

Groton Daily Independent

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Thursday, April 28

10 a.m.: Girls Golf Meet in Redfield

7 p.m.: Middle School Spring Concert

School Breakfast: Egg omelets.

School Lunch: Corn dogs, smiley fries.

Senior Menu: Turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, broccoli, cranberry sauce, pumpkin bar, whole wheat bread

Friday, April 29

1 p.m.: Track Meet at Webster School

Breakfast: French toast sticks.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

Senior Menu: Salmon loaf, creamed peas, fruit, brownie, whole wheat bread.



Senior Legion Coach Wanted



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

Applications can be picked up at Groton City Hall and mailed to:

Doug Hamilton
411 N. 4th St.
Groton, SD 57445

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

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

The Life of Donald "Don" Dayton



The funeral service for Donald 'Don' Dayton, 84, of Stratford, SD, will be held at Spitzer Miller Funeral Home on Friday April 29, 2022 at 10:30 a.m. with Pastor Ruth Clendenin officiating. Burial at West Rondell Cemetery. Don passed away Friday, April 22, 2022 surrounded by family in the same home he was born in.

Visitation will be from 3:00-7:00pm, Thursday, followed by a prayer service at 7:00pm at Spitzer-Miller Funeral Home, 1111 South Main Street.

Don Dayton was born July 24, 1937, to Arlo and Jeanette 'Nettie' Dayton on the family farm near Stratford, SD. He grew up and attended country school, then played basketball in high school and graduated from Stratford High in 1955. Don met the love of his life, Olene 'Fae' VanStone, at the drive-in picture show, later being united in marriage on October 12, 1957. They lived on the farm, which has now been in the Dayton family for 127 years. Over the years, they raised chickens, pigs, beef cattle, horses, goats, sheep, and through his children's 4H projects, they added registered Brown Swiss dairy cattle to the farm. His children know him for his whistle that could summon them from anywhere on the farm to

come to his aid! Beyond his time on the farm, Don and his brothers also did carpentry work together. After retiring from farming in 1995, Don worked as a custodian at Roncalli School where he made unforgettable memories and many friends.

Don could often be found out in his workshop making wood furniture projects and toys for family or starting a project with his grandkids. He enjoyed inventing and building of all sorts, including a motorized Ferris wheel out of license plates, rebuilding a farm tractor originally built and used for several years by his father, and restoring the first truck he purchased from his father while working as a young farmer, which was a 1940 International, his pride and joy. Among these talents, Don also spent a lot of time in the garden, watching westerns on TV, and singing and listening to old country music, especially Sherwin Linton. Don and Fae loved dancing, and found joy in teaching their kids to dance, too. Don was an avid hunter, once killing two does with a single shot. He also enjoyed the yearly Andover Thrashing Show and being a "friend of the fair" at the Brown County Fair while Fae served on the board. They also have fond memories of their family vacation to Disney World to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. Don and Fae were also able to take a 19 day trip to Europe seeing England, France, Switzerland, Austria and Denmark.

Grateful for having shared Don's life are his wife Fae; children Barbara (James) Hoops, Becky (Daniel) Thyen, Stacey (Joel) Frink, Steven (Juliann) Dayton, Heather (Troy) Opdahl, Shad (Darcy) Wood, and Kara (Andrew) Paulson; grandchildren Elise Casavan, Matthew Anderson, Jared (Alyson) Anderson, Nathan (Jennifer) Thyen, Natalie (Justin) Arendsee, Andrew (Taylor) Thyen, Alex (Cassidy) Thyen, Dawson Frink, Aspyn Frink, Taryn Opdahl, Talayna Opdahl, Shaydon Wood, Steven Paulson, Henry Paulson, and Cort Paulson; great-grandchildren Chandler Pullman, Jessica Pullman, Jason Schmidt, Averi Thyen, Vaelyn Welk, Weston Thyen, Waylon Arendsee, and Wynonna Arendsee; sister-in-law Shirley Dayton, and several nieces and nephews.

Preceding Don in death are his parents: Arlo and Nettie Dayton; children Gregory Lee Dayton and Gordon Arlo Dayton; his siblings Hazel Dayton, Earl (Ida Mae) Dayton, Robert (Evelyn) Dayton, Ray (Esther) Dayton, Dale (Betty) Dayton, Mabel (Ed) Radcliffe, Ben Dayton, Arlys Ann Dayton, and Gladys (Delmar) Hansen.

Service Notice: Lyle Cutler

Services for Lyle Cutler, 90, of Claremont will be 4:30 p.m., Saturday, April 30th at the United Methodist Church in Claremont. Pastor Rodney Ulmer will officiate. Burial with military honors will follow in Huffton Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Friday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m. Lyle passed away April 26, 2022 at home surrounded by his family.

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Friendly Fellows and Daisies 4-H Club

Date: April 3, 2022

The Friendly Fellows and Daisies 4-H Club met on April 3, 2022, in Aberdeen, at 3M. The meeting was called to order by Blake Pauli. American Pledge was led by Logan Ringgenberg. The 4-H Pledge was led by Logan Warrington. Roll call topic was favorite Easter activity. The treasurer's report was approved by Ashlynn Warrington and seconded by Hudson Eichler. There were no additions or improvements. The Secretary's report was read by Logan Warrington and approved by Hailey Pauli and seconded by Treyton Smith. Logan Warrington made a motion to close old business; Ashlynn Warrington approved it and was seconded by Hudson Eichler. For new business the club read the Newshound. New business was closed by Kennedy Anderson and seconded by Parker Zoellner. The meeting was adjourned by Ashlynn Warrington and seconded by Parker Zoellner. Logan Ringgenberg and Blake Pauli did a demonstration on the State Basketball Trip. Lunch was served by the Logan Ringgenberg family. The club members took a tour of the 3M plant.

Submitted by Walker Zoellner, Club Reporter

Groton City Sump Pump Alert



Sump pumps must be discharged outside (not in the sanitary sewer).



Thanks for your immediate compliance!

