

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Friday, April 22

School Breakfast: Waffles.

School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.

Senior Menu: BBQ beef sandwich, potato salad, carrots and peas, fresh fruit.

Saturday, April 23

GHS Prom, 7 p.m.

Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am

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.

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

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ACP Provides internet discount

Internet access is now necessary for work, school, healthcare, and more. However, for many households, it remains unaffordable. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) wants everyone, including your clients, to access reasonably priced internet services. The FCC recently launched the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) to reduce the cost of getting online.

The ACP provides a discount of up to:

\$30 per month toward internet service for eligible households.

\$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands.

Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 toward purchasing a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers. To qualify for this one-time discount, households must contribute more than \$10 and less than \$50 toward the purchase price.

Any household with an individual who receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is eligible to receive discounted internet service through the ACP. Social Security doesn't count ACP assistance as income or a resource for SSI purposes. Receipt of this assistance will not affect a person's SSI payment.

Who Is Eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program?

A household is eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program if the household income is at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines, or if a member of the household meets at least one of the criteria below:

- Received a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year;
- Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating provider's existing low-income internet program;
- Participates in one of these assistance programs:
 - SNAP
 - Medicaid
 - Federal Public Housing Assistance
 - Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
 - WIC
 - Veterans Pension or Survivor Benefits
 - or Lifeline;
- Participates in one of these assistance programs and lives on Qualifying Tribal lands:
 - Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance
 - Tribal TANF
 - Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations
 - Tribal Head Start (income based)

Two Steps to Enroll

Go to [ACPBenefit.org](https://www.acpbenefit.org) to submit an application or print out a mail-in application.

Contact your preferred participating provider to select a plan and have the discount applied to your bill. Some providers may have an alternative application that they will ask you to complete.

Eligible households must both apply for the program and contact a participating provider to select a service plan.



Feeding South Dakota reaches out to the Pantry

The Pantry was visited by officials from Feeding South Dakota. The Pantry will be located at the Groton Community Center. There are a few hurdles that will need to be crossed to get the full backing of Feeding South Dakota. The Groton Lions Club members will assist with the paperwork to create a 503(c)3 organization. Once that is done, The Pantry can receive donations which can be used to purchase food through Feeding South Dakota.

There was also discussion of Feeding South Dakota having a mobile drop in Groton where boxes of food could be distributed to qualifying households.

Pictured above Karen Weber-Boyer, Feeding South Dakota Agency Relations Coordinator; Karyn Babcock and Topper Tastad, Groton Lions Club members; and Josh Hansen, Feeding South Dakota Mobile Food Pantry Program Coordinator. According to figures secured by Weber-Boyer, 8.3 percent of the Groton City population is considered in poverty.

7 Ways You Can Slash Food Waste At Home—Starting Right Now!

Roughly 8-10 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions are associated with uneaten food, the U.N. Environment Programme reports. That's almost twice the annual emissions produced by all cars driven in the U.S. and Europe.

Part of what's both frustrating and inspiring about food waste is just how solvable it is. According to ReFED, more than 14 million tons of food were tossed in landfills from just U.S. residential kitchens alone, which is, frankly, staggering—but it also means that, with some simple changes, we all have significant power to reverse this destructive trend.

This week at Food Tank, we're highlighting some of our favorite quick and easy tips to make sure you—and the planet—are getting the most out of your food:

1. Get creative in the kitchen to take advantage of all parts your ingredients

With a little ingenuity, it's possible to use up greens wilting in the fridge or take advantage of all parts of an ingredient. Cooks can turn everything from carrot greens to seafood scraps into a delicious part of the meal.

"Everybody knows you get spinach, you buy some kale, it starts to get a little softer, now what do you do with that?" Chef and restaurateur Tiffany Derry says. "All of sudden we turned that into a little bit of wilted greens [or] you throw it in soup. You get creative in your own household."

The James Beard Foundation offers a number of tips and recipes to help home cooks use up foods sitting in their fridges and pantries. Together with Derry, the James Beard Foundation also put out a series of videos like this one to help everyone cook with food waste in mind.

2. Before you throw away, brush up on your understanding of date labels

Except for infant formula, there are no federal standards regulating the date labels that appear on food and beverages. Best before, use by, and sell by are just of the date labels that can appear on packaging. And while some indicate safety, other labels reflect quality. "Currently, there are about 30 different types of labeling language used across products," Katy Franklin, Operations Director for ReFED says.

The variety of terms often leads to confusion, with research in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior showing that many consumers do not understand how to differentiate between them. Often, consumers opt to throw food away, mistakenly assuming it is no longer safe to enjoy.

But becoming familiar with date labels, consumers can take steps toward reducing unnecessary food waste. Resources including the Labels Unwrapped website from the Vermont Law School's Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture can help consumers determine what they can hold onto—and use—and what should make its way to the compost bin.

3. Shop strategically with recipes in mind and receipts to track what you're using

Food waste warriors like Chef Tiffany Derry encourage eaters to shop strategically. By buying food with recipes in mind, Derry argues it can help households ensure that they use up the food they bring home. "We have to make a plan," Derry says. "Oftentimes when we aren't prepared, we fail...Figure out what works for you, what works for your family, what works for your budget."

Katy Franklin, Operations Director of ReFED also encourages everyone to hang onto their receipts. Using a sharpie or highlighter, individuals can then track the foods that went to waste from their last grocery trip. Though simple, Franklin says, it can serve as a reminder of how much is too much and which products may not be as tempting once they're sitting in the fridge.

4. Make the season's bounty last with preservation tricks like canning and infusing

Preservation methods — some of which have been practiced for thousands of years — allow eaters to

prevent food waste and enjoy fruits and vegetables long after their season's end. Whether this means canning, picking up a new recipe for infused vinegars, or simply making better use of the freezer, consumers can work to use up everything they bought from the store or grew in their garden. Check out Food Tank's roundup of resources and safety tips to get started.

5. Stretch produce and leftovers by becoming friends with your freezer

In addition to using the freezer to preserve fresh fruits and vegetables, the Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC) also recommends freezing extra portions of a prepared meal, baked goods, raw protein, and more. Save the Food, a campaign from NRDC working to end food waste, includes recommendations to make the most of the freezer. Tips include keeping containers airtight, freezing in portions, and defrosting foods safely.

6. Share with your neighbors! A great way to strengthen community relationships

Chef Crystal Wahpepah (Kickapoo), Owner of Wahpepah's Kitchen in Oakland California tells Food Tank that one of her favorite food waste tips is to share excess food with friends and neighbors. Not only does this help home cooks ensure that their dishes don't end up in the landfill after cooking a large meal, but it also helps to build community and strengthen relationships.

Apps including Fresh Food Connect and OLIO are also helping to facilitate food exchanges. By providing individuals with a platform, these apps help individuals look beyond their immediate networks and share food with other members of their local communities.

"We all play a vital role in our food system for our community health and wellness," Wahpepah says.

7. Finally, if food truly isn't safe to save or donate, compost the rest

"We shouldn't feel guilty, we all [waste food]," Denise Osterhues, Senior Director of Sustainability and Social Impact for The Kroger Company and President of Kroger's Zero Hunger & Zero Waste Foundation. But, Osterhues says, after taking steps to manage food better in the house, look to "composting what we can't eat or use."

When food is no longer safe to eat or donate, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) encourages consumers to follow their Food Recovery Hierarchy and compost what they can. Composting not only reduces the amount of food sent to landfills, but also generates organic material that can enrich soil and reduce the need for chemical fertilizers.

Check to see if your area has composting sites accepting household food scraps or see NRDC's tips for building your own compost bin. The EPA also offers guidance to help determine what foods do and don't belong in the compost.

While we're on the subject of food waste, on the calendar over the next few weeks are a few critical dates for action on food loss and waste. Tomorrow, April 22, is Earth Day, and next Wednesday, April 27, is Stop Food Waste Day—a time for businesses, community leaders, restaurants, home cooks, and more to come together and fight food waste. Food Tank is thrilled to partner with and curate discussions at ReFED's 2022 Food Waste Solutions Summit next month in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

SOUTH DAKOTA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY BENEFITS ALL COUNTIES IN 2021

PIERRE, S.D. – In 2021, visitor spending in South Dakota reached a record high of \$4.4 billion. A recent analysis shows all areas of South Dakota rebounded significantly in 2021.

The detailed analysis, done by Tourism Economics, indicates a majority of visitor activity took place in Minnehaha, Pennington, Lawrence, Brown and Custer counties, making up 68% of all visitor spending.

While the majority of visitor activity took place in these five counties in 2021, all counties in South Dakota saw an increase over 2020. The counties that experienced the largest year-over-year growth compared to 2020 were Todd (44%), Pennington (40%), Meade (39%), Lawrence (37%) and Buffalo (36%).

"In addition to the impressive growth over 2020, we were pleased to see 43 counties surpass pre-pandemic levels of visitor spending," said Jim Hagen, Secretary of the Department of Tourism. "The impact these visitors have on communities across our state is significant. These visitors come to enjoy the beauty of our open prairies, fish our pristine lakes and abundant rivers, hunt our bountiful fields and stand in awe at our monuments. These visitors support the diners, marinas, hotels and attractions in communities large and small."


The resiliency of South Dakota's tourism industry has proven to be the best in the nation. South Dakota was the first state in the nation to fully recover from the pandemic, and visitor activity helped keep South Dakota citizens employed during a challenging time.

"Our industry has so much to be proud of," said Hagen. "This industry supported more than 54,000 jobs and provided 1.8 billion dollars in household income to South Dakota families."

To view the full Tourism Economics County and Region Level Impact Report, visit www.SDVisit.com.

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

Senior Legion Coach Wanted



Groton Legion Post #39 is seeking qualified applicants for Head Coach for the Groton Legion Post #39 Senior Baseball Team. The applicant must have previous coaching experience. The application period will close on April 29, 2022.

Applications can be picked up at Groton City Hall and mailed to:
Doug Hamilton
411 N. 4th St.
Groton, SD 57445

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

April 25, 2022 – 7:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
 - a. Grades 2 and 3...E. Dinger, A. Zoellner, M. Smith, D. Winburn
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Cast ballots for SDHSAA election.
 - a. Division II Representative – Superintendent
 - b. Constitutional Amendment #1
 - c. Constitutional Amendment #2
 - d. Constitutional Amendment #3
 - e. Constitutional Amendment #4
 - f. Constitutional Amendment #5
 - g. Constitutional Amendment #6
 - h. Constitutional Amendment #7
2. Consider request from Groton Youth Football for use of school bus to attend NSU Football Camp on May 22 and 23.
3. Approve resignation of Jennifer Furman, MS/HS Special Education Paraprofessional, at end of 2021-22 school year.
4. Executive Session pursuant SDCL1-25-2(4) for negotiations and SDCL1-25-2(1) for personnel.
5. Approve 2022-2023 GTA Negotiated Agreement.
6. Issue 2022-2023 Teacher Contracts with return date of May 4, 2022.

ADJOURN

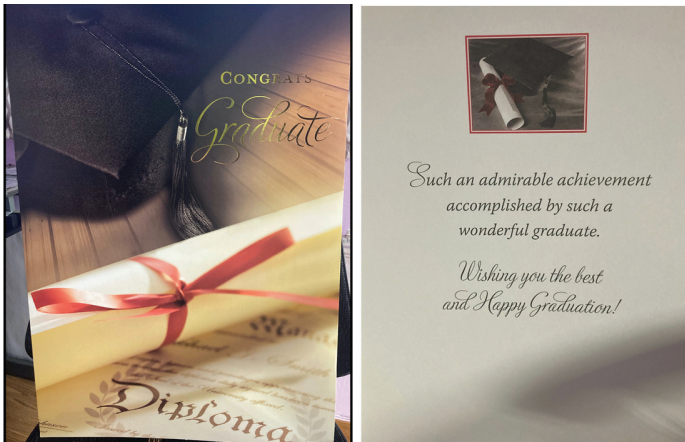
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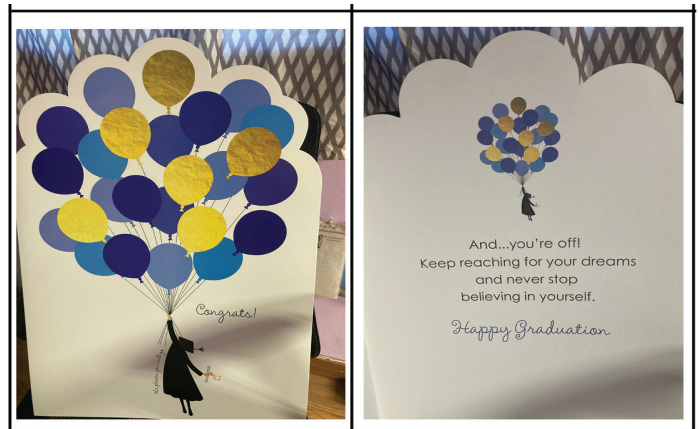
Jumbo Graduation Cards

Only \$7.99 each ~ Card Size: 16.25" x 24"

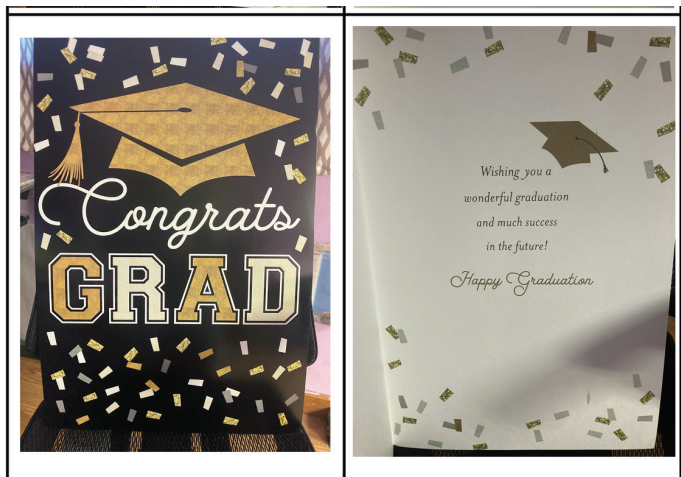
Can now be ordered on-line at 397news.com - Link on Black Bar
Or Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460 or Tina at 605-397-7285
to reserve your card(s)



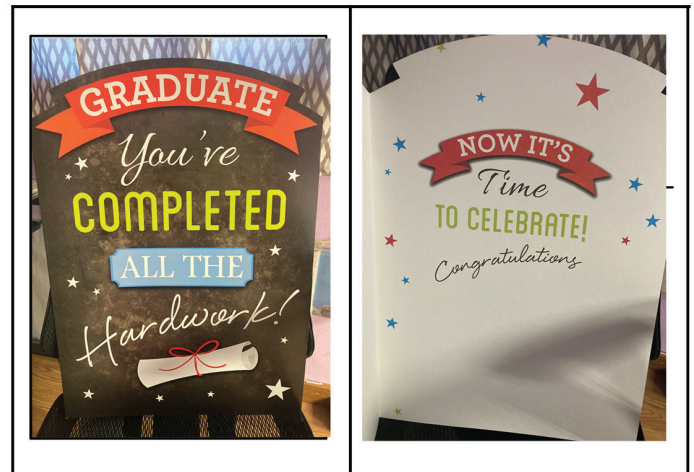
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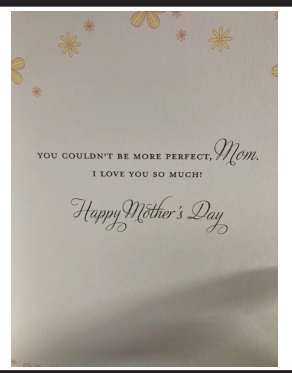
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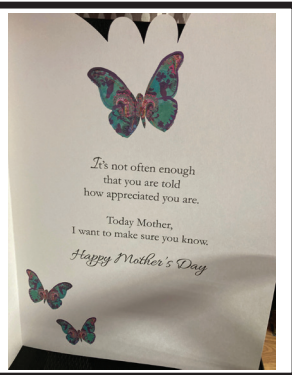
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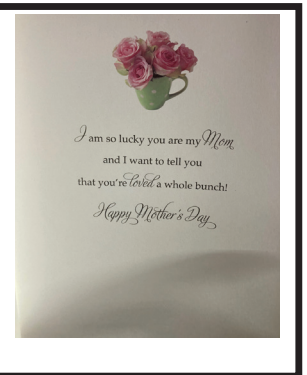
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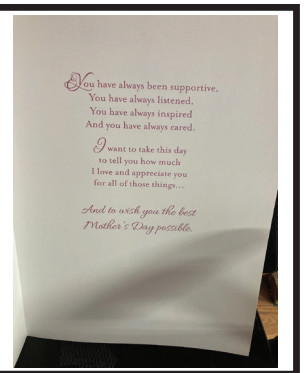
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WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT VOTING IN JUNE 7 PRIMARY

Dear Editor:

With the start of the absentee voting period on April 22nd, another election cycle in South Dakota has begun. I want to use this opportunity to share important information regarding the upcoming primary election, which will be held June 7th.

To request an absentee ballot, you must submit an absentee ballot application form to your county auditor. Absentee ballot application forms are available on the Secretary of State's website at www.sdsos.gov or by contacting your county auditor. County Auditor contact information is also available on our website. As required by state statute, the form must be notarized or accompanied by a copy of your photo ID. Acceptable photo identification cards include a South Dakota driver's license or non-driver ID card, tribal photo ID, passport or other picture ID issued by the United States government, or a current student photo ID issued by a South Dakota high school or postsecondary education institution. Voters also have the option to in-person absentee vote with your county auditor up to the day before the election.

The deadline for voter registration in South Dakota is 15 days prior to any election in which you plan to vote. That means anyone wishing to vote in the upcoming primary election must be registered by May 23rd. Our state has a great history of civic engagement that continues today with over 643,000 registered voters. I would encourage every eligible South Dakotan who is not yet registered to complete the process and ensure your voice can be heard.

Late last year, the South Dakota Legislature completed legislative redistricting. This process is completed every ten years to adjust legislative district boundaries to align with our changing population. As a result of this process, some of your voting district information may have changed. To verify if you were impacted, I would encourage you to contact your county auditor or visit the Voter Information Portal (VIP) on our website at <https://vip.sdsos.gov/VIPLogin.aspx>. On the VIP page you'll find a sample ballot along with polling location and absentee ballot information.

On Election Day, polls will be open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. local time. I would like to encourage anyone interested in becoming an election worker to contact their county auditor. Election workers, which are paid positions, play a crucial role in ensuring free, fair, and accessible elections for all South Dakotans. These positions provide you with a rewarding opportunity to give back to your community and help strengthen our democracy.

The goal of all election officials in our state is to ensure every South Dakota voter has access to exercise their right to vote. Citizens exercising their right to vote is the foundation of our democracy, and I encourage everyone to participate.

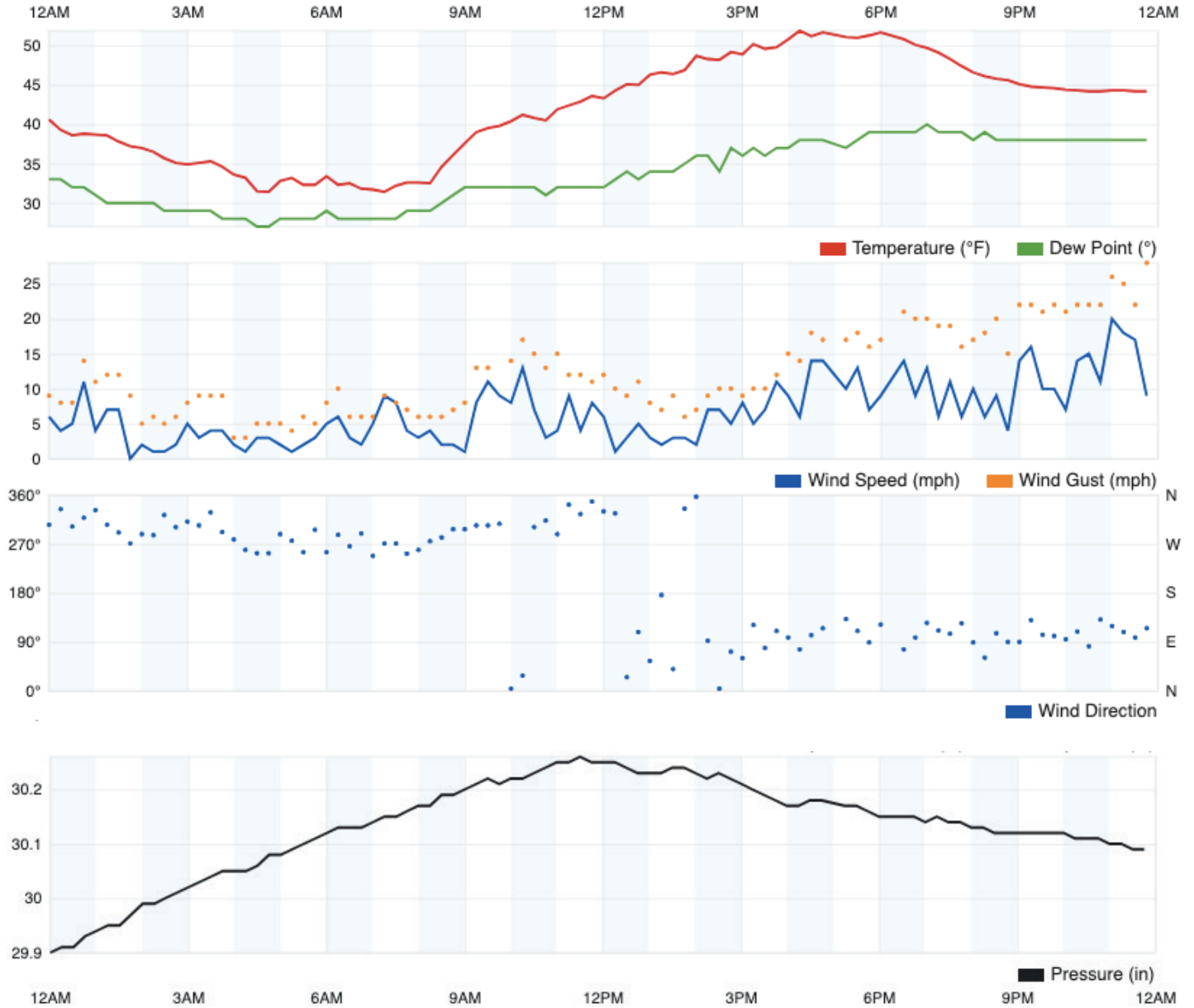
Sincerely,

Steve Barnett
South Dakota Secretary of State

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
30%	50% 60%	30%	40% 50%	30% 30%
Chance Rain	Breezy. Chance T-storms then Rain Likely	Chance T-storms and Windy	Breezy. Chance Rain then Chance Rain/Snow	Breezy. Chance Rain/Snow then Chance Rain
High: 59 °F	Low: 55 °F↑	High: 66 °F	Low: 35 °F	High: 42 °F



Severe Thunderstorm Potential Friday

April 21, 2022
1:08 PM

Overview

Isolated strong to severe thunderstorms are possible Friday evening and overnight.

Timing



Friday evening and overnight.

Severe Threats



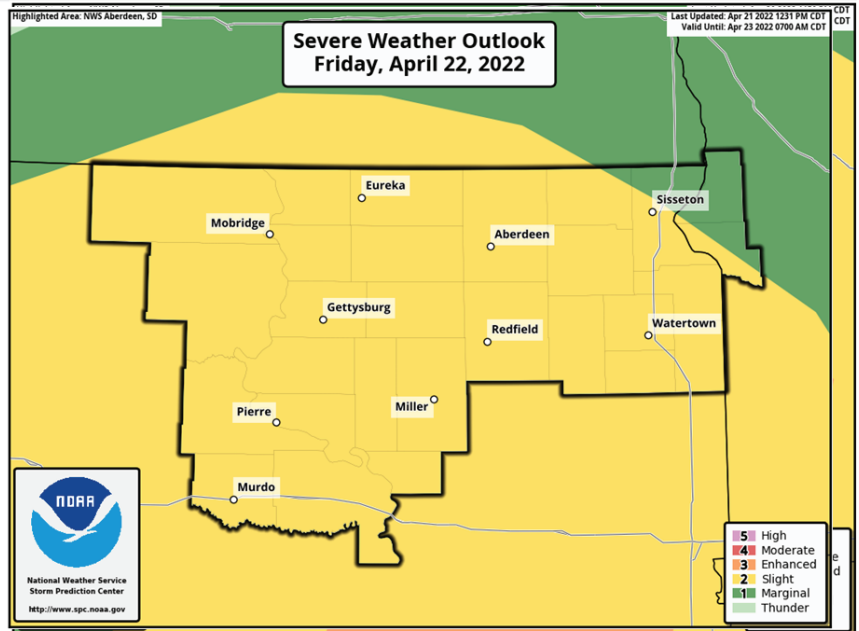
Large Hail

This remains the primary threat
Up to golf ball size possible



Damaging Wind

Severe winds are also possible



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Updated outlook for Friday's severe weather potential. #sdwx #mnwx

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Today in Weather History

April 22, 1968: A late season snow storm affected most of South Dakota, with the heaviest snowfall measuring 18 inches at Eagle Butte. Also, localized icing damaged utility lines, and 40 mph winds caused localized blizzard conditions. Some calf losses were reported.

April 22, 1992: With a fresh blanket of snow from a recent snowstorm helping to keep the air cool the high temperature at Sioux Falls only reached 31 degrees. This cold temperature is the latest below freezing high temperature on record in Sioux Falls.

April 22, 2001: Heavy snow of 7 to 15 inches fell across much of central and northeast South Dakota from early on the 22nd to early on the 23rd. Some freezing rain also brought heavy icing in Buffalo, Eastern Lyman, and far southern Roberts counties resulting in some downed trees and branches along with some downed power lines. This late season snowstorm caused many travel problems along with some accidents. There were many vehicles in the ditch along Interstate-29 in Roberts County. Many schools and events were either canceled or delayed on the 22nd and 23rd. The heavy snow also caused problems with ranchers and their livestock with some calves lost in the storm. Around 9:30 am on the 23rd in Kennebec, the heavy snow resulted in the roof of the 40 by 64-foot feed and seed warehouse to collapse. Late season record snowfalls were set at Aberdeen and Pierre. Some snowfall amounts included 7 inches at Timber Lake and Leola, 8 inches at Eagle Butte, Mobridge and Aberdeen, 9 inches at Kennebec and Pollock, 10 inches at Gettysburg, Selby, Redfield, and Webster, and 11 inches at Onida, Mission Ridge, Hosmer, and Columbia. Locations with snowfall amounts of a foot or more included, 12 inches at Britton, Ree Heights, Highmore, Blunt, Seneca, and Pierre, 13 inches at Murdo, Presho, Miller, and Wilmot, 14 inches at Roy Lake and southwest of Harrold, and 15 inches at Saint Lawrence.

1883: A tornado outbreak from Louisiana to Kansas claimed the lives of at least 127 people and injured over 800 others. One of the tornadoes destroyed the town of Beauregard, Mississippi.

1978: Lightning sometimes strikes tents. In this case, a tent containing some sleeping Girl Scouts was hit by lightning as they were camping at DeGray Lake in Arkansas. Two of the Girl Scouts suffered minor burns.

1980 - A record April heat wave sent the mercury up to the 100 degree mark in Iowa. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Fifteen cities in the southeastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 96 degrees at Pensacola FL established a record for the month of April. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Heavy snow fell over northern Nebraska, with 15 inches reported at Mullen. Heavy snow also blanketed the mountains of northern Arizona, with 16 inches reported at Munds Park. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-seven cities in the central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. The high of 96 degrees at Omaha was an April record, and the high of 100 degrees at Lubbock TX equalled their record for April. Hill City KS and Liberal KS tied for honors as the hot spot in the nation with afternoon highs of 103 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather from the Southern and Central High Plains to north-west Florida during the afternoon and evening. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 67 mph at Gillette WY, hail two inches in diameter west of Roswell NM, and deluged Cheyenne OK with 8.68 inches of rain leaving some parts of the town under five feet of water. Temperatures reached the low 90s in the north central U.S. Chamberlain SD and Pickstown SD tied Presidio TX for honors as the hot spot in the nation with afternoon highs of 94 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1999: A one million dollar air charter Bowling 727 flew into large hail. Although the plane and its 66 occupants landed safely, the aircraft was declared a total loss.

2003: Tropical Storm Ana became the first Atlantic tropical storm since records began in 1871 to form during the month April. Maximum sustained winds reached 55 mph. Starting as a non-tropical area of low pressure on the 18th about 210 miles south-southwest of Bermuda, it was classified as a sub-tropical storm early on the 20th, it gained full tropical characteristics near 0000 UTC on the 21st, developing an "eye" feature.

