S. Senate in 2020; and Emil Notti, a Democrat who narrowly lost the 1973 election to Young. Former lawmakers Andrew Halcro and Mary Sattler Peltola are also running.

They join a field that had already included Republican Nick Begich, who previously announced plans to run for U.S. House last fall; Democrat Christopher Constant, an Anchorage Assembly member; and John Coghill, a Republican former state lawmaker.

Begich, an early challenger to Young, said he sees the Matanuska-Susitna region, a hotbed of conservatism that includes Palin's hometown of Wasilla, as one of his strongest areas of the state.

Begich said there are a "lot of opportunistic candidates, in our view, that have chosen to get in. I think that the entry of Gov. Palin is completely consistent with that sort of spirit of opportunism that we're seeing right now."

Revak, who previously worked for Young's office, said he felt a "strong calling and a duty" to step forward.

He said he was "heartbroken" by the filing timeline, coinciding with a period he said should be focused on remembering Young. Young died in state at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday. A public memorial was held in the Washington, D.C.-area on Wednesday and a public memorial is planned in Anchorage on Saturday.

Revak said he also plans to run in the regular primary for U.S. House. Palin, Begich, Constant, Gross and Peltola are also among those who have filed to run in both. Sweeney in a statement said she planned to run in both.

Sweeney is a former assistant secretary of Indian Affairs with the U.S. Department of Interior.

"This weekend I will join my fellow Alaskans in honoring the life and legacy of Congressman Young," she said in a statement. "For nearly 50 years he fought tirelessly for our state and he sets the bar for what it means to serve."

She said she is excited to share her vision for the future in the coming weeks.

Gross' campaign has announced a leadership team that includes several Republicans and independents, as well as Democrats, including former Gov. Tony Knowles.

"We are building a campaign that embodies all of Alaska," Gross said in a statement.

Wool said he has privately discussed a run for years. He said earlier in the day Friday that he looked at the candidates running in the special primary and "wasn't that impressed. Many of them have never won an election, don't have any statewide recognition and politically aren't aligned certainly not with me or what I would think the majority of Alaskans are looking for."

Wool, from Fairbanks, said he considers himself moderate. He said he has yet to decide whether to run in the regular primary.

Halcro, who has a podcast on which he talks politics, lost to Palin in the 2006 gubernatorial general election. He said during this campaign he plans to play up his intent to only run to fill the remainder of the term. He is running as an independent.

He said if the person who wins the special election also is in the November general election, he expects they would spend a fair amount of time campaigning. He said if elected, he would be focused on congressional work.

Peltola, a Democrat from Bethel, noted the long list of candidates and said there is "obviously a lot of pent-up desire to serve our state." She said Alaska is diverse and that "it's important to me that the field of candidates also reflects Alaska's diversity." Peltola is Yup'ik Eskimo.

Meanwhile, a man who years ago legally changed his name to Santa Claus and serves on the North Pole city council also filed for the special primary. Claus, who said he has a "strong affinity" for Bernie Sanders, is running as an independent.

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He said he is not soliciting or raising money. He said the new elections process "gives people like me an opportunity, without having to deal with parties, to throw our hat in the ring."

"I do have name recognition," he said with a laugh.

South Carolina women top Louisville, advance to title game

By DAVE CAMPBELL AP Sports Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — This time, Aliyah Boston and the South Carolina Gamecocks were smiling as they strutted off the court at the Final Four.

The only crying came from relief and joy, one year after a painfully opposite finish in the national semifinals.

Boston took over after halftime and finished with 23 points and 18 rebounds to back up her AP National Player of the Year award, carrying South Carolina to the NCAA championship game with a 72-59 victory over Louisville on Friday night.

"You see happy tears, happy tears, right now," Boston said in her postgame TV interview. "I'm just thanking God we have one more game."

Brea Beal matched her season high with 12 points and helped hold Cardinals star Hailey Van Lith to nine points on 4-for-11 shooting as the Gamecocks (34-2) delivered another stifling defensive performance and advanced to meet Connecticut, a 63-58 semifinal winner over Stanford, on Sunday night.

"Life in general, it's going to throw tests at you. You're going to have to pass the tests or you're going to have to retake them," said coach Dawn Staley, who will try to win her second national championship with South Carolina eight months after the Hall of Famer led the U.S. team to a gold medal in the Tokyo Olympics.

Destanni Henderson scored 11 points with 3-for-6 shooting from 3-point range for South Carolina, which had a 19-5 assists advantage and improved to 13-0 this season against AP-ranked opponents.

Emily Engstler led Louisville with 18 points and nine rebounds as the Cardinals went 1 for 8 from 3-point range and were never able to find a rhythm in the half court against the No. 1 overall seed in this tournament.

South Carolina, which won it all in 2017, was ousted in the semifinals last season by one point to eventual champion Stanford when Boston's put-back attempt bounced off the rim at the buzzer. The 6-foot-5 junior from the U.S. Virgin Islands has bounced right back a year later, and the Gamecocks have followed her lead.

"We knew that were going to be tested, and this is the hump that we need to get over," Boston said.

Kianna Smith and Olivia Cochran each scored 14 points for the Cardinals (29-5), who were the only team in this Final Four without an NCAA championship in their trophy case. This was the program's fourth trip to the national semifinals in coach Jeff Walz's 15 seasons.

"You don't ever want to say that's your favorite team, because then all your past teams get mad at you, but I'd put this group right up there at the top," Walz said. "It was just an absolute joy to coach."

The Gamecocks, who were the wire-to-wire No. 1 team in the AP poll this season, squeezed their first four tournament opponents in the Greensboro Region to a bleak average of 41.2 points on their way to a fourth Final Four in the last seven years.

The Cardinals, one of the three No. 1 seeds in this Final Four, made it out of the Wichita Region without any trouble. Van Lith, the relentless sophomore guard with the perpetually flopping blond pigtailed, hit the 20-point mark in each of their first four tournament games.

LOCKDOWN ON LOUISVILLE

Van Lith met her match with Beal, who had a four-inch height advantage and shadowed her all over the court as she often does to the opponent's most dangerous player. Van Lith, whose first basket came on a knifing drive for a layup with 1:43 left in the second quarter, had two jumpers blocked by Beal and three turnovers in the first half.

Engstler, the tough-as-nails transfer from Syracuse, helped Louisville keep Boston from getting too comfortable in the paint while Cochran helped with the muscle. Physical play can come with a price, though, and with 4.2 seconds left in the third quarter Boston drew Engstler's fourth foul on a putback layup and

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stretched the lead to 57-48 with the and-one free throw.

Engstler fouled out with 4:56 to go and had her head buried in her clenched hands on the bench as her teammates tried to console her.

"I think we should all leave this arena and Minneapolis with our heads held very high. I'm extremely proud of this team, and I've had an amazing time with them," Engstler said.

BOSTON STRONG

After putting up 28 points and 22 rebounds in the Sweet 16 against North Carolina, Boston had plenty left for the Final Four.

Wearing her familiar vibrant braids in a bright-pink-and-purple combination, Boston helped the Gamecocks set a commanding tone early with an 11-2 lead. The Cardinals missed seven of their first eight shots from the floor.

Louisville enjoyed a 12-0 run early in the second quarter to take a short-lived three-point edge, but South Carolina simply had so much more to offer after that. Henderson's 3-pointer gave the Gamecocks their largest lead at 51-36 midway through the third quarter, and the Cardinals were only within less than eight points for 42 seconds after that.

Boston had 15 points and 10 rebounds in the second half.

"The game just opened up," she said. "We were able to continue to move the ball."

ANTHEM ABSENCE

The entire South Carolina team stayed off the court during the national anthem, keeping with the Gamecocks' practice all season. Last season, several players took a knee during the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Zelenskyy: Retreating Russians leave many mines behind

By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned his people early Saturday that retreating Russian forces were creating "a complete disaster" outside the capital as they leave mines across "the whole territory," even around homes and corpses.

He issued the warning as the humanitarian crisis in the encircled city of Mariupol deepened, with Russian forces blocking evacuation operations for the second day in a row, and the Kremlin accused the Ukrainians of launching a helicopter attack on a fuel depot on Russian soil.

Ukraine denied responsibility for the fiery blast, but if Moscow's claim is confirmed, it would be the war's first known attack in which Ukrainian aircraft penetrated Russian airspace.

"Certainly, this is not something that can be perceived as creating comfortable conditions for the continuation of the talks," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, five weeks after Moscow began sending upwards of 150,000 of its own troops across Ukraine's border.

Russia continued withdrawing some of its ground forces from areas around Kyiv after saying earlier this week it would reduce military activity near the Ukrainian capital and the northern city of Chernihiv.

"They are mining the whole territory. They are mining homes, mining equipment, even the bodies of people who were killed," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation. "There are a lot of trip wires, a lot of other dangers."

He urged residents to wait to resume their normal lives until they are assured that the mines have been cleared and the danger of shelling has passed.

While the Russians kept up their bombardment around Kyiv and Chernihiv, Ukrainian troops exploited the pullback on the ground by mounting counterattacks and retaking a number of towns and villages.

Still, Ukraine and its allies warned that the Kremlin is not de-escalating to promote trust at the bargaining table, as it claimed, but instead resupplying and shifting its troops to the country's east. Those movements appear to be preparation for an intensified assault on the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas region in the country's east, which includes Mariupol.

Zelenskyy warned of difficult battles ahead as the Russians redeploy troops. "We are preparing for an

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even more active defense," he said.

He did not say anything about the latest round of talks, which took place Friday by video. At a round of talks earlier in the week, Ukraine said it would be willing to abandon a bid to join NATO and declare itself neutral — Moscow's chief demand — in return for security guarantees from several other countries.

The invasion has left thousands dead and driven more than 4 million refugees from Ukraine.

Mariupol, the shattered and besieged southern port city, has seen some of the worst suffering of the war. Its capture would be a major prize for Russian President Vladimir Putin, giving his country an unbroken land bridge to Crimea, seized from Ukraine in 2014.

Mariupol's fate could determine the course of the negotiations to end the war, said Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Ukrainian think tank Penta.

"Mariupol has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance," Fesenko said, "and without its conquest, Putin cannot sit down at the negotiating table." The fall of Mariupol, he said, "will open the way to a peace agreement."

On Friday, the International Committee for the Red Cross said it was unable to carry out an operation to bring civilians out of Mariupol by bus. It said a team had been on its way but had to turn back.

City authorities said the Russians were blocking access to Mariupol.

"We do not see a real desire on the part of the Russians and their satellites to provide an opportunity for Mariupol residents to evacuate to territory controlled by Ukraine," Petro Andryushchenko, an adviser to the mayor of Mariupol, wrote on the Telegram messaging app.

He said Russian forces "are categorically not allowing any humanitarian cargo, even in small amounts, into the city."

Around 100,000 people are believed left in the city, down from a prewar 430,000, and weeks of Russian bombardment and street fighting have caused severe shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine.

"We are running out of adjectives to describe the horrors that residents in Mariupol have suffered," Red Cross spokesperson Ewan Watson said.

On Thursday, Russian forces blocked a 45-bus convoy attempting to evacuate people from Mariupol and seized 14 tons of food and medical supplies bound for the city, Ukrainian authorities said.

Zelenskyy said more than 3,000 people were able to leave Mariupol on Friday. He said he discussed the humanitarian disaster with French President Emmanuel Macron by telephone and with the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, during her visit to Kyiv.

"Europe doesn't have the right to be silent about what is happening in our Mariupol," Zelenskyy said. "The whole world should respond to this humanitarian catastrophe."

Elsewhere, at least three Russian ballistic missiles were fired late Friday from the Crimean Peninsula at the Odesa region on the Black Sea, regional leader Maksim Marchenko said. The Ukrainian military said the Iskander missiles were intended for critical infrastructure but did not hit their targets because of Ukraine's air-defense forces. It was unclear where they hit. Marchenko said there were casualties, but he did not elaborate.

Odesa is Ukraine's largest port and the headquarters of its navy.

As for the fuel depot explosion, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said two Ukrainian helicopter gunships flew in extremely low and attacked the civilian oil storage facility on the outskirts of the city of Belgorod, about 25 kilometers (16 miles) from the Ukraine border.

The regional governor said two workers at the depot were wounded, but the Rosneft state oil company denied anyone was hurt.

Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's national security council, said on Ukrainian television: "For some reason they say that we did it, but in fact this does not correspond with reality."

In an interview with Fox, Zelenskyy refused to say whether Ukraine launched the attack.

Russia has reported cross-border shelling from Ukraine before, including an incident last week that killed a military chaplain, but not an incursion of its airspace.

Amid the Russian pullback on the ground and its continued bombardment, Ukraine's military said it had retaken 29 settlements in the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions.

Russian forces in the northeast also continued to shell Kharkiv, and in the southeast sought to seize the cities of Popasna and Rubizhne as well as Mariupol, the Ukrainian military said.

Meanwhile, Russia on Friday began its annual spring conscription, which aimed at rounding up 134,500 men for a one-year tour of military duty. Russian officials say new recruits won't be sent to the front lines or "hot spots," but many young Russians are skeptical and fear they will be drawn into the war.

On the outskirts of Kyiv, where Russian troops have withdrawn, damaged cars lined the streets of Irpin, a suburban area popular with young families, now in ruins. Emergency workers carried elderly people on stretchers over a wrecked bridge to safety.

Three wooden crosses next to a residential building that was damaged in a shelling marked the graves of a mother and son and an unknown man. A resident who gave her name only as Lila said she helped hurriedly bury them on March 5, just before Russian troops moved in.

"They were hit with artillery and they were burned alive," she said.

An Irpin resident who gave his name only as Andriy said the Russians packed up their equipment and left on Tuesday. The next day, they shelled the town for close to an hour before Ukrainian soldiers retook it.

"I don't think this is over," Andriy said. "They will be back."

Amazon workers in NYC vote to unionize in historic labor win

By HALELUYA HADERO, ANNE D'INNOCENZIO and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Amazon workers in Staten Island, New York, voted to unionize on Friday, marking the first successful U.S. organizing effort in the retail giant's history and handing an unexpected win to a nascent group that fueled the union drive.

Warehouse workers cast 2,654 votes — or about 55% — in favor of a union, giving the fledgling Amazon Labor Union enough support to pull off a victory. According to the National Labor Relations Board, which is overseeing the process, 2,131 workers — or 45% — rejected the union bid.

The 67 ballots that were challenged by either Amazon or the ALU were not enough to sway the outcome. Federal labor officials said the results of the count won't be verified until they process any objections — due by April 8 — that both parties may file.

The victory was an uphill battle for the independent group, made up of former and current workers who lacked official backing from an established union and were out-gunned by the deep-pocketed retail giant. Despite obstacles, organizers believed their grassroots approach was more relatable to workers and could help them overcome where established unions have failed in the past. They were right.

Chris Smalls, a fired Amazon employee who has been leading the ALU in its fight on Staten Island, bounded out of the NLRB building in Brooklyn on Friday with other union organizers, pumping their fists and jumping, chanting "ALU." They uncorked a bottle of Champagne, and Smalls hailed the victory as a call to arms for other Amazon workers across the sprawling company.

"I hope that everybody's paying attention now because a lot of people doubted us," he said.

Smalls hopes the success in New York will embolden workers at other facilities to launch their own organizing campaigns. Even his group will soon shift their attention to a neighboring Amazon warehouse on Staten Island, where a separate union election is scheduled to be held in late April. Organizers believe Friday's win is going to make it easier for them to win there, too.

Amazon posted a statement on its company website Friday saying that it was evaluating its options following the election.