**Failure to comply will result in fines.
Groton City Council**

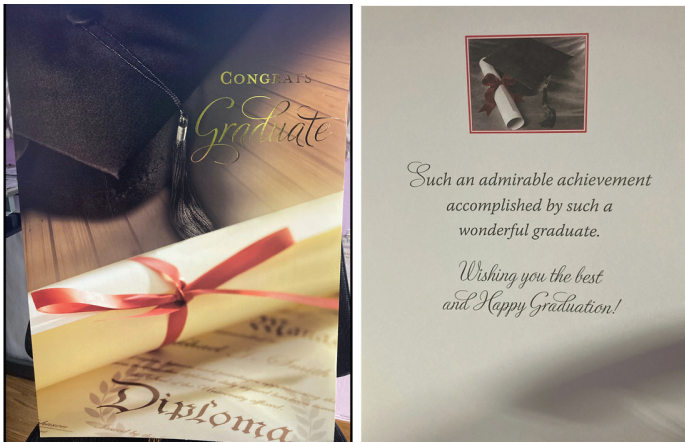
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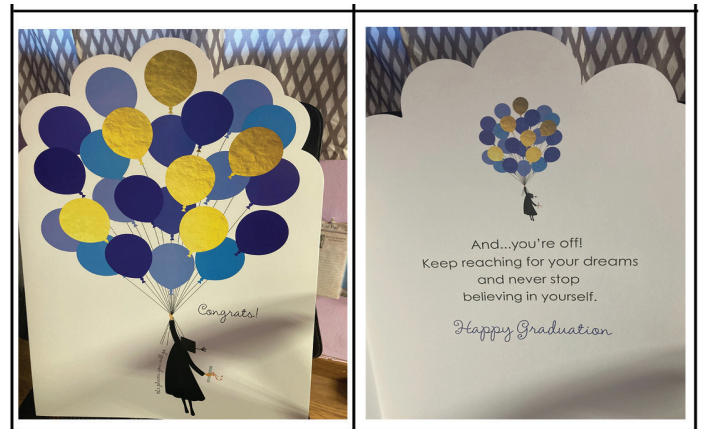
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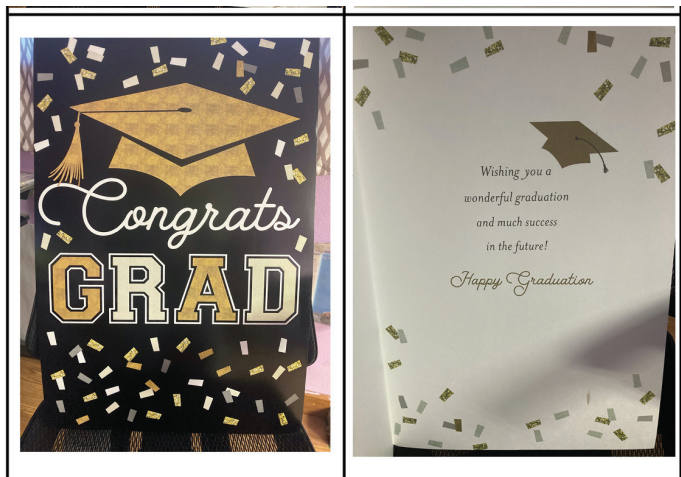
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Or Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460 or Tina at 605-397-7285
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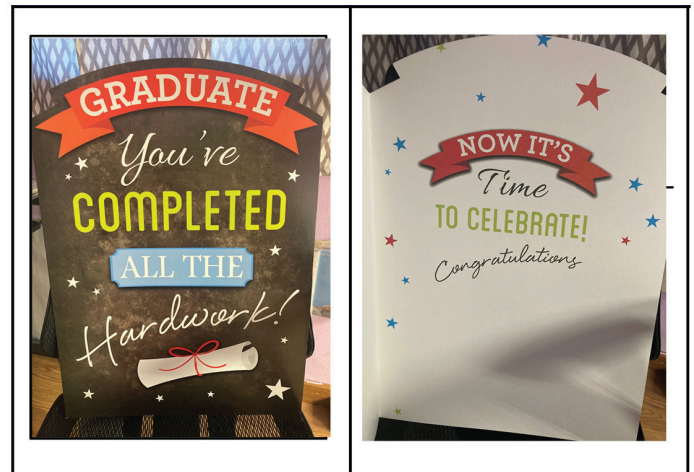
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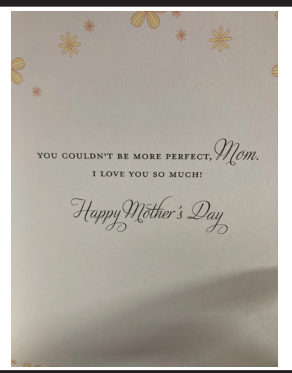
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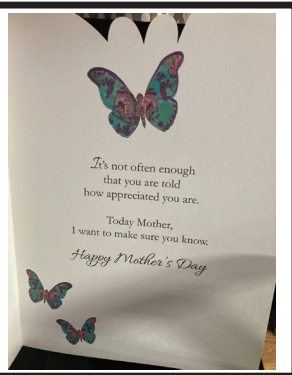
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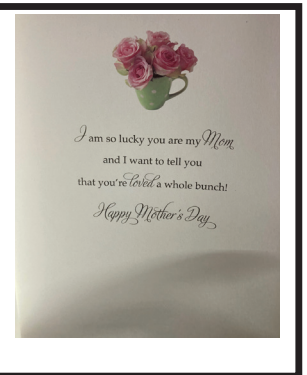
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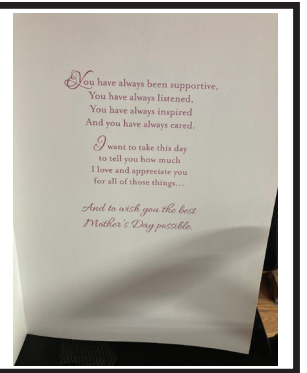
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PO Box 34, Groton, SD
57445-0034
www.397news.com
Call/Text Paul: 605/397-7460
Call/Text Tina: 605/397-7285
paperpaul@grotonsd.net

Scan Code Below for
More Details



New at the
GDI FIT
The Stairmaster
and Air Bike



Call/Text Paul at 605/397-7460
or Tina at 605/397-7285
for membership info

Order your Graduation Balloons while we have a good supply!



#1 - \$5



#2 - \$5



#3 - \$6



#4 - \$10 - 45"



#5 - \$5



#6 - \$6



\$3.50 - 9" on a stick



#7 - \$10 - 36"



#8 - \$5



#9 - \$5



#10 - \$5



#11 - \$5



#12 - \$5



#13 - \$8 35"