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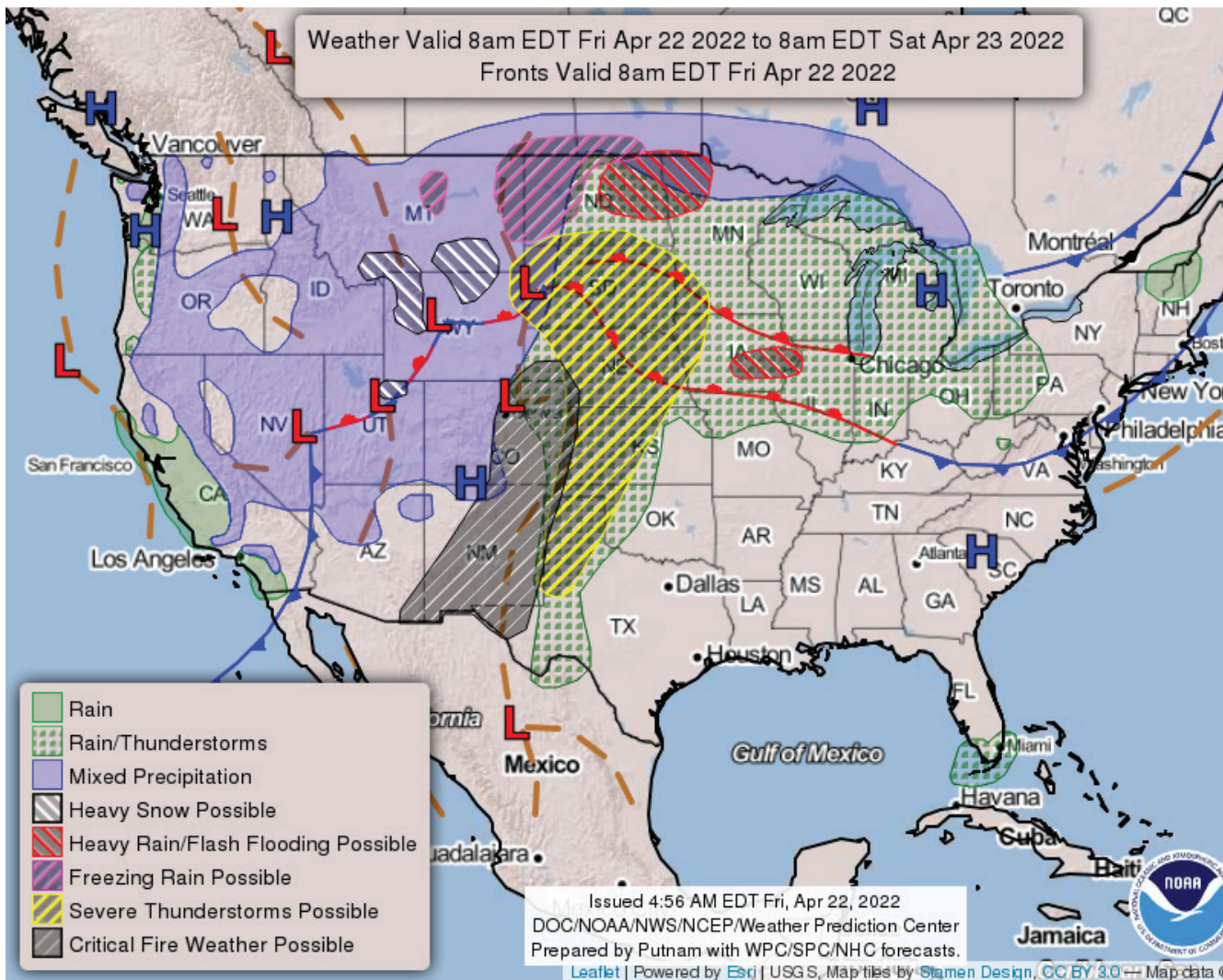
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 52 °F at 4:14 PM
Low Temp: 31 °F at 4:36 AM
Wind: 27 mph at 11:40 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 13 hours, 56 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 90 in 1990
Record Low: 15 in 2015
Average High: 61°F
Average Low: 34°F
Average Precip in April.: 1.19
Precip to date in April.: 2.10
Average Precip to date: 3.25
Precip Year to Date: 3.90
Sunset Tonight: 8:28:59 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:31:04 AM



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UNENDING MERCY

One of the greatest attractions in all of America is Yellowstone National Park. There are over two hundred active geysers in the park, but Old Faithful is the best known and most visited. It is famous because it is so predictable in its "activity" of shooting streams of water high into the air.

No one knows when it began, but it was first discovered in 1870. The silvery cascades of water shoot out of the geyser about every sixty-five minutes every day of the year.

This geyser serves as a visible example of the faithfulness that both the ancient Hebrews and present-day Christians see in God. His mercy is timeless and inexhaustible. Since the fall of man, there has not been one moment when God did not have man's need for redemption in the center of His heart. This need for our redemption springs upward and outward from God's unlimited mercy every moment of every day – much like the dependability of Old Faithful.

The "mercy" of God is an everlasting expression of His divine compassion. This "mercy" of God is a statement of the undeserving love that He has for us by withholding His judgment on us for our sins. We are reminded of His immeasurable love whenever we pause and think of His Son coming to earth to die on a cross for our sins. God's mercy is "God at work" helping and healing, protecting and providing, strengthening us and sustaining us each day – saving us from death and destruction.

Give thanks to the Lord! His mercy is never ending!

Prayer: We lift grateful hearts to You, Lord, for mercy we do not deserve yet desperately need for our salvation. What a blessing to be able to trust in Your faithfulness! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever. Psalm 136:26

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2022 Community Events

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

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News from the Associated Press

Sioux Falls VA Healthcare leader reassigned amid complaints

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The director of the Sioux Falls VA Healthcare System has been reassigned following a multitude of complaints about mismanagement.

The VA's Midwest region director Robert McDivitt said Lisa Simoneau will stay with the Veterans Affairs Department and serve at regional headquarters in the Twin Cities.

VA employees in Sioux Falls were notified this week that Simoneau would no longer lead that office.

According to a letter from Sen. Mike Rounds to Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough at least 46 employees left during Simoneau's tenure, which began in January 2020.

"According to whistleblowers who have contacted my office, the SFVA medical center is a hostile work environment, where employees are mistreated and veteran care is not a priority."

Rounds said he was concerned that patient care was at risk because of the leadership issues.

Simoneau did not respond to a message for comment Thursday.

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson met with veterans at the Military Heritage Alliance in Sioux Falls Wednesday and heard firsthand about the problems.

"The wait times to call in were absolutely unacceptable, the average wait times were at 52 or 55 minutes," said Johnson.

According to Johnson, those wait times have improved, KELO-TV reported.

"Our congressional delegation does not normally get involved in calling for somebody to be reassigned but in this instance, it was just clear that a change had to be made, obviously that is going to create a little bit of disruption. I think getting the right leadership in place is going to make a big impact long term," said Johnson.

Dr. Timothy Pendergrass, the current chief of staff, will take over as the interim director. The Sioux Falls VA medical center serves 25,000 veterans in eastern South Dakota.

Mourners to gather at funeral after Patrick Lyoya shooting

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Mourners will gather Friday at the funeral for Patrick Lyoya, a Black man who was fatally shot in the back of the head after a traffic stop and struggle with a white police officer in Michigan.

Civil rights leader the Rev. Al Sharpton will deliver the eulogy at the family's request. Their lawyer, prominent civil rights attorney Ben Crump, also will speak at Renaissance Church of God in Christ in Grand Rapids.

Lyoya's funeral marks the most recent time that Sharpton and Crump have joined with mourners to speak at the funeral of a Black person killed by police. Sharpton's eulogies have included those for George Floyd, whose death in Minneapolis sparked a national reckoning on race; Daunte Wright, who was shot during a traffic stop in suburban Minneapolis; Andre Hill, who was killed in Columbus, Ohio; and Andrew Brown Jr., who was killed in North Carolina.

An unarmed Lyoya, a native of Congo, was face down on the ground when he was shot April 4. The officer, whose name has not been released, was on top of him and can be heard on video demanding that he take his hand off the officer's Taser.

Earlier, the officer is heard saying that the license plate did not match the car Lyoya had been driving. Lyoya, a 26-year-old father of two, declined to get back into the vehicle as ordered, and a short foot chase ensued before the deadly struggle.

On Thursday, Peter and Dorcas Lyoya joined protesters in Lansing for a march and rally, where the call was renewed for authorities to release the name of the officer who killed their son.

State police are investigating the shooting. The agency will forward findings to Kent County prosecutor Chris Becker for consideration of any charges. He has told the public to not expect a quick decision.

Attorneys for the Lyoya family have said they believe video collected and released by police shows was

resisting the officer, not fighting him. His parents have called the shooting an "execution."

Israeli police storm Jerusalem holy site after rock-throwing

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli police in full riot gear stormed a sensitive Jerusalem holy site sacred to Jews and Muslims on Friday after Palestinian youths hurled stones at a gate where they were stationed.

The renewed violence at the site, which is sacred to Jews and Muslims, came despite Israel temporarily halting Jewish visits, which are seen by the Palestinians as a provocation. Medics said more than two dozen Palestinians were wounded before the clashes subsided hours later.

Tens of thousands of worshippers took part in the main Friday prayers at midday, which were held as planned without any reports of violence.

Palestinians and Israeli police have regularly clashed at the site over the last week at a time of heightened tensions following a string of deadly attacks inside Israel and arrest raids in the occupied West Bank. Three rockets have been fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by the Islamic militant group Hamas.

The string of events has raised fears of a repeat of last year, when protests and violence in Jerusalem eventually boiled over, helping to ignite an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas, and communal violence in Israel's mixed cities.

Palestinian youths hurled stones toward police at a gate leading into the compound, according to two Palestinian witnesses who spoke on condition of anonymity out of security concerns. The police, in full riot gear, then entered the compound, firing rubber bullets and stun grenades.

Israeli police said the Palestinians, some carrying Hamas flags, had begun stockpiling stones and erecting crude fortifications before dawn. The police said that after the rock-throwing began, they waited until after early morning prayers had finished before entering the compound.

Video footage showed the police firing at a group of journalists holding cameras and loudly identifying themselves as members of the press. At least three Palestinian reporters were wounded by rubber bullets fired by police.

Some older Palestinians urged the youths to stop throwing rocks but were ignored, as dozens of young masked men hurled stones and fireworks at the police. A tree caught fire near the gate where the clashes began. Police said it was ignited by fireworks thrown by the Palestinians.

The violence subsided later in the morning after another group of dozens of Palestinians said they wanted to clean the area ahead of the main weekly prayers midday.

Those prayers went ahead, with some 150,000 worshippers attending, according to the Islamic endowment that administers the site.

The Palestinian Red Crescent medical service said at least 31 Palestinians were wounded, including 14 who were taken to hospitals. A policewoman was hit in the face by a rock and taken for medical treatment, the police said.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City is the third holiest site in Islam. The sprawling esplanade on which it is built is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because it was the location of two Jewish temples in antiquity. It lies at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and clashes there have often ignited violence elsewhere.

Palestinians and neighboring Jordan, the custodian of the site, accuse Israel of violating longstanding arrangements by allowing increasingly large numbers of Jews to visit the site under police escort.

A longstanding prohibition on Jews praying at the site has eroded in recent years, fueling fears among Palestinians that Israel plans to take over the site or partition it.

Israel says it remains committed to the status quo and blames the violence on incitement by Hamas. It says its security forces are acting to remove rock-throwers in order to ensure freedom of worship for Jews and Muslims.

Visits by Jewish groups were halted beginning Friday for the last 10 days of the Muslim holy month of

Ramadan, as they have been in the past.

This year, Ramadan coincided with the week-long Jewish Passover and major Christian holidays, with tens of thousands of people from all three faiths flocking to the Old City after the lifting of most coronavirus restrictions.

The Old City is in east Jerusalem, which Israel captured along with the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 Mideast war. Israel annexed east Jerusalem in a move not recognized internationally and considers the entire city its capital. The Palestinians seek an independent state in all three territories and view east Jerusalem as their capital.

Le Pen's far-right vision: Retooling France at home, abroad

By ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — No more Muslim headscarves in public. All schoolchildren in uniforms. Laws proposed and passed by referendum. Generous social services unavailable to foreigners unless they've held a job for five years.

That's just a sampling of Marine Le Pen's vision for France if the far-right leader wins Sunday's runoff presidential election against incumbent Emmanuel Macron. In all things, France, and the French, would come first.

Polls portray Macron as the front-runner in Sunday's vote, but a Le Pen win is possible — an outcome that could rock France's system of governance, strike fear among its immigrants and Muslims, jolt the dynamics of the European Union, and unnerve NATO allies.

Macron, 44, a centrist who is ardently pro-EU, has relentlessly blasted his adversary as a danger and framed their election showdown as an ideological battle for the soul of the nation. Le Pen, 53, views Macron as a progressive technocrat for whom France is just a part of the EU.

She says she would retool the country's political system and the French Constitution to accommodate her populist agenda, putting the EU into second place and making France truer to its bedrock principles.

"I intend to be the president who gives the people back their voices in their own country," Le Pen said at a news conference.

Critics fear a threat to democracy under Le Pen, a nationalist who is cozy with Hungary's autocratic prime minister, Viktor Orban, and anti-immigrant far-right parties elsewhere in Europe. Le Pen met with Russian President Vladimir Putin before the 2017 French presidential vote that she lost to Macron in a landslide.

The United States has long considered France its oldest ally, but a Le Pen presidency could pose a problem for the Biden administration by undermining trans-Atlantic unity over sanctions against Russia and by bolstering autocratic populists elsewhere in Europe.

The National Rally leader also is wary of free-trade deals and would seek a more independent stance for France in the United Nations and other multilateral bodies.

In a column published Thursday in several European newspapers, the center-left leaders of Germany, Spain and Portugal raised a warning about "populists and the extreme right" who hold Putin "as an ideological and political model, replicating his chauvinist ideas."

"They have echoed his attacks on minorities and diversity and his goal of nationalist uniformity," wrote German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa.

Le Pen's meeting five years ago with Putin has haunted her campaign amid Russia's war in Ukraine, even though she has condemned the invasion "without ambiguity."

But if she were president, Le Pen said she would think twice about supplying Ukraine with weapons and would oppose energy sanctions against Moscow — for the sake of the Russian people.

She also said she would pull France out of NATO's military command, weakening the Western military alliance's united front against Moscow, and that there should be a "strategic rapprochement" with Russia once the war is over.

Macron has sought similar policies in the past and tried his own outreach with Putin. But his government

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says it has sent more than 100 million euros (\$108 million) in weapons to Ukraine since the war started, and France has been central to the West's ever-tougher sanctions against Russia.

Le Pen has projected a nurturing image throughout her campaign, saying she would oversee France as "the mother of the family." She has focused on the purchasing power of consumers while standing firm on emblematic issues that define the far right, such as immigration, security, national identity and sovereignty.

To soften the blow of rising prices, Le Pen wants to slash taxes on energy bills from 20% to 5.5%. She promises to put 150-200 euros (\$162-\$216) per month back in consumers' pockets.

Macron, a former French economy minister and banker, considers such measures misdirected and economically unviable.

Le Pen insists her agenda addresses the "France of the forgotten" that he has ignored.

She has proposed a "referendum revolution" as the centerpiece of her plan to help heal the "democratic fracture" that she says accounts for low turnout in recent French elections and growing social discord.

Laws could be passed by referendum — bypassing elected lawmakers - after supporters gather the signatures of 500,000 eligible voters, That was a demand of the sometimes violent "yellow vest" movement that challenged Macron's presidency two years ago.

"During my mandate, I count on consulting the only expert that Emmanuel Macron never consulted — the people," Le Pen said this month.

But there's a hitch.

The French Constitution would need to be revised to give citizens such a direct voice in lawmaking. It would also need changing for another key Le Pen goal: giving a "national preference" for state housing and job benefits to French citizens before foreigners.

Macron failed in his own bid to change the constitution, a complicated process requiring support from both houses of parliament. Le Pen wants to skirt that by using a special article in the constitution like Gen. Charles de Gaulle did in 1962 to allow for direct universal suffrage.

"She wants to dynamite liberal democracy by calling on the people," four constitutional law professors wrote last week in the newspaper Le Monde.

Le Pen would use a referendum for other items in a controversial package to stop "uncontrolled immigration." These include treating any asylum demands abroad, not in France, and "systematically" expelling migrants without residency papers, among others; and ending automatic citizenship for those born in France to foreign parents.

She would also reinstate uniforms in all schools, and fortify police powers.

Le Pen has called Muslim headscarves "Islamist uniforms" and proposed a ban on wearing them in public. Macron said in a debate Wednesday night that such a ban could lead to "civil war" in the country with Europe's largest Muslim population.

But it was an elderly woman in a blue-and-white headscarf confronting Le Pen last week in the southern town of Pertuis who may have put a dent in her plan.

"What is the headscarf doing in politics?" she asked Le Pen.

After the pushback by the woman, Le Pen party officials moved into damage control, saying that banning headscarves in streets would be progressive and not target a "grandmother of 70."

An embarrassed Le Pen conceded later that the headscarf was a "complex problem."

Biden order aims to protect old-growth forests from wildfire

By MATTHEW DALY and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — President Joe Biden is taking steps to restore national forests that have been devastated by wildfires, drought and blight, using an Earth Day visit to Seattle to sign an executive order protecting some of the nation's largest and oldest trees.

Old-growth trees are key buffers against climate change and provide crucial carbon sinks that absorb significant amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.

Biden's order directs federal land managers to define and inventory mature and old-growth forests na-

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tionwide within a year. The order requires the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service to identify threats to older trees, such as wildfire and climate change, and develop policies to safeguard them.

The order does not ban logging of mature or old-growth trees, the White House said.

By signing the order on Friday, Biden can publicly reassert his environmentalist credentials at a time when his administration has been preoccupied by high oil and gasoline prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Gas costs have been a drag on Biden's popularity and created short-term political pressures going into this year's midterm elections, yet the Democratic president has been focused on wildfires that are intensifying because of climate change.

The measure is intended to safeguard national forests that been severely damaged by wildfires, drought and blight, including recent fires that killed thousands of giant sequoias in California. Redwood forests are among the world's most efficient at removing and storing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and provide critical habitat for native wildlife and watersheds that supply farms and communities in the West.

Blazes so intense to kill trees once considered virtually fire-proof have alarmed land managers, environmentalists and tree lovers the world over — and demonstrated the grave impacts of climate change. A warming planet that has created longer and hotter droughts, combined with a century of fire suppression that choked forests with thick undergrowth, has fueled flames that extinguished trees dating to ancient civilizations.

A senior administration official noted that forests absorb more than 10% of U.S. annual greenhouse gases, while also providing flood control, clean water, clear air and a home to wildlife. The official insisted on anonymity to discuss details of Biden's order before it was made public.

Biden's ambitious climate agenda has been marred by setbacks, a year after he took office amid a flurry of climate-related promises. The president hosted a virtual summit on global warming at the White House last Earth Day. He used the moment to nearly double the United States' goal for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, vaulting the country to the front lines in the fight against climate change.

A year later, his most sweeping proposals remain stalled on Capitol Hill despite renewed warnings from scientists that the world is hurtling toward a dangerous future marked by extreme heat, drought and weather.

In addition, Russia's war in Ukraine has reshuffled the politics of climate change, leading Biden to release oil from the nation's strategic reserve and encourage more domestic drilling in hopes of lowering sky-high gas prices that are emptying American wallets.

While Biden is raising fuel economy standards for vehicles and included green policies in last year's bipartisan infrastructure law, the lack of greater progress casts a shadow over his second Earth Day as president.

Timber industry representative Nick Smith said before the order was made public that loggers are worried it will add more bureaucracy to a forest management framework already unable to keep up with growing wildfires due to climate change.

That would undercut the Biden administration's goal of doubling the amount of logging and controlled burns over the next decade to thin forests in the tinder-dry West, said Smith, a spokesman for the American Forest Resource Council, an Oregon-based industry group.

"The federal government has an urgent need to reduce massive greenhouse gas emissions from severe wildfires, which can only be accomplished by actively managing our unhealthy and overstocked federal forests," he said.

But former U.S. Forest Service Deputy Chief Jim Furnish said wildfire risks and climate change would be better addressed by removing smaller trees that can fuel uncontrolled blazes, while leaving mature trees in place.

For many years the Forest Service allowed older trees that are worth more to be logged, to bring in money for removal of smaller trees, Furnish said. But that's no longer necessary after Congress approved more than \$5 billion to reduce wildfire risks in last year's infrastructure bill, he said. The law includes money

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to hire 1,500 firefighters and ensure they earn at least \$15 an hour.

Timber sales from federal forests nationwide more than doubled over the past 20 years, as Republicans and Democrats have pushed more aggressive thinning of stands to reduce small trees and vegetation that fuel wildfires.

Critics, including many forest scientists, say officials are allowing removal of too many older trees that can withstand fire.

A letter signed by 135 scientists called on Biden to protect mature and old-growth forests as a critical climate solution.

"Older forests provide the most above-ground carbon storage potential on Earth, with mature forests and larger trees driving most accumulation of forest carbon in the critical next few decades. Left vulnerable to logging, though, they cannot fulfill these vital functions," the scientists wrote Thursday. Former Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck and Norman Christensen, founding dean and professor emeritus at Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment, were among those signing the letter.

Protecting mature forests also "would set an important, highly visible example for other major forest-holding nations to follow as they address climate change threats," the scientists wrote.

Shanghai vows to ease anti-virus controls amid food worries

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Officials in Shanghai promised Friday to ease anti-virus controls on truck drivers that are hampering food supplies and trade, while city streets were still largely empty after millions of people were allowed out of their homes.

A deputy mayor, Zhang Wei, promised "every effort" to resolve problems that prompted complaints about lack of food and fears that the shutdown, which barred most of Shanghai's 25 million people from going outdoors, might disrupt global trade.

The streets of China's most populous city were quiet despite an easing of restrictions beginning April 13 that has released more than 10 million people. Many were barred from leaving their neighborhoods. Others had nowhere to go because most factories, shops and offices were closed.

In one neighborhood, a woman rode a skateboard and a couple took a child's photo outside a park. Delivery drivers rode past on scooters while government employees in white suits sprayed disinfectant on trash bags.

"You can only walk the dog," said resident Isabella Kao, who cannot leave her apartment compound because nearby areas are quarantined. "There's no point in going out because all your stores are closed, right?"

On Friday, the government reported 11 coronavirus deaths and 17,529 new cases in Shanghai. All but 1,931 had no symptoms. Shanghai accounted for 95% of the 18,598 new cases on China's mainland, of which 2,133 had symptoms.

Shanghai leaders are scrambling to ease the impact of a "zero-COVID" strategy that shut down most businesses starting March 28.

China's infection numbers in its biggest outbreak since the start of the pandemic in 2020 are low compared with other major countries. But the ruling Communist Party has suspended access to Shanghai and some other major cities to isolate every case, fueling public frustration and warnings about the rising cost.

Truck drivers who bring food to Shanghai and goods to its port, the world's busiest, are hampered by multiple checkpoints and virus tests. That has led to long waits and reports some shipping companies and drivers are avoiding Shanghai.

Under the new system, drivers are allowed through if they have a negative virus test within the past 48 hours, no fever and a "green health code" on their smartphone that shows they haven't been to areas with outbreaks, according to Wu Chungeng, director of the Highway Bureau of the Ministry of Transportation.

"All localities should directly release them," Wu said, according to news reports.

Meanwhile, some 80,000 small enterprises in government-owned buildings in Shanghai will be given six

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months' free rent, the director of the city's commission for state-owned assets, Bai Tinghui, said at the news conference with Zhang, according to state media.

The government has made 65 billion yuan (\$10 billion) in "support loans" to Shanghai businesses and distributed other financial aid, the online news outlet The Paper reported, citing city officials.

Officials said the Shanghai port is operating normally, according to news reports. But daily cargo volume they cited of the equivalent of 100,000 containers is down almost 30% from the normal level of 140,000 containers.

Authorities are enforcing a three-tier system that allows residents out of their homes if their area has no new infections in the past week. They can leave the neighborhood after two weeks without a case. Supermarkets and pharmacies are reopening.

Some residents say they came close to being allowed out before a new case was found in a neighboring building and the wait started from scratch.

Kao, 38, who runs a trading company, said she and her partner have spent most of the six weeks since March 11 in their apartment. She said they were allowed to go to other parts of the city for only four days during that time.

Kao said her building is a "control area," which means they are allowed outside, but around it is a "closed area" whose residents are confined to their homes.

"I feel the people of Shanghai are puzzled by the current anti-epidemic policy," Kao said.

Slovenia to hold election amid divisions over populist path

By ALI ZERDIN Associated Press

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia (AP) — When he visited Ukraine last month with two other European leaders, Prime Minister Janez Jansa of Slovenia was looking to show solidarity with the war-stricken nation and to attract support at home ahead of what is expected to be a close parliamentary election.

The election set for Sunday is taking place amid heightened political divisions in Slovenia. Observers say the vote will determine whether the small Alpine nation of 2 million people slides further into right-wing populism under Jansa or returns to its traditionally moderate balance.

Recent opinion surveys showed Jansa's Slovenian Democratic Party in a tight race with the Freedom Movement, a newly formed liberal-green political party. The party is led by a U.S.-educated expert, Robert Golob, who has promised to unite centrist and left-oriented groups in a future coalition government.

Both parties appeared to have voter support hovering around 20%. Polls showed several smaller left- and right-leaning groups trailing in the race for seats in Slovenia's 90-member national legislature. Some surveys suggested 20% of the electorate remained undecided.

With no single party likely to secure enough votes to form a government on its own, analysts predicted Golob would have a better chance than Jansa at cobbling together a post-election coalition.

The 63-year-old Jansa, a veteran politician, took over as head of government at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, succeeding a liberal who resigned. While the prime minister has boasted of economic successes during tough times, critics have sounded alarm over his increasingly authoritarian course.

"The race is tight," Jansa told a preelection convention of his party. "We will fight for every ballot."

Known as a nature-loving nation of stunning scenic beauty, Slovenia was long regarded as a post-Communist success and one of the most stable countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Slovenia was among 10 countries that joined the European Union in May 2004, the bloc's largest single expansion.

But it has come under EU scrutiny as Jansa has forged close relations with fellow populist, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Orban, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic — another right-wing regional leader — recently scored sweeping reelection victories.

Since he became the Slovenian Democratic Party's leader in 1993, Jansa has served as both defense minister and prime minister multiple times, faced a corruption trial and engaged in constant spats with journalists.

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He denies recurring allegations that he has moved to give his party control over public media, intimidate critics and install loyalists in key positions at state institutions.

Fractured left-wing groups failed to mount a serious challenge to Jansa in more than two years despite simmering popular anger that fueled street protests and clashes with police. An array of civic movements have joined protests, seeking to galvanize public discontent and create a wider movement.

Golob, 55, has emerged as a new face, appealing to Slovenians who are disillusioned with the political mainstream. Under the slogan "We deserve a better state," he has promised a green transformation and sustainable development to contrast with Jansa's strong nation narrative.

For Andraz Zorko, a public opinion analyst at the Valicon agency, the current pre-election campaign has been marked by a grassroots effort and tireless field work, designed to animate the new generation of Slovenia's youth to vote.

"Trends are now in favor of the Freedom Movement," Zorko said.

Political analyst Zenel Baragelj, however, told the AP election outcome is "impossible to predict," due to fluctuating loyalties and several parties teetering near the threshold line of 4%.

Observers say Jansa's similarities with Hungary's Orban can be spotted in their anti-liberal rhetoric and governing styles, as well as their financial dealings. Orban's associates have invested in Slovenia's pro-government media and companies.

A formerly pro-Jansa political magazine, Reporter, recently urged Slovenia's voters to "ask yourself if you want to live in a country such as Orban's Hungary." A group of prominent intellectuals and public figures warned in a petition that Sunday's election was of "historic importance" and the "last chance to stop the authoritarian tendencies of Janez Jansa."

Jansa has dismissed criticism as a leftist plot to undermine his government and promised voters stability and continuity in uncertain times. To polish his image, he distanced himself from Orban during the campaign and took a tough line against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In an attention-grabbing move meant to display regional leadership within Europe, Jansa traveled to Ukraine's capital with the prime ministers of Poland and the Czech Republic in mid-March. Shortly after the trip, Slovenia's government reopened the country's embassy in Kyiv and urged other EU nations to do the same.

Surveys indicate that citizens' concerns center more around domestic issues such as social equality, environmental protection and the rule of law rather than the war in Ukraine. Jure Mocivnik, a resident of Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital, said he expected high turnout and strong voter interest in the election.

Asked about the outcome, Mocivnik said: "I don't have a clue, everything is possible."

Love thy enemy: Critics key for Macron in France's election

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — As France elects a president, Paris-based artist Vincent Aitzegagh is going to ground, escaping to a bucolic village to avoid what for him — and millions of other left-wing French voters — is a painful, even impossible, electoral choice. For the first time in his life, the 65-year-old has decided to not vote at all in the decisive ballot this Sunday.