"We're disappointed with the outcome of the election in Staten Island because we believe having a direct relationship with the company is best for our employees," the post said. "We're evaluating our options, including filing objections based on the inappropriate and undue influence by the NLRB that we and others (including the National Retail Federation and U.S. Chamber of Commerce) witnessed in this election."

The company did not elaborate but it signaled it might challenge the election based on a lawsuit filed in March by the NLRB, which sought to force Amazon to reinstate a fired employee who was involved in the union drive.

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NLRB spokesperson Kayla Blado responded to Amazon's statement by noting that the independent agency has been authorized by Congress to enforce the National Labor Relations Act.

"All NLRB enforcement actions against Amazon have been consistent with that Congressional mandate," she said.

Mark Cohen, director of retail studies at Columbia University, said he doesn't see how workers will benefit from a unionized Amazon facility and called the overall push to unionize companies misguided. He said that Amazon is a "highly disciplined and regimented" business willing to pay premium wages and good benefits, but it also demands tremendous output from its workers who work 10-hour shifts.

"Amazon is not going to change their culture because there is now a union in their midst," Cohen said. "'They might be forced to let people work eight hours but those people will make less money.'"

The successful union effort on Staten Island stood in contrast to the one launched in Bessemer, Alabama by the more established Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. Workers at an Amazon warehouse there appeared to have rejected a union bid but outstanding challenged ballots could change the outcome. The votes were 993-to-875 against the union. A hearing to review 416 challenged ballots is expected to begin in the next few days.

The union campaigns come at a time of widespread labor unrest at many corporations. Workers at more than 140 Starbucks locations around the country, for instance, have requested union elections and several of them have already been successful.

But Amazon has long been considered a top prize for the labor movement given the company's massive size and impact. The results in Staten Island reverberated all the way to the White House.

"The president was glad to see workers ensure their voices are heard with respect to important workplace decisions," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at Friday's briefing about the vote. "He believes firmly that every worker in every state must have a free and fair choice to join a union and the right to bargain collectively with their employer."

John Logan, director of labor and employment studies at San Francisco State University, said the union win was a potential tipping point two years into a pandemic that has shifted the labor landscape.

"We knew that unions were having a moment, but this is much bigger," Logan said "There is no bigger prize than organizing Amazon."

He added that the ALU's win defies traditional thinking that only national unions can take on big companies. But the group might still have a fight ahead of it, according to Erin Hatton, a sociology professor at the University of Buffalo in New York.

"Getting Amazon to the bargaining table will be another feat all together," Hatton said. "Oftentimes the union will fizzle out because the company doesn't come to the bargaining table in good faith as they're obliged to do."

Rebecca Givan, professor of labor studies at Rutgers University, said the victory is just the first step in a likely protracted battle against Amazon.

"It's clear Amazon will keep fighting, they're not conceding that workers have a right to organize," she said. "It looks like the legal questions they've raised this afternoon suggest they're trying to undermine entire authority of NLRB."

Amazon has pushed back hard in the lead-up to both elections in Staten Island and Bessemer. The retail giant held mandatory meetings, where workers were told unions are a bad idea. The company also launched an anti-union website targeting workers and placed English and Spanish posters across the Staten Island facility. In Bessemer, Amazon has 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.

Both labor fights faced unique challenges. Alabama, for instance, is a right-to-work state that prohibits a company and a union from signing a contract that requires workers to pay dues to the union that represents them.

The union landscape in Alabama is also starkly different from New York. Last year, union members accounted for 22.2% of wage and salary workers in New York, ranked only behind Hawaii, according to the

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U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's more than double the national average of 10.3%. In Alabama, it's 5.9%.

Amazon workers in Staten Island are seeking longer breaks, paid time off for injured employees and an hourly wage of \$30, up from a minimum of just over \$18 per hour offered by the company. The estimated average wage for the borough is \$41 per hour, according to a similar U.S. Census Bureau analysis of Staten Island's \$85,381 median household income.

Tristan Dutchin, who began working for the online retailer about a year ago, is hopeful that the new union will improve working conditions at his jobsite.

"I'm excited that we're making history," Dutchin said. "This will be a fantastic time for workers to be surrounded in a better, safer working environment."

Tinea Greenaway voted against unionizing but said she would reserve judgment for now.

"We can't take back our votes," she said. "I'll give things a chance, but let's see if they deliver on what they promised."

Will Smith resigns from film academy over Chris Rock slap

By LYNN ELBER AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Will Smith resigned Friday from the motion picture academy following his Oscars night slap of Chris Rock and said he would accept any further punishment the organization imposed.

Smith in a statement released Friday afternoon said he will "fully accept any and all consequences for my conduct. My actions at the 94th Academy Awards presentation were shocking, painful, and inexcusable."

Film academy president David Rubin said Smith's resignation was accepted. "We will continue to move forward with our disciplinary proceedings against Mr. Smith for violations of the Academy's Standards of Conduct, in advance of our next scheduled board meeting on April 18."

Smith loses voting privileges with his resignation. But there are other, less tangible benefits to being part of the academy, Hollywood's most prestigious organization: It bestows industry credibility on its members. It's invitation only, and with a once-a-year membership review.

"I betrayed the trust of the Academy. I deprived other nominees and winners of their opportunity to celebrate and be celebrated for their extraordinary work," Smith's statement said. "I am heartbroken. I want to put the focus back on those who deserve attention for their achievements and allow the Academy to get back to the incredible work it does to support creativity and artistry in film.

"Change takes time and I am committed to doing the work to ensure that I never again allow violence to overtake reason," Smith concluded in the statement.

The resignation came two days after the academy's leadership board met to initiate disciplinary proceedings against Smith for violations against the group's standards of conduct. Those proceedings could have resulted in suspension or expulsion, and it was not immediately clear what additional punishment he could face.

Had he been expelled, Smith would have joined a small group of men removed from the academy: Harvey Weinstein, Roman Polanski, Bill Cosby and the actor Carmine Caridi, who was kicked out for sharing awards screeners.

On Sunday, Smith strode from his front-row Dolby Theatre seat on to the stage and smacked Rock, who had made a joke at the expense of Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith. Moments later, he went on to win the best actor award for his role in "King Richard."

Rock, who was about to present Oscar for best documentary, declined to file charges when asked by police. He has only briefly addressed the attack publicly, saying at one comedy concert in Boston this week that he was still "kind of processing what happened."

Smith stunned Rock, the theater crowd and viewers at home when he took the stage after Rock joked: "Jada, I love you. 'G.I. Jane 2,' can't wait to see it."

Pinkett Smith, who has spoken publicly about her hair loss condition, alopecia, had a closely shaved head similar to that of Demi Moore in the original movie.

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After Smith's attack, he returned to his seat and angrily twice shouted at Rock to "get my wife's name out your (expletive) mouth." When Smith took the stage again less than hour later to accept his Oscar, he tearfully apologized to the academy but notably omitted any mention of Rock.

The fallout was immediate and intense. Smith had supporters for coming to his wife's defense, but he was widely condemned for responding with violence and for marring both his long-sought Oscar victory and overshadowing the night's other winners.

That included Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, director of the winning documentary, "Summer of Soul," and the film's producers. They claimed their awards in the unsettled moments following Smith's attack and outburst, when the room's attention was shattered.

Before the disruption, the ceremony had represented a reset from the pandemic-constrained versions of the past two years. It was back in its home theater, boasted a trio of well-received female hosts — Regina Hall, Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes — and had tallied several breakthrough winners.

Among them were "West Side Story" star Ariana DeBose, the first Afro-Latina and openly LGBTQ actor to win in the category of best supporting actress, and Troy Kotsur of "CODA," the first deaf male actor to win the supporting actor prize. The night ended with "CODA" being crowned best picture, a landmark achievement for a streaming service and for a film with a largely deaf cast.

Hope Solo arrested on DWI, child abuse charges

By TOM FOREMAN Jr. Associated Press

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (AP) — Former U.S. women's national team star goalkeeper Hope Solo was arrested after she was found passed out behind the wheel of a vehicle in North Carolina with her 2-year-old twins inside, police said.

A police report said Solo was arrested on Thursday in a shopping center parking lot in Winston-Salem and charged with driving while impaired, resisting a public officer and misdemeanor child abuse. She has been released from jail and has a court date of June 28, the report indicated.

According to an arrest warrant, a passerby noticed Solo passed out behind the steering wheel for more than an hour with the vehicle's engine running and the two children in the backseat. A responding officer could smell alcohol, and the warrant said that Solo refused a field sobriety test and her blood was drawn instead.

Rich Nichols, a Texas-based attorney who represents Solo, released a statement Friday but didn't respond to specific questions on the charges and said his client wouldn't respond, either.

"On the advice of counsel, Hope can't speak about this situation, but she wants everyone to know that her kids are her life, that she was released immediately and is now at home with her family, that the story is more sympathetic than the initial charges suggest, and that she looks forward to her opportunity to defend these charges," Nichols said.

Solo was dismissed from the national team following the 2016 Olympics in Brazil after calling the Swedish team "cowards" for taking a defensive stance against the defending gold medalists, ending a laudable playing career that was also marred by controversy.

She was suspended for 30 days in early 2015 after she and husband Jerramy Stevens were pulled over in a U.S. Soccer-owned van and Stevens was charged with DUI. She was also benched after publicly questioning coach Greg Ryan's decision to start Briana Scurry against Brazil during the 2007 World Cup, comments many saw as a slight against Scurry.

Solo was also involved in an altercation with family members in 2014 that resulted in Solo's arrest, although charges in that case were eventually dropped.

Solo made 202 appearances with the national team, with 153 wins and an international-record 102 shutouts. She won a World Cup title and two Olympic gold medals with the team.

During the 2015 World Cup championship run, she allowed just three goals in seven games with five shutouts.

She was elected to the U.S. Soccer Hall of Fame in January. The induction ceremony is set for May 21.

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Solo married Stevens, a former tight end for the Seattle Seahawks and Tampa Bay Buccaneers, in 2012. The couple have twins, Vittorio Genghis and Lozen Orianna Judith Stevens, born on March 4, 2020.

'Go, Mississippi': State could ditch song with racist roots

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Mississippi is on the verge of scuttling a state song with racist roots, two years after it retired a Confederate-themed state flag.

The current song, "Go, Mississippi," takes its tune from a 1959 campaign jingle of Democratic Gov. Ross Barnett. "Roll With Ross" included the lyrics, "For segregation, 100%. He's not a moderate, like some of the gents."

Barnett unsuccessfully resisted integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962, and legislators that year adopted a state song setting new words to his campaign ditty: "Go, Mississippi, keep rolling along. Go, Mississippi, you cannot go wrong."

Some legislators have quietly sought a new song in recent years, saying the Barnett connection is an embarrassing relic of the bad old days.

The effort gained momentum when Republican House Speaker Philip Gunn opened this year's legislative session by showing a video of "One Mississippi," composed by country music singer and songwriter Steve Azar for the state's 2017 bicentennial celebration.

Azar is a Mississippi native. His lyrics play on the hide-and-seek counting game (One Mississippi ... two Mississippi ... three Mississippi ...) and incorporate familiar images: magnolia trees, fried catfish, hurricanes, kudzu.

The Republican-controlled House and Senate on Thursday passed the final version of a bill to replace the Barnett-linked song with "One Mississippi." The bill also would create a committee to recommend that legislators designate additional state songs later. Tennessee is among states with multiple official songs.

Asked for his opinion on the measure, Republican Gov. Tate Reeves told The Associated Press on Friday that he's not well-versed in the song proposal because he's been focused on other issues, including teacher pay raises and a tax cut.

Reeves also said he doesn't know the state song and can't recall whether he was supposed to learn it in school.

"I was focused on shooting basketballs," Reeves deadpanned.

Two teenagers working as state Senate pages said Mississippi needs to change its song.

"I don't think it's a good idea to take the tune of a racist song and make it for everybody," said Karmen Owens, a 15-year-old freshman at North Pike High School in McComb.

Raniyah Younger, a 17-year-old junior at Jackson's Callaway High, said a new state song should reflect different cultures and "equality of all races and all colors and all sexualities, of course."

Democratic Sen. Hillman Frazier of Jackson worked for years to retire the Mississippi state flag, the last in the nation to feature the Confederate battle emblem. Frazier said Mississippi should not have a song affiliated with a segregationist governor, but he wants a committee to examine Mississippi's deep musical heritage and come up with a new song.

"Most people don't know the state song. They never sing it," Frazier said Thursday. "So, six months trying to get it right wouldn't hurt a thing."

Republican Sen. Nicole Boyd of Oxford said it's best to ditch the old song now.

"It's one more thing that doesn't portray Mississippi in its best light," Boyd said. "We need things that represent the state and really highlight the amazing people we have."

Judge upholds Ghislaine Maxwell's sex trafficking conviction

By TOM HAYS and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A U.S. judge refused to throw out Ghislaine Maxwell's sex trafficking conviction Friday,

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despite a juror's failure to disclose before the trial began that he'd been a victim of childhood sexual abuse. Maxwell, a British socialite, was convicted in December of helping the millionaire Jeffrey Epstein sexually abuse several teenage girls.

U.S. Judge Alison J. Nathan declined to order a new trial weeks after questioning the juror under oath in a New York courtroom about why he failed to disclose his personal history as an abuse survivor on a questionnaire during the jury selection process.

The juror had said he "skimmed way too fast" through the questionnaire and did not intentionally give the wrong answer to a question about sex abuse.

"I didn't lie in order to get on this jury," he said.

In an opinion certain to trigger a higher court appeal, Nathan said the juror's failure to disclose his prior sexual abuse during the jury selection process was highly unfortunate, but not deliberate.

The judge also concluded the juror "harbored no bias toward the defendant and could serve as a fair and impartial juror."

Had the juror answered the questions correctly, Maxwell's lawyers had said they potentially could have objected to the man's presence on the jury on the grounds that he might not be fair to a person accused of a similar crime.

The U.S. attorney's office declined comment Friday. Messages were left with Maxwell's attorneys.

Maxwell, 60, was convicted of sex trafficking and other charges after a monthlong trial that featured testimony from four women who said she played a role in setting them up for abuse by Epstein.

Epstein killed himself in August 2019 as he awaited trial at a federal jail in New York on related sex trafficking charges.

Maxwell says she's innocent.

After the trial's conclusion, the juror, identified in court papers only as Juror No. 50, gave interviews with several media outlets describing deliberations, and disclosing that he'd been abused as a child. He said he persuaded some fellow jurors that a victim's imperfect memory of abuse doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Potential jurors in the case had been required to fill out a 50-page questionnaire including a question that asked: "Have you or a friend or family member ever been the victim of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, or sexual assault?"

The juror checked "No."

The juror said in one of the interviews that he didn't remember being asked that question, which was No. 48 on the form.

Defense lawyers for Maxwell asked the judge to immediately order a new trial, but she said she could not do so without questioning the juror.

After Nathan questioned the juror in early March, lawyers on both sides submitted written arguments. Prosecutors said the juror made an "honest mistake" and that it was "crystal clear" that Maxwell received a fair trial.

Maxwell's lawyers disagreed.

"Excusing Juror 50's false answers because he believes his concealed history of sexual abuse did not affect his ability to serve as a fair and impartial juror does not satisfy the appearance of justice," they argued. "Only a new trial would."

But Nathan rejected that reasoning, writing that the juror's claims that he remained impartial toward Maxwell rang true.

When questioned about it, he answered "frankly and honestly, even when the answers he gave were the cause of personal embarrassment and regret," she said. "His tone, demeanor and responsiveness gave no indication of false testimony."

Federal tax probe into Biden's son, Hunter, moves forward

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal grand jury has heard testimony in recent months about Hunter Biden's income and payments he received while serving on the board of a Ukraine energy company, according to two people familiar with the probe.