#14 - \$5



#15 - \$5



#16 - \$5



#17 - \$5



#18 - \$5



#19 - \$5



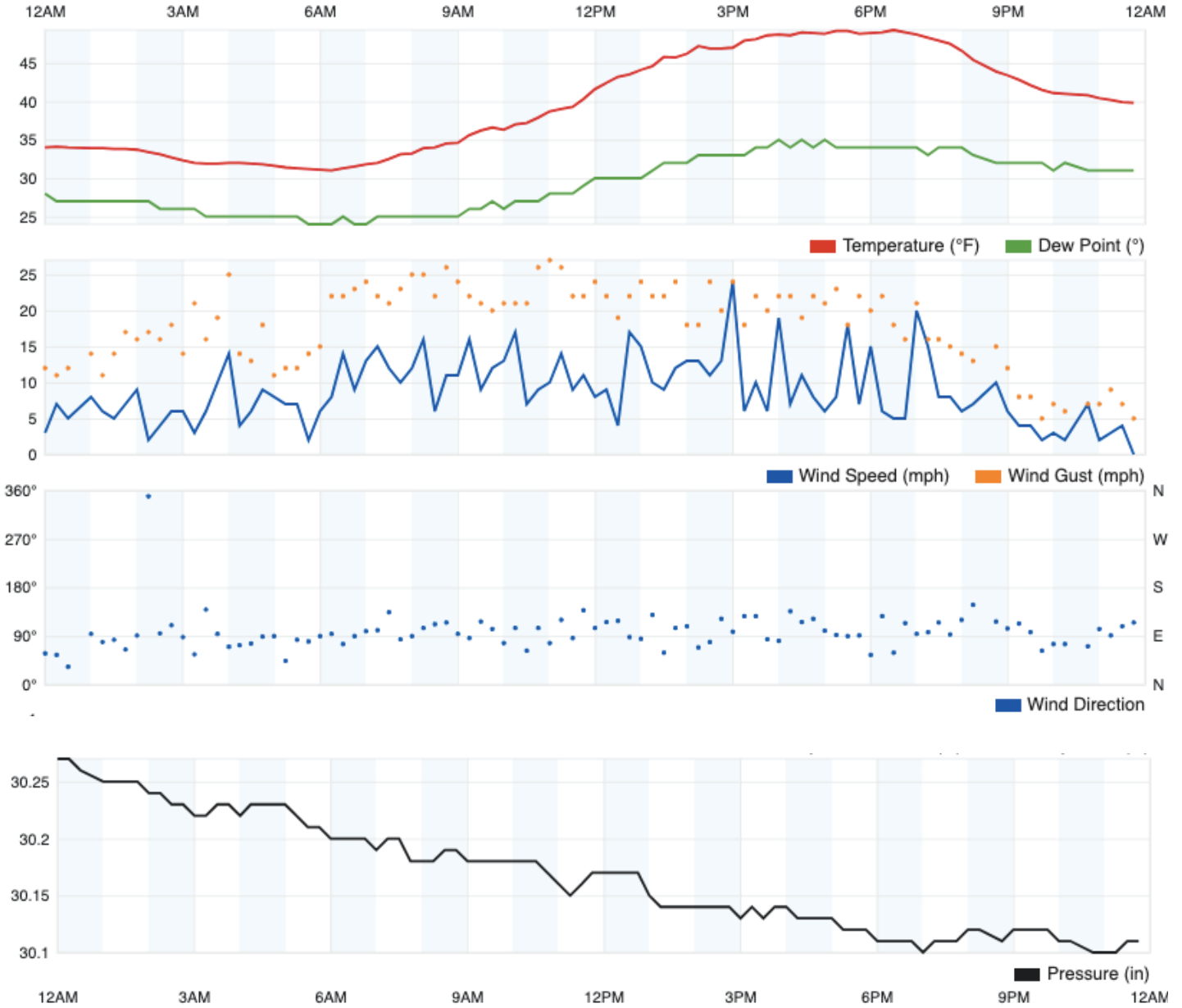
#20 - \$5

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
 20%	 30%	 100%	 90%	 90%
Slight Chance Rain then Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy then Chance Rain	Rain and Breezy	Rain and Breezy	Rain and Breezy
High: 55 °F	Low: 40 °F	High: 51 °F	Low: 43 °F	High: 49 °F

Rainy and Cool

Today	Tonight	Friday
Scattered Showers	Widespread Rain moves in after midnight	Moderate Rain and Iso'd Tstorms
HIGHS: 45 to 65° Warmest Central	LOWS: 37 to 45°	HIGHS: 45 to 55°

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
Aberdeen, SD 4/28/2022 4:31 AM  

Scattered showers are expected today, focusing in the east by afternoon. Moderate rain and isolated thunderstorms will begin to affect the region late tonight as a potent low moves into the plains. Generally, 1.5 to 3 inches of rain is forecast through Saturday night with localized heavier amounts possible.

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Today in Weather History

April 28, 1994: Snow accumulated 5 to 12 inches over most of the eastern half of South Dakota, with the 12-inch report from Winner. Ten to eleven inches of snow was reported at numerous places including Sioux Falls and Platte in the southeast, and Summit in the northeast. Numerous accidents were caused by snow and ice, including one which killed a man and injured two women on Highway 12 near Bath, South Dakota. There was some undetermined crop damage, and livestock loss was feared as the late season cold and snow lowered resistance to disease.

1893: A half-mile wide estimated F4 tornado killed 23 people and injured 150 as it tore a path of devastation through Cisco, Texas. Every building in the town was either destroyed or severely damaged.

1973: The record crest of the Mississippi River at St. Louis, Missouri was registered at 43.23 feet on this day. This level exceeded the previous 1785 mark by 1.23 feet. This record was broken during the 1993 Flood when the Mississippi River crested at 49.58 feet on August 1st. At Memphis, Tennessee, the Mississippi was over flood stage for 63 days, more than that of the historic 1927 flood, and the river was above flood stage for an even longer 107 days at upstream Cairo, Illinois. Out of the seven largest floods on the Mississippi between 1927 and 1997, the 1973 event ranked third in both volume discharged and duration but only sixth in flood height. Over \$250 million of damages were incurred mainly in the Mississippi Valley states of Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

1991: Memphis, Tennessee recorded their wettest April ever with 15.03 inches, breaking their previous record of 13.90 inches in 1872.

1928 - A coastal storm produced tremendous late season snows in the Central Appalachians, including 35 inches at Bayard WV, 31 inches at Somerset PA, and 30 inches at Grantsville MD. High winds accompanying the heavy wet snow uprooted trees and unroofed a number of homes. The storm caused great damage to fruit trees and wild life. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Twenty cities in the western and central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Highs of 95 degrees at Houston TX, 95 degrees at Lake Charles LA, and 94 degrees at Port Arthur TX, were April records. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Miami, FL, hit 92 degrees, marking a record eight days of 90 degree heat in the month of April. Squalls produced snow in the Washington D.C. area. Belvoir VA reported a temperature reading of 57 degrees at the time the snow began. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong northerly winds and heavy snow ushered cold air into the north central U.S. Snowfall totals in Montana ranged up to 20 inches at Miles City. Thunderstorms produced severe weather from eastern Texas to the Southern Appalachians and the southern Ohio Valley. Hail four and a half inches in diameter was reported at Keller TX and White Settlement TX. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in the southeastern U.S. during the day. Severe thunderstorms spawned four tornadoes, including one which injured four persons at Inman SC. There were also more than one hundred reports of large hail and damaging winds, with better than half of those reports in Georgia. Strong thunderstorm winds injured four people at Sadler's Creek SC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data) Twenty-nine cities in the northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date as readings soared into the 80s and lower 90s. Highs of 88 degrees at Binghamton NY, 94 degrees at Buffalo NY, 89 degrees at Erie PA, 90 degrees at Newark NJ, 93 degrees at Rochester NY and 92 degrees at Syracuse NY, were records for the month of April. (The National Weather Summary)