"I am fleeing," he says. "Because it stinks."

Disgruntled voters like Aitzegagh whose favored candidates were knocked out in the election's first round on April 10 are the wild cards in the winner-takes-all runoff. How they vote — or don't vote — on Sunday will in large part determine whether incumbent Emmanuel Macron gets a second five-year term or cedes the presidential Elysee Palace to far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen, a seemingly unlikely but not impossible outcome that would be seismic for France and Europe as they deal with the fallout of Russia's war in Ukraine.

With the stakes high, never has the decision been so difficult for leftist voters who view both Macron and Le Pen as anathema — a choice that some describe as "between the plague and cholera."

"It's horrible, enough to make one cry. I have spent sleepless nights in tears not knowing what to do,"

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says Clek Desentredeux, a disabled and queer artist and live-streamer who voted for hard-left leader Jean-Luc Melenchon in round one.

With 7.7 million votes, Melenchon finished just 420,000 votes shy of the runoff, in third place behind Le Pen. Le Pen and Macron have since expended much time and energy trawling for support in Melenchon's now orphaned and disappointed reservoir of voters. It is an uphill battle for them both.

Generally speaking, many leftist voters resent Macron for having dynamited France's political landscape with his get-things-done middle-way method of governance, siphoning ideas, supporters, government ministers and political oxygen away from mainstream parties on both the left and right.

His pragmatism is too vanilla and opportunistic for many leftist voters hungry for a sharper and more ideological political divide. More specifically, many describe the 44-year-old former banker as friend to the rich and oppressor of the poor. Some also blame him for Le Pen's rise, saying that in trying to undercut support in France for the extreme right, Macron swerved too far right-ward himself.

Macron's saving grace, however, is also Le Pen. After years of drum-banging about immigration and Islam's influence in the country with the largest Muslim population in Western Europe, the 53-year-old is reviled by many on the left as a racist xenophobe, too dangerous for France's stated principles of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" to ever vote for. In conceding defeat in round one, Melenchon said his backers "must not give a single vote to Madame Le Pen" — repeating the exhortation four times.

But he stopped short of asking his electors to shift their votes to Macron, instead leaving them to wrestle alone with what Melenchon described as a choice between "two evils."

Some will deliberately spoil their ballots, even putting toilet paper in the voting envelope instead of a candidate's name to show how dimly they view the options. Some won't vote. Some will cast ballots with no name.

They include 22-year-old Emma Faroy in Paris.

"I'm going to vote because some women died for my right to do so," she said. "But I'm going to cast a blank ballot because I don't want to choose between either of them."

Others will, almost literally, hold their noses and vote for Macron to keep out Le Pen. Some will back Le Pen, in a poke at the president. Multiple polls indicate that Macron, who won round one, is now building a significant runoff lead, larger than the polling margin of error. Melenchon voters from round one appear to be shifting in greater numbers behind him than Le Pen. But the outcome remains uncertain because many have yet to choose.

"I'll decide at the last moment," said retired power worker Pierre Gineste. Having voted Melenchon in round one, round two for him is the dilemma of a ballot for Macron, a blank ballot or not voting. He said he won't vote Le Pen.

The choice is so difficult and divisive that friendships and families are being tested. Aitzegagh voted for the green party candidate in round one; his daughter chose Melenchon. She then told her dad that she might vote Le Pen in the runoff because she cannot stomach Macron. Aitzegagh said he responded by warning: "If you vote Le Pen, I will repudiate you."

In 2002, when Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie, stunned France by advancing to the runoff, Aitzegagh was among the 82% of voters who came together behind conservative Jacques Chirac, in a powerful rejection of the extreme right.

In 2017, Aitzegagh voted for Macron in the run-off — once again solely to be a barrage against a Le Pen, this time Marine. Macron won handily — 66% to 34% — but in the knowledge that many of his votes were simply ballots against her. The same will be true on Sunday.

In a first for him and with "sadness and disgust," Aitzegagh will abstain, because Macron's first term has been "five years of cholera, five years of crap, five years of destruction" and Le Pen isn't an option for him.

"I don't want to be a barrage any more," he said. "I have had enough."

Desentredeux, who uses the gender-neutral pronoun they, agonized long and hard over their choice — and then decided that Le Pen's presence again in the runoff left them with no choice at all.

This is the first presidential election that Desentredeux has been old enough to vote in and it will end

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with a reluctant vote for Macron.

"Macron winning would be a catastrophe, but Le Pen getting through would be criminal," Desentredeux said. "I don't want to do it but I feel obliged."

Possible mass graves near Mariupol shown in satellite images

By YESICA FISCH Associated Press

ZAPORIZHZHIA, Ukraine (AP) — New satellite images show apparent mass graves near Mariupol, where local officials accused Russia of burying up to 9,000 Ukrainian civilians to conceal the slaughter taking place in the ruined port city that's almost entirely under Russian control.

The images emerged just hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday claimed victory in the battle for Mariupol, despite the presence of an estimated 2,000 Ukrainian fighters who were still holed up at a giant steel mill. Putin ordered his troops to seal off the stronghold "so that not even a fly comes through" instead of storming it.

Putin's decision to blockade the Azovstal steel plant likely indicates a desire to contain Ukrainian resistance in Mariupol and free up Russian forces to be deployed elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, Britain's Defense Ministry said in an assessment Friday.

Satellite image provider Maxar Technologies released the photos, which it said showed more than 200 mass graves in a town where Ukrainian officials say the Russians have been burying Mariupol residents killed in the fighting. The imagery showed long rows of graves stretching away from an existing cemetery in the town of Manhush, outside Mariupol.

Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boychenko accused the Russians of "hiding their military crimes" by taking the bodies of civilians from the city and burying them in Manhush.

The graves could hold as many as 9,000 dead, the Mariupol City Council said Thursday in a post on the Telegram messaging app.

Boychenko labeled Russian actions in the city as "the new Babi Yar," a reference to the site of multiple Nazi massacres in which nearly 34,000 Ukrainian Jews were killed in 1941.

"The bodies of the dead were being brought by the truckload and actually simply being dumped in mounds," an aide to Boychenko, Piotr Andryushchenko, said on Telegram.

There was no immediate reaction from the Kremlin. When mass graves and hundreds of dead civilians were discovered in Bucha and other towns around Kyiv after Russian troops retreated three weeks ago, Russian officials denied that their soldiers killed any civilians there and accused Ukraine of staging the atrocities.

In a statement, Maxar said a review of previous images indicates that the graves in Manhush were dug in late March and expanded in recent weeks.

After nearly two lethal months of bombardment that largely reduced Mariupol to a smoking ruin, Russian forces appear to control the rest of the strategic southern city, including its vital but now badly damaged port.

But a few thousand Ukrainian troops, by Moscow's estimate, have stubbornly held out for weeks at the steel plant, despite a pummeling from Russian forces and repeated demands for their surrender. About 1,000 civilians were also trapped there, according to Ukrainian officials.

Ukrainian officials have repeatedly accused Russia of launching attacks to block civilian evacuations from Mariupol.

At least two Russian attacks on Thursday hit the city of Zaporizhzhia, a way station for people fleeing Mariupol. No one was wounded, the regional governor said.

Among those who arrived in Zaporizhzhia after fleeing the city were Yuriy and Polina Lulac, who spent nearly two months living in a basement with at least a dozen other people. There was no running water and little food, Yuriy Lulac said.

"What was happening there was so horrible that you can't describe it," said the native Russian speaker who used a derogatory word for the Russian troops, saying they were "killing people for nothing."

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"Mariupol is gone. In the courtyards there are just graves and crosses," Lulac said.

The Red Cross said it had expected to evacuate 1,500 people by bus, but that the Russians allowed only a few dozen to leave and pulled some people off of the buses.

Dmitriy Antipenko said he lived mostly in a basement with his wife and father-in-law amid death and destruction.

"In the courtyard, there was a little cemetery, and we buried seven people there," Antipenko said, wiping away tears.

Instead of sending troops to finish off the Mariupol defenders inside the steel factory in a potentially bloody frontal assault, Russia apparently intends to maintain the siege and wait for the fighters to surrender when they run out of food or ammunition.

All told, more than 100,000 people were believed trapped with little or no food, water, heat or medicine in Mariupol, which had a prewar population of about 430,000. Over 20,000 people have been killed in the siege, according to Ukrainian authorities.

The city has seized worldwide attention as the scene of some of the worst suffering of the war, including deadly airstrikes on a maternity hospital and a theater.

Boychenko rejected any notion that Mariupol had fallen into Russian hands.

"The city was, is and remains Ukrainian," he declared. "Today our brave warriors, our heroes, are defending our city."

The capture of Mariupol would represent the Kremlin's biggest victory yet of the war in Ukraine. It would help Moscow secure more of the coastline, complete a land bridge between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia seized in 2014, and free up more forces to join the larger and potentially more consequential battle now underway for Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, the Donbas.

At a joint appearance with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Putin declared, "The completion of combat work to liberate Mariupol is a success," and he offered congratulations to Shoigu.

Shoigu predicted the Azovstal steel mill could be taken in three to four days. But Putin said that would be "pointless" and expressed concern for the lives of Russian troops in deciding against sending them in to clear out the sprawling plant, where the die-hard defenders were hiding in a maze of underground passageways.

Instead, the Russian leader said, the military should "block off this industrial area so that not even a fly comes through."

The plant covers 11 square kilometers (4 square miles) and is threaded with some 24 kilometers (15 miles) of tunnels and bunkers.

"The Russian agenda now is not to capture these really difficult places where the Ukrainians can hold out in the urban centers, but to try and capture territory and also to encircle the Ukrainian forces and declare a huge victory," retired British Rear Adm. Chris Parry said.

Russian officials for weeks have said capturing the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas is the war's main objective. Moscow's forces opened the new phase of the fighting this week along a 300-mile (480-kilometer) front from the northeastern city of Kharkiv to the Azov Sea.

While Russia continued heavy air and artillery attacks in those areas, it did not appear to gain any significant ground over the past few days, according to military analysts, who said Moscow's forces were still ramping up the offensive.

Despite Russia's renewed focus, its troops are still suffering from losses sustained earlier in the conflict, according to the British assessment. In order to try and reconstitute their depleted forces, the Russians have resorted to sending inoperable equipment back to Russia for repair, it said.

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the Pentagon's assessment, said the Ukrainians were hindering the Russian effort to push south from Izyum.

In the U.S., President Joe Biden pledged an additional \$1.3 billion for new weapons and economic assistance to help Ukraine, and he promised to seek much more from Congress to keep the guns, ammunition and cash flowing.

Southwest fire crews brace for return of dangerous winds

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Firefighters are bracing for the return of ferocious winds in the Southwest after a brief reprieve allowed them to attack flames from the air for the first time in days as a half-dozen large wildfires continue to grow in Arizona and New Mexico.

More than 500 firefighters were manning fire lines in the two states and more help was on the way Friday when the largest type of management team is scheduled to take command of resources at one of the biggest, most dangerous fires near Flagstaff, Arizona.

Spirits were lifted Thursday as helicopters were able to start dropping water on that blaze for the first time. It has burned more than 32-square miles (83-square kilometer), forced evacuations of 765 homes and destroyed at least two dozen structures since it broke out on Sunday.

Aerial attacks also resumed in northern New Mexico, where at least one airtanker was able to join the effort northeast of Santa Fe — something that's likely to be impossible on Friday.

Sheriff's deputies called for additional evacuations Thursday of scattered homes and closed some roads at a big fire burning in a rural area southeast of Taos, New Mexico, where no structure damage has been reported.

But fire officials and weather forecasters across the region warn the worst may be yet to come.

"There is high confidence that a widespread extreme and catastrophic fire weather event will occur on Friday," Santa Fe National Forest officials said late Thursday.

"We are urging the public to stay vigilant, to continue to watch for expected changes in evacuation status and be prepared to leave in a rapid manner," officials said.

Sustained winds of 30-50 mph (48-80 kph) are forecast there Friday morning, with gusts from 60-80 mph (97-129 kph) in the afternoon from the Gila Mountains up through the Rio Grande Valley to neighboring highlands.

The combination of the high winds, warmer temperatures and extremely dry conditions will make for an atmosphere that's "pretty much on steroids," said Scott Overpeck with the National Weather Service in Albuquerque.

"This is not typical," he said, looking ahead to what he said could be potentially explosive fire growth on Friday. "This is really one of those days we need to be on our toes and we need to be ready."

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey on Thursday declared a state of emergency in Flagstaff's Coconino County. The declaration clears the way for state funding for evacuations, shelter, repairs and other expenses. However, the money can't be used to reimburse home and business owners for losses.

About 30 structures have been destroyed, but it's still unclear how many were homes, the county sheriff's office said.

On Thursday, firefighters fanned out across blackened landscape in Arizona's high country, digging into the ground to put out smoldering tree stumps and roots as helicopters buzzed overhead with buckets of water to drop on a massive blaze.

Wildfire has become a year-round threat in the West given changing conditions that include earlier snow-melt and rain coming later in the fall, scientist have said. The problems are exacerbated by decades of fire suppression and poor forest management along with a more than 20-year megadrought that studies link to human-caused climate change.

At a fire that's consumed about 3 square miles (8 square kilometers) of timber and brush and forced evacuations near Prescott, Arizona, Forest Service officials reported the blaze continues to burn "in continuous thick, dry, dead and down fuels in very rugged terrain."

"Erratic winds and fire behavior is making conditions hazardous for firefighters," who are "being directed to not put themselves in situations where the risks are high and probability of success is low," Prescott National Forest officials said in an update Thursday.

Popular lakes and national monuments closed in Arizona — including Sunset Crater Volcano National

Monument outside Flagstaff because the wildfire moved directly over it, blackening trees, and burning tools and vehicles in a maintenance yard, said monument spokesman Richard Ullmann.

The Coconino National Forest has closed where the wildfire is burning but has not enacted broader fire restrictions or closures. A sign at a gate warns of potential loose debris, falling trees and branches, and flash floods.

Fire restrictions go into effect Friday at National Park Service sites in New Mexico, including Valles Caldera National Preserve and Bandelier National Monument.

In Colorado, firefighters got a handle on two small wildfires in the southern and northern part of the state on Thursday while contending with strong winds.

The Boulder County blaze was sparked by the battery of a crashed drone that researchers were using to study severe weather, the sheriff's office said Thursday. Researchers used a fire extinguisher, but the fire spread quickly in high winds, authorities said. The other fire damaged or destroyed an estimated 15 structures, including homes, in Monte Vista, a community of about 4,150 people surrounded by farm fields, police said.

In India, hate-filled songs are a weapon to target Muslims

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — The frenzied fury against Muslims began with provocative songs played by Hindu mobs that called for violence. It ended with Muslim neighborhoods resembling a war zone, with pavements littered with broken glass, charred vehicles and burned mosques.

On April 10, a Hindu festival marking the birth anniversary of Lord Ram turned violent in Madhya Pradesh state's Khargone city after Hindu mobs brandishing swords and sticks marched past Muslim neighborhoods and mosques. Videos showed hundreds of them dancing and cheering in unison to songs blared from loudspeakers that included calls for violence against Muslims.

Soon groups of Hindus and Muslims began throwing stones at each other, police said. By the time the violence subsided, the Muslims were left disproportionately affected. Their shops and homes were looted and set ablaze. Mosques were desecrated and burned. Overnight, dozens of families were displaced.

"Our lives were destroyed in just one day," said Hidayatullah Mansuri, a mosque official.

It was the latest in a series of attacks against Muslims in India, where hardline Hindu nationalists have long espoused a rigid anti-Muslim stance and preached violence against them. But increasingly, incendiary songs directed at Muslims have become a precursor to these attacks.

They are part of what is known as "saffron pop," a reference to the color associated with the Hindu religion and favored by Hindu nationalists. Many such songs openly call for the killing of Muslims and those who do not endorse "Hindutva," a Hindu nationalist movement that seeks to turn officially secular India into an avowedly Hindu nation.

For some of the millions of Indian Muslims, who make up 14% of the country's 1.4 billion people, these songs are the clearest example of rising anti-Muslim sentiment across the country. They fear that hate music is yet another tool in the hands of Hindu nationalists to target them.

"These songs make open calls for our murder, and nobody is making them stop," said Mansuri.

The violence in Khargone left one Muslim dead and the body was found seven days later, senior police officer Anugraha. P said. She said police arrested several people for rioting but did not specify whether anyone who played the provocative songs was among them.

India's history is pockmarked with bloody communal violence dating back to the British partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. But religious polarization has significantly increased under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government, with minority Muslims often targeted for everything from their food and clothing style to inter-religious marriages.

The hate-filled soundtracks have further heightened tensions, but the creators of these songs see them as a form of devotion to their faith and a mere assertion of being a "proud Hindu."

"India is a Hindu nation and my songs celebrate our religion. What's wrong with that?" said singer

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Sandeep Chaturvedi.

Among the many songs played in Khargone before the violence, Chaturvedi's was the most provocative. That song exhorts Hindus to "rise" so that "those who wear skull caps will bow down to Lord Ram," referring to Muslims. It goes on to say that when Hindu "blood boils" it will show Muslims their rightful place with their "sword."

For Chaturvedi, a self-avowed Hindu nationalist, the lyrics are not hate-filled or provocative. They rather signify "the mood of the people."

"Every Hindu likes my songs. It brings them closer to their religion," he said.

Chaturvedi's assessment is partly true. Despite the tacky production quality, poorly matched lip-synching and repetitive techno beats, many of the music videos for these songs have millions of views on YouTube and are a hit among the country's Hindu youth.

Music in a variety of languages, and often in praise of various Hindu deities, has historically been an important part of Hinduism. Bhajan, a style of devotional music performed in temples and homes, remains a key part of this tradition. But observers say the gradual rise of Hindu nationalism has encouraged a more aggressive form of music that spawns anti-Muslim sentiments.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, a journalist based in New Delhi who has written a biography on Modi, said the hate songs were first harnessed in the early 1990s by Hindu nationalists through audio cassettes that were set to the tune of popular Bollywood music, helping them appeal to younger listeners. The beginning of that decade saw a violent campaign by India's right wing that in 1992 led to the demolition of a 16th-century mosque in central India by a Hindu mob, catapulting Modi's party to national prominence.

Mukhopadhyay said the songs have since become a "time-tested trope" of Hindu nationalists to "insult Muslims, disparage their religion and provoke them into responding."

"Most mob attacks against Muslims follow a similar pattern. A large procession of Hindus enters Muslim neighborhoods and plays hate speeches and incendiary songs which inevitably escalates into communal violence. The songs are, in fact, played with even greater vigor in front of the mosques to elicit a response from Muslims," said Mukhopadhyay, who has also written about major riots in India.

Over the years, the songs have become common during Hindu festivals and are not just limited to the fringe.

The day violence struck Khargone, T. Raja Singh, a lawmaker from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, led a similar procession of Hindu devotees in southern Hyderabad city and belted out a self-composed song that made veiled references to the removal of Muslims from the country. Police charged him with "hurting the religious sentiments of people."

Similar songs that called for Hindus to kill those who do not chant "Jai Shri Ram!" or "Hail Lord Ram," a slogan that has become a battle cry for Hindu nationalists, were also played in front of mosques in multiple Indian cities on the same day. They were followed by a wave of violence, leaving at least one dead in Gujarat state.

Meanwhile, the demand for these songs keeps rising.

Last week, the singer Laxmi Dubey performed some of her hits before a Hindu gathering in central India's Bhopal city. In one song, she exhorted a cheering crowd of Hindus to "cut off the tongues of enemies who speak against Lord Ram," videos from the event showed.

On Saturday, the same song was played in New Delhi during a procession marking another Hindu festival. TV broadcasts showed hundreds of Hindu youth, brandishing swords and homemade handguns, marching through a Muslim neighborhood as loudspeakers blasted the hate-filled music.

In a phone interview, Dubey said it showed her music was widely accepted.

"It is what people want," she said.

Audio: McCarthy said he would urge Trump to resign

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy told fellow GOP lawmakers shortly after

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the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection that he would urge then-President Donald Trump to resign, according to audio posted by The New York Times and aired on Rachel Maddow's MSNBC show .

In the recording of a Jan. 10 House Republican Leadership call posted by the Times Thursday night, McCarthy is heard discussing the Democratic effort to remove Trump from office and saying he would tell Trump, "I think it will pass and it would be my recommendation he should resign."

It's unclear whether McCarthy, who is in line to become House speaker if Republicans gain control during the fall midterm elections, followed through on his thinking or was merely spit-balling ideas shared privately with his colleagues in the aftermath of the deadly Capitol assault.

In the same conversation, McCarthy told his colleagues he doubted Trump would take the advice to step aside.

"That would be my recommendation," McCarthy is heard saying in response to question from Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., who would emerge as a staunch Trump critic. "I don't think he will take it, but I don't know."

Earlier Thursday, after the Times published its initial story describing the conversation, McCarthy released a statement calling it "totally false and wrong." His spokesman, Mark Bednar, had told the paper, "McCarthy never said he'd call Trump to say he should resign."

Bednar did not immediately respond to questions late Thursday night after the audio's release. Representatives for Trump did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the tape.

The audio threatens to badly damage the relationship between McCarthy and Trump, who remains the most popular figure in the Republican Party, despite his role in inciting the Jan. 6 insurrection and his refusal to accept the results of the 2020 election. And it could threaten McCarthy's standing with House Republicans aligned with Trump, whose support he will need for votes to become House speaker next year.

The audio depicts a very different McCarthy than the one who has been leading House Republicans over the last year and a half and who has remained allied with Trump even after delivering a speech on the House floor shortly after Jan. 6, during which he called the attack on the Capitol "un-American." At the time, McCarthy called the assault among the saddest days of his career and told his fellow Republicans that Trump "bears responsibility" for the violence.

Even after the violence, though, McCarthy joined half of the House Republicans in voting to challenge Joe Biden's election victory.

Since then, the California Republican has distanced himself from any criticism of Trump and has avoided directly linking him to what happened. Within weeks of the siege at the Capitol McCarthy said he did not think Trump provoked the attack, as other prominent Republicans said at the time.

Instead, McCarthy has cozied up to Trump, visiting him at the former president's Florida residence at Mar-a-Lago as he relies on the former president's brand for campaign support this fall.

McCarthy indicated during an interview with The Associated Press this week in California that Trump will motivate voters to turn out for the party in this fall's midterm elections.

"He'll motivate, get a lot of people out," McCarthy said at a GOP event in Fresno.

The Times report Thursday was adapted from an upcoming book, "This Will Not Pass: Trump, Biden and the Battle for America's Future," by Times reporters Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns.

In the audio, Cheney, who eventually lost her No. 3 leadership position after voting in favor of Trump's impeachment, can be heard asking McCarthy about a 25th Amendment resolution calling for Trump's ouster and whether Trump might resign.

"I've had a few discussions. My gut tells me no. I'm seriously thinking of having that conversation with him tonight," McCarthy is heard saying. "What I think I'm gonna do is I'm gonna call him."

"I think it will pass and it would be my recommendation he should resign," he later adds. "I mean, that would be my take but I don't think he would take it. But I don't know."

McCarthy, 57, has been strategically charting his own delicate course as he positions himself to try to take over as speaker if Republicans retake the House. He has begun to build out his leadership team and last summer tasked several groups of Republican lawmakers with drafting proposals on the party's core

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legislative priorities in hopes of making a fast start in 2023.

But even as he inches closer to leading the chamber, McCarthy is well aware of the downside of power in recent months as hard-right members of the conference have created headaches with inflammatory actions and statements.

There was little immediate reaction Thursday night from fellow Republicans who could determine his future.

To be sure, no other Republican leader in the House has amassed the standing to challenge McCarthy for the leadership position.

McCarthy has recruited the class of newcomers bolstering GOP ranks and raised millions to bolster Republican campaigns. He has drawn his closest rivals into the fold even as he works to shore up the votes that would be needed to become speaker.

An outside group aligned with McCarthy has led fundraising ahead of the midterm elections, and rank-and-file Republicans working to regain the House majority are unlikely to be critical of the leader ahead of November.

Still, McCarthy has also been a person of interest for the House committee investigating the storming of the Capitol on Jan 6. The select committee, which Cheney vice-chairs, requested an interview with McCarthy in mid-January, hoping to learn more about his conversations with Trump "before, during and after" the riot.

They had also sought information about McCarthy's communications with former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows in the days before the attack. Hours after the request was made, McCarthy issued a statement saying he would refuse to cooperate because he saw the investigation as not legitimate and accused the panel of "abuse of power."

The committee has been especially focused on McCarthy's communications with Trump and White House staff in the week after the violence, including a conversation with Trump that was reportedly heated.

Without his cooperation, it remains unclear whether the panel will be able to gain testimony from McCarthy or any other congressional allies of Trump. While the committee has considered subpoenaing fellow lawmakers, they have so far avoided doing so as it would be an extraordinary move and could run up against legal and political challenges.

Iowa GOP open to non-Trump prospects as 2024 gets underway

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Former President Donald Trump's persistent flirtation with another White House run is doing little to discourage other potential Republican candidates from stepping up their activity in Iowa, the state that will formally launch the 2024 nomination process.

Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo quietly finished his fifth trip to Iowa last week, and former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley is making plans for a statewide trip this summer. Former Vice President Mike Pence, meanwhile, is expected to visit the heart of conservative western Iowa this weekend.

Pence's trip is particularly notable since he spent the better part of four years in lockstep with Trump. It provides further evidence that Pence, whose life was threatened by Trump supporters during the violent Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, is considering his political future without regard to the former president's plans.

Pence and his wife, Karen, will make their plans based on "where they are being called to serve, not on what anyone else is doing, including Trump," said senior Pence adviser Marc Short.

From his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, Trump is closely watching the developments in Iowa and working with operatives in the state to ensure that he would dominate the caucuses if he decided to run again. But some Republicans warn that Trump doesn't have the state locked down.

His status as a former president who remains deeply popular with the GOP base "doesn't mean someone else with the right message couldn't appeal to them in a way that really cuts into Trump's support," said David Kochel, a veteran Iowa Republican campaign strategist.

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Pence, in particular, seems prepared to dig in to the state, especially the sprawling swath of northern and western Iowa where Christian conservatives have lifted the past three GOP caucus winners. Making his third trip to Iowa since the 2020 election, Pence plans to campaign on Saturday with Rep. Randy Feenstra in the Republican-heavy 4th Congressional District and cap the day with a speech to the county GOP meeting in Ames.

Last month, he outlined a policy agenda for 2022 candidates, noting "elections are about the future." The comment could foreshadow a confrontation with Trump, who continues to falsely insist that widespread voter fraud cost him a second term in 2020.

Federal and state election officials and Trump's own attorney general have said there is no credible evidence the election was tainted. The former president's allegations of fraud were also roundly rejected by courts, including by judges Trump appointed.

Still, Trump has criticized Pence for not stopping the certification of the Electoral College vote totals that made Democrat Joe Biden the winner. Vice presidents play only a ceremonial role in the counting of Electoral College votes. Any attempt to interfere in the count would have represented an extraordinary violation of the law and an assault on the democratic process, sparking a constitutional crisis.

Only this year did Pence publicly renounce Trump's claims, saying in February the former president was "wrong" to insist that he had the power to unilaterally overturn the results of the 2020 election. He further distanced himself from Trump after Russia invaded Ukraine. Pence said, "There is no room in this party for apologists" for Russian leader Vladimir Putin, whom Trump has praised.

The former president has become more critical of Putin as the war in Ukraine has intensified.

The GOP's full court press in Iowa won't likely begin until after the November midterm elections. But the party has already committed to maintaining the state's status as home to the first nominating contest. That's in contrast to Democrats, who are taking the boldest steps in a generation to revise their calendar and potentially concentrate power in states that are more racially diverse.

Pompeo, who wrapped up a two-day trip in western Iowa last week, has been a regular visitor, appearing at local, county and state GOP meetings across the state. But it's Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton who owns the early lead for Iowa visits at six, with a seventh planned for July.

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, the 2016 Iowa GOP caucus winner, has also visited, and endorsed candidates for Congress.

Despite the activity, it's unclear that anyone visiting the state is gaining much traction among Iowa GOP activists at this early stage. During recent interviews with a dozen county Republican activists, GOP consultants and donors, much of the focus was on Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has yet to visit the state. The closest he's come is as a guest of Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts' at a September fundraiser south of Omaha.

"There are a number of people that are interesting and have done work that's been noticed, especially Ron DeSantis," said former Republican county chair Gwen Ecklund, of Crawford County in conservative western Iowa.

DeSantis, governor of the nation's third most-populous state, has recently become a rallying voice in the country's cultural battles, particularly related to LGBTQ issues. He has refused to recognize the transgender swimmer who won the NCAA women's freestyle championship. He signed a bill last month forbidding instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity for early elementary school students, a measure opponents have dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" law.

He's in an increasingly heated battle with Disney, whose executives have criticized the anti-LGBTQ measures. At his request, the Florida legislature on Thursday gave final passage to a bill that would stop allowing Walt Disney World to operate a private government over its properties in the state.

Influential Republican donors, such as retired insurance executive Cam Sutton of suburban Des Moines, describe DeSantis as similar to Trump on policy, "but without the tweets."

Sutton was among a contingent of wealthy Iowa Republicans who traveled to New Jersey in 2011 in hopes of recruiting then-Gov. Chris Christie to run in 2012. Sutton and others remain in touch with Christie and would not be surprised if he runs, as he did in 2016.

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Still, Trump remains overwhelmingly popular among Iowa Republicans. According to The Des Moines Register's Iowa Poll in October, 91% of Iowa Republicans said they have a favorable view of him.

That same month, during Trump's most recent appearance in Iowa, he drew tens of thousands to the Iowa State Fairgrounds, where he endorsed Iowa Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley, who is seeking an eighth term.

Iowa staff working for his super PAC were recently meeting at the former president's Florida home to discuss his Iowa plans for the year, mindful of the attention others would be receiving.

"Oh, I know there are some who can't wait for him to run again," said Crawford County's Ecklund. "But others are sitting back and starting to pay attention to others."

Biden's election year challenge: Blame GOP for nation's woes

By WILL WEISSERT and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has an election-year message for frustrated voters: At least he's trying.

For those who think he isn't doing enough to help Ukraine fend off the Russian invasion, Biden announced \$800 million in new military support on Thursday. To ease the pain of high gas prices, he's tapped the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and reopened onshore sales of oil and natural gas leases on public land. And to address historic inflation, Biden has tried to smooth out supply chain-crimping bottlenecks at the nation's ports.

The president hopes the moves, which are being announced in near-daily rollouts and in a stepped up travel schedule, will present a contrast with Republicans — who, he argues, spend more time complaining about problems than proposing solutions.

"I mean this sincerely — name me something the national Republican Party is for," Biden said at a recent Democratic National Committee meeting.

But it's not clear he's attracting much support. A new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds just 45% of Americans approve and 54% disapprove of how Biden is handling the presidency. The approval rate in the poll taken from April 14-18 is about the same as last month, but down from the president's 63% approval rating a year ago.

There are bright spots for Biden. Applications for unemployment benefits have fallen to the lowest levels in decades and wages are rising. The economy is growing after the pandemic-induced doldrums.

Still, with crime rates rising in some parts of the country and inflation at its highest levels since 1981, these don't feel like boom times to many. Seventy percent of Americans call the nation's economy poor. Further, just 33% say they approve and 66% say they disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy, with about a third of Democrats, along with almost all Republicans, disapproving.

Primary elections that begin next month will help show whether Democrats are embracing Biden's vision of a moderate party that counters the increasingly far-right GOP.

In Ohio, Rep. Tim Ryan is well positioned to win the Democratic nomination for an open Senate seat with a message appealing to centrist, blue collar workers that is in line with Biden's overall approach. But in the president's native state of Pennsylvania, moderate Conor Lamb could be in a tight Senate primary against the more progressive John Fetterman.

Biden has suggested that one way to address his political challenges is to get on the road and make the case directly to voters about the impact of his administration's policies. He has increased his domestic travel lately to promote a \$1 trillion, bipartisan infrastructure package that cleared Congress last fall. Biden has visited Iowa, North Carolina, New Hampshire and Oregon since last week, and is in Seattle on Friday.

But some top Democrats running for office aren't clamoring for the president's help. Former Texas Rep. Beto O'Rourke says he has no interest in national Democratic figures visiting his state as he now runs for governor. Florida Rep. Val Demings, as she campaigns for Senate, was non-comittal about Biden's help, as was Ryan.

"My philosophy is like: I'm running. I'm the candidate. I don't need any validators," Ryan said at the Knox

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County Democratic Party office in Mount Vernon, Ohio. Nearby stood cardboard cutouts of Obama and Hillary Clinton. There wasn't one of Biden, though there was a campaign sign bearing his name outside.

Asked if appearing with Biden could be damaging, Ryan was unusually blunt.

"I don't know," he said. "I really don't."

Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris nevertheless plan on boosting U.S. trips in coming weeks, as well as stepping up their fundraising on behalf of the Democratic Party, according to administration officials and allies. But most of their activity is likely to take place in the late summer and early fall — after primaries are concluded and as voters will have their choice at the ballot box laid out for them.

Some in the administration have pressed for Biden and Democrats to draw a stronger contrast with Republicans, for instance arguing that the president should be more forcefully highlight a new study that Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to introduce redundant inspections on truck travel cost the U.S. economy \$9 billion in 10 days.

At a Thursday Democratic fundraiser at a yacht club in Portland, Oregon, Biden predicted that Democrats would add two seats in November to secure a 52-48 Senate majority.

"The far right's taken over that party," he said of Republicans. "And it's not even conservative in a traditional sense of conservatism. It's mean. It's ugly."

But trying to blame the other side amid mounting problems can have its limitations. Democrat Terry McAuliffe attempted to make last year's Virginia governor's race a referendum on the dangers of modern day GOP — even branding Republican opponent Glenn Youngkin "Trump in a sweater vest." McAuliffe lost in a state Biden had carried by 10 points barely a year earlier.

Some who would otherwise be the White House's fiercest allies say it'll be up to Biden to energize voters ahead of November — regardless of what Republicans do.

"He's not an effective communicator," said Wes Bellamy, founder of Our Black Party, which advocates for issues to strengthen African American communities.

The president "speaks in a tone that doesn't really resonate with much of his base and I don't think they do a good enough job of being active on the ground," Bellamy said.

Adding to the challenge is the fact that, when the president addresses one problem, he may prompt another. Some of what the administration has done to tame prices at the pump, for instance, run counter to Biden's promises about combating climate change — especially after his signature social spending bill, "Build Back Better," collapsed in Congress.

"His midterm strategy with respect to the environment is pretty underwhelming and not likely to work," said Brett Hartl, chief political strategist at the Center for Biological Diversity Action Fund.

Hartl said Americans, particularly young ones who backed Biden in 2020 thinking he'd help make the country dramatically greener, are now disillusioned with "a really steady trail of defeats on the climate crisis."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki suggested Biden may help Democrats avoid a Republican midterm romp by evoking the phrase "Don't compare me to the Almighty, compare me to the alternative." That's something Biden said frequently as vice president and while campaigning for the White House in 2020.

"Really, if you look at the other side, they have nothing in the cupboard. They have no plan," Psaki said during a recent event for "Pod Save America." "We could be saying that more."

From Ukraine to Russia: Boy safer, but not closer to US dad

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

Cesar Quintana agonized for weeks that his 2-year-old son wouldn't make it out of the battered Ukrainian coastal port Mariupol as Russian troops encircled the city.

Thankfully, he did.

But Alexander and his mother are now in Russia, where Quintana, who has full legal custody of the boy in California, is no closer to seeing him again.

Quintana has been trying to bring his son back to the U.S. since his estranged wife took the child to Ukraine without Quintana's permission in 2020. He was working to get the boy returned through a Ukrai-

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nian court when the war broke out, and he lost communication with them.

Last month, he finally learned that, unlike the millions of Ukrainians who fled to Poland or Moldova, the family and others from Mariupol escaped across the closest international border to Russia.

Russia, however, is not a partner of the United States under an international treaty that governs the return of children abducted overseas by one of their parents, though Ukraine is. That has Quintana hoping the Ukrainian court will take his case back up and he can get Russian authorities to enforce any ruling in his favor. He said he's also trying to persuade his estranged Ukrainian-American wife, Antonina Aslanova, to return to California on her own.

"I'm not giving up, and my son's not going to grow up in Russia," Quintana said.

A WhatsApp message sent to Aslanova seeking comment was not returned.

International parental child abduction cases are complex, and advocates say relatively few children taken from their countries of residence are promptly returned. More than 2,000 applications were filed in 2015 under the international treaty that puts in place a process for resolving these cases, and about 45% resulted in the children being returned, according to a report by the Hague Conference on Private International Law.

Many countries have signed the treaty, but it isn't in effect between the United States and Russia, which makes getting a child returned very difficult, said Melissa Kucinski, a Washington-based attorney who specializes in these cases.

"With the child now sitting in Russia, my expectation is the father's California custody order will probably mean very little," Kucinski said.

Quintana, 35, has been trying for more than a year to get his son back through the treaty process with Ukraine, since a California judge ordered that the boy should be returned to him. Quintana traveled to Ukraine, hired a lawyer and said he got Aslanova to agree to let him bring the boy to California. But he said her mother opposed and filed a complaint with police, which stopped him from doing so.

Then, a critical court hearing in February was delayed to March and put off again because of the war.

Since then, Ukraine has said it won't be able to uphold its treaty commitments during the war, according to the U.S. State Department's website. The U.S. embassy in Kyiv is closed, though the State Department said it can assist Americans with consular services once they reach another country.

In Russia, the U.S. government's ability to provide routine or emergency services to U.S. citizens is "severely limited," a department official said.

The war drove Quintana to desperation. He sent money to Aslanova when the invasion began, but communication was cut off as the city of Mariupol fell under siege. When he couldn't reach his son, Quintana asked Ukrainian officials for permission to travel to the war-torn country to find him. He was planning to buy a plane ticket to Europe when he said the State Department confirmed the boy, Aslanova and her family had escaped to Russia.

Quintana said he spoke with Aslanova after she got out of Mariupol. He said she was considering coming back to California but was reluctant because she faces criminal charges for child abduction and also for driving under the influence in a case that prompted Quintana to seek the custody order in 2020.

"She is worried about jail," he said. "Why does my son have to suffer because of her?"

Noelle Hunter, co-founder of the iStand Parent Network, said a voluntary agreement is typically the best option in these cases. She said Quintana has asked the district attorney's office to drop the abduction charge if Aslanova returns, but prosecutors have not committed to doing so. State Department officials have offered to expedite documents should Aslanova leave Russia and take the child to another country, she said.

"We can't just kind of sit on our hands," said Hunter, whose organization supports parents whose children were taken overseas. "We have to be ready."

The Orange County district attorney's office declined to discuss the case.

Quintana and Aslanova were in the process of divorcing when she was arrested for investigation of driving under the influence, according to a letter from Orange County prosecutors to Ukrainian officials.

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Quintana was granted a custody order and allowed Aslanova to visit the boy at his home in December 2020. While he was sleeping, she took him to the airport and boarded a flight to Turkey then another to Ukraine, he said.

EXPLAINER: Why Washington is boosting heavy arms for Ukraine

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Eight weeks into the war, the Biden administration's decision to dramatically ramp up delivery of artillery guns to Ukraine signals a deepening American commitment at a pivotal stage of fighting for the country's industrial heartland.

It also brings into stark relief Moscow's warning that continued U.S. military aid to Ukraine would have "unpredictable" consequences, suggesting that Russia sees the international wave of weaponry as a growing obstacle to its invasion as well as a Western provocation.

"We're in a critical window" of time now, President Joe Biden said Thursday in announcing he had approved an additional \$800 million in battlefield aid that includes 72 of the U.S. Army's 155mm howitzers, along with 144,000 artillery rounds and more than 120 armed drones that will require training for Ukrainian operators.

This brings to \$3.4 billion the amount of security assistance provided since Russia began its invasion Feb. 24. That is an extraordinary total of U.S. military aid for a country to which the United States has no defense treaty obligation.

A look at the U.S. assistance and U.S. expectations for what it will accomplish:

WHY IS ARTILLERY SO IMPORTANT NOW?

Heavy weapons such as artillery are shaping up as a key feature of the unfolding battle for Ukraine's eastern region known as the Donbas. The relatively flat terrain is suited for what the military calls maneuver warfare — the movement of tanks and other ground forces backed by long-range guns like the 155mm howitzer.

The Russians have been deploying their own additional artillery to the Donbas region in recent days, along with more ground troops and other material to support and sustain what could be a long fight for terrain in Ukraine's industrial heartland.

The howitzers the U.S. is sending to Ukraine will be the latest American model, known as the M777, used by the Army and the Marine Corps. Smaller and more maneuverable than the older model, the M777 can be deployed on the battlefield by heavy-lift helicopters and moved relatively quickly between positions by seven-ton trucks that also are being provided by the Pentagon.

"What makes it important is the kind of fighting that we expect in the Donbas. Because of the terrain, because it's open, because it's flat, because it's not as urban, we can expect the Russians to rely on long-range fires — artillery in particular," said John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary. "So we know that this is going to be part of the Russians' playbook."

A senior U.S. defense official said the first of the 72 howitzers are expected to begin moving to Europe by this weekend. Of 18 other 155mm howitzers that Biden approved last week for shipment to Ukraine, an unspecified number already are in Europe, and U.S. howitzer training for Ukrainian personnel began Wednesday in an undisclosed country outside of Ukraine.

WILL THIS BE ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE?

Probably not, and Biden said he already has asked the Pentagon to get to work on additional potential military assistance.

Biden said this phase of Russia's invasion will be "more limited in terms of geography but not in terms of brutality." He also acknowledged that he needs Congress to approve the funds necessary to continue providing key weapons to Ukraine beyond the latest \$800 million package, which he said would ensure a steady flow of arms only for the next few weeks.

U.S. officials say the Russians are trying to adjust their approach in Ukraine after early setbacks, suggesting the fight could be a long one.

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After failing to take Kyiv, the capital, in the early weeks of its multipronged invasion, Russia has since narrowed its objectives by focusing on the Donbas, where Moscow-backed separatists have been fighting since 2014, and on a stretch of coastal territory along the Sea of Azov from Mariupol to the Crimean Peninsula. One Russian advantage is this region's proximity to Russian territory, which allows for shorter supply lines than earlier battles in Ukraine's north.

WHAT ELSE IS THE U.S. PROVIDING?

In addition to the 72 howitzers and the vehicles required to move them around the battlefield, the new weapons package for Ukraine includes artillery rounds and armed drones from U.S. Air Force stocks. Still in the pipeline from a separate \$800 million weapons package announced only last week is a wide range of articles, including radars used to enable the targeting of Russian artillery, as well as air surveillance radars and unmanned coastal drone vessels.

"Artillery and drones are the exact things Ukraine will need as Russia heads into its next campaign in the East and South," said Mark Montgomery, a retired Navy rear admiral who previously served with U.S. European Command in helping improve U.S.-Ukrainian military relations. Montgomery is now an analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

The drone included in the latest package is called the Phoenix Ghost, made by a U.S. company, Aevex Aerospace, which bills itself as a leader in "full-spectrum airborne intelligence solutions." Kirby, the Pentagon spokesman, declined to describe the drone's capabilities beyond saying that it is used "largely but not exclusively to attack targets." It also has onboard cameras.

Kirby said the drones are especially well suited for the terrain on which the Ukrainians are fighting in the Donbas.

LGBTQ leader is key in blocking Kansas ban on trans athletes

By JOHN HANNA AP Political Writer

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — As state lawmakers moved to ban transgender kids from girls' sports, Kansas' most visible LGBTQ-rights lobbyist recently said during an interview in a Statehouse corridor that conservatives don't mind if kindergartners "have their genitals inspected."

The politically needling comment was bold enough to make Tom Witt's point, and loud enough for a lobbyist supporter of the ban to hear as she walked by. It was also classic Witt: Boisterous. Engaged. And well-targeted.

Witt is a key reason Kansas is unlikely to join a growing number of states this year with a ban, despite Republican supermajorities in its Legislature. With lawmakers returning Monday from a spring break, supporters don't yet have the two-thirds majorities to override Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly's veto of their bill. They didn't last year, either.

Witt, 60, is executive director of Equality Kansas and a Democratic consultant. During 18 years at the Statehouse, he's spotlighted conservatives' bills so that unwanted publicity prompts Republican leaders to disavow them or discourages GOP-led committees from even holding hearings. Others describe him as relentless in pursuing just enough "no" votes when it counts, and was influential enough in the state Democratic Party to help push it to the left.

He's even let his health slide. In 2017, he ignored growing fatigue to successfully lobby against requiring transgender students to use facilities associated with their genders assigned at birth — then had a heart attack and bypass surgery.

As for this year's bill, he said unnamed Republicans told him they "really hate" it before voting for it anyway. He said he's bitter that they might have considered the political cost of voting no.

"This is life and death for some kids," he said. "This is not trivial. This is not politics."

Witt plans to retire from activism, lobbying and consulting by year's end, having mentored younger, self-described progressive lobbyists.

Democratic state Rep. Stephanie Byers, the state's first elected transgender lawmaker and a retired Wichita band director, credits Witt with connecting her to national groups and making media interviews

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easier to navigate during her 2020 campaign. Kari Rinker, a friend and American Heart Association lobbyist, said he taught her how to fundraise and work with a nonprofit board.

But Witt is sometimes profane and often pugnacious, even with friends. As for lawmakers, he said, party doesn't matter: "If they vote against LGBT rights, I'm going to go after them."

Brittany Jones, the conservative lobbyist who was walking by Witt's recent hallway interview, begins her recollection of their Statehouse introduction in 2019 with, "I believe he's made in the image of God just like I am."

"As soon as he found out who I worked for, he dropped my hand, walked away and wouldn't speak to me," said Jones, policy director for the conservative group Kansas Family Voice. Witt doesn't dispute that.

As Witt fights to keep Kansas from following at least 15 other states in banning transgender athletes from female school and college sports, some Kansas lawmakers are conflicted.

State Sen. David Haley, a Kansas City Democrat, voted no earlier this month but said "reasonable" constituents see the bill as common sense. He was the deciding vote last year against a veto override, giving a speech weighing both sides before voting no — as Witt sat in the main visitors' gallery, visibly on edge.

"You know, it's kind of like he's a Marine Corps drill sergeant when he is committed to the advocacy for his ideology," Haley said. "It's like, 'Everybody line up. This is the way it's going to go.'"

The Kansas measures have applied to K-12 students, and a few lawmakers cite that as a problem. Witt said elementary schools would be forced to physically inspect children as young as 5 to settle disputes over transgender kids competing against other girls.

The bill's text doesn't say exactly how disputes would be resolved, and Haley called Witt's argument "a little bit beyond belief." State Rep. Barbara Wasinger, a Republican from western Kansas, said Witt's argument is diverting attention from what she sees as the real issues, fair competition and scholarship opportunities for young women.

But Witt sees this year's proposals triggering bullying and suicides. He pointed out a scar on his left cheek and said it's from being attacked and cut with a knife in a high school bathroom in the 1970s.

"In some respects, not a damn thing has changed," he said. "In the 70s, the things that trans people are being called today are what gays and lesbians were called then. The panic about bathrooms? We had the bathroom panic in the 70s."

He also recalled how his activism began ahead of a 2005 statewide vote in favor of banning same-sex marriage in Kansas. A computer software writer and IT troubleshooter, he was living in Wichita with his future husband and their daughter.

"All I ever wanted in my life was a family," Witt said. "And it felt like those people were coming after it."

Satellite photos show possible mass graves near Mariupol

By ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Satellite images released Thursday showed what appeared to be mass graves near Mariupol, and local officials accused Russia of burying up to 9,000 Ukrainian civilians there in an effort to conceal the slaughter taking place in the siege of the port city.

The images emerged hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed victory in the battle for the Mariupol, despite the presence of an estimated 2,000 Ukrainian fighters who were still holed up at a giant steel mill. Putin ordered his troops not to storm the stronghold but to seal it off "so that not even a fly comes through."

Satellite image provider Maxar Technologies released the photos, which it said showed more than 200 mass graves in a town where Ukrainian officials say the Russians have been burying Mariupol residents killed in the fighting. The imagery showed long rows of graves stretching away from an existing cemetery in the town of Manhush, outside Mariupol.

Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boychenko accused the Russians of "hiding their military crimes" by taking the bodies of civilians from the city and burying them in Manhush.

The graves could hold as many as 9,000 dead, the Mariupol City Council said Thursday in a post on the

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Telegram messaging app.

Boychenko labeled Russian actions in the city as "the new Babi Yar," a reference to the site of multiple Nazi massacres in which nearly 34,000 Ukrainian Jews were killed in 1941.

"The bodies of the dead were being brought by the truckload and actually simply being dumped in mounds," an aide to Boychenko, Piotr Andryushchenko, said on Telegram.

There was no immediate reaction from the Kremlin. When mass graves and hundreds of dead civilians were discovered in Bucha and other towns around Kyiv after Russian troops retreated three weeks ago, Russian officials denied that their soldiers killed any civilians there and accused Ukraine of staging the atrocities.

In a statement, Maxar said a review of previous images indicates that the graves in Manhush were dug in late March and expanded in recent weeks.

After nearly two lethal months of bombardment that largely reduced Mariupol to a smoking ruin, Russian forces appear to control the rest of the strategic southern city, including its vital but now badly damaged port.

But a few thousand Ukrainian troops, by Moscow's estimate, have stubbornly held out for weeks at the steel plant, despite a pummeling from Russian forces and repeated demands for their surrender. About 1,000 civilians were also trapped there, according to Ukrainian officials.

Instead of sending troops to finish off the defenders in a potentially bloody frontal assault, Russia apparently intends to maintain the siege and wait for the fighters to surrender when they run out of food or ammunition.

Boychenko rejected any notion that Mariupol had fallen into Russian hands.

"The city was, is and remains Ukrainian," he declared. "Today our brave warriors, our heroes, are defending our city."

The capture of Mariupol would represent the Kremlin's biggest victory yet of the war in Ukraine. It would help Moscow secure more of the coastline, complete a land bridge between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia seized in 2014, and free up more forces to join the larger and potentially more consequential battle now underway for Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, the Donbas.

Putin expressed concern for the lives of Russian troops in deciding against sending them in to clear out the sprawling Azovstal steel plant, where the die-hard defenders were hiding in a maze of underground passageways.

At a joint appearance with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Putin declared, "The completion of combat work to liberate Mariupol is a success," and he offered congratulations to Shoigu.

Shoigu predicted the steel plant could be taken in three to four days, but Putin said that would be "pointless."

"There is no need to climb into these catacombs and crawl underground through these industrial facilities," the Russian leader said. "Block off this industrial area so that not even a fly comes through."

The plant covers 11 square kilometers (4 square miles) and is threaded with some 24 kilometers (15 miles) of tunnels and bunkers.

"The Russian agenda now is not to capture these really difficult places where the Ukrainians can hold out in the urban centers, but to try and capture territory and also to encircle the Ukrainian forces and declare a huge victory," retired British Rear Adm. Chris Parry said.

Russian officials for weeks have said capturing the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas is the war's main objective. Moscow's forces opened the new phase of the fighting this week along a 300-mile (480-kilometer) front from the northeastern city of Kharkiv to the Azov Sea.

While Russia continued heavy air and artillery attacks in those areas, it did not appear to gain any significant ground over the past few days, according to military analysts, who said Moscow's forces were still ramping up the offensive.

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the Pentagon's assessment, said the Ukrainians were hindering the Russian effort to push south from Izyum.

Rockets struck a neighborhood of Kharkiv on Thursday, and at least two civilians were burned to death

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in their car. A school and a residential building were also hit, and firefighters tried to put out a blaze and search for anyone trapped.

Elsewhere, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said Russian troops kidnapped a local official heading up a humanitarian convoy in the southern Kherson region. She said the Russians offered to free him in exchange for Russian prisoners of war, but she characterized that as unacceptable.

Vereshchuk also said efforts to establish three humanitarian corridors in the Kherson region failed Thursday because Russian troops did not hold their fire.

Western nations, meanwhile, rushed to pour heavy weapons into Ukraine to help it counter the offensive in the east.

U.S. President Joe Biden announced an additional \$800 million in military assistance, including heavy artillery, 144,000 rounds of ammunition and drones. But he also warned that the \$13.6 billion approved last month by Congress for military and humanitarian aid is "almost exhausted" and more will be needed.

All told, more than 100,000 people were believed trapped with little or no food, water, heat or medicine in Mariupol, which had a prewar population of about 430,000. Over 20,000 people have been killed in the siege, according to Ukrainian authorities.

The city has seized worldwide attention as the scene of some of the worst suffering of the war, including deadly airstrikes on a maternity hospital and a theater.

Ukraine has repeatedly accused Russia of launching attacks to block civilian evacuations from the city. On Thursday, at least two Russian attacks hit the city of Zaporizhzhia, a way station for people fleeing Mariupol. No one was wounded, the regional governor said.

Among those who arrived in Zaporizhzhia after fleeing Mariupol were Yuriy and Polina Lulac, who spent nearly two months living in a basement with at least a dozen other people. There was no running water and little food, Yuriy Lulac said.

"What was happening there was so horrible that you can't describe it," said the native Russian speaker who used a derogatory word for the Russian troops, saying they were "killing people for nothing."

"Mariupol is gone. In the courtyards there are just graves and crosses," Lulac said.

The Red Cross said it expected to to evacuate 1,500 people by bus, but that the Russians allowed only a few dozen to leave and pulled some people off of the buses.

Dmitriy Antipenko said he lived mostly in a basement with his wife and father-in-law amid death and destruction.

"In the courtyard, there was a little cemetery, and we buried seven people there," Antipenko said, wiping away tears.

Philadelphia to end mask mandate, days after reinstating it

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM Associated Press

Philadelphia is ending its indoor mask mandate, city health officials said Thursday night, abruptly reversing course just days after people in the city had to start wearing masks again amid a sharp increase in infections.

The Board of Health voted Thursday to rescind the mandate, according to the Philadelphia health department, which released a statement that cited "decreasing hospitalizations and a leveling of case counts."

The mandate went into effect Monday. Philadelphia had ended its earlier indoor mask mandate March 2.

The health department did not release data to back up its reversal on masking, saying more information would be provided Friday. But the acting health commissioner, Dr. Cheryl Bettigole, told the Board of Health at a public meeting Thursday night that hospitalizations had unexpectedly gone down 25% in a matter of days.

"We're in a situation that we really had not anticipated being in this soon but it is good news," she said, according to a transcript of the meeting. "So I'm really very happy ... to say it appears that we no longer need to mandate masks in Philadelphia and that we can actually move to simply a strong recommendation."

Philadelphia had become the first major U.S. city to reinstate its indoor mask mandate, but faced fierce blowback as well as a legal effort to get the mandate thrown out. Few masks were worn at the Philadelphia

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76ers' home playoff game on Monday, even though they were required under city rules.

City officials said the mandate would be lifted Friday morning.

When the city announced April 11 that mandatory masking was coming back, Bettigole said it was necessary to forestall a potential new wave driven by an omicron subvariant. She said Philadelphia had crossed the threshold of rising cases at which the city's guidelines call for people to wear masks indoors.

"If we fail to act now, knowing that every previous wave of infections has been followed by a wave of hospitalizations, and then a wave of deaths, it will be too late for many of our residents," Bettigole said at the time.

Cases and hospitalizations continued to rise at least through Monday, when the health department reported 82 patients in the hospital with COVID-19 — up nearly 80% from a week earlier — with confirmed cases up 58% over that same span to 224 per day. Those numbers were still a fraction of what the city endured during the wintertime omicron surge.

Bettigole told the Board of Health on Thursday night that hospitalizations had since drifted down to 65.

The restaurant industry had pushed back against the city's reimposed mask mandate, saying workers would bear the brunt of customer anger over the new rules.

Several businesses and residents filed suit in state court in Pennsylvania seeking to overturn the renewed mandate. The Board of Health's vote to rescind the mandate came after board members met in private to discuss the lawsuit.

"We were very pleased to see Philadelphia make the correct decision to rescind the mask mandate," said the plaintiffs' lawyer, Thomas W King III, who was among those involved in last year's successful legal challenge to the statewide mask mandate in schools.

Shortly before news broke that the mandate was ending, the issue came up during Thursday night's debate between the three leading Democratic candidates seeking the party's nomination for Pennsylvania's open U.S. Senate seat. Notably, two of them, Lt. Gov. John Fetterman and state Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta of Philadelphia, came out against the mandate.

"We have to move past COVID," said Fetterman, adding that "we have to live with this virus, and I don't believe going backwards with a mask mandate or with closures is appropriate."

U.S. Rep. Conor Lamb of suburban Pittsburgh said he hated wearing masks, but thought Philadelphia officials were "trying to do what's best for everybody."

Most states and cities dropped their masking requirements in February and early March following new guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that put less focus on case counts and more on hospital capacity and said most Americans could safely take off their masks.

The Justice Department, meanwhile, said it is appealing a judge's order that voided the federal mask mandate on planes and trains and in travel hubs. The CDC asked the Justice Department to appeal the decision handed down by a federal judge in Florida earlier this week.

Boston urges masks as battle brews over transit rule

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

Boston urged people to start wearing masks Thursday and the Biden administration weighed its next legal step in what is shaping up to be a high-stakes court fight over the abrupt end of the national mask mandate on airplanes and mass transit.

The Boston Public Health Commission noted a rise in hospitalizations, as well as a 65% increase in cases and an even larger spike in COVID-19 levels in local wastewater samples. It also stressed that the guidance was merely a recommendation, not an order.

The country is wrestling with how to deal with the next phase of the pandemic and find the right balance in enacting health measures at a time when many Americans are ready to move on after two exhausting years.

A federal judge in Florida this week threw out a national mask mandate on mass transportation, and airlines and airports responded swiftly Monday by repealing their requirements that passengers wear face

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coverings. That put the Biden administration in the position of trying to navigate an appeal that could have sweeping ramifications over the power that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has in regulating future health emergencies.

Los Angeles County bucked national trends and said Thursday it will still require masks on public transit including trains, subways, buses, taxis and rideshares. Cases have risen in the past week and hospitalizations have plateaued after falling the previous two months.

Philadelphia last week became the first big city to bring back a mask mandate, responding to a rise and infections and hospitalizations there, but the city abruptly reversed course Thursday night and ended the mandate. Other cities in the Northeast have been closely watching the trend lines and a new color-coded map from the CDC to decide next steps.

The map that the CDC switched to in late February is less focused on positive test results and more on what's happening at hospitals to give community leaders clearer guidelines on when to urge masking. Nearly 95% of U.S. counties still have low transmission based on the map, but more places have shifted to medium and high transmission in recent weeks, including many places in upstate New York.

Hospitalizations nationally have ticked up in recent weeks but are nowhere near the peak reached at the height of the omicron surge.

"COVID-19 cases have increased rapidly citywide, so we need people to be vigilant and take precautions that can help us avoid another potential surge," said Dr. Bisola Ojikutu, the Boston commission's executive director. "Living with COVID-19 is about collective responsibility and working together."

She said people in Boston should mask indoors, stay up to date with their vaccinations and test for suspected infections.

The Boston recommendation came two days after the city's transit system lifted mask requirements in response to the national transportation ruling, reflecting the mishmash of reactions following the court decision by an appointee of former President Donald Trump.

As the Biden administration figures out an appeal, Lawrence Gostin, a public health law expert at Georgetown University, said a "monumental battle" was shaping up, with the future of the CDC at stake. The agency continues to recommend that people wear masks in all indoor public transportation settings.

"The question the courts are going to have to decide, and the public will have to decide, is when the next health crisis hits — and it will — will we have a strong public health agency to protect the population?" he said. "Or will the CDC simply have its hands tied behind its back? I think it's a very real possibility we're going to see the CDC handcuffed."

While the Supreme Court did strike down the agency's eviction moratorium for housing, that was more at the edge of the agency's authority. Setting rules for mask wearing on public transit is a basic, core tenant of the CDC's power, Gostin said.

"If someone gets on a flight from New York to LA, there's no state stopping them. The only thing preventing that transmission is the CDC," Gostin said.

Temple University Law Professor Scott Burris echoed that sentiment, saying that the U.S. government's legal authority to respond sensibly to epidemics and other kinds of emergencies is at stake in the case.

Burris said the ability to manage future health emergencies "must have weighed heavily" in the reasoning of the Justice Department to appeal the ruling, "but let's not forget we're going into another surge" and there is the potential for new variants.

An appeal would go to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, which is considered a right-leaning court, and conservative justices have a majority on the U.S. Supreme Court. A ruling could take away the CDC's power to issue mask orders and cast any future orders under a "legal cloud," he said.

Temple Law's Craig Green said the federal government's strategy is "really almost brilliant" because it could win in two ways with its appeal. If COVID-19 cases numbers continue to fall, Justice Department attorneys could argue that the issue is moot and ask to have the case thrown out.

"No one will have reason to cite it ever in the future as a precedent," he said.

But he said that if cases rise, the federal government would be better positioned to reimpose a mask

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mandate.

"I think the arguments about what a government can do, what the federal level can do under conditions of emergency were very difficult and problematic," he said. "I can understand why the Department of Justice and the United States government really did not want to see that kind of limit on their authority in the future, even if COVID ends up being more controlled in the future.

Amid the court battle, American, United and Delta have all indicated that they will lift the bans they imposed on passengers who refused to wear masks now that masks are optional on flights.

"We have talked to them individually," United CEO Scott Kirby told NBC on Thursday. "Many of them assure us that now that the mask mandate is off, everything is going to be fine, and I trust that the vast majority of them will."

Many passengers were shrugging off the changes. When Jon Schaudies flies from Chicago to San Antonio next week, he'll wear a mask, but won't worry if the passenger next to him doesn't do the same.

Schaudies, who travels frequently as vice president of a small manufacturing company, feels that he has enough protection from the COVID-19 vaccine and booster to avoid becoming seriously ill if he does contract it.

"I feel like people are at such extremes, but I'm sort of right down the middle," said Schaudies, 51, who plans to get a second booster shot.

He understands the worries of parents traveling with children who are too young to be vaccinated, but says "they have decision to make" about whether to fly. "But for business travelers, we can't stop."

"The world has to go on at some point."

War in Ukraine spurs bid to take a closer look at UN vetoes

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Two days into Russia's attack on Ukraine, a majority of U.N. Security Council members voted to demand that Moscow withdraw. One thing stood in their way: a veto by Russia itself.

It was the latest in decades of vetoes — on issues ranging from the Korean War to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to climate change — that at least temporarily stymied the council that was designed to be the U.N.'s most potent component.

A round of venting followed over the veto power afforded to just five of its 15 members: China, the United States, Russia, France, and Britain. Each has used that power over the years.

Proposals to change the council's structure or rein in vetoes have sputtered for more than half a century. But now, a new approach — simply subjecting vetoed matters to scrutiny by the full U.N. membership — appears to be gaining traction.

Spearheaded by Liechtenstein, the measure has more than 55 co-sponsors, including the U.S. The 193-member General Assembly is due to consider the proposed resolution Tuesday.

"This is really an important initiative," said Thomas Weiss, a City University of New York Graduate Center political science professor and Chicago Council on Global Affairs distinguished fellow who specializes in U.N. politics. To him, the proposal promotes transparency and challenges the idea that a few powerful countries can tank Security Council initiatives without so much as an explanation.

"It does, in important ways, suggest that the veto is not sacrosanct," he said.

The proposal wouldn't limit vetoes, but they would trigger public debates in the General Assembly. Whichever country or countries had cast a veto would be invited to say why.

The assembly wouldn't have to take or even consider any action. Regardless, the discussion could put veto-wielders on the spot and let a raft of other countries be heard.

It aims "to promote the voice of all of us who are not veto-holders, and who are not on the Security Council, on matters of international peace and security because they affect all of us," said Liechtenstein's U.N. ambassador, Christian Wenaweser.

From the U.N.'s 1945 start, World War II allies Britain, France, China, the Soviet Union (succeeded by Russia), and the U.S. have been the only countries with permanent seats and veto power in the Security

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Council. Other members are elected to two-year terms.

While the General Assembly got a broad membership and agenda, the council got more power. Its resolutions are legally binding, if sometimes ignored nonetheless, and can entail military action (i.e., assembling peacekeeping forces with troops contributed by various countries.)

Vetoes arose quickly. So did frustration. By the end of 1946, the assembly asked the council "to make every effort" not to let vetoes hinder prompt decision-making.

By now, more than 200 different Security Council proposals have been vetoed, some by multiple countries, according to U.N. records. The subjects were as sweeping as reporting on weapons stockpiles and as specific as the governance of a part of the Indian Ocean nation Comoros.

The Soviet Union/Russia has cast the most vetoes by far, followed by the United States. Fewer still have been cast by Britain, China and France.

Countless other ideas were never brought to a vote because of an expected veto.

All that has engendered laments that the council's sometime paralysis undermines its legitimacy and public faith in the U.N. And Russia's invasion of Ukraine has only brought those grievances more into focus.

"We are dealing with a state that is turning the veto in the United Nations Security Council into the right to die," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told the council via video April 5. Saying the group "simply cannot work effectively," he called on members to remove Russia, reform or "dissolve yourself and work for peace."

Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia, in turn, bristled that his country had been thwarted in its efforts to hold a separate council meeting on Ukraine the day before. Current council president Britain said it was just a scheduling disagreement.

With the council at an impasse, the no-veto General Assembly has voted to demand that Russia stop the war, to blame Russia for the humanitarian crisis that has ensued, to urge an immediate cease-fire, and to suspend Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council. Russia subsequently said it withdrew from the rights group before the vote.

Assembly resolutions can function as prominent statements of world opinion but aren't legally binding.

Liechtenstein initially planned to introduce its proposal in March 2020 but held off because of the coronavirus pandemic, Wenaweser said. He said the Ukraine stalemate has helped build support for the idea.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield cited what she called Russia's "shameful pattern of abusing its veto privilege" when she announced last week that Washington was backing Liechtenstein's proposal. She called it innovative and "a significant step toward the accountability, transparency and responsibility" of countries with veto power.

The United States last used it to kill an August 2020 proposal about prosecuting and rehabilitating people involved in terrorism. Washington objected that the measure didn't call for repatriating foreign fighters for the Islamic State extremist group in Iraq and Syria.

The other veto-wielding countries haven't responded to requests for comment on Liechtenstein's proposal. Wenaweser said Russia had raised objections, centered on views about the General Assembly's proper role in international peace and security issues.

Wenaweser said his country is "pragmatic" about the future of veto power, but "we want to help initiate a change in mindset as to the way in which the veto is cast."

Kentucky abortion law blocked in win for clinics

By BRUCE SCHREINER Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked a state law that effectively eliminated abortions in Kentucky after the state's two remaining clinics said they couldn't meet its requirements.

The decision by U.S. District Judge Rebecca Grady Jennings was a victory for abortion rights advocates and a setback for the Republican-led legislature, which passed the law in March and then overrode Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear's veto of the measure last week. Both of the clinics indicated Thursday that they

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would immediately resume abortion services.

The new law bans abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy and requires women to be examined by a doctor before receiving abortion pills. It also contains new restrictions and reporting requirements that the Kentucky clinics said they couldn't immediately comply with. Noncompliance can result in stiff fines, felony penalties and revocation of physician and facility licenses.

Jennings' order did not delve into the larger issue of the new law's constitutionality. Instead, it focused on the clinics' claims that they're unable to immediately comply with the measure because the state hasn't yet set up clear guidelines. The judge said her order does not prevent the state from crafting regulations.

Jennings, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump, said she decided to block the measure because she lacked information "to specifically determine which individual provisions and subsections are capable of compliance."

Abortion rights activists said they were relieved by the decision but noted more rounds are ahead in the legal fight.

"This is a win, but it is only the first step," said Rebecca Gibron, the CEO for Planned Parenthood in Kentucky, where its clinic is immediately resuming abortion services. "We're prepared to fight for our patients' right to basic health in court and to continue doing everything in our power to ensure abortion access is permanently secured in Kentucky."

Kentucky's Republican attorney general, Daniel Cameron, signaled that he'll be ready to defend the law as the case proceeds.

"We are disappointed that the court chose to temporarily halt enforcement of the entire law," he said in a statement. "This law is constitutional and we look forward to continuing to defend it."

Supporters say the goal of Kentucky's new law is to protect women's health and strengthen oversight. Opponents say the objective all along was to stop abortions in the state completely.

Abortions had been suspended at the two Louisville clinics since the law took effect last week. During that time, women in Kentucky were forced to either travel out of state to end their pregnancies or wait for the judge's decision. Many of the women affected were young and poor, advocates said.

Attorneys for the two clinics — Planned Parenthood and EMW Women's Surgical Center — filed separate lawsuits challenging the law and seeking an order halting its enforcement. Jennings issued the order in the Planned Parenthood suit.

"Abortion remains legal and is once again available in Kentucky," said Heather Gatnarek, a staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky, which filed the suit on behalf of EMW. "We will always fight to keep it that way here and across the country."

Kentucky is among several GOP-led states that have passed restrictive abortion laws in anticipation of a U.S. Supreme Court decision that could reverse the landmark Roe v. Wade decision that established a right to abortion nationwide nearly 50 years ago.

Pending before the high court is a challenge to a law passed in a fifth state, Mississippi, that bans abortion after 15 weeks. The court has indicated that it will allow Mississippi's ban to stand and conservative justices have suggested they support overruling Roe.

The Mississippi case loomed even as abortion rights supporters cheered their victory Thursday in Kentucky.

"Unfortunately, the ability to receive an abortion will continue to hang by a thread throughout the United States," Gatnarek said. "In a few weeks, the Supreme Court will decide whether to weaken or overturn Roe v. Wade."

No matter how the current conservative-dominated Supreme Court handles pending high-profile abortion cases — perhaps weakening Roe, perhaps gutting it completely — there will be no monolithic, nationwide change. Fractious state-by-state battles over abortion access will continue.

UK patient had COVID-19 for 505 days straight, study shows

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

A U.K. patient with a severely weakened immune system had COVID-19 for almost a year and a half,

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scientists reported, underscoring the importance of protecting vulnerable people from the coronavirus. There's no way to know for sure whether it was the longest-lasting COVID-19 infection because not everyone gets tested, especially on a regular basis like this case.

But at 505 days, "it certainly seems to be the longest reported infection," said Dr. Luke Blagdon Snell, an infectious disease expert at the Guy's & St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust.

Snell's team plans to present several "persistent" COVID-19 cases at an infectious diseases meeting in Portugal this weekend.

Their study investigated which mutations arise — and whether variants evolve — in people with super long infections. It involved nine patients who tested positive for the virus for at least eight weeks. All had weakened immune systems from organ transplants, HIV, cancer or treatment for other illnesses. None were identified for privacy reasons.

Repeated tests showed their infections lingered for an average of 73 days. Two had the virus for more than a year. Previously, researchers said, the longest-known case that was confirmed with a PCR test lasted 335 days.

Persistent COVID-19 is rare and different from long COVID.

"In long COVID, it's generally assumed the virus has been cleared from your body but the symptoms persist," Snell said. "With persistent infection, it represents ongoing, active replication of the virus."

Each time researchers tested patients, they analyzed the genetic code of the virus to make sure it was the same strain and that people didn't get COVID-19 more than once. Still, genetic sequencing showed that the virus changed over time, mutating as it adapted.

The mutations were similar to the ones that later showed up in widespread variants, Snell said, although none of the patients spawned new mutants that became variants of concern. There's also no evidence they spread the virus to others.

The person with the longest known infection tested positive in early 2020, was treated with the antiviral drug remdesivir and died sometime in 2021. Researchers declined to name the cause of death and said the person had several other illnesses.

Five patients survived. Two cleared the infection without treatment, two cleared it after treatment and one still has COVID-19. At the last follow-up earlier this year, that patient's infection had lasted 412 days.

Researchers hope more treatments will be developed to help people with persistent infections beat the virus.

"We do need to be mindful that there are some people who are more susceptible to these problems like persistent infection and severe disease," Snell said.

Although persistent infections are rare, experts said there are many people with compromised immune systems who remain at risk of severe COVID-19 and who are trying to stay safe after governments lifted restrictions and masks started coming off. And it's not always easy to know who they are, said Dr. Wesley Long, a pathologist at Houston Methodist in Texas, who was not part of the research.

"Masking in crowds is a considerate thing to do and a way we can protect others," he said.

EXPLAINER: Why the battle for Mariupol's steel mill matters

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian President Vladimir Putin is claiming control over Ukraine's port city of Mariupol even as its defenders are still holding out at a giant seaside steel mill.

His statement reflected the importance of the city on the Sea of Azov and appeared to be an attempt to declare victory without storming the last pocket of Ukrainian resistance there: the massive Azovstal plant.

WHY IS MARIUPOL IMPORTANT?

Mariupol, which is part of the industrial region in eastern Ukraine known as the Donbas, has been a key Russian objective since the Feb. 24 invasion began. Capturing the city would allow the establishment of a land corridor from Russia's border to Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula that Moscow annexed in 2014. It also would deprive Ukraine of a major port and prized industrial assets.

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The seven-week siege has tied up significant numbers of Russian forces, which are badly needed for an offensive elsewhere in the Donbas. The region is where Moscow-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian government forces since 2014, after the Crimea annexation.

HOW HAS THE RUSSIAN SIEGE GONE?

Since it began March 1, the Russian military has pummeled Mariupol relentlessly with artillery barrages and air raids, flattening most of the once-bustling city. The indiscriminate bombardment has hit homes, hospitals and other public buildings, killing thousands. That includes about 300 people killed in an airstrike on the Mariupol Drama Theater that was being used as a shelter, with officials inscribing the Russian word for "CHILDREN" in huge white letters on the pavement outside.

Mayor Vadym Boychenko told The Associated Press that at least 21,000 people were killed in Mariupol, with bodies "carpeted through the streets." He said Russia deployed mobile cremation equipment to methodically dispose of the remains in order to destroy evidence of the massacre and prevent international organizations from documenting "the horror the Russian army is responsible for." He alleged bodies also were dumped into mass graves outside the city.

He estimated that 120,000 people remain in Mariupol out of a prewar population of about 450,000.

HOW HAS UKRAINE RESPONDED?

Ukraine sent some of its best troops to defend Mariupol. They included the 36th Marine Brigade, Interior Ministry troops, border guards and the national guard's Azov Regiment. The regiment is a seasoned volunteer force that is widely considered one of Ukraine's most capable units and has been singled out by Russia as a particular villain because of its far-right ideology.

Moscow has deployed fighters from Chechnya, known for their ferocity, to wage street battles in Mariupol. Chechnya's Moscow-backed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, has repeatedly boasted on social media about defeating Ukrainians in Mariupol, but the fight has continued.

After weeks of house-to-house battles in which Russia has incurred massive losses, including several senior officers, Mariupol's defenders holed up at the last remaining pocket of resistance — the mammoth Azovstal plant that employed 10,000 workers before the war.

WHY HAS THE BATTLE FOR THE STEEL MILL TAKEN SO LONG?

A few thousand Ukrainian troops, by Moscow's estimate, remained in the plant, which covers an area of nearly 11 square kilometers (over 4.2 square miles). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said about 1,000 civilians were also trapped in the plant.

Azovstal has a 24-kilometer (15-mile) labyrinth of underground tunnels and passages, which allowed its defenders to maneuver freely to repel the Russian attacks.

Before the war, Ukrainian authorities prepared for the Russian offensive by building up stockpiles of food and water at Azovstal.

"The plant covers a huge area, and the Ukrainians can move through underground tunnels to quickly change location," said Ukrainian military expert Oleh Zhdanov.

"Azovstal is very hard to storm, and the Russians risk losing many troops, resources and, most importantly, time there," Zhdanov said. "It's a city within a city, and fighting there could take months."

He added that "as long as Mariupol holds, the Russians can't redeploy 10-12 of their elite units to other areas in eastern Ukraine."

The city "keeps distracting the Russian army forces and thwarting the Kremlin plans for an offensive in the Donbas."

HOW IS PUTIN PORTRAYING THE BATTLE FOR MARIUPOL?

Putin met Thursday with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who said the entire city except Azovstal is now under Russian control. It would take three to four days to flush the Ukrainian troops out of the steel mill, he added.

In a tightly choreographed televised meeting, Putin congratulated the military, saying that "putting such an important center in the south as Mariupol under control is a success."

At the same time, he ordered Shoigu not to send troops into Azovstal to finish off the resistance, so as

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to avoid losses. Instead, the plant would be sealed tightly "so that not even a fly comes through."

The remarks appeared to reflect Putin's attempt to claim victory without a bloody, all-out assault of the plant in hopes that its defenders will surrender after running out of food and ammunition. Putin said nothing about halting a bombardment of the plant, which will probably continue.

HOW IS UKRAINE RESPONDING?

Oleksiy Arestovich, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, mocked Putin's claim of victory, saying it reflects the fact the Russian military "cannot physically capture Azovstal."

Retired British Rear Adm. Chris Parry described Putin's remarks as a sign of a shift in approach, observing that "the Russian agenda now is not to capture these really difficult places where the Ukrainians can hold out in the urban centers, but to try and capture territory and also to encircle the Ukrainian forces and declare a huge victory."

Parry likened the Ukrainian resistance in Mariupol to the battle of Stalingrad, in which the Red Army routed the Nazis blockading the city in a key turning point in World War II.

"I think there's a great totemic value in the Ukrainians holding on to Mariupol," Parry said. "If the Ukrainians can hang on to it ... elevated to the level of Stalingrad, then I think it's going to be a major lever for them both in the propaganda war, but also on the ground campaign as well."

Commanders of Ukrainian units at the plant made a series of desperate video appeals in recent days, saying they are clinging by a thread and begging for help.

Maj. Serhiy Volynskyy of the 36th Marine Brigade said in a video Wednesday that "we are probably facing our last days, if not hours," adding that "the enemy outnumbers us 10-1."

"We appeal and plead to all world leaders to help us," he said, asking world leaders to help safely evacuate the plant's defenders and civilians holed up there.

Zelenskyy said about 1,000 civilians could be taking shelter in the plant and that "we are open to different formats of exchange of our people for Russian people, Russian military that they have left behind."

But he added that Russia has stonewalled Ukraine's attempts for a negotiated exit.

Callery pears: An invader 'worse than murder hornets!'

By JANET McCONNAUGHEY Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Stinky but handsome and widely popular landscape trees have spawned aggressive invaders, creating thickets that overwhelm native plants and sport nasty four-inch spikes.

Bradford pears and 24 other ornamental trees were developed from Callery pears — a species brought to America a century ago to save ravaged pear orchards. Now, their invasive descendants have been reported in more than 30 states.

"Worse than murder hornets!" was the tongue-in-cheek title of a U.S. Department of Agriculture webinar in 2020 about Callery pears including the two dozen thornless ornamental varieties sold since the 1960s.

"They're a real menace," said Jerrod Carlisle, who discovered that four trees in his yard and one at a neighbor's had spawned thousands on 50 acres (20 hectares) he was turning from cropland to woods in Otwell, a community of about 400 in southern Indiana.

Indiana is among 12 midwestern and western states that have reported invasions, though most are in the South and Northeast.

Until 2015, Carlisle rented his field to a farmer. Then he enrolled it in a USDA crop reduction program that paid for planting 29,000 trees as wildlife habitat.

Carlisle realized the spiky flowering pears were a problem in 2019. When he cut or mowed them, new sprouts popped up. Trees sprayed with herbicide regrew leaves. Cutting off bark in a circle around the trunk kills most trees. Not these.

He and his 17-year-old son have cut down an estimated 1,400 Callery pears, applying herbicide to the stumps. But he figures there are about 1,000 more to go.

Without regular maintenance, fields near seed-producing trees can be covered with sprouts within a couple of years, said James "J.T." Vogt, a scientist at the U.S. Forest Service's Southern Research Station

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in Athens, Georgia.

"If you mow it, it sprouts and you get a thicket," he said. "If you burn it, it sprouts, too."

Seedlings only a few months old bear spurs that can punch through tractor tires, said David R. Coyle, an assistant professor in Clemson University's Department of Forestry and Environmental Conservation.

The stench wafting from the tree's billows of white blossoms has been compared to perfume gone wrong, rotting fish, chlorine, and a cheese sandwich left in a car for a week. The trunks branch off in deep Vs, so after 15 to 20 years they tend to break in storms.

But Frank N. Meyer, an agricultural explorer who brought 2,500 species of plants including his namesake Meyer lemon to the USDA in the early 1900s, called the Callery pear wonderful, noting that it survived drought and poor soil.

At the time, a fungus called fire blight was devastating U.S. pear orchards, University of Cincinnati researchers Theresa M. Culley and Nicole A. Hardiman wrote in a 2007 BioScience article about the plant's U.S. history.

And, just as researchers had hoped, grafting edible pears onto Callery roots produced blight-resistant fruit trees.

In 1952, USDA workers noticed a spikeless mutant growing among Callery pears started from seed. By grafting its cuttings onto roots of other Callery pears, they cloned an ornamental line they named Bradford pears. That variety was commercially available by 1962, Culley and Hardiman wrote.

Other seedlings grew into 24 more ornamental varieties. All are so pretty, hardy and insect-resistant that they were planted nationwide.

Bradford and other Callery ornamentals are the third most common trees of 132 species planted along New York City streets -- more than 58,000 out of 650,000 as of 2015, the most recent count, said city parks department spokesman Dan Kastanis.

But the city is no longer planting them, Kastanis said. Neither is Newport News, Virginia, which got rid of its Bradford pears in 2005. South Carolina, Ohio and cities including South Bend, Indiana, have banned or are banning all commercial varieties of Callery pears.

Some states, including Missouri and Alabama, are asking homeowners and landowners to stop planting them or to cut existing ones down and apply herbicide to the stumps. Several, such as North Carolina, offer free native trees to landowners who provide photos proving they have cut down Callery pears on their property.

For the USDA, which ordered Meyer to send Callery pear seeds from China, the nasty spurs and marbled, inedible fruit were irrelevant. What mattered was that the plant was resistant to fire blight.

Genetically identical pears don't produce seed, so botanists figured the cloned varieties were safe for ornamental use.

In 1971, the USDA even put out a brochure about their care, touting them as trees that bloom several times from spring through fall, thrive in many climates and soils, and don't attract plant pests.

Now, the USDA describes Callery pears as near ubiquitous and has been studying the best way to kill them.

Their adaptability is one reason they're so invasive. And their bug-resistant waxy leaves mean insect-eating birds don't come near them.

"They're kind of a food desert for a bird," said Coyle, who leads Clemson's annual "Bradford pear bounty," providing native saplings to landowners who have felled their Callery ornamentals.

It turned out that, although trees of the same variety cannot produce seeds with each other, two different varieties within a pollinator's range can produce fruit that squishes on sidewalks and feeds starlings and robins, which spread the seeds widely.

In addition, the root stock can send up sprouts. If those aren't regularly pruned to prevent them from blossoming, they can cross-pollinate with the grafted-on tree to produce fertile seed, noted University of Cincinnati's Culley.

"A wild population can potentially originate from a single landscaping tree that someone plants in their yard," she said in an email.

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Carlisle, the Indiana landowner, thinks he's finally getting ahead of his invasion because native trees planted for reforestation, especially six oak species, are casting enough shade to inhibit Callery seedlings. "I truly believe I'm in eradication mode now," he said.

13 Nassar victims seeking \$130M from FBI over bungled probe

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Thirteen sexual assault victims of Larry Nassar are seeking \$10 million each from the FBI, claiming a bungled investigation by agents led to more abuse by the sports doctor, lawyers said Thursday.

It's an effort to make the government responsible for assaults that occurred after July 2015. The Justice Department's inspector general concluded that the FBI made fundamental errors when it became aware of allegations against Nassar that year.

Nassar was a Michigan State University sports doctor as well as a doctor at USA Gymnastics. He is serving decades in prison for assaulting female athletes, including medal-winning Olympic gymnasts.

"This was not a case involving fake 20 dollar bills or tax cheats," attorney Jamie White said. "These were allegations of a serial rapist who was known to the FBI as the Olympic U.S. doctor with unfettered access to young women."

Nassar, he added, continued a "reign of terror for 17 unnecessary months."

Indianapolis-based USA Gymnastics told local FBI agents in 2015 that three gymnasts said they were assaulted by Nassar. But the FBI did not open a formal investigation or inform federal or state authorities in Michigan, according to the inspector general's report.

Los Angeles FBI agents in 2016 began a sexual tourism investigation against Nassar and interviewed several victims but also didn't alert Michigan authorities, the inspector general said.

"No one should have been assaulted after the summer of 2015 because the FBI should have done its job," said Grace French, founder of a group called The Army of Survivors. "To know that the FBI could have helped to avoid this trauma disgusts me."

White is not suing the FBI yet. Under federal law, tort claims must be filed with a government agency, which then has six months to reply. A lawsuit could follow, depending on the FBI's response.

The FBI declined to comment Thursday but referred to Director Christopher Wray's remarks to Congress about how the matter was poorly handled.

"I'm sorry that so many different people let you down, over and over again," Wray told victims at a Senate hearing last year. "And I'm especially sorry that there were people at the FBI who had their own chance to stop this monster back in 2015 and failed. And that's inexcusable. It never should have happened."

White said more than 100 women were assaulted after July 2015, and he expects other lawyers will file claims against the FBI. Nassar wasn't arrested until November 2016 during an investigation by Michigan State University police.

The Michigan attorney general's office ultimately handled the assault charges against Nassar, while federal prosecutors in Grand Rapids, Michigan, filed a child pornography case.

White noted the 2018 massacre at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The FBI received a tip about five weeks before 17 people were killed at the school, but the tip was never forwarded to the FBI's South Florida office. The government agreed to pay \$127.5 million to families of those killed or injured.

Michigan State University, which was also accused of missing chances over many years to stop Nassar, agreed to pay \$500 million to more than 300 women and girls who were assaulted. USA Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee made a \$380 million settlement.

Powell reinforces expectations of sharp rate hike next month

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve must move faster than it has in the past to rein in high inflation, Chair Jerome Powell said Thursday, signaling that sharp interest rate increases are likely in the coming months, beginning at the Fed's next policy meeting in May.

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In a panel discussion held by the International Monetary Fund during its spring meetings, Powell also suggested that “there’s something in the idea of front-loading” aggressive rate hikes as the Fed grapples with inflation that has reached a four-decade high.

“So that does point in the direction of (a half-point rate increase) being on the table” for the Fed’s policy meeting May 3-4, Powell said. Typically in the past, the Fed has raised its benchmark short-term rate by more modest quarter-point increments. When the Fed raises its rate, it often leads to higher borrowing costs for people and businesses, including those seeking to borrow to buy homes, cars and other costly goods.

Wall Street investors already expect the Fed to raise its key rate by a half-point at its next three meetings, including those that will occur in June and July. Powell’s comments Thursday underscored those expectations. That would be the fastest tightening since 1994, when the Fed raised its rate by 1.25 percentage points over the course of three meetings.

Powell’s comments caused stocks to shed early gains and sell off in the afternoon, with the S&P 500 falling 1.5% by the close of trading.

Last month, the Fed implemented its first rate hike in more than three years, raising its target rate to a range of 0.25% to 0.5%. Expectations for sharp rate increases have risen quickly, reflecting the steady surge in inflation. As recently as December, Fed officials had penciled in just three quarter-point rate hikes this year.

Fed officials had hoped that inflation would mostly fall on its own as supply chain snarls and shortages of items like semiconductors unraveled, but those “expectations have disappointed,” Powell said.

By contrast, Christine Lagarde, president of European Central Bank, who took part in Thursday’s discussion, sounded a much more cautious note. Inflation in the 19 countries that use the euro reached 7.5% last month, compared with a year earlier, the highest level since records began in 1997.

Yet Europe’s economy faces a greater threat from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has sent food and particularly energy prices on the continent soaring and has weighed more on its economic growth than in the United States.

Lagarde said the ECB, at its next meeting in June, would decide when to end its program of bond purchases, which are intended to lower long-term interest rates. The Fed completed a similar effort in March. The ECB has set the July-September quarter as a target to stop buying bonds but hasn’t been more specific.

One reason for Lagarde’s caution, she said, is that about half of Europe’s inflation is driven by high energy prices. Typically, interest rate policies can do little about such supply shocks.

“Our economies are moving at a different pace,” Lagarde said, referring to Europe and the United States, where growth has been faster. “Our inflation is fed by different components.”

In his remarks, Powell said the Fed wants to “expeditiously” raise its benchmark rate to a neutral level, meaning a level that neither encourages nor restrains economic growth. Fed officials now consider a rate of between 2.25% and 2.5% to be roughly neutral. That’s 2 percentage points above its current level.

The Fed could raise rates beyond neutral, Powell said, to a level that would slow the economy — “if that turns out to be appropriate” to stem high inflation.

How quickly the Fed should lift rates to a point they start to restrain the economy could be a point of debate among policymakers in the coming months. On Wednesday, Charles Evans, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, said that rates “will probably end up” above neutral by next year.

But Mary Daly, president of the San Francisco Federal Reserve, suggested Wednesday that once the Fed lifted rates to a level that no longer encouraged or restricted growth, it should proceed cautiously.

“If we slam the brakes on the economy by adjusting rates too quickly or too much, we risk...potentially tipping the economy into recession,” Daly said.

CNN’s streaming service shutting down a month after launch

By TALI ARBEL and DAVID BAUDER Associated Press Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — CNN is shutting down its CNN+ streaming service less than a month after its launch,

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a spectacular flameout for a venture that had attracted stars like Chris Wallace and Alison Roman and was seen as a way to attract a new generation of news consumers.

It had started March 29, shortly before CNN was taken over by new corporate parents. The new leaders of Warner Bros. Discovery quickly let it be known they considered CNN+ an ill-conceived idea.

The subscription-based service will be shut down at the end of April. Executives said some CNN+ programming and employees will be absorbed into the television network and website but there will be layoffs. The head of CNN+, Andrew Morse, is leaving the company.

In a memo to employees on Thursday, incoming CNN Chief Executive Chris Licht said consumers wanted "simplicity and an all-in service" rather than stand-alone offerings. Discovery had previously suggested that it wanted to merge the new company's separate streaming services, which include Discovery+ and HBO Max, into a single app.

In a Thursday town hall, executives also said that the service's inability to show live breaking news was a crucial failing. Because of contracts with cable and satellite companies, CNN+ could not stream the CNN television network.

"It's a little bit like The New York Times subscription without The New York Times," said J.B. Perrette, head of Discovery's streaming services.

Perrette said Discovery had learned from trying to launch its own news service in Poland, and in seeing the experiences of other paid streaming services in the United States like Fox Nation, that CNN+ could not expect to get near one million subscribers. Unlike CNN+, which was charging customers \$5.99 a month, broadcast networks like ABC, CBS and NBC offer free news-streaming services.

"Those are the facts," Perrette said. "We've learned from painful history, financially costly history."

If the company is going to go in a different direction than CNN+, "we can't let it go on one second more than it needs to," he said.

There had been skepticism from outside CNN about whether the streaming service could succeed, particularly given the glut of streaming services already available. Even Netflix, the streaming pioneer, is feeling the competitive pressure.

"This is a service leveraging the CNN brand that is not delivering the type of content that the CNN brand is known for, the live impactful news content," said Parks Associates research director Paul Erickson. "It was already a bit of a tricky proposition to begin with" — even without the change in corporate ownership.

Under AT&T, there were \$100 million in development costs and some 500 employees assigned to building out CNN+. Perrette told the employees they would have "first dibs" on some 100 jobs currently open at CNN. Licht's memo said there would be at least six months of severance pay for departing staffers.

In the meeting, a CNN staff member wondered why AT&T, CNN's previous corporate owner, was allowed to develop and start the service with new management coming in that clearly had its reservations about it. But executives said they were not allowed, until the takeover was formally approved weeks ago, to be involved in meetings about the service.

The executives said accountability for the rapid failure lies squarely with previous management.

"Would we have preferred to have this discussion six months ago, nine months ago?" Perrette said. "Couldn't do it."

The CNN+ service's flagship was arguably Wallace's daily interview show, for which he left his previous job as "Fox News Sunday" host. Wallace did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

It also featured programming from food-media star Roman, former NPR host Audie Cornish, ex-NBC News host Kasie Hunt, Jemele Hill, Rex Chapman and current CNN personalities Anderson Cooper, Wolf Blitzer, Jake Tapper, Sara Sidner and Kate Bolduan. Some of the shows hadn't even started yet.

Warner Bros. Discovery is led by Discovery CEO David Zaslav, who has his own vision for CNN and its Warner siblings.

Licht said in his memo that the "incredibly difficult" decision to shutter CNN+ is the right one for the long-term success of CNN. It will allow leaders to refocus resources on the core products that "drive our singular focus: further enhancing CNN's journalism and its reputation as a global news leader."

On the television network, Licht is expected to increase CNN's emphasis on news coverage with less commentary.

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He told staff members that the decision was no reflection on the service that they had built. Licht acknowledged in the staff meeting that the experience with CNN+, at least initially, will have repercussions with personnel and those who might want to come there. "We have to own the erosion of trust and build it back," he said.

JD Vance paid \$70K by colleges he bashes as Senate candidate

By JULIE CARR SMYTH and COLLIN BINKLEY Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Before Republican JD Vance began targeting universities as the enemy of the conservative movement, the Donald Trump-endorsed U.S. Senate candidate in Ohio leveraged a network of higher education institutions across the country to promote his book — and he made money doing it.

In the two years after the 2016 release of "Hillbilly Elegy," his bestselling memoir of growing up in Appalachia, Vance visited at least 18 universities to give graduation speeches, lectures or political talks. For those visits, Vance was paid more than \$70,000, according to records provided to The Associated Press by the colleges.

At the time, Vance, a graduate of Ohio State University and Yale Law School, spoke glowingly of education.

During an appearance on CBS' "Sunday Morning" in 2017, he complimented universities on providing "high-quality talent" and "intellectual property necessary for folks to get their businesses off the ground." In his book, he recalled watching an episode of "The West Wing" about "education in America, which the majority of people rightfully believe is the key to opportunity."

But his rhetoric has hardened before the state's May 3 primary as he courts conservative voters in a crowded GOP field.

Although higher education was instrumental in his own success, Vance now accuses universities of pursuing "deceit and lies." The shift underscores the extent to which Republicans are increasingly embracing anti-elite populism as they try to appeal to blue-collar voters who view institutions and intellectualism with skepticism.

As he seeks the Senate seat, it's another example of Vance's transformation, from once entertaining the idea of supporting Hillary Clinton to now portraying himself as a loyal Trump ally. That evolution has worried some Ohio Republicans, who urged Trump not to endorse Vance out of fear that the candidate would not connect with the party's core supporters. His past anti-Trump statements have even prompted one conservative group, Ohio Value Voters, to urge a boycott of Trump's planned rally for Vance and others in Ohio on Saturday.

In November, shortly after entering the race, Vance laid out his line of attack during a 30-minute speech, "The Universities are the Enemy," at the National Conservatism Conference.

"I think if any of us want to do the things that we want to do for our country and for the people who live in it, we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country," he said. He ended his remarks with a quote by former President Richard Nixon: "The professors are the enemy."

As he promoted his book, though, Vance was collecting checks from universities.

Many of them were in the Midwest and in conservative states, but some were Ivy League schools in liberal states, including Yale and Columbia. Vance's contract required "first-class private ground transportation" and "first-class hotel accommodations and meals."

Taylor Van Kirk, his campaign spokesperson, said the visits gave Vance "the opportunity to see first-hand how college campuses often punish free speech and diversity of thought in favor of a culture that is hostile towards American ideals."

"Thinking it's hypocritical to speak on college campuses just because college professors are biased leftists is absurd," she said. "Engaging young people in these important discussions is exactly what we should be doing. They'll determine the direction of this country and they deserve better."

Vance's largest payment was for a 2017 visit to Millikin University, a small private college in Decatur, Illinois. Vance's contract required a \$20,000 fee and \$1,000 in airfare, records show. He was booked for an hourlong event that included a speech and brief discussion as part of a week of events exploring race

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and poverty.

Records show that Vance flew in from Columbus a few hours before the event, was treated to dinner with students and faculty, gave his remarks and then flew back to Ohio. A Millikin spokesperson said the college paid \$10,000, while other local groups covered the remainder.

Three days later, Vance was hosted by the University of Arkansas. His contract included a \$13,000 fee and \$850 in travel costs. During that visit, he gave a lecture, took questions and stayed for dinner and a reception, records show.

Two other schools — Bowling Green State University and West Virginia University — paid Vance a speaker fee of \$15,500 each, the records showed.

Not all of his campus visits included speaker fees. For a 2017 political discussion at Purdue University, he received \$800 for travel but no other fee. Ohio State, Vance's undergraduate alma mater, hosted him in 2016 but says it has no record of a contract or payment. The school also brought him on as a scholar in residence in 2017. That position was unpaid.

In endorsing him, Trump praised Vance's educational background, noting he is a Marine veteran of the Iraq War, "a graduate of The Ohio State University, and earned a Law Degree from Yale — a great student."

Two colleges refused to provide details about any payment to Vance.

Monmouth College in Illinois, which hosted him in 2016, said it does not release financial details about campus speakers. Ohio's Marietta College hosted him a year later, but spokesperson Tom Perry declined to provide details to the AP, saying, "We are not going to share any of the contractual information."

Some colleges did not respond to records requests, including Pepperdine University.

Most of Vance's college travels were for lectures, but he was honored as the keynote graduation speaker at Centre College in Kentucky and Zane State College in Ohio, both in 2017.

A foundation for Zane State College issued Vance a \$7,000 check as an honorarium for the speech, but he never cashed it, college officials said.

Cleaner Earth: Healing ozone hole, less smog, more eagles

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

With climate change, plastic pollution and a potential sixth mass extinction, humanity has made some incredible messes in the world.

But when people, political factions and nations have pulled together, they have also cleaned up some of those human-caused environmental problems, including healing the ozone hole, clearing perpetually smoggy air and saving many species from the brink of extinction.

"We can be good at cleaning up our messes, it's whether or not we choose to be and what we prioritize," said Michigan State University environmental sustainability researcher Sheril Kirshenbaum.

For Earth Day, The Associated Press asked more than 25 environmental scientists and policy experts, including two former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency chiefs and the current director of the United Nations Environment Programme, to share their top stories about environmental problems that the world fixed.

"There are some amazing success stories," said Stanford University environmental scientist Rob Jackson. "It's easy for us to get tunnel vision with everything going wrong, and there is a lot that needs to change quickly. But it's wonderful to remind ourselves that other people in the past have succeeded and that society has succeeded too, both nationally here in the U.S. and also internationally."

Here are the four successes mentioned most often and a key aspect that so many ecological wins have in common.

HEALING THE OZONE HOLE

Fixing ozone depletion was by far the top choice of scientists, officials and environmental policy experts.

"It was a moment where countries that usually compete with each other grasped the collective threat and decided to implement a solution," former EPA chief Carol Browner said in an email.

Scientists in the 1970s had discovered that a certain class of chemicals, often used in aerosol sprays and

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refrigeration, was eating away the protective ozone layer in Earth's atmosphere that shields the planet from harmful ultraviolet radiation linked to skin cancer.

The ozone layer was thinning everywhere, creating a hole over Antarctica, which not only threatened increased skin cancer cases, but cataracts and widespread changes to ecosystems around the globe, said University of North Carolina atmospheric scientist Jason West.

"It's the first time we created a planet-killing problem and then we turned around and solved it," Stanford's Jackson said.

In 1987, the countries of the world signed the Montreal Protocol, a first of its kind treaty that banned the ozone-munching chemicals. At this point every nation in the world has adopted the treaty, 99% of the ozone-depleting chemicals have been phased out, "saving 2 million people every year from skin cancer," United Nations Environment Programme Director Inger Andersen said in an email.

The ozone hole over Antarctica worsened for a couple decades, but over the last several years it has slowly started to heal in fits and spurts. The United Nations Environment Programme projects that the ozone "will heal completely by the 2030s."

While activists point to the Montreal Protocol as a hope and example for the fight against climate change, it's not quite the same. In the case of the banned ozone-sapping chemicals the corporations that manufactured them also made their replacements. But with climate change "it's more of an existential threat to the oil and gas companies," Jackson said.

CLEANER AIR AND WATER

In the United States and much of the industrialized world, the air is much cleaner and clearer than it was 50 or 60 years ago when major cities like Los Angeles were choked with smog and even more dangerous microscopic particles in the air. And lakes and rivers were dumping grounds, especially around Ohio, Michigan and Canada.

"We would go to Lake Erie when I was young... and play on the beach and there would be dead fish everywhere. We would have dead fish fights," Stanford's Jackson said.

In the United States the Clean Air Act of 1970 and its follow up in 1990 with EPA regulations "effectively cleaned our air," UNC's West said. A similar law passed in the 1972 for water.

"This has led to fewer health conditions such as cancer and asthma, for example, and saved millions of lives and trillions of dollars in health care costs," Syracuse University environmental sciences professor Sam Tuttle said. "That means healthier people, more productive fisheries and a healthier and more attractive environment for all of us to enjoy."

Tight restrictions on tiny particles alone decreased annual U.S. air pollution deaths "from about 95,000 in 1990 to 48,000 in 2019," West said.

In Los Angeles in 1955, smog levels peaked at 680 parts per billion. In the last couple years they hit 185 parts per billion but are usually much smaller.

It's not just air outside. Former EPA chief William K. Reilly and University of Maryland environmental health scientist Sacoby Wilson said restricting indoor smoking had huge public health effects.

On the water, Brown University environmental scientist J. Timmons Roberts also grew up on Lake Erie and stopped going to the water because of the dead fish: "Regulations and cooperation between the U.S. and Canada really made the difference and now there's genuine eco-tourism there and thousands of walleye and other fishers come out every summer."

SOLAR AND WIND POWER

The steep fall in price of solar and wind power, which do not produce heat-trapping gases, has surprised experts and given them hope that the world can wean itself from coal, oil and natural gas that are causing global warming.

From 2010 to 2020, the price of residential solar power dropped 64% and the price of large-scale utility solar power generation dropped 82%, according to the National Renewable Energy Lab.

Solar "is becoming a dominant energy technology and it's becoming cheaper," Jackson said. "It is cheaper than almost all other forms of electricity generation."

Few people thought solar and wind prices would drop so quickly just ten years ago, Jackson, Kirshen-

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baum and others said.

Experts credit renewable power subsidies to pull the world out of the 2008 Great Recession, especially in Germany and the United States.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

The bald eagle, American alligator, peregrine falcon, Canada geese and humpback whales are each environmental success stories.

All were once on the brink of extinction, put on the endangered species list for protection. Now they are all of the protected list and in some cases they are so abundant that people consider them a nuisance or they cause problems for other species.

"Conservation efforts are clawing some endangered species back from the brink," Duke University ecologist Stuart Pimm said. "We are learning to do this thing called conservation."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has taken 96 species off the endangered species list, 65 of them because they have recovered.

Experts credit regulations and laws across the world with restricting the killing and trading of endangered species and preventing destruction of crucial habitat for those critters and plants.

Another key change was the ban on the pesticide DDT, which reverberated through the food chain, causing thinning eggs for eagles, peregrine falcons and other birds of prey, Cornell University environmental biology professor Robert Howarth said.

COOPERATION

In the United States, many of these key successes were spurred by laws and actions taken by Republican administrations of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

"All these major milestones, including the creation of the EPA, were bipartisan, but unfortunately today we can't seem to get that stuff done," said Christie Todd Whitman, who was an EPA chief during a Republican presidency. "Sadly, Republicans don't seem to care about these issues anymore — everything is so hyper partisan now that (the) GOP seem to be Neanderthals on the environment."

Often when a Republican is president, the rest of the country moves left and becomes more friendly to environmental action, whereas they move right and become more environmentally complacent during Democratic administrations, said Kirshenbaum, a former congressional staffer and director of Science Debate. What's important is cooperation and buy-in to big issues from all sides, experts said.

The treaty to heal the ozone hole is the example for what working together can accomplish, Syracuse's Tuttle said: "This agreement proved that the international community could come together to create an enforceable framework to tackle an environmental problem of global significance."

Rates for measles, other vaccinations dip for kindergartners

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

A smaller portion of U.S. children got routine vaccinations required for kindergarten during the pandemic, government researchers said Thursday, raising concerns that measles and other preventable diseases could increase.

Rates were close to 94% for measles, whooping cough and chickenpox vaccinations for the 2020-21 school year. That was down 1% from a year earlier and means 35,000 U.S. children entered kindergarten without evidence that they were vaccinated for extremely contagious diseases, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a report.

In addition, almost 400,000 fewer children than expected entered kindergarten and their vaccination status is uncertain, the CDC said.

Pandemic-related disruptions likely contributed to the decline, the report said, as pediatricians canceled non-emergency appointments, parents skipped checkups for their children and vaccine requirements were eased for students doing remote learning.

"We haven't seen outbreaks and that's probably representative of the fact that families were staying home during the pandemic," said Dr. Georgina Peacock, the CDC's director of immunization services. But

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authorities worry that could change if kids remain behind on their shots as more people return to normal routines.

Data for the current school year, due in November, should indicate whether the lag persisted, said the CDC's Shannon Stokley.

The data come from schools' reports on vaccination rates in 47 states plus Washington, D.C. The CDC said staffing shortages and other pandemic disruptions could have led to incomplete or absent school reports, a limitation in assessing the true vaccination rates.

In 16 states, rates for kids entering kindergarten were at least 95% for measles shots and for the combination diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough shot. The rates were below 90% for the combined whooping cough shot in eight states plus Washington, D.C., and in seven states plus Washington, D.C., for measles shots.

For chickenpox vaccinations, 17 states had rates of at least 95% and nine plus Washington, D.C., had rates below 90%.

Fewest Americans collecting jobless aid since 1970

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Applications for unemployment benefits inched down last week as the total number of Americans collecting aid fell to its lowest level in more than 50 years.

Jobless claims fell by 2,000 to 184,000 last week, the Labor Department said Thursday. The four-week average of claims, which levels out week-to-week volatility, rose by 4,500 to 177,250.

About 1.42 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment benefits in the week of April 9, the fewest since February 21, 1970.

Two years after the coronavirus pandemic plunged the economy into a brief but devastating recession, American workers are enjoying extraordinary job security. Weekly applications for unemployment aid, which broadly track with layoffs, have remained consistently below the pre-pandemic level of 225,000.

Last year, employers added a record 6.7 million jobs, and they've added an average of 560,000 more each month so far in 2022. The unemployment rate, which soared to 14.7% in April 2020 in the depths of the COVID-19 recession, is now just 3.6%, barely above the lowest point in 50 years. And there is a record proportion of 1.7 job openings for every unemployed American.

The U.S. job market and overall economy has shown remarkable resiliency despite ongoing supply chain breakdowns, the economic consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine and the highest consumer inflation in 40 years.

Tensions over race, religion in France's presidential race

By ARNO PEDRAM Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — From attacks on "wokeism" to crackdowns on mosques, France's presidential campaign has been especially challenging for voters of immigrant heritage and religious minorities, as discourse painting them as "the other" has gained ground across a swath of French society.

French voters head to polls on Sunday in a runoff vote between centrist incumbent Emmanuel Macron and nationalist rival Marine Le Pen, wrapping up a campaign that experts have seen as unusually dominated by discriminatory discourse and proposals targeting immigration and Islam.

With Le Pen proposing to ban Muslim headscarves in public, women like 19-year-old student Naila Ouazarf are in a bind.

"I want a president who accepts me as a person," said Ouazarf, clad in a beige robe and matching head covering. She said she would defy the promised law should Le Pen become president and pay a fine, if necessary.

Macron attacked Le Pen on the headscarf issue during their presidential debate Wednesday, warning it could stoke "civil war."

In the first-round vote, far-right candidates Le Pen and Eric Zemmour together collected nearly a third

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of votes. An elementary school teacher in the ethnically diverse Paris suburb of Saint-Denis on Thursday described pupils who are "scared to death" because of the campaign.

Le Pen's National Rally party, formerly called the National Front, has a history of ties with neo-Nazis, Holocaust deniers and militias that opposed Algeria's war for independence from colonial France. Le Pen has distanced herself from that past and softened her public image.

But a top priority of her election program is to prioritize French citizens over immigrants for welfare benefits, a move that critics see as institutionalizing discrimination. Le Pen also wants to ban Muslim women from wearing headscarves in public, to toughen asylum rules and to sharply curtail immigration.

She has gained ground among voters since 2017, when she lost badly to Macron. This time around, Le Pen has put a greater emphasis on policies to help the working poor.

Saint-Denis student Yanis Benahmed, 20, said he was unconvinced by the candidate's attempt to broaden her appeal.

"We live in this city, and we know exactly how things are, the kind of people you have here," he said. Le Pen "wants to 'clean' everything. With everything she's said and her family history, we know exactly what her plan is. And Zemmour didn't make it any better."

The rabble-rousing Zemmour, who placed fourth in the first-round vote, boosted Le Pen's popularity by making her seem softer. He has multiple convictions for inciting racial or religious hatred in France.

Zemmour also has promoted the baseless "great replacement" conspiracy theory, used as justification by the white supremacists who committed massacres in New Zealand's Christchurch and in El Paso, Texas, and attacked a California synagogue.

"Eric Zemmour's presence placed the issue (of Islam and immigration) on the side of aggressive and violent stigmatization," Cecile Alduy, a Stanford semiologist who has studied Zemmour's language, told The Associated Press. "Meanwhile, there is a decline in humanist values: words such as equality, human rights, fight against discrimination, or gender are qualified as politically correct or 'wokeism' by a large swath of media, public intellectuals, and ministers of the current government."

For some experts and anti-racist groups in France, Macron, too, is at fault for the current climate. His administration has adopted legislation and language that echoes some far-right mottos in hopes of eating into Le Pen's support.

Racial profiling and police brutality targeting people of color, which activists in France have long decried, have also remained a concern. During Macron's presidency, France saw repeated protests against police violence after George Floyd, a Black American, died at the hands of police in the U.S.

Also under Macron's watch, France passed a law against terrorism that enshrined in common law a state of emergency imposed after the deadly 2015 attacks on the Bataclan theater, Paris cafes and Charlie Hebdo newspaper.

The law extended the government's right to search people, conduct surveillance, control movement and shut down some schools and religious sites in the name of fighting extremism.

Human rights watchdogs warned the law was discriminatory. "In some cases, Muslims may have been targeted because of their religious practice, considered to be 'radical,' by authorities, without substantiating why they constituted a threat for public order or security," Amnesty International said.

In 2021, the government passed another law targeting what Macron labeled "separatism" by Muslim radicals. The measure extended the state's oversight of associations and religious sites. The government's own watchdog argued that the law's scope was too broad.

Abdourahmane Ridouane has seen this firsthand. In February, two police officers handed him a notice of closure for the mosque he manages in the southwestern town of Pessac in Bordeaux wine country.

Authorities argued the mosque's criticism of "state Islamophobia" allegedly encouraged and justified Muslim rebellion and terrorism. The authorities also criticized anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian posts on the mosque's social media page.

Ridouane challenged the action and won on appeal. The appeals court found the closure was a "grave and manifest illegal infringement on religious liberty." The state took the case to France's highest court, which is expected to rule in the case soon.

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"I felt deeply saddened by a process I deemed unworthy of a democratic state," Ridouane told the AP. Islam is France's No. 2 religion, though there are no hard data on the races and religions of voters because of France's doctrine of colorblindness, which sees all citizens as universally French and encourages assimilation. Critics say the principle allows authorities to ignore deep-seated discrimination, both on the French mainland and in overseas French territories where most voters aren't white.

France has also seen the rise of criticism of "Islamism" and "wokeism," and Macron's government has commissioned a study into its presence in French universities. Yet race or colonial studies research departments don't exist in French universities, because they are seen as contrary to French universalism.

"The election comes in this climate, the increasing right-wing and conservative discourse, a retreat into a white, universalist, colorblind discourse blind to all discriminations and systemic racism in French society," said Nacira Guénif, an anthropology and sociology professor at Paris VIII University who focuses on race and gender.

On the left, meanwhile, "denial prevails," Guénif said, because many left-wing French voters are "profoundly uncomfortable with the question of race because they think that talking about race makes you racist."

The criticism of so-called "wokeism," championed in particular by Zemmour's campaign, is reminiscent of attacks on critical race theory in the U.S. Critical race theory is an academic framework that analyzes American history through the lens of racism. It centers on the idea that racism is systemic in U.S. institutions, which maintain the dominance of white people.

Despite concerns over some of the policies adopted in France under Macron, Ridouane, the Pessac mosque director, has no doubt for whom he will - and for whom he won't - cast his vote for president on Sunday.

"If Le Pen manages to take the levers of power, it will be the worst thing we will have ever seen," he said.

Nicolas Cage faces off with a new foe: himself

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — "Metropolis." Bruce Lee. Woody Woodpecker. A pet cobra. All of these things have been inspirations behind Nicolas Cage performances — sometimes private homages that the actor has used like blueprints to build some of his most exaggerated, erratic and affecting characters.

A conversation with Cage, likewise, pulls from a wide gamut of sources. In a recent and typically wide-ranging interview ahead of the release of "The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent," Cage touched on Picasso, Elia Kazan, Timothée Chalamet and Francis Bacon. A book of interviews with Bacon, "The Brutality of Fact," for instance, helped Cage define his attraction to intense, even grotesque performance — "that which is not obviously beautiful," he says — rather than naturalism.

"And I've kind of approached my public perception, as well as the way I design my film work, as an actor with that concept in mind -- to not be afraid to be ugly in behavior or even in appearance," says Cage. "To create a kind of taste that you have to discover."

With more than 100 films, the 58-year-old Cage — an Oscar-winner ("Leaving Las Vegas"), an action star ("Con Air") and the source of countless Internet memes for his most theatrical moments in films like "Face/Off" — has long been one of the most particular tastes in movies. Yet by being "an amateur surrealist," as he refers to himself, Cage has emerged — even after resorting to a string of VOD releases to pay off back taxes and get himself out of debt — as one of Hollywood's most widely loved stars. As "Unbearable Weight" director Tom Gormican says, "the sight of his face sort of makes people happy."

But for even the mercurial Cage, "The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent," which opens in theaters Friday, represents something different. In it, Cage plays himself. Or, rather, he plays a fun-house mirror version of himself that sometimes interacts with a younger version of himself. The movie is one big homage to Cage in which the actor somehow manages to both satirize perceptions of himself and act out those personas sincerely.

"The through line that's always been there for me: No matter what I designed, and it has been a design whether it's ridiculous — and it's often ridiculous — or whether it's sublime, it has to be informed with

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genuine emotional content," says Cage.

"No matter how broad or what some folk like to call over the top, it had genuine feeling."

But what to Cage constitutes over the top? This is the actor who, channeling Nosferatu in "Vampire's Kiss," gave one of the most bonkers recitals of the alphabet ever heard. He's fond of answering: "Well, show me where the top is and I'll tell you if I'm over it."

"I grew up in a house where my mom would do things that if you put it in a movie, you would say that was over the top," says Cage, whose mother, Joy Coppola, was a dancer and choreographer. His father, August Coppola, brother of Francis, was a professor of literature. "But what is the top? When you want to design something and you think about different styles — naturalism, impressionism, surrealism, abstract — then you start to look at it in a different way. It's not going to be for everybody and it's not necessarily going to sell tickets. But that's OK."

"Movies are a business and it was not without peril that I took this path, but it was important to me," he adds. "I stuck by it and, sure, I got plenty of rotten tomatoes thrown in my face. But I knew that was going to happen so it wasn't anything I didn't expect."

But what's unusual about Cage is that many of those experiments HAVE sold tickets. A lot of them. Cage's films account for nearly \$5 billion in worldwide box office. Still, it's been a while since he was front-and-center in a major studio film.

"The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent," which Lionsgate premiered at South by Southwest to warm reviews, allows him to play around with the notion of a comeback. In the film, he's desperate to score better parts than the birthday party he's been offered \$1 million to attend. The movie was an opportunity to wrestle — usually comically, sometimes physically — with his own exaggerated mythology.

"He would come up to me and say, (lowers voice) 'Tom, there's a guy who wears rings and leather jackets and he lives in Las Vegas and he would never say that line,'" recalls Gormican. "And I would go, 'Oh, you mean you.' He'd say, 'Yes.' And I'd be like, 'Well, it's not you. It's a character based on you.' And he'd go, 'But he has my name.' I was like, 'Come on, man, just say the line.'"

"We'd have discussions about who understood Nick Cage more," adds Gormican, laughing.

Gormican was initially turned down several times by Cage before a heartfelt letter finally convinced the actor to make the film. The issue was that Cage, even at his most outlandish, has never put quotation marks around his performances. He tends to invest fully in even the most unhinged characters. (Werner Herzog's "Bad Lieutenant: Port of New Orleans" comes to mind.) Cage initially feared Gormican's film would be self-mocking parody, and while it has those elements, Cage steers it in more unpredictable directions.

"Without mentioning names, there were some actors that came out of the gate that I thought were really sincere and profoundly emotional and honest in the beginning and then became too high on their own supply," Cage says. "They started winking at the audience and, in my opinion, it lost the emotional connection. It's a slippery slope when you make the decision that you want to be emotional and raw."

The actor does reach some gonzo heights in the film. After one scene, Gormican was honored to hear Cage say: "That was the Full Cage. You got the Full Cage." Another scene features the two Cages making out, after which the younger exclaims, "Nick Cage smooches good!"

Cage's own exotic tastes — he once had to return a dinosaur skull he purchased that had been stolen from Mongolia — have contributed to his legend. But he insists that he is normal in his life so that he can be extreme in his work — and that some of his self-promotion, like an infamously nutty appearance on "Wogan," was itself an act.

Cage last year married Riko Shibata, his fifth wife, and they are expecting a child. (Cage also has two grown sons; a sticking point in "Unbearable Weight" was that he not be shown as an absentee father — one fiction Cage wouldn't permit.) After an unusually introspective press tour for the film, Cage is looking forward to returning to the desert outside Las Vegas, where he lives. He could use a break from "Nick Cage."

But "The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent" wraps a chapter for the actor. He's finally out of the red after making some 30 video-on-demand films over the last decade to pay off the IRS and his creditors. He makes no apologies for those films. They made him a better actor, he says.

"I was practicing. I managed to keep my access to my imagination at my fingertips. It was a much better way for me to get this financial crisis off my back than doing something like a Super Bowl commercial — and believe me they offered," says Cage. "That was also a point for me, that I'm not a salesman, I'm an actor."

Cage can also once again feel some mainstream momentum behind him. His performance in last year's "Pig," as a grizzled truffle hunter with a past, earned some of his best reviews in years. It was a more naturalistic performance than Cage is generally known for — and a reminder of his limitless range. Having started professionally at 15, Cage reminds that he's been doing this a long time. To him, his path began, appropriately enough, with an audacious performance.

Cage's father, the actor says, had a massive influence on him, exposing him to books, early films and paintings. But he could cut his son down with words.

"And I just wasn't going to take it," says Cage. "I knew that he thought more of me than he let on. I tricked him once and I did something that I've never done ever again. I lied. I said, 'Dad, I wrote this song.' And I played him Joe Jackson's "Is She Really Going Out With Him?" And he believed me. He said, "Wow, Nicky, that's incredible." Then I got the positive affirmation that I needed to believe in myself. That was the one time a lie saved me."

UK lawmakers OK probe into PM Boris Johnson's alleged lies

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British lawmakers on Thursday ordered a parliamentary investigation into Prime Minister Boris Johnson for allegedly lying about whether he broke coronavirus restrictions by attending illegal gatherings during the pandemic.

The move, approved by cries of "aye" and without a formal vote in the House of Commons, means Parliament's Committee of Privileges will investigate whether Johnson knowingly misled Parliament — historically a resigning offense if proven.

The probe piles more pressure on a Conservative prime minister whose grip on power has been shaken by claims he flouted the pandemic rules he imposed on the country, then repeatedly failed to own up to it.

The move was instigated by the opposition Labour Party and passed after the government abandoned efforts to get Conservative lawmakers to block it. Johnson's Conservatives have a substantial majority in Parliament, but many lawmakers are uneasy with the prime minister's behavior.

Labour leader Keir Starmer said the move sought to uphold "the simple principle that honesty, integrity and telling the truth matter in our politics."

"It is a British principle ... guiding members from every political party in this House," Starmer said. "But it is a principle under attack."

Johnson was not present for the decision on a scandal that has rocked his leadership of the country and the Conservative Party. He was more than 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometers) away in India, insisting he wanted to "get on with the job" of leading the country.

Johnson was fined 50 pounds (\$66) by police last week for attending his own birthday party in his office in June 2020, when people in Britain were barred from meeting up with friends and family, or even visiting dying relatives. Johnson is the first British prime minister ever found to have broken the law while in office.

He has apologized, but denied he knowingly broke the rules. Johnson's shifting defense — initially saying there were no illegal gatherings, then claiming it "did not occur to me" that the birthday event was a party — has drawn derision and outrage from opponents, who have called for him to quit.

"The truth is simple and it's this — he lied to avoid getting caught, and once he got caught, he lied again," Scottish National Party lawmaker Ian Blackford said in the House of Commons.

Usually lawmakers are forbidden from accusing one another of lying, but Blackford was not reprimanded by the Speaker.

A growing number of Conservatives are uncomfortable about defending a leader who broke rules he imposed on the country. A few have called openly for Johnson to go, and the number is rising. Others

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are waiting to see whether public anger translates into Conservative losses at local elections on May 5.

"It is utterly depressing to be asked to defend the indefensible," said Conservative legislator William Wragg. "Each time part of us withers."

Lawmaker Steve Baker, until now a prominent supporter, said that Johnson "should be long gone" for violating the "letter and spirit" of the rules."

"I'll certainly vote for this motion," he said. "But really, the prime minister should just know the gig's up."

The Committee of Privileges probe will not start until twin police and civil-service investigations into "partygate" have concluded.

Senior civil servant Sue Gray is investigating 16 events, including "bring your own booze" office parties and "wine time Fridays" in Johnson's 10 Downing St. office and other government buildings. Police are probing a dozen of the events and so far have handed out at least 50 fines, including ones to Johnson, his wife Carrie and Treasury chief Rishi Sunak. Johnson is believed to have attended about six of the gatherings and could face more police fines.

Johnson and his allies argue that it would be reckless for the country to change leaders now amid the war in Ukraine and a cost-of-living squeeze sparked by soaring prices for energy and food.

As he flew to India for a two-day visit focused on boosting economic ties, Johnson again denied knowingly misleading Parliament and insisted he would lead the Conservatives into the next national election, due by 2024.

"I have absolutely nothing, frankly, to hide," Johnson told Sky News during his visit to the western Indian state of Gujarat. "I want to get on with the job that I was elected to do."

Bird flu drives free-range hens indoors to protect poultry

By DAVID PITT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Is it OK for free-range chickens to not range freely?

That's a question free-range egg producers have been pondering lately as they try to be open about their product while also protecting chickens from a highly infectious bird flu that has killed roughly 28 million poultry across the country.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends that chickens be moved indoors to protect against the disease, but while some are keeping their hens inside, not everyone agrees.

John Brunquell, the CEO of Indiana-based Egg Innovations, which contracts with more than 50 farms in five states to produce free-range and pasture-raised eggs, said any of his chickens in states with bird flu cases will stay in "confinement mode" until the risk passes.

"We will keep them confined at least until early June," Brunquell said. "If we go four weeks with no more commercial breakouts then we'll look to get the girls back out."

Bird flu cases have been identified in commercial chicken and turkey farms or in backyard flocks in 29 states, according to the USDA. Spread of the disease is largely blamed on the droppings of infected migrating wild birds.

The farms Brunquell contracts with are in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Wisconsin, all of which have had at least once case of bird flu.

But some, like Mike Badger, the executive director of the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association, are taking a different approach.

Badger, whose Pennsylvania-based nonprofit group has about 1,000 members across the country, believes birds kept outdoors are at less risk of infection than chickens and turkeys raised amid thousands of others in large, enclosed barns.

"We put them outside and they get in touch with the environment so I think they have a better immune system to be able to fight off threats as they happen," Badger said.

Research has not clearly proven significant immune system differences in chickens housed outdoors versus indoors. And Badger speculates that lower density of animals, air movement and less sharing of equipment and staff in pasture-raised operations may contribute to a lack of virus infections.

He said the decision whether to bring hens inside to wait out the annual migration of wild waterfowl is

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a farm-to-farm decision “based on the comfort level with the risk acceptance.”

Commercial outdoor flocks make up only a small percentage of U.S. egg production. About 6 million hens, or 2% of national flock, are free-range and about 4.2 million hens, or 1.3% of U.S. egg production, are from pasture-raised chickens.

Chickens are categorized as free-range or pasture-raised primarily by the amount of time they spend outdoors and space they are provided.

Free-range chickens typically must have at least 21.8 square feet (2 square meters) of roaming space outdoors and remain out until temperatures drop below around 30 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 1 Celsius), according to the American Humane Association, which certifies egg operations. Pasture-raised chickens typically must have 108 square feet (10 square meters) outdoors each and remain outside most of the year except during inclement weather.

The certifying organizations have protocols for high-risk situations and allow for temporary housing indoors — a time period not specifically defined — once a farm documents an outbreak near an outdoor flock. Certification agencies monitor farms to ensure they don’t use bird flu as an excuse to keep birds inside too long.

Brunnquell said none of his farms had infections during the last big outbreak in 2015, and he hasn’t had any cases this year.

Farmers in Europe have been dealing with the bird virus longer than those in the U.S., with cases reported as early as last December.

The United Kingdom has ordered free-range hens to be housed inside to protect them from the avian flu, and that has forced changes to how those eggs are labeled in stores. Free-range packaging is still used but must be marked with an added label of “barn eggs,” according to a communications representative for the British Free Range Egg Producers Association. Each egg also is stamped with a No. 2 that denotes “barn” rather than No. 1 for “free-range.”

For U.S. consumers, it means the free-range eggs they buy at a premium price could come from a chicken being temporarily kept inside. But producers say they think people who pay more for pasture-raised or free-range eggs have animal-welfare concerns and don’t want the chickens to be endangered the virus.

Brunnquell also noted that the certification agencies monitor farms to ensure they don’t use bird flu as an excuse to keep birds inside too long.

Eggs of all kinds have grown costlier recently thanks to bird flu concerns and a national spike in food costs.

Last week, prices for conventional eggs increased by 40 cents per dozen to \$1.47 while cage-free egg prices rose 3 cents to \$2.40 per dozen, according to the USDA. Organic eggs, which are from chickens required to have access to the outdoors, were selling for a national average of \$4.39 a dozen last week, up from \$3.65 the week before.

The price of eggs used by bakeries and other food products soared to a record high on April 8.

So-called breaker eggs, which will later be broken by processors and sold in containers weighing up to 50 pounds, peaked at \$2.51 per pound, said Karyn Rispoli, egg market reporter for Urner Barry, a New Jersey-based food commodity market research and analytics firm. Many of the egg layers that have died from bird flu were on farms contracted to provide breaker eggs used as food product ingredients, Rispoli said.

Bird flu likely will remain a problem for at least several more weeks as migrating waterfowl will remain on the move in the Mississippi Flyway until June. In the past, warmer weather and the end of migration brought an end to bird flu cases, allowing turkey and chicken farmers to begin the monthlong process of replenishing flocks and resuming production.

Third suspect arrested in South Carolina mall shooting

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Police have arrested a third suspect accused of participating in an Easter week-end shootout at a South Carolina mall that wounded nine people.

The Columbia Police Department said Thursday on Twitter that Amari Sincere-Jamal Smith, 21, of Co-

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lumbia, turned himself in after authorities obtained arrest warrants earlier this week.

Smith and two other men face charges of attempted murder and aggravated assault after police said they brought guns to a busy Columbia shopping center, eventually shooting nine bystanders. Another six were injured in the rush to exit Columbiana Centre in the state's capital city. No fatalities have been announced in the incident.

Columbia Police Chief W.H. "Skip" Holbrook said at a Monday news conference that the three identified suspects knew each other and the attack was not random.

"Emotions took over, you had firearms that were introduced into the dispute, gunfire was exchanged and innocent people got injured in the crossfire," Holbrook said.

Police said Smith also faces a charge of unlawfully carrying a pistol. Smith was scheduled for a bond hearing Monday afternoon, according to online court records.

A judge denied bond for two other defendants, Jewayne M. Price and Marquise Love Robinson, on Tuesday, news outlets reported.

The mall shootout was one of two mass shootings that rocked the state over the Easter holiday weekend. State police are investigating after at least nine people were also shot at a nightclub in Hampton County that weekend.

Zelenskyy gets John F. Kennedy award for defending democracy

BOSTON (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is among five people named Thursday as recipients of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for acting to protect democracy.

Zelenskyy was chosen because of the way he has "marshaled the spirit, patriotism and untiring sacrifice of the Ukrainian people in a life-or-death fight for their country," as Russia pours in troops and assaults cities and towns, the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation said.

The foundation said four U.S. officials were chosen for standing up for free and fair elections, as the system is challenged in ways it has never been before.

They are: Republican U.S. Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, Arizona House Speaker Rusty Bowers and Fulton County, Georgia, elections worker Wandrea "Shaye" Moss.

Caroline Kennedy and her son, Jack Schlossberg, will present the awards May 22 at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston. The award was created by the family of the late president to honor public figures who risk their careers by embracing unpopular positions for the greater good, and is named after Kennedy's 1957 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Profiles in Courage."

"There is no more important issue facing our country, and the world, today than the fight for democracy," Kennedy said in a statement. "The war in Ukraine has shown the world that we can't take freedom for granted, and the courage of our elected officials in the U.S. reminds us that as citizens we each have a responsibility to protect our democracy and exercise our fundamental right to vote."

Cheney chaired the Republican House Conference before being ousted from her post last year because of her unrelenting criticism of former President Donald Trump and statements blaming him for the violence at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

The foundation said Cheney "broke with most in her party, urged fidelity to the Constitution, and stood her ground with honor and conviction," and that she has remained a "consistent and courageous voice in defense of democracy."

Michigan was one of the battleground states where Trump allies demanded further review of the 2020 election. Benson defended the certification of the results.

Protestors showed up at her home one evening in December 2020, angry about what they incorrectly said was voter fraud leading to Trump's loss. The foundation said Benson defended the will of Michigan voters, repeatedly refused to back down from fulfilling the duties of her office and continues to speak out about the risks to free and fair elections.

Bowers, a Republican, broke ranks with many in his party in December 2020 when he rejected a request from Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani for the Arizona Legislature to step in and replace electors legally pledged

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for Joe Biden with others who would support Trump.

The foundation said Bowers made a “decision of conscience,” for which he endured persistent harassment and intimidation tactics from Trump supporters, and he acted again to protect the integrity of Arizona elections by stopping a wide-ranging election bill that would eliminate nearly all forms of early voting and require ballots to be counted by hand, though Republicans are still trying to pass these changes.

Moss has worked for the Fulton County elections department since 2012 and supervised the absentee ballot operation during the 2020 election. Trump allies falsely claimed she engaged in ballot fraud. The foundation said “despite the onslaught of random, undeserved and malicious attacks,” Moss continues to do the “hard and unseen work to run our democracy.”

2 months after Griner’s arrest, mystery surrounds her case

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For another person in another country at another time, the case might have been a minor matter: an American citizen detained at an airport for allegedly possessing a cannabis derivative legal in much of the world.

But the circumstances for Brittney Griner couldn’t have been worse.

Griner, a WNBA All-Star and two-time Olympic gold medalist, was arrested in Russia, where the offense can mean years in prison, and at a moment when tensions with the U.S. were rising to their highest point in decades. She is a prominent gay, Black woman facing trial in a country where authorities have been hostile to the LGBTQ community and the country’s nationalist zeal has raised concerns about how she will be treated.

“There are many countries around the world where you do not want to get in trouble, and Russia is one of them,” said Clarence Lusane, a Howard University political science professor who specializes in criminal justice and drug policy.

As extraordinary as her circumstances are, the details surrounding Griner’s case remain a mystery as a crucial court date approaches next month. Russian prosecutors have offered little clarity and the U.S. government has made only measured statements. Griner’s legal team has declined to speak out about the case as it works behind the scenes.

Griner is easily the most prominent American citizen known to be jailed by a foreign government, but in many ways her case isn’t unusual. Americans are frequently arrested overseas on drug and other charges and U.S. authorities are limited about what they can say or the help they can offer. The State Department generally can’t do much to help beyond consular visits and helping the American get an attorney. It also can’t say much unless the person arrested waives privacy rights, which Griner hasn’t fully done.

In some cases, U.S. officials do speak out loudly when they’re convinced an American has been wrongly detained. But Griner’s case is barely two months old and officials have yet to make that determination. A State Department office that works to free American hostages and unjust detainees is not known to be involved.

The Phoenix Mercury star was detained at a Moscow airport in mid-February after Russian authorities said a search of her luggage revealed vape cartridges that allegedly contained oil derived from cannabis — accusations that could carry up to 10 years in prison, though some experts predict she’d get much less if convicted. She was returning to the country after the Russian League, in which she also plays, was taking a break for the FIBA World Cup qualifying tournament.

U.S. officials have said they are tracking the case but have not spoken extensively about it, in part because Griner has not signed a full Privacy Act Waiver. The statements so far have been careful and restrained, focused on ensuring she has access to U.S. consular affairs officials — she had a meeting last month — rather than explicitly demanding her immediate release.

There’s little the U.S. government can do diplomatically to end a criminal prosecution in another country, particularly in the early days of a case. Any deal that would require concessions by the U.S. would seem a nonstarter, especially with Russia at war with Ukraine and the U.S. coordinating actions involving Russia

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with Western allies.

"It's a trial lawyer's nightmare since you have to conduct a trial when the larger political environment is negative," said William Butler, a Russian law expert and professor at Penn State Dickinson Law.

The State Department has been "doing everything we can to support Brittney Griner to support her family, and to work with them to do everything we can, to see that she is treated appropriately" and that her rights are respected, spokesman Ned Price said last month. Last week, he said the U.S. was in frequent contact with her legal team and "broader network."

That's a more restrained posture than the Biden administration has taken with two other Americans jailed in Russia — Paul Whelan, a corporate security executive from Michigan sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage-related charges his family says are bogus, and Trevor Reed, a Marine veteran sentenced to nine years on charges that he assaulted a police officer in Moscow as he was being driven to a police station after a night of heavy drinking.

The State Department has pressed Russia for their release, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken raising their cases in a meeting last December with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In contrast to Griner's case, it has publicly described both men as unjustly detained.

Race and gender issues are also front and center in the Griner case.

Lusane, the Howard University professor, said under Putin "there's been a hyper nationalism in Russia, so basically anyone who's not considered Slavic is considered an outsider and a potential threat."

He added, "She fits into that category."

On the other hand, he said, there could also be an opening for Putin to build "an inroad into the African American community" by ordering her released as a humanitarian gesture.

Some Griner supporters, including Democratic Rep. Cori Bush of Missouri, have maintained that her case would be getting more attention if she weren't a Black woman.

The president of the WNBA players' association, Nneka Ogwumike, said in a "Good Morning America" interview that Griner was in Russia because WNBA players don't earn enough in the U.S.

"She's over there because of a gender issue, pay inequity," Ogwumike said.

Many of Griner's fellow WNBA players have remained circumspect for fear of antagonizing the situation, though her coach and some of her teammates have made clear in interviews that the 6-foot-9 center is on their minds.

"I spent 10 years there, so I know the way things work," Phoenix guard Diana Taurasi said of Russia. "It's delicate."

Griner recently had her detention extended to May 19. More information about her case may emerge then. But regardless of the factual allegations against her in court, it's impossible to divorce the legal case from the broader political implications.

"Russians are great chess players," said Peter Maggs, a research professor and expert in Russian law at the University of Illinois College of Law. "The more pawns you have, the greater your chance of eventual victory. And since things are not going their way, obviously, in Ukraine, any pawns they have they want to hold onto."

Many say Biden not tough enough on Russia: AP-NORC poll

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many people in the U.S. still question whether President Joe Biden is showing enough strength in response to Russia's war against Ukraine, even as most approve of steps Biden is already taking and few want U.S. troops to get involved in the conflict.

A poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows 54% of Americans think Biden has been "not tough enough" in his response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thirty-six percent think his approach has been about right, while 8% say he's been too tough.

But as the war has dragged on, Americans' desire to get involved has waned somewhat. Thirty-two percent of Americans say the U.S. should have a major role in the conflict. That's ticked back down from

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40% last month, though that remains slightly higher than the 26% who said so in February. An additional 49% say the U.S. should have a minor role.

The results underscore the conundrum for the White House. As images of Russian attacks on civilians and hospitals are shared around the world, there's pressure to stop Russian President Vladimir Putin and help millions of Ukrainians under attack in their home country or fleeing for safety. But Biden must also manage the threat of escalation with Putin, who has raised the alert level on using Russia's nuclear weapons, and prevent the U.S. from getting involved in a much larger conflict.

"Given the potential desperation of President Putin and the Russian leadership, given the setbacks that they've faced so far militarily, none of us can take lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low-yield nuclear weapons," CIA Director William Burns said in a recent speech at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Burns added that "so far we haven't seen a lot of practical evidence" of Russian nuclear escalation.

The White House has authorized more than \$2 billion in weapons and led Western sanctions that have crushed the Russian economy. Biden announced Thursday an additional \$800 million in military aid for Ukraine. Biden has ruled out sending U.S. troops — a decision supported by a majority of Americans.

The U.S. has also held back some weapons and defensive systems sought by Ukraine and placed early limits on intelligence sharing that have been loosened throughout the conflict.

The poll and follow-up interviews with respondents indicate many Americans, responding to images of Ukrainians being killed and Russian forces allegedly committing war crimes, want to see more action to stop Putin. A majority — 57% — say they believe Putin has directed his troops to commit war crimes. Just 6% say he has not, while 36% say they aren't sure.

"I know that we're not directly responsible," said Rachel Renfro, a 35-year-old from Nashville, Tennessee. "But we've always been the kind of people that insert ourselves into these kinds of situations, and I don't understand why we're not doing that now to a bigger degree."

Renfro wants to see the U.S. accept more refugees and provide more aid to Ukraine. Sending troops should be "an absolute last resort," she said.

Most Americans are in favor of the U.S. sanctioning Russia for the invasion, providing weapons to Ukraine and accepting refugees from Ukraine into the U.S. More Americans also support than oppose deploying U.S. troops to Eastern Europe to support U.S. NATO allies in response to Russia's invasion, and about two-thirds say NATO membership is good for the U.S.

But public support stops short of deploying U.S. troops to Ukraine to fight against Russian forces. Only 22% say they favor deploying U.S. troops to Ukraine to fight against Russian forces, while 55% are opposed; 23% say they are neither in favor nor opposed.

Michael Gonzalez, a 31-year-old from Fort Collins, Colorado, said Biden's response was "about right," citing wide-ranging sanctions on Russian banks, oligarchs, and government officials and their families.

"In a perfect world, I wish we can go out there with the troops," said Gonzalez, whose father served in the Cuban military and whose stepfather worked as a private contractor during the U.S. war in Afghanistan. "I feel like we shouldn't be policing the world and going everywhere. I wish we could help them, but we've been fighting for a while."

Biden faces other significant political challenges heading into the midterms with inflation at a four-decade high and soaring energy prices exacerbated by the war. The poll suggests the balance in the tradeoff between sanctions on Russia and the U.S. economy might be shifting. By a narrow margin, Americans say the nation's bigger priority is sanctioning Russia as effectively as possible over limiting damage to the U.S. economy, 51% to 45%. Last month, more said they prioritized sanctioning Russia over limiting damage to the economy, 55% to 42%.

Anthony Cordesman, emeritus chair in strategy at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, noted that Americans broadly support many actions the White House is already taking. Building up Ukraine's air defense or sending more tanks and airplanes also requires setting up logistics, including radar and maintenance capabilities, that take far longer than many people would expect, Cordes-

man said.

The White House making that case to people who want more action carries its own risk.

"If you start communicating the limits to what we can do in detail, you may or may not reassure the American people, but you're providing Russia with a lot of information that you scarcely want to communicate," Cordesman said.

Biden drug control plan stresses harm reduction, treatment

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

President Joe Biden is sending his administration's first national drug control strategy to Congress as the U.S. overdose death toll hit a new record of nearly 107,000 during the past 12 months.

The strategy, released Thursday, is the first national plan to prioritize what's known as harm reduction, said White House drug czar Dr. Rahul Gupta. That means it focuses on preventing death and illness in drug users while trying to engage them in care and treatment.

The strategy calls for changes in state laws and policies to support the expansion of harm reduction.

"All too often, these drugs wind up in communities where naloxone isn't readily available," Gupta said Wednesday, referring to the medication that can revive users who have overdosed, "where harm reduction services are restricted or underfunded, where there are unacceptable barriers to treatment."

The American Medical Association has advocated for naloxone to be made available over the counter. Test strips that prevent overdoses by checking drugs for fentanyl and clean syringe programs are other examples of harm reduction.

Harm reduction prevents overdoses, reduces the transmission of infectious diseases and "as declared in a recent congressional commission report, it has bipartisan support," Gupta said.

The first physician to head the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gupta will oversee the strategy, which also includes:

- Targeting the financial activities of transnational criminal organizations that manufacture and traffic illicit drugs in the United States.
- Reducing the supply of illicit drugs smuggled across U.S. borders.
- Improving data systems and research that guide drug policy.
- Making sure the people most in danger of overdose can get evidence-based treatments, including people experiencing homelessness and those in prison or jail.

"Everyone who wants treatment should be able to get it," Gupta said.

EXPLAINER: What medical treatments do transgender youth get?

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

Transgender medical treatment for children and teens is increasingly under attack in many states, labeled child abuse and subject to criminalizing bans. But it has been available in the United States for more than a decade and is endorsed by major medical associations.

Many clinics use treatment plans pioneered in Amsterdam 30 years ago, according to a recent review in the British Psych Bulletin. Since 2005, the number of youth referred to gender clinics has increased as much as tenfold in the U.S., U.K, Canada and Finland, the review said.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health, a professional and educational organization, and the Endocrine Society, which represents specialists who treat hormone conditions, both have guidelines for such treatment. Here's a look at what's typically involved.

PUBERTY BLOCKERS

Children who persistently question the sex they were designated at birth are often referred to specialty clinics providing gender-confirming care. Such care typically begins with a psychological evaluation to determine whether the children have "gender dysphoria," or distress caused when gender identity doesn't match a person's assigned sex.

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Children who meet clinical guidelines are first offered medication that temporarily blocks puberty. This treatment is designed for youngsters diagnosed with gender dysphoria who have been counseled with their families and are mature enough to understand what the regimen entails.

The medication isn't started until youngsters show early signs of puberty — enlargement of breasts or testicles. This typically occurs around age 8 to 13 for girls and a year or two later for boys.

The drugs, known as GnRH agonists, block the brain from releasing key hormones involved in sexual maturation. They have been used for decades to treat precocious puberty, an uncommon medical condition that causes puberty to begin abnormally early.

The drugs can be given as injections every few months or as arm implants lasting up to year or two. Their effects are reversible — puberty and sexual development resume as soon as the drugs are stopped.

Some kids stay on them for several years. One possible side effect: They may cause a decrease in bone density that reverses when the drugs are stopped.

HORMONES

After puberty blockers, kids can either go through puberty while still identifying as the opposite sex or begin treatment to make their bodies more closely match their gender identity.

For those choosing the second option, guidelines say the next step is taking manufactured versions of estrogen or testosterone — hormones that prompt sexual development in puberty. Estrogen comes in skin patches and pills. Testosterone treatment usually involves weekly injections.

Guidelines recommend starting these when kids are mature enough to make informed medical decisions. That is typically around age 16, and parents' consent is typically required, said Dr. Gina Sequiera, co-director of Seattle Children's Hospital's Gender Clinic.

Many transgender patients take the hormones for life, though some changes persist if medication is stopped.

In girls transitioning to boys, testosterone generally leads to permanent voice-lowering, facial hair and protrusion of the Adam's apple, said Dr. Stephanie Roberts, a specialist at Boston Children's Hospital's Gender Management Service. For boys transitioning to girls, estrogen-induced breast development is typically permanent, Roberts said.

Research on long-term hormone use in transgender adults has found potential health risks including blood clots and cholesterol changes.

SURGERY

Gender-altering surgery in teens is less common than hormone treatment, but many centers hesitate to give exact numbers.

Guidelines say such surgery generally should be reserved for those aged 18 and older. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health says breast removal surgery is OK for those under 18 who have been on testosterone for at least a year. The Endocrine Society says there isn't enough evidence to recommend a specific age limit for that operation.

OUTCOMES

Studies have found some children and teens resort to self-mutilation to try to change their anatomy. And research has shown that transgender youth and adults are prone to stress, depression and suicidal behavior when forced to live as the sex they were assigned at birth.

Opponents of youth transgender medical treatment say there's no solid proof of purported benefits and cite widely discredited research claiming that most untreated kids outgrow their transgender identities by their teen years or later. One study often mentioned by opponents included many kids who were mistakenly identified as having gender dysphoria and lacked outcome data for many others.

Doctors say accurately diagnosed kids whose transgender identity persists into puberty typically don't outgrow it. And guidelines say treatment shouldn't start before puberty begins.

Many studies show the treatment can improve kids' well-being, including reducing depression and suicidal behavior. The most robust kind of study — a trial in which some distressed kids would be given treatment and others not — cannot be done ethically. Longer term studies on treatment outcomes are underway.

Surprisingly low Shanghai COVID death count spurs questions

By HUIZHONG WU and DAKE KANG Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Lu Muying died on April 1 in a government quarantine facility in Shanghai, with her family on the phone as doctors tried to resuscitate her. She had tested positive for COVID-19 in late March and was moved there in line with government policy that all coronavirus cases be centrally isolated.

But the 99-year-old, who was just two weeks shy of her 100th birthday, was not counted as a COVID-19 death in Shanghai's official tally. In fact, the city of more than 25 million has only reported 25 coronavirus deaths despite an outbreak that has spanned nearly two months and infected hundreds of thousands of people in the world's third-largest city.

Lu's death underscores how the true extent of the virus toll in Shanghai has been obscured by Chinese authorities. Doctors told Lu's relatives she died because COVID-19 exacerbated her underlying heart disease and high blood pressure, yet she still was not counted.

Interviews with family members of patients who have tested positive, a publicly released phone call with a government health official and an internet archive compiled by families of the dead all raise issues with how the city is counting its cases and deaths, almost certainly resulting in a marked undercount.

The result is a blurred portrait of an outbreak that has sweeping ramifications for both the people of Shanghai and the rest of the world, given the city's place as an economic, manufacturing and shipping hub.

An Associated Press examination of the death toll sheds light on how the numbers have been clouded by the way Chinese health authorities tally COVID-19 statistics, applying a much narrower, less transparent, and at times inconsistent standard than the rest of the world.

In most countries, including the United States, guidelines stipulate that any death where COVID-19 is a factor or contributor is counted as a COVID-related death.

But in China, health authorities count only those who died directly from COVID-19, excluding those, like Lu, whose underlying conditions were worsened by the virus, said Zhang Zuo-Feng, an epidemiologist at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"If the deaths could be ascribed to underlying disease, they will always report it as such and will not count it as a COVID-related death, that's their pattern for many years," said Jin Dong-yan, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong's medical school.

That narrower criteria means China's COVID-19 death toll will always be significantly lower than those of many other nations.

Both Jin and Zhang said this has been China's practice since the beginning of the pandemic and is not proof of a deliberate attempt to underreport the death count.

However, Shanghai authorities have quietly changed other standards behind the scenes, in ways that have violated China's own regulations and muddied the virus' true toll.

During this outbreak, Shanghai health authorities have only considered virus cases where lung scans show a patient with evidence of pneumonia as "symptomatic," three people, including a Chinese public health official, told the AP. All other patients are considered "asymptomatic" even if they test positive and have other typical COVID-19 symptoms like sneezing, coughing or headaches.

This way of classifying asymptomatic cases conflicts with China's past national guidelines. It's also a sharp change from January, when Wu Fan, a member of Shanghai's epidemic prevention expert group, said that those with even the slightest symptoms, like fatigue or a sore throat, would be "strictly" classified as a symptomatic case.

Further adding to the confusion, the city has overlapping systems to track whether someone has the virus. City residents primarily rely on what's called their Health Cloud, a mobile application that allows them to see their COVID-19 test results. However, the Shanghai health authorities have a separate system to track COVID-19 test results, and they have the sole authority to confirm cases. At times, the data between the systems conflict.

In practice, these shifting and inconsistent processes give China's Centers for Disease Control and Preven-

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tion “wobble room” to determine COVID-related deaths, said the Chinese health official, allowing them to rule out the coronavirus as being the cause of death for people who didn’t have lung scans or positive test results logged on their apps. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic.

In response to questions about Shanghai’s COVID-19 figures, China’s top medical authority, the National Health Commission, said in a fax that there is “no basis to suspect the accuracy of China’s epidemic data and statistics.” Shanghai’s city government did not respond to a faxed request for comment.

Statements from the authorities are little comfort to the relatives of the dead. Chinese internet users, doubting the official figures, have built a virtual archive of the deaths that have occurred since Shanghai’s lockdown based on firsthand information posted online. They have recorded 170 deaths so far.

Chinese media reports on the unrecorded COVID-19 deaths have been swiftly censored, and many criticisms of Shanghai’s stringent measures expunged online. Instead, state media has continued to uphold China’s zero-COVID approach as proof of the success of its political system, especially as the world’s official death toll climbs past 6.2 million.

Earlier this month, doubts over the data burst into public view when a Shanghai resident uploaded a recording of a phone conversation he had with a CDC officer in which he questioned why city health authorities told his father he had tested positive for COVID-19 when data on his father’s mobile application showed up as negative.

“Didn’t I tell you to not look at the Health Cloud?” said the official, Zhu Weiping, referring to the app. “The positive cases are only from us notifying people.”

Others skeptical of the data include relatives of Zong Shan, an 86-year-old former Russian translator who died March 29. Despite testing positive and being moved to a government quarantine facility, online test results showed Zong supposedly was negative for COVID-19 on the day of her death.

“My relative, like most of the other people in Shanghai who were notified as positive, all reported negative results” on the Health Cloud app, one of Zong’s relatives said, declining to be named for fear of retribution.

Zong was taken to a government quarantine facility from the Donghai Elderly Care Hospital on March 29, and died there that night. The family was told by hospital staff she was being transferred after she tested positive for COVID-19. But they didn’t think the virus was the biggest threat to her health — rather, it was the dearth of nursing care at the quarantine facility. Zong needed to be fed liquids and couldn’t eat without assistance.

She had been in stable condition before the transfer, said a relative. When the family asked for the cause of death, doctors didn’t give a clear answer.

“They gave me very vague answers. One minute they said it was stroke, then they said this was also just a hypothesis,” said the relative. “But on one point, they were very clear, they said it had nothing to do with COVID. Her lungs were clear.”

Lu, who was also transferred from the Donghai hospital, would have celebrated her 100th birthday on April 16; her relatives had ordered a cake and gotten permission to host a small celebration Thursday. But when she tested positive, the family made mental preparations for her death, acknowledging she had lived a long life.

But the strange thing, a relative said, was the night before she died, the doctor had specifically called the family to let them know Lu was now testing negative for COVID-19. Ultimately, the doctor said she died because the virus had worsened her underlying illnesses, said the relative, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the issue.

Further, the family knew of another patient from the same hospital, a neighbor, who died the day after being transferred to a quarantine facility on March 25 and also had not been counted.

Jin, the Hong Kong virologist, noted the potential political benefits of Shanghai’s low official COVID-19 death toll.

“They might claim this is their achievement, and this is their victory,” Jin said.

EXPLAINER: Why Mideast tensions are soaring yet again

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By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Everyone worried this might happen.

In the weeks before a rare confluence of major Jewish, Christian and Muslim holidays, with tens of thousands of visitors expected in Jerusalem for the first time since the pandemic, Israeli, Palestinian and Arab leaders discussed how to calm tensions.

Israel took steps to ease the conditions of its nearly 55-year military rule over millions of Palestinians, lifting some movement restrictions and issuing thousands of work permits. Israeli police said they would work to ensure everyone could pray in peace.

The goal was to avoid a repeat of last year, when weeks of protests and clashes in Jerusalem eventually helped trigger an 11-day war between Israel and Gaza's militant Hamas rulers.

It hasn't worked out as planned.

Israel has seen the deadliest string of attacks in years. Its troops have launched arrest raids deep inside the occupied West Bank, triggering gunbattles. Clashes have broken out at a major site in Jerusalem sacred to Jews and Muslims and rockets have been fired from Gaza.

Here's a look at how we got here:

A WAVE OF ATTACKS

On March 22, a Palestinian citizen of Israel killed four people in a car-ramming and stabbing rampage in the city of Beersheba. Shooting attacks by Palestinians over the next three weeks, including in the heart of Tel Aviv, killed another 10.

Israeli authorities said the attackers acted mostly alone, and while Hamas and other militant groups cheered the attacks, none claimed them. Some of the assailants supported the Islamic State group, but there's no evidence it organized the attacks.

Israel launched raids across the occupied West Bank, arresting dozens. Palestinians hurled stones and firebombs, and in Jenin, a longtime militant stronghold, gunbattles erupted.

At least 26 Palestinians have been killed, according to an Associated Press count, including the attackers and many who took part in the clashes. But the dead also include a lawyer and an 18-year-old woman who appear to have been bystanders, as well as an unarmed woman shot dead at a checkpoint.

Israel captured the West Bank, along with east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories to form their future state.

Israel has full control of over 60% of the West Bank, where it has built more than 130 settlements that are home to nearly 500,000 Jewish settlers. The increasingly unpopular Palestinian Authority administers major population centers and cooperates with Israel on security.

CLASHES IN JERUSALEM

On April 15, clashes erupted at dawn between Palestinians and Israeli police at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City. The police say Palestinians hurled stones at them and in the direction of an adjacent Jewish holy site, forcing them to move in. Palestinians say they used excessive force.

More than 150 Palestinians and three Israeli police were wounded. Police fired rubber-coated bullets and stun grenades and Palestinians hurled stones and fireworks. At one point, police burst into the mosque itself to arrest suspected stone-throwers inside.

Smaller confrontations have broken out since then, and on Sunday, Palestinians pelted buses with stones just outside the Old City.

"A Hamas-led incitement campaign has been waged against Israel," Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said this week. "Israel is doing everything so that all peoples, as always, can celebrate the holidays safely — Jews, Muslims and Christians."

The sprawling esplanade where the mosque is located is the third holiest site in Islam and the holiest for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because two Jewish temples stood there in antiquity. It lies at the emotional core of the century-old conflict and has been ground zero for several outbreaks of violence.

The Palestinians view regular visits by nationalist and religious Jews under police escort as a provocation

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and possible prelude to Israel taking over the site or partitioning it. Israeli authorities say they are committed to maintaining the status quo.

The Old City is part of east Jerusalem, which Israel annexed in a move not recognized internationally and considers part of its capital. The Palestinians want east Jerusalem to be the capital of their future state.

Discriminatory policies in east Jerusalem support the expansion of Jewish settlements. Palestinians are systematically denied construction permits, forcing many to build without authorization, risking home demolition. Dozens of Palestinian families are at risk of being forcibly removed from their homes because of a decades-long campaign by settlers to expand the Jewish presence in east Jerusalem.

Jews born in Jerusalem are Israeli citizens. Most Palestinians refuse Israeli citizenship, but those who seek it must go through a long and uncertain bureaucratic process. Palestinians who spend too much time outside east Jerusalem, for work, study or family reasons, can lose their residency and be prohibited from returning. That policy does not apply to Jews.

ROCKETS FROM GAZA

On Monday night, a rocket was fired into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip. The military intercepted it and carried out airstrikes. No one was hurt, and no one claimed the rocket — the first to be fired at Israel in months. Two more rockets were fired overnight, the army said Thursday, and Israel carried out more airstrikes.

Israel and Egypt have imposed a crippling blockade on Gaza since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces 15 years ago. Unemployment hovers around 50%, electricity outages last around 12 hours a day, tap water is undrinkable, and Hamas remains firmly in power.

Israel and Hamas have fought four wars since 2008, compounding the misery of the 2 million Palestinians who live in the narrow coastal strip. Gaza has barely started to rebuild after the most recent one, which left more than 250 Palestinians dead, including 129 civilians, according to the U.N. Fourteen people were killed in Israel.

Gaza's woes long predate Hamas, which burst onto the scene in the late 1980s, during the first of two Palestinian uprisings against Israeli rule. The militant group — branded terrorists by Israel and Western countries — does not recognize Israel and has carried out numerous deadly attacks on Israeli civilians over the years.

More than half of the 2 million Palestinians living in Gaza are the descendants of refugees from what is now Israel who fled or were driven out during the 1948 war surrounding its creation.

Around 60% of Palestinians in all three territories are under the age of 30, with little or no memory of the Mideast peace process, which broke down more than a decade ago.

"We have a very radicalized generation," said Mkhaimar Abusada, a political science professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University "They don't really care if we go to another war with Israel or not, whether it's over Al-Aqsa or any other thing."

EXPLAINER: What's the impact if Europe cuts off Russian oil?

By The Associated Press undefined

Europe is struggling to find ways to stop paying Russia \$850 million a day for energy and hit the Kremlin's finances over its invasion of Ukraine.

The 27-member European Union is finding that reversing decades of dependence on Russian oil and natural gas is not a simple matter.

Leaders are now discussing sanctions on Russian oil, including a possible boycott. Here is what such a move could mean for people in Europe and the rest of the world:

HOW MUCH DOES EUROPE PAY RUSSIA FOR ENERGY?

Gas and oil are flowing to Europe even as governments denounce the war. The EU sends \$450 million a day to Russia for oil and \$400 million per day for natural gas, according to calculations by analysts at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels.

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That means energy revenue is bolstering the Kremlin's budget, adding to foreign currency reserves even as Western sanctions have targeted Russia's reserves abroad. The Russian government got an average of 43% of its revenue from oil and gas between 2011 and 2020.

HOW MUCH RUSSIAN OIL GOES TO EUROPE?

Europe is the biggest purchaser of Russian crude, receiving 138 million tons in 2020 out of Russia's total exports of 260 million tons — or 53%, according to the BP Statistical Review of World Energy. Europe, which imports almost all of its crude, gets a quarter of its needs from Russia.

Oil is refined into fuel for heating and driving as well as being a raw material for industry.

WHY IS THE FOCUS ON OIL INSTEAD OF NATURAL GAS?

It's harder to find alternative sources of natural gas because it comes mainly by pipeline. It would be easier to find other sources for oil, which mostly moves by tanker and is traded globally.

Natural gas is off the table for now. Heavy users like Germany say an immediate cutoff could cost jobs, with industrial associations warning of shutdowns in glass and metals businesses.

Cutting off both natural gas and oil would likely cause a recession in Europe, economists say. European governments agreed to stop Russian coal imports starting in August, but that's a relatively small part of energy payments to Russia.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF RUSSIAN OIL SUPPLIES STOP?

Europe imported 3.8 million barrels a day from Russia before the war. In theory, European customers could replace those barrels from suppliers in the Middle East, whose exports now mostly go to Asia, as well as from the United States, Latin America and Africa. Meanwhile, cheaper Russian oil could take the place of the Middle East shipments to Asia.

But it would take time for global markets to make that adjustment. In Europe, customers might scramble to reverse the usual east-west movement of oil using rail, truck and river barge. Refineries making gasoline and other products are set up for Russia's particular kind of oil. Several major refineries depend on a pipeline from Russia.

Analysts at the Bruegel think tank say European countries should be ready to impose measures to reduce fuel use, such as making public transport free and incentivizing car-sharing. If those measures don't work, tougher ones such as odd-even driving bans based on license plate numbers would be needed. Similar measures were taken during the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, when Germany imposed car-free Sundays.

"This would give markets enough time for a structural reorientation away from Russian oil," the analysts said.

Phasing in a ban over the rest of the year would be one way to prevent shortages. Germany has already said it plans to end Russian oil imports by year's end.

Prices for oil would likely go up, not just for Europe but for everyone, because oil is a global commodity and a net loss of supplies from Russia would be likely. That would mean higher costs for driving and heating fuel and more consumer inflation.

Russia is a major supplier of Europe's diesel fuel for trucks and farm equipment, meaning its price affects those for a wide range of food and goods.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO THE GLOBAL OIL MARKET?

All of Russia's oil couldn't be redirected from Europe to Asia due to shipping and logistical constraints. It's not clear to what extent buyers in countries like India and China would buy Russian oil if it means possible sanctions trouble with the West.

The OPEC oil cartel led by Saudi Arabia — which sets production levels along with allied non-members like Russia — has made it clear it won't increase output to make up for any supply loss from Russia due to a boycott.

"It would be a major, major, major rebalancing of crude flows," said Claudio Galimberti, senior vice president for analysis at Rystad Energy. "From a theoretical standpoint, it's possible. From an operational standpoint, it's more complicated because not everything can be redirected."

Global demand for oil was already high as economies rebounded from the COVID-19 pandemic, and uncertainties over the war exacerbated the tight market and high prices. U.S. President Joe Biden has

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ordered releases from the strategic petroleum reserve to combat rising gasoline prices for Americans, while 30 other nations also have agreed to send more oil to the global market.

In the most severe scenario of a loss of Russia's 3.8 million barrels to Europe and other countries refusing its oil, a huge price spike to \$180 per barrel could happen, followed by a sharp fall due to declining demand and economic growth. However, "that does not look like it's going to be the case," Galimberti said.

Rystad's expectation is a loss of 1.5 million to 2 million barrels per day and oil reaching \$120 to \$130 per barrel by year's end.

A milder scenario, in which most Russian oil shunned by Europe is snapped up at a discount in other energy-hungry countries, would see a loss of only 1 million barrels per day. Oil prices would drop below \$100 by June and keep falling to \$60 by year's end. That's not too far from today's situation, with some traders and banks shunning Russian oil even without sanctions.

"It's a huge price range, but that's reflective of the huge uncertainty we have on the Russian loss," Galimberti said.

HOW MUCH WOULD A BOYCOTT COST RUSSIA?

The price for Russia's main export benchmark to Europe, Urals crude, has been knocked down to a \$35-per-barrel discount compared to international benchmark Brent. Yet because of generally higher oil prices, Russia's revenue losses have so far been limited. Those foreign currency earnings are helping prop up Russian finances amid sanctions.

"As long as Russian barrels find a market, then Russia is in business," Galimberti said. "The moment they stop finding a market, that is the moment when oil prices shoot up and Russia will have serious economic problems."

Gaza violence intensifies as Jerusalem clashes resume

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel's air force and Palestinian militants traded fire across the Gaza frontier early Thursday as clashes erupted again at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site, worsening an escalation that has been eerily similar to the lead-up to last year's Israel-Gaza war.

The Gaza violence, fueled by the unrest between Israeli police and Palestinians in Jerusalem, appears to be the heaviest-cross-border fighting since last year's 11-day war and comes despite efforts to prevent a repeat. A rocket fired from Gaza earlier this week was the first to have been launched since the war.

The latest Israeli-Palestinian tensions boiled over after a series of deadly attacks by Palestinians against Israelis, which then sparked days-long, sometimes lethal, arrest raids by the military in a flashpoint West Bank city and spread into daily clashes in Jerusalem. This year, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan has coincided with Passover, a time of heightened religious observances and visits by large numbers of people to Jerusalem.

Palestinian militants fired two rockets toward Israel from the Gaza Strip late Wednesday and early Thursday, and Israeli aircraft hit militant targets in the seaside, Hamas-ruled enclave. One rocket landed in the southern Israeli city of Sderot, a frequent target, and another fell short and landed in Gaza, the Israeli military said. The launches set off air-raid sirens across parts of southern Israel, disrupting the quiet of the Passover holiday week.

Early Thursday, Israeli warplanes conducted airstrikes in the central Gaza Strip, local media reported. Social media posts by activists showed smoke billowing in the air. The Israeli military said the airstrikes were aimed at a militant site and the entrance of a tunnel leading to an underground complex holding chemicals to make rockets.

The military later said its planes attacked another Hamas compound after an anti-aircraft missile was fired from Gaza. It said the missile failed to hit its target and no injuries or damage were reported.

In Jerusalem, Israeli police said dozens of masked protesters holed up in the Al-Aqsa Mosque early Thursday, sealed the doors and began throwing rocks and firecrackers. Police said they attempted to disperse the Palestinians using "riot dispersal means," without elaborating, and that forces did not enter

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the mosque itself.

A Palestinian official from the Waqf, which administers the site, said large numbers of police used stun grenades to clear out the site. He said police also fired stun grenades and rubber-coated bullets against Palestinians who had sealed themselves inside the mosque. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the incident with the media.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said 20 people were injured, one critically.

Similar clashes have taken place throughout the week, while fiercer ones broke out at the site earlier this month, wounding more than 150 Palestinians and three police officers.

The Palestinians have accused Israeli police of using excessive force at the holy site, and Palestinian social media have been filled with videos showing Israeli forces striking what appear to be unarmed Palestinians, including women. Police say Palestinians instigate the violence and have released their own videos showing young Palestinian men throwing rocks and fireworks toward the security forces. Police say the Palestinians are desecrating their own shrine and putting others at risk.

An emergency meeting of a regional Arab committee convened in Jordan Thursday over what it called "illegal Israeli policies and measures" in Jerusalem. It condemned the Israeli actions, called them provocative and called on Israel to ensure that only Muslims worship at the site.

The committee includes member countries who have recently normalized ties with Israel, including the United Arab Emirates. The country's top diplomat, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid spoke by phone Thursday. Al Nahyan called for stability, according to the United Arab Emirates' state-run WAM news agency.

A U.S. State Department delegation is also in the region in a bid to secure calm.

The scenes of rocket fire and repeated violence in Jerusalem recalled the run-up to last year's war. Last year, the violence also spread to mixed Jewish-Arab cities, which hasn't happened in the current wave of unrest.

On Wednesday, hundreds of flag-waving Israeli ultra-nationalists marched toward predominantly Palestinian areas around Jerusalem's Old City, a demonstration of Israeli control over the disputed city seen as a provocation by Palestinians. Last year's war erupted during a similar march, when Gaza militants, declaring themselves the guardians of Jerusalem, fired a barrage of rockets toward the holy city.

Those events, along with other developments, led to an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas that killed over 250 Palestinians and 14 people in Israel, causing extensive damage in Gaza.

This year, Israeli police closed the main road leading to the Damascus Gate of the Old City and the heart of Muslim Quarter. After some pushing and shoving with police, the marchers rallied near the barricades, waving flags, singing and chanting.

Israeli nationalists stage such marches to try to assert sovereignty over east Jerusalem, which Israel seized in 1967, along with the West Bank and Gaza, and annexed in a move not recognized internationally. The Palestinians seek an independent state in all three territories and consider east Jerusalem their capital.

The hilltop shrine in the Old City is the emotional ground zero of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the center of previous rounds of violence. Known to Muslims as the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, it is the third holiest site in Islam. It is also the holiest site in Judaism, revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, the site of their biblical temples.

Israel says it is maintaining a decades-old status quo at the site, which prevents Jews from praying there. But during the Passover holiday this year, visits by Jews have skyrocketed and in some cases Jews have been praying at the compound. Palestinians view the visits, under police escort, as a provocation and possible prelude to Israel taking over the site or partitioning it.

For Palestinians, the mosque compound, administered by Muslim clerics, is also a rare place in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem where they have a measure of control.

Palestinian militant groups in Gaza — the ruling Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad — have positioned themselves as defenders of the Jerusalem holy site. On Wednesday, Hamas said Israel would bear "full responsibility for the repercussions" if it allowed the marchers "to approach our holy sites."

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Today in History: April 22, Oklahoma Land Rush

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, April 22, the 112th day of 2022. There are 253 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 22, 2000, in a dramatic pre-dawn raid, armed immigration agents seized Elian Gonzalez, the Cuban boy at the center of a custody dispute, from his relatives' home in Miami; Elian was reunited with his father at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington.

On this date:

In 1889, the Oklahoma Land Rush began at noon as thousands of homesteaders staked claims.

In 1915, the first full-scale use of deadly chemicals in warfare took place as German forces unleashed chlorine gas against Allied troops at the start of the Second Battle of Ypres (EE'-preh) in Belgium during World War I; thousands of soldiers are believed to have died.

In 1937, thousands of college students in New York City staged a "peace strike" opposing American entry into another possible world conflict.

In 1944, during World War II, U.S. forces began invading Japanese-held New Guinea with amphibious landings at Hollandia and Aitape.

In 1954, the publicly televised sessions of the Senate Army-McCarthy hearings began.

In 1970, millions of Americans concerned about the environment observed the first "Earth Day."

In 1993, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum was dedicated in Washington, D.C., to honor victims of Nazi extermination.

In 1994, Richard M. Nixon, the 37th president of the United States, died at a New York hospital four days after suffering a stroke; he was 81.

In 2004, Army Ranger Pat Tillman, who'd traded in a multi-million-dollar NFL contract to serve in Afghanistan, was killed by friendly fire; he was 27.

In 2005, Zacarias Moussaoui (zak-uh-REE'-uhs moo-SOW'-ee) pleaded guilty in a federal courtroom outside Washington, D.C., to conspiring with the Sept. 11 hijackers to kill Americans. (Moussaoui is serving a life prison sentence.)

In 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil platform, operated by BP, sank into the Gulf of Mexico two days after a massive explosion that killed 11 workers.

In 2016, leaders from 175 countries signed the Paris Agreement on climate change at the United Nations as the landmark deal took a key step toward entering into force years ahead of schedule.

Ten years ago: The U.S. and Afghanistan reached a deal on a strategic partnership agreement ensuring that Americans would provide military and financial support to the Afghan people for at least a decade beyond 2014, the deadline for most foreign forces to withdraw.

Five years ago: From the Washington Monument to Germany's Brandenburg Gate and even to Greenland, scientists, students and research advocates rallied on Earth Day, conveying a global message about scientific freedom without political interference. Erin Moran, the former child star who played Joanie Cunningham in the sitcoms "Happy Days" and "Joanie Loves Chachi," died in New Salisbury, Indiana; she was 56.

One year ago: In an announcement tied to a U.S.-hosted virtual summit of 40 world leaders on climate change, President Joe Biden committed the U.S. cut its fossil fuel emissions by as much as 52% by 2030; some developed U.S. allies also made specific pledges to reduce damaging fossil fuel pollution. The Supreme Court, in a 6-3 ruling, made it easier to sentence minors convicted of murder to life in prison without the possibility of parole. A judge in New York sentenced a Bangladeshi immigrant to life in prison for an attempted suicide bombing attack in a subway station beneath Times Square in 2017; the attack largely failed when the bomb barely exploded.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Jack Nicholson is 85. Singer Mel Carter is 83. Author Janet Evanovich is 79. Country singer Cleve Francis is 77. Movie director John Waters is 76. Singer Peter Frampton is 72. Rock

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singer-musician Paul Carrack (Mike and the Mechanics; Squeeze) is 71. Actor Joseph Bottoms is 68. Actor Ryan Stiles is 63. Baseball manager Terry Francona is 63. Comedian and entertainment executive Byron Allen is 61. Actor Chris Makepeace is 58. Rock musician Fletcher Dragge (DRAH'-guh) is 56. Actor Jeffrey Dean Morgan is 56. Actor Sheryl Lee is 55. Actor-talk show host Sherri Shepherd is 55. Country singer-musician Heath Wright (Ricochet) is 55. Country singer Kellie Coffey is 51. Actor Eric Mabius is 51. Actor Ingo Rademacher (RAH'-deh-mah-ker) is 51. Rock musician Shavo Odadjian (System of a Down) is 48. Rock singer-musician Daniel Johns (Silverchair) is 43. Actor Malcolm Barrett is 42. Actor Cassidy Freeman is 40. Actor Michelle Ryan is 38. Actor Zack Gottsagen is 37. Actor Amber Heard is 36. Singer-songwriter BC Jean (Alexander Jean) is 35. Drummer Tripp Howell (LANCO) is 33. Rapper/singer Machine Gun Kelly is 32.