

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Saturday, April 23

GHS Prom, 7 p.m.

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

Sunday, April 24

Princess Prom 4:30-8pm

Emmanuel: 9 a.m. Worship, 10:15 a.m. Sunday school, 10:15 a.m. Grace Alone Study, 7 p.m. Choir

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

Monday, April 25

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

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Junior High Track Meet at Britton, 3:30 p.m.

Noon: Senior Citizens potluck meeting at Groton Community Center

School Breakfast: Eggs and breakfast potatoes.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, tiny whole potatoes.

Senior Menu: Swiss steak with mushroom gravy, mashed potatoes, mixed vegetables, pears, whole wheat bread.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

Remember
there's no
such thing as
a small act of
kindness.
Every act
creates a
ripple with no
logical end

-Scott Adams



Chicken Soup
for the Soul

Tuesday, April 26

State FFA Convention at SDSU

11:30 a.m.: Track Meet in Groton (Aberdeen Central, Aberdeen Christian, Aberdeen Roncalli, Britton-Hecla, Frederick, Griggs-Midkota, Ipswich, James Valley Christian, Langford, Milbank, Miller, Sisseton, Tiospa Zina, Tri-State, Wagner Community, Warner @ Groton Area High School)

School Breakfast: Doughnuts.

School Lunch: Popcorn chicken, tater tots.

Senior Menu: Lemon chicken breast, creamy noodles, spinach salad, baked apple slices, whole wheat bread.

Truss Pros Help Wanted

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

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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A semi truck went off the road into the gravel area at The Fuel Stop on the west edge of Groton Saturday morning. The result was getting stuck. Groton received .94 of rain overnight and with the frost just coming out of the ground, roads are being challenged to be traveled upon. (Photos by Paul Kosel)



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Missouri River Levels

This Week



US Army Corps
of Engineers®

Northwestern Division, Omaha District
Mainstem and Tributary Reservoir Bulletin
Project Data Date/Time: 04-23-2022 00:00
Last Updated Date/Time: 04-23-2022 08:35



Project	Project Information				Current Data					Occupied Storage		
	Elevations (ft)		Cumulative Stor (ac-ft)		Elev (ft)	Daily Elev Change (ft)	Storage (ac-ft)	Inflow (cfs)	Release (cfs)	MP (%)	FC (ac-ft)	FC (%)
	MP	FC	MP	FC								
Missouri River Mainstem Projects												
Fort Peck Dam	2234.0	2250.0	14,788,340	18,462,840	2222.60	0.01	12,544,000	4,000	6,100	84.8	0	0.0
Garrison Dam	1837.5	1854.0	17,744,640	23,451,300	1827.56	0.14	14,865,000	11,000	14,600	83.8	0	0.0
Oahe Dam	1607.5	1620.0	18,667,635	22,982,900	1595.30	0.25	15,148,000	15,000	25,600	81.1	0	0.0
Big Bend Dam	1420.0	1423.0	1,631,474	1,810,414	1420.33	-0.16	1,650,000	27,000	28,800	100.0	18,526	10.4
Fort Randall Dam	1350.0	1375.0	3,000,732	5,293,473	1354.31	-0.46	3,370,000	16,000	24,100	100.0	369,268	16.1
Gavins Point Dam	1204.5	1210.0	295,406	428,033	1205.96	0.07	327,000	26,000	26,000	100.0	31,594	23.8
System Totals	--	--	56,128,227	72,428,960	--	--	47,904,000	--	--	85.3	0	0.0
USBR Section 7 Projects												

Last Week



US Army Corps
of Engineers®

Northwestern Division, Omaha District
Mainstem and Tributary Reservoir Bulletin
Project Data Date/Time: 04-16-2022 00:00
Last Updated Date/Time: 04-16-2022 06:35



Project	Project Information				Current Data					Occupied Storage		
	Elevations (ft)		Cumulative Stor (ac-ft)		Elev (ft)	Daily Elev Change (ft)	Storage (ac-ft)	Inflow (cfs)	Release (cfs)	MP (%)	FC (ac-ft)	FC (%)
	MP	FC	MP	FC								
Missouri River Mainstem Projects												
Fort Peck Dam	2234.0	2250.0	14,788,340	18,462,840	2222.73	-0.07	12,576,000	5,000	6,100	85.0	0	0.0
Garrison Dam	1837.5	1854.0	17,744,640	23,451,300	1827.71	-0.14	14,939,000	16,000	14,400	84.2	0	0.0
Oahe Dam	1607.5	1620.0	18,667,635	22,982,900	1595.80	-0.05	15,311,000	17,000	25,200	82.0	0	0.0
Big Bend Dam	1420.0	1423.0	1,631,474	1,810,414	1420.39	-0.51	1,660,000	26,000	27,900	100.0	28,526	15.9
Fort Randall Dam	1350.0	1375.0	3,000,732	5,293,473	1354.92	0.12	3,406,000	29,000	22,200	100.0	405,268	17.7
Gavins Point Dam	1204.5	1210.0	295,406	428,033	1206.18	-0.07	331,000	23,000	23,900	100.0	35,594	26.8
System Totals	--	--	56,128,227	72,428,960	--	--	48,223,000	--	--	85.9	0	0.0

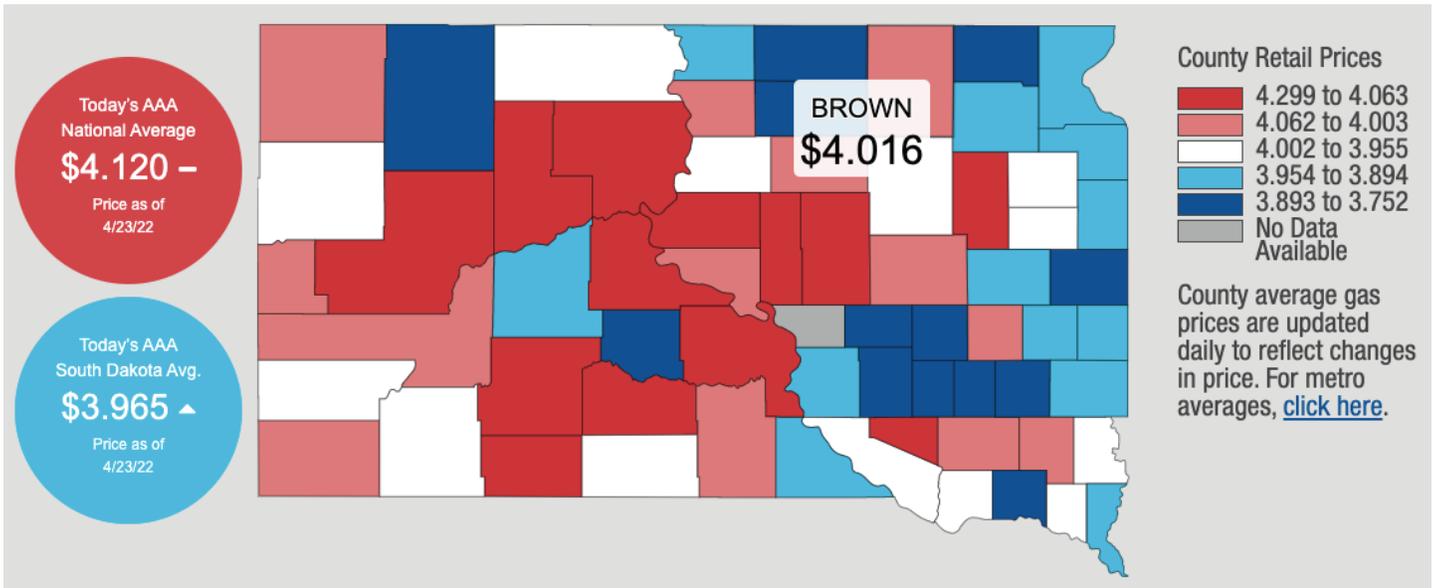
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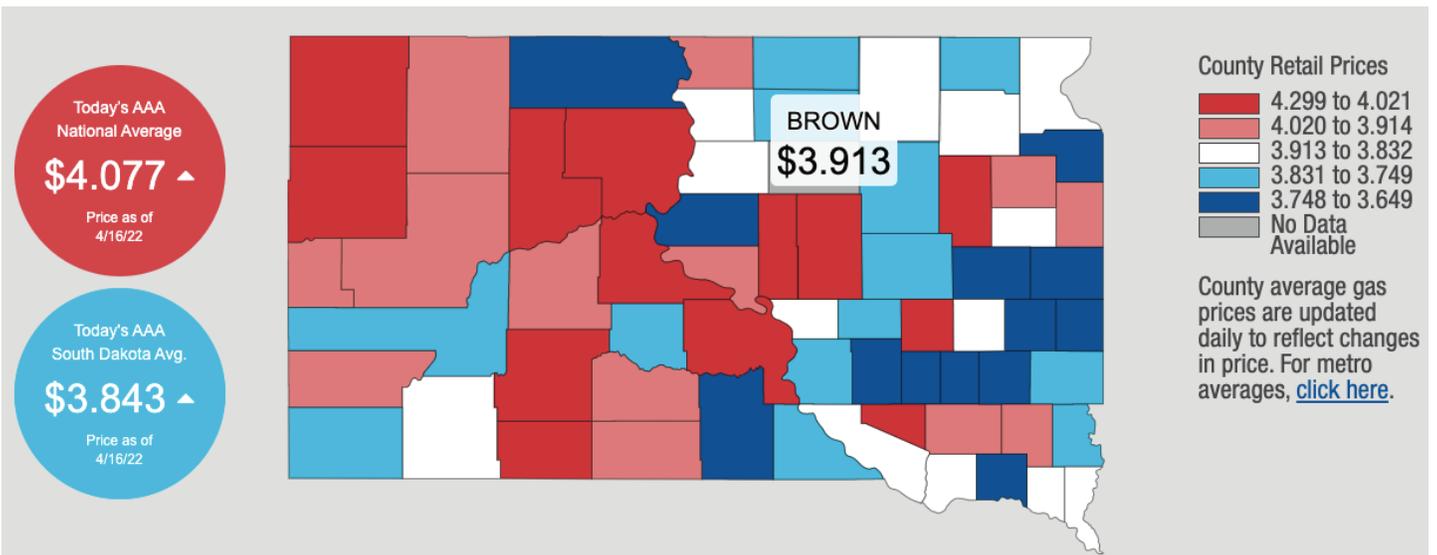
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.965	\$4.092	\$4.458	\$4.893
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.961	\$4.075	\$4.452	\$4.883
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.843	\$3.984	\$4.326	\$4.794
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.938	\$4.054	\$4.457	\$4.671
Year Ago Avg.	\$2.851	\$2.959	\$3.300	\$3.075

This Week



Last Week



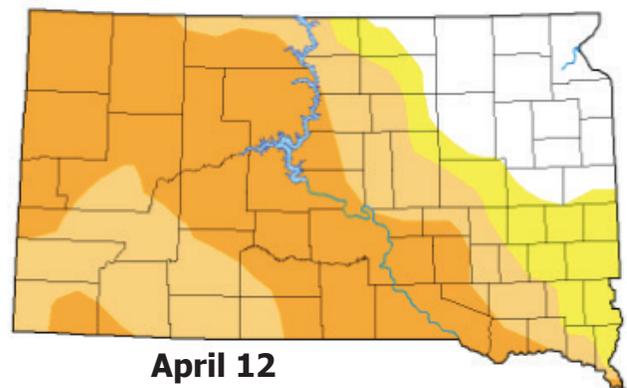
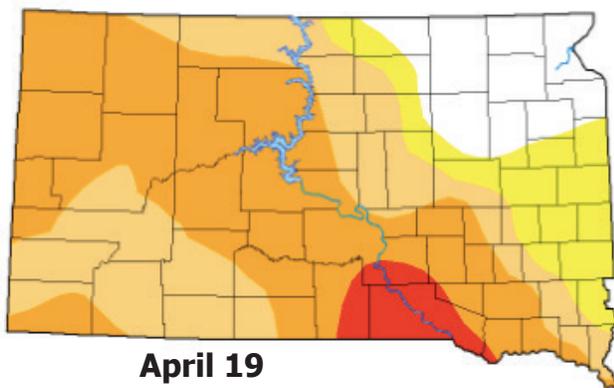
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



High Plains

A winter-like storm pounded North Dakota and portions of neighboring states, delivering much-needed moisture but disrupting travel and stressing livestock. Across the remainder of the High Plains, however, windy, dry weather raised dust, resulted in fast-spreading wildfires, and led to a broad increase in the coverage of abnormal dryness (D0) and moderate to extreme drought (D1 to D3). In North Dakota, April 12-14 snowfall included 12.6 inches in Grand Forks (National Weather Service office) and 18.3 inches in Bismarck. Storm-total snowfall topped 2 feet in several North Dakota communities, including Velva (28.0 inches), Lansford (27.5 inches), Dunn Center (26.0 inches), and Underwood (24.3 inches). During the storm, a wind gust to 54 mph was clocked in Bismarck; elsewhere in North Dakota, gusts reached 60 mph in Dickinson and 63 mph in Minot and Hettinger. In the storm's wake, single-digit low temperatures were common across snow-covered North Dakota, where temperatures fell to 8°F in Minot and Grand Forks. With a low of 0°F on the 16th, Bismarck, North Dakota, experienced its latest-ever reading of 0°F or below—and its coldest April weather since 1996, when it was -1°F on April 5. Temperatures briefly plunged across the central Plains, threatening the already drought-stressed winter wheat crop. Denver, Colorado, registered 10°F on April 13, a record for the date, followed the next day by daily-record lows of 4°F in Sidney, Nebraska, and 9°F in Colby, Kansas. By April 17, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that topsoil moisture was rated more than 60% very short to short in each of the region's states except North Dakota, led by Nebraska (84% very short to short). On the same date, nearly half (48%) of the winter wheat in Colorado was rated in very poor to poor condition. One-fifth to one-third of the wheat was rated very poor to poor in Kansas (31%), Nebraska (27%), and South Dakota (22%).

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

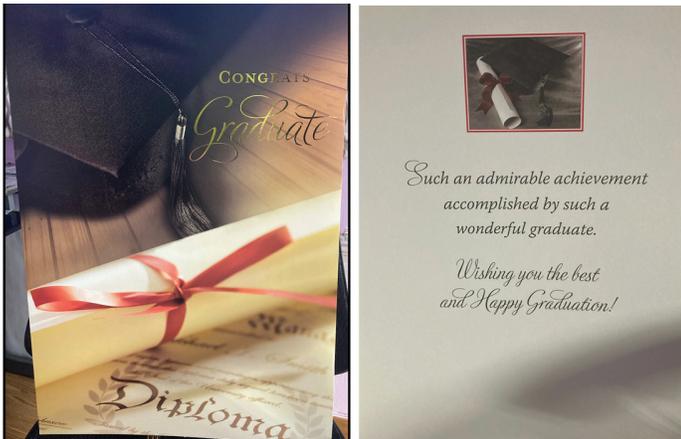
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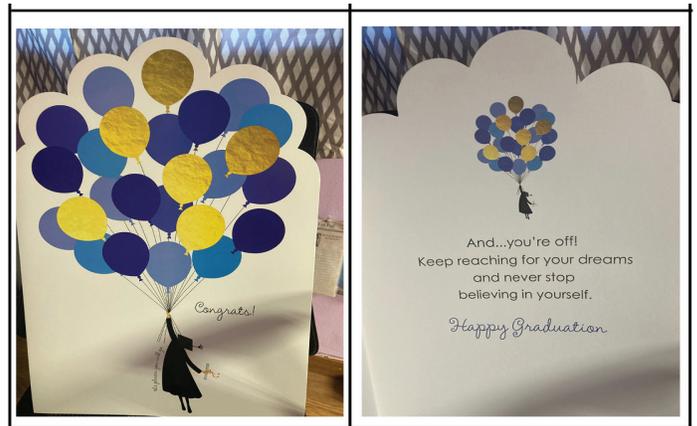
Jumbo Graduation Cards

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

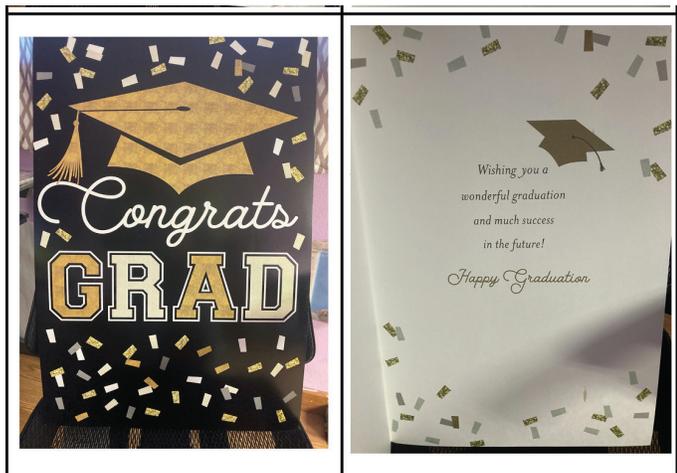
Can now be ordered on-line at 397news.com - Link on Black Bar
Or Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460 or Tina at 605-397-7285
to reserve your card(s)



50-9903-C
\$7.99



50-9666-C
\$7.99



50-10977JM-C
\$7.99



50-9360-C
\$7.99

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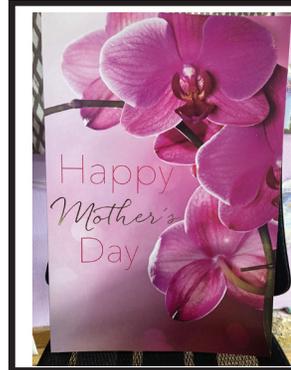
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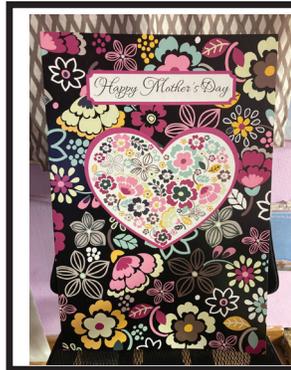
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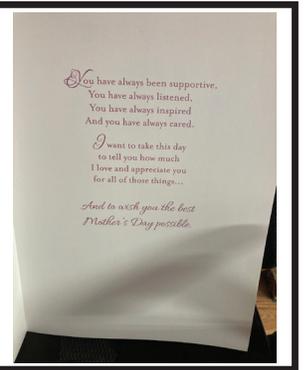
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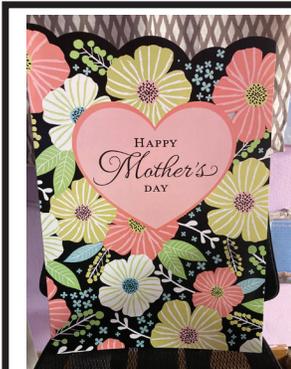
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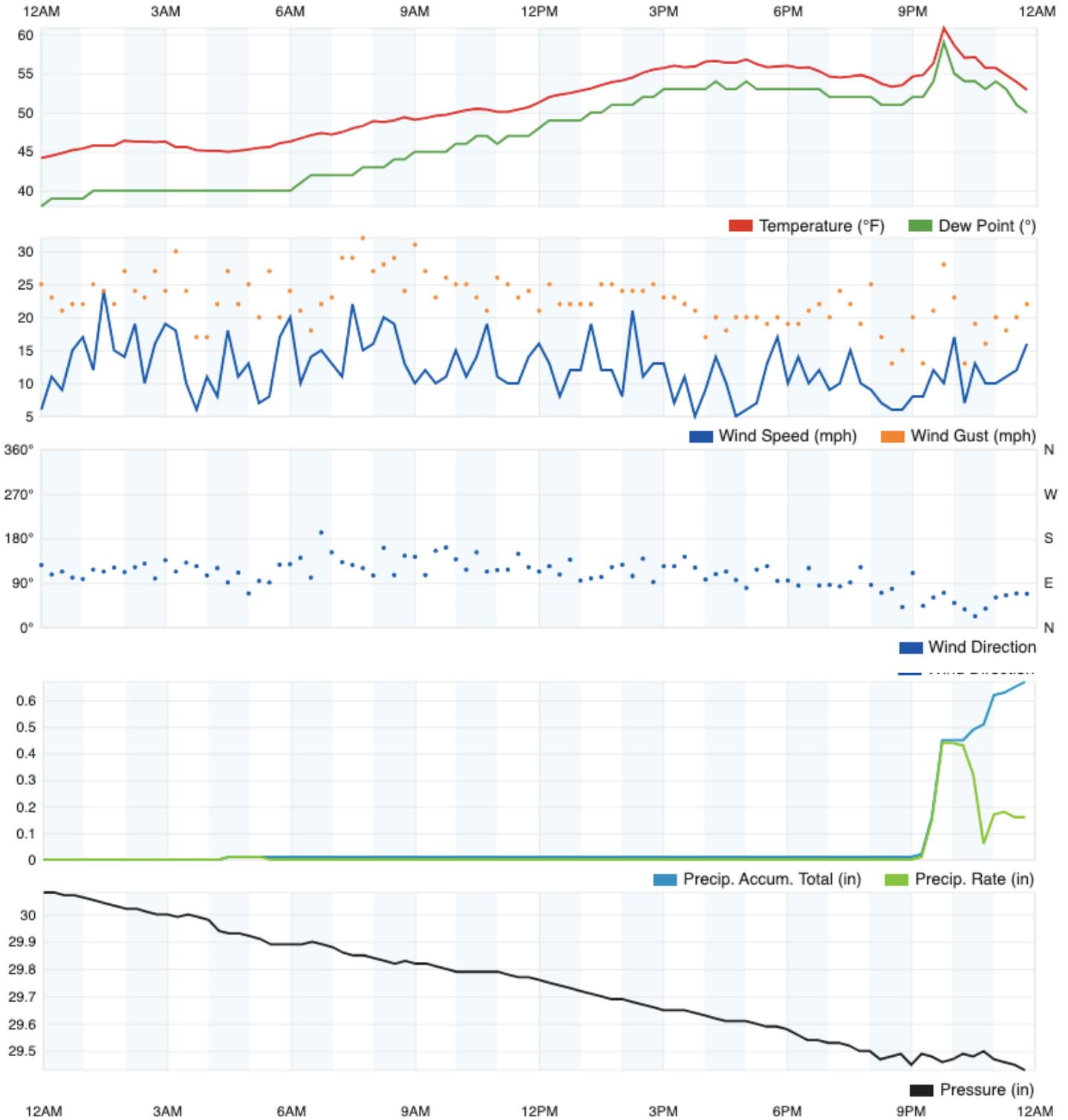
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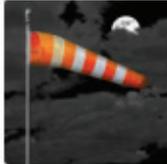
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
50%	60%	40%		
Chance T-storms and Windy	Rain Likely and Breezy	Chance Rain and Breezy	Mostly Cloudy and Blustery	Partly Sunny and Breezy
High: 65 °F ↓	Low: 36 °F	High: 42 °F	Low: 26 °F	High: 42 °F

Severe Storms Possible Again Today

ISSUED: 4:53 AM - Saturday, April 23, 2022

WHAT/WHEN

Strong to severe thunderstorms may produce large hail, damaging winds and a few tornadoes. They are most likely from this late morning through the early afternoon.

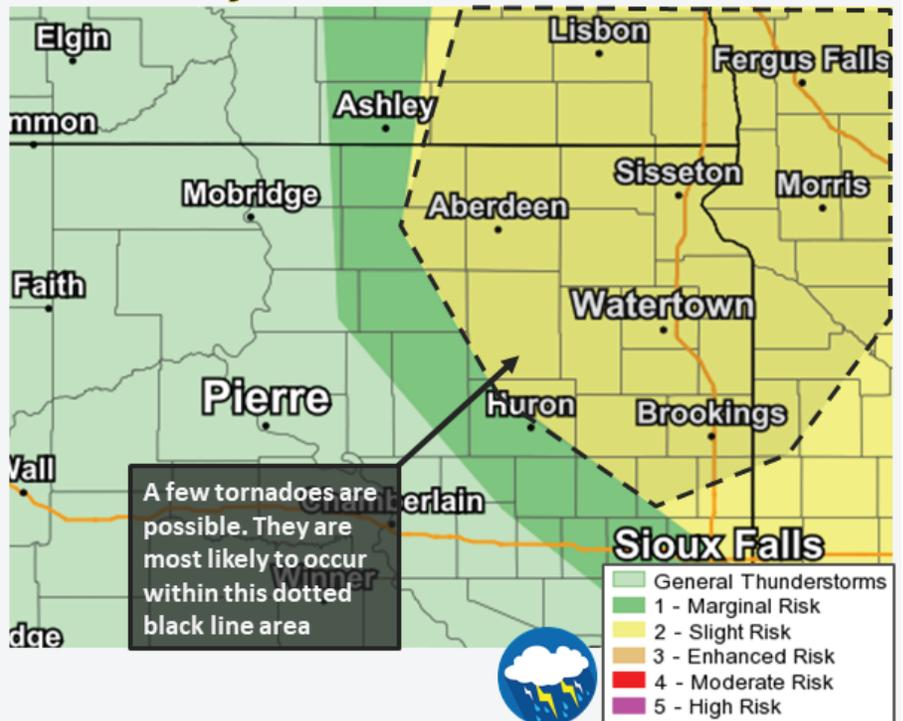
WHERE

Most likely across the yellow "slight" risk area at the right.

ACTION

Storms will be moving quickly northeast. Stay weather-aware by having a way to receive warning information, and have a plan of action in case storms threaten your area.

Saturday's Severe Thunderstorm Outlook



Strong to severe thunderstorms may develop once again today, this time during the late morning into the afternoon across northeastern SD and west central MN. All severe weather hazards are possible. Stay weather-aware, and have a way to receive warning information!

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Windy Conditions Through Sunday

ISSUED: 4:58AM - Saturday, April 23, 2022

WHAT/WHEN

Strong non-thunderstorm winds. **Gusts of 45 to 60+ mph are anticipated today through the day Sunday.** Winds will be from the southwest today, and then switch to the northwest from west to east across the area this evening and tonight.

WHERE

Across much of the area.

IMPACT

Strong wind can be a hazard to high-profile vehicles, potentially pushing or toppling them. Elevated grassland fire danger.

Wind Gust Forecast Through Noon Monday

	Sat					Sun								Mon				
	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm
Aberdeen	44	44	44	40	35	33	33	33	41	44	43	38	35	31	32	28	32	32
Britton	41	45	47	41	35	33	30	33	41	43	44	38	37	35	32	32	35	35
Eagle Butte	38	44	52	54	54	52	51	48	52	54	51	44	39	36	32	26	24	23
Eureka	44	47	47	41	37	41	44	45	51	55	53	44	40	37	36	30	30	31
Gettysburg	37	40	40	37	38	40	44	44	45	45	44	37	36	33	33	28	30	32
Kennebec	45	51	51	52	47	51	48	45	51	51	49	44	38	33	32	26	30	30
McIntosh	52	52	58	55	55	58	58	55	58	60	60	51	44	38	35	30	28	28
Milbank	38	48	45	38	33	33	33	31	38	40	39	35	33	33	33	30	30	31
Miller	44	47	48	41	40	40	44	40	45	47	45	37	37	32	31	26	30	31
Mobridge	35	37	37	37	40	41	45	44	51	51	48	39	36	33	31	24	26	28
Murdo	41	52	55	55	52	52	52	48	54	58	55	44	41	38	32	29	25	24
Pierre	37	40	44	44	47	51	51	47	48	48	46	39	36	33	28	22	25	25
Redfield	40	45	47	38	35	35	35	35	41	44	41	37	33	31	30	26	31	33
Sisseton	41	47	47	44	40	38	38	38	44	47	46	41	40	40	40	37	33	35
Watertown	47	51	48	40	38	37	35	33	40	40	40	37	33	33	32	29	32	33
Wheaton	41	45	48	37	31	31	30	30	37	38	40	37	37	36	33	31	29	30

*Table values in mph



A strong low pressure system will lead to continued windy conditions through Sunday. Wind gusts of 45 to 60+ mph are possible at times.

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Today in Weather History

April 23, 2002: High winds of 35 to 50 mph gusting to over 70 mph occurred across much of central and northeast South Dakota. The high winds caused some spotty damage to property and trees. With the dry conditions, dust was stirred up by the winds and caused reduced visibilities at many locations. The highest wind gust was 72 mph at Onida.

1885 - The city of Denver, CO, was in the midst of a storm which produced 23 inches of snow in 24 hours, and at Idaho Springs CO produced 32 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1910 - The temperature at the Civic Center in Los Angeles, CA, hit 100 degrees to establish an April record for the city. (The Weather Channel)

1948: A three block long section was devastated at the edge of Ionia, Iowa in Chickasaw County by an estimated F4 tornado. Six homes and a church were leveled, and nine other homes were severely damaged. Two deaths occurred in the collapse of the Huffman Implement Store. Overall, the tornado killed five people, injured 25, and caused \$250,000 in damages. An F2 tornado touched down initially 5 miles northeast of Rochester. Barns, silos, windmills, and machinery were destroyed on four farms as this tornado tracked north.

1961: Severe weather struck the south suburbs of Chicago, IL. Joliet, IL reported an inch of hail with some hailstones the size of golf balls. Heavy rain from these storms also resulted in some flooding. A tornado struck the town of Peotone resulting in damage to nearly every building with damage also reported in Lorenzo and Wilton Center, IL. Estimated damage was \$9 million with about 30,000 structures affected.

1983 - A mini-blizzard produced sixteen inches of snow at Laramie, WY, including a foot of snow in just eight hours during the night. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms in the Atlantic Coast Region produced golf ball size hail and wind gusts to 67 mph at Anderson SC. The high winds destroyed two planes at the airport, and the large hail damaged fifty other planes, and severely damaged twenty-three greenhouses. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - An intense winter-like storm brought thunderstorms to southern California, and produced snow in some of the higher elevations. Nine girls at Tustin CA were injured when lightning struck the tree under which their softball team had taken shelter from the rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989: Salina Kansas was the hot spot in the nation with a high of 105 degrees. The high of 105 degrees established an April record for the state of Kansas.