2002: During the evening hours, a violent F4 tornado carved a 64-mile path across southeast Maryland. The La Plata, Maryland tornado was part of a larger severe weather outbreak that began in the mid-Mississippi Valley early on that day and spread across portions of the Ohio Valley and the Mid-Atlantic States. In Maryland, three deaths and 122 injuries were a direct result of the storm. Property damage exceeded \$100 million. Tornadoes along the Atlantic coast are not frequent, and tornadoes of this magnitude are extremely rare. Only six F4 tornadoes have occurred farther north and east of the La Plata storm: Worchester, Massachusetts - 1953; New York/Massachusetts - 1973; Windsor Locks, Connecticut - 1979; five counties in New York - 1989; New Haven, Connecticut - 1989; North Egremont, Massachusetts - 1995. None was as close to the coast. The tornado traveled across the Chesapeake Bay almost to the Atlantic.

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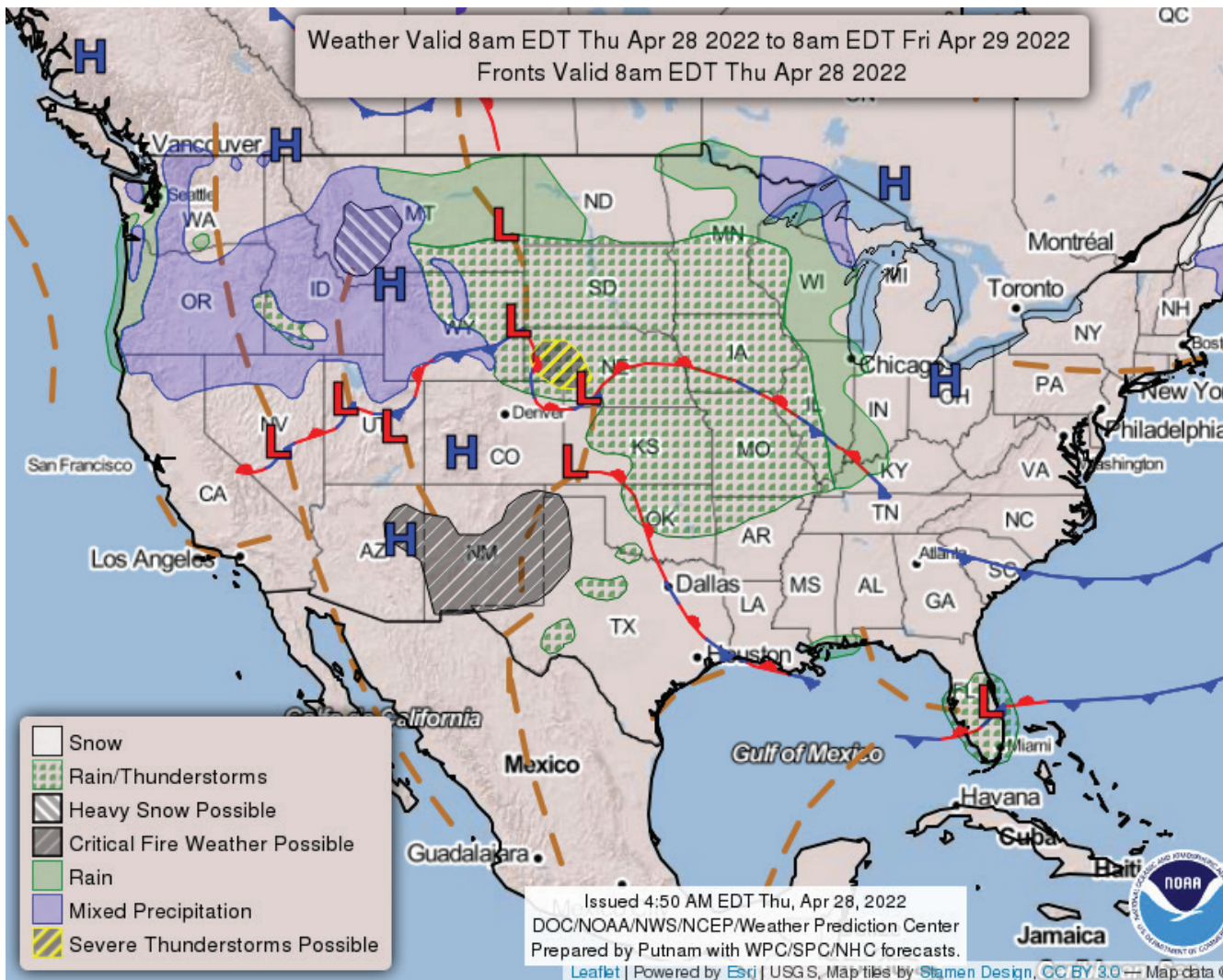
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 49 °F at 4:34 PM
Low Temp: 31 °F at 5:51 AM
Wind: 27 mph at 7:45 AM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 14 hours, 13 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 90 in 1934
Record Low: 19 in 2008
Average High: 63°F
Average Low: 36°F
Average Precip in April.: 1.72
Precip to date in April.: 3.15
Average Precip to date: 3.78
Precip Year to Date: 4.95
Sunset Tonight: 8:36:41 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:21:27 AM



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ALWAYS ON HIS MIND!

He was looking forward to his marriage. But at the last moment, his fiancée decided that she did not want a life that included sharing his blindness. In his disappointment and distress, he turned to the Lord for His comfort and compassion. In Christ, he found Someone who would love him "no matter what." He became one of the greatest preachers of his day, and people would travel great distances to hear his sermons. Over the years he became known as "The Blind Preacher Who Could See Quite Well."

Because of his limited sight, he became dependent on his sister, who assisted him in the chores of living and his pastoral responsibilities. On the day of her marriage, he became very distraught mentally. Whether it was because it brought back memories of his once anticipated marriage or whether he realized that he would be abandoned once again, in pain, anguish, and sadness, he wrote:

O Love that wilt not let me go
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

He penned this hymn in five minutes, never having to make one correction or change. And its spirit seems to capture the words of David when he wrote, "How precious it is Lord, to realize that You think about me constantly. I can't even count how many times a day Your thoughts turn to me. And when I awaken You are still thinking of me."

What great love God offers us. It will never let us go.

Prayer: It's simply impossible, Father, for us to fathom the depths of Your love. In deep humility we thank You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand! And when I wake up, you are still with me!
Psalm 139:17-18

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2022 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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News from the Associated Press

NFL draft class faced major challenges in COVID-19 battles

By MICHAEL MAROT AP Sports Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — This year's NFL draft prospects reluctantly recall their personal COVID-19 experiences.