It remains unclear whether he might be charged. But the grand jury activity underscores that a federal tax investigation into President Joe Biden's son that began in 2018 remains active as prosecutors continue to examine foreign payments and other aspects of his finances.

A lawyer for Hunter Biden did not return a phone message and email seeking comment on Friday. A Justice Department spokesman deferred a request for comment to the U.S. attorney's office in Delaware, which is handling the investigation. A spokesperson for the office did not return a phone message seeking comment.

The people familiar with the investigation could not discuss details of the ongoing probe publicly and spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

No matter how the investigation resolves, it has already presented a political headache for the Biden administration and could lead to an even bigger one, particularly if Republicans who have seized on the probe to attack the president retake control of the House in midterm elections later this year. Republicans would then control congressional committees and shape the focus of any investigations.

A White House that has sought to deflect questions about law enforcement matters to the Justice Department was asked this week whether it stood by the president's assertion in a 2020 debate that his son had not had unethical business dealings with Ukraine or China. White House communications director Kate Bedingfield said yes.

The investigation could also force a delicate decision for the Justice Department, which has sought to assert its independence and has publicly stressed its willingness to let the facts and evidence, not political decisions, guide its investigative and charging decisions.

Attorney General Merrick Garland has not shed any light publicly on the investigation. But the Justice Department did leave in place the top federal prosecutor in Delaware — David Weiss, a Trump administration holdover — presumably as a way to ensure continuity.

Hunter Biden confirmed the existence of an investigation into his taxes in December 2020, one month after the presidential election. He said in a statement at the time that he was "confident that a professional and objective review of these matters will demonstrate that I handled my affairs legally and appropriately, including with the benefit of professional tax advisors."

The Associated Press reported later that month that a subpoena served on the younger Biden sought information related to more than two dozen entities. One was Burisma, a Ukrainian gas company whose board he had joined when his father was vice president. That move sparked concerns about a potential conflict of interest given that elder Biden was deeply involved in U.S. policy toward Ukraine during the Obama administration.

The breadth of the subpoena highlighted the wide-ranging scope of the investigation into Hunter Biden, though there is no indication that the probe includes any scrutiny of the president himself. Biden has said he did not discuss his son's international business dealings with him and has denied having ever taken money from a foreign country.

Witnesses in recent months have been questioned about payments Hunter Biden received while serving on the Burisma board, the people familiar with the probe said.

Republicans tried making Hunter Biden's business dealings in Ukraine a prominent issue during the 2020 presidential election.

A year earlier, then-President Donald Trump tried pressuring his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to launch investigations into the Bidens at the same time Zelenskyy was seeking military aid from the U.S.

Trump was later impeached by the House over the phone call but was acquitted by the Senate.

Number of COVID patients in US hospitals reaches record low

By BEN FINLEY and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — COVID-19 hospitalization numbers have plunged to their lowest levels since the early days of the pandemic, offering a much needed break to health care workers and patients alike following the omicron surge.

The number of patients hospitalized with the coronavirus has fallen more than 90% in more than two months, and some hospitals are going days without a single COVID-19 patient in the ICU for the first time since early 2020.

The freed up beds are expected to help U.S. hospitals retain exhausted staff, treat non-COVID-19 patients more quickly and cut down on inflated costs. More family members can visit loved ones. And doctors hope to see a correction to the slide in pediatric visits, yearly checkups and cancer screenings.

"We should all be smiling that the number of people sitting in the hospital right now with COVID, and people in intensive care units with COVID, are at this low point," said University of South Florida epidemiologist Jason Salemi.

But, he said, the nation "paid a steep price to get to this stage. ... A lot of people got sick and a lot of people died."

Hospitalizations are now at their lowest point since summer 2020, when comprehensive national data first became available. The average number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 in the last week nationwide dropped to 11,860, the lowest since 2020 and a steep decline from the peak of more than 145,000 set in mid-January. The previous low was 12,041 last June, before the delta variant took hold.

The optimistic trend is also clear in ICU patient numbers, which have dipped to fewer than 2,000, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"We're beginning to be able to take a breath," said Dr. Jeffrey Weinstein, the patient safety officer for the Kettering Health hospital system in western Ohio.

COVID-19 patients had filled 30% of Kettering Health's nearly 1,600 hospital beds back in January, Weinstein said. Kettering's eight hospitals now average two to three COVID-19 admissions a day — and sometimes zero.

And while Salemi agreed this is a good time for an exhausted health care system to take a breath, he warned that the public health community needs to keep an eye on the BA.2 subvariant of omicron. It's driving increases in hospitalizations in Britain, and is now estimated to make up more than half of U.S. infections.

"We're probably under-detecting true infections now more than at any other time during the pandemic," Salemi said.

For now at least, many hospitals are noting the low numbers.

In California on Thursday, UC Davis Health tweeted that its intensive care unit had no COVID-19 patients for two consecutive days for the first time in two years.

"The first COVID-19 patient to arrive in our ICU did so in February 2020, and the unit treated at least one positive individual every day since, for at least 761 consecutive days," the hospital system said.

Toby Marsh, the chief nursing and patient care services officer, said in a statement that they hope the numbers "are indicative of a sustained change."

In Philadelphia, patients are spending less time in the Temple University Health System because there are no longer backlogs for MRIs, CT scans and lab tests, said Dr. Tony Reed, the chief medical officer.

Temple Health's three hospitals had six adult COVID-19 patients on Thursday, likely its lowest patient count since March 2020, Reed said.

During the omicron surge, patients waited as long as 22 hours for a routine MRI, which is normally done within 12 hours. Longer waits affected those who came in with trouble walking — and in a lot of pain — for example, because of a herniated disc pinching their sciatic nerve.

"Nobody wants to stay in the hospital a day longer than they have to," Reed said.

The emptying of beds is also helping patients in rural areas, said Jay Anderson, the chief operating of-

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ficer for Ohio State's Wexner Medical Center in Columbus. During the surges, the hospital faced challenges accepting people from community hospitals who needed elevated care for brain tumors, advanced cancer and stroke. That burden is now being lifted.

Visitors also will return in higher numbers, starting Tuesday. Ohio State will no longer restrict patients to two designated guests, who could only stop by separately.

"Patients heal better when they have access to their family and loved ones," Anderson said.

Doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists are also getting a much needed break in some areas.

In Colorado, Dr. Michelle Barron said the consistently low COVID-19 hospitalizations prompted smiles among staff, even as she double-checks the numbers to make sure they're actually correct.

"I had one of these moments like, oh this is amazing," said Barron, medical director of infection prevention and control at UHealth University of Colorado Hospital. "It feels unreal."

UHealth loosened some restrictions, including dropping testing requirements for anyone who entered a facility. And while that produced some anxiety among staffers, Barron says the numbers haven't spiked.

"I think some people have started to take vacations and not feel guilty," she said. "I had spring break with my kids and it was a level of happiness where I went, oh my god, this is actually normal."

The omicron surge had stretched staff at work — but also at home, said Dr. Mike Hooper, chief medical officer for Sentara Norfolk General Hospital in southeastern Virginia.

"It was stressful to be at the store ... to visit your family," Hooper said. "We're all hoping that some 'return to normalcy' will help people deal with the inherent stresses of being part of the health care team."

But just because hospitalizations are down does not mean hospitals are empty, said Dr. Frank Johnson, chief medical officer for St. Luke's Health System in Idaho.

Some measures — like wearing masks in certain settings — will remain in place.

"I don't know when we may go back to old practices regarding mask wearing in our clinical areas," Johnson said. "We've seen some benefits of that in terms of reduction in the number of other viral infections."

In the meantime, the public health community is keeping an eye on the BA.2 subvariant of omicron.

Salemi, the University of South Florida epidemiologist, said the increase in at-home testing means that more results are not being included in official coronavirus case counts. Therefore, wastewater surveillance will be the early warning signal to watch, he said.

"BA.2 is here," he said. "We don't have to look that far in the rear-view mirror to know things can change very rapidly. We saw what happened with delta. We saw what happened with omicron.... We don't want to wait until we see a lot of people hospitalized before we take action."

Alex Jones loses bid to avoid fines in Sandy Hook case

WATERBURY, Conn. (AP) — A Connecticut judge on Friday rejected Infowars host Alex Jones' bid to avoid escalating daily fines for missing a deposition in a lawsuit by relatives of some victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, who sued the conspiracy theorist for saying the massacre was a hoax.

Judge Barbara Bellis in Waterbury kept in place her ruling that fines Jones \$25,000 per weekday, beginning Friday, and increasing by \$25,000 each weekday until he appears at a deposition.

Jones had asked Bellis to put her ruling on hold while he appeals the fines to the state Supreme Court. His lawyers said he plans to attend a deposition in Connecticut on April 11. If he does not appear until then, his fines would total \$525,000.

Jones said he did not attend a deposition scheduled last week in Austin, Texas, where he lives, because he was too ill to attend. Bellis said there was not enough evidence Jones was too ill to appear at the deposition.

Twenty first graders and six educators were killed in the 2012 shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.

Psaki won't confirm she's leaving White House for MSNBC

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Friday would not confirm reports that she will soon take a TV job at MSNBC, saying she is focused on her job speaking for President Joe Biden.

"I have nothing to confirm about my length of public service or planned service or anything about consideration about next plans," Psaki said under questioning at her first briefing after COVID-19 forced her into quarantine for a second time in late-March.

"I'm very happy to be standing with all of you here today after it felt like a never-ending time in my basement quarantining away from my family," she said. "My focus every day continues to be speaking on behalf of the president."

The Axios news site first reported Friday, citing a source close to the matter, that Psaki is in exclusive talks to join MSNBC after she leaves the White House around May.

Multiple MSNBC representatives did not respond Friday to emailed requests for comment.

Reports earlier this year said Psaki was being heavily courted by both MSNBC and CNN, where she provided on-air commentary before joining then-President-elect Biden's transition team. The Axios report Friday suggested that Psaki, 43, had narrowed her search.

Under questioning Friday about her future employment and the ethics of negotiating a TV job while still serving as a public face for the administration, Psaki repeatedly stressed that she has complied with all ethical and legal requirements imposed by the Biden administration.

"I have always gone over and above the stringent ethical and legal requirements of the Biden administration, and I take that very seriously," she said. "And as is standard for every employee at the White House, I've received rigorous ethics counseling, including as it relates to any future employment."

White House press secretaries typically do not hold the grueling job for very long, and presidents often are served by multiple chief spokespersons. President Barack Obama had three during his eight years in office, while President Donald Trump had four during his four-year term.

Psaki has been open about saying she would hold the job for at least a year before she started to think about moving on, often citing her young son and daughter as a reason.

In May 2021, she spoke to political strategist and podcast host David Axelrod about why she loved the job of White House press secretary — and why she was unlikely to still be doing it a year later.

"I have little kids and I don't want to miss time with them. I don't want to miss moments," she said.

She expressed similar sentiment Friday.

"At whatever time I leave the White House, I can promise you the first thing I'm going to do is sleep and spend time with my 3- and 6-year-olds, who are my most important audiences of all," Psaki said.

Kentucky's Tshiebwe named AP men's college player of year

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Kentucky's Oscar Tshiebwe spent an entire season relentlessly chasing and pulling down seemingly every rebound that came his way — and plenty that didn't, too.

"I want to be the greatest rebounder I can be," Tshiebwe said.

The 6-foot-9, 255-pound junior put up better rebounding numbers than anybody in Division I in decades. And it's a big reason why he is The Associated Press men's college basketball national player of the year.

Tshiebwe was the clear choice for the award announced Friday, receiving 46 of 60 votes from AP Top 25 voters. Johnny Davis, a 6-5 sophomore who averaged 19.7 points and led Wisconsin to a share of the Big Ten regular-season title, was second with 10 votes. Iowa sophomore Keegan Murray (three) and Illinois big man Kofi Cockburn (one) also earned votes.

Tshiebwe, a West Virginia transfer and native of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is only the second player in the history of the storied history of the Wildcats program to win the AP's top honor. The other was one-and-done star Anthony Davis, who led Kentucky to its eighth NCAA title a decade ago before becoming the No. 1 NBA draft pick.

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"It is amazing to be join somebody like Anthony Davis," Tshiebwe said. "And that gives me confidence and gives me more help for my future, too, for what I'm trying to do and what I'm trying to accomplish. I'm just putting God first because God knows what I need, and he has great plans for me."

Tshiebwe thrived all season while averaging 15.1 rebounds, the highest per-game output in Division I since 1980. He had five games of at least 20 rebounds this season and three games with at least 10 boards on the offensive glass alone.

The highlight came when he had a Division I high of 28 rebounds in a December win against Western Kentucky.

He also worked to expand his offensive game, adding range on a developing jumpshot to go with his relentless board work. Tshiebwe averaged 17.4 points and shot 60.6% from the floor, a big step forward from his freshman season when he averaged 11.2 points and 9.3 rebounds with the Mountaineers before transferring after 10 games.

Tshiebwe said the rebounding success is a product of studying his opponents closely, playing the odds on where the ball is headed and the determination not to "let anybody move you."

"First of all, it's the position," he said. "You have to place yourself where you don't need to work too hard for the basketball just to come in your hands. You've got to read it. ... If somebody's shooting this angle, probably 75% it's going that way because the ball's coming in this way, 25% it's coming this way. You have to know that."

Rick Mancino watched Tshiebwe learning those rebounding lessons as his high school coach at Kennedy Catholic in Pennsylvania. First it was Mancino telling Tshiebwe to embrace his "knack for the ball," only to have to walk it back a touch so that Tshiebwe didn't get in foul trouble chasing literally every loose ball.

"I just think he realized how big rebounding is in the game, where with a lot of kids, it's not a glamorous job," Mancino said. "He loves it because I think he knows he's good at it. I think the extra incentive is he realizes people love it, and they appreciate it, and his teammates appreciate it."

Tshiebwe said he shed about 10 pounds to get a little faster and studied to make sure he knew the plays to be ready for an immediate impact this season for the Wildcats, who were coming off a nine-win season that stood as the program's worst in nearly a century. The Wildcats regrouped by winning 26 games and earning a 2-seed in the NCAA Tournament before falling in an upset to Saint Peter's in the opening round.

Now Tshiebwe — who had 30 points and 16 rebounds in the final loss — is mulling whether to return to Kentucky or jump for his goal of playing in the NBA. If he returns, at least the Wildcats will know they're set on the glass.

"I knew I was going to help this team because my dad always used to tell me if you don't have a vision about what you're trying to do as this year is coming, then you're in the wrong business," he said.

"You've got to know a year from today, what are you trying to do? What are you trying to accomplish? You've got to write (it) down, you've got to have a good vision. You've got to know what I'm here for."

Arizona's Tommy Lloyd wins AP men's coach of the year

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer

Tommy Lloyd spent 22 years as Mark Few's right-hand man turning Gonzaga into a national powerhouse. He needed just one season to return Arizona to prominence.

Lloyd was named The Associated Press men's college basketball coach of the year on Friday after leading the Wildcats to the Sweet 16 in his first season. He received 28 votes from a 61-person media panel that votes on the AP Top 25 to edge Providence's Ed Cooley, who got 21 votes. No other coach got more than three.

Lloyd joins Indiana State's Bill Hodges in 1979 and Drake's Keno Davis in 2008 in earning AP coach of the year in their first season as a head coach.

"I always tell people, it's an easy answer: I love coaching and teaching," Lloyd said. "Everything basketball-wise, I've done, basically I've been a part of doing before, so I had a real comfort level and a conviction in what I wanted to do."

Lloyd was expected to take over for Few whenever he retires. He had no reason to look anywhere else.

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When the Arizona job opened up, Lloyd couldn't pass up the opportunity.

The Wildcats spent the previous three seasons embroiled in FBI and NCAA investigations that, in part, led to the firing of Sean Miller last April. The NCAA investigation is still pending, but it did little to impede Arizona's rapid ascent under Lloyd.

Expectations were lukewarm for Lloyd's first season; the Wildcats were unranked in the AP preseason poll and picked to finish fourth in the Pac-12.

Arizona upended those perceptions quickly, winning its first 11 games. The Wildcats swept the Pac-12 season and tournament titles to reach the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2018. Lloyd joined Hodges and North Carolina's Bill Guthridge in 1998 as the only first-year coaches to earn a No. 1 seed. Arizona lost to Houston in the South Region semifinals, finishing 34-3.

Arizona's run was a mix of having the right players to fit Lloyd's system and the 47-year-old coach's penchant for player development since the Wildcats had lost four of their top six scorers from last season.

"I think we really built some foundational pieces this year that are really going to serve us well moving forward," Lloyd said.

Lloyd brought what he learned at Gonzaga with him to the desert, made a few tweaks of his own and turned Arizona into a free-flowing offensive juggernaut. The Wildcats led the nation in assists with 19.8 per game, were third in scoring (84.6 points) and had at least one 10-0 run in (29 of 36) games.

Arizona's defense, anchored by 7-footers Christian Koloko and Oumar Ballo, was nearly as dominating, finishing eighth nationally with 5.8 blocked shots per game.

"He knew what he wanted to do and came in with a plan," associate head coach Jack Murphy said. "Every step of the way, when any of us — myself or anyone on the staff — wanted to kind of speed things up or jump steps, he was always the voice of reason and was sticking to his plan."

Once a skinny, offensively-limited freshman, Koloko turned into a dominant defensive player with a more well-rounded offensive game under Lloyd's tutelage. Benedict Mathurin got a confidence injection from Lloyd and became the Pac-12 player of the year and a potential NBA lottery pick.

"He's a players' coach — he does everything for his players," Koloko said. "He's a very detail-oriented coach, goes into the detail to really teach you the game."

Russia war sanctions mean a struggle for Cuban car owners

By JUAN ZAMORANO and GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

ARTEMISA, Cuba (AP) — Francisco Pérez Rodríguez has a car problem — one that's starting to be all too common for many Cubans.

He's been rebuilding the engine of his father-in-law's Moskvich — one of tens of thousands of cars and other vehicles that poured into Cuba from its Cold War allies in the Soviet bloc and later Russia over the past half century.

To run, it needs a new timing belt. But Pérez Rodríguez said that's something only available these days in Russia. And flights there have been disrupted by Western sanctions imposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Global restrictions on transport and trade with Russia pose an especially serious problem for Cubans, whose socialist government has lived since the early 1960s under an embargo imposed by the nearby United States. Much of the island's fleets of trucks, buses, cars and tractors came from distant Russia and are now aging, in need of parts.

And much like Russian tourists, those parts are no longer arriving.

Transportation in Cuba can be difficult in the best of times. Buses have often been in short supply, cargo trucks are sometimes pressed into service for rural passengers and the streets are filled with Russian-made Ladas, Niva SUVs and Jeep-like Uazs.

Even many of the legendary 1950s-vintage American cars that roll along Havana's waterfront have been modified over the years to use Russian engines and other parts.

Cuban statistics indicate the island has about 20,000 old American cars and 80,000 to 100,000 Ladas.

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"For the Ladas, everything is brought from Russia. Many people are going to be affected," said Pérez Rodríguez, 57, who operates a lathe workshop in Artemisa, just southeast of Havana.

Along with disruption of the key tourism industry and financial transactions with Russia, "the interruption of transportation is going to be a problem for Cuba in terms of spare parts," said William LeoGrande, an expert on Cuba at the American University in Washington, D.C.

"This just makes life even harder, even if they find ways to work around these sanctions on Russia," he said. "It is going to be more expensive; it is going to be more time consuming, and it is just going to make their economic situation worse"

Cuba's economy already has been slammed by tightened U.S. sanctions under the Trump administration and by the coronavirus pandemic.

Manuel Taboada, a 26-year-old taxi driver in Old Havana, is already worried about his own Lada.

"Now with the mess of the war, with everything that is happening, it will have a big effect because they can't travel and they can't bring things in," Taboada said. "Honestly, we don't know how we are going to end up because there are specific parts for this car."

The exact scale of the problem is difficult to measure because much of the trade in parts occur in the informal market — exchanges between individuals, said Pavel Vidal Alejandro, an economics professor at the Pontifical Javeriana University in Cali, Colombia. "The Cubans have a lot of restrictions on travel without a visa to other countries, and Russia is one of the exceptions."

"Even with the distance and the cost that implies in terms of travel, it was a market from which came goods" both for the formal market and for self-employed Cubans, he said.

Many found it easier to get the parts via trips to Florida, where some sellers specialized in importing Russian car parts specifically for people travelling to and from Cuba. Now sanctions on dealings with Russian banks and on shipping complicate that as well.

"There is more demand; it has risen about 80%," said Roberto Hernández, owner of MZ Miami, a shop that sells parts for Ladas as well as motorcycles and bicycles.

Basilio Pérez is one of those in Florida who often make the trip back to the island to visit family — so often that he still has an old Moskvich there.

He said he'd been unable in recent days to find parts he needs to fix the car's steering mechanism — either in Florida or in Cuba.

"Before, people (in Cuba) travelled and could find parts. Now there is nothing," Pérez said.

Back in Artemisa, 69-year-old Humberto Santana turned up at Pérez Rodríguez's workshop hoping to repair a crankshaft for his Russian-made truck. But with that apparently impossible, and no replacement parts, he said he'd try to find a Japanese engine instead and make it fit.

"The Cuban always invents," Santana said.

Imprisoned Griner gets support from USA Basketball teammates

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A'ja Wilson wishes that she and her USA Basketball teammates could do more to help Brittney Griner right now.

They've all been straddling the line of trying not to say anything that could potentially hurt the WNBA star's case as she's still imprisoned in Russia on drug allegations, but also wanting Griner and her family to know that they care about her.

"We're not not talking BG the basketball player, we're talking about BG the wife, the daughter, the sister the human being," Wilson, the 2020 WNBA MVP, said Friday at USA Basketball training camp.

"That's what I'm caring about. I get the silence and you don't want to talk about it. I can't even imagine to put myself in that situation. It's tough," she said.

Griner, one of many stars who play in Russia during the WNBA offseason, was detained after arriving at a Moscow airport in mid-February. Russian authorities said a search of her luggage revealed vape cartridges that allegedly contained oil derived from cannabis, which could carry a maximum penalty of 10

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years in prison.

The 6-foot-9 Phoenix Mercury center was returning to the country after the Russian League took a break for the FIBA World Cup qualifying tournament. The two-time Olympic gold medalist recently had her detention extended to the middle of May.

"Hopefully everyone's doing what they need to do to make sure she get's home safe," Wilson said. "That's going to be the top priority of all of us. I know it's tough and hard."

Players have been keeping discussions about how to best help Griner within their community. WNBA players have been very cohesive in the past when rallying behind issues such as voter registration or the Black Lives Matters movement.

For the first few weeks following Griner's detention, it was decided that it was clearly better for them to say less. That's changed over the last few days as players have been more available and willing to talk.

"I can guarantee you this, this group here and women of the WNBA , we're not going to forget about Brittney Griner," USA Basketball coach Cheryl Reeve said. "Brittney's not here, we're going to do the things she would have done. She's very philanthropic. Try to honor her in that way until the highest level of government can work this out."

Breanna Stewart has stepped up to help The Phoenix Rescue Mission, a charity that Griner has been involved with for a long time.

"While BG is away I wanted to support her and her charitable efforts and do what I can from an off-the-court standpoint to help her and her family," Stewart said.

Griner's legal team has been quietly seeking her release and has declined to speak out about the case since her arrest was made public.

Of the thousands of U.S. citizens arrested and jailed in prisons abroad, a small subset are designated by the U.S. government as wrongfully detained — a category that affords their cases an extra level of government attention and places them under the auspices of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the State Department. The U.S. government has not yet put Griner's case in that category.

Griner is not the only American detained in Russia. Marine veteran Trevor Reed was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2020 on charges alleging that he assaulted police officers in Moscow. And Michigan corporate security executive Paul Whelan is serving a 16-year sentence on espionage charges that his family and the U.S. government have said are false. U.S. officials have publicly called for Moscow to release them.

Paris attacks trial: Key suspect speaks, shocking images

By NICOLAS VAUX-MONTAGNY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Shouts of fear and panic. The thunder of gunfire. Dozens of corpses in pools of blood on the floor of the Bataclan concert hall. A Paris court on Friday released audio recordings and photos of the 2015 Paris terror attacks that had never been made public before, to expose the horrors of that night.

Some survivors of the attacks cried while others left the courtroom in shock.

It was a jarring end to the most crucial week in the months-long trial over the Islamic State attacks on the Bataclan, cafes in Paris and France's national stadium on Nov. 13, 2015, which killed 130 people. With thousands of plaintiffs, this trial is among the the biggest in modern French history.

Lawyers and victims' families saw this week as crucial for shedding light on what happened, but it left many of them frustrated.

The last surviving member of the attack team, Salah Abdeslam, and suspected accomplices were questioned at last about the day of the attacks itself. They stayed largely silent, refusing to answer most questions, while the courtroom waited in breathless silence.

And when Abdeslam finally chose to speak briefly, instead of expressing remorse for his role in the attacks, he expressed regret that he didn't detonate his suicide belt that bloody night.

"I didn't go all the way," Salah Abdeslam told the court Wednesday. "I gave up trying to put on the (suicide) belt, not out of cowardice or fear. I didn't want to, that's all."

Abdeslam dropped off three attackers in a car, who then blew themselves up on the forecourt of

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France's national soccer stadium moments after a France-Germany match kicked off. Abdelslam said he subsequently drove to the north of Paris, and took the metro to the southern suburb of Montrouge, where he hid his explosives belt after he claimed didn't have the nerve to detonate it.

Abdelslam said he lied to his co-attackers that the belt had not worked "because I was ashamed of not having gone all the way. I was afraid of the eyes of others." Abdelslam's testimony contradicted that of a police explosives expert who has told the court that the suicide belt was faulty.

Then on Friday, the court heard audio recordings and was shown photos from inside the Bataclan concert hall that have never been made public before.

The first recording marked the moment the attackers entered the theater. Music from the performers on stage — American band Eagles of Death Metal — can still be heard as the assailants unleashed a solid minute of constant gunfire from their automatic weapons. The crowd shouted and cried, and the music stops. And then the shooting starts again.

The second recording involved the subsequent hostage-taking, including the voice of one victim who said "they're going to blow up everything — they have explosives."

Then came the final assault: A volley of gunfire from police, followed by blasts from the attackers' suicide belts. Then the evacuation, as police commanded: "Go! Go! We're getting out, hands up and run!"

The 20 photos included images from around the Bataclan hall — the entry, the balcony, the stairwell. Blood is everywhere. One shows about 30 corpses in the dance pit below the stage.

Some survivors cried while watching the images. About 20 other people left the courtroom, visibly upset, as the audio played.

All the attackers were killed that night, but Abdeslam fled France and traveled to the Molenbeek district of Brussels where he grew up. He was arrested in March 2016. For years, he refused to speak to investigators, and he has stayed largely silent through the trial.

During Wednesday's key session, chief judge Jean-Louis Peries spent an hour asking Abdeslam questions. No answer, again and again.

Finally Abdeslam agreed to answer the questions of just one of the plaintiffs' many lawyers. He said three days before the attacks, he was planning to travel to Syria and was unaware of the attack plot until his brother Brahim filled him in. Brahim Abdeslam blew himself up on Nov. 13, 2015, after attacking a Paris cafe.

Abdelslam's lawyers Olivia Ronen and Martin Vettes defended his reluctance to speak. In a statement to The Associated Press, they said Abdeslam "made use of his right to silence" but then decided to answer the questions of one lawyer for the civil parties who "sought to understand what he had to say."

A total of 20 people are on trial on charges including attack planning, the supply of weapons and giving logistical support. Several are presumed to have been killed while fighting for the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq. The end of the trial is scheduled for June.

Migrants march from south Mexico as US lifts COVID ban

By EDGAR H. CLEMENTE undefined

TAPACHULA, Mexico (AP) — Some 500 migrants from Central America, Venezuela and elsewhere fought with Mexican police, National Guard and immigration officers in southern Mexico Friday in one of the first such marches this year.

The migrants described the march as a traditional annual protest related to Holy Week, and those at the front carried a white cross, as others have done in previous years.

However, this year the protest came two weeks early and some participants said they would go far beyond the usual short march and try to reach the U.S. border.

In a clash with National Guard officers and immigration agents, the migrants used the cross they were carrying as a battering ram to break through the Guard lines, shattering the wooden cross.

The officers, who had riot shields, batons and what appeared to be an irritant spray, detained some marchers. The two sides exchanged blows and many migrants left behind knapsacks in the melee.

Some managed to break through and disappear down dirt roads and paths, but many of the rest of the

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marchers took refuge in a church just a few miles outside of Tapachula.

The migrants set out from the southern Mexico city of Tapachula, near the border with Guatemala, early Friday. Migrants have complained they have been essentially confined to Tapachula by the slow processing of their asylum cases and that they are unable to find work in the border state of Chiapas that would allow them to support their families.

"They are practically holding us prisoners; they do not allow us to leave this state because we are not regularized here," said Venezuelan migrant Noreydi Chávez. "They require us to get a visa, but we never get any answers. We fill out paperwork, but they never process it."

Reynaldo Bello, a migrant from Peru, joined the march with his wife and baby because the family had been living a park and going hungry while waiting for their immigration paperwork to be processed.

The march came as the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden announced it would end a policy that allows turning back asylum seekers on grounds of protecting the country against the coronavirus pandemic.

Migrants have been expelled more than 1.7 million times from the U.S. under the policy, known as Title 42 for a public health law, which was invoked in March 2020.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control said Friday it would end the authority effective May 23.

Near the height of the omicron variant in late January, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had extended the order to this week.

Luis García Villagrán, an immigration activist with the Center for Human Dignification, said Mexican immigration authorities had largely shut off most visa processes in Tapachula and told migrants the only path to regularize their stay in Mexico was through the much lengthier procedure of applying for asylum or refugee status.

A migrant march in the same area was broken up in January, and similar efforts were dissolved by police and immigration agents in 2021 and 2020. The marches are significantly smaller than caravans in 2018 and 2019 that brought thousands of migrants to the U.S. border.

The caravans began several years ago as a way for migrants who did not have the money to pay smugglers to take advantage of safety in numbers as they moved toward the U.S. border. However, Guatemala and Mexico became more aggressive in breaking up the caravans.

The Mexican government has tried to appease the United States by stopping caravans of walking migrants and allowing reinstatement of the so called "Remain in Mexico" policy.

But Mexico has been unable to stanch the flood of migrants stuffed by the hundreds into trucks operated by smugglers who charge thousands of dollars to take them to the U.S. border, trips that all too often turn deadly.

House panel's possible options for alleging Trump 1/6 crimes

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate acquitted former President Donald Trump last year of inciting the Capitol insurrection. But neither Trump nor any of his top advisers have faced charges over the attack in a court of law, and it's uncertain if they ever will.

But increasingly, lawmakers on the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 assault are pressing Attorney General Merrick Garland to investigate Trump and his associates. They've been laying out possible crimes in at least one court filing and openly discussing others, all related to that day's violent attack by Trump supporters looking to disrupt Congress' formal certification of his reelection defeat.

Here's a look at some of the suggested crimes floated by the House panel:

CRIMINAL CONSPIRACY TO DEFRAUD THE UNITED STATES

After floating possible crimes for several months, lawmakers on the panel put it on paper for the first time in a March court filing. The filing was in response to a lawsuit from John Eastman, a lawyer and law professor who was consulting with Trump while attempting to overturn the election and who tried to withhold documents from the committee.

The committee argued that it has evidence supporting the idea that Trump, Eastman and other allies

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of the former president "entered into an agreement to defraud the United States." The panel says Trump and his allies interfered with the election certification process, disseminated misinformation about election fraud and pressured state and federal officials to assist in that effort.

OBSTRUCTION OF AN OFFICIAL PROCEEDING

Late last month, U.S. District Court Judge David Carter appeared somewhat swayed by the panel's arguments. In ordering Eastman to turn over the materials, Carter wrote that the court "finds it more likely than not that President Trump corruptly attempted to obstruct the Joint Session of Congress on January 6, 2021."

In the filing, the committee argued that Trump either attempted or succeeded at obstructing, influencing, or impeding the ceremonial process on Jan. 6 and "did so corruptly" by pressuring Vice President Mike Pence to overturn the results as he presided over the session. Pence declined to do so.

"President Trump and members of his campaign knew he had not won enough legitimate state electoral votes to be declared the winner of the 2020 Presidential election during the January 6 Joint Session of Congress, but the President nevertheless sought to use the Vice President to manipulate the results in his favor," the committee wrote.

COMMON LAW FRAUD

The committee has also floated a charge of "common law fraud," or falsely representing facts with the knowledge that they are false. Trump embarked on a wide-scale campaign to convince the public and federal judges that the 2020 election was fraudulent and that he, not Biden, won the Electoral College tally. Election officials and courts across the country, along with Trump's attorney general, rejected those claims.

As an example of such fraud, the committee noted in the Eastman filing that a Justice Department official told Trump directly that a Facebook video posted by his campaign "purporting to show Georgia officials pulling suitcases of ballots from under a table" was false, yet the campaign continued to run it. Georgia officials also repeatedly denied the claim.

"The president continued to rely on this allegation in his efforts to overturn the results of the election," the committee said.

DERELICTION OF DUTY

Though they didn't lay it out in the Eastman filing, leaders of the House panel suggested earlier this year that they believe Trump could also be liable for "dereliction of duty," or inaction as his supporters violently broke the windows and doors of the U.S. Capitol.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., the committee chairman, said in January that "the harm that I see is the president of the United States seeing the Capitol of the United States under siege by people he sent to the Capitol and did nothing during that time."

The committee's vice chairwoman, Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyoming, noted that same month that the panel knows from "firsthand testimony" that Trump watched the attack happen on television. "We know that he did not walk the very few steps to the White House briefing room, get on camera immediately, and tell the people to stop and go home," she said.

Cheney said it was hard "imagine a more significant and more serious dereliction of duty" than Trump's failure to quell the insurrection.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

While the committee hasn't floated specifics, it has created an internal task force to investigate financing for the massive rally on the National Mall the morning of Jan. 6 and any donors who might have backed transportation or other costs that could have helped foster the violence.

Asked earlier this year on CNN if they have any evidence of financial fraud, Thompson said members of the committee "have some concerns, but we have not made those concerns public at this point."

"We do think it's highly concerning on our part that people raised monies for one activity, and we can't find the money being spent for that particular activity," Thompson said. "So, we will continue to look at it. And the financing is one of those things that we will continue to look at very closely."

UNCERTAINTY AHEAD

More than 775 rioters have been arrested for crimes related to the insurrection. Yet legal consequences have been elusive for Trump and the other top officials who told lies about election fraud and laid the groundwork for their actions.

Congress has no authority to prosecute, but can send so-called criminal referrals to the Justice Department. Garland can then decide whether to act.

Justice Department action would be far from guaranteed. And it's uncertain whether any charges against the oft-investigated president would hold up in court. It could be difficult for prosecutors to craft a winning case against Trump.

The president urged on his massive crowd of supporters that morning and returned to the White House and watched them break into the Capitol on television. The rioters beat police, sent lawmakers running and interrupted the certification of President Joe Biden's victory.

Russia aims Ukraine disinformation at Spanish speakers

By DAVID KLEPPER and AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

Washington (AP) — Though Russia is the country that invaded its neighbor Ukraine, the Kremlin's version relentlessly warns social media users across Latin America that the U.S. is the bigger problem.

"Never forget who is the real threat to the world," reads a headline, translated here from Spanish. The article, originally posted in late February on Twitter by RT en Español, is intended for an audience half a world away from the fighting in Kyiv and Mariupol.

As that war rages, Russia is launching falsehoods into the feeds of Spanish-speaking social media users in nations that already have long records of distrusting the U.S. The aim is to gain support in those countries for the Kremlin's war and stoke opposition against America's response.

Though many of the claims have been discredited, they're spreading widely in Latin America and helping to make Kremlin-controlled outlets some of the top Spanish-language sources for information about the war. Russian outlet RT en Español is now the third most shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Russia's invasion.

"RT's success should be concerning to anyone worried about the success of democracy," said Samuel Woolley, a University of Texas professor who researches disinformation. "RT is geared toward authoritarian control and, depending on the context, nationalism and xenophobia. What we risk is Russia gaining control of an increasingly large market share of eyeballs."

U.S.-based tech companies have tried to rein in Russian outlets' ability to spread propaganda following the invasion, by banning apps linked to the outlets, demoting the content and labeling state-run media outlets. The European Union has banned RT and Russian state-owned Sputnik,

Yet the content thrives on Spanish-language websites, message boards and social media pages. While Russia also creates propaganda in languages including English, Arabic, French and German, it's found particular success with Spanish-speaking users, according to recent research by Esteban Ponce de Leon, a Bogota, Colombia-based analyst with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, a Washington think tank that receives funding from the U.S. and other governments.

Russia's discredited claims about Ukraine and the U.S. include allegations that the invasion was necessary to confront neo-Nazis, or that the U.S. has secretly backed biological warfare research in Ukraine. In fact, the U.S. has long publicly provided funding for biological labs in Ukraine that research pathogens with the hope of curbing dangerous disease outbreaks.

That type of disinformation can easily flow from Latin America into other countries — including the U.S. — that have large Spanish-speaking communities. Sometimes it's passed between relatives who might be sharing the claims across continents with one another. It's another potential entry point for Russia, and a reminder of the sophistication of the Russians' efforts.

"There's different avenues where RT is actively engaging communities across Latin America and the United States," said Jacobo Licon, a researcher at the Democratic firm, Equis Labs. "That's part of the reason RT has been so effective, they've been building this network or community ahead of time."

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As one of the world's most-spoken languages, Spanish is of obvious interest to any government or organization intent on shaping global public opinion. But Russia's focus on the Spanish language goes further, reflecting the historic and strategic importance of Central and South America during the Cold War, said analyst Ponce de Leon of the Atlantic Council.

For decades, the Soviet Union sought to exploit historic tensions between the U.S. and Latin America by supporting communist factions and larger allies including Cuba. Russia has sought to portray the U.S. as a colonizing empire, even as the Kremlin has worked to strengthen its own ties to the hemisphere.

RT's Spanish language service began in 2009, four years after its English language version. It has rapidly gained ground, and is now far more popular than its English counterpart. RT en Español has more than 16 million followers on its Facebook page, nearly triple the number of its English site.

High profile names in Latin America have in some cases given RT a hand. Ex-Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa began hosting a weekly political talk show for RT in 2018, less than a year after he left office. Since then he's been convicted of corruption charges that forced him to flee Ecuador for Europe. Authorities in Ecuador have also accused him of trying to destabilize his successor's government.

In March, RT en Español's Facebook page experienced a boost in interactions, generating roughly 75,000 likes, reactions and comments on its pages daily, according to an analysis by the Equis Institute, a Democratic research and polling firm. The bump in engagement continued even after tech company Meta said it was demoting Russian-state media pages across its platforms, which include Facebook and Instagram.

On Twitter, RT and Sputnik get help from Russian diplomats and a network of other accounts that researchers say artificially boost the popularity of the posts. That has helped RT become the third-most shared site for Spanish-language information on the Ukraine war on Twitter, outperforming local news sources as well as international outlets like the BBC and CNN.

Ponce de Leon tracked thousands of accounts that posted or reposted content from RT and Sputnik on Twitter and found that 171 accounts were responsible for 11% of the overall engagement with the posts. During one eight-day period in March, those accounts posted more than 200,000 times, or an average of 155 tweets per day for each account – significantly more than a normal user.

The suspect accounts helped spread the content to authentic users, Ponce de Leon said, in an effort to grow RT's already impressive audience in Latin America.

"Russia is seeking to maintain its popularity in Latin America," he said. "RT and Sputnik already have a big audience in the region. Should we be concerned? The answer would be yes."

UN says Yemen's warring parties agree to 2-month truce

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Yemen's warring sides have accepted a two-month truce, starting with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the U.N. envoy to Yemen said Friday.

The envoy, Hans Grundberg, announced the agreement from Amman, Jordan, after meeting separately with both sides in the country's brutal civil war in recent days. He said that he hoped the truce would be renewed after two months.

The agreement comes after a significant escalation in recent weeks that saw Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels claim several attacks across the country's borders, targeting the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he hoped the truce would pave the way toward peace, but added, "we know that these agreements are always fragile."

The truce is to start on Saturday, the first day of Ramadan, and will also allow for shipments of fuel to arrive in the Yemen's key port city of Hodeida and for passenger flights to resume from the airport in the capital, Sanaa.

U.N. spokesperson Farhan Haq said the warring sides agreed to halt all offensive military, air, ground and maritime operations inside Yemen and across its borders, starting at 7 p.m. Saturday.

The agreement came after the Saudi-led coalition, which has been battling the Houthis in Yemen since

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2015, began observing a unilateral cease-fire on Wednesday — an offer that was rejected by the rebels. Saudi Arabia had proposed the unilateral cease-fire as part of talks it hosted aiming to resolve the war in Yemen. But the Houthis did not attend the talks because they were not held on neutral territory.

Last Saturday, the Houthis also announced their own unilateral initiative that included a three-day suspension of cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia, as well as fighting inside Yemen. Their announcement came shortly after they claimed attacks on a key Saudi oil facility in the Red Sea city of Jiddah, ahead of a Formula One race in the kingdom.

Inside Yemen, many front lines have largely stagnated, particularly in the key government-held city of Marib, as the war has become more stalemated.

On Friday, in a Twitter post, Mohammed Abdel-Salam, the spokesman and chief negotiator of the Houthis, welcomed the cease-fire.

Yemen's war began in September 2014, when the Houthis swept into the capital, Sanaa, from their northwestern stronghold in the Arab world's poorest country. The Houthis then pushed into exile the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, elected in 2012 as the sole candidate after the long rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

A Saudi-led coalition, including the UAE, entered the war in March 2015 to try and restore Hadi's government to power. But the war, which evolved into a proxy conflict, stretched into long bloody years, pushing much of Yemen's people to the brink of famine.

The United Nations and others had been pushing the coalition and rebels to stop the fighting for Ramadan, as has tenuously occurred in past years.

"This is the result of fairly painstaking work" by Grundberg and other diplomats, Haq said. He said the envoy called the truce "a first and long-overdue step" toward ending the fighting that has killed more than 150,000 people, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project figures. That figure includes both fighters and civilians.

During the two-month truce, the Saudi-led coalition will allow 18 vessels carrying fuel into the port of Hodeida, and two commercial flights a week from and to the Yemeni capital to Jordan and Egypt, according to a document of the truce obtained by The Associated Press.

After the truce takes effect, the U.N. envoy will call for both sides to convene to agree on opening roads around Taiz and other provinces, the document said. Taiz, which remains partially held by the forces fighting on behalf of the internationally recognized government, has been blockaded by the Houthis for years.

There are hopes the truce could build momentum for further steps towards peace, though past attempts at cease-fires have repeatedly fallen through. The terms of this latest agreement bear a resemblance to a 2018 peace deal that brought an end to fighting in Hodeida but failed to bring wider peace.

"It must have taken a phenomenal effort to get here," said Peter Salisbury, Yemen expert at the International Crisis Group. "But it's going to take an even more monumental effort to turn the agreement into a reality."

Guterres, speaking to reporters at the United Nations in New York, urged the parties to adhere to the truce, renew it after two months and work toward a political settlement.

"Today must be the start of a better future for the people of Yemen," he said.

The Iran-backed Houthis and Yemen's internationally recognized government have also said they were working on a deal to release over 2,220 prisoners of war, including Hadi's brother and a former defense minister.

Jan. 6 panel puts Garland in 'precarious' spot, ups pressure

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol are increasingly going public with critical statements, court filings and more to deliver a blunt message to Attorney General Merrick Garland and the Department of Justice.

President Donald Trump and his allies likely committed crimes, they say. And it's up to you to do some-

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thing about it.

"Attorney General Garland, do your job so we can do ours," prodded Rep. Elaine Luria of Virginia.

"We are upholding our responsibility. The Department of Justice must do the same," echoed Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif.

Their rhetoric, focused this week on two contempt of Congress referrals approved by the committee, is just the latest example of the pressure campaign the lawmakers are waging. It reflects a stark reality: While they can investigate Jan. 6 and issue subpoenas to gather information, only the Justice Department can bring criminal charges.

Committee members see the case they are building against Trump and his allies as a once-in-a-generation circumstance. If it's not fully prosecuted, they say, it could set a dangerous precedent that threatens the foundations of American democracy.

The lawmakers seem nearly certain to send a criminal referral to the Justice Department once their work is through.

It all puts Garland, who has spent his tenure trying to shield the Justice Department from political pressure, in a precarious spot. Any criminal charges related to Jan. 6 would trigger a firestorm, thrusting prosecutors back into the partisan crossfire that proved so damaging during the Trump-Russia influence investigation and an email probe of Hillary Clinton.

Garland has given no public indication about whether prosecutors might be considering a case against the former president. He has, though, vowed to hold accountable "all January 6th perpetrators, at any level" and has said that would include those who were "present that day or were otherwise criminally responsible for the assault on our democracy."

It's already the largest criminal prosecution in the department's history — for rioters who entered the Capitol building on Jan. 6 as well as members of extremist groups who are accused of planning the attack. More than 750 people have been charged with federal crimes. Over 220 riot defendants have pleaded guilty, more than 100 have been sentenced and at least 90 others have trial dates.

Parts of the department's investigation have overlapped with the committee's. One example is in late January when Justice announced it had opened a probe into a fake slate of electors who falsely tried to declare Trump the winner of the 2020 election in seven swing states that Joe Biden won. Three days later, lawmakers subpoenaed more than a dozen people involved in the effort.

But the Jan. 6 committee wants more. Their message was amplified this week when a federal judge in California — District Judge David Carter, a Bill Clinton appointee — wrote that it is "more likely than not" that Trump himself committed crimes in his attempt to stop the certification of the 2020 election.

The practical effect of that ruling was to order the release of more than 100 emails from Trump adviser John Eastman to the Jan. 6 Committee. But lawmakers zeroed in on a particular passage in the judge's opinion that characterized Jan. 6 as a "coup."

"Dr. Eastman and President Trump launched a campaign to overturn a democratic election, an action unprecedented in American history. Their campaign was not confined to the ivory tower—it was a coup in search of a legal theory," Carter wrote.

But experts caution that Carter's opinion was only in a civil case and does not meet the longstanding charging policy the Justice Department is required to meet. Justin Danilewitz, a Philadelphia-based attorney and former federal prosecutor, noted the department faces a higher burden of proof in court to show that presidential immunity should not apply. And he said the legal advice Trump received from Eastman "undermines an inference of corrupt or deceitful intent."

The department will be guided by the evidence and law, he said, "but the social and political ramifications of a decision of this kind will not be far from the minds of Attorney General Garland and his staff."

"A decision to bring or not bring criminal charges will have significant ripple effects," he added.

Taylor Budowich, a Trump spokesperson, called the judge's ruling an "absurd and baseless ruling by a Clinton-appointed Judge in California." He called the House committee's investigation a "circus of partisanship."

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Another point of friction with the Justice Department is the effort to enforce subpoenas through contempt of Congress charges.

The House approved a contempt referral against former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows in December after he ceased cooperating with the Jan. 6 panel. While an earlier contempt referral against former Trump adviser Steve Bannon resulted in an indictment, the Department of Justice has been slower to decide whether to prosecute Meadows.

"The Department of Justice is entrusted with defending our Constitution," Rep. Liz Cheney, the Republican committee chair, said at a hearing this week. "Department leadership should not apply any doctrine of immunity that might block Congress from fully uncovering and addressing the causes of the January 6 attack."

A decision to pursue the contempt charges against Meadows would have to come from career prosecutors in the U.S. attorney's office in Washington before senior Justice Department officials would weigh in and decide how to proceed.

Bringing a case against Meadows would be more challenging for prosecutors than the case against Bannon, in large part because Bannon wasn't a White House official during the insurrection.

The Justice Department has long maintained that senior aides generally cannot be forced to testify if a president invokes executive privilege, as Trump has done. And bringing charges could risk undermining the longstanding principle that lets the executive branch of the government keep most discussions private.

While the majority of committee members have turned up the pressure on Garland, one member, Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, has not gone as far.

"I feel strongly that we restore the tradition of respect for the independence of the law enforcement function," Raskin told reporters this week. "That was one of the things that got trashed during the Trump period. And so I think that Congress and the president should let the Department of Justice and attorney general do their job."

"Attorney General Garland is my constituent," Raskin added, "and I don't beat up on my constituents."

Lamb revives gun incident to attack Fetterman in Senate race

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Conor Lamb is accusing rival John Fetterman in Pennsylvania's Democratic U.S. Senate primary of skipping candidate forums to avoid talking about a 2013 incident when, shotgun in hand, he confronted a Black man because he suspected the man was involved in gunfire nearby.

The accusation more directly inserts issues of race into a campaign that could hinge on which candidate appeals to Black voters. It might also damage Fetterman and his party with a key voting bloc whose support would be important should he become the Democratic candidate in the general election in November.

The accusation marks a sharp escalation in tone between candidates vying for the Democratic nomination in Pennsylvania's May 17 Senate primary election. The contest to replace retiring Republican Sen. Pat Toomey represents perhaps the Democrats' best opportunity to pick up a seat in the closely divided Senate.

Fetterman, Pennsylvania's lieutenant governor, has insisted he isn't skipping forums for any such reason, and has repeatedly maintained that he was acting as a mayor concerned for public safety and confronted the man, not knowing his race.

Fetterman has spoken before of how he believed he had heard gunfire while outside his home in the small town of Braddock when he was mayor in 2013. He has said he pursued a mask- and goggle-wearing man he saw running nearby, covered head to toe in the cold January weather, pulling out a shotgun until police arrived.

The man — Christopher Miyares, who is Black — was unarmed and said in a TV interview afterward that he had been jogging when Fetterman, who is white, pulled up in his pickup and pointed the shotgun at him. Fetterman has denied pointing the shotgun at Miyares and said it wasn't loaded.

On Thursday night, Lamb, a third-term congressman, took to Twitter to raise the episode, which has bubbled just below the surface of a primary campaign that previously had been relatively cordial.

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"We all know why John Fetterman isn't coming to the debate on Sunday," Lamb wrote. "He doesn't want to talk about the fact that he chased down an unarmed Black man and held him at gunpoint. That's the elephant in the room. And we have to talk about it."

A third Democrat in the primary, Malcolm Kenyatta, who is Black, echoed Lamb. In an interview Friday, Kenyatta said Fetterman "needs to leave the candidate protection program and actually publicly debate his record."

Fetterman has missed several forums, including one hosted by a predominantly Black church in Philadelphia. He has previously denied avoiding forums for anything other than legitimate scheduling conflicts or unforeseen family circumstances.

His campaign pointed out Friday that it has agreed to join three televised debates in coming weeks and that Fetterman has joined numerous other forums.

A Franklin & Marshall College poll in February found that Fetterman appeared to have an early lead in the Democratic primary, but many voters are undecided.

Fetterman's campaign suggested that Lamb, who is white, is raising the encounter now because he isn't breaking through with voters.

"The people of Braddock understand that, as the town's mayor and chief law enforcement officer, John was acting to keep his community safe," Rebecca Katz, an adviser to Fetterman's campaign, said in an email.

Braddock — a town that is about 70% Black — reelected Fetterman 10 months later "because they know this incident had nothing to do with race," Katz said.

Meanwhile, Fetterman and Miyares have each accused the other of lying.

Fetterman said he didn't know Miyares' race when he got into his pickup truck to pursue him. He also has suggested that Miyares was involved in something untoward that he was running away from.

Police never charged Fetterman or Miyares in the matter.

In a letter to The Philadelphia Inquirer last year, Miyares — writing from state prison, where he is serving time in an unrelated case — insisted that Fetterman knew he was Black and not only pointed the shotgun at him, but also loaded it.

The subject has shadowed the campaign trail. A political action committee that supports Black candidates, including Kenyatta, raised it early last year and used it in advertisements on radio stations popular with Black listeners.

Republicans also have used it to attack Fetterman. But until Thursday night, a Democratic rival had not used it in such a public way to go after Fetterman.

Kenyatta and Lamb warn that the episode remains a liability for Fetterman, especially if he wins the primary.

"That's a huge problem when we're picking our nominee for the biggest race in the country," Lamb wrote on Twitter.

Kenyatta, a state lawmaker, said the situation could have ended badly for Miyares as a Black man and that an apology from Fetterman would show people that he understands he may have made a mistake.

"For years now, John has failed to apologize for his vigilante behavior and he doesn't even own the fact that what he did was dangerous and wrong," Kenyatta said.

Pope makes historic Indigenous apology for Canada abuses

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis on Friday made a historic apology to Indigenous peoples for the "deplorable" abuses they suffered in Canada's Catholic-run residential schools and said he hoped to visit Canada in late July to deliver the apology in person to survivors of the church's misguided missionary zeal.

Francis begged forgiveness during an audience with dozens of members of the Metis, Inuit and First Nations communities who came to Rome seeking a papal apology and a commitment from the Catholic Church to repair the damage. The first pope from the Americas said he hoped to visit Canada around the Feast of St. Anna, which falls on July 26.

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More than 150,000 native children in Canada were forced to attend state-funded Christian schools from the 19th century until the 1970s in an effort to isolate them from the influence of their homes and culture. The aim was to Christianize and assimilate them into mainstream society, which previous Canadian governments considered superior.

The Canadian government has admitted that physical and sexual abuse was rampant at the schools, with students beaten for speaking their native languages. That legacy of that abuse and isolation from family has been cited by Indigenous leaders as a root cause of the epidemic rates of alcohol and drug addiction now on Canadian reservations.

After hearing their stories all week, Francis told the Indigenous groups that the colonial project ripped children from their families, cutting off their roots, traditions and culture and provoking inter-generational trauma that is still being felt today. He said it was a "counter-witness" to the same Gospel that the residential school system purported to uphold.

"For the deplorable conduct of those members of the Catholic Church, I ask forgiveness of the Lord," Francis said. "And I want to tell you from my heart, that I am greatly pained. And I unite myself with the Canadian bishops in apologizing."

The trip to Rome by the Indigenous leaders, elders and survivors was years in the making but gained momentum last year after the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves outside some of the residential schools in Canada. The three groups met separately with Francis over several hours this week, telling him their stories, culminating with Friday's audience.

The president of the Metis National Council, Cassidy Caron, said the Metis elder sitting next her burst into tears upon hearing what she said was a long-overdue apology.

"The pope's words today were historic, to be sure. They were necessary, and I appreciate them deeply," Caron told reporters in St. Peter's Square. "And I now look forward to the pope's visit to Canada, where he can offer those sincere words of apology directly to our survivors and their families, whose acceptance and healing ultimately matters most."

First Nations' Chief Gerald Antoine echoed the sentiment, saying Francis recognized the cultural "genocide" that had been inflicted on Indigenous peoples.

"Today is a day that we've been waiting for. And certainly one that will be uplifted in our history," he said. "It's a historical first step, however, only a first step."

He and other delegates said there was far more for the church to do on the path of reconciliation, but that for now Indigenous leaders insisted on being involved in organizing the papal visit to make sure Francis stops in places that hold spiritual importance to their people.

Natan Obed, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, thanked Francis for addressing all the issues the Indigenous delegations had brought to him. "And he did so in a way that really showed his empathy towards the Indigenous people of Canada," he said.

Nearly three-quarters of Canada's 130 residential schools were run by Catholic missionary congregations.

Last May, the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Nation announced the discovery of 215 gravesites near Kamloops, British Columbia, that were found using ground-penetrating radar. It was Canada's largest Indigenous residential school and the discovery of the graves was the first of numerous, similar grim sites across the country.

Even before the grave sites were discovered, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission specifically called for a papal apology to be delivered on Canadian soil for the church's role in the abuses.

In addition, as part of a settlement of a lawsuit involving the Canadian government, churches and the approximately 90,000 surviving students, Canada paid reparations that amounted to billions of dollars being transferred to Indigenous communities. The Catholic Church, for its part, has paid over \$50 million and now intends to add \$30 million more over the next five years.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, meanwhile, acknowledged Francis' apology and said he looked forward to having him deliver it in person in Canada.

"This apology would not have happened without the long advocacy of survivors who journeyed to tell

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their truths directly to the institution responsible and who recounted and relived their painful memories," he said. "Today's apology is a step forward in acknowledging the truth of our past in order to right historical wrongs, but there is still work to be done."

Francis said he felt shame for the role that Catholic educators had played in the harm, "in the abuse and disrespect for your identity, your culture and even your spiritual values," he said. "It is evident that the contents of the faith cannot be transmitted in a way that is extraneous to the faith itself."

"It is chilling to think of determined efforts to instill a sense of inferiority, to rob people of their cultural identity, to sever their roots, and to consider all the personal and social effects that this continues to entail: unresolved traumas that have become inter-generational traumas," he said.

After the papal apology, the audience continued with joyous performances of Indigenous prayers by drummers, dancers and fiddlers that Francis watched, applauded and gave a thumbs up to. The delegates then presented him with gifts, including snowshoes. Francis, for his part, returned a First Nations cradle that the delegation had left with him overnight as he pondered his apology.

Francis' apology went far beyond what Pope Benedict XVI had offered in 2009 when an Assembly of First Nations delegation visited. At the time, Benedict only expressed his "sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the church." But he did not apologize.

The Argentine pope is no stranger to offering apologies for his own errors and for what he himself has termed the "crimes" of the institutional church. Most significantly, during a 2015 visit to Bolivia, he apologized for the sins, crimes and offenses committed by the church against Indigenous peoples during the colonial-era conquest of the Americas.

He made clear those same colonial crimes occurred far more recently in Canada at the Catholic-run residential schools.

"Your identity and culture has been wounded, many families separated, many children have become victims of this homogenization action, supported by the idea that progress occurs through ideological colonization, according to programs studied at the table rather than respecting the lives of peoples," he said.

US added 431,000 jobs in March in sign of economic health

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

America's employers extended a streak of robust hiring in March, adding 431,000 jobs in a sign of the economy's resilience in the face of a still-destructive pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine and the highest inflation in 40 years.

The government's report Friday showed that last month's job growth helped shrink the unemployment rate to 3.6%. That's the lowest rate since the pandemic erupted two years ago and just above the half-century low of 3.5% that was reached two years ago.

Despite the inflation surge, persistent supply bottlenecks, damage from COVID-19 and now a war in Europe, employers have added at least 400,000 jobs for 11 straight months. In its report, the government also sharply revised up its estimate of hiring in January and February by a combined 95,000 jobs.

The job growth in March, though solid, was the lowest since September and slightly below what economists had expected. Still, Vincent Reinhart, chief economist at Dreyfus and Mellon, said the numbers show that "the U.S. economy continues to have underlying momentum and that firms are taking workers when they can."

The March report sketched a bright picture of the job market, with steady hiring and rising wages. Average hourly pay has risen a strong 5.6% over the past 12 months, welcome news for employees across the economy. For leisure and hospitality workers, including people who work in hotels, restaurants and bars, average pay has jumped 11.8% from a year earlier — "a clear sign that employers are desperate for staff," said Saru Jayaraman, president of One Fair Wage, which advocates for better pay and conditions for service employees.

For most workers, though, pay raises aren't keeping up with the spike in inflation that has put the Federal Reserve on track to raise rates multiple times, perhaps aggressively, in the coming months. Those rate

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hikes will result in costlier loans for many consumers and businesses. In the meantime, worker pay raises, a response in many cases to labor shortages, are themselves feeding the economy's inflation pressures.

The steady job growth has failed to buoy President Joe Biden's flagging popularity, with the gains overshadowed in the public's mind by chronically high inflation. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine driving oil and gasoline prices higher, Biden has announced plans to release a million barrels of oil daily from the U.S. strategic reserve for the next six months.

Since the pandemic struck in 2020, many Americans have remained on the sidelines of the job market, a trend that has contributed to the worker shortage in many industries. But in an encouraging sign for the economy, 418,000 people began looking for a job in March, and many found one. Over the past year, 3.8 million people have rejoined the labor force, meaning they now either have a job or are looking for one.

Across the economy, hiring gains were widespread last month. Restaurants and bars added 61,000 jobs, retailers 49,000, manufacturers 38,000 and hotels 25,000. Construction jobs rose by 19,000 and have now returned to their pre-pandemic level.

Some economists sounded a note of caution, though, suggesting that the prospect of much higher borrowing rates engineered by the Fed will inevitably slow the job market and the overall economy.

"We continue to expect that the Federal Reserve will move rates up expeditiously to counter surging inflation, and that this report only adds more urgency to their plans to do so," said Mike Fratantoni, chief economist at the Mortgage Bankers Association.

For now, the job market continues to rebound from the coronavirus recession. Fueled by generous federal aid, savings amassed during the pandemic and ultra-low borrowing rates orchestrated by the Fed, U.S. consumers have spent so fast that many factories, warehouses, shipping companies and ports have failed to keep pace with their customer demand. Supply chains have snarled, forcing up prices.

The proportion of Americans who are either working or looking for work — the so-called labor force participation rate — ticked up to 62.4% last month, the highest since the early days of the pandemic in March 2020. Even so, the participation rate remains a full percentage point below its pre-pandemic level, limiting the pool of potential job applicants employers can choose from. Many Americans remain on the sidelines because of lingering health concerns and trouble finding childcare.

"You can't keep adding 400,000 workers a month without running out of workers," said Reinhart, a former high-ranking Fed economist.

Reinhart said he expects higher interest rates, on top of the expiration of government aid, to eventually slow hiring to "a more sustainable" pace.

"The bad news," he said, "is we haven't yet recovered the pre-pandemic level of employment, and it will take longer" to get there.

Labor Secretary Marty Walsh suggested Friday that the streak of hiring gains may be "sustainable for a little while" but that "the key to us going forward" would be drawing more Americans back to the job market.

Karen Fichuk, CEO of the staffing company Randstad North America, noted that the economy now has a record 1.7 job openings for every unemployed person.

"Even if you get all the unemployed workers back, it still leaves a gap," she said. "We need to attract people back into the workforce."

In particular, Fichuk said, businesses need to draw more women back by, for example, offering flexible hours and childcare centers or stipends for childcare expenses.

It's unclear how long the economy can maintain its momentum of the past year, especially as high inflation pinches family budgets and the Fed's rate hikes slow economic activity. Hourly pay, adjusted for higher consumer prices, fell 2.6% in February from a year earlier — the 11th straight month in which inflation has outpaced year-over-year wage growth. According to AAA, average gasoline prices, at \$4.23 a gallon, are up a dizzying 47% from a year ago.

At the same time, the job market has kept hurtling ahead. Employers posted a near-record 11.3 million positions in February. Nearly 4.4 million Americans quit their jobs, a sign of confidence that they could find something better.

At Threshold Brands, a company in Newport Beach, California, that operates eight brands specializing in home services and repair, franchisees are struggling to hire fast enough to keep up with orders.

"If they could just add more people, they could meet all that demand," said Hagan Kappler, the company's CEO. "They're having to turn business away."

Some businesses are trying novel ways to hire and retain employees. InHome Therapy in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, needs highly skilled physical, occupational and speech therapists to treat patients in their homes. Besides paying therapist salaries of \$90,000 to \$120,000 a year, InHome provides company cars and helps employees repay student loans.

"They longer they stay with us," said CEO Matt Murphy, "the more of their student loans we'll help them pay back."

Man who parked weapons near Capitol on 1/6 gets prison

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

An Alabama man who parked a pickup truck filled with weapons and Molotov cocktail components near the U.S. Capitol on the day of last year's riot was sentenced Friday to nearly four years in prison.

U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly said she still hasn't heard an explanation for why Lonnie Leroy Coffman had "almost a small armory in his truck, ready to do battle." She sentenced Coffman to three years and 10 months in prison, giving him credit for the more than one year he already has served since his arrest.

Coffman, 72, of Falkville, Alabama, said he never intended to hurt anybody or destroy any property. He said he drove to Washington alone "to try to discover just how true and secure was the (2020 presidential) election."

"If I had any idea that things would turn out like they did, I would have stayed home," he wrote in a handwritten letter to the judge.

More than 770 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the Capitol riot, when supporters of outgoing President Donald Trump stormed the building in an effort to disrupt lawmakers' formal certification of his reelection defeat. Five people died and scores of Capitol Police officers were seriously injured.

Over 240 participants in the attack have pleaded guilty, mostly to misdemeanors punishable by a maximum of six months imprisonment. More than 130 have been sentenced. Coffman is one of nine defendants whose prison sentence exceeds one year.

Coffman, a Vietnam War veteran who served in the U.S. Army, pleaded guilty in November to possession of an unregistered firearm and carrying a pistol without a license. He was carrying a loaded handgun and revolver without a license as he walked in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6, 2021, according to prosecutors. He isn't accused of entering the Capitol or joining the mob during the riot that day.

When Coffman parked his truck a few blocks from the Capitol on the morning of Jan. 6, it contained a handgun, a rifle, a shotgun, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, a crossbow, machetes, a stun gun and a cooler containing eleven mason jars with holes punched in the lids, according to prosecutors. Each jar contained a mixture of gasoline and Styrofoam, which are components of the homemade incendiary devices called Molotov cocktails, prosecutors said.

Law enforcement officers found the cache of weapons and ammunition when they searched Coffman's truck. They had been sweeping the area after pipe bombs were found near the headquarters of the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee. Later, investigators also found Molotov cocktail components at Coffman's home in Alabama.

"Possession of so much dangerous weapons in our nation's capital is uniquely offensive to our cherished, democratic political traditions," Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Friedman said.

Handwritten notes found inside the vehicle included a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln that said, "We The People Are The Rightful Masters Of Both The Congress And The Courts, Not To Overthrow The Constitution But To Overthrow The Men Who Pervert The Constitution."

The notes included a list of "good guys" and "bad guys," with a federal judge named in the latter cat-

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egory, and contact information for a member of a Texas militia group known as the "American Patriots," prosecutors said.

"The handwritten notes also included an address for a reported gathering place in Texas called 'Camp Lonestar,' where militia groups had reportedly sought to patrol the border looking for illegal aliens," prosecutors wrote.

Investigators had previously identified Coffman as an armed participant at Camp Lonestar, according to prosecutors.

Coffman, a retired machine operator, had travelled to Washington in December 2020 and tried to drive to the home of a U.S. senator who isn't named in a court filing by prosecutors. He also called the senator's office in an effort to "help with the election fraud he saw."

"A staff member at the Senator's office recorded that the defendant seemed 'unbalanced' or 'not 100% there' during the call, but did not seem threatening," prosecutors wrote.

Prosecutors recommended a prison sentence of approximately three years and six months. Defense attorney Manuel Retureta said a prison term wouldn't be appropriate given Coffman's age and medical condition.

Coffman didn't have a criminal record before this case.

"At my age, one of the most precious (things) we possess is time, and I have wasted almost a whole precious year," he wrote in his letter to the judge.

Analysis: Oil prices, Ukraine war create Saudi pivot point

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press
DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) —

The world is looking to Saudi Arabia to boost oil production as global energy prices spike because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But that could mean rethinking how to deal with the kingdom's controversial crown prince.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ties with longtime allies have been troubled by a string of issues. At the top of the list is the killing and dismemberment of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018, as well as Saudi Arabia's intervention in neighboring Yemen's war.

U.S. President Joe Biden has kept the 36-year-old prince at a distance. But with economic worries high, others may be putting the controversies behind them.

Turkey on Thursday moved to end an ongoing court case of Khashoggi's death, a step that could ease tensions with Saudi Arabia.

With higher oil prices flooding the kingdom's coffers, the crown prince and his father King Salman face a potential pivot point of their own.

Can the ruling Al Saud family reset its relationship with the United States, long the security guarantor for the wider Persian Gulf? Or does the kingdom tip toward further toward China, now its biggest buyer of crude, or Moscow?

An American rapprochement seems unlikely. Asked in a recent interview about what he'd want Biden to know about, Prince Mohammed bluntly said: "I don't care."

"It's up to him to think about the interests of America," the prince added.

Perhaps no other country in the world stands to rapidly benefit financially from the Ukraine war as Saudi Arabia.

Its vast oil resources, located close to the surface of its desert expanse, make it one of the world's cheapest places to produce crude. For every \$10 rise in the price of a barrel of oil, Saudi Arabia stands to make an additional \$40 billion a year, according to the Institute of International Finance.

It's a wild turn of events considering oil prices in April 2020 turned negative at the height of lockdowns in the coronavirus pandemic. Now, benchmark Brent crude stands at \$105 a barrel — highs unseen since 2014.

The additional cash comes in handy for Prince Mohammed, who also has to deal with questions at home,

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particularly how to find jobs for a growing number of unemployed youth.

The crown prince has been known for his brash moves. His vision for Saudi Arabia includes developing a futuristic city called Neom in the desert reaches along the Red Sea. Its latest iteration involves a ski slope project called Trojena, advertised in a computer-generated commercial now in heavy rotation across Mideast satellite channels.

But while expansive palaces now exist there, satellite photos from Planet Labs PBC show the wider Neom project remains at an early stage. It likely will be years before it produces the jobs the prince counts on to slingshot the kingdom's economy away from oil.

Meanwhile, unemployment among youth stood at 32.7% for men and 25.2% for women late last year, according to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics. Reopening cinemas and allowing concerts in a kingdom where ultraconservatives view music as a sin comes as a part of that push for jobs.

"If I'm going to get the employment rate down, and tourism could create 1 million jobs in Saudi Arabia, ... that means I have to do it," the prince told *The Atlantic* magazine in a recent interview. "Choose a lesser sin rather than a bigger sin."

The sheen, however, has come off for human rights activists and some Western nations.

Saudi Arabia just put to death 81 prisoners in a single day, the biggest known mass execution in the kingdom's history, after a pandemic lull. Despite a unilateral Ramadan cease-fire, the Saudi-led war in Yemen against the Houthi rebels rages years after the prince promised a quick victory — and the Arab world's poorest country has been left in wreckage.

Internationally, perhaps nothing received more attention than Khashoggi's killing.

U.S. intelligence services believe Prince Mohammed approved the operation that killed Khashoggi, a permanent resident of the United States. Finding a resolution over the split with a close ally remains a difficult knot to untangle.

Biden, who called the crown prince "a pariah" while campaigning, pointedly has only spoken to King Salman since entering the White House. Biden's first foreign trip was to a G-7 summit in England, rather than the sword-dancing embrace then-President Donald Trump gave to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates appear to be leveraging record gasoline prices at the pump to extract American concessions on Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has repeatedly said it can't be held responsible for energy price jumps caused by Houthi attacks on its oil facilities. That steps up pressure on Biden, whose administration withdrew American air defenses from Saudi Arabia last year.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is maintaining its own ties to Russia. The kingdom also is again reportedly thinking of selling some crude oil in Chinese yuan to Beijing, rather than the U.S. dollar.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy weighed in on the situation in recent days, urging Qatar and other regional energy powers to increase their output to make up for the loss of Russian supply. "The future of Europe depends on your efforts," he told them.

Faisal J. Abbas, the editor-in-chief of Saudi Arabia's English-language daily newspaper *Arab News*, wrote that the kingdom needs "all the support it can get" against the Houthis.

"The kingdom cannot — and must not — be left alone to safeguard global energy supplies at a time when the entire world is unanimously hurting from price hikes," he wrote.

Where the support comes from in the future remains the question.

\$14M jury award for protesters could resonate around US

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A federal jury's \$14 million award to Denver protesters hit with pepper balls and a bag filled with lead during 2020 demonstrations over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis could resonate nationwide as courts weigh more than two dozen similar lawsuits.

The jury found police used excessive force against protesters, violating their constitutional rights, and ordered the city of Denver to pay 12 who sued.

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Nationwide, there are at least 29 pending lawsuits challenging law enforcement use of force during the 2020 protests, according to a search of the University of Michigan's Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse.

The verdict in Denver could give cities an incentive to settle similar cases rather than risk going to trial and losing, said Michael J. Steinberg, a professor at the University of Michigan Law School and director of the Civil Rights Litigation Initiative. It could also prompt more protesters to sue over their treatment at the hands of police.

"There's no doubt that the large jury verdict in Denver will influence the outcome of pending police misconduct cases brought by Black Lives Matter protesters across the country," said Steinberg, whose law students have been working on a similar lawsuit brought by protesters in Detroit.

Lawyers for the claimants argued that police used indiscriminate force against the nonviolent protesters, including some who were filming the demonstrations, because officers did not like their message critical of law enforcement.

"To the protest of police violence they responded with brutality," one of their attorneys, Timothy Macdonald, told jurors.

People who took part in the protests have already made similar allegations in lawsuits filed across the country.

In Washington, DC, activists and civil liberties groups sued over the forcible removal of protesters before then-President Donald Trump walked to a church near the White House for a photo op. The claims against federal officials were dismissed last year but a judge allowed the case against local police to continue.

Several lawsuits alleging protesters were wrongfully arrested or that police used excessive force have been filed against New York City and its police department, including one brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James that claims police used excessive force and wrongfully arrested protesters. In Rochester, New York, people who protested the death of Daniel Prude, a Black man who lost consciousness after being pinned to the street by officers during a mental health call in 2020, claim police used extreme force against them in a lawsuit that also alleges city officials have allowed a culture of police brutality against racial minorities to fester.

One of their attorneys, Donald Thompson, said he plans to raise the Denver award in settlement talks with the city and note that unlike most of the Denver protesters, some of his clients suffered lasting injuries including the loss of an eye and scarring from being hit in the face with a tear gas canister. Thompson also thinks the Denver verdict shows that the public, in the age of cellphone and body camera videos, is not as willing to give police the benefit of the doubt anymore.

"Now people see how this policing really works. You can't be naïve," he said.

A spokesperson for Rochester, Barbara Pierce, declined to comment, saying the best forum to discuss its legal position was through the litigation process. When the case was filed, the city said it had already revised the way police responds to protests.

Over the last two months, the city of Austin, Texas has agreed to pay a total of \$13 million to four people who were hit in the head with bean bag rounds fired by police.

Even before the Denver ruling last week, the police department made some changes in response to criticism that arose from the protests, including eliminating the use of 40mm foam rounds for crowd control and changing the way officers are permitted to use pepper balls.

Denver's Department of Public Safety, which includes the police department, said in a statement that the city was not prepared for the level of sustained violence and destruction. During the trial, lawyers and witnesses said over 80 officers were injured as some in the crowds hurled rocks, water bottles and canned food at them.

The department said it continues to evaluate its policies to "better protect peaceful protestors while addressing those who are only there to engage in violence."

Still, the large award is not expected to lead to an overhaul of how officers respond to what experts say are inherently chaotic situations that are difficult to prepare for.

Ed Obayashi, a use-of-force consultant to law enforcement agencies and a deputy sheriff and legal adviser in Plumas County, California, said society may have to bear the cost of such settlements because

innocent people can be injured during protests as outnumbered police try to react on the fly, including to people intent on violence.

"It really goes south in an instant because there are individuals out there who want to cause chaos," he said.

Obayashi said there is not much police training for protests, which have been relatively rare. He said it would be prohibitively expensive to have officers practice deploying equipment such as tear gas canisters. Because projectiles used in crowds and considered "less lethal" by police, such as rubber bullets and pepper balls, have less velocity and less power to hurt people, it is harder to ensure they hit their intended target, he said.

Lawyers representing people who have also alleged police misconduct and violation of their constitutional right to protest can now use the Denver damage award as part of their own settlement negotiations, said Mark Silverstein, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, which represented some of the winning Denver protesters.

The decision came nearly two years after thousands of people angry about Floyd's death took the streets nationwide, a relatively quick result for the legal system and soon enough for others who allege misconduct by police to file a claim. In Colorado and many other states, there is a two-year statute of limitations for such lawsuits Silverstein said, leaving only a few months for others to sue.

The city attorney's office said it has not decided whether to appeal the verdict, but appeals in such big cases are common, said Gloria Browne-Marshall, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Outside lawyers will also scrutinize the case to try to determine if there are unique circumstances that may have led to a "lightning in a bottle" verdict that is less likely to be repeated.

However, she thinks the verdict sends a significant message that regular people respect the right of protest and demand change from the government, which she believes police and prosecutors have been undermining.

"It should send a message to both, but whether or not they listen is a different issue," Browne-Marshall said.

Turkey to OK Khashoggi murder trial's move to Saudi Arabia

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkey's justice minister said Friday that the government will recommend that an Istanbul court close a trial in absentia against 26 Saudi nationals charged in the slaying of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi and transfer the case to Saudi Arabia.

Bekir Bozdag spoke a day after a Turkish prosecutor requested the transfer, in line with a request from the kingdom.

The request, which came as Turkey and Saudi Arabia have been working to improve ties, raised fears of a possible coverup of the killing that triggered an international outcry and cast a cloud of suspicion over Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

A panel of judges hearing the case made no ruling on the surprise request by the prosecutor on Thursday but said it would seek the Justice Ministry's opinion. Trial was adjourned until April 7.

"We will send our opinion today," the state-run Anadolu Agency quoted Bozdag as saying. "We will provide a positive opinion concerning the transfer of this case."

Amnesty International has urged Turkey to press ahead with the trial, arguing that the case would be placed under wraps if moved to Saudi Arabia.

Bozdag said, however, that should the case be moved to the kingdom, the Turkish court would evaluate any verdict reached by a Saudi court. The Turkish judiciary would then drop the case if it is satisfied with the verdict reached in Saudi Arabia or resume proceedings if the defendants are acquitted, Anadolu reported.

The trial's transfer to Saudi Arabia "does not abolish the jurisdiction of the Turkish courts," Anadolu quoted the minister as saying.

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Moving Khashoggi's trial to Saudi Arabia would provide a diplomatic resolution to a dispute that exemplified the wider troubles between Ankara and the kingdom since the 2011 Arab Spring.

Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan supported Islamists as the uprisings took hold, while Saudi Arabia and its ally the United Arab Emirates sought to suppress such movements for fear of facing challenges to their autocratic governments. Meanwhile, Turkey sided with Qatar in a diplomatic dispute that saw Doha boycotted by Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Khashoggi, who wrote critically of Saudi Arabia's crown prince, disappeared on Oct. 2, 2018, after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, seeking documents that would allow him to marry his Turkish fiancée. He never emerged.

Turkish officials allege that the Saudi national, who was a United States resident, was killed and then dismembered with a bone saw inside the consulate by a team of Saudi agents sent to Istanbul. His body has not been found.

Turkey began prosecuting the defendants in absentia in 2020 after Saudi Arabia rejected requests for their extradition.

In arguing for the transfer, the prosecutor told the court that the Saudi chief public prosecutor's office requested the Turkish proceedings be transferred to the kingdom in a letter dated March 13, and that international warrants issued by Ankara against the defendants be lifted, according to the private DHA news agency.

The prosecutor said that because the arrest warrants cannot be executed and defense statements cannot be taken, the case would remain inconclusive in Turkey.

Shanghai moves to 2nd part of lockdown as testing lines grow

BEIJING (AP) — About 16 million residents in Shanghai are being tested for the coronavirus during the second stage of the lockdown that shifted Friday to the western half of China's biggest city and financial capital.

Meanwhile, residents of Shanghai's eastern districts who were supposed to be released from four days of isolation have been told their lockdowns could be extended if COVID-19 cases are found in their residential compounds.

The lockdown in Shanghai, being done in two phases over eight days to enable testing of its entire population, has shaken global markets worried about the possible economic impact. China's manufacturing activity fell to a five-month low in March, a monthly survey showed, as lockdowns and other restrictions forced factories to suspend production.

For four days starting Friday, residents of Puxi on the west side of the Huangpu River dividing Shanghai cannot leave their neighborhoods or housing compounds. The gates at some compounds were locked from the outside, with groceries and meals delivered to collection points.

Government workers and volunteers wearing full protective equipment went door-to-door with megaphones in the city with 26 million people, calling on residents to report for testing at designated sites where they were met by long lines and waits of more than 90 minutes.

Veronica Wang, a resident of Pudong, as Shanghai's eastern half is known, said she and many she knows were still under lockdown, with no word on when normal life will be restored.

Wang's compound had been closed off even before the lockdown began. She said a large part of her days is now spent on trying to hop on to large group orders for groceries and items from soy sauce to toothpaste obtained through personal connections.

"For example, we have one (group order) set up for vegetables, one for eggs, one for bread," she said.

Shanghai had not previously experienced a sweeping lockdown, although many residents chose to stay at home even without formal orders to do so.

This time, the "whole environment is rather tense," Wang said, citing a neighbor who waited hours for an emergency call to be answered.

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"The mood is different," she said.

China's National Health Commission said another 1,787 domestic cases of COVID-19 had been recorded on Thursday, including 358 in Shanghai. Another 5,442 tested positive for the virus without becoming ill, 4,144 of them in Shanghai.

People who tested positive without symptoms are being taken to temporary isolation centers, including gymnasiums and exhibition centers.

Public transport has been suspended and roads closed, bringing the normally bustling metropolis to a standstill. While city residents are being told to stay put, airports and train stations remain open.

The lockdown reflects China's continuing adherence to its "zero-COVID" approach despite restrictions being eased elsewhere. China set the hard-line tone at the start of the pandemic in 2020 with the 76-day lockdown on the city of Wuhan where the virus was first detected.

The measures have been decried by some Chinese as excessive, although there has been little open defiance. Amid the grumbling, Shanghai authorities have conceded shortcomings in their handling of the surge driven by the omicron variant, after panic buying stripped store shelves of necessities.

"We didn't prepare sufficiently enough," Ma Chunlei, a senior Shanghai official said at a news conference Thursday. "We sincerely accept the criticisms from the public and are making efforts to improve it."

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Altered photo fuels false claims that Oscars slap was staged

CLAIM: A photo shows comedian Chris Rock wearing a pad on his cheek during the incident at the Oscars where Will Smith slapped him.

THE FACTS: Rock was not wearing a pad on his face when he was hit. The photo, which was originally published by Reuters, was manipulated to make it seem as if Rock was wearing a pad on his left cheek. The altered photo circulated widely online following the confrontation at Sunday's 94th Academy Awards, with claims it showed the incident was staged. One Facebook user who shared the altered photo wrote: "Definitely staged, But why ?? Bro gotta whole face pad on his face!!" The original photo was taken for Reuters, Heather Carpenter, a spokesperson for the news agency, confirmed in an email to The Associated Press. An AP review of the original photo and the altered version shows that it has been manipulated. It appears that natural wrinkles on Rock's face were changed to make it seem as if he was wearing some sort of skin-colored material on his left cheek. Additionally, AP photos of the incident clearly show that Rock was not wearing a pad on his face. Smith walked onstage during the ceremony, slapped Rock, then returned to his seat and yelled expletives at the comedian after he made a joke about Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, who has a shaved head. Pinkett Smith has spoken publicly about her diagnosis with alopecia, a disease that causes hair loss. Smith went on to win best actor for his role as Richard Williams, father of Venus and Serena, in "King Richard." Other false claims about the incident have circulated on social media in recent days, including that Rock issued a public apology for his joke, saying he "crossed a line that I shouldn't have and paid the enormous price of my reputation as a renown comedian." The apology was fake and didn't come from Rock, according to his publicist, Leslie Sloane.

— Associated Press writers Josh Kelety in Phoenix and Ali Swenson in New York contributed this report.

'Edmonton' firefighter gear in news clip was donated to Ukrainians

CLAIM: A CNN clip showing fires near Lviv, Ukraine, must have been staged or filmed elsewhere because a firefighter in the clip can be seen wearing a jacket labeled for the Canadian city of Edmonton.

THE FACTS: The clip was captured at an oil facility on the northeastern outskirts of Lviv and there's no

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merit to claims that it was staged. A Canadian group called Firefighter Aid Ukraine donated the jacket to Ukrainian firefighters in need of equipment, the group's founder told the AP. The false claims pushed the baseless conspiracy theory that Russia's war on Ukraine is exaggerated or fake by suggesting that the jacket labeled "Edmonton" proved the scene was staged or that the clip was actually captured in Canada. The footage, which aired on CNN on March 26, shows anchor Don Lemon in a helmet and vest reporting from an oil facility near the western Ukrainian city of Lviv that was burning after being hit by Russian air strikes. A firefighter wearing an Edmonton jacket can be seen in the background. "CNN caught faking the news...again," wrote one Twitter user. But there was a simple explanation for the Edmonton jacket: The gear was donated to Ukrainians by Edmonton firefighters, according to Kevin Royle, a firefighter in Edmonton and the founder of Firefighter Aid Ukraine. "Without a doubt, that equipment did come from us," Royle said. "That was not a firefighter from Edmonton." Royle said his group has donated thousands of pieces of equipment across the world and in Ukraine, including in Lviv. Canadian mediareports from 2017 covered a trip his group took to Lviv. Landmarks in the CNN clip matched visual features of a location about a 10-minute drive northeast of downtown Lviv, which is where Lemon said he was located in the live shot. AP images captured at the same oil facility the next day also show firefighters working onsite. Emily Kuhn, senior director of communications at CNN Digital Worldwide, confirmed the claims were baseless.

— Ali Swenson

Biden signed anti-lynching act into law on Tuesday

CLAIM: President Joe Biden's outdoor signing of the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act, shown in numerous photographs, could not have happened on Tuesday because the White House South Lawn was completely empty and the weather was freezing cold.

THE FACTS: Associated Press photos prove Biden signed the bill in the White House Rose Garden — not on the South Lawn — on Tuesday, and government records of the bill's progress show the same. With the stroke of a pen, he made lynching a federal hate crime, signing a proposal into law that, in different forms, had previously failed to pass Congress more than 200 times. As activists rejoiced in a law that they called "a long time coming," at least one Facebook user cast doubt on the event. "This DID NOT happen yesterday," the widely circulating post read. "The south lawn of the WH was completely empty, no chairs or anything set up. ABSOLUTELY nothing. Also, it was FREEZING cold yesterday. 30° and extremely windy. I was bundled up and my cheeks were numb after about 15 min. More lies. FAKE NEWS." Commenters on the post fed into the false theory, with one writing, "People need to wake up to the lies." Yet Biden's signing of the bill just after 4 p.m. on Tuesday in the White House Rose Garden was clearly documented in dozens of news reports and in AP photos and video from the ceremony.

— Ali Swenson

COVID-19 vaccines did not cause excess deaths among millennials

CLAIM: There were more than 61,000 excess deaths among the millennial age group in the U.S. in the second half of 2021 because of COVID-19 vaccines.

THE FACTS: There was an increase in excess deaths — which is the difference between the observed numbers of deaths and expected numbers of deaths in a specific period — among millennials at that time, but health experts say there is no evidence vaccines played a role. Social media users pushed the false claim while sharing a video that asserted there was a large number of excess deaths among the "millennial" age group, or people ages 25-44, due to the vaccine in late 2021. Deaths were indeed up in 2021 — provisional mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows 63,141 more deaths among millennials in 2021 compared to 2019, according to Brian Tsai, a spokesperson for the agency's National Center for Health Statistics. But experts told the AP that COVID-19 itself is the obvious culprit for the deaths, not the vaccines. The rise coincided with the spread of the highly contagious delta and omicron variants, the experts noted. "I don't disagree with the fact that the pandemic has been responsible for an enormous number of excess deaths in the US and that adults age 25-44 were deeply

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affected. But it's ridiculous to attribute this catastrophe to vaccine mandates and boosters," Steven Woolf, director emeritus of the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University, said in an email to the AP. Woolf noted that only 65% of the U.S. population was vaccinated at the time. CDC data from December indicated that 2021 was on track to be America's deadliest year on record, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to AP reporting. COVID-19 has become the third leading cause of death in the U.S., behind heart disease and cancer. Experts have said drug overdoses also contributed to higher-than-expected death rates in 2021. "If you compare the excess deaths numbers to the total COVID reported death numbers, most of those excess deaths are going to be from COVID itself," Spencer Fox, associate director for the University of Texas' COVID-19 Modeling Consortium, told the AP. "They're not there's not some mysterious thing happening that's causing these excess deaths." Reports of death due to the COVID-19 vaccine are extremely rare. The CDC has recorded nine deaths associated with rare blood clots that were caused by the Johnson & Johnson/Janssen vaccine. Currently, 217.2 million people in the U.S. are fully vaccinated. "To date, CDC has not detected any unusual or unexpected patterns for deaths following immunization that would indicate that COVID vaccines are causing or contributing to deaths, outside of the nine confirmed deaths following the Janssen vaccine," said Martha Sharan, a spokesperson for the CDC.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, April 2, the 92nd day of 2022. There are 273 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 2, 2005, Pope John Paul II died in his Vatican apartment at age 84.

On this date:

In 1792, Congress passed the Coinage Act, which authorized establishment of the U.S. Mint.

In 1865, Confederate President Jefferson Davis and most of his Cabinet fled the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, because of advancing Union forces.

In 1912, the just-completed RMS Titanic left Belfast to begin its sea trials eight days before the start of its ill-fated maiden voyage.

In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war against Germany, saying, "The world must be made safe for democracy." (Congress declared war four days later.)

In 1982, several thousand troops from Argentina seized the disputed Falkland Islands, located in the south Atlantic, from Britain. (Britain seized the islands back the following June.)

In 1986, four American passengers, including an 8-month-old girl, her mother and her grandmother, were killed when a terrorist bomb exploded aboard a TWA jetliner en route from Rome to Athens, Greece.

In 1992, mob boss John Gotti was convicted in New York of murder and racketeering; he was later sentenced to life, and died in prison.

In 1995, after a work stoppage lasting nearly eight months, baseball owners accepted the players' union offer to play without a contract.

In 2002, Israel seized control of Bethlehem; Palestinian gunmen forced their way into the Church of the Nativity, the traditional birthplace of Jesus, where they began a 39-day standoff.

In 2003, during the Iraq War, American forces fought their way to within sight of the Baghdad skyline.

In 2007, in its first case on climate change, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency*, ruled 5-4 that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases were air pollutants under the Clean Air Act.

In 2020, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases worldwide passed the 1 million mark, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. The captain of a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier facing a coronavirus outbreak was fired after widely distributing a memo pleading for help; Navy Secretary Thomas Modly said Capt. Brett Crozier had demonstrated "poor judgment" in a crisis. (Modly himself would resign days later after

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facing a backlash over his harsh criticism of Crozier in remarks to the ship's crew.)

Ten years ago: A gunman killed seven people at Oikos University, a Christian school in Oakland, California. (The shooter, One Goh, died in 2019 while serving a life prison sentence.) The U.S. Supreme Court ruled, 5-4, that jailers may perform invasive strip searches on people arrested even for minor offenses. Kentucky won its eighth men's national NCAA basketball title, holding off Kansas for a 67-59 victory.

Five years ago: Jason Aldean was named entertainer of the year at the Academy of Country Music Awards held in Las Vegas. A'ja Wilson scored 23 points to help coach Dawn Staley and South Carolina win their first women's NCAA championship with a 67-55 victory over Mississippi State.

One year ago: In his first call to the president of Ukraine, President Joe Biden underscored U.S. support for that country, amid reports of Russian troop movements on Ukraine's eastern border. A U.S. Capitol police officer, William Evans, was killed when a man rammed a car into officers at a barricade outside the Capitol building and then emerged with a knife; authorities shot the suspect, who died at a hospital. Major League Baseball rescinded its decision to have Atlanta host the 2021 All-Star Game; the move came in response to a sweeping new voting law in Georgia that critics said would negatively affect communities of color. Rapper DMX was rushed from his home to a suburban New York hospital after going into cardiac arrest; he died a week later.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Sharon Acker is 87. Actor Dame Penelope Keith is 82. Actor Linda Hunt is 77. Singer Emmylou Harris is 75. Actor Sam Anderson is 75. Social critic and author Camille Paglia is 75. Actor Pamela Reed is 73. Rock musician Dave Robinson (The Cars) is 73. Country singer Buddy Jewell is 61. Actor Christopher Meloni is 61. Singer Keren Woodward (Bananarama) is 61. Country singer Billy Dean is 60. Actor Clark Gregg is 60. Actor Jana Marie Hupp is 58. Rock musician Greg Camp is 55. Actor Roselyn Sanchez is 49. Country singer Jill King is 47. Actor Pedro Pascal is 47. Actor Adam Rodriguez is 47. Actor Michael Fassbender is 45. Actor Jaime Ray Newman is 44. Rock musician Jesse Carmichael (Maroon 5) is 43. Actor Bethany Joy Lenz is 41. Singer Lee Dewyze (TV: "American Idol") is 36. Country singer Chris Janson is 36. Actor Drew Van Acker is 36. Actor Briga Heelan (TV: "Great News") is 35. Actor Jesse Plemons is 34. Singer Aaron Kelly (TV: "American Idol") is 29.