1999: On Friday, April 23, 1999, a horrific hailstorm moved southeast from Pennsylvania across Garrett County, Maryland and into the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. It had weakened some as it crossed Garrett County and the Allegheny Front, but as it passed east of Keyser, West Virginia, hail began to increase in size once again. By the time it reached Capon Bridge in eastern Hampshire County, West Virginia, the size of the hail had grown from golf balls to baseballs. As it moved into Frederick County, VA, the hail storm continued to grow dropping golf ball size hail in a swath now reaching from the north of Winchester, south to Stephen City (about 10 miles). Hailstones grew to the size of Grapefruit (4 inches in diameter) east of Winchester. The storm continued east through Clarke County, southern Loudoun, and northern Fauquier doing considerable damage to Middleburg, then across Fairfax County hitting Centreville, Chantilly, Fairfax, Burke, Springfield, and Lorton with golf ball size to baseball size hail. It crossed the Potomac River and weakened slightly. It moved across northern Charles, clipped southern Prince Georges and then into Calvert County with 1 inch to 1.5-inch diameter hail and onto the Chesapeake Bay continuing southeast to the ocean. The damage left behind was incredible. In Northern Virginia alone, it amounted to over \$50 million in losses to public and private properties. Some communities saw a third of the homes with siding and roof damage. Some required total replacement. Windows were broken, cars dented, and windshields smashed. Piles of shredded plant debris were left on the ground in the storm path. In about 6 hours of time, this one thunderstorm, moving at about 50 mph, did \$75 million in damage. There have been other severe hail storms to hit this area before, but none to cause this much damage to property.

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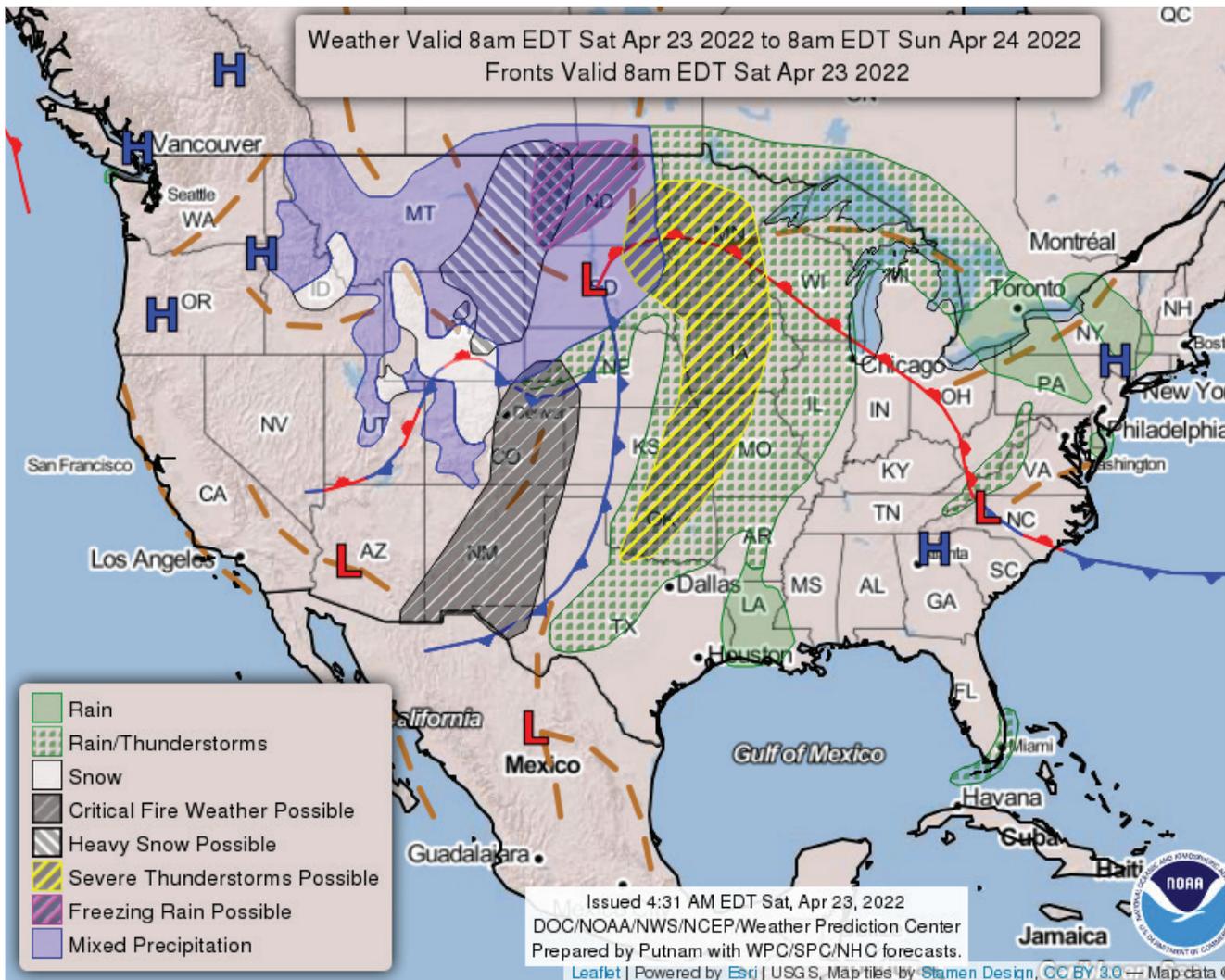
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 61 °F at 9:45 PM
Low Temp: 44 °F at 12:00 AM
Wind: 34 mph at 8:47 AM
Precip: 0.94

Day length: 13 hours, 59 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 90 in 2009
Record Low: 14 in 1956
Average High: 61°F
Average Low: 34°F
Average Precip in April.: 1.27
Precip to date in April.: 3.04
Average Precip to date: 3.33
Precip Year to Date: 4.84
Sunset Tonight: 8:30:16 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:29:25 AM



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LOOK CAREFULLY

Years ago, I was given a pencil. Written on one side of it was a quote from Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living." When I asked what it meant, I was told, "Humans should look within themselves to find the true meaning of life." Most of us do "examine" ourselves in one way or another. Often, however, it is difficult to be honest and objective, thorough and impartial. Many times we do not like what we see and gloss over our faults and failures. Sometimes when we can no longer hide a flaw, we make excuses and blame someone else for what we see and do not like. Often when we see what we do not like, we try to cover it up and hide it from others.

But we cannot hide from God. "O Lord," the Psalmist wrote, "You have examined my heart and know everything there is about me." If that statement were about anyone but God, most of us would be rather frightened by what someone might do with that information.

But with God, it's different. What He knows about us can be used to our advantage to complete the purpose and plan He has for our lives. He knows when we sit down, when we stand up, what we are thinking, where we are going, when we are active, and when we are resting, even everything we are going to say before we say it. "Why" we ask?

And, the Psalmist answered it clearly and convincingly: "You go before me and follow me. You place Your hand of blessing on my head." He is before us and after us to bless us!

God has no intention of gathering information about us to destroy us. He knows everything there is to know about us, yet He still accepts us and loves us. He is with us in every situation, in every trial and every triumph, every defeat and every victory.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your involvement in our lives. We are grateful for Your grace that guides and guards us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything there is about me. Psalm 139:1

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2022 Community Events

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

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

07-28-29-58-59, Mega Ball: 10, Megaplier: 3

(seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-nine; Mega Ball: ten; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$22 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$400 million

Ramsdell appointed as U.S. attorney for South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota federal court officials have appointed a U.S. attorney who will serve until the position is filled by a presidential nominee.

Alison Ramsdell was sworn in as top federal prosecutor on Thursday and started the job on Friday. She first joined the office in 2014 as an assistant U.S. attorney and has led the district's civil division since 2016.

Ramsdell replaces Dennis Holmes, who announced his retirement earlier this week. Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed Holmes as U.S. attorney for 120 days in December following U.S. Attorney Ron Parsons' resignation.

"It is a profound honor to serve the District of South Dakota in this capacity, and I am deeply grateful to be doing the work alongside such exceptional colleagues," Ramsdell said in a statement.

Ramsdell received her bachelor's degree from Valparaiso and her law degree from the University of Iowa. She lives in Flandreau with her husband and two sons.

Blizzard warning for parts of Dakotas, Wyoming, Montana

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Heavy snow and strong gusty winds will whip up blizzard conditions for parts of several states this weekend, including the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana, according to forecasters.

The National Weather Service issued a blizzard warning from overnight Friday through Sunday. Portions of northeastern Wyoming and northwestern South Dakota, including the northern Black Hills, could see up to 18 inches (45.7 centimeters) to 20 inches (50.8 centimeters) of snow with wind gusts of 65 mph to 75 mph.

Travel should be restricted to emergencies only, the weather service advised.

Across the plains from Rapid City eastward, severe thunderstorms were expected Friday afternoon and evening with large hail, damaging winds and the potential for tornadoes.

It's another round of challenging weather, especially for North Dakota where a three-day blizzard last week dropped 2 feet (60.9 centimeters) to 3 feet (91.4 centimeters) of snow over a wide western area, and an Easter Sunday storm that followed added several inches more. The snowy and cold weather set more than two dozen records in the state, including nearly 10 in Bismarck alone.

Snowfall rates up to 2 inches per hour are possible in western North Dakota on Saturday, according to AccuWeather, the Bismarck Tribune reported.

"Where the heaviest snow falls, on the order of 1-2 feet, strong winds can not only create blizzard conditions but cause drifts of 5-8 feet in some cases," AccuWeather meteorologist Alex Sosnowski said. "Motorists with travel plans through these areas should be prepared for major delays and road closures. Interstate 94 could be affected," he added.

Tour boat with 26 missing in north Japan after distress call

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By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A tour boat with 26 people aboard was missing in rough and cold waters off northern Japan on Saturday after issuing a distress call and reporting to be sinking, the coast guard said.

No survivors have been found after more than 10 hours of an intense search involving six patrol boats, five aircraft and divers. The coast guard said it will continue with the search through the night.

The 19-ton Kazu 1 made an emergency call in early afternoon, saying the ship's bow had flooded and was beginning to sink and tilt while it was traveling off the western coast of Shiretoko Peninsula in the northern island of Hokkaido, the coast guard said.

The tour boat has since lost contact, according to the coast guard. It said the boat was carrying 24 passengers, including two children, and two crew.

Average April sea temperatures in Shiretoko National Park are just above freezing.

An official of the vessel's operator, Shiretoko Pleasure Cruise, said he could not comment as he had to respond to calls from worried families of the passengers.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who was attending a two-day water summit in Kumamoto in southern Japan, was canceling his program for Sunday and was set to return to Tokyo to deal with the missing boat, the NHK public broadcaster reported.

High waves and strong winds were observed in the area around noon, according to a local fisheries cooperative. Japanese media reports said fishing boats had returned to port before noon because of the bad weather.

NHK said there was a warning for high waves of up to 3 meters (9 feet) high.

Yoshihiko Yamada, a Tokai University marine science professor, said the boat was likely to have run aground after it was tossed around in high waves and damaged, flooded and probably sank. A tour boat of that size usually does not carry a life boat, and passengers possibly could not jump out of a rapidly sinking vessel with its windows probably closed to shield them from strong winds.

In an interview with the TBS television, Yamada said there is also a slight possibility that the boat might have been hit by a whale.

The cold temperature and strong wind could cause hypothermia and put the passengers in severe conditions for survival, according to Jun Abe, vice chairman of the Society of Water Rescue and Survival Research. "It's a very severe condition especially when they are wet," Abe told TBS.

According to the operator's website, the tour takes about three hours and offers a scenic view of the western coast of the peninsula, including the nature and animals such as whales, dolphins and the brown bear. The national park is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site and is famous as the southernmost region to see drifting sea ice.

For Ukrainian Orthodox in US, war news casts pall on Easter

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

The rituals leading up to Easter are the same. The solemn Good Friday processions. The Holy Saturday blessings of foods that were avoided during Lent. The liturgies accompanied by processions, bells and chants.

But while Easter is the holiest of holy days on the church calendar, marking the day Christians believe Jesus triumphed over death, many members of Ukrainian Orthodox churches across the United States are finding it difficult to summon joy at a time of war.

Many are in regular contact with relatives or friends suffering amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has laid waste to cities and claimed thousands of civilian lives, according to the Ukrainian government.

"This is a very strange Easter for us," said the Rev. Richard Jendras, priest at St. Mary's Ukrainian Orthodox Cathedral in Allentown, Pennsylvania. "It should be a joyous holiday, and it's all about new life, and yet here we are being confronted with the harbingers of murder and killing and genocide and death."

Many believers "are walking around like zombies," he said. "We are going through the motions of Easter right now because it's what we have to hang on to."

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Orysia Germak, a member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Volodymyr in New York City, said news from the war summons bad memories: She was born in a camp for displaced persons camp after her mother fled Ukraine post-World War II, she said.

"Easter is such a joyous occasion, but this underlines everything," she said. "It's surreal."

Both cathedrals are part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA, whose parishes include many people with recent or ancestral ties to the old country.

Most Catholics and Protestants celebrated Easter last Sunday, but Eastern Orthodox are celebrating this Sunday. They usually do so later than Western churches because they use a different method of calculating the date for the holy day, which they call Pascha.

Some Ukrainian Catholics, particularly in Ukraine itself, also are celebrating this Sunday. But Ukrainian Catholics in the U.S. celebrated last Sunday.

Pascha will be marked on both sides of the battle lines. Eastern Orthodoxy is the predominant religion in Ukraine and Russia, as well as in several neighboring lands. A schism among Ukrainian Orthodox — with one group asserting independence and the other historically loyal to the patriarch of Moscow — has reverberated worldwide amid competing claims of legitimacy. But the two main Orthodox bodies in Ukraine have both fiercely opposed the Russian invasion.

In the United States, many people with ties to Ukraine are monitoring the war closely and sending funds to individuals and aid groups there, said Andrew Fessak, president of the board of trustees at St. Volodymyr.

While Orthodox in America can celebrate freely, "our relatives and friends in Ukraine are under pressure from an invading army and aren't as free to celebrate as they wish," Fessak said. "They may not be able to get to churches. They may not be able to walk about town like they wish. They may not be able to have traditional foods they might have on Easter."

And yet he takes heart in the strength of the Ukrainian resistance.

"The Ukrainian population has shown they are highly keen on retaining Ukrainian independence," he said. "That's at least a strong comfort to us, to see there is such a strong civic pride and sense of patriotism."

The Rev. John Charest of St. Peter & St. Paul Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Carnegie, Pennsylvania, said it's important to carry out the historic rituals even in somber times — in part to defy Russian President Vladimir Putin, who launched the war while claiming that Ukraine has no historic legitimacy apart from Russia. Ukrainians say they are a separate though related people group, with their own language and traditions.

Even though believers in the U.S. may have "a feeling of survivor's guilt," they have a duty to continue traditions that are under such threat in Ukraine, Charest said.

"We do need to be strong now and we do need to be celebrating this feast," he said. "If we're not celebrating our traditions, that's exactly what Putin wants."

Jendras said the holy day offers a timeless message: "We have to look at the evil in front of us and say no, good does triumph and will always triumph."

EXPLAINER: How South Carolina execution firing squad works

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — It's unknown how long a stay will hold off the execution of Richard Bernard Moore — South Carolina's first-ever inmate to be put to death by a firing squad — as his attorneys pursue legal challenges.

But the issuance of Moore's death warrant, initially planned to be carried out April 29, has renewed interest in how a state puts in motion its plans to shoot an inmate to death. The method is employed in only a handful of states and has not been used in the U.S. in more than a decade.

South Carolina just instituted the firing squad option last year, giving condemned inmates the choice between that and electrocution, prompted by an inability to procure lethal injection drugs.

In choosing the firing squad, the 57-year-old Moore said he didn't concede that either method was legal or constitutional but that he more strongly opposed death by electrocution and only opted for the firing

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squad because he was required to make a choice.

Moore drew the death sentence for the 1999 killing of convenience store clerk James Mahoney in Spartanburg. Planning to rob the store for money to support his cocaine habit, investigators have said that Mahoney pulled a gun, which Moore was able to wrestle away and use to shoot the clerk.

A May 13 execution date has also been set for another inmate, Brad Sigmon, although a state judge is examining his legal argument that both electrocution and the firing squad are "barbaric" methods of killing.

Only three executions in the United States have been carried out by firing squad since 1976, according to the Washington-based nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center. Moore's would mark the first since Ronnie Lee Gardner's 2010 execution by a five-person firing squad in Utah.

WHEN DID THIS PROCESS BEGIN?

South Carolina — once home to one of the busiest death chambers in the nation — has been unable to carry out any execution since 2011, an involuntary pause that officials have attributed to the state's inability to procure the trifecta of drugs needed to carry out a lethal injection. Condemned inmates had the choice between injection and electrocution, meaning that opting for the former would in essence leave the state unable to carry out the sentence.

For several years, lawmakers have mulled adding the firing squad as an option to approved methods, but debate never advanced. Last year, Democratic Sen. Dick Harpootlian and GOP Sen. Greg Hembree, both of whom previously served as prosecutors, again argued in favor of adding the firing squad option.

"The death penalty is going to stay the law here for a while. If it is going to remain, it ought to be humane," Harpootlian said, positing that the firing squad provided a more humane alternative than electrocution, if executions were to continue in the GOP-dominated state.

The measure, which Republican Gov. Henry McMaster signed into law last May, made South Carolina the fourth state in the country to allow use of a firing squad, according to the Washington-based nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center.

HOW IS THE EXECUTION CARRIED OUT?

Since the bill's passage, the South Carolina Department of Corrections worked at retrofitting its existing death chamber in Columbia — where executions by lethal injection and electrocution have been carried out for more than 30 years — to accommodate the needs of a firing squad.

The agency spent \$53,600 in state funding on renovations, including the installation of bullet-resistant glass between the death chamber and witnesses, as well as a metal chair into which the inmate will be strapped. They also cut into the brick wall of the chamber to make an aperture through which the three shooters — all volunteer employees from the Corrections Department — will thread their weapons, all loaded with live ammunition.

The aperture is 15 feet from the condemned, situated in a corner of the room, according to a memo released last month by the prisons agency. While the inmate will be visible to witnesses, officials said that the shooters and their weapons will not.

The electric chair, which officials say cannot be removed from the chamber, will be covered in its spot between the glass wall and the firing squad chair.

After an opportunity to make a final statement, the inmate will be strapped into the chair and a hood placed over his head. An execution team member will place a "small aim point" over the inmate's heart.

After the warden reads the execution order, officials said the team will fire. The agency has not specified what caliber rifles the volunteer shooters will use, nor details of the "certain qualifications" they will be required to have met.

WHO WILL BE THERE TO WITNESS IT?

Aside from the state officials in the chamber to carry out the execution, three media witnesses may attend the execution, as well as three witnesses from the victim's family, according to the Corrections Department.

State law also allows religious and legal counsel for the inmate, as well as representatives from law enforcement and local prosecutors.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTERWARD?

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As is standard with all South Carolina executions, a physician will examine the inmate and make a death declaration. A photo released by Corrections officials shows a lipped metal basin underneath the inmate chair, as well as a rectangular box directly behind it, potentially to absorb the gunfire.

Immediately thereafter, the witnesses will be escorted from the room and taken to the Corrections headquarters building, where other media will be gathered.

Out of sight of the witnesses, the inmate's body is removed from the chamber and taken by the Richland County Coroner's Office for an autopsy before being returned to the inmate's family.

French election: Macron in pole position, Le Pen racing hard

By SYLVIE CORBET The Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron is in the pole position to win reelection Sunday in the country's presidential runoff, yet his lead over far-right rival Marine Le Pen depends on one major uncertainty: voters who could decide to stay home.

A Macron victory in this vote — which could have far-reaching repercussions for Europe's future direction and Western efforts to stop the war in Ukraine — would make him the first French president in 20 years to win a second term.

All opinion polls in recent days converge toward a win for the 44-year-old pro-European centrist — yet the margin over his nationalist rival varies broadly, from 6 to 15 percentage points, depending on the poll. Polls also forecast a possibly record-high number of people who will either cast a blank vote or not vote at all.

Overseas French territories allowed voters to start casting ballots Saturday in polling stations that ranged from near the Caribbean shore in the Antilles to the savannahs of French Guiana on the South American coast.

Back on the French mainland, workers assembled a stage Saturday beneath the Eiffel Tower where Macron is expected to make his post-election speech, win or lose.

France's April 10 first-round vote eliminated 10 other presidential candidates, and who becomes the country's next leader — Macron or Le Pen — will largely depend on what supporters of those losing candidates do on Sunday.

The question is a hard one, especially for leftist voters who dislike Macron but don't want to see Le Pen in power either. Macron issued multiple appeals to leftist voters in recent days in hopes of securing their support.

"Think about what British citizens were saying a few hours before Brexit or (people) in the United States before Trump's election happened: 'I'm not going, what's the point?' I can tell you that they regretted it the next day," Macron warned this week on France 5 television.

"So if you want to avoid the unthinkable ... choose for yourself!" he urged hesitant French voters.

The two rivals were combative in the final days before Sunday's election, clashing Wednesday in a one-on-one televised debate. No campaigning is allowed through the weekend, and polling is banned.

Macron argued that the loan Le Pen's far-right party received in 2014 from a Czech-Russian bank made her unsuitable to deal with Moscow amid its invasion of Ukraine. He also said her plans to ban Muslim women in France from wearing headscarves in public would trigger "civil war" in the country that has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe.

"When someone explains to you that Islam equals Islamism equals terrorism equals a problem, that is clearly called the far-right," Macron declared Friday on France Inter radio.

In his victory speech in 2017, Macron had promised to "do everything" during his five-year term so that the French "have no longer any reason to vote for the extremes."

Five years later, that challenge has not been met. Le Pen has consolidated her place on France's political scene after rebranding herself as less extreme.

Le Pen's campaign this time has sought to appeal to voters struggling with surging food and energy prices amid the fallout of Russia's war in Ukraine. The 53-year-old candidate said bringing down the cost of living would be a top priority if she was elected as France's first woman president.

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She criticized Macron's "calamitous" presidency in her last rally in the northern town of Arras.

"I'm not even mentioning immigration or security for which, I believe, every French person can only note the failure of the Macron's policies ... his economic record is also catastrophic," she declared.

Political analyst Marc Lazar, head of the History Center at Sciences Po, said even if Macron is reelected, "there is a big problem," he added. "A great number of the people who are going to vote for Macron, they are not voting for this program, but because they reject Marine Le Pen."

He said that means Macron will face a "big level of mistrust" in the country.

Macron has vowed to change the French economy to make it more independent while still protecting social benefits. He said he will also keep pushing for a more powerful Europe.

His first term was rocked by the yellow vest protests against social injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. It notably forced Macron to delay a key pension reform, which he said he would relaunch soon after reelection, to gradually raise France's minimum retirement age from 62 to 65. He says that's the only way to keep benefits flowing to retirees.

The French presidential election is also being closely watched abroad.

In several European newspapers on Thursday, the center-left leaders of Germany, Spain and Portugal urged French voters to choose him over his nationalist rival. They raised a warning about "populists and the extreme right" who hold Putin "as an ideological and political model, replicating his chauvinist ideas."

A Le Pen victory would be a "traumatic moment, not only for France, but for European Union and for international relationships, especially with the USA," Lazar said, noting that Le Pen "wants a distant relationship between France and the USA."

In any case, Sunday's winner will soon face another obstacle in governing France: A legislative election in June will decide who controls a majority of seats in France's National Assembly.

Already, the battles promise to be hard-fought.

Israeli restrictions on 'Holy Fire' ignite Christian outrage

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Christians celebrated their "Holy Fire" ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on Saturday against a backdrop of rising tensions with Israel, which imposed new restrictions on attendance this year that it said were needed for safety.

Israel says it wants to prevent another disaster after a crowd stampede at a packed Jewish holy site last year left 45 people dead. Christian leaders say there's no need to alter a ceremony that has been held for centuries.

In the dense confines of Jerusalem's Old City, where Jews, Christians and Muslims must share their holiest sites — no matter how reluctantly — even small changes can cause prophetic angst.

The city has already seen a week of clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police at the nearby Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam. It stands on a hilltop that is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount.

This year major Jewish, Christian and Muslim holidays have converged against a backdrop of renewed Israeli-Palestinian violence. Tensions have soared as tens of thousands of people flock to Jerusalem's Old City to visit some of the holiest sites for all three faiths for the first time since the lifting of pandemic restrictions.

Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that on the Saturday before Easter a miraculous flame appears inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a sprawling 12th century basilica built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected.

On Saturday, Greek Patriarch Theophilos III entered the Holy Edicule, a chamber built on the traditional site of the tomb, and returned with two lit candles, passing the flame among thousands of people holding candles, gradually illuminating the walls of the darkened basilica. The flame will be transferred to Orthodox communities in other countries on special flights.

The source of the Holy Fire has been a closely guarded secret for centuries, and highbrow skeptics going

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back to the Middle Ages have scorned it as a carnival trick for the masses.

Two years ago, the church was nearly empty because of a coronavirus lockdown, but Israel made special arrangements for the flame to be carried abroad. Hundreds attended last year, when travel restrictions were in place and the ceremony was limited to the fully-vaccinated.

This year, Israel applied a safety law that limits crowd size based on space and the number of exits. Authorities say they want to prevent a repeat of last year's stampede on Mount Meron in northern Israel during a religious festival attended by around 100,000 mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews.

It was one of the worst disasters in the country's history, and authorities came in for heavy criticism over alleged negligence.

"There's never a problem until there's a problem, and this is what happened last year in Meron," said Tania Berg-Rafaeli, the director of interreligious affairs at the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

If something were to happen at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, "we would have to take responsibility for that, and we want to avoid any problem," she said.

Authorities said they would allow a total of 4,000 people to attend the Holy Fire ceremony, including 1,800 inside the church itself, which has a single large entryway with a raised step. Berg-Rafaeli said Israeli authorities have been in close contact with the churches and would revise the quota upwards next year if more doors in the basilica can be opened.

"It's totally about safety and not at all about anything else," she said.

Church leaders rejected any restrictions on principle, saying they infringe on religious freedom. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, like Al-Aqsa, is governed by a decades-old set of informal arrangements known as the status quo. As at Al-Aqsa, seemingly minor violations have ignited violence, including notorious brawls between monks of different denominations.

In a statement released earlier this month, the Greek Patriarchate said it was "fed up with police restrictions on freedom to worship."

"The orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem has decided, by the power of the Lord, that it will not compromise its right to provide spiritual services in all churches and squares," it said. "Prayers will be held as usual." The patriarchate says up to 11,000 people attend in normal years.

Police sealed off the main entrances to the Christian Quarter with barricades. Large crowds jostled to get in, as the police waded through a trickle of local residents and some foreign tourists.

The ceremony, which goes back at least 1,200 years, hasn't always passed peacefully.

In 1834 a frenzied stampede broke out in the darkened church, and the ruler of the Holy Land at the time barely escaped with his life after his guards drew swords and hacked their way through the crowd, the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore recounts in his history of Jerusalem. Some 400 pilgrims died in the melee, most from suffocation or trampling.

Israel says it is committed to ensuring freedom of worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims, and has long presented itself as an island of tolerance in the Middle East.

In recent years, however, tensions have risen with the local Christian community, most of whom are Palestinian Christians, a population that has steadily dwindled through decades of conflict as many have sought economic opportunities abroad.

Israel captured east Jerusalem — which includes the historic Old City and its religious sites — along with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in the 1967 Mideast war.

The Palestinians want all three territories for a future state with east Jerusalem as its capital. Israel annexed east Jerusalem shortly after the war in a move not recognized internationally, and considers the entire city to be its unified capital.

In recent years, the Greek Patriarchate has been locked in a legal battle with a Jewish settler group over the sale of three properties in the Old City, including two Palestinian-run hotels. The patriarchate says it has proof of corruption in the disputed 2004 sale.

Israel's Supreme Court upheld the sale in 2019, ruling in favor of Ateret Cohanim, an Israeli organization that seeks to expand the Jewish presence in mostly Palestinian neighborhoods of east Jerusalem.

The settlers took over part of one of the hotels — a popular backpacker hostel — last month. Christian leaders denounced the move, accusing them of trying to change the religious character of Jerusalem's Christian Quarter.

The frustration could be felt outside the New Gate leading to the Christian Quarter on Saturday, as crowds waited to enter. Some lifted baby strollers and small children over the barricades as they were waved through.

"It's like this every year and every year there's a different excuse," said Dr. Muna Mushahwar, a physician who argued with police as she tried to organize the entry of a foreign delegation.

"They don't want the Christians here. The more you push people the more frustrated they get and then they leave."

EU law targets Big Tech over hate speech, disinformation

By KELVIN CHAN and RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Big tech companies like Google and Facebook parent Meta will have to police their platforms more strictly to better protect European users from hate speech, disinformation and other harmful online content under landmark EU legislation approved early Saturday.

European Union officials clinched the agreement in principle on the Digital Services Act after lengthy final negotiations that began Friday. The law will also force tech companies to make it easier for users to flag problems, ban online ads aimed at kids and empower regulators to punish noncompliance with billions in fines.

The Digital Services Act, one half of an overhaul for the 27-nation bloc's digital rulebook, helps cement Europe's reputation as the global leader in efforts to rein in the power of social media companies and other digital platforms.

"With the DSA, the time of big online platforms behaving like they are 'too big to care' is coming to an end," said EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton.

EU Commission Vice President Margrethe Vestager added that "with today's agreement we ensure that platforms are held accountable for the risks their services can pose to society and citizens."

The act is the EU's third significant law targeting the tech industry, a notable contrast with the U.S., where lobbyists representing Silicon Valley's interests have largely succeeded in keeping federal lawmakers at bay.

While the Justice Department and Federal Trade Commission have filed major antitrust actions against Google and Facebook, Congress remains politically divided on efforts to address competition, online privacy, disinformation and more.

The EU's new rules should make tech companies more accountable for content created by users and amplified by their platforms' algorithms.

The biggest online platforms and search engines, defined as having more than 45 million users, will face extra scrutiny.

Breton said they will have plenty of stick to back up their laws, including "effective and dissuasive" fines of up to 6% of a company's annual global revenue, which for big tech companies would amount to billions of dollars. Repeat offenders could be banned from the EU, he said.

The tentative agreement was reached between the EU parliament and the bloc's member states. It still needs to be officially rubber-stamped by those institutions, which is expected after summer but should pose no political problem. The rules then won't start applying until 15 months after that approval, or Jan. 1, 2024, whichever is later.

"The DSA is nothing short of a paradigm shift in tech regulation. It's the first major attempt to set rules and standards for algorithmic systems in digital media markets," said Ben Scott, a former tech policy advisor to Hillary Clinton who's now executive director of advocacy group Reset.

The need to regulate Big Tech more effectively came into sharper focus after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when Russia used social media platforms to try to influence voters. Tech companies like Facebook and Twitter promised to crack down on disinformation, but the problems have only worsened. During the

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pandemic, health misinformation blossomed and again the companies were slow to act, cracking down after years of allowing anti-vaccine falsehoods to thrive on their platforms.

Under the EU law, governments would be able to ask companies take down a wide range of content that would be deemed illegal, including material that promotes terrorism, child sexual abuse, hate speech and commercial scams. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter would have to give users tools to flag such content in an "easy and effective way" so that it can be swiftly removed. Online marketplaces like Amazon would have to do the same for dodgy products, such as counterfeit sneakers or unsafe toys.

These systems will be standardized to work the same way on any online platform.

Germany's justice minister said the rules would safeguard freedom of speech online by ensuring sites can be made to review decisions on deleting posts. At the same time, they'll be required to prevent their platforms being misused, said Marco Buschmann.

"Death threats, aggressive insults and incitement to violence aren't expressions of free speech but rather attacks on free and open discourse," he said.

Tech companies, which had furiously lobbied Brussels to water down the legislation, responded cautiously.

Twitter said it would review the rules "in detail" and that it supports "smart, forward thinking regulation that balances the need to tackle online harm with protecting the Open Internet."

TikTok said it awaits the act's full details but "we support its aim to harmonize the approach to online content issues and welcome the DSA's focus on transparency as a means to show accountability."

Google said it looks forward to "working with policymakers to get the remaining technical details right to ensure the law works for everyone." Amazon referred to a blog post from last year that said it welcomed measures that enhance trust in online services. Facebook didn't respond to a request for comment.

The Digital Services Act bans ads targeted at minors, as well as ads based on users' gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. It also bans deceptive techniques companies use to nudge people into doing things they didn't intend to, such as signing up for services that are easy to opt into, but hard to decline.

To show they're making progress on limiting these practices, tech companies would have to carry out annual risk assessments of their platforms.

Up until now, regulators have had no access to the inner workings at Google, Facebook and other popular services. But under the new law, the companies will have to be more transparent and provide information to regulators and independent researchers on content-moderation efforts. This could mean, for example, making YouTube turn over data on whether its recommendation algorithm has been directing users to more Russian propaganda than normal.

To enforce the new rules, the EU's executive Commission is expected to hire more than 200 new staffers. To pay for it, tech companies will be charged a "supervisory fee."

Experts said the new rules will likely spark copycat regulatory efforts by governments in other countries, while tech companies will also face pressure to roll out the rules beyond the EU's borders.

"If Joe Biden stands at the podium and says 'By golly, why don't American consumers deserve the same protections that Google and Facebook are giving to Europe consumers,' it's going to be difficult for those companies to deny the application of the same rules" elsewhere, Scott said.

But they're unlikely to do so voluntarily, said Zach Meyers, senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform think tank. There is just too much money on the line if a company like Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, is restricted in how it can target advertising at specific groups of users.

"The big tech firms will heavily resist other countries adopting similar rules, and I cannot imagine the firms voluntarily applying these rules outside the EU," Meyers said.

The EU reached a separate agreement last month on its Digital Markets Act, a law aimed at reining in the market power of tech giants and making them treat smaller rivals fairly.

And in 2018, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation set the global standard for data privacy protection, though it has faced criticism for not being effective at changing the behavior of tech companies. Much of the problem centers on the fact that a company's lead privacy regulator is in the country where its European head office is located, which for most tech companies is Ireland.

Irish regulators have opened dozens of data-privacy investigations, but have only issued judgments for a handful. Critics say the problem is understaffing, but the Irish regulator says the cases are complex and time-consuming.

EU officials say they have learned from that experience and will make the Commission the enforcer for the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act.

Sanctions hit Russian economy, although Putin says otherwise

By KEN SWEET and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Nearly two months into the Russian-Ukraine war, the Kremlin has taken extraordinary steps to blunt an economic counteroffensive from the West. While Russia can claim some symbolic victories, the full impact of Western sanctions is starting to be felt in very real ways.

As the West moved to cut off Russia's access to its foreign reserves, limit imports of key technologies and take other restrictive actions, the Kremlin launched some drastic measures to protect the economy. Those included hiking interest rates to as high as 20%, instituting capital controls and forcing Russian business to convert their profits into rubles.

As a result, the value of the ruble has recovered after an initial plunge, and last week the central bank reversed part of its interest rate increase. Russian President Vladimir Putin felt emboldened and proclaimed — evoking World War II imagery — that the country had withstood the West's "blitz" of sanctions.

"The government wants to paint a picture that things are not as bad as they actually are," said Michael Alexeev, an economics professor at the University of Indiana, who studied Russia's economy in its transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A closer look, however, shows that the sanctions are taking a bite out of Russia's economy:

— The country is enduring its worst bout of inflation in two decades. Rosstat, the state's economic statistic agency, said inflation last month hit 17.3%, the highest level since 2002. By comparison, the International Monetary Fund expects consumer prices in developing countries to rise 8.7% this year, up from 5.9% last year.

— Some Russian companies have been forced to shut down. Several reports say a tank manufacturer had to stop production due to the lack of parts. U.S. officials point to the closing of Lada auto plants — a brand made by Russian company Avtovaz and majority-owned by French automaker Renault — as a sign of sanctions having an effect.

— Moscow's mayor says the city is looking at 200,000 job losses from foreign companies shutting down operations. More than 300 companies have pulled out, and international supply chains have largely shut down after container company Maersk, UPS, DHL and other transportation firms exited Russia.

— Russia is facing a historic default on its bonds, which will likely freeze the country out of the debt markets for years.

Meanwhile, Treasury officials and most economists urge patience that sanctions take months to have full effect. If Russia can't get appropriate amounts of capital, parts or supplies over time, that will cause even more factories and businesses to shut down, leading to higher unemployment.

It took nearly an entire year after Russia was sanctioned for seizing Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014 for its economic data to show signs of distress, such as higher inflation, a decline in industrial production and a slowdown in economic growth.

"The things that we should be looking for to see if the sanctions are working are, frankly, not easy to see yet," said David Feldman, a professor of economics at William & Mary in Virginia. "We'll be looking for the price of goods, the quantity of goods they are producing and the quality of goods. The last being the hardest to see and probably the last to appear."

Transparency into how sanctions are affecting the Russian economy is limited, largely because of the extraordinary lengths the Kremlin has taken to prop it up and its largest sector — oil and gas — is largely unencumbered due to European, Chinese and Indian reliance on Russian energy.

Benjamin Hilgenstock and Elina Ribakova, economists with the Institute of International Finance, esti-

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mated in a report released last month that if the European Union, Britain and the U.S. were to ban Russian oil and natural gas, the Russian economy could contract more than 20% this year. Current projections forecast a 15% contraction.

While the EU has agreed to ban Russian coal by August and is discussing sanctions on oil, there's been no consensus among the 27 nations so far about halting oil and natural gas. Europe is far more reliant on Russian supplies than Britain and the U.S., which have banned or are phasing out Russian oil. In the meantime, Russia gets \$850 million a day from Europe for its oil and gas.

The U.S. and its allies have argued that they have tried to tailor sanctions to affect Russia's ability to wage war and financially hit those in the highest echelons of government, while leaving everyday Russians largely unaffected.

But Russians have noticed a spike in prices. Residents of one Moscow suburb said 19-liter jugs of drinking water they regularly order have become nearly 35% more expensive than before. In supermarkets and stores in their area, the price for 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of sugar has grown by 77%; some vegetables cost 30% to 50% more.

Local news sites in different Russian regions in recent weeks have reported that multiple stores are shuttered in malls after Western companies and brands halted operations or pulled out of Russia, including Starbucks, McDonald's and Apple.

The Kremlin and its allies on social media have repeatedly pointed to the recovery of Russia's ruble as a sign that Western sanctions aren't working. The ruble crashed to around 150 to the dollar in the early days of the war but recovered to around 80 to the dollar, about where it was before the invasion. A gauge of weekly inflation by Rosstat has shown inflation slowing, but that is not surprising after the central bank raised interest rates as quickly as it did.

Russia's central bank had doubled its benchmark interest rate to support the ruble's plunging value and stop bank runs. It dropped the rate to 17% from 20% this month and signaled it might lower it further.

This isn't the first time Russia has thrown its full force behind defending the ruble's value as a symbol of resistance against the West. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the Soviet Union had an official exchange rate of one ruble equaling about \$1.35, whereas the black-market exchange rate was closer to four rubles to the dollar. The Russian debt crisis of the late 1990s also was caused partially by the Kremlin's active defense of the currency's value.

U.S. Treasury officials have dismissed the significance of the ruble's recovery.

"The Russian economy is really reeling from the sanctions that we put in place," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said, adding that the ruble's value has been artificially inflated by central bank intervention.

If and how Russia wins the economic war will come down to whether the Kremlin can drive division in the West, causing the sanctions to become patchy and less effective. At the same time, Russia will have time to develop alternatives for goods it can no longer access, a concept known as import substitution.

Looking back at the 2014 sanctions, the Congressional Research Service said in January that the impact on Russia was modest only because the U.S. effectively acted alone. This time, there are multiple international actors.

But Alexeev, the University of Indiana professor, sees one glaring gap.

"As long as Russia can continue to sell oil and gas, they will muddle through this," he said.

Twitter bans ads that contradict science on climate change

BERLIN (AP) — Twitter says it will no longer allow advertisers on its site who deny the scientific consensus on climate change, echoing a policy already in place at Google.

"Ads shouldn't detract from important conversations about the climate crisis," the company said in a statement outlining its new policy Friday.

There was no indication that the change would affect what users post on the social media site, which along with Facebook has been targeted by groups seeking to promote misleading claims about climate change.

The announcement coinciding with Earth Day came hours before the European Union agreed upon a deal requiring big tech companies to vet their sites more closely for hate speech, disinformation and other harmful content.

Twitter said it would provide more information in the coming months on how it plans to provide "reliable, authoritative context to the climate conversations" its users engage in, including from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The U.N.-backed science panel's reports on the causes and effects of climate change provide the basis for international negotiations to curb climate change.

The company already has a dedicated climate topic on its site and offered what it described as "pre-bunks" during last year's U.N. climate conference to counter misinformation surrounding climate change.

EXPLAINER: Johnny Depp's wild testimony, cross-examination

By R.J. RICO Associated Press

For three days, Johnny Depp has been testifying in a libel trial that, at least in theory, is about whether Amber Heard defamed him in a 2018 newspaper op-ed.

The trial has turned into a spectacle in which Depp has testified about everything from taking pills as a child to a near mental breakdown in which the actor said he used his severed finger to write on the walls in his own blood to recount his ex-wife's alleged lies.

WHY IS DEPP DOING THIS?

Heard's lawyers had warned that the trial would be a mudslinging soap opera that would expose the "real Johnny Depp." Depp denies ever abusing Heard and, despite the public attention brought to his drug use and his violent text messages, he said he's obsessed with revealing the truth and doesn't want to disappoint those who'd looked up to him.

"My goal is the truth because it killed me that all these people I had met over the years ... that these people would think that I was a fraud," Depp testified Tuesday.

The actor has said that his movie career suffered after Heard wrote a 2018 op-ed piece in The Washington Post in which she referred to herself as a "public figure representing domestic abuse."

Heard never mentioned Depp by name, but Depp's lawyers said it was a clear reference to accusations Heard made when she sought a 2016 restraining order against him.

Depp said the accusations and the article made him a Hollywood outcast and cost him his role in the lucrative "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie franchise.

Heard's lawyers have argued that Heard's opinion piece was accurate and didn't defame him. They've said Depp's ruined reputation was due to his own bad behavior and have argued that The Walt Disney Co. had already decided to ax Depp from "Pirates of the Caribbean" months before the article's publication.

WHAT ARE HEARD'S ALLEGATIONS?

Heard has accused Depp of physically and sexually assaulting her on multiple occasions before and during their brief marriage, often in situations where she said he drank so much he later blacked out.

Depp said Heard's allegations of his substance abuse have been "grossly embellished" and that he was never out of control during that time period. The two met in 2009, got married in 2015 and Heard filed for divorce a year later.

Heard's attorneys have highlighted many text messages Depp sent to friends recounting the copious amount of alcohol and drugs he had taken at a time in which he claims he wasn't a problematic drinker.

Depp filed a similar lawsuit in England against a newspaper there and lost. The judge there found that Depp assaulted Heard on a dozen occasions and put her in fear for her life multiple times.

Heard is expected to testify later in the trial.

HOW DID DEPP AND HEARD MEET?

Depp and Heard met through the filming of "The Rum Diary," a 2011 Depp-produced movie based upon an initially unpublished novel by the late Hunter S. Thompson that Depp discovered while going through the gonzo journalist's papers with Thompson, his friend.

Depp said Heard was the perfect embodiment of the book's femme fatale character named Chenault.

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"That's the Chenault that Hunter wants," Depp recalled. "Yep, she could definitely kill me."

They started dating a few years later, with Depp portraying the early part of their relationship as a classic Hollywood romance. Depp would call Heard "Slim," while she called him "Steve," nicknames used by the Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall characters in the 1944 film "To Have and Have Not."

Depp, 58, said he was also cognizant of the age difference between himself and Heard, 36, and compared it to the 25-year gap between Bogart and Bacall.

"I acknowledge the fact I was the old, craggy fogey and she was this beautiful creature," he said.

HOW DID THEIR MARRIAGE FALL APART?

Depp said things began to change in his marriage when he felt that he "was suddenly just wrong about everything" in Heard's eyes.

Depp said Heard made little digs at him, demeaned and berated him. The insults escalated into full-fledged circular arguments from which there was "no way in or out," Depp said. "It was sort of a rapid-fire, sort of endless parade of insults," Depp said.

Soon after, Heard began physically attacking him, Depp said. He said she once threw two bottles of vodka at him, the second of which exploded and severed his finger to the point where bone was exposed. Depp said he used the resulting blood to write on his walls and recount lies in which he had caught Heard. At the hospital, Depp said he lied to protect Heard and told the doctors that he had injured himself. Heard's lawyers contend he cut his own finger.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE BOSTON FLIGHT?

One of the chief points in contention is what occurred on a 2014 private flight from Boston to Los Angeles that Depp and Heard took while he was filming the gangster film "Black Mass."

Heard has said Depp assaulted her on the flight while he was blackout drunk.

Depp testified he took two oxycodone pills — an opiate to which he admits he was addicted at the time — and locked himself in the plane bathroom and fell asleep to avoid her badgering.

He told the court that he drank only a glass of Champagne while boarding the flight. But texts he sent to the actor Paul Bettany at the time referenced drinking half a bottle of whiskey, "a thousand Red Bull vodkas" and two bottles of Champagne before the flight.

Heard's attorneys have also pointed to text messages Depp sent to Heard after the flight, saying, "Once again I find myself in a place of shame and regret. ... I must get better."

WHAT ELSE DID DEPP TEXT?

Heard's attorneys have focused on text messages Depp sent to Bettany in which he expressed a desire to kill and defile Heard.

After saying he wanted to burn her, Depp wrote, "Let's drown her before we burn her!!! I will (expletive) her burnt corpse afterwards to make sure she's dead."

Depp has apologized to the jury for the vulgar language and said that "in the heat of the pain I was feeling, I went to dark places." He also compared his writing to Thompson's gonzo style, which often incorporated brash language and embellished thoughts.

MOMENTS OF LEVITY

Despite the dark accusations and profane text messages being read to the court, Depp's testimony has on occasion featured humorous moments.

Asked whether he would sometimes drink whiskey in the morning, Depp responded, "I mean, isn't happy hour any time?"

And asked whether he had ever given pills to musician Marilyn Manson, Depp conceded that he once gave Manson a pill to get him to "stop talking so much."

Depp also admitted that he's never watched "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl," the 2003 megahit in which he played the unhinged Captain Jack Sparrow. Asked how the film fared, Depp smiled and said, "I didn't see it, but ... well, the film did pretty well, apparently."

And then there's the bizarre matter of the alleged penis vandalism. Heard's attorney repeatedly asked Depp whether he was responsible for drawing a penis on a painting inside his home shortly after the

actor said Heard severed his finger. "Drawing a penis on a painting was not the first thing on my mind," Depp testified.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING IN VIRGINIA?

The trial is taking place in Fairfax County Circuit Court in Fairfax, Virginia.

Heard's lawyers had sought to have the case tried in California, where the actors reside. But a judge ruled that Depp was within his rights to bring the case in Virginia because The Washington Post's computer servers for its online edition are located in the county.

Depp's lawyers have said they brought the case in Virginia in part because the laws here are more favorable to their case.

US military drops appeal of Hawaii order to drain fuel tanks

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — The U.S. government on Friday dropped its appeals of a Hawaii order requiring it to remove fuel from a massive military fuel storage facility that leaked petroleum into the Navy's water system at Pearl Harbor last year.

Attorneys for the U.S. Department of Defense notified the state and federal courts of its decision. The move comes more than a month after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the military would permanently shut down the tanks and drain all of their fuel.

The Hawaii Department of Health, which issued the order, said the decision regarding the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility was a "step forward."

"While today's announcement is good news, the work continues," the department said in a statement. It said it would "continue to act expeditiously and proactively to oversee the safe defueling and decommissioning of Red Hill and restoration of the aquifer."

David Henkin, an attorney for Earthjustice which is representing the Sierra Club of Hawaii as an interested party in the case said his clients would remain vigilant to make sure the tanks are promptly defueled.

"It's a wonderful Earth Day gift to the people of Hawaii and in particular to all the residents of Oahu who depend on safe, clean drinking water when they turn on their tap," Henkin said.

The Navy and the Hawaii Department of Health did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment.

Henkin said even if Austin were to change his mind and try to keep the tanks open, the military will now face "an enforceable, unimpeachable, unchallengeable order from the Department of Health that they need to follow."

The order from the Hawaii Department of Health requires the military to remove fuel from the tanks 30 days after it's safe to do so. The military will have to stick to this deadline now that it's dropping the appeal, Henkin said.

The military, with oversight from the state health department and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, is currently developing plans to safely remove the fuel. It's uncertain how long this will take.

Sen. Brian Schatz, a Democrat from Hawaii, said in a statement that the dropping of the lawsuit "paves the way for us to shut down Red Hill this year."

The legal challenge made it hard for the state to work cooperatively with the Defense Department, Schatz said. He said he pushed hard for the military to make this decision.

Petroleum leaked from the Red Hill tanks into a Navy drinking water well late last year, sickening 6,000 people mostly living in military housing. Medical teams treated people complaining of nausea, headaches, rashes and other symptoms. The military put about 4,000 families in hotels for several months while it cleaned its water pipes.

The tanks also pose a threat to water consumed by 400,000 on Oahu. That's because they sit 100 feet (30 meters) above an aquifer that serves the Honolulu Board of Water Supply, the city's water utility, in addition to the Navy's water system.

The city utility has suspended use of three of its wells until it can be sure petroleum won't migrate

through the aquifer from the area by the Navy's well to its own wells.

The water utility and local leaders are also worried another spill could poison the city's water system.

In election misinformation fight, '2020 changed everything'

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Beth Bowers grew up in the 1960s and 1970s with parents who marched in protests, wrote letters to members of Congress and voted in elections big and small.

Her father, a World War II veteran, and her mother, an educational counselor, did not use social media sites in their lifetimes. But Bowers is sure they would be disheartened to see how easily falsehoods about the U.S. elections are disseminated online to millions and millions of people.

That's why the Evanston, Illinois, mom spends a few hours each week scouring Facebook groups for conspiracy theories or lies as part of a nationwide volunteer effort to debunk misinformation about voting.

"The good thing about this work is, it'd be so easy to become incredibly cynical and hopeless, but I think we feel like this is something we can do and make a difference," Bowers, 59, said in a phone interview.

As voters ready for hundreds of elections of local and national importance this year, officials and voting rights advocates are bracing for a repeat of the misinformation that overwhelmed the 2020 presidential race and seeded distrust about the legitimacy of Democrat Joe Biden's victory. It culminated in the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 by angry supporters of then-President Donald Trump who believed his lies that the election was stolen from him.

"2020 changed everything," said Alex Linser, deputy director of the Hamilton County, Ohio, election board. "This has got to be a part of our job now. Not just doing our job well, but showing the public how we do our job. For a long time, the system just worked and people didn't have to think about it. Now, there's a lot of people calling it into question."

The voting advocacy group Common Cause will rely on thousands of volunteers like Bowers to identify misinformation floating around online and push for Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to take down the most egregious falsehoods. False claims about voting times, locations or eligibility, for example, are banned across Twitter and Meta's platforms, which include Facebook and Instagram.

During the 2020 election, platforms applied fact checks, labeled or removed more than 300 pieces of popular, false content that Common Cause turned up. More recently, in Texas, more than 100 volunteers worked four-hour shifts to monitor false claims coming out of the state's primary election in March. The most frequent conspiracy theory shared that night claimed that staffing shortages at polling locations were deliberate, Bowers noted.

"Texas is kind of the playbook for things to come," said Emma Steiner, a disinformation analyst for the group. "My major concern is that local issues, like with these staff or ballot shortages, will be amplified by influencers or partisan actors with a national platform as signs of malign interference in elections; it's a pretty recognized pattern from 2020."

On Election Day 2020, Pennsylvania was a hotbed for false claims about voting machine outages and discarded votes that were shared across conservative news websites and social media.

It's a problem that many counties in the state remain ill-equipped to handle, said Al Schmidt, who served as the lone Republican on Philadelphia's election board during the 2020 presidential contest. He drew national attention for refuting Trump's false claims of mass voter fraud. He resigned from his post in January and now runs a government watchdog group that also educates Pennsylvania voters about the election process.

"Elections are all consuming and few have the time to monitor and counter misinformation," Schmidt said. "A lot of them don't have the resources to do this, or the in-house capacity to do this by themselves — you're hit at the time you're most busy."

Election officials in Ohio's Hamilton County hope they are better prepared this year.

They have produced videos and crafted graphics, shared across Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, in an ongoing series called "MythBusters" that explains how complex voting issues such as recounts, audits

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and provisional ballots work. Last year, as the elections board was overwhelmed with calls and emails complaining about the voting process, it invited critics to take a tour of the warehouse that stores voting equipment and elections offices. Roughly two dozen people showed up, Linser said.

Trump has continued to describe the 2020 election as "rigged" or "stolen," despite a coalition of top government and industry officials calling it "the most secure in American history." A mountain of evidence has concluded that the election was executed without any widespread fraud. An Associated Press review of six battleground states disputed by Trump identified 475 cases of potential voter fraud, nearly all of which were isolated cases and were certainly not enough to tip the election in either candidate's favor.

Yet Trump's supporters have pushed for additional audits and reviews of the vote count.

In Arizona, GOP lawmakers last year hired a firm called Cyber Ninjas that spent six months searching for evidence of fraud to support Trump's false claims of a stolen election. The group instead concluded that Biden had won the state by 360 more votes than the official results certified in 2020.

Staff in Arizona's Maricopa County, the target of many false claims about the vote, have used the county's official Twitter accounts to respond directly to misinformation, in both English and Spanish.

"BREAKING: The #azaudit draft report from Cyber Ninjas confirms the county's canvass of the 2020 General Election was accurate and the candidates certified as the winners did, in fact, win," Maricopa County's official Twitter account tweeted in September.

During last year's gubernatorial recall effort in California, Los Angeles election officials found that using social media to respond directly to questions, mishaps at polling locations or misleading claims helped quickly stamp out viral misinformation or misunderstandings.

In one case, a Twitter user posted that he was unable to cast his ballot at a polling location because of a technical error that showed he had already voted. His story started to gain traction on social media, where it was held up as proof of widespread voter fraud.

The Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder County Clerk's office responded publicly to the tweets, explaining that staffers had reached out to the voter directly to make sure he could cast a ballot.

The approach helps build trust with voters, said Mike Sanchez, a spokesperson for the office.

"Some individuals will just quite candidly tell us, 'I never thought you would have responded,'" he said.

Official: Meadows had been warned of possible 1/6 violence

By FARNOUSH AMIRI, ERIC TUCKER and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A former White House official told the House committee investigating the Capitol riot that President Donald Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, had been advised of intelligence reports showing the potential for violence, according to just-released transcripts.

Cassidy Hutchinson, a special assistant in the Trump White House, told the committee "there were concerns brought forward" to Meadows before the storming of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, but it was unclear what Meadows did with that information.

"I just remember Mr. Ornato coming in and saying that we had intel reports saying that there could potentially be violence on the 6th," Hutchinson said, presumably referencing Anthony Ornato, a senior Secret Service official. "And Mr. Meadows said: 'All right. Let's talk about it.'"

The exact nature of what Meadows was told is not clear from Hutchinson's testimony. Though law enforcement had been bracing for potential violence on Jan. 6, officials had not properly accounted for the prospect that a violent mob would attack the Capitol.

The filing late Friday is the latest in a long legal fight over the extent to which Meadows, whose proximity to Trump has made him a key target of House Democrats, can be forced to cooperate with the committee's investigation. Meadows has handed over thousands of text messages, but he has refused to sit for an interview, has argued that he is immune from having to testify by virtue of his White House position, and has sued the committee.

The filing seeks a court ruling in the committee's favor that Meadows has no valid basis to refuse to testify. It says the committee has refined the scope of its request to focus on seven specific topics, includ-

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ing testimony about communication with Congress before Jan. 6, 2021; White House plans to replace the leadership of Justice Department so the department could pursue Trump's bogus claims of election fraud; and efforts to create alternate, or fake, slates of state electors who could change the outcome of the vote of the 2020 election that Democrat Joe Biden won.

The committee released excerpts of testimony from multiple witnesses it has interviewed, including Hutchinson. Besides describing warnings of potential violence provided to Meadows, Hutchinson revealed how the White House counsel's office cautioned against plans to enlist fake electors in states, including in meetings involving Meadows and Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani.

The filing also includes new text messages that Meadows turned over, including several from House Republicans who were pushing the former North Carolina congressman to act. Meadows' close friend, Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, suggests in a late text on Jan. 5, 2021 — the day before Congress was due to certify Biden's victory — that Vice President Mike Pence "should call out all electoral votes that he believes are unconstitutional as no electoral votes at all."

Meadows texted back in the early hours of Jan. 6: "I have pushed for this. Not sure it is going to happen." Pence ultimately resisted the overwhelming pressure from Trump and his allies and did not attempt to object to Biden's certification.

Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., was texting Meadows as early as Dec. 26, 2020: "Mark, just checking in as time continues to count down. 11 days to 1/6 and 25 days to inauguration. We gotta get going!"

In the texts released by the committee, Perry encouraged Meadows to talk to Jeffrey Clark, an assistant attorney general who was sympathetic to Trump's bogus claims of election fraud. A week later, on Jan. 3, Clark attended a meeting at the White House with Trump, where the prospect of elevating Clark to the role of acting attorney general was discussed — but adamantly resisted by Justice Department officials, who threatened to resign, and White House lawyers. Trump ultimately backed down.

Hutchinson said Meadows talked "frequently" to Clark, and Hutchinson recalled Clark's presence at the White House and "his frequent outreach and communications."

In another interview released by the committee Friday, former Justice Department official Steven Engel, then the head of the Office of Legal Counsel, said Clark had suggested that the department provide a legal opinion to Pence regarding the vice president's authority to object to the certification of the presidential election. Engel said he told Clark that was "absurd" and reminded him that Pence's role was a ceremonial one as president of the Senate.

The testimony released Friday also reinforced how certain Republicans in Congress were deeply involved in White House discussions about overturning the election in the months leading to the deadly insurrection.

Hutchinson, for instance, described several calls involving Meadows and members of the far-right House Freedom Caucus in late November and early December in which participants discussed what Pence's role could be on Jan. 6, besides the ceremonial role he was required to play.

On those calls, according to Hutchinson, were representatives from Trump's legal team, including Giuliani, Jenna Ellis and Sidney Powell, as well as Jordan and Perry.

Meadows' lawsuit asked a judge to invalidate two subpoenas that he received from the committee, alleging they were "overly broad and unduly burdensome." The suit accused the committee of overreaching by subpoenaing Verizon for his cellphone records.

After the complaint was filed, the House committee sent a contempt of Congress charge against Meadows to the full House, where it passed on a near-party-line vote. It was the first time the chamber had voted to hold a former member in contempt since the 1830s.

While an earlier contempt referral against former Trump adviser Steve Bannon resulted in an indictment, the Justice Department has been slower to decide whether to prosecute Meadows.

Any criminal case against Meadows would be more complex than that presented against Bannon, in part because Meadows was a White House chief of staff and because he had begun to cooperate with the committee, even providing documents to the nine-member panel.

Meadows' attorney, George Terwilliger, has previously defended his client by noting that due to Meadows' willingness to turn over records, he should not be compelled to appear for an interview. Terwilliger did not

immediately return an email seeking comment about the latest disclosures.

Ukraine reports Russians trying to storm Mariupol plant

By DAVID KEYTON and YESICA FISCH Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces attacked a steel plant in the shattered Ukrainian port city of Mariupol on Saturday, Ukrainian officials said, apparently seeking to eliminate the last pocket of Ukrainian resistance in the strategic city the Kremlin claims its military has otherwise seized.

The assault was reported by an advisor to Ukraine's presidential office as an estimated 1,000 civilians sheltered in the Azovstal plant alongside the remaining Ukrainian fighters, while Russian forces pressed their offensive elsewhere in the eastern Donbas region amid fierce Ukrainian counterattacks.

The presidential advisor, Oleksiy Arestovich, said during a briefing that Russian forces had resumed air strikes on the massive seaside plant and were trying to storm it, which would represent a reversal from an order Russian President Vladimir Putin gave two days earlier.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reported to Putin on Thursday that the whole of Mariupol, with the exception of Azovstal, had been "liberated" by the Russians. At the time, Putin ordered him not to send Russian troops into the plant but instead to block off the facility, an apparent attempt to starve out the Ukrainians and force them to surrender.

Ukrainian officials have estimated that about 2,000 of their troops are inside the plant along with the civilians sheltering in the facility's underground tunnels. Arestovic said the Ukrainian forces were trying to counter the new attacks.

Earlier Saturday, the Azov Regiment of Ukraine's National Guard, which has members holed up in the plant, released footage of around two dozen women and children, some of whom said they had been in the mill's underground tunnels for two months and longed to see the sun.

"We want to see peaceful skies, we want to breathe in fresh air," one woman in the video said. "You have simply no idea what it means for us to simply eat, drink some sweetened tea. For us, it is already happiness."

The regiment's deputy commander, Sviatoslav Palamar, told The Associated Press the video was shot Thursday, the same day Russia declared victory over the rest of Mariupol. The contents could not be independently verified.

Both Ukrainian and Russian authorities have said the Azovstal plant is the last remaining defense stronghold in Mariupol, which has strategic importance to Moscow and has been under siege since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

More than 100,000 people — down from a prewar population of about 430,000 — are believed trapped in Mariupol with little food, water or heat, according to Ukrainian authorities.

The footage of Azovstal showed soldiers giving sweets to children who respond with fist-bumps. One young girl says she and her relatives "haven't seen neither the sky, nor the sun" since they left home on Feb. 27.

Over 20,000 civilians have been killed in Mariupol during the nearly two-month siege. Satellite images released this week showed what appeared to be mass graves near Mariupol, and local officials accused Russia of burying thousands of civilians to conceal the slaughter taking place there.

Ukrainian officials had said they were trying again Saturday to evacuate women, children and older adults from Mariupol after many previous attempts failed. Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said on the messaging app Telegram that the effort was to get underway at midday, but it wasn't clear how the new assault on the plant would affect any possible evacuation.

Russia has pulled a dozen crack military units from Mariupol to bolster the offensive elsewhere in the eastern Donbas region, while other troops continue to keep the remaining Ukrainian troops in the city pinned in the plant, Ukrainian officials said.

In Donbas, Russian troops pressed their offensive in an attempt to fully seize Ukraine's industrial heartland but have made little headway as fierce Ukrainian counterattacks have slowed their efforts, Ukrainian

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and British officials said Saturday.

Ukrainian forces over the past 24 hours repelled eight Russian attacks in the two regions, destroying nine tanks, 18 armored units and 13 vehicles, a tanker and three artillery systems, Ukraine's General Staff said.

"Units of Russian occupiers are regrouping. Russian enemy continues to launch missile and bomb strikes on military and civilian infrastructure," the General Staff said on its Facebook page.

Luhansk Governor Serhiy Haidai said Saturday that two people were killed by Russian shelling in the city of Popasna. Separately, Kharkiv regional governor Oleh Synehubov said on Telegram on Saturday that two people were killed and 19 more wounded by the Russian shelling. Synehubov said that over the past day the Russian forces fired at the region's civilian infrastructure 56 times.

"In addition to the fact that street fighting continues in the city (of Popasna) for several weeks, the Russian army constantly fires at multistory residential buildings and private houses," Haidai wrote on the messaging app Telegram. "Just yesterday, local residents withstood five enemy artillery attacks. ... Not all survived,"

Britain's Ministry of Defense said despite their increased activity "Russian forces have made no major gains in the last 24 hours as Ukrainian counter-attacks continue to hinder the efforts."

Russia still has not established air or sea control due to Ukrainian resistance, and despite Putin's declaration of victory in Mariupol, "heavy fighting continues to take place, frustrating Russian attempts to capture the city, thus further slowing their desired progress in the Donbas," the Ministry of Defense said.

Overall, the Kremlin has thrown more than 100,000 troops and mercenaries from Syria and Libya into the fight in Ukraine and is deploying more forces in the country every day, Danilov said.

"We have a difficult situation, but our army is defending our state," he said.

In western Ukraine, regional governor Maksym Kozytskyy announced a curfew for the Lviv area ahead of Orthodox Easter. Kozytskyy cited "new intelligence" and said the curfew would run from 11 p.m. Saturday to 5 a.m. Sunday, and then every day between these hours until further notice.

"Unfortunately, the enemy doesn't have such a concept as a major religious holiday," Kozytskyy wrote.

Mariupol has taken on outside importance in the war. Fully capturing it would deprive the Ukrainians of a vital port and allow Russia to create a land corridor with the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014.

Taking over the city also would allow Putin to throw more of his forces into the potentially climactic battle for the Donbas and its coal mines, factories and other industries.

The city has been reduced largely to smoking rubble by weeks of bombardment, and Russian state TV showed the flag of the pro-Moscow Donetsk separatists raised on what it said was the city's highest point, its TV tower. It also showed what it said was the main building at in flames.

Under cover of darkness, Ukrainian forces have managed to deliver weapons to the besieged steelworks via helicopter, said Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council.

The latest satellite photos from Maxar Technologies revealed what appeared to be a second mass grave site near Mariupol. The site at a cemetery in the town of Vynohradne has several newly dug parallel trenches measuring about 40 meters (131 feet) long, Maxar said in a statement.

Earlier, Maxar released photos of what appeared to be rows upon rows of more than 200 freshly dug mass graves next to a cemetery in the town of Manhush, outside Mariupol. That prompted Ukrainian accusations that the Russians are trying to conceal the slaughter of civilians in the city.

The Ukrainians estimated that the graves seen in the photos released Thursday could hold 9,000 bodies. The Kremlin did not respond to the satellite pictures.

Russian mercenaries are Putin's 'coercive tool' in Africa

By CARLEY PETESCH and GERALD IMRAY Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — When abuses were reported in recent weeks in Mali — fake graves designed to discredit French forces; a massacre of some 300 people, mostly civilians — all evidence pointed to the shadowy mercenaries of Russia's Wagner Group.

Even before these feared professional soldiers joined the assault on Ukraine, Russia had deployed them

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to under-the-radar military operations across at least half a dozen African countries. Their aim: to further President Vladimir Putin's global ambitions, and to undermine democracy.

The Wagner Group passes itself off as a private military contractor and the Kremlin denies any connection to it or even, sometimes, that it exists.

But Wagner's commitment to Russian interests has become apparent in Ukraine, where its fighters, seen wearing the group's chilling white skull emblem, are among the Russian forces currently attacking eastern Ukraine.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Wagner has gained substantial footholds for Russia in Central African Republic, Sudan and Mali. Wagner's role in those countries goes way beyond the cover story of merely providing a security service, experts say.

"They essentially run the Central African Republic," and are a growing force in Mali, Gen. Stephen Townsend, the commander of U.S. armed forces in Africa, told a Senate hearing last month.

The United States identifies Wagner's financier as Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch who is close to the Russian president and sometimes is called "Putin's chef" for his flashy restaurants favored by the Russian leader. He was charged by the U.S. government with trying to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the Wagner Group is the subject of U.S. and European Union sanctions.

Russia's game plan for Africa, where it has applied its influence as far north as Libya and as far south as Mozambique, is straightforward in some ways, say analysts. It seeks alliances with regimes or juntas shunned by the West or facing insurgencies and internal challenges to their rule.

The African leaders get recognition from the Kremlin and military muscle from Wagner. They pay for it by giving Russia prime access to their oil, gas, gold, diamonds and valuable minerals.

Russia also gains positions on a strategically important continent.

But there's another objective of Russia's "hybrid war" in Africa, said Joseph Siegle, director of research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

Siegle said Russia is also waging an ideological battle, using Wagner as a "coercive tool" to undermine Western ideas of democracy and turn countries toward Moscow. Putin wants to challenge the international democratic order "because Russia can't compete very well in that order," Siegle said.

"If democracy is held up as the ultimate aspirational governance model, then that is constraining for Russia," Siegle said.

Rather, Wagner promotes Russian interests with soldiers and guns, but also through propaganda and disinformation, as Prigozhin has done for Putin before.

In Central African Republic, Wagner fighters ride around the capital Bangui in unmarked military vehicles and guard the country's gold and diamond mines. They have helped to hold off armed rebel groups and to keep President Faustin-Archange Touadera in power, but their reach goes much further. Russian national Valery Zakharov is Touadera's national security advisor but also a "key figure" in Wagner's command structure, according to European Union documents accusing the mercenary group of serious human rights violations.

A statue erected last year in Bangui depicts Russian soldiers standing side by side to protect a woman and her children. Russia is cast as the country's savior and pro-Russia marches have been held in support of the war in Ukraine and to criticize former security partner France — though several protesters said they are paid.

"A Central African adage says that when someone helps you, you have to reciprocate. This is why we have mobilized as one to support Russia," said Didacien Kossimatchi, an official in Touadera's political party. "Russia has absolved us of the unacceptable domination of the West."

Kossimatchi said Russia was "acting in self-defense" in Ukraine.

Such support from African countries is a strategic success for Russia. When the United Nations voted on a resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine, 17 of the 35 countries that abstained from the vote — nearly half — were African. Several other African nations did not register a vote.

"Africa is fast becoming crucial to Putin's efforts to dilute the influence of the United States and its in-

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ternational alliances," said a report in March by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, a non-profit set up by the former British prime minister.

Russia's strategy in Africa comes at a minimal cost economically and politically. Analysts estimate Wagner operates with only a few hundred to 2,000 mercenaries in a country. Many are ex-Russian military intelligence, Siegle said, but because it's a private force the Kremlin can deny responsibility for Wagner's actions.

The real price is paid by ordinary people.

The people of Central African Republic aren't more secure, said Pauline Bax, Africa Program deputy director of the International Crisis Group think tank. "In fact, there's more violence and intimidation," she said.

France, the U.S. and human rights groups have accused Wagner mercenaries of extra-judicial killings of civilians in Central African Republic. A U.N. panel of experts said private military groups and "particularly the Wagner Group" have violently harassed people and committed rape and sexual violence. They are just the latest accusations of serious abuses by the group.

Central African Republic in 2021 acknowledged serious human rights violations by Russians, which forced Russian ambassador Vladimir Titorenko to leave his post.

The Wagner group has responded with a charm offensive — creating films designed to please the public, sponsoring beauty pageants and distributing educational materials that promote Russia's involvement in Africa. Russian is now being taught in universities.

Russia has taken its Central African Republic blueprint to Mali and elsewhere in Africa. In Mali, there has been an "uprooting of democracy," said Aanu Adeoye, an analyst on Russia-Africa affairs at the London-based Chatham House think tank.

Following coups in 2020 and last year, France is withdrawing troops from its former colony that had been helping fight Islamic extremists since 2013. Wagner moved in, striking a security deal with Mali's new military junta, which then expelled the French ambassador and banned French TV stations. Tensions with the West have escalated. So has the violence.

Last month, Mali's army and foreign soldiers who witnesses suspected were Russian killed an estimated 300 men in the rural town of Moura. Some of those killed were suspected extremists but most were civilians, Human Rights Watch said, calling it a "deliberate slaughter of people in custody."

This week, when French forces handed over control of the Gossi military base, suspected Wagner agents hurriedly buried several bodies nearby and a Russian social media campaign blamed France for the graves. The French military, however, had used aerial surveillance after their withdrawal to show the creation of the sandy graves.

Both atrocities bear the hallmarks of Wagner mercenaries and Russia's foreign policy brand under Putin, say several analysts.

"They have no concerns about minor things like democracy and human rights," said Chatham House's Adeoye.

Female artists dominate the Venice Biennale for 1st time

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

VENICE, Italy (AP) — For the first time in the 127-year history of the Venice Biennale, the world's oldest and most important contemporary art fair features a majority of female and gender non-conforming artists, under the curatorial direction of Cecilia Alemani.

The result is a Biennale that puts the spotlight on artists who have been long overlooked despite prolific careers, while also investigating themes including gender norms, colonialism and climate change.

Alemani's main show, titled "The Milk of Dreams," alongside 80 national pavilions opens Saturday after a one-year pandemic delay. The art fair runs through Nov. 27. It is only the fourth of the Biennale's 59 editions under female curation.

Women took the top Golden Lion awards announced Saturday for best national pavilion, which went to the United Kingdom pavilion and artist Sonia Boyce. Best participant in the main exhibition was won by U.S. sculptor Simone Leigh.

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The predominance of women among the more than 200 artists that Alemani chose for the main show "was not a choice, but a process," Alemani, a New York-based Italian curator, said this week.

"I think some of the best artists today are women artists," she told The Associated Press. "But also, let's not forget, that in the long history of the Venice Biennale, the preponderance of male artists in previous editions has been astonishing."

"Unfortunately, we still have not solved many issues that pertain to gender," Alemani said.

Conceived during the coronavirus pandemic and opening as war rages in Europe, Alemani acknowledged that art in such times may seem "superficial." But she also asserted the Biennale's role over the decades as a "sort of seismographer of history ... to absorb and record also the traumas and the crises that go well beyond the contemporary art world."

In a potent reminder, the Russian pavilion remains locked this year, after the artists withdrew following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nearby, sandbags have been erected in the center of the Giardini by the curators of the Ukrainian Pavilion, and surrounded by stylized posters of fresh artwork by Ukrainian artists representing the horrors of the two-month-old war.

American artist Leigh is among the women getting long-overdue recognition in mid-career at this Biennale. She is both headlining the U.S. pavilion and setting the tone at the main exhibit with a towering bust of a Black woman that Alemani originally commissioned for the High Line urban park in New York City.

Fusun Onur, a pioneer of conceptual art in Turkey, at age 85 has filled the Turkish pavilion with wiry cats and mice set up in storyboard tableaus that confront modern-day threats like the pandemic and climate change. While proud of her role representing Turkey and the work she produced during the pandemic in her home overlooking the Bosphorus, she acknowledged that the honor was late in coming.

"Why it is so I don't know," Fusun said by phone from Istanbul. "Women artists are working hard, but they are not always recognized. It is always men first."

New Zealand is represented by third gender artist Yuki Kihara, whose installation "Paradise Camp," tells the story of Samoa's Fa'afafine community of people who don't accept the gender they were assigned at birth.

The exhibition features photos of the Fa'afafine mimicking paintings of Pacific islanders by post-impressionist French artist Paul Gauguin, reclaiming the images in a process the artist refers to as "upcycling."

"Paradise Camp is really about imagining a Fa'afafine utopia, where it shatters colonial hetero-normality to make way for an Indigenous world view that is inclusive and sensitive to the changes in the environment," Kihara said.

The image of a hyper-realistic sculpture of a futuristic female satyr giving birth opposite her satyr partner, who has hung himself, sets a grim post-apocalyptic tone at the Danish Pavilion, created by Uffe Isolotto.

The Nordic nations of Norway, Sweden and Finland this year turned over their shared pavilion to the Sami, one of Europe's oldest Indigenous groups, touching on a different idea of nation as the Sami ancestral arctic homeland now spans four nations.

The Sami Pavilion offered a more hopeful path out of the apocalypse, with artwork and performances depicting the struggle against colonialism by the Sami people, while also celebrating their traditions.

"We have in a way discovered how to live within the apocalyptic world and do it while, you know, maintaining our spirits and our beliefs and systems of value," said co-curator Liisa-Ravna Finbog.

This year's Golden Lion for lifetime achievement awards go to German artist Katherina Fritsch, whose life-like Elephant sculpture stands in the rotunda of the main exhibit building in the Giardini, and Chilean poet, artist and filmmaker Cecilia Vicuna, whose portrait of her mother's eyes graces the Biennale catalog cover.

Vicuna painted the portrait while the family was in exile after the violent military coup in Chile against President Salvador Allende. Now 97, her mother accompanied her to the Biennale.

"You see that her spirit is still present, so in a way that painting is like a triumph of love against dictatorship, against repression, against hatred," Vicuna said.

Israel closes crossing to Gaza workers after rockets

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By JOSEPH KRAUSS and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel said Saturday that it would close its border crossing to thousands of Gaza workers after a series of rockets were fired from the territory ruled by the militant Hamas group in recent days.

The Palestinians denounced the move as “collective punishment” of the impoverished territory’s 2 million residents, who have lived under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces nearly 15 years ago.

The rocket fire came amid near-daily clashes at a flashpoint Jerusalem holy site over the past week, with Palestinians hurling stones and fireworks and Israeli police entering the compound and firing rubber-coated bullets and stun grenades.

The violence in Jerusalem, and a string of deadly attacks inside Israel and raids across the occupied West Bank, have raised fears of another war between Israel and Hamas like the one that broke out under similar circumstances last year.

Israel said Palestinian militants fired two rockets late Friday, with one landing in an open area inside Israel and the other falling inside Gaza. Palestinian media reported that two Gaza residents were wounded by the rocket that fell short. There was no immediate comment from health officials.

Another rocket was fired from Gaza early Saturday, but the military did not say where it landed. There were no reports of casualties or damage.

The Israeli military body that coordinates civilian affairs in Gaza said the crossing used by workers would not be re-opened on Sunday, the start of the work week. “The re-opening of the crossing will be decided accordingly with a security assessment,” it said in a statement.

In recent months, Israel had issued thousands of work permits to Palestinians from Gaza, which has been under a crippling Israeli and Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces nearly 15 years ago.

Israel portrayed the move as a goodwill gesture in order to maintain calm, but the permits — which can be revoked at any time — also give it a strong form of leverage over Palestinians. Israel grants permits to some 12,000 Palestinians in Gaza and over 100,000 to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, mostly for work in construction and other menial jobs.

The Gaza workers union said the closure was “collective punishment” and would hurt the already suffering economy, where unemployment hovers around 50%. It said the timing of the closure, just before the Eid al-Fitr holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan, would compound the pain for families struggling to make ends meet.

Sami Amassi, the head of the union, said the permits themselves were meant to “exploit” the workers for political purposes, rather than improve their lives.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Wasseem said the move “aims at tightening the siege and is a form of aggression that we cannot accept.”

“This will not succeed. The police of collective punishment against the Palestinians has always proven to fail,” he told The Associated Press.

Israel captured east Jerusalem — which includes major holy sites sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims — along with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 war. The Palestinians want all three territories to form their future state.

Israel annexed east Jerusalem in a move not recognized internationally, and has built Jewish settlements across the occupied West Bank that now house nearly 500,000 settlers alongside nearly 3 million Palestinians. There have been no substantive peace talks in more than a decade.

The violence in Jerusalem has been centered on the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. Jews consider the hilltop on which it is built to be their holiest site, and refer to it as the Temple Mount because it was the location of two Jewish temples in antiquity.

The site lies at the emotional heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and clashes there have often ignited violence elsewhere.

South Africa's Durban still recovering from deadly floods

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

DURBAN, South Africa (AP) — Grief-stricken South Africans are still searching for family members swept away by last week's floods in which 435 people died and more than 40,000 were made homeless in the coastal city of Durban and the surrounding KwaZulu-Natal province.

The South African army has deployed 10,000 troops to help find those missing, rebuild roads, bridges and utilities, and distribute emergency aid to families made destitute by the deluge. The government has allocated \$67 million in relief aid for affected families.

Families grimly persist in searches to find the bodies of their loved ones.

Joseph Nkosi, 56, of Inanda township, spends his days with neighbors searching through a debris-laden river stream for the body of his 15-year-old daughter, Ntombenhle, last seen trying to cross a low-lying bridge when the waters carried her away.

"I am heartbroken," Nkosi told The Associated Press. "What I am hoping for now is just to find her body. I have already accepted that she is no more. All I am holding on to is her school tie which we found in this river stream."

In a nearby neighborhood, Apollo Mdladla, 47, said he and his young daughter are struggling to cope with the deaths of 10 members of a neighboring family. A mother, her children and grandchildren all died when the floods swept away their home.

"We still have trauma. Those children used to play with my own child. Now she asks, 'Where is Manelisa? Where is Lulu?' I had to be honest and tell her that they have died, because she can see that they are no longer here," said Mdladla as rescue teams searched for bodies in the pile of flotsam in his backyard.

Five bodies of the family have been found, but the other five are still missing, he said.

The largest number of deaths and homes destroyed occurred in Durban's low-lying poor neighborhoods, where families built homes on open, unsafe ground. But middle-class and affluent neighborhoods were also hit when mudslides crushed homes built on hillsides.

Schools, churches and community halls have become shelters for thousands of displaced families and most of those centers lack electricity or clean water.

"The city remains in crisis 10 days after the storm, and it is now primarily a crisis of water and sanitation provision — to hospitals, clinics and communities. Failure to get this right could spell a deepening health crisis, characterized by water-borne disease," said Mani Thandrayen, medical team leader for Doctors Without Borders in Durban. The organization is supporting four shelters with food, water, cookware, blankets, mattresses and other basic items, he said.

Even many homes still standing must be evacuated because they are now unstable and may soon collapse, said South African National Defence Force spokesman Brigadier General Andries Mokoena Mahapa.

"What we have said from day one is that those people need to be moved out. We need to shelter them at a temporary shelter while we are trying to find alternative accommodation," he said. "We cannot repair them because any moment from now, those houses will fall off," said Mahapa.

Flood damage to roads and bridges is estimated at \$373 million, schools at \$26 million and health clinics at \$12 million, according to officials.

Lack of maintenance of Durban's drainage systems worsened the floods in Durban, according to Jeff Smithers, director of the Center for Water Resources Research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He's called for an improvement in early warning systems to respond to such disasters.

"What has exacerbated the situation is the lack of maintenance," which allowed drainage systems to become blocked by trash, he said. "But even in the perfect scenario we would have had some flooding."

Still shaken by the floods, Sandile Cele, 23, surveyed the scene of wreckage from his family's home on a small hill in Inanda. He used to look through a steel-framed window, but now an entire wall of the dining room is missing, torn away by the surging waters.

"My mother was trying to sweep away the water that had entered the house, but we soon heard part of the house collapsing and we ran to our neighbor's house," he said.

The family watched helplessly as the floods shattered windows, tore down walls and ripped off roofs

from their two houses.

"We've lost so much. We had recently completed building the second house with the money that my mother received when my father passed away," said Cele. "What we are desperate for is a home, a proper house where we can live and feel safe."

'A great pity': Ukrainian village faces a churchless Easter

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

LUKASHIVKA, Ukraine (AP) — A single metal cross remains inside the church of shattered brick and blackened stone. Russian soldiers used the house of worship for storing ammunition, residents said, and Ukrainian forces shelled the building to make the Russians leave.

There will be no Orthodox Easter service here Sunday in this small village in northern Ukraine.

One of the church's golden domes was blown off. Its gilded cross is propped up against an exterior wall.

"It's a great pity," resident Valentina Ivanivna, 70, said, standing with her bike on Orthodox Good Friday as men dismantled abandoned Russian military vehicles nearby.

The church in Lukashivka, a village near the city of Chernihiv, survived World War II and the most austere years of the Soviet Union, a time when authorities stripped it of its religious icons, residents said.

This time, locals think it will take years for the church to recover its past beauty.

Its bells fell onto unstable ground that is littered with ammunition casings and cans of Russian tinned meat. A stand for candles remains, along with a dented teapot and a pasta strainer.

Outside, the finned part of a rocket is stuck in the mud.

Villagers have vowed to rebuild, whatever it takes. They've already started on their own homes, even as they wait for basic services to resume.

There is no gas available to bake Easter bread. At a bend in a road, a military chaplain, Volodymyr Vyshyvkin, and volunteers handed out food and verses.

Remember, Jesus was resurrected, the chaplain told them. Ukraine will do the same. He called on the villagers to pray for those on the front line in places like Mariupol, a southern city the Russians are determined to take and continued to bomb Friday.

Resistance never died during the local occupation of Lukashivka, said Valentyna Golyak, 64.

"I was telling the Russians, 'You will stay in this land as fertilizer. If you want to kill me, kill me.' They looked ashamed," she said. "I think they don't believe in God."

Golyak said she also told the Russian soldiers that she had lived her whole life without war and had expected to die the same. Instead, the soldiers damaged or destroyed almost every village home. And the church had been beautiful, she said.

But she celebrates new life, too. Her daughter gave birth in a village basement during the Russia occupation. On Saturday, the baby girl will be 1 month old.

She was named Victoria.

France's two presidential contenders: Who's proposing what

By THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — It's crunch time for voters in France as incumbent President Emmanuel Macron, a centrist, is meeting far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen of the National Rally at the ballot box for Sunday's final presidential vote. With foreign policy an issue as war ravages Europe's east, along with worries over inflation in one of the world's biggest economies, the stakes could not be higher.

Here's a look at their key proposals.

WHAT WOULD THEY DO ABOUT UKRAINE?

Macron has played a key role in international talks on supporting Ukraine amid war and imposing sanctions on Russia. His prominence on the international stage at the beginning stages of the race gave him an initial poll bump but impeded his ability to campaign effectively.

Macron's government says it sent 100 million euros in weapons to Ukraine since the Russian invasion

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and Macron vows to continue this support and "significantly" reinforce European armed forces' capacities and cooperation. He has supported sanctions against Russia and EU unity on the issue, and likens the presidential vote to a "referendum on Europe," claiming that his rival wishes to trigger a "Frexit" in all but name.

Le Pen has for years cultivated ties with Moscow, receiving a loan of 9 million euros from a Russian bank in 2014 and meeting with Putin in 2017. She acknowledged that Russia's invasion of Ukraine "partially" changed her views about Putin, saying he was "wrong" and it was "unacceptable." She says she supports the Ukrainian people and refugees must be welcomed.

Le Pen is skeptical about supplying weapons to Ukraine, opposed to oil and gas sanctions, and wary of NATO, wanting France to remain a member but with a reduced role. Le Pen is no longer calling for a referendum on leaving the EU or withdrawal from the euro.

WHAT ABOUT THE ECONOMY?

A former economist and banker, Macron has championed startups and promises "full employment." The jobless rate decreased during his 2017-2022 term to its lowest level in a generation. Some voters dub him "president of the rich" for abolishing a wealth tax and some of his comments about the poor.

He wants to progressively raise the retirement age from 62 to 65, boost the minimum monthly pension, and raise teachers' wages. He wants companies to be able to give employees an untaxed bonus of up to €6,000 and has spent billions capping energy bills.

Le Pen has tapped into frustration among working class voters over inflation, and promises to cut taxes on energy and essential goods. She wants to maintain the minimum retirement age at 62 and proposes that anyone who began working at 20 can retire at 60.

She wants to raise the minimum pension, and end income tax for under-30s. She wants companies to increase salaries by 10%, and to raise teachers' salaries over the next five years. She claims she could fund this by slashing "massive immigration."

ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

Although Macron was associated with the slogan "Make The Planet Great Again," his green credentials are mixed. He capitulated to "yellow vest" protesters by scrapping a fuel tax hike. He pledges to build new-generation nuclear reactors and develop solar energy and wind farms at sea. Macron is pledging that his next prime minister would be in charge of environmental planning as France seeks to become carbon neutral by 2050. He also promises more public transport nationwide to wean people off being dependent on cars.

Le Pen has earned support in rural regions by campaigning against wind farms, vowing to dismantle them and invest in nuclear and hydro energy. She would also scrap subsidies for renewable energies. She wants to force schools to serve a majority of French agricultural products in their cafeterias instead of imported food.

HOW WOULD THEY APPROACH IMMIGRATION?

This has been the central pillar of Le Pen's party for generations. Le Pen's plans include ending family reunification policies, restricting social benefits to the French only, and deporting foreigners who stay unemployed for over a year and other migrants who entered illegally. She wants French nationals to be fast-tracked over foreigners for social services. This plan to create a "national preference" for French citizens across employment, benefits, welfare and housing might violate EU law and cause trouble in Brussels.

Macron has taken a tougher line on immigration as he has sought support from right-wing voters. He pushes for strengthening the external borders of the European passport-free area and creating a new force to better control national borders. He vows to speed up processing of asylum and residence permit applications and to deport those who aren't eligible.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER BIG ISSUES?

Le Pen wants citizens to be able to have a direct voice in laws by allowing them to propose referendums if they obtain 500,000 signatures to back them. For that, the constitution would need to be revised. This was a key demand of the anti-Macron yellow vest protesters, who saw him as too powerful and out of

touch with everyday concerns.

Among Le Pen's most controversial proposals is a promised law banning Muslim headscarves in all public places. She calls the garb an "Islamist uniform" that spreads a radical vision of religion. Macron is a firm defender of French secularism but warns this ban could lead to "civil war." Since France has Western Europe's biggest Muslim population, this constituency's vote could play a role in runoff vote.

Beijing on alert after COVID-19 cases discovered in school

BEIJING (AP) — Beijing is on alert after 10 middle school students tested positive for COVID-19, in what city officials said was an initial round of testing.

City officials suspended classes in the school for a week following the positive test results on Friday. The Chinese capital also reported four other confirmed cases that day that were counted separately.

Mainland China reported 24,326 new community-transmitted infections on Saturday, with the vast majority of them asymptomatic cases in Shanghai, where enforcement of a strict "zero-COVID" strategy has drawn global attention.

China has doubled down on the approach even in face of the highly transmissible omicron variant. The zero-COVID policy warded off many deaths and widespread outbreaks when faced with less transmissible variants through mass testing and strict lockdowns where people could not leave their homes.

But recent developments in Shanghai have led some to question whether the strategy is worth the tradeoffs. Many residents in the city have struggled to get adequate food supplies during a lockdown this month, while some were also unable to get drugs or medical attention. Some elderly people died after an outbreak at a hospital led medical staff to be quarantined.

The country is now facing its worst outbreak since the beginning of the pandemic in the central city of Wuhan.

Local media reported that in Beijing's Chaoyang district, the government ordered the suspension of in-person after-school activities and classes. The city government is now conducting a round of mass testing to look for more cases.

In Shanghai, city officials reported 12 new deaths Saturday, all elderly patients with underlying illnesses.

To save a life: Refugees make protective vests for Ukraine

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

PRAGUE (AP) — A Czech leatherwork company that makes a wide variety of handmade products — travel bags, messenger totes, wallets and belts — never planned to add personal protective gear that would save lives in a war to its offerings.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed that.

After Russian troops launched their assault on Ukraine, Tlustý & Co. hired refugees from Ukraine to help the company join a manufacturing operation equipping Ukrainian volunteers with body armor to face the invading troops.

The Prague-based company agreed to a request from the Post Bellum nongovernmental organization to join a project to supply the protection gear similar to bulletproof vests to Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces. Thousands of Ukrainian volunteers have joined the troops to resist the Russian invasion.

"We specialize in completely different production," Tlustý & Co. owner Ivan Petruv said. "We were facing a situation where we had to decide. And because we consider ourselves part of a community that wants to help in this situation as we can, which is only natural when you see the news, we decided to say yes."

To make the new production happen was a race against the clock, he said. The company needed to get new machines, new materials and above all, to hire extra employees to join the 20-25 staffers in a country whose unemployment rate of 3.4% reflects a lack of available workers in many fields.

"What would take weeks if not months under normal circumstances, we had to solve in hours and several days," he said.

Since the war began, 300,000 refugees who fled Ukraine have arrived in the Czech Republic, mostly

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women with children, so Petruv said they became an obvious place to look for new hires.

"We published an advertisement at 8 a.m. and at noon we had a list of 70 people," Petruv said.

Four days later, the 15 most qualified people started to work to complete the unusual contract. They sew ballistic plate carriers while other Ukrainians working for Post Bellum assemble the whole gear by inserting steel plates into the vests. The NGO finances it all through a crowd-funding campaign.

Natalia Bielonosova is one of the company's new workers. She came to Prague from her town of Irpin, located near the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. with a friend.

"I wanted to make the protection gear for Ukraine," Bielonosova said. "That's a way for me to help my country."

Her husband, a humanitarian worker, stayed at home and her son serves in the Ukrainian army.

"He has no electricity, gas, heating or warm water but has survived so far," she said of her husband.

Of her son, she says "it's painful to read about what's happening. I'd like a solution to be found to end the fighting."

With Irpin and many places badly damaged by heavy Russian shelling, Bielonosova can see her future in Prague, the Czech capital.

"They've destroyed cities and destroyed infrastructure. It would be a very hard life (to go back)," she said.

The work she and other Ukrainian refugees have done has impressed Petruv.

"We'd like them to stay," he said. "We're talking about hardworking, skillful people who deserve the job."

The Czech company has so far made 720 of the protective vests with 400 more to deliver. What happens next is unclear.

Petruv said his company was ready to continue the project but "we would be delighted to end it as soon as possible, because this isn't something we want to do. We do it only because of the current situation and a feeling of responsibility."

Meanwhile, he is planning a new project for his Ukrainian workers for the time when peace is restored. It would be products designed for Czech kids and their families.

It's called "Mothers for mothers."

Crews tackle growing wildfires; 'A very chaotic situation'

By FELICIA FONSECA and SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Maggie Mulligan said her dogs could sense the panic as she and her husband packed them up and fled a fast-moving wildfire barreling toward their home in northeast New Mexico as they agonized over having to leave their horses behind.

"We don't know what's next," she said. "We don't know if we can go back to the horses."

Mulligan and her husband, Bill Gombas, 67, were among the anxious residents who hurriedly packed up and evacuated their homes Friday ahead of ominous western wildfires fueled by tinder-dry conditions and ferocious winds.

More than 1,600 firefighters were battling nine different large fires in Arizona and New Mexico that have destroyed dozens of homes and burned more than 100 square miles (258 square kilometers) in the blazes.

Fires also were burning in Colorado, where new evacuations were ordered Friday west of Colorado Springs. But there were no immediate reports of structures lost.

With no air support or crews working directly on the fire lines, there was explosive growth in the size and number of new small fires in the U.S. Southwest on Friday.

"It's a very chaotic situation out there," Stewart Turner, a fire behavior analyst, said during a briefing Friday night on the edge of the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico. "We've had extreme fire behavior all day."

Firefighters working to keep more homes from burning on the edge of a mountain town in northern Arizona were helped by snow, scattered showers and cooler temperatures early Friday. But the favorable weather did not last. While sustained winds were forecast to ease a bit, more gusts were expected to batter parts of Arizona and all of New Mexico through the weekend.

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The fire danger in the Denver area on Friday was the highest it had been in over a decade, according to the National Weather Service, because of unseasonable temperatures in the 80s combined with strong winds and very dry conditions.

At one of the biggest fires near Flagstaff, Arizona, where 30 homes and numerous other buildings have been destroyed, authorities said they had used sirens and alarms Thursday night to warn residents to flee evacuation areas but howling winds muffled the alarms.

By Friday, afternoon winds were gusting up to 75 mph (120 kph) in northern New Mexico near the Colorado line, shrouding the Rio Grande Valley with dust and pushing flames through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the north.

A wall of smoke stretched from wilderness just east of Santa Fe about 50 miles (80 km) to the northeast where ranchers and other rural inhabitants were abruptly told to leave by law enforcement.

Mulligan, 68, of Ledoux, a dog breeder, said her dog Liam "was a nervous wreck," when a sheriff came to their house Friday afternoon and told them they had to leave.

They did — with nine dogs and five puppies packed into an SUV and an old blue Cadillac They considered dropping the horses off at a local fairgrounds, but they decided it was in the same path of the burning fire as their home and more likely to burn.

"There's water in their pasture, and there's hay. So we'll see what happens," Mulligan said.

Lena Atencio and her husband, whose family has lived in the nearby Rociada area for five generations, got out Friday as winds kicked up. She said most people were taking the threat seriously.

"As a community, as a whole, everybody is just pulling together to support each other and just take care of the things we need to now. And then at that point, it's in God's hands," she said as the wind howled miles away in the community of Las Vegas, New Mexico, where evacuees were gathering.

Another wind-whipped fire in northeastern New Mexico also was forcing evacuations. The town of Cimarron and the headquarters of the Philmont Scout Ranch, owned and operated by the Boy Scouts of America, were preparing to flee if necessary. The scout ranch attracts thousands of summer visitors, but officials said no scouts were on the property.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed emergency declarations for four counties over the fires.

In Arizona, flames had raced through rural neighborhoods outside Flagstaff just days earlier. A break in the weather Thursday allowed helicopters to drop water on the blaze and authorities to survey the damage.

They found 30 homes and numerous other buildings were destroyed, with sheriff's officials saying over 100 properties were affected. That fire has burned close to 32 square miles (83 square kilometers) and forced the evacuations of 765 homes after starting last Sunday.

Kelly Morgan is among neighbors at the edge of the evacuation zone who did not leave. She and her husband have lived through wildfires before, she said, and they are prepared if winds shift and flames race toward the home they moved into three years ago.

"Unfortunately, it's not something new to us ... but I hate seeing it when people are affected the way they are right now," she said. "It's sad. It's a very sad time. But as a community, we've really come together."

Pro-gun group grows into potent political force in Oklahoma

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Wayne Shaw seemed to have all the conservative credentials needed to win reelection to his state Senate seat in Oklahoma two years ago. The mild-mannered pastor with deep ties to the community had a solidly conservative voting record during his eight years in office.

But when Shaw, as chair of the Senate Public Safety Committee, declined to hear a bill to allow people to carry guns into bars, he drew the ire of an unemployed truck driver who was passionate about gun rights.

The angry gun advocate, Don Spencer, belonged to a local pro-firearms group. In short order, he and his friends recruited a Republican challenger for Shaw, held a fundraiser in his district and helped defeat the incumbent in the primary.

"I'm not opposed to guns," said Shaw, who was stunned by the development. "But that (guns in bars)

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is a good way of throwing gasoline on a fire.”

Spencer’s feat is an example of a phenomenon in red states where the Republican Party is moving farther and farther to the right: The most potent political forces aren’t always the long-established organizations that have groomed candidates and advanced legislation for decades. In the current climate, little-known outsiders, even without pedigree or money, can become powerbrokers quickly if connected to incendiary issues like guns or abortion. And almost any officeholder can become vulnerable.

Few at the Oklahoma State Capitol had even heard of Spencer when he started advocating for pro-gun laws, but now he’s a formidable presence in the building. The 62-year-old from Meridian, a small town about 40 miles from Oklahoma City, is warmly welcomed by senior Republicans, and he often sets up camp in legislators’ offices and helps draft legislation.

At bill signing ceremonies, Spencer can often be seen flashing a smile among the lawmakers flanking the governor. Political hopefuls seek him out, and he gives them a seven-page questionnaire to fill out to determine whether they might receive an endorsement.

In the five years since Spencer took over the group, the Oklahoma 2nd Amendment Association has grown from a handful of chapters to more than 50, set up its own political action committee and begun branching out into other right-wing causes, like stopping vaccine mandates and limiting discussions of race in schools.

Spencer sees the opportunities as boundless. “People in this state are concerned about their rights, and they realize now it’s more important what’s going on in their backyard than what those crazies are doing in Washington, D.C.,” Spencer said in an interview.

The push to expand gun rights comes amid a surge in gun violence in communities across the country, including several mass shootings in recent weeks. Between 2019 and 2020, the last year for which federal data is available, shooting deaths increased 35%. Yet calls for tougher firearms limits have been blocked by GOP opposition, with leaders instead citing an even greater need for citizens to protect themselves.

Fear that government will threaten conservative values is running strong in red states right now, said Michael Crespin, a political science professor at the University of Oklahoma who is familiar with the OK2A group.

“There’s this whole idea that Democrats are going to come and take their guns away,” Crespin said. “That’s not happening,” but “that fear is a good motivator for politics.”

OK2A racked up its broadest achievement in 2018 when lawmakers passed constitutional carry legislation which allows adults to openly carry firearms in public without a license or training. The bill had previously been vetoed by a Republican governor, Mary Fallin, but it was the first one signed into law by new Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt.

This year the group is pushing to allow people to carry guns on college campuses, at sporting events and at county and state fairs, despite opposition from pro-business groups like chambers of commerce.

While Republican politics had been moving rightward already, the COVID-19 pandemic has boosted the role of conservative interest groups, buoyed by resistance to health restrictions. Even meetings in thinly populated rural counties can draw more than 50 people, with hundreds more tuned into livestreams online.

Fundraising is rising sharply. OK2A raised nearly \$40,000 in 2019, \$83,000 in 2020 and more than \$122,000 last year, according to state campaign finance data. Much of the money is spent on online ads and for booths at gun shows. Records show Spencer has started drawing a salary, about \$30,000 each of the last two years.

“They do have influence out there, especially in Republican primaries,” said Gary Jones, former chair of the Oklahoma Republican Party. “Where they have their greatest success is low-turnout races where they can mobilize and turn out a bigger percentage of their supporters.”

Tensions sometimes flare between OK2A and the party’s established leaders. When the leader of the Senate expressed concerns last year over a bill designed to protect Oklahoma from “federal overreach,” Spencer called for him to step down and quickly summoned almost 1,000 people to the Capitol to protest.

Earlier this year, a Senate Republican, Lonnie Paxton, complained that Spencer went too far when he

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declared at a rally, "We win at the ballot box so we don't have to go to the ammo box."

Noting the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing was fueled by anti-government rhetoric, Paxton said the remark "crossed every conceivable line of decency."

Spencer brushed off the complaint, saying it only helped his fundraising.

Republican candidates and officeholders regularly ask to speak to the group's chapter meetings, with speeches typically including a healthy dose of fiery anti-government rhetoric.

At a recent meeting at an Oklahoma City firearms store, a Republican candidate for U.S. Senate, Tulsa preacher Jackson Lahmeyer, derided Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious-disease expert, as a "mass murderer." Another Republican candidate offered raffle entries starting at \$25 for four custom-built AR-15s and a .50-caliber rifle.

At the Capitol, members ask Spencer about new bills to introduce.

"On a firearms issue, he'd be the first stop to go to," said Rep. Eric Roberts, a Republican from Oklahoma City.

A leading Democrat, Rep. Emily Virgin, said she's concerned the group's power is becoming dangerous.

"This really has just turned into a far-right extremist organization, and the fact that so many Republicans in the House and Senate seem to take their cues from that organization is what is most concerning," she said.

But Winona Heltzel, a group member from the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond, said she joined because she thinks the group can help prevent gun confiscation.

"I know everybody talks about the government, but I'm worried about criminals," Heltzel said.

Trump's Oz, Vance endorsements bring cash windfall, backlash

By JILL COLVIN, MARC LEVY and JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

INDEPENDENCE, Ohio (AP) — Former President Donald Trump's late endorsements in hypercompetitive Republican Senate primaries in Ohio and Pennsylvania have unlocked a flood of support for his chosen candidates, including millions in cash.

But the endorsements have also provoked backlash from some Republicans who believe Trump has betrayed his core supporters by backing "Hillbilly Elegy" author JD Vance in Ohio and TV's Dr. Mehmet Oz in Pennsylvania. Both candidates have been criticized for time spent outside their states and being insufficiently committed to the former president and his "America First" agenda.

The blowback has included calls by a major conservative group aligned with a Vance rival to boycott the rally Trump is holding Saturday night to try to boost his candidate. The state's tea party movement, which overwhelmingly supports Trump, is also planning a protest outside.

"For him to endorse JD Vance really seemed like President Trump was out of touch with what's going on in Ohio and what his supporters here want," said Tom Zawistowski, a leader of the group.

It's unclear whether Trump's support will pull Vance and Oz across the finish line in races that will serve as key early tests of the former president's clout in this year's midterm elections. But the endorsements pose a risk to Trump, who has staked his status as a GOP kingmaker on his ability to mobilize his supporters as he eyes another White House run in 2024.

In Ohio, Trump's endorsement has been a major boon to Vance, who had been trailing in the polls before Trump's intervention. While allies concede Trump's announcement at 5 p.m. on Good Friday, less than three weeks before the May 3 primary election, may not have been the most desirable timing, the campaign nonetheless reports a 300% increase in online donations — a majority from new donors — including \$20,000 raised online and \$30,000 by bundlers that Friday alone.

Protect Ohio Values, the super PAC supporting Vance, says it has brought in \$5 million since Trump's endorsement. That includes a \$3.5 million check from venture capitalist Peter Thiel, who had previously given \$10 million, Politico first reported.

Both groups are using that money to air new ads trumpeting Trump's endorsement that they expect to run exclusively through the rest of the campaign.

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"We want to make sure 100% of people know about it. And we're going to go all out on that," said Luke Thompson, who runs the super PAC, which has found that Vance's support rises when voters are made aware that he is Trump's pick.

Ohio strategists and rival campaigns had long conceded an endorsement from Trump, who remains deeply popular with Republican voters despite his 2020 election defeat and his role in inciting the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, was likely to push any candidate to the front of the pack. Vance aides see the endorsement as particularly useful for their candidate given that the chief line of attack lodged against him has been his past criticism of Trump.

But the endorsement has also sparked deep resentment from those backing Vance's rivals, who launched a furious, last-ditch effort last week to try to change Trump's mind. Trump has called on his supporters to rally around Vance, but Vance's chief rivals, including the Trump-aligned Club for Growth, which supports former state treasurer Josh Mandel, have so far refused to stand down. They have instead continued to run anti-Vance ads, drawing anger, in particular, from Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., who has been campaigning for Vance and is set to return to the state Monday for a full day of events.

Joe Kildea, a Club for Growth spokesperson, said the group will increase its spending in the coming days to air even more anti-Vance ads.

Ohio Value Voters, a conservative group that has also endorsed Mandel, has called for a boycott of Trump's Saturday rally. The group, in statement, said that Trump had made a "terrible decision" and that those who decide to attend should let Trump know Vance is "wrong for Ohio" by booing when he takes the stage.

Zawistowski, the tea party leader, warned the endorsement could wind up splitting Trump's base of support in the state primary three ways among Vance, Mandel and Cleveland banker Mike Gibbons. He said that could open up a path to victory for former state GOP chair Jane Timken or even moderate state Sen. Matt Dolan, the one candidate in the race who has not promised to support Trump and his positions if elected.

So far, some voters are siding with Trump.

Linda Davidson, a retired financial consultant from Kirtland, said Trump's endorsement "very much" crystallized her vote for Vance.

"I was actually waiting. I couldn't decide," she said after an event in the Cleveland suburb of Independence on Wednesday. "I was kind of confused on who to vote for."

But at a Mandel event near Cleveland on Thursday, Jeanine Hammack, the campaign chair for the Strongsville Republican Party, said Trump's endorsement will "not at all" influence her vote.

"We love Trump. Always will," she said, adding that she's sure the former president "has his reasons" for picking Vance, but that she knows Mandel better.

In Pennsylvania, Oz is seeing a similar bump since Trump's surprise April 9 endorsement in his close race against former hedge fund CEO David McCormick. The week following Trump's endorsement was the best digital fundraising week for Oz since his campaign launched late last year, with the campaign bringing in nearly three times as much money as it had the week before, said campaign manager Casey Contres.

Some supporters concede that Oz could still lose the May 17 primary with Trump's backing, but argue he likely wouldn't have been able to win without it. His team has shifted its ad strategy for television and digital pitches to focus on the former president's announcement.

"It is a game changer," said John Fredericks, a talk radio host who had urged Trump to back the celebrity doctor.

"Trump's endorsement has given people a chance to stop and think and go, 'Wait a minute. I've seen this guy on TV helping people for 30 years. Trump sees it, too. And now I'm going to take a second look,'" Fredericks said.

Oz acknowledged the impact during a virtual town hall Trump held Friday night to rally support for his candidate.

"Mr. President, there are a lot of voters who are passionate about you who have said that they're coming out to see me because of your endorsement," Oz said, before asking Trump if he would "mind easing

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people's fears" by vouching for Oz's conservative credentials.

Trump assured listeners that the doctor was the only candidate who has his support and the only one he believes can win the general election.

It was an acknowledgement of the fact that Trump's endorsement of a man who has little history with the Republican Party — not to mention Pennsylvania, after living in New Jersey for the past two decades — has roiled party activists who aren't sold on Oz and believe that he is insufficiently conservative on issues like guns and abortion.

While some county party officials said the endorsement had no further divided Republicans than they had been already, given the seven-candidate primary field, some county party officials reported a tide of angry calls.

"The conservative Trumpers are very upset over his endorsement, and they cannot understand it," said Arnold McClure, the Republican Party chair in rural Huntingdon County, where Trump won 75% of the vote in 2020. "The Trump era is over in Pennsylvania because of his endorsement of Dr. Oz."

"A very chaotic situation': Crews tackle growing wildfires

By FELICIA FONSECA and SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Destructive fires in the U.S. Southwest have burned dozens of homes in northern Arizona and put numerous small villages in New Mexico in the path of danger, as wind-fueled flames chewed up wide swaths of tinder dry forest and grassland and plumes of smoke filled the sky.

"It's a very chaotic situation out there," Stewart Turner, a fire behavior analyst, said during a briefing Friday night on the edge of the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico. "We've had extreme fire behavior all day."

Firefighters working to keep more homes from burning on the edge of a mountain town in northern Arizona were helped by some snow, scattered showers and cooler temperatures early Friday. But the favorable weather did not last and more gusts were expected to batter parts of Arizona and all of New Mexico through the weekend.

Crews were tackling more than a dozen large fires Friday nationwide, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. More than 1,600 firefighters were battling six blazes in New Mexico and three in Arizona that have consumed more than 100 square miles (258 square kilometers) of timber and brush.

By Friday afternoon winds were howling across New Mexico, gusting up to 75 mph (120 kph) near the Colorado line, shrouding the Rio Grande Valley with dust and pushing flames through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the north. Fire officials expected one blaze northeast of Santa Fe to overrun several communities before Saturday.

A wall of smoke stretched from wilderness just east of Santa Fe some 50 miles (80 km) to the northeast where ranchers and other rural inhabitants were abruptly told to leave by law enforcement.

Maggie Mulligan, 68, of Ledoux, a dog breeder, and her husband, Brad Gombas, 67, left with nine dogs and five puppies packed into an SUV and an old blue Cadillac.

She said her dog Liam "was a nervous wreck," when a sheriff came to their house Friday afternoon and told them to leave.

They agonized over having to leave their horses behind as they drove 40 miles (65 km) north of Las Vegas, New Mexico, to a middle school turned into a Red Cross shelter.

"We don't know what's next. We don't know if we can go back to the horses," Mulligan said. "There's water in their pasture and there's hay so we'll see what happens."

With no air support or crews working directly on the fire lines, there was explosive growth in a number of fires. San Miguel County Sheriff Chris Lopez warned the situation very dangerous.

Lena Atencio and her husband, whose family has lived in the nearby Rociada area for five generations, got out Friday as winds kicked up. She said people were taking the threat seriously.

"As a community, as a whole, everybody is just pulling together to support each other and just take care of the things we need to now. And then at that point, it's in God's hands," she said as the wind howled

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miles away in the community of Las Vegas, where evacuees were gathering.

Another wind-whipped fire in northeastern New Mexico also was forcing evacuations while the town of Cimarron and the headquarters of the Philmont Scout Ranch, owned and operated by the Boy Scouts of America, were preparing to flee if necessary. The scout ranch attracts thousands of summer visitors, but officials said no scouts were on the property.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed emergency declarations for four counties over the fires.

In Arizona, flames had raced through rural neighborhoods outside Flagstaff just days earlier. A break in the weather Thursday allowed helicopters to drop water on the blaze and authorities to survey the damage.

They found 30 homes and numerous other buildings were destroyed, with sheriff's officials saying over 100 properties were affected. That fire has burned close to 32 square miles (83 square kilometers) and forced evacuations of 765 homes after starting last Sunday.

Authorities used alarms overnight Thursday to warn residents to flee evacuation areas, said sheriff's spokesman Jon Paxton. Howling winds muffled the alarms.

Kelly Morgan is among neighbors at the edge of the evacuation zone who did not leave. She and her husband have lived through wildfires before, she said, and they're prepared if winds shift and flames race toward the home they moved into three years ago.

"Unfortunately, it's not something new to us ... but I hate seeing it when people are affected the way they are right now," she said. "It's sad. It's a very sad time, but as a community, we've really come together."

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

Fire danger in the Denver area on Friday was the highest it had been in over a decade, according to the National Weather Service, because of unseasonable temperatures in the 80s combined with strong winds and very dry conditions. New evacuations were ordered Friday west of Colorado Springs but there were no immediate reports of structures lost.

Looking to deepen pain for Putin, West studying oil and gas

ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States unleashed some of its toughest actions against Russian President Vladimir Putin right after he rolled his troops into Ukraine. Polls in the U.S. find that people want Washington to do more. So what's left, financially, diplomatically and militarily, to step up the pressure?

The U.S. could get strong results from any number of next steps, economists and current and former U.S. officials say. It could simply persist in pouring cash and potent weaponry into Ukraine — a likely course. It could even commit to shutting down some of the inroads the Kremlin has made into U.S. political and financial systems, also conceivable.

But the mightiest trigger the West can pull now on Russia, many experts agree, is the one on a gas pump nozzle. Cutting off Russian profits from oil and natural gas sales has become a main topic among world leaders looking at what else they can do to force Putin to end his invasion.

"It would be very useful to try to devise a way to reduce proceeds from those sales and that really is the proper objective, I think, of a ban," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told a meeting of world finance leaders Thursday.

"But if we can think of a way to do that without harming the entire world from higher energy prices, that would be ideal," Yellen said.

President Joe Biden already has ended the relatively minor U.S. imports of Russian oil and other fossil fuel products. But the U.S. would be central if allies move to cut the global flow of Russian fuel and punish nations and businesses that fail to comply.

Global purchases of Russian oil and gas production account for at least 40% of government revenue for Moscow. Exports are keeping Russia's economy afloat despite the sanctions enacted so far and financing

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the war.

Cutting back further on Russian petroleum to the market would make a global supply crunch even worse, increasing prices for everyone, including in the United States.

Republicans already are making gas price increases that stem in part from Russia's war a top campaign point against Biden.

"Everybody wants a pain-free option, right?" asked Daniel Fried, a former assistant U.S. secretary of state for Europe, and one of many urging the U.S. to take tougher action as Russia builds forces for a new phase of attacks in Ukraine. "Yeah, they seldom exist."

"If anybody writes they can do this thing without some effect on gas prices, you know, without taking a hit — you're crazy, because you can't," Fried said.

The U.S. is already being asked to assure the world that U.S. producers can help make up for lost Russian supply, if Europe moves to cut the hose on Russian oil purchases quickly. The U.S. would likely be an administrator and enforcer in any secondary sanctions to penalize China or other nations or businesses if they buy from or enable Russia's oil and gas industry.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said European nations have considered diverting their payments for Russian oil and gas into escrow accounts, similar to deals forced on Iran and Iraq as part of sanctions.

A poll by The Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that more than half of respondents want Biden to be tougher on Putin.

People in the U.S. may just be coming around to accepting that doing that could mean financial hardships for them. By 51% to 45%, respondents in the AP-NORC poll said the U.S. should focus on sanctioning Russia as effectively as possible more than on limiting damage to the U.S. economy.

But ask Alan Gold of Potomac, Maryland, if he's willing to pay more for gasoline as part of any global move to starve Russia of money for the Ukraine war, and the answer you get is a growl.

"I'm paying \$5 a gallon now," Gold said this past week at a strip mall gas station, jerking his head at the price tally rolling upward as he pumped gas into his vehicle.

Elina Ribakova, deputy chief economist of the Institute of International Finance, said Russia's war is boosting the price it gets for its oil and gas, driving the surplus in Russia's current accounts to nearly \$60 billion, a recent high despite all the West's sanctions.

Economists and policymakers have to decide next steps as part of the larger context of militaries at war, the risks of nuclear war and the cost of Ukrainian lives, Ribakova told an online panel with Princeton's Bendheim Center for Finance this past week. "This is the cost we're thinking about when we think about sanctions ... not just about economics."

Barring major shifts, the financial realm is the one where the next major U.S. actions against Russia will come from.

Militarily, the U.S. is unlikely to send in many new, complex weapons systems, like U.S. tanks or fighter or bomber jets. Doing so would tie up Ukrainian fighters in training on unfamiliar weapons when they're needed for fighting, by the Pentagon's reasoning.

Instead, the U.S. is expected to keep doing what it's doing militarily, only more so, pumping in more cash and basic battlefield weapons and resupplies. On Thursday Biden pledged an additional \$1.3 billion for heavy artillery, 144,000 rounds of ammunition and other aid.

Further boosting U.S. intelligence-sharing to help Ukraine in the fight is an option.

On the diplomatic front, the U.S. and likeminded nations are exploring ways Russia could be further isolated. Russia has already been suspended from the U.N. Human Rights Council and is facing a push at the world body's educational, scientific and cultural organization to strip it of its UNESCO presidency and bar it from hosting a June meeting of its World Heritage Committee.

Russia is unlikely to be suspended from the International Civil Aviation Organization, World Health Organization or Food and Agriculture Organization, however. Any attempt to remove it from the world body's most powerful grouping — the U.N. Security Council — would fail on a Russian and likely Chinese veto.

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Talk of the U.S. officially designating Russia or Russian mercenaries as terrorists or supporters of terrorism hasn't gained traction.

There is another big step the U.S. and its democratic allies should take, that doesn't get as much attention, argues Alex Finley, a former officer of the CIA's directorate of operations: Clean up their own act.

"We need to examine our own role," said Finley, who tracks seizures of Russian yachts and other Western penalties on Putin. She and others say lax regulation and enforcement in the West have allowed Putin and Russia to influence U.S. elections, park cash from corrupt enterprises in shell companies and offshore tax havens, and buy visas and passports to Western countries.

It's all served to erode transparency and the rule of law in Western democracies, as Putin intended, said Finley.

The West got lax because "we made money with it," Finley said. "But we did it in a way that we sold ... part of the soul of democracy."

Young hits floater with 4.4 left, Hawks beat Heat 111-110

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Trae Young struggled in the first two games of the playoffs.

Didn't really matter.

With Game 3 on the line and the season hanging in the balance, the Atlanta Hawks wanted the ball in his hands.

Young delivered, hitting a floater in the lane with 4.4 seconds left that gave the Hawks a 111-110 victory over top-seeded Miami on Friday night after Atlanta overcame a 16-point deficit in the second half.

The Hawks cut the Heat's series lead to 2-1.

"I didn't have any doubts," Young said. "I was able to get to the basket and get my floater."

Jimmy Butler missed a jumper with 12.6 second left that could've given the Heat a three-point cushion. The Hawks grabbed the rebound and got the ball in Young's hands, passing up the chance to call a timeout.

"No way I was calling a timeout there," Hawks coach Nate McMillan said. "We got the rebound down by one with the ball in Trae's hands. That's a great chance to get in transition."

Miami had one more chance to win it, but Butler missed again on an off-balance 3 at the buzzer with De'Andre Hunter in his face to give the Hawks a burst of hope in the best-of-seven series.

"The plan was get free, shoot it and make it," Butler said. "I didn't do it. I'll make the next one."

Game 4 is Sunday night in Atlanta.

P.J. Tucker led a 21-0 run in the third quarter that pushed the Heat to an 84-68 lead and seemingly on cruise control to a 3-0 lead. But Young and the Hawks would not let them get away.

The Heat also were dealing with an injury to point guard Kyle Lowry, who went out in the third quarter with a hamstring problem and did not return. He'll undergo tests Saturday to determine the severity of the injury.

"I love that guy as our point guard," Butler said. "If he's with us, yippee ki-yay. If he's not, someone will step in and do his job. We've got enough guys in that room to make up for him."

After being held to eight points in Miami's Game 1 blowout and committing a career-worst 10 turnovers in Game 2, Young looked more like himself on his home court.

He had 24 points despite another stout defensive effort by the Heat, and turned it over just three times. And, of course, Young hit the shot that really mattered at the end.

"He's the head of the snake," teammate Delon Wright said.

Bogdan Bogdanovic added 18 points, Hunter 17 and three others scored in double figures to take some of the pressure off the star guard.

Coming off a 45-point effort in Game 3, the best playoff game of his career, Butler was held to 20 in this one and missed a prime opportunity to put Miami on the cusp of a sweep.

Tyler Herro led the Heat with 24 points, and Max Strus also had 20.

The Hawks led by 11 in the first half and were still up 68-63 when Hunter hit a 3-pointer with just under

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eight minutes remaining in the third.

That's when Miami suddenly took control of a game that was delayed about 45 minutes after a suspicious package was found outside State Farm Arena before the game.

The Heat turned up their stifling defense, knocked down shots and silenced a sellout crowd that was used to seeing the Hawks win at home.

Tucker scored eight points in the six-minute spree, but his best work came at the other end on Young. Leaning on him so much that Young shoved him away in frustration on an inbounds play, the 36-year-old Tucker used every trick in the book to stifle just the second player in NBA history to lead the league in total points and assists.

SUSPICIOUS PACKAGE

Tipoff was delayed after the suspicious package was found outside Gate 2 of the arena, near a stairwell that provides access to a MARTA subway station.

Three gates were closed, preventing fans from entering while police, K-9 units and arena security cleared the area and investigated the package.

A bomb squad safely removed the package after it was found not to be explosive, clearing the way for the entrances to be opened.

Even with the delay, many fans were still bogged down in long lines outside the arena when the game began. But the place was hopping at the end of the night.

BENCH HELP

The Hawks went with just three players off the bench, but all made huge contributions.

Bogdanovic made four 3-pointers, Wright had 13 points and Onyeka Okongwu had nine points and six rebounds.

Most tellingly, all three played the entire fourth quarter, forming an effective group with Young.

"When you've got multiple guys who can dribble and make plays, for sure it makes it a lot easier for me," Young said.

TIP-INS

Heat: Tucker had 11 points. ... Butler nearly had a triple-double with 10 rebounds and eight assists. ... Bam Adebayo had 13 points and 11 rebounds.

Hawks: John Collins started again at center in place of injured Clint Capela, who has yet to play in the series, but wasn't much of a factor. Struggling again with an injured finger, Collins managed just six points and five rebounds. .

UP NEXT

The Hawks have built quite a home-court advantage since mid-January, winning 21 of their last 24 games in the A-T-L. They'll go for their seventh straight home win in Game 4.

McCarthy, Trump have 'positive' call despite Jan. 6 audio

By LISA MASCARO, FARNOUSH AMIRI and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy had a "positive" call with Donald Trump and appeared to be suffering little political blowback Friday from the release of audio in which he suggested the president should resign shortly after the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection.

McCarthy worked swiftly to shore up support among Republicans, calling and texting many lawmakers about his conversation with Trump as he rushed to contain the fallout. Trump himself told The Wall Street Journal that he has had "a very good relationship" with McCarthy.

In the audio, first posted Thursday by The New York Times and aired on Rachel Maddow's MSNBC show, McCarthy is heard discussing with House Republicans the Democratic effort to remove Trump from office after the president's supporters stormed the Capitol.

In the recording of a Jan. 10, 2021, discussion, McCarthy says he would tell Trump, "I think it will pass, and it would be my recommendation you should resign."

McCarthy released a statement Thursday calling the report "totally false and wrong." His spokesman, Mark Bednar, told the newspaper, "McCarthy never said he'd call Trump to say he should resign."

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But on Friday, the Times released another recording, this time of a Jan. 11, 2021, Republican conference call. In the audio, McCarthy can be heard telling his caucus that he had asked the former president if he felt responsible for the deadly insurrection and that Trump acknowledged some responsibility.

"I asked him personally today, does he hold responsibility for what happened?" McCarthy says on this recording. "Does he feel bad about what happened? He told me he does have some responsibility for what happened and he'd need to acknowledge that."

In his first public statement since the audio was released, Trump told the Journal late Friday: "I've had actually a very good relationship" with McCarthy. "I like him. And other than that brief period of time, I suspect he likes me quite a bit."

"He made a call. I heard the call. I didn't like the call," Trump said. "But almost immediately, as you know, because he came here and we took a picture right there — you know, the support was very strong."

When asked about the Jan. 11 recording, Trump told the Journal: "No, that's false. I never claimed responsibility."

The release of the audio could threaten the Republican House leader's hold on power. McCarthy is in line to become speaker if Republicans win control in the fall's election, and he is heavily reliant on Trump's support to get there. But a person familiar with McCarthy's Thursday call with Trump described it as "positive."

"I'm not mad at you," Trump told McCarthy in a call Thursday afternoon, according to a second person familiar with the conversation. Both people were granted anonymity to discuss the call. McCarthy and his office did not immediately respond to requests for comment about the Trump call.

Trump and McCarthy had a strained relationship immediately after the Capitol attack, but mended their alliance after the GOP leader flew to the former president's resort in Florida to patch up their differences.

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

There has been no indication that McCarthy actually told Trump he should resign. In the same conversation, McCarthy told his colleagues he doubted Trump would take the advice to step aside rather than be pushed.

"That would be my recommendation," McCarthy is heard saying in response to a 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."

The crowd that attacked the Capitol marched there from a rally near the White House where Trump had implored them to fight to overturn the election result. However, he has strongly denied responsibility for the violence.

Trump 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.

McCarthy indicated during an interview with The Associated Press this week in California how important Trump remains to his party and its prospects for winning control of the House this fall. "He'll motivate, get a lot of people out," McCarthy said at a GOP event in Fresno.

President Joe Biden, asked about McCarthy's situation Friday, said: "This ain't your father's Republican Party."

Biden suggested Trump's grip on the GOP is strong. "This is a MAGA party now," he told reporters, referring to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

The audio depicts a very different McCarthy from 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 Biden's 2020 election victory.

Since then, the California Republican has distanced himself from any criticism of Trump and has avoided

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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 the former president at his Florida residence at Mar-a-Lago.

McCarthy, 57, has been strategically charting his own delicate course toward the speaker's gavel, well aware of the support he'll need from hard-right members who have created headaches with inflammatory actions and statements.

No other Republican leader in the House has amassed the standing to challenge McCarthy for the leadership. McCarthy has recruited the class of newcomers bolstering GOP ranks and raised millions to bolster Republican campaigns. He has tried to temper his closest rivals, Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana and Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, even as he works to shore up the votes that would be needed to become speaker.

So long as Trump continues to back McCarthy, whom he had once fondly called "My Kevin," the job is the Californian's to lose.

Several Republican lawmakers came out in force Friday to defend McCarthy and reiterate that his road to speakership is still on track.

Rep. Tony Gonzales, R-Texas, tweeted that months from now, Republicans will win back the majority and "and Kevin McCarthy will be Speaker of the House."

On a Fox Business show, Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina said she supports McCarthy "100%."

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, seeking information on his communications with Trump and White House staff in the week after the violence, including a conversation with Trump that was reportedly heated.

McCarthy issued a statement at the time saying he would refuse to cooperate because he saw the investigation as not legitimate and accused the panel of "abuse of power."

Ukraine: Russians shift elite units to the new battleground

By DAVID KEYTON and YESICA FISCH Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia shifted a dozen crack military units from the shattered port of Mariupol to eastern Ukraine and pounded away at cities across the region, Ukrainian authorities said Friday, as the two sides hurtled toward what could be an epic battle for control of the country's industrial heartland.

Meanwhile, Russia reported that one serviceman was killed and 27 others were left missing after the fire on board the warship Moskva, which sank a week ago following what the Ukrainians boasted was a missile attack. Moscow previously reported everyone aboard had been rescued.

The Russian Defense Ministry did not acknowledge an attack on the ship. It continued to say a fire broke out after ammunition detonated, without explaining how that happened. The loss of the guided missile cruiser — the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet — was a humiliating setback for Moscow.

In Mariupol, reduced largely to smoking rubble by weeks of bombardment, Russian state TV showed the flag of the pro-Moscow Donetsk separatists raised on what it said was the city's highest point, its TV tower. It also showed what it said was the main building at Mariupol's besieged Azovstal steel plant in flames.

The Kremlin has thrown over 100,000 troops and mercenaries from Syria and Libya into the fight in Ukraine and is deploying more forces in the country every day, said Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council.

"We have a difficult situation, but our army is defending our state," he said.

Numerous cities and villages came under bombardment in the Donbas — the industrial region in the east that the Kremlin has declared the new, main theater of war — as well as in the Kharkiv region just to the west, and in the south, authorities said.

Russian forces pummeled an estimated 2,000 Ukrainian fighters holed up inside the sprawling Azovstal plant, the last known pocket of resistance in the strategic southern port city, the mayor's office reported.

"Every day they drop several bombs on Azovstal," said Petro Andryushchenko, an adviser to Mariupol's

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mayor. "Fighting, shelling, bombing do not stop."

A day earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared victory in the battle for Mariupol despite the steel-mill holdouts. He ordered his forces not to storm the plant to finish off the defenders but to seal it off instead in an apparent bid to force them to surrender.

Mariupol has taken on outsize importance in the war. Capturing it would deprive the Ukrainians of a vital port and complete a land corridor between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, which Putin seized from Ukraine in 2014.

It would also allow Putin to throw more of his forces into the potentially climactic battle for the Donbas and its coal mines, factories and other industries, or what the Kremlin has now declared to be its main objective.

Danilov reported that some 12 to 14 of Russia's elite military units have, in fact, left Mariupol and begun moving to the east to take part in the fighting there.

"It will now be difficult for our forces, because our guys in Mariupol were taking (those units) on themselves. It is their courage and feat," he said.

Danilov also said Kyiv managed to deliver weapons via helicopter at great risk under cover of night to the Mariupol steelworks, which have been bombarded for weeks.

Putin said Russia gave Ukrainian forces inside the plant the option to surrender, with guarantees to keep them alive, and offered "decent treatment and medical care," according to an account of a phone call with European Council President Charles Michel, provided by the Kremlin.

"But the Kyiv regime does not allow them to take this opportunity," Putin charged.

More than 100,000 people — down from a prewar population of about 430,000 — are believed trapped in Mariupol with little food, water or heat, and over 20,000 civilians have been killed in the nearly two-month siege, according to Ukrainian authorities.

Most attempts to evacuate civilians from the city have failed because of what the Ukrainians said was continued Russian shelling.

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said no humanitarian corridors for civilian evacuations would be open in Ukraine on Friday because it was too dangerous. She urged civilians to "be patient" and "hang in there."

Days into the Russian offensive to take the east, the campaign has yet to become a full-out assault, with military analysts saying Moscow's forces are still ramping up and have not achieved any major breakthroughs in the Donbas or gained any significant ground.

But shelling attacks killed three civilians in a small town and two villages Friday in the Donetsk region, which is part of the Donbas, the regional governor, Pavlo Kyrylenko, posted on a messaging app. Kyrylenko said the Russians opened fire on at least 20 of the region's settlements.

In other developments, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said talks between the two countries have "ground to a halt" because Moscow hasn't received a response from Kyiv to its latest proposals, the details of which have not been released.

Putin's lead negotiator at the talks, Vladimir Medinsky, said he held several lengthy conversations Friday with the head of the Ukrainian delegation. He gave no details.

Also, Rustam Minnekayev, a senior Russian military official, publicly outlined Russian war aims that appeared to be wider than what the Kremlin has stated in recent weeks. He said Russia's forces aim to take full control of not just eastern Ukraine but southern too.

He said such a move would open the way to the nation of Moldova, where Russia backs the breakaway region of Transnistria. Moldovan officials are warily watching Putin's actions in Ukraine.

In his nightly video address, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned: "The Russian invasion of Ukraine was assumed to be just the beginning; further, they want to grab other countries."

Zelenskyy adviser Mykhailo Podolyak added that Russia "was always lying to everyone and that, in fact from the very beginning, it wanted stupidly to steal some of Ukraine's territory to secure an outlet to Transnistria."

Satellite photos released Friday by Maxar Technologies revealed what appeared to be a second mass

grave site excavated recently near Mariupol. The site at a cemetery in the town of Vynohradne has several newly dug parallel trenches measuring about 40 meters (131 feet) long, Maxar said in a statement.

A day earlier, Maxar made public satellite photos of what appeared to be rows upon rows of more than 200 freshly dug mass graves next to a cemetery in the town of Manhush, outside Mariupol. That prompted Ukrainian accusations that the Russians are trying to conceal the slaughter of civilians in the city.

"This confirms again that the occupiers arrange the collection, burial and cremation of dead residents in every district of the city," Andriyushchenko said on the Telegram messaging app.

The Ukrainians estimated that the graves seen in the photos released on Thursday could hold 9,000 bodies. The Kremlin did not respond to the satellite pictures.

The U.N. Human Rights office again condemned the Russian invasion.

"Over these eight weeks, international humanitarian law has not merely been ignored but seemingly tossed aside," U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said.

Big Tech faces 'major' EU law on hate speech, disinformation

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Taking aim at hate speech, disinformation and other harmful content online, the European Union is nearing agreement on a sweeping law that would force big tech companies to police themselves harder, make it easier for users to flag problems, and empower regulators to punish noncompliance with billions in fines.

EU officials negotiated into the late hours of Friday night over the final details of the Digital Services Act, which would overhaul the digital rulebook for 27 countries and cement Europe's reputation as the global leader in reining in the power of social media companies and other digital platforms, such as Facebook, Google and Amazon. But midnight passed without an agreement announced, though several EU officials tweeting about the proceedings expressed optimism that things were getting close.

The act would be the EU's third significant law targeting the tech industry, a notable contrast with the U.S., where lobbyists representing Silicon Valley's interests have largely succeeded in keeping federal lawmakers at bay.

While the Justice Department and Federal Trade Commission have filed major antitrust actions against Google and Facebook, Congress remains politically divided on efforts to address competition, online privacy, disinformation and more.

The EU's new rules, which are designed to protect internet users and their "fundamental rights online," would make tech companies more accountable for content created by users and amplified by their platforms' algorithms.

"The DSA is nothing short of a paradigm shift in tech regulation. It's the first major attempt to set rules and standards for algorithmic systems in digital media markets," said Ben Scott, a former tech policy advisor to Hillary Clinton who's now executive director of advocacy group Reset.

Once agreed to in principle, the law would still need to be approved by the European Parliament and European Council, though that is not expected to be a major hurdle. It has not been decided when the law would go into effect.

Negotiators had been hoping to hammer out a deal before the end of Friday, ahead of French elections Sunday. A new French government could stake out different positions on digital content.

The need to regulate Big Tech more effectively came into sharper focus after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when Russia was found to have used social media platforms to try to influence the country's vote. Tech companies like Facebook and Twitter promised to crack down on disinformation, but the problems have only worsened. During the pandemic, health misinformation blossomed and again the companies were slow to act, cracking down after years of allowing anti-vaccine falsehoods to thrive on their platforms.

Under the EU law, governments would be able to request companies take down a wide range of content that would be deemed illegal, including material that promotes terrorism, child sexual abuse, hate speech and commercial scams. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter would have to give users tools

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to flag such content in an "easy and effective way" so that it can be swiftly removed. Online marketplaces like Amazon would have to do the same for dodgy products, such as counterfeit sneakers or unsafe toys.

These systems will be standardized so that they will work the same way on any online platform.

Companies that violate the rules face fines amounting to as much as 6% of their annual global revenue, which for tech giants would mean billions of dollars. Repeat offenders could be banned from the EU market.

The tech giants have been lobbying furiously in Brussels to water down the EU rules. Google said in a statement on Friday that it looks forward to "working with policymakers to get the remaining technical details right to ensure the law works for everyone." Amazon referred to a blog post from last year that said it welcomed measures that enhance trust in online services. Facebook didn't respond to requests for comment, and Twitter declined to comment.

The Digital Services Act would ban ads targeted at minors, as well as ads targeted at users based on their gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. It would also ban deceptive techniques companies use to nudge people into doing things they didn't intend to, such as signing up for services that are easy to opt into, but hard to decline.

To show they're making progress on limiting these practices, tech companies would have to carry out annual risk assessments of their platforms.

Up until now, regulators have had no access to the inner workings at Google, Facebook and other popular services. But under the new law, the companies will have to be more transparent and provide information to regulators and independent researchers on content-moderation efforts. This could mean, for example, making YouTube turn over data on whether its recommendation algorithm has been directing users to more Russian propaganda than normal.

To enforce the new rules, the European Commission is expected to hire more than 200 new staffers. To pay for it, tech companies will be charged a "supervisory fee," which could be up to 0.1% of their annual global net income, depending on the negotiations.

Experts said the new rules will likely spark copycat regulatory efforts by governments in other countries, while tech companies will also face pressure to roll out the rules beyond the EU's borders.

"If Joe Biden stands at the podium and says 'By golly, why don't American consumers deserve the same protections that Google and Facebook are giving to Europe consumers,' it's going to be difficult for those companies to deny the application of the same rules" elsewhere, Scott said.

But the companies aren't likely to do so voluntarily, said Zach Meyers, senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform think tank. There is just too much money on the line if a company like Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, is restricted in how it can target advertising at specific groups of users.

"The big tech firms will heavily resist other countries adopting similar rules, and I cannot imagine the firms voluntarily applying these rules outside the EU," Meyers said.

The EU reached a separate agreement last month on its so-called Digital Markets Act, a law aimed at reining in the market power of tech giants and making them treat smaller rivals fairly.

And in 2018, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation set the global standard for data privacy protection, though it has faced criticism for not being effective at changing the behavior of tech companies. Much of the problem centers on the fact that a company's lead privacy regulator is in the country where its European head office is located, which for most tech companies is Ireland.

Irish regulators have opened dozens of data-privacy investigations, but have only issued judgements for a handful. Critics say the the problem is understaffing, but the Irish regulator says the cases are complex and time consuming.

EU officials say they have learned from that experience and will make the bloc's executive Commission the enforcer for the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act.

Sharpton demands name of officer who killed Patrick Lyoya

By DAVID EGGERT, MIKE HOUSEHOLDER and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — The Rev. Al Sharpton demanded that authorities publicly identify the

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Michigan officer who killed Patrick Lyoya, a Black man and native of Congo who was fatally shot in the back of the head after a struggle, saying at Lyoya's funeral Friday: "We want his name!"

Sharpton's comments renewed demands by Lyoya's family members and activists. He told the roughly 1,000 people gathered that authorities cannot set a precedent of withholding the names of officers who kill people. Police in Grand Rapids have said they would withhold the officer's name unless he is charged with a crime, which they describe as a long-standing practice that applies to the public as well as city employees.

"Every time a young Black man or woman is arrested in this town, you put their name all over the news. Every time we're suspected of something, you put our name out there," Sharpton said. "How dare you hold the name of a man that killed this man? We want his name!"

Mourners at Renaissance Church of God in Christ, many wearing T-shirts or sweatshirts bearing Lyoya's picture, stood and applauded.

In a statement Friday, City Manager Mark Washington acknowledged the demands and said he would discuss the matter with the police chief and human resources officials.

"Police reform requires evaluating many long-standing practices to ensure our actions are consistent with the best interests of the community and the individuals involved," Washington said.

No timeline has been set for the discussions or a decision, spokesman David Green said, adding that Washington's statement was intended to let city residents know "we hear you" and "we're willing to assess that practice and see if it works or not."

Sharpton noted that Lyoya was killed on April 4, the anniversary of the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., putting Lyoya's death in the context of the national civil rights movement. He said Lyoya came to America in search of a better life and "ran into an America that we know too well." He urged those gathered to continue to fight for justice, and called for a federal investigation into Lyoya's killing.

"We can't bring Patrick back. But we can bring justice in Patrick's name," he said.

Andrew Birge, U.S. attorney for the district that includes Grand Rapids, said in a statement that his office and the FBI had offered help state investigators and local prosecutors and that the Justice Department can provide "consultation, mediation or training assistance." He said his office will continue to review the facts to determine whether additional federal response is warranted.

Sharpton and civil rights attorney Ben Crump, who is representing the Lyoya family, have frequently joined with mourners to speak at the funerals of Black people killed by police. Sharpton has eulogized 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.

Crump also called for justice Friday, saying "an unnamed police officer escalated a simple misdemeanor traffic stop into a deadly execution." He said the issue is one of humanity, and he called on federal lawmakers to pass reforms aimed at curbing systemic racism in policing.

"World leaders can't condemn Russian soldiers shooting unarmed citizens in the back of the head in Ukraine, but then refuse to condemn police officers shooting unarmed Black citizens here in Grand Rapids, Michigan," he said. "If it's wrong that you do it in the Ukraine then it's wrong that you do it in Grand Rapids."

After the service, Crump told reporters: "We believe the whole world is watching Grand Rapids, Michigan."

Lyoya's body lay in a white, open casket inside the church before the service began. Once the funeral started, the casket was closed and the flag of Congo was draped over it. Below the casket, a sign bearing an image of the American flag and a photo of Lyoya said: "It's our right to live," in both English and Swahili.

Lyoya's mother, Dorcas, sobbed as mourners filed in to pay their respects, and tears ran down her cheek as music played and a choir sang.

U.S. Rep. Brenda Lawrence, Michigan's only Black member of Congress, read a proclamation saluting Lyoya's memory, saying he was an American of great distinction, whose life and legacy would not be forgotten.

"This is personal to me. This is my family. You are my family. This is my community," she said. "And if I don't stand up, who will?"

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Other elected officials, such as Grand Rapids Mayor Rosalynn Bliss and state Sen. Winnie Brinks, were also in attendance.

The funeral program was printed in English and Swahili, and a portion of the service was led by leaders in the Congolese community. Bethlehem Shekanena, whose parents immigrated from Congo, said the Lyoyas came to the U.S. for life, liberty and the ability to pursue happiness.

"We are gathered here today because the promise given to all those who reside on this land, the very foundation of what makes America America — it was broken the moment Patrick Lloya was killed in the streets," she said, adding: "He did not deserve to die."

Before the service, mourners were given T-shirts that read "Justice For Patrick Lyoya" on one side and "It's our Right to Live!" on the other. Some men removed their suit jackets and slipped the shirt on over their dress shirts.

Lyoya, who was unarmed, 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 Lyoya was stopped because the license plate did not match the car Lyoya was 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.

"How dare you pull your gun about some car tags?" Sharpton said during his eulogy.

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

Disney government dissolution bill signed by DeSantis

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill on Friday to dissolve the private government Walt Disney World controls on its property in the state, punishing the entertainment giant for opposing a new law that critics call "Don't Say Gay."

The move is expected to have huge tax implications for Disney and further sour the relationship between the Republican-led government and a major political player whose theme parks have transformed Orlando into one of the world's most popular tourist destinations.

For DeSantis, the attack on Disney is the latest front in a culture war waged over policies involving race, gender and the coronavirus, battles he has harnessed to make himself one of the most popular Republicans in the country and a likely 2024 presidential candidate.

The law would eliminate the Reedy Creek Improvement District, as the 55-year-old Disney government is known, as well as a handful of other similar districts by June 2023. The measure does allow for the districts to be reestablished, leaving an avenue to renegotiate the future of the deal that allows the company to provide services such as zoning, fire protection, utilities and infrastructure.

DeSantis said Friday that the company would end up paying more taxes than it currently does and that the law isn't expected to cause tax increases for residents around Disney. He gave no additional details.

The dispute began with Disney's criticism of a new law barring instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade as well as instruction that is not "age appropriate or developmentally appropriate." DeSantis and his fellow Republicans have defended the law as reasonable, saying that parents, not teachers, should be discussing such topics with children.

Under mounting pressure, Disney eventually said it would suspend political donations in the state and that it would support organizations working to oppose the new law.

"You're a corporation based in Burbank, California, and you're gonna marshal your economic might to attack the parents of my state," DeSantis said Friday before signing the bill into law at a ceremony in Hialeah Gardens. "We view that as a provocation, and we're going to fight back against that."

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The governor has hammered Disney for coming out against the bill, portraying the company as a purveyor of “woke” ideology that injects inappropriate subjects into children’s entertainment. In a fundraising pitch sent out this week, DeSantis told supporters, “It took a look under the hood to see what Disney has become to truly understand their inappropriate influence.”

Republican Rep. Randy Fine, sponsor of the bill to eliminate the Disney district, has said Disney is a guest in the state and that Floridians are not interested in the company’s California values.

“You kick the hornet’s nest, things come up,” Fine told lawmakers in the GOP-controlled statehouse this week.

Democrats have slammed the Disney measure as petty retaliation, warning that homeowners could face tax bills if they have to absorb costs from the company, though details are far from clear.

“The devil is in the details and we don’t yet today have the details,” said Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings, whose county is partially home to Disney World. He added it would be “catastrophic for our budget” if the county had to assume the costs for public safety at the theme park resort.

Disney is one of Florida’s biggest private employers, last year saying it had more than 60,000 workers in the state. It is not immediately clear how the company or local governments around its properties would be affected if the district was dissolved.

The creation of the Reedy Creek Improvement District, and the control it gave Disney over 27,000 acres (11,000 hectares) in Florida, was a crucial element in the company’s plans to build near Orlando in the 1960s. Company officials said they needed autonomy to plan a futuristic city along with the theme park. The city never materialized, however; instead, it morphed into the Epcot theme park.

The company is a major political player in Florida, as well as the rest of the country. The Walt Disney Co. and its affiliates made more than \$20 million in political contributions to both Republicans and Democrats in the 2020 campaign cycle, the most recent year for which figures are available, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks such spending.

That same year, Disney-related entities funneled \$10.5 million to the America First Action committee, which supports Republican former President Donald Trump. Disney also contributed \$1.2 million to support Democratic President Joe Biden’s campaign.

Voting groups sue over Florida congressional map

By BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Voting rights groups sued Florida on Friday over a congressional map drawn by Gov. Ron DeSantis and passed by the GOP-controlled Legislature, saying it will diminish the state’s Black representation and benefit Republicans.

Florida lawmakers approved the map Thursday as part of a contentious three-day special legislative session during which Black and Democratic representatives staged a sit-in on the House floor, prayed and sang “We Shall Overcome” in protest.

DeSantis, who is considered a top tier presidential candidate in 2024, signed the measure into law Friday.

The League of Women Voters of Florida, the Black Voters Matter Capacity Building Institute, Equal Ground Education Fund and others filed the suit in a state court in Tallahassee. The case alleges the new map violates provisions of the Florida Constitution that prohibit districts from diluting the electoral power of minorities and from being drawn to benefit one political party over another.

“He wants to rig the state and he wants to do that by drawing lines that unfairly represent the state and our voting population,” said Equal Ground founder Jasmine Burney-Clark in a phone interview. “We also know that he has ambitions to become president of the United States, and creating a Congress that is more favorable to the issues he presumably would push in his administration makes it easier for him to do so.”

The lawsuit names as defendants Secretary of State Laurel M. Lee, Attorney General Ashley Moody and the Republican leaders of the House and Senate, among others. Their offices did not immediately return emails seeking comment.

DeSantis took the unusual step of vetoing the map drawn by the Legislature earlier this year and proposing his own, calling lawmakers back into the special session to approve it. Democrats say the map

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strongly favors the GOP and would dismantle two districts currently held by Black members of congress.

The governor's office drew up a map it described as neutral on race and party affiliation, and which it said abided by both the state and federal constitutions. But even supporters have acknowledged that it is likely to draw legal challenges.

Democratic state Rep. Angie Nixon, who led the protest on the House floor, was expecting the lawsuit. "The map is unconstitutional and it's illegal and they knew it," she said in a phone interview.

She said she's heard rumblings that she's going to be punished for her protest, but said it's minor in comparison to actions that civil rights leaders have endured to seek racial equality.

"I cried this morning," she said, with a trembling voice. "I cried because I thought about what my grandmother went through, and my grandfather, and my ancestors who risked their lives to vote, to have a voice to be heard, to be respected."

The Florida congressional delegation now has 16 Republicans and 11 Democrats, and the state is poised to gain one U.S. House seat based on the results of the 2020 U.S. census. Many political observers have said the DeSantis map could give Republicans a 20-8 advantage, though Florida's vast number of unaffiliated voters can swing elections. Such an advantage would help DeSantis, should he run for and win the White House in 2024.

Of Florida's 14.3 million registered voters, about 36% are Republicans and 35% Democrats, while the overwhelming majority of the remainder have no party affiliation.

Black Floridians currently serve in five of the state's 27 districts, representing about 19% of the delegation. Four of them are Democrats; one of them is a Republican in an overwhelmingly white constituency. Black people represent about 16% of Florida's population.

Previous maps had included a long, slim district spanning northern Florida that would have largely kept intact the constituency of Black Democratic Rep. Al Lawson. DeSantis has singled out that district, saying it violated guidelines for compactness.

Climate progress remains elusive for Biden on Earth Day

By JOSH BOAK, CHRIS MEGERIAN and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — With a backdrop of flowering trees, it was a setting fit for the signing of major environmental legislation. Even Seattle's notorious clouds parted as President Joe Biden stepped up to speak Friday.

But when he sat down at a small desk with the presidential seal that had been set up for the occasion, there was no new law to sign, just an executive order directing federal officials to keep better track of trees in national forests.

The gap between the scale of the global warming crisis and the president's initiatives seemed wider than ever on Earth Day. Although last year's infrastructure legislation had some climate policies, such as building more charging stations for electric cars, many of Biden's most ambitious proposals remain stalled in Congress.

Biden seemed eager to be signing something other than his executive order.

"My pen is ready," Biden said in Seattle's Seward Park. "Get some of these bills to my desk."

He criticized Republicans for opposing climate action and hinted at his frustration with Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, although he didn't mention them by name. Within the Democratic caucus, he said, "there's only two senators who occasionally don't vote with me."

The lack of unanimity among Democrats and the steadfast resistance from Republicans in the evenly divided Senate has blocked hundreds of billions of dollars in tax credits for clean energy. Environmental advocates question whether the country can hit Biden's ambitious goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions without such policies, and scientists warn that the world faces extreme heat, drought and weather unless fossil fuels are phased out swiftly.

With so much of his agenda in doubt, Biden instead drew a sharp contrast with his predecessor, former President Donald Trump, who often mocked climate change as he unraveled the country's fight against

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global warming during his time in office.

"We've reached the point where the crisis on the environment has become so obvious, with the notable exception of the former president, that we really have an opportunity to do things we couldn't have done two, five, 10 years ago," Biden said.

Biden said he was staking his hopes on an up-and-coming generation.

"Every time I get a little down ... I just turn on the television or take a look at all the young people," he said. "This younger generation is not going to put up with all this stuff. No, they're not."

Biden spoke to some of that generation at his second stop of the day, Green River College, just south of Seattle. The auditorium included scores of students, plus faculty and local elected officials, and Biden used the moment to promote an agenda that goes far beyond the environment.

The speech was a collage of laws he's passed and what he still needs congressional support to achieve. He discussed college funding, health care prices, child care expenses, corporate taxes, high speed internet and the importance of nursing.

Biden also warned that Republicans remain determined to repeal the Affordable Care Act more than a decade after it was signed into law by President Barack Obama.

"We need to keep this fight up," he said.

Biden singled out the high cost of insulin for treating diabetes, which he wants to limit through new legislation.

"There's no excuse. None," he said. "We're not asking drug companies to do anything they can't afford."

The executive order signed by Biden on Friday directs federal land managers to define and inventory mature and old-growth forests nationwide within a year. The order requires the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to identify threats to older trees, such as wildfire and climate change, and develop policies to safeguard them.

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.

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

Biden used his Earth Day events to reassert his environmentalist credentials 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.

He's even encouraged more domestic oil drilling, angering some environmental activists, to compensate for the problem.

At the same time, Biden has focused on wildfires that are intensifying because of climate change. Blazes that are intense enough to kill trees once considered virtually fire-proof have alarmed land managers, environmentalists and tree lovers the world over. 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.

Timber industry representative Nick Smith said before the order was made public that loggers are worried it will add more bureaucracy, undercutting 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.

"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 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.

"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.

Marjorie Taylor Greene hostile in testimony over eligibility

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene was hostile during testimony Friday in a hearing on her eligibility to run for reelection, saying she did not remember liking and making various social media posts surrounding the attack on the U.S. Capitol last year and accusing an opposing lawyer of using chopped videos and twisting her words.

Voters in the Georgia congresswoman's district have said Greene helped facilitate the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection that disrupted certification of President Joe Biden's victory, making her ineligible for reelection under a rarely cited section of the 14th Amendment dealing with "insurrection or rebellion."

But Greene — who, the day before the Capitol riot, proclaimed on TV that this is "our 1776 moment" — testified that she's never endorsed violence.

Greene is set to appear on the Republican ballot for Georgia's May 24 primary and has been endorsed by former President Donald Trump. The administrative law judge who oversaw the hearing must present his findings to Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, who will then make the ultimate determination over whether Greene is qualified.

Greene has repeatedly denied aiding or engaging in an insurrection and has filed a lawsuit alleging that the law the voters are using to challenge her eligibility is itself unconstitutional.

But Ron Fein, a lawyer for the voters who filed the challenge, said Greene took an oath and then broke it by engaging in an insurrection. While Greene wasn't on the steps of the Capitol, she nevertheless played an important role in stoking Republican fury ahead of the attack, Fein said.

Unlike the Civil War and other insurrections that involved military uniforms and tactics, he said, "The leaders of this insurrection were among us, on Facebook, on Twitter, on corners of social media that would make your stomach hurt."

Andrew Celli, a lawyer for the voters, questioned Greene about posts on her social media accounts. She repeatedly responded, "I don't recall," or "I don't remember."

When asked about the fact that her Facebook account had, in 2019, "liked" a post calling for Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to be shot in the head, Greene said she had no memory of that and said someone else could have been responsible.

Whenever Celli suggested that she'd endorsed the use of violence to interrupt the certification of the electoral votes, Greene asserted she doesn't support violence and was encouraging peaceful protest.

Celli played a clip of an interview Greene did Jan. 5, 2021, in which she said this is "our 1776 moment." When Celli asked if she was aware some Trump supporters used that reference as a call to violence, Greene said that wasn't her intention and that she was talking about her plans to object to the certification of electoral votes.

"I was talking about the courage to object," she said.

Celli appeared to grow frustrated at times when she didn't directly answer his questions and accused him of was speculating.

"Ms. Greene, I'm just asking questions," he said.

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"I'm just answering," she responded.

Administrative Law Judge Charles Beaudrot sometimes seemed exasperated by repeated rephrasing of questions and at times told Celli to move on. He also repeatedly admonished Greene supporters for clapping or cheering during the proceedings.

James Bopp, a lawyer for Greene, said his client "did not engage in the attack on the Capitol," and the challengers are making a very serious charge with significant ramifications.

"They want to deny the right to vote to the thousands of people living in the 14th District of Georgia by removing Greene from the ballot," he said.

At the time of the riot, Greene was in a dark hallway at the Capitol urging people via social media to be safe and remain calm, he said.

"Rep. Greene was a victim of this attack," Bopp said, adding that she believed her life could be in danger.

Bopp said that Greene was engaging in protected political speech. He also argued that the administrative hearing process is meant to address basic qualification questions, not to evaluate major constitutional and federal claims.

Dozens of Greene supporters attended the hearing, including U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, a Florida Republican and staunch Greene ally.

The challenge to Greene's eligibility to run for reelection was filed by five voters who live in her district, and the procedure for such a challenge is outlined in Georgia law.

The law says any voter who's eligible to vote for a candidate can challenge that candidate's qualifications by filing a written complaint. The secretary of state then has to request a hearing before an administrative law judge.

Beaudrot asked both sides to submit briefs by midnight Thursday, and said he would try to make a decision within a week after that.

Once he submits findings, Raffensperger will be tasked with deciding the eligibility of Greene, a Trump loyalist, as he faces a tough primary challenge from a Trump-endorsed candidate. Raffensperger attracted Trump's wrath shortly after the 2020 election when he refused to take steps to overturn Trump's narrow loss in the state.

The 14th Amendment says no one can serve in Congress "who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress ... to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same." Ratified shortly after the Civil War, it aimed to keep representatives who had fought for the Confederacy from returning to Congress.

U.S. District Judge Amy Totenberg in Atlanta on Monday declined a request from Greene to halt the challenge process. Greene is appealing that ruling.

The Georgia complaint was filed on the voters' behalf by Free Speech for People, a national election and campaign finance reform group.

The group filed similar challenges on behalf of voters in Arizona, where a judge on Friday ruled to keep three Republicans on the ballot, and in North Carolina against Republican U.S. Rep. Madison Cawthorn, who spoke at the rally that preceded the riot.

A federal judge last month blocked the challenge against Cawthorn, writing that laws approved by Congress in 1872 and 1898 mean the 14th Amendment section can't apply to current House members.

Stocks stumble 2.8% as worries about interest rates worsen

By STAN CHOE and ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Stocks tumbled on Wall Street Friday, leaving the S&P 500 with its biggest one-day loss in almost seven weeks, as worries deepen about a surge in interest rates and the U.S. central bank's efforts to fight inflation.

Several disappointing profit reports from companies also shook what's been the market's main pillar of support.

The S&P 500 sank 2.8% and marked its third losing week in a row. The Dow Jones Industrial Average

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slumped 2.8%, its biggest drop in 18 months, after briefly skidding more than 1,000 points. The Nasdaq also had its worst day in nearly seven weeks, closing 2.6% lower.

A day earlier, Wall Street seemed set for healthy gains for the week after American Airlines, Tesla and other big companies reported strong profits or better forecasts for future earnings than analysts expected. Such corporate optimism has helped stocks remain relatively resilient, even as worries swirl about the highest inflation in decades, the war in Ukraine and the coronavirus.

But markets buckled as the chair of the Federal Reserve indicated the central bank may indeed hike short-term interest rates by double the usual amount at upcoming meetings, starting in two weeks.

The Fed has already raised its key overnight rate once, the first such increase since 2018, as it aggressively removes the tremendous aid thrown at the economy through the pandemic. It's also preparing other moves to put upward pressure on longer-term rates.

By making it more expensive for businesses and households to borrow, the higher rates are meant to slow the economy, which should hopefully halt the worst inflation in generations. But they can also trigger a recession, all while putting downward pressure on most kinds of investments.

"After years of being very accommodative, the Fed has made it clear that policy is going to be tighter for the foreseeable future," said Brian Price, head of investment management for Commonwealth Financial Network. "Their hawkish stance is giving investors pause as many are left to evaluate the impact on profit margins and (stock) multiples moving forward."

The S&P 500 fell 121.88 points to 4,271.78. The Dow dropped 981.36 points to 33,811.40. The Nasdaq lost 335.36 points, closing at 12,839.29. The Dow and Nasdaq also posted losses for the week.

Smaller company stocks also fell sharply. The Russell 2000 slid 50.80 points, or 2.6%, to 1,940.66.

A preliminary report on Friday indicated the U.S. services industry's growth is slowing, hurt in particular by surging costs for fuel, wages and other expenses.

Treasury yields have soared as investors prepare for a more aggressive Fed, and stocks have often moved in the opposite direction of them. The yield on the 10-year Treasury slipped to 2.90% from 2.91% late Thursday, but remains close to its highest level since 2018. It began the year at 1.51%.

The two-year Treasury yield, which moves more on expectations for Fed action on short-term rates, has zoomed even more. It was at 2.69% late Friday after more than tripling from 0.73% at the start of the year.

Markets around the world are feeling similar pressure on rates and inflation, particularly in Europe as the war in Ukraine pushes up oil, gas and food costs.

On Wall Street, most stocks fell, including more than 95% of the companies in the S&P 500. Technology and health care companies were among the biggest weights. Apple fell 2.8% and Microsoft dropped 2.4%.

HCA Healthcare slumped 21.8% for the biggest decline in the S&P 500 after reporting weaker earnings per share for the latest quarter than analysts expected. The hospital operator also cut its forecasted ranges for revenue and earnings this year.

Verizon Communications slid 5.6% after it said it expects earnings for the year to fall at the lower end of the range it had previously forecast. The company also reported slightly weaker revenue than expected for the first three months of the year.

Retailer Gap sank 18% after it cut its forecast for sales for the current fiscal quarter and said the CEO of its Old Navy business will leave the company.

The disappointing company earnings and outlooks, plus Powell's remarks Thursday, have ratcheted up worries for investors already trying to navigate economic uncertainty over the lingering global supply chain issues, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, said Greg Bassuk, CEO of AXS Investments.

"Looking ahead, that's putting a sour taste in investors' mouths around the likelihood of corporate earnings being stronger for the balance of 2022," he said.

The Edsel, Quibi and CNN+? New addition to business failures

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Edsel. Quibi. New Coke. The Segway. DeLorean sports cars. The pantheon of

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colossal business failures has a new member in the CNN+ streaming service.

The news network's subscription offering hadn't even been operating for a month before Warner Bros. Discovery announced this week that it would be shutting down on April 30.

"It's going to be in the Top 10," said Steve Rosenbaum, executive director of the NYC Media Lab and an expert in business innovation, surveying the lengthy history of products that went belly-up.

While "CNN minus" comments quickly proliferated, it's no joke to the more than 300 people hired for CNN+, which was in development for two years. CNN is expected to absorb some of those jobs but there will be layoffs — a clear picture on those numbers is still emerging.

The company spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the project and no one knew when, or if, losses would be replaced by profits.

Old-timers remember the Edsel, a new car model introduced by Ford in 1957 that was poorly made and too expensive. It was discontinued after two years, costing Ford an estimated \$250 million, the name remembered as a synonym for business failure long after the car itself was forgotten.

Coca-Cola's attempt to introduce a new flavor in 1985 was dropped in weeks. Except for its cameo role in the "Back to the Future" movies, the DeLorean didn't make a dent. Inventors of the Segway found in 1999 that not many people wanted to spend around \$5,000 for a glorified scooter.

Quibi, short for "quick bites," had the backing of Hollywood's biggest names and \$1.75 billion from investors when the mobile video service was introduced in 2020. It lasted six months.

Presciently, reporter Josef Adalian recalled that failure in an article for Vulture headlined, "CNN+ has Quibi Vibes," that posted two days after its launch.

"CNN+ in its formative phase feels somewhat like the Quibi of streaming news," Adalian wrote. "Lots of money has been spent, big stars are onboard, but it's hard to figure out just what the service is supposed to be and why a large number of people will want to pay for it."

Rosenbaum, a self-described news junkie, couldn't figure out what CNN+ offered that was unique and vital to him. He said he never even considered paying the monthly \$5.99 fee to subscribe.

He said it had "lots of famous faces that I get other places."

CNN+ has a handful of its own news programs, documentaries and talk shows and big names like Chris Wallace, Anderson Cooper and Jemele Hill but, because of cable and satellite contracts, could not offer a streamed version of what most people know CNN for, the television network's continuous news coverage.

People can find streaming news in several places — ABC, CBS and NBC all have their own services, for example — for free.

"In launching a new business, timing is everything and their timing couldn't have been worse," said Allen Adamson, cofounder of the marketing firm Metaforce. "Streaming services were in a bubble and everyone knew there was a limit to how many streaming services they would get."

When Discovery bought out CNN's previous corporate owner, AT&T, many observers believed CNN+ would eventually be absorbed into a larger app that also had entertainment offerings.

It never got that far, leaving some of its employees shell-shocked at the Thursday meeting when they were told the service would abruptly close.

One of the service's biggest champions, former CNN chief Jeff Zucker, was bumped out of the picture on Feb. 1 when he was forced to resign because of not disclosing a romantic relationship with a co-worker.

CNN+ launched on March 24, only days before Discovery executives took over. In a sense, that was a business provocation: Why start a project that was the brainchild of a former leadership team, just before new leaders were coming with ideas of their own, not to mention a mandate to cut costs?

Incoming CNN chief executive Chris Licht, in Thursday's meeting with employees, likened it to a new owner coming in, seeing a beautiful new house, but declaring he needed an apartment instead.

The Discovery team made it clear in the meeting that they didn't think CNN+ was going to work, based on its own experience with streaming.

"If we're going in a new direction, we can't let it go on one moment more than it needs to," said J.B. Perrette, head of streaming for the new company, in the employee meeting.

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Licht repeatedly praised his staff for the quality of CNN+, and there's no way of knowing whether the product itself would have failed if it had a few years to settle in.

And Rosenbaum said he might have been enticed to see if it was worth it with an offer of a few free months.

Time, however, was one thing CNN+ did not have.

"It's a big failure," Adamson said, "but not as big as it would have been if it kept going and became a black hole of money."

Russian swimmer Rylov banned for appearing at Putin rally

LAUSANNE, Switzerland (AP) — Russian Olympic gold medalist swimmer Evgeny Rylov has been banned from the sport for nine months for appearing at a rally in support of President Vladimir Putin and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Rylov stood on stage with medalists from other Olympic sports at the event last month and wore a jacket with a "Z" on the chest. The letter isn't part of the Russian alphabet but has become a symbol of support for Russian troops after it was used as a marker on Russian armored vehicles operating in Ukraine.

A brief statement from swimming's world governing body, FINA, on Thursday said it "acknowledged" an earlier, as yet unpublished ruling from a disciplinary panel to ban Rylov "following Mr. Rylov's attendance and conduct at an event held at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow."

Rylov was the star of Russia's swim team at the Olympics in Tokyo last year with two gold medals.

His ban began on Wednesday and covers any international competition. The effect on Rylov is likely to be mostly symbolic since FINA also extended its decision to exclude competitors from Russia and its ally Belarus from all international events for the remainder of 2022. He also lost a sponsorship deal with Speedo last month.

FINA previously banned Russia and Belarus from the world championships in Hungary in June but left it possible for them to enter other events. At the time, FINA said Russia planned to boycott all international events anyway, something Russia denied. That position has now been clarified.

"The bureau also confirmed its position that Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials will not be invited to any FINA event through the end of 2022," FINA said on Thursday. FINA's remit covers a range of aquatic sports including swimming, diving, water polo and artistic swimming.

International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach indicated he backs disciplinary measures against athletes such as Rylov.

"The IOC president made it clear that the IOC supports sanctions against anybody in the Olympic community who is in support of the war, and continues to monitor the situation," the IOC said on Friday in a statement on a meeting Bach held with Ukrainian sports officials.

The IOC has previously urged event organizers to bar Russian and Belarusian athletes and teams from their competitions, or, Bach said last month "in special circumstances to at least prohibit any identification of their nationality."

There has been no word of any disciplinary investigations against the other Russian athletes from sports including figure skating, gymnastics and skiing who also appeared at the March 18 rally.

French accuse Russian mercenaries of staging burials in Mali

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso (AP) — The French military has released videos appearing to show Russian mercenaries burying bodies near an army base in northern Mali, which it says is part of a smear campaign against the French who handed the base to Malian forces earlier this week.

Aerial surveillance images taken by the French military on Thursday morning and provided to The Associated Press show what appear to be 10 Caucasian soldiers covering approximately a dozen Malian bodies with sand 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) east of the Gossi military base in the country's north, according to a

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French military officer who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press on the matter.

In the video one of the soldiers appears to be filming the scene. The Caucasian soldiers in the video are believed to be members of the Wagner Group, a Russian mercenary force, the officer said.

Several tweets with pictures of the bodies have been posted on accounts that support Russia or fake accounts created by Wagner, the officer said. The tweets blame the French for the killings and the burials, according to the French officer.

One tweet from an account called Dia Diarra, allegedly created by Wagner, said: "This is what the French left behind when they left base at #Gossi. These are excerpts from a video that was taken after they left! We cannot keep silent about this!"

The French army transferred control of the Gossi base to Malian soldiers on Tuesday, in what the French said was a safe, orderly and transparent manner. Later that day a "French sensor observed a dozen Caucasian individuals, most likely belonging to the Wagner Group," and a detachment from the Malian army arrive at the Gossi site and unload equipment, said the French military in a confidential report that was seen by AP.

Mali's army spokesman Col. Souleymane Dembele said that a team has been dispatched to Gossi to investigate, adding "it is still early for us to react on this case."

The French military said the move to discredit the French forces operating in northern Mali is part of a coordinated campaign of multiple information attacks on them that has been going on for months.

"The Wagner Group and the Malian Armed Forces appear to be taking disregard for human life to new levels in Mali," said Alex Thurston, assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati in the United States.

"Anti-French sentiments, however, reflect more than just Russian disinformation. The Malian junta and Wagner are trying to harness those frustrations, but they did not create them," he said.

French troops have been a major presence in Mali since helping to dislodge jihadi rebels from strongholds in northern Mali in 2013. But the extremists' attacks on civilians and the military have continued as the rebels have pushed south. The ongoing violence has prompted numerous anti-French protests in the capital.

In February, France announced it would withdraw its troops from Mali amid tensions with the country's ruling military junta and the West African country's decision to employ Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group. About 1,000 of the Russian mercenaries are believed to be operating in Mali, according to military experts.

Earlier this month foreign soldiers thought to be the Russians working with the Malian army were accused of killing an estimated 300 men — some of them suspected Islamic extremist fighters but most civilians — in Moura in central Mali, according to Human Rights Watch. It was the worst single atrocity reported in Mali's 10-year armed conflict against Islamic extremists, according to the group which said it interviewed several witnesses about the killings.

It's unclear where the bodies seen in the video Friday came from. The French military official said they might have possibly been taken from near Hombori town, approximately 90 kilometers (56 miles) from Gossi, where there had been fighting a few days earlier, but he could not confirm it.

The apparently staged graves can be seen as the latest example of Russia's disinformation campaign to damage France's reputation and it also reflects badly on Mali's army, which must have been aware of the Russians' actions, said Rida Lyammouri, senior fellow at the Policy Center for the New South, a Moroccan-based organization focused on economics and policy.

"This incident at Gossi camp will further put Mali's junta at odds with the international community, and it wouldn't be surprising if they come up with an unrealistic explanation," he said.

He said the aerial images provided by the French military have largely stymied the Russian disinformation effort. "This is a big win for France who's been facing tough times about its reputation in Mali," he said.

Mask mandates return to US college campuses as cases rise

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By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

The final weeks of the college school year have been disrupted yet again by COVID-19 as universities bring back mask mandates, switch to online classes and scale back large gatherings in response to upticks in coronavirus infections.

Colleges in Washington, D.C., New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Texas have reimposed a range of virus measures, with Howard University moving to remote learning amid a surge in cases in the nation's capital.

This is the third straight academic year that has been upended by COVID-19, meaning soon-to-be seniors have yet to experience a normal college year.

"I feel like last summer it was everyone was like, 'Oh, this is it. We're nearing the tail end,'" recalled Nina Heller, a junior at American University in Washington D.C., where administrators brought back a mask mandate about a month after lifting it. "And then that didn't quite happen, and now we're here at summer again, and there's kind of no end."

Mandates were shed widely in the wake of spring break as case numbers dropped following a winter surge fueled by the omicron variant. But several Northeast cities have seen a rise in cases and hospitalizations in recent weeks, as the BA.2 subvariant of the omicron variant continues to rapidly spread throughout the U.S.

"As much as we would like to move on and think that the pandemic is over, and I think we all would like that to happen at this point, it's wishful thinking," said Anita Barkin, co-chair of a COVID-19 task force for the American College Health Association. "The pandemic is still with us."

COVID-19 had eased so much at Williams College that the private liberal arts school in Massachusetts allowed professors to decide whether to require masks in their classes early last week. But just days later, with cases rising, it reinstated an indoor mask mandate, which was even stricter than what had been in place before.

"I think students are really feeling like people they know are dropping like flies," said junior Kitt Urdang, who's had a half-dozen friends test positive in recent days. "There's definitely been a lot more uncertainty than there's been on campus since COVID hit."

Philadelphia recently brought back its mask mandate, leading the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University to again require them starting Monday. Although the city ended the mandate Thursday, the colleges haven't made any changes.

In Washington, D.C., Howard University's main campus, affectionately dubbed "The Hilltop" by students and alums, was largely quiet this week, with many students taking classes and exams from home. The academic year is coming to a muted end as rising virus numbers prompted administrators to abruptly shift back to online education.

The city's COVID infection rate has more than doubled in April. Besides American, Georgetown and George Washington University also reinstated their indoor mask mandates. But Howard is the only one that has moved away from in-person instruction. The spring semester ends Friday, with final exams for most students starting next week. Administrators have promised an update on what this means for the May 7 commencement ceremony.

"I don't think people are super unhappy about wearing masks," said Lia DeGroot, a George Washington senior who never shed her mask during the single week the mandate was lifted at her school. "Of all of the things that the pandemic has disrupted, I think wearing masks is, you know, a relatively small thing to do. I think that's kind of the mindset that a lot of students have."

In nearby Baltimore, Maryland, Johns Hopkins University announced this month that it was testing all undergraduate students twice weekly through Friday, noting a steep rise in cases. The school also said masks would be required not just in classrooms, but in places like residence hall common areas.

In Houston, Rice University announced earlier this month that students should resume wearing masks in classrooms, citing an uptick in cases on campus. Large college parties also were canceled.

New Mexico State University took a different tack, announcing Monday that all students on campus must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by July 1, ending the option of submitting weekly tests as an

alternative.

One of the few counties still identified by the CDC as having high spread is home to New York's Syracuse University, which announced Monday that it would again require masks in classrooms.

J. Michael Haynie, the school's vice chancellor for strategic initiatives and innovation, said in a letter that "it is important that we take reasonable action to minimize the impact of COVID infections" with finals and commencement fast approaching.

The University of Rochester in upstate New York, the University of Connecticut, Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, and Columbia University in New York City took a similar approach. Many, like Columbia, noted that their surveillance testing programs were finding more cases.

While many students were eager to mask up, grumbling was emerging.

"We're to the point where we're tired of masks," said Neeraj Sudhakar, a Columbia grad student studying financial engineering. "We probably have a 99% vaccination rate, so at this point I think we just need to move on with the pandemic and treat it as endemic rather than going back to what we were doing the past two years."

Deep-red Utah embraced voting by mail. Then came 2020.

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PROVO, Utah (AP) — As Dewon Holt toured a Utah ballot counting center, she listened intently and questioned election officials about concerns circulating since the 2020 election — about voting machines, people mailed multiple ballots and dead voters.

Holt came away confident in the integrity of the vote count after the tour in one of the state's Republican strongholds and even suggested election officials do more to publicize the tours.

"Because we had this national fraud thing going on, everybody thinks there's fraud here," the 76-year-old Republican said in Provo. "I feel like Utah County is good. But I don't know if we have problems in the rest of the counties in the state."

Distrust in elections continues to reverberate around the U.S. and subject election officials to new levels of scrutiny, even in Utah where universal mail-in voting has been widely embraced since the GOP-controlled Statehouse allowed counties to adopt the policy a decade ago.

Pushed by constituents like Holt swept up in fears of widespread fraud, lawmakers made election security a central focus in the Statehouse this year, with 35 proposals considered. They ultimately passed laws tightening voter ID, requiring 24-hour surveillance at ballot drop boxes and making it easier for people to opt out of mail voting, but rejected more drastic proposals, including one to end universal vote by mail altogether.

Despite a newfound focus on outreach and education from election officials, doubters remain. Opposition to the state's vote-by-mail policy has grown.

"It's completely upended the work that election officials do," said Lt. Gov. Deidre Henderson, Utah's top election official said of election misinformation. "What gets really problematic is when the fervor from a loud few in the in the populace gets to elected officials. And then the elected officials start saying 'Well, I got to address the concerns.'"

Utah, where then-President Donald Trump won the last election by 20 percentage points, is the only Republican-led state to mail all active voters ballots each election.

A decade before Trump called it "the greatest scam in the history of politics," lawmakers championed the practice as a way to boost turnout and make voting more convenient in rural areas. Before 2020, the top concern voiced by election officials was parents of those serving missions for the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints filling out their children's ballots.

By 2019, every county in the state had opted into the state's policy allowing counties to mail all active voters ballots making Utah the fourth state to conduct "all-mail" elections. On Election Day, a limited number of polling places remain open.

The practice was so popular that in Utah County — where Holt toured the ballot center — there was an

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outcry from residents after officials in 2018 decided against mailing ballots to all active voters, one year after implementing the policy for the first time.

"This is just blatantly wrong. It isn't the American way," a city official complained about the decision at the time. "Don't we want high turnout?"

The county later reversed the decision.

Fast forward several years: Mail-in ballots remain the overwhelmingly popular method for voting, with 92% using them in the 2020 general election. But disproven claims that they open the door for widespread fraud are transforming the policy discussion, provoking rancorous opposition and newfound skepticism.

Opponents crowded five overflow rooms to listen to a legislative hearing on a proposal to abolish universal voting by mail earlier this year.

Fresh off a failed effort to gather signatures and qualify a measure for the 2022 ballot that would end voting by mail in Utah, members of the anti-mail ballot crowd referring to themselves as "We, the People," said they had heard of ballots mailed to voters who had died and urged lawmakers to require post-election independent audits.

The proposal's sponsor, GOP Rep. Phil Lyman, claimed without evidence that certain precincts had recorded 300% voter turnout in recent elections.

"We're blanketing communities with ballots and assuming that the people that we're sending them to are legitimate on the voter rolls whether they requested it or not. And what we're finding in Utah and other places is that that's not always the case," he said.

Opposition to mail-in ballots has also emerged in other Republican-led states that expanded their use before the 2020 election. In Nebraska, counties with fewer than 10,000 people may conduct all-mail elections. In Georgia, the secretary of state mailed absentee ballot request forms to every voter ahead of the 2020 election.

In many of these places, a schism has emerged between veteran Republican lawmakers who considered election-related bills for years before they became politicized and ones who ascended to office during the Trump era.

In Georgia, Republicans since 2005 have gradually expanded practices such as early voting and no-excuse absentee ballots. Ed Lindsey, a former state lawmaker who now serves on the Georgia's election board, said he observed such a generational divide.

Last year, veteran lawmakers, Lindsay said, were prepared to tweak rules to make ballots more secure, but fought efforts to end no-excuse absentee voting entirely. "They certainly weren't prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater because they'd seen that this was something their constituents liked," he said.

Georgia lawmakers ultimately kept no-excuse absentee voting but added provisions making it more difficult to request mail ballots.

Election officials there and in Utah are unsure whether trends will continue showing more people choosing to vote by mail, or whether opposition will lead people to return to polling places and potentially long lines.

In Utah County, the rancor contributed to the sitting county clerk's decision not to seek reelection.

Unlike what he and others in the election office had grown accustomed to before 2020, officials are "facing a constant barrage of scrutiny," Clerk Josh Daniels said.

"It's like playing a game of whack-a-mole, trying to respond to questions and concerns, records requests and things like that — some of which are very interesting and bizarre," he added.

Daniels' likely replacement, Republican Aaron Davidson, is a universal vote-by-mail opponent who told an applauding audience in a March debate he planned to petition the Legislature to end the practice.

Davidson plans to follow state laws, which currently require he mail all active voters ballots. "But I'm going to do everything I possibly can to make sure if we're doing vote by mail, it's going to be as clean as possible," he said in an interview.

Rep. Steve Eliason, a Republican who sponsored the 2012 legislation allowing counties to implement all-mail elections, said its opponents were vocal, but still very much a minority. Regardless of the growing number of calls he may field about elections, after seeing all counties gradually switch to universal vote

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by mail over the past decade, he's confident it'll survive challenges, even in deep-red Utah.

"We got ahead of the curve when it wasn't politicized," he said. "It's largely been institutionalized. They're what people are used to. It's convenient."

EXPLAINER: Can climate change be solved by pricing carbon?

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — As climate change bakes the planet, dozens of nations and many local governments are putting a price tag on greenhouse gas emissions that are increasing flooding, droughts and other costly catastrophes.

Pennsylvania on Saturday becomes the first major fossil fuel-producing state in the U.S. to adopt a carbon pricing policy to address climate change. It joins 11 states where coal, oil and natural gas power plants must buy credits for every ton of carbon dioxide they emit.

President Joe Biden is attempting a less direct approach — known as the social cost of carbon — that calculates future climate damages to justify tougher restrictions on polluting industries. Republicans say that could crush many businesses. They want the U.S. Supreme Court to stop the administration after lower courts in Louisiana and Missouri split on the issue.

Governments elsewhere have moved more aggressively. Canada, for example, imposes fuel charges on individuals and also makes big polluters pay for emissions. It's one of 27 nations with some kind of carbon tax, according to The World Bank.

The varied strategies come as scientists warn climate change is accelerating — and all can help reduce emissions. But experts say U.S. efforts have been hobbled by its fractured approach.

"Part of the reason you need all of these things to work in tandem is we do not have a federal climate policy," said Seth Blumsack, director of the Center for Energy Law and Policy at Penn State University. "We have social cost of carbon used in regulatory decisions but not (a carbon price) that is faced by the market."

SO WHAT'S THE PRICE TAG?

It varies. A lot.

The Biden administration's social cost estimate is about \$51, meaning every ton of carbon dioxide spewed from a power plant or tail pipe today is projected to contribute to \$51 in economic damages in coming years. The state of New York has its own social cost of carbon, updated in 2020 to \$125 a ton to account for economic trends.

By contrast, emissions were most recently valued at \$13.50 per ton at auction under the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative in the Northeast, which Pennsylvania is joining. A similar "cap and trade" emissions program is in place in California, and one is due to go into effect in Washington state in 2023.

Canada's carbon taxes include a minimum fuel charge for individuals equivalent to about \$40 per ton.

WHY THE BIG DIFFERENCES?

The social cost of carbon attempts to capture the value of all climate damage, centuries into the future. Carbon pricing reflects how much companies are willing to pay today for a limited amount of emission credits offered at auction.

In other words, the social cost of carbon guides policy, while carbon pricing represents policy in practice.

"You're trying to get the price to reflect the true cost to society," said economist Matthew Kotchen, a former U.S. Treasury Department official now at Yale University. "A more stringent policy would have a higher carbon price. A more lax policy would give you a lower carbon price."

In the most efficient world, economists say the two figures would line up, meaning there would be agreement about what climate change damages will cost and the policies used to address them.

IS ANY OF THIS WORKING?

Emissions from northeastern states would have been about 24% higher if the carbon pricing consortium hadn't been in place, according to researchers from Duke University and the Colorado School of Mines.

The carbon auctions also have brought in almost \$5 billion that can be used to reduce household energy cost increases and promote renewable energy.

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The consortium began in 2009 — the year of a failed push in Congress to establish a nationwide cap and trade program. The bipartisan proposal died amid arguments over cost and whether climate change was even occurring.

Following lawsuits from environmentalists, President Barack Obama's administration crafted the social cost of carbon and began including future damage estimates in cost-benefit analyses for new regulations. It was used under Obama more than 80 times, including for tightened vehicle emissions standards and regulations aimed at shuttering coal plants.

President Donald Trump moved to roll back many of the Obama-era rules — and to help justify the changes, the Republican administration cut the social cost of carbon from about \$50 per ton to \$7 or less. The lower number included only domestic climate impacts and not global damages.

"On its face that might sound okay, but when you think about it, global harms from climate change have implications in the U.S. in terms of the global financial system," said Romany Webb, a climate change law expert at Columbia Law School.

WHAT'S NEXT?

On the day Biden took office, he set up an interagency group that revived the Obama estimate and promised a revised figure incorporating previously overlooked consequences of climate change. Many economists expect the revised figure to be higher, perhaps more than double the current \$51.

Without a nationwide cap and trade program, environmentalists and some economists want the government to be more aggressive in using the social cost of carbon to overhaul government energy policy.

Under Biden, the U.S. Interior Department for the first time is applying climate damage considerations to oil and gas sales on public lands and waters. An upcoming lease sale in Wyoming, for example, could result in future emissions of 34 million tons (31 million metric tons) of carbon dioxide. That's equivalent to more than \$1.5 billion in future damages.

But the agency still plans to sell the leases because officials said there were no "established thresholds" to evaluate whether the increased emissions were acceptable, or not.

The expansion of carbon pricing into Pennsylvania remains tenuous. A legal challenge is pending and the state's term-limited Democratic governor could soon be replaced by a successor who opposes the state's participation.

"While pricing carbon would be the gold standard, it seems politically difficult to actually get there," said Brian Prest with Resources for the Future, a Washington, D.C.-based research organization.

Till relatives seek accuser's prosecution in 1955 kidnapping

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

Stymied in their calls for a renewed investigation into the killing of Emmett Till, relatives and activists are advocating another possible path toward accountability in Mississippi: They want authorities to launch a kidnapping prosecution against the woman who set off the lynching by accusing the Black Chicago teen of improper advances in 1955.

Carolyn Bryant Donham was named nearly 67 years ago in a warrant that accused her in Till's abduction, even before his mangled body was found in a river, FBI records show, yet she was never arrested or brought to trial in a case that shocked the world for its brutality.

Authorities at the time said the woman had two young children and they did not want to bother her. Donham's then-husband and another man were acquitted of murder.

Make no mistake: Relatives of Till still prefer a murder prosecution. But there is no evidence the kidnapping warrant was ever dismissed, so it could be used to arrest Donham and finally get her before a criminal court, said Jaribu Hill, an attorney working with the Till family.

"This warrant is a stepping stone toward that," she said. "Because warrants do not expire, we want to see that warrant served on her."

There are plenty of roadblocks. Witnesses have died in the decades since Till was lynched, and it's unclear what happened to evidence collected by investigators. Even the location of the original warrant is a

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mystery. It could be in boxes of old courthouse records in Leflore County, Mississippi, where the abduction occurred.

A relative of Till said it's long past time for someone to arrest Donham in Till's kidnapping, if not for the slaying itself.

"Mississippi is not the Mississippi of 1955, but it seems to still carry some of that era of protecting the white woman," said Deborah Watts, a distant cousin of Till who runs the Emmett Till Legacy Foundation.

Now in her late 80s and most recently living in Raleigh, North Carolina, Donham has not commented publicly on calls for her prosecution. She did not seem to know she had been named in an arrest warrant in Till's abduction until decades later, said Dale Killinger, a retired FBI agent who questioned her more than 15 years ago.

"I think she didn't recall it," he said. "She acted surprised."

The Justice Department closed its most recent investigation of the killing in December, when the agency said Donham had denied an author's claim that she had recanted her claims about Till doing something improper to her in the store where she worked in the town of Money. The writer could not produce any recordings or transcripts to back up the allegation, authorities said.

Till relatives met in March with officials including District Attorney Dewayne Richardson, the lead prosecutor in Leflore County, but left unsatisfied, Watts said. "There doesn't seem to be the determination or courage to do what needs to be done," she said.

Richardson has been in office for about 15 years and was the first Black person to serve as president of the Mississippi Prosecutors Association. He did not return phone messages or emails seeking comment about a potential kidnapping case.

Keith Beauchamp, a filmmaker whose documentary "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till" preceded a renewed Justice Department probe that ended without charges in 2007, said there's enough evidence to prosecute Donham.

"If we're saying we are a country of truth and justice, we must get truth and justice ... no matter the age or gender of the person involved," said Beauchamp.

Stories about the events that led to Till's killing have varied through the years, but the woman known at the time as Carolyn Bryant was always at the center of it, said author Devery Anderson, who obtained original FBI files on the case while researching his 2015 book "Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement."

Till was a 14-year-old from Chicago visiting relatives in Mississippi when he entered the store on Aug. 24, 1955; Donham, then 21, was working inside. A Till relative who was there at the time, Wheeler Parker, told The Associated Press that Till whistled at the woman. Donham testified that Till grabbed her.

Two nights later, Donham's then-husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, showed up armed at the rural home of Till's great-uncle, Mose Wright, looking for the youth.

Wright testified in 1955 that a person with a voice "lighter" than a man's identified Till from inside a pickup truck and the abductors took him away. Other evidence in FBI files indicates that earlier that night, Donham told her husband that at least two other Black men were not the right person.

Authorities already had obtained warrants charging the two men and Donham with kidnapping before Till's body was found in the Tallahatchie River, FBI files show, but police never arrested Donham.

"We aren't going to bother the woman," Leflore County Sheriff George Smith told reporters, "she's got two small boys to take care of."

Roy Bryant and Milam were quickly indicted on murder charges and they were acquitted by an all-white jury in Tallahatchie County about two weeks later.

Grand jurors in neighboring Leflore County refused to indict the men on kidnapping charges afterward, effectively ending the threat of prosecution for Roy Bryant and Milam. Both men have been dead for decades, leaving Donham as the lone survivor who was directly involved.

Killinger, the retired federal agent, said he saw neither the original warrant during his investigation nor any indication that it was ever canceled by a court, and it's unclear whether it could be used today to arrest or try Donham. Even if authorities located the original paperwork with sworn statements detailing

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evidence, he said, courts need witnesses to testify.

"And it's my understanding that all those people are dead," Killinger said.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Posts spread fictional tale of 'Ukrainian beauty' who blew up 52 tanks

CLAIM: Photo of woman in a military uniform shows "Ukrainian beauty" who "blew up 52 invading Russian tanks."

THE FACTS: The woman in the photo is a military doctor, not a combat soldier, according to news reports, posts on her Facebook account and messages from her mother. A misrepresented photo of a trauma doctor in Ukraine is the latest example of false propaganda and disinformation that have overwhelmed social media in response to Russia's war on Ukraine over the past seven weeks. The widely-shared photo showed a young woman in a camouflage jacket decorated with medals and pins, including one with a Ukrainian flag. Twitter posts touted her as a combat hero, responsible for destroying Russian military vehicles. "This Ukrainian beauty blew up 52 invading Russian tanks," read one tweet that was shared more than 9,000 times. "Retweet if you think she's a HERO," another Twitter user added. But the information is incorrect. A reverse-image search found the photo of the Ukrainian woman, Maj. Victoria Palamarchuk, appeared in an article about her work as a military doctor. The article was published in March 2021 by ArmyInform, an information agency of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense. The article described Palamarchuk as a traumatologist who began working for the Ukrainian military in 2014. ArmyInform said in 2021 that she was a senior resident of the traumatology department who operated on patients with gunshot wounds, performed amputations and carried out other surgeries at a military medical clinic in the eastern Ukrainian city of Dnipro. The Associated Press used Facebook to locate Palamarchuk's mother, Tatyana Palamarchuk, who confirmed the claims she blew up 52 tanks were false. "About tanks - it's a fake! Victoria is a military doctor, trauma surgeon," the elder Palamarchuk wrote in a Facebook message in Ukrainian. "She does not need false merits. She has something to be proud of and rightly so." Tatyana Palamarchuk said her daughter was too busy with work to respond to the false claim, but shared her daughter's Facebook account, which corroborated her residence in Dnipro and her work as a trauma doctor. When Palamarchuk learned about the false claims spreading about her, she reported them to Ukraine's state security service, the SBU, her mother said. A wider internet search found Palamarchuk was featured in other media reports, including various interviews published on YouTube and a feature story on her participation in a military motorcycle club.

— Associated Press writers Ali Swenson in New York contributed this report with additional reporting from Arijeta Lajka in New York.

Private gift shop, not White House, selling coins honoring Zelenskyy

CLAIM: The Biden administration "dedicated two commemorative coins" to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

THE FACTS: The White House Gift Shop, which is a private company and not part of the federal government, is selling the coins. The White House-themed shop recently began selling two coins focused on Zelenskyy — one honoring him, the other commemorating his address to Congress. But social media posts in recent days have wrongly claimed that it was the White House itself behind the coins. "The US Presidential Administration dedicated two commemorative coins in the 'Historical Moments' series to Ukraine and its President Volodymyr Zelenskyy," reads one tweet, which included a screenshot of the coins from the White House Gift Shop. But that shop, despite its name, is not operated by the federal government.

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It's a private company. While the store was associated with the White House when it was founded in the 1940s as a "flower fund" for the families of White House police officers, that is no longer the case. "The White House Gift Shop is privatized," Anthony Giannini, CEO and executive director of the shop, told the AP. Giannini said he officially acquired the shop in 2012 from the now-defunct U.S. Secret Service Uniformed Division Benefit Fund. U.S. Patent and Trademark Office records show that "White House Gift Shop" is trademarked by Giannini Strategic Enterprises, a Pennsylvania company. The shop used to operate in Washington, D.C., but no longer has a physical location. It operates online and has a distribution center in Rochester, Michigan, near Detroit, Giannini said. Separately, the nonprofit White House Historical Association operates two retail shops, including one at the White House Visitor Center.

— Associated Press writer Angelo Fichera in Philadelphia contributed this report.

Fake BBC tweet spreads fabricated Macron quote

CLAIM: The BBC tweeted that French President Emmanuel Macron said France needs to be prepared to take up to 60 million refugees from Africa and the Middle East over the next 20 years because sanctions against Russia will cause economic collapse in Africa.

THE FACTS: The BBC never tweeted this, and Macron has not argued that France, a country of 67 million people, needs to prepare for 60 million refugees. As French citizens prepare to vote in the April 24 runoff election that will decide the country's next president, social media users are sharing an image made to look like a BBC tweet to push a false narrative about the incumbent candidate. "France's President Macron tells re-election audience, 'Europe needs to be prepared to take up to 60 million refugees, over the next 20 years, from Africa and the Middle East,' as he warns that sanctions on Russia are leading to economic collapse in Africa, which imports vast amounts of Russian wheat," the fake tweet read. It was manipulated to look like a screenshot of a post from the account @BBCWorld on April 11. The doctored image included a photograph of Macron with BBC News branding in the bottom left corner. But the tweet was not posted on any BBC account, nor does it reflect any real story published by the broadcaster, the BBC press office confirmed to the AP in an email. "This isn't a BBC article and we encourage audiences to visit the BBC News website if they're unsure if a story is real," the BBC press office wrote. The office also reposted an April 17 tweet from BBC journalist Shayan Sardarizadeh pointing out the misinformation. The Internet Archive saved a snapshot of the @BBCWorld Twitter profile less than five hours after the tweet was allegedly posted and showed no evidence of the post. The text in the fake tweet also was too long for Twitter, exceeding the platform's 240-character limit. The quote attributed to Macron in the tweet is not real, Macron's office confirmed to the AP. While France is a major destination for asylum-seekers, Macron's centrist government expels thousands of migrants every year who don't qualify for asylum and has toughened immigration policy. His rival in Sunday's presidential runoff election, nationalist Marine Le Pen, would sharply curtail immigration if elected, and her supporters have sought to paint Macron as soft on the issue.

— Ali Swenson in New York contributed this report with additional reporting from Associated Press writer Angela Charlton in Paris.

Cloud seeding hasn't caused flooding in Australia

CLAIM: A rain-enhancing process known as cloud seeding caused historic flooding in Tasmania, Australia, in 2016 and along Australia's southeastern coast this year.

THE FACTS: There's no evidence to suggest that cloud seeding played a role in either flood, and an atmospheric research expert told the AP that cloud seeding would not change the dynamics of a cloud enough to cause massive flooding. In recent months, Australia's southeastern coast has experienced some of its worst flooding in more than a decade, leading some social media users to highlight a previous instance of flooding and spread false theories about what caused it and other floods over the years. Twitter users are sharing a clip from a 2016 news broadcast about flooding in Tasmania to claim it proves that cloud seeding — which involves spraying fine particles of silver iodide and dry ice into a cloud system to enhance precipi-

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tation — provoked the heavy rainfall. In the 2016 clip from the Australian TV network 7News, a journalist says, "Residents in southern Tasmania are demanding to know why cloud seeding was conducted over the Derwent River catchment the day before the worst floods in 40 years." One social media user shared the old clip Tuesday with a caption claiming that cloud seeding made flooding worse. But a probe by the Tasmanian government into the 2016 flooding has since been completed, and investigators found that cloud seeding by Hydro Tasmania, a government-owned generator of renewable energy, did not contribute to or worsen the heavy rains. "Hydro Tasmania (HT)'s cloud seeding activities on 5 June had no impact on precipitation, with this conclusion having a solid scientific basis," stated the June 2017 independent report. Hydro Tasmania also denied that its flights were to blame and said in a statement that "the operation had no measurable impact on rainfall on that day." A Hydro Tasmania spokesperson told the AP that it has since stopped cloud seeding. Sarah Tessendorf, a project scientist at the Colorado-based National Center for Atmospheric Research, said cloud seeding "does not have the ability to suddenly produce all kinds of heavy rain and snow." She said the process would not dramatically worsen clouds that are already forecast to produce severe weather, either. Everything from wind speed, air movement and updraft, or a current of rising air, can affect a storm's strength, Tessendorf added. A really strong storm, she explained, will already have a very strong updraft and wind flow characteristics that help create the cloud to begin with. "We're not altering the updraft of the clouds. We don't have that technology," she said. "This type of microphysical response is very unlikely to produce such an overwhelming change in the cloud." Social media users are also sharing a separate example to baselessly claim that cloud seeding played a role in deadly flooding that happened throughout February and March in Queensland and New South Wales. One widely shared post singled out the aviation company Handel Aviation to make the unfounded claim that it ran a cloud seeding flight that was contributing to large-scale flooding in Lismore. Handel Aviation posted a statement in response calling the claims "misinformation" and denying that it conducts cloud seeding flights, stating that it only operates an aerial photography aircraft. That aircraft was capturing images of the flood damage at the time, according to the statement. Nearmap, which analyzes and distributes the company's photos, confirmed in a statement to the AP that the claims associating Handel's recent flight with cloud seeding are false. The aerial images were commissioned after the flooding and were used to document the impact on property and infrastructure, according to the statement. Archives of Handel Aviation's website dating back to 2008 show that cloud seeding services have never been mentioned or offered.

Lawmakers want US to set up field hospitals for Ukraine

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers is calling on the Biden administration to establish field hospitals near Ukraine's border and ramp up medical support for what's expected to be a monthslong war of attrition waged by Russia.

Forces aligned with Ukraine have suffered thousands of casualties since Russia invaded on Feb. 24. And Russian strikes on hospitals and other non-military targets have killed large numbers of civilians and strained Ukraine's ability to care for sick and wounded people. The Associated Press has documented three dozen Russian attacks on medical facilities, hitting medics, patients and even newborns.

More than a dozen House members wrote Friday to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin asking for the U.S. to fill gaps in Ukraine's medical infrastructure. The steps recommended by the group include opening field hospitals in eastern Poland, providing Ukraine with armored ambulances and taking some of the sick and wounded to the U.S. military's Landstuhl regional hospital in western Germany.

"We're going to have to really step up in a really big way to relieve the combat wounded and civilian casualties that will be coming in the weeks and months ahead," said Rep. Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat who recently visited Poland and other countries in the region.

Rep. Joe Wilson, a South Carolina Republican, said in a statement that "we must remain united and provide Poland and our other NATO partners with the necessary medical and healthcare assistance to al-

leviate the suffering of the Ukrainian people.”

With diplomatic efforts making little public progress so far, most observers believe the war in eastern Ukraine could go into the summer. President Joe Biden has committed to the U.S. ramping up its support for Ukraine while not sending U.S. troops to Ukraine and avoiding actions the White House sees as drawing Russian President Vladimir Putin into a direct conflict with Washington. Deploying U.S. doctors and medics to eastern Poland could be risky if there’s a strike near the border.

Crow said he supported Biden’s decision not to send troops or establish a no-fly zone over parts of Ukraine to limit the risk of escalation with Russia. But providing medical support should not be seen as escalatory, he said.

After failing to take Kyiv and other major cities across Ukraine, Russia has shifted its forces into a battle focused on Ukraine’s south and east. Putin appears to be focusing on a boomerang-shaped front through much of Ukraine’s Donbas region, bombarding military sites as well as hospitals and other known shelters for civilians.

Ukraine has held out against Putin’s offensive longer than much of the world expected. An estimated 2,000 troops remain holed up inside a sprawling steel plant in the key port city of Mariupol, which Russia is close to taking after having bombed and shelled it for weeks. Biden on Thursday announced an additional \$1.3 billion in new weapons and economic assistance.

Even hundreds of miles away from the front line, field hospitals in eastern Poland staffed by U.S. and Western personnel could ease the burden on Ukraine and “make sure there’s sustainability to this conflict,” said Crow, a former Army Ranger.

“The Ukrainians just do not have the capacity to support tens of thousands of combat wounded over the course of months,” he said.

Marine Corps Lt. Col. Anton T. Semelroth, a Pentagon spokesman, said the Defense Department since the war began has provided first aid kits and tourniquets to Ukraine, and “we are considering what additional assistance could be provided.”

State Department spokesman Ned Price, asked about Ukraine’s medical needs, noted that the U.S. is providing “the Ukrainian government with resources it can use as it sees fit.”

Vatican clears aide to John Paul II of negligence claims

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — A Vatican investigation into allegations that the former top aide to St. John Paul II was negligent in handling sex abuse claims in his native Poland has cleared him of wrongdoing, the Vatican’s embassy in Poland said Friday.

A statement from the embassy, or nunciature, said the investigation conducted by a Holy See envoy determined that Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz’s actions were “correct, and therefore, the Holy See decided not to proceed any further.”

The Vatican sent Italian Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco to Poland in June 2021 to gather evidence and documentation into allegations of negligence while Dziwisz was archbishop of Krakow, Poland, from 2005 to 2016. A priest had said he gave Dziwisz a letter detailing allegations of abuse against another priest, and the presumed victim said he never heard back about what came of the case.

Bagnasco’s investigation did not consider Dziwisz’s tenure while he was at the Vatican and the private secretary to John Paul, who was pope from 1978-2005.

John Paul and Dziwisz, now 83, often dismissed allegations of sexual impropriety involving priests because of their experience in communist Poland, when many priests were discredited with false allegations.

A 2020 in-house Vatican investigation into disgraced and defrocked ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick raised uncomfortable questions about Dziwisz’s role in McCarrick’s appointment to head the archdiocese of Washington, D.C., despite evidence of sexual misconduct against him. The Vatican report found that John Paul had taken McCarrick out of consideration for the job but changed his mind after McCarrick wrote an impassioned letter to Dziwisz denying he ever had sex with anyone.

After John Paul died in 2005, Dziwisz was appointed archbishop of Krakow, in southern Poland, where he had served as secretary to Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, the future pope, before they moved to the Vatican. Pope Benedict XVI made Dziwisz a cardinal in 2006.

For Muslims with eating disorders, Ramadan can pose dilemmas

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — When the Islamic holy month of Ramadan begins, a battle rages in Habiba Khanom's mind: If she goes without food or drink, is she doing it for God or because of her anorexia? Deep down she knows the answer, and it saddens her.

"If I did fast, it would be for my eating disorder," said Khanom, a 29-year-old London resident. The religious duty that many Muslims find soul-nourishing can, in her case, offer "permission ... to fall back into my old habits and lose weight and kind of not get judged for it because everyone is doing it."

A time of worship, contemplation and joyous gatherings with family and friends, Ramadan is also a month when food plays a central role, from the ritual daytime fasting to celebratory iftar meals to break the fast.

For Muslims grappling with eating disorders, navigating those religious and social rituals can pose unique challenges. It's a struggle that they and the specialists treating them say is often largely invisible to broader society, which at times can make it all the more difficult.

"Understanding of eating disorders in general is minimal," said Ghena Ismail, director of the eating disorders program at the American University of Beirut Medical Center in Lebanon. "People are just beginning to appreciate mental illness."

Fasting from sunrise to sunset during Ramadan, which this year started in early April, is a religious obligation, one of the Five Pillars or fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam. The faith allows for exceptions, however, such as for young children and sick adults.

The advice Ismail gives to Muslims with eating disorders depends on each individual's stage of treatment. For those with severe symptoms, she recommends not fasting. She holds one-on-one discussions about the purpose of fasting and alternative ways to feel connected to the faith, such as reading the Quran and focusing on the charitable giving element of Ramadan. Self-compassion is key.

"I reframe that as part of their actual duty toward themselves and toward the relationship to the Creator, that you could not engage in any kind of ritual at the expense of your own health," Ismail said.

"This becomes an occasion for helping them recognize their eating disorder as a clinical condition with medical, psychological and interpersonal consequences," she continued.

As for Khanom, she faces potential triggers in both the fasting and feasting elements of Ramadan. She is in recovery after developing as a teen anorexia, which typically involves severe undereating and can be fatal if not treated in time, and also bulimia, which involves the consumption of large quantities of food followed by purging.

Ubiquitous conversations about food stress her out, and being invited for iftar without knowing what will be served can also be overwhelming since she prefers to plan her meals as a health measure.

"When I see a lot of food, I'm scared I'd get tempted to eat so much and then I'd start purging again," she said. "It was a big, big achievement to stay away from that."

Since Ramadan is also the one time of the year when her family eats together, she worries that puts her under a microscope as loved ones may scrutinize what's on her plate or offer her more food.

This Ramadan she has approached it on a day-by-day basis. Some days she fasted; others, she didn't. Some evenings she ate her iftar meal alone; others, with family.

In a personal triumph, Khanom found herself more at peace with her decisions: "It's OK if I still eat when others aren't, because I am looking after myself."

Recently, Beat, a U.K. charity supporting people with eating disorders, held an online discussion via Instagram about navigating Ramadan, in which Omara Naseem, a London-based psychologist specializing in such conditions, reminded anyone feeling guilty about not fasting that medical exemptions are explicitly allowed under Islam.

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Naseem, who has developed Ramadan guidelines for people with eating disorders, also advised them during the event to turn their attention to activities that can help them relax and feel good, while also remembering other ways of observing the holy month.

In a separate Instagram post, Beat offered tips for self-care during the Christian holiday of Easter, which similarly can cause anxiety due to an increased emphasis on food and dietary routine changes.

"Any celebration, whether it's religious or not, that centers around food can have its challenges," said Edward Emond, deputy director of services at Beat. "We find a lot of people ... approaching us for support around here in the buildup to those moments."

Dr. Rania Awaad, director of the Muslim Mental Health & Islamic Psychology Lab at Stanford University, said discussions of eating disorders and Ramadan fasting come up frequently in medical circles.

When clinicians turn to her for religiously and culturally sensitive guidance, she tells them to take each case individually and consider factors such as a person's treatment stage and whether other medical conditions are involved.

"Don't make a blanket statement," Awaad said.

Halima Said, an associate professional clinical counselor in San Diego, recently decided to create "a safe space" for Muslims who cannot fast because of an eating disorder. Through an organization she co-founded, virtual support groups formed that drew people from the United States and beyond, in Australia, Canada and England. From the initial plan of one session each Sunday during the month, Said doubled that due to demand.

Participants found mutual support and bonded over shared struggles such as anxiety over iftar meals and dealing with comments about their bodies from family members and misunderstandings about their illnesses.

"The last thing that they would need pressure on is being shamed for not fasting when they're sick," Said said. "Eating disorder is an illness, and it's a very manipulative illness."

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 presidential runoff 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 27-nation 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 "region" 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.

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.

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In a column Thursday in several European newspapers, the center-left leaders of Germany, Spain and Portugal all backed Macron, raising 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 Russian 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 French pocketbooks and for 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, echoing the past position of Macron, who has tried his own outreach with Putin.

Still, his government 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 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 that has Western 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.

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"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."

Le Pen, nevertheless, said Friday on Europe 1 radio that "their role of grandmother is to protect their little granddaughters, and I ask them to help me."

Today in History: April 23, Hank Aaron's first home run

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, April 23, the 113th day of 2022. There are 252 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 23, 2005, the recently created video-sharing website YouTube uploaded its first clip, "Me at the Zoo," which showed YouTube co-founder Jawed Karim standing in front of an elephant enclosure at the San Diego Zoo.

On this date:

In 1616 (Old Style calendar), English poet and dramatist William Shakespeare died in Stratford-upon-Avon on what has traditionally been regarded as the 52nd anniversary of his birth in 1564.

In 1898, Spain declared war on the United States, which responded in kind two days later.

In 1940, about 200 people died in the Rhythm Night Club Fire in Natchez, Mississippi.

In 1954, Hank Aaron of the Milwaukee Braves hit the first of his 755 major-league home runs in a game against the St. Louis Cardinals. (The Braves won, 7-5.)

In 1969, Sirhan Sirhan was sentenced to death for assassinating New York Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. (The sentence was later reduced to life imprisonment.)

In 1971, hundreds of Vietnam War veterans opposed to the conflict protested by tossing their medals and ribbons over a wire fence in front of the U.S. Capitol.

In 1988, a federal ban on smoking during domestic airline flights of two hours or less went into effect.

In 1992, McDonald's opened its first fast-food restaurant in the Chinese capital of Beijing.

In 1993, labor leader Cesar Chavez died in San Luis, Arizona, at age 66.

In 1998, James Earl Ray, who confessed to assassinating the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and then insisted he'd been framed, died at a Nashville, Tennessee, hospital at age 70.

In 2007, Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first freely elected president, died in Moscow at age 76.

In 2020, at a White House briefing, President Donald Trump noted that researchers were looking at the effects of disinfectants on the coronavirus, and wondered aloud whether they could be injected into people.

Ten years ago: Actor-singer Jennifer Hudson broke down in tears while testifying at the Chicago trial of William Balfour, the man accused of killing her mother, brother and 7-year-old nephew in a jealous rage in 2008. (Balfour was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.) The government reported that Social Security was rushing even faster toward insolvency, with its trust funds expected to run dry in 2033, three years earlier than previously projected.

Five years ago: Centrist Emmanuel Macron (eh-mahn-yoo-EHL' mah-KROHN') and far-right populist Marine Le Pen advanced to a May runoff in France's presidential election (Macron ended up defeating Le Pen).

One year ago: U.S. health officials lifted an 11-day pause on COVID-19 vaccinations using Johnson & Johnson's single-dose shot, after scientific advisers decided its benefits outweighed a rare risk of blood clot. Reality TV personality and Olympic hero Caitlyn Jenner joined a growing list of Republican candidates seeking to oust Democratic California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who was facing a likely recall election. (Newsom would beat back the recall effort in a September vote.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Alan Oppenheimer is 92. Actor David Birney is 83. Actor Lee Majors is 83. Irish nationalist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey is 75. Actor Blair Brown is 75. Writer-director Paul Brickman is 73. Actor Joyce DeWitt is 73. Actor James Russo is 69. Filmmaker-author Michael Moore is 68. Actor Judy Davis is 67. Actor Valerie Bertinelli is 62. Actor Craig Sheffer is 62. Actor-comedian-talk show host George

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Lopez is 61. U.S. Olympic gold medal skier Donna Weinbrecht is 57. Actor Melina Kanakaredes (kah-nah-KAH'-ree-deez) is 55. Rock musician Stan Frazier (Sugar Ray) is 54. Actor Scott Bairstow (BEHR'-stow) is 52. Actor-writer John Lutz is 49. Actor Barry Watson is 48. Rock musician Aaron Dessner (The National) is 46. Rock musician Bryce Dessner (The National) is 46. Professional wrestler/actor John Cena is 45. Actor-writer-comedian John Oliver is 45. Actor Kal Penn is 45. Retired MLB All-Star Andruw Jones is 45. Actor Jaime King is 43. Pop singer Taio (TY'-oh) Cruz is 39. Actor Aaron Hill is 39. Actor Jesse Lee Soffer is 38. Actor Rachel Skarsten is 37. Rock musician Anthony LaMarca (The War on Drugs) is 35. Singer-songwriter John Fullbright is 34. Actor Dev Patel (puh-TEHL') is 32. Actor Matthew Underwood is 32. Model Gigi Hadid is 27. Rock musicians Jake and Josh Kiszka (Greta Van Fleet) are 26. Actor Charlie Rowe (TV: "Salvation") is 26. Retired tennis player Ashleigh Barty is 26. U.S. Olympic gold medal snowboarder Chloe Kim is 22.