Some consider them inspirational reminders of obstacles already overcome. Others sound more reminiscent of old war stories. And while the stories change, each comes with unforgettably vivid detail and heartfelt emotion about a challenging two-year battle to pursue their dreams.

Pandemic protocols prevented Alabama receiver John Metchie III from seeing his Canadian family for two years. South Dakota State running back Pierre Strong played 24 games in 10 months. Minnesota tackle Daniel Faalele tipped the scales at 405 pounds after opting out of the 2020 season. Kentucky guard Darian Kinnard worked out by flipping logs while his mother tended to hospitalized patients and UConn defensive tackle Travis Jones dealt with the cancellation of an entire season.

None of it was easy.

"I'm glad my family was staying safe and all," Metchie said in March. "Not seeing my mom for two years was tough. I knew, eventually, I'd see her again. Of course, technology nowadays helps. It's not the same as seeing them in person or being around them in person, but it definitely helps."

This draft class arrived on campus with the exuberant expectation of a traditional college experience and instead wound up using video calls to socialize, isolation to continue playing and pure grit to cope with constantly evolving rules, regulations and restrictions.

It lost the 2020 spring football schedule and planned individual workouts with whatever they could find nearby. Even when they did return to campus, uncertainty remained.

Some Big Ten schools actually started practicing in pads before university presidents pulled everyone off the field and announced no games would be played. When the SEC and other leagues did not follow the Big Ten's lead, Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields and his Buckeyes teammates petitioned conference officials to reinstate the season.

The effort worked — sort of.

"It's crazy," Ohio State tackle Nick Petit-Frere said. "The season got canceled, came back, games got canceled. We played one of the most crazy seasons you could ever imagine in the history of college football and somehow, the Ohio State Buckeyes were in the (national) championship game. ... This has been a once-in-a-lifetime two or three years."

But in some cases, the physical and mental toll came with a cost.

Strong faced a monumental obstacle when the Football Championship Division decided to play a spring and fall season in 2021. He helped the Jackrabbits make playoff runs both times, logging 371 carries and 2,393 yards from mid-February to mid-December. Still, he ran a 4.37-second 40-yard dash, tying Isaih Pacheco of Rutgers for the best time among running backs at the NFL's annual scouting combine.

While Kinnard took the usual measures of extra hand washing and social distancing to help keep his mother healthy, the 6-foot-5, 322-pound offensive lineman like many people was unhappy being "cooped up" as he ran hills to stay in shape.

At Louisiana, it was worse for tackle Max Mitchell who spent two weeks in isolation after a COVID-19 test showed he had antibodies. He returned in October and finished the season, but the impact lingers.

"It was frustrating to say the least," Mitchell said. "I never tested positive and they came and pulled me off the field in the middle of practice. If you've been sick, I understand you have to take care of yourself. But when you feel fine, there's a guilty feeling when you're not out there."

It's not just what happens on the field, either.

When league officials announced during the combine that all COVID-19 restrictions would be lifted this fall, the feeling from the overwhelming majority of the 300-plus invitees was gratitude.

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"First, no one wants that stick up your nose," Auburn linebacker Zakoby McClain said. "I got my vaccine so I didn't have to go through it as much. It will be very stress-free because no one wants that stick up their nose."

For a player such as Metchie, who was born in his mother's native Taiwan, lived in Ghana until moving to Canada at age 6 and attended high schools in New Jersey and Maryland as the son of a Nigerian father before choosing Alabama, the easing of travel restrictions would be a welcome respite — especially as he works his way back from a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee.

But for everyone hoping to be drafted, the life-changing twists and turns they've faced on the path to this year's draft will help keep football in perspective.

"To think at the end of it all, I'm talking in front of you guys, with an NFL microphone, an NFL nameplate, at a combine with a chance to do what almost every little kid, or every athlete dreamed of, to go run a 40 at Indy," Petit-Frere said. "When I think about that and I think about where I am now, I can't really imagine how it happened."

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

01-02-09-10-14

(one, two, nine, ten, fourteen)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

10-24-35-36-50, Star Ball: 3, ASB: 3

(ten, twenty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, fifty; Star Ball: three; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$12.06 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$43 million

Powerball

11-36-61-62-68, Powerball: 4, Power Play: 2

(eleven, thirty-six, sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-eight; Powerball: four; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$454 million

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Rapid City Journal. April 23, 2022.

Editorial: Racism is beyond unpopular

As Rapid City leaders and Native American groups prepare to meet to work on ways to bridge the city's racial divide, some people and groups are more interested in diminishing and excusing the blatantly racist comments that blew the lid off of a problem that had been simmering for years.

A leader of South Dakota Citizens for Liberty seems to believe the First Amendment applies to her and those who share her views, but not to the thousands of Native Americans impacted by racist comments from business owners in Rapid City.

The Journal published a letter to the editor from Tonchi Weaver, a lobbyist and organizer for South Dakota Citizens for Liberty, where she categorized racist comments from members of the Uhre family as "unpopular speech." Connie Uhre caused a firestorm when she said she was going to ban all Native Americans from the Grand Gateway Hotel because she can't tell a "Good Native" from a "Bad Native" following a fatal shooting at the hotel.

Her son, Nick Uhre, defended his mother's comments and then also went on a tirade of several emails filled with racially-charged statements against Native Americans — including one addressed to Gov. Kristi

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Noem where he begged the governor for help.

Nick Uhre made a presentation to South Dakota Citizens for Liberty before his mother's inexcusable comments. According to materials presented at that meeting, he blamed rising crime rates on police inaction, a law enforcement grant from a charitable organization, and again blamed Native Americans.

As a result of the racist comments, the Native American community and right-minded Rapid City allies took a stand against the Uhre family and their multiple businesses in the area. One organization, NDN Collective, announced a formal boycott of the Uhre family's businesses and used their First Amendment right to peaceably assemble in front of the Foothills Inn to demonstrate that racism will not be tolerated.

Instead of standing against racism, Weaver used her First Amendment right to defend the Uhre family's "right to engage in commerce" and referred to the racist comments as merely "unpopular speech." She demonized NDN Collective's action as racketeering and warned that a "shakedown of the entire business community is coming, too."

The Journal published Weaver's letter to show that many in the community refuse to condemn the racism that persists in some corners of the Black Hills. The letter also shows that Weaver is loyal to the Uhre family.

Being loyal to a friend is admirable. But when your friend says and does racist things, it isn't loyalty — it's complicity.

And it isn't admirable, it's deplorable.

We look forward to the day when people with a right to free speech don't use that right to express or condone racism.

Yankton Press & Dakotan. April 25, 2022.

Editorial: Amendment C And What It Really Does

South Dakota Chamber of Commerce President Dave Owen was in Yankton last week mainly to give his postmortem on the recently completed legislative session, but he also took aim at an issue that will be before voters — that is, ALL voters — in the June primary.

He discussed Amendment C, a proposed constitutional amendment that would require all constitutional amendments or initiated measures that increase taxes or appropriate \$10 million or more to garner at least 60% of the vote to pass. Currently, a simple majority is needed.

Owen, who has been part of a lawsuit against Amendment C, said the proposed amendment is an attempt to make it even more difficult for South Dakota voters to expand Medicaid this November with Amendment D.

"We have been complaining since last year's session — meaning the 2021 session — about how they put that on the June ballot," Owen said. "It's not right and it's not fair."

Critics say Amendment C is on the June ballot because there are typically fewer voters participating in the primary election, and its proponents want it in place before Amendment D comes before voters in the fall.

In fact, critics aren't the only ones saying this. State Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, an Amendment C supporter, has publicly stated he wants the new rule on the books to make Medicaid expansion even more difficult.

"You know what? It doesn't matter what ballot it's on. It's on the primary so we can get it in place as soon as possible, because (special interest groups) are pushing a welfare program on the November ballot. And you want this to apply to that vote as well," he told Dakota News Now.

You don't see that in Amendment C's campaign literature. Instead, the proposed amendment is cast as being a way to fight higher taxes as well as a means to tamp down inflation and resist special interest groups.

But in fact, Amendment C looks like an attempt to game the system:

- It does indeed aim to place an even greater obstacle in front of the Medicaid expansion measure. Amendment D might well pass on a simple majority vote, but a 60% threshold would be much more difficult;
- Thus, in a broader scheme, it undercuts the principle of majority rule. If 59% of the people support a measure that meets the criteria of the amendment, it still fails. It empowers the minority to dictate to

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the majority;

- It's designed to make it more difficult for people outside of the government apparatus to initiate a measure and have a direct influence on state laws and policies;
- According to Owen, Amendment C also defies the reasoning that derailed the measure approved by voters in 2020 to legalize recreational marijuana, among other things. Ultimately, the Supreme Court decided it violated the rule that such a measure could only be about one topic. Meanwhile, Owen argues that Amendment C addresses taxes and other spending, which is at the heart of the current lawsuit.

Amendment C will be packaged and marketed as many things in the next several weeks, but what it's really doing is asking the public to surrender some of its power to initiate laws and create change. It proposes that a minority knows better than the majority on certain issues and that lawmakers know better than the public most of the time. It won't be stated that way, but that would be the result.

Man who drove drunk in fatal crash given 6 years in prison

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A Bismarck man has been ordered to serve six years in prison for a 2021 New Year's Day crash that killed a South Dakota woman.

Kenyon Eagle, 20, pleaded guilty in January to criminal vehicular homicide, two counts of criminal vehicular injury and reckless endangerment.

South Central District Judge Cynthia Feland suspended all but six years of a 15-year prison sentence Tuesday. She also ordered Eagle to spend three years on probation.

Eagle was accused of driving drunk and going the wrong way in the westbound lanes of the Bismarck Expressway. His pickup truck collided head-on about 2:15 a.m. with a car driven by Tiffany Shaving, of Cherry Creek, South Dakota, the Bismarck Tribune reported.

The North Dakota Highway Patrol said Shaving died at the scene. Her two passengers -- Ryan Whitebull, 28, and Carlin Mellette, 25, both of Bismarck -- were seriously injured and required hospitalization and surgery. Eagle also was taken to a hospital for treatment.

Eagle's blood alcohol content was 0.21% at the time of the crash, Assistant Morton County State's Attorney Gabrielle Goter said in court. The legal limit for driving is 0.08%.

Ukraine says Russian offensive in east picks up momentum

By INNA VARENYTSIA and DAVID KEYTON Associated Press

IRPIN, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine said Thursday that Russia's offensive in the east picked up momentum, with several towns coming under intense attack as Moscow's forces attempt to surround Ukrainian troops.

In a reminder of the horrific toll the war has taken since it began Feb. 24, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres visited towns outside the capital of Kyiv where evidence of mass killings of civilians was found after Russia's retreat from the area.

The fighting gathered pace after Russia suddenly cut off natural gas to two NATO nations on Wednesday, in what was seen as a bid to punish and divide the West over its support for Ukraine ahead of the potentially pivotal battle in the eastern industrial region of the Donbas.

The General Staff of Ukraine's military said Russian forces were "exerting intense fire" in several places as they pushed on with the second phase of their invasion. The most intensive action was around Donetsk and close to Kharkiv, which lies outside the Donbas but is seen as key to Russia's apparent bid to encircle Ukrainian troops there.

Tatiana Pirogova spoke of the intense fear of living under constant bombardment.

"It's not just scary. It's when your stomach contracts from pain" the Kharkiv resident said. "When they shoot during the day, it's still OK, but when the evening comes, I can't describe how scary it is."

The General Staff said that over the past 24 hours, the Ukrainian forces have repelled six attacks in the Donbas, control of which is now Moscow's primary focus ever since its initial offensive faltered and failed to take the Ukrainian capital.

Luhansk governor Serhiy Haidai said the Russian army shelled the residential area in his region "29 times

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by aircrafts, multiple rocket launches, tube artillery and mortars.”

Satellite photos analyzed by The Associated Press also showed evidence of intense Russian fire on Mariupol in recent days. The images show how concentrated attacks have greatly damaged a central facility at the Azovstal steelworks, the last redoubt of Ukrainian fighters in the key battleground city.

An estimated 1,000 civilians are sheltering along with about 2,000 Ukrainian fighters in the steelworks, a massive Soviet-era complex with a warren of underground facilities built to withstand airstrikes.

Russia, meanwhile, said a city under its control in the south also came under fire.

With the war now in its third month, Guterres on Thursday toured towns outside Kyiv, including Bucha, that have seen some of the most horrific attacks of the war.

“Civilians always pay the highest price,” he said as he visited the bombed out suburb of Irpin. “And this is something everyone should remember, everywhere in the world. Wherever there is a war the highest price is paid by civilians.”

Evidence of atrocities was discovered in the towns Guterres visited on Thursday after the Russians retreated from the area in the face a fiercer than expected Ukrainian resistance, bolstered by Western arms.

In what could be a further Ukrainian counterattack, a series of explosions boomed near the television tower late Wednesday in southern Ukraine’s Kherson, which has been occupied by Russian forces since early in the war. The blasts at least temporarily knocked Russian channels off the air, Ukrainian and Russian news organizations reported.

Ukraine has urged its allies to send even more military equipment so it can continue its fight.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said Thursday that “up to date, NATO allies have pledged and provided at least 8 billion U.S. dollars in military support to Ukraine. And we see the importance of further stepping up our support to Ukraine.”

While Russia’s initial blitz was stunted — and it suffered the humiliating loss of a massive warship — Britain’s Defense Ministry said the Russian navy still has the ability to strike coastal targets in Ukraine.

In an intelligence briefing posted Thursday morning, the ministry says that about 20 Russia naval vessels, including submarines, are currently operating the Black Sea zone.

But the ministry says Russia isn’t able to replace the guided-missile cruiser Moskva, which sank earlier this month in the Black Sea, because the Bosphorus Strait remains closed to all non-Turkish warships. Russia also lost the landing ship Saratov, which was destroyed by explosions and fire on March 24.

While it presses its campaign in the east, Moscow has also piled on the pressure by leveraging its biggest export product —energy, cutting off NATO members Poland and Bulgaria from its natural gas on Wednesday.

European leaders blasted that decision as “blackmail,” saying the move and the Kremlin’s warning that it might cease shipments to other countries is a failed attempt to divide the West over its support for Ukraine.

The tactic against the two EU countries could eventually force targeted nations to ration gas and deal another blow to economies suffering from rising prices. At the same time, it could deprive Russia of badly needed income to fund its war effort.

The gas cuts do not immediately put the two countries in any dire trouble. Poland, especially, has been working for many years to line up other suppliers, and the continent is heading into summer, making gas less essential for households.

Gazprom said it shut off the two countries because they refused to pay in rubles, as President Vladimir Putin has demanded of “unfriendly” nations. The Kremlin said other countries may be cut off if they don’t agree to the payment arrangement.

European countries have balked at Russia’s demand for rubles. Moscow has since proposed a system that it says satisfies its demand — but that the Europeans say means they are still paying in either euros or dollars.

“Europe (and) Germany will make payments in euros and others may pay in dollars, and not in rubles,” Germany’s Economy Minister Robert Habeck said Wednesday. “The conversion, once the payments have been made, is a matter for Gazprom. We have discussed this with the European Union. We will continue

down this path.”

Still, the cutoff and the Kremlin warning that other countries could be next sent shivers of worry through the 27-nation European Union. Germany is the world’s biggest buyer of Russian energy, and Italy is also a significant consumer, though they, too, have been taking steps to reduce their dependence on Moscow.

Taiwan faces largest COVID-19 outbreak yet

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Taiwan, which had been living mostly free of COVID-19, is now facing its worst outbreak since the beginning of the pandemic with over 11,000 new cases reported Thursday.

Cases have been on the upswing since late March. In April, the island’s central authorities announced that they would no longer maintain a “zero-COVID” policy like the Chinese government’s in which they would centrally quarantine positive cases.

Instead, the government is asking people to quarantine at home if they test positive, unless they show moderate to severe symptoms.

Chen Shih-chung, the island’s health minister, announced Thursday they had found 11,353 new cases, along with two deaths. During the daily press briefing held by the Central Epidemic Command Center, he said 99.7% of the cases in the current outbreak either had no symptoms or had mild symptoms.

Chin Siz-rong, a 24-year-old travel agent in Taipei, isn’t planning to take any extra precautions because he already got a booster COVID-19 vaccine and is used to wearing a mask. He said he switched to takeout when he eats out alone, but still will go to restaurants with friends.

“I already got three shots, and now everyone is saying its severity is like a cold. So I’m not too afraid for myself,” said Chin.

Most of Taiwan’s 858 COVID-19 deaths came from summer 2021. Until this month, it had been the island’s one major outbreak in the pandemic.

Taiwan has been relatively lucky throughout the pandemic, but also has maintained strict border controls with a two-week quarantine on arrival required for all visitors.

Domestically, mask wearing is universal both outdoors and indoors. Masks are legally required on public transportation and in places like shops and theaters.

In the past few weeks, as cases have ratcheted up, people scrambled to buy up rapid tests with stores selling out in just a few hours. Convenience stores across Taipei were unsure where their next delivery would come from.

Difficulty buying rapid tests is likely due in part to the government’s thought throughout the pandemic that there are few benefits to mass testing. The health minister last year said that public funds and medical resources could better be used elsewhere.

That changed with last year’s outbreak.

The central government this month said it would work with Taiwanese companies who manufacture tests to ensure that everyone would have access. A system was rolled out Thursday that limits each person to buying one pack of five tests per trip. Each purchase must be linked to an individual’s national ID to ensure that there is no stockpiling.

Experts are worried about the 5 million people who have not been fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Those who did not complete a full vaccination course are four times more likely to get moderate or severe symptoms compared to those those who have gotten a booster, said Ho Mei-Shang, a vaccine expert in Taiwan who has also worked for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to Central News Agency.

Most vulnerable in Taiwan’s outbreak this time are children and the elderly. The vaccination rate among people over 75 is 72.5%. However, only 59.1% in the same age group received a booster.

Wang Zi-yu, 78, said she overcame her hesitation and got three doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

“I thought not getting the vaccine is worse. In the beginning with the AstraZeneca vaccine, I was worried,” she said, referring to concerns that the vaccine could cause a rare blood clot. “And then later I got

the Moderna shot and didn't have any negative reaction. It was fine."

Many of her friends are concerned about the side effects of getting the COVID-19 vaccine, Wang added. Society's youngest are also not protected. Some schools have switched back to remote learning based on the number of positive cases each school is reporting. The island is opening up vaccine shots to children ages 6-11 next week.

A 2-year-old boy in New Taipei City died last week, the youngest victim of COVID-19 in Taiwan. His condition deteriorated rapidly after testing positive in a rare case.

Still, officials urged the public to not panic, saying that Taiwan was better prepared with vaccines and ways to ensure moderate and severe cases would get prompt attention.

"We want to tell the public, from the medical world, please rest assured," said Chiu Tai-yuan, a lawmaker who also heads the Taiwan Medical Association. "Last year's outbreak situation is not like the one we face today."

A chilling Russian cyber aim in Ukraine: Digital dossiers

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Russia's relentless digital assaults on Ukraine may have caused less damage than many anticipated. But most of its hacking is focused on a different goal that gets less attention but has chilling potential consequences: data collection.

Ukrainian agencies breached on the eve of the Feb. 24 invasion include the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which oversees the police, national guard and border patrol. A month earlier, a national database of automobile insurance policies was raided during a diversionary cyberattack that defaced Ukrainian websites.

The hacks, paired with prewar data theft, likely armed Russia with extensive details on much of Ukraine's population, cybersecurity and military intelligence analysts say. It's information Russia can use to identify and locate Ukrainians most likely to resist an occupation, and potentially target them for internment or worse.

"Fantastically useful information if you're planning an occupation," Jack Watling, a military analyst at the U.K. think tank Royal United Services Institute, said of the auto insurance data, "knowing exactly which car everyone drives and where they live and all that."

As the digital age evolves, information dominance is increasingly wielded for social control, as China has shown in its repression of the Uyghur minority. It was no surprise to Ukrainian officials that a prewar priority for Russia would be compiling information on the citizenry.

"The idea was to kill or imprison these people at the early stages of occupation," Victor Zhora, a senior Ukrainian cyber defense official, alleged.

Aggressive data collection accelerated just ahead of the invasion, with hackers serving Russia's military increasingly targeting individual Ukrainians, according to Zhora's agency, the State Service for Special Communications and Information Protection.

Serhii Demediuk, deputy secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, said via email that personal data continues to be a priority for Russian hackers as they attempt more government network breaches: "Cyberwarfare is really in the hot phase nowadays."

There is little doubt political targeting is a goal. Ukraine says Russian forces have killed and kidnapped local leaders where they grab territory.

Demediuk was stingy with specifics but said Russian cyberattacks in mid-January and as the invasion commenced sought primarily to "destroy the information systems of government agencies and critical infrastructure" and included data theft.

The Ukrainian government says the Jan. 14 auto insurance hack resulted in the pilfering of up to 80% of Ukrainian policies registered with the Motor Transport Bureau.

Demediuk acknowledged that the Ministry of Internal Affairs was among government agencies breached Feb. 23. He said data was stolen but would not say from which agencies, only that it "has not led to significant consequences, especially when it comes to data on servicemen or volunteers." Security researchers from ESET and other cybersecurity firms that work with Ukraine said the networks were compromised

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months earlier, allowing ample time for stealthy theft.

The data collection by hacking is a work long in progress.

A unit of Russia's FSB intelligence agency that researchers have dubbed Armageddon has been doing it for years out of Crimea, which Russia seized in 2014. Ukraine says it sought to infect more than 1,500 Ukrainian government computer systems.

Since October it has tried to breach and maintain access to government, military, judiciary and law enforcement agencies as well as nonprofits, with a primary goal of "exfiltrating sensitive information," Microsoft said in a Feb. 4 blog post. That included unnamed organizations "critical to emergency response and ensuring the security of Ukrainian territory," plus humanitarian aid distribution.

Post-invasion, hackers have targeted European organizations that aid Ukrainian refugees, according to Zhora and the cybersecurity firm Proofpoint. Authorities have not specified which organizations or what may have been stolen.

Yet another attack, on April 1, crippled Ukraine's National Call Center, which runs a hotline for complaints and inquiries on a wide array of matters: corruption, domestic abuse, people displaced by the invasion, war veteran benefits. Used by hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, it issues COVID-19 vaccine certificates and collects callers' personal data including emails, addresses and phone numbers.

Adam Meyers, senior vice president of intelligence at the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, believes the attack may, like many others, have a greater psychological than intelligence-gathering impact — aiming to degrade Ukrainians' trust in their institutions.

"Make them scared that when the Russians take over, if they don't cooperate, the Russians are going to know who they are, where they are and come after them," Meyers said.

The attack knocked the center offline for at least three days, center director Marianna Vilshinska said: "We couldn't work. Neither phones nor chatbots worked. They broke down all the system."

Hackers calling themselves the Cyber Army of Russia claimed to steal personal data on 7 million people in the attack. However, Vilshinska denied they breached the database with users' personal information, while confirming that a contact list the hackers posted online of more than 300 center employees was genuine.

Spear-phishing attacks in recent weeks have focused on military, national and local officials, aimed at stealing credentials to open government data troves. Such activity relies heavily on Ukraine's cellular networks, which Meyers of CrowdStrike said have been far too rich in intelligence for Russia to want to shut down.

On March 31, Ukraine's SBU intelligence agency said it had seized a "bot farm" in the eastern region of Dnipropetrovsk that was controlled remotely from Russia and sent text messages to 5,000 Ukrainian soldiers, police and SBU members urging them to surrender or sabotage their units. Agency spokesman Artem Dekhtiarenko said authorities were investigating how the phone numbers were obtained.

Gene Yoo, CEO of the cybersecurity firm ReSecurity, said it likely was not difficult: Subscriber databases of major Ukrainian wireless companies have been available for sale by cybercriminals on the dark web for some time — as they are for many countries.

If Russia is successful at taking control of more of eastern Ukraine, stolen personal data will be an asset. Russian occupiers have already collected passport information, a top Ukrainian presidential adviser tweeted recently, that could help organize separatist referendums.

Ukraine, for its part, appears to have done significant data collection — quietly assisted by the U.S., the U.K., and other partners — targeting Russian soldiers, spies and police, including rich geolocation data.

Demediuk, the top security official, said the country knows "exactly where and when a particular serviceman crossed the border with Ukraine, in which occupied settlement he stopped, in which building he spent the night, stole and committed crimes on our land."

"We know their cell phone numbers, the names of their parents, wives, children, their home addresses," who their neighbors are, where they went to school and the names of their teachers, he said.

Analysts caution that some claims about data collection from both sides of the conflict may be exaggerated.

But in recordings posted online by Ukrainian Digital Transformation Minister Mikhaïlo Fedorov, callers are heard phoning the far-flung wives of Russian soldiers and posing as Russian state security officials to say parcels shipped to them from Belarus were looted from Ukrainian homes.

In one, a nervous-sounding woman acknowledges receiving what she calls souvenirs — a woman's bag, a keychain.

The caller tells her she shares criminal liability, that her husband "killed people in Ukraine and stole their stuff."

She hangs up.

Most in US fear Ukraine war misinformation: AP-NORC poll

By AMANDA SEITZ and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A majority of U.S. adults say misinformation around Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a major problem, and they largely fault the Russian government for spreading those falsehoods.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows 61% of people in the United States say the spread of misinformation about the war is a major problem, with only 7% saying it's not a problem. Older adults were more likely to identify the wartime misinformation as an issue, with 44% of those under 30 calling it a problem, compared with 65% of those 30 or older.

Misleading social media posts, fake pictures or videos and propagandized headlines have proliferated on websites, from TikTok to Facebook, since Russia's assault on Ukraine began in February. In recent weeks, Russian state media and social media accounts have operated in lockstep to push tweets, TV reports and posts that claim photos of bombed buildings and bodies across Ukraine have been staged or faked. Even well-meaning, everyday social media users have fallen victim to the falsehoods, accidentally sharing or liking posts and images that turned out to be inaccurate.

About three-quarters of the American public fault the Russian government for advancing misinformation around the war, while many also blame social media users, tech companies and the news media. Far fewer place a great deal of blame on the Ukrainian or U.S. governments.

Russia's falsehoods about the war are finding millions of eyeballs across social media and in state-media reports. Earlier this month, for example, a chorus of Kremlin media reports, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and Telegram channels tried to refute photographs and satellite images of bodies left by Russian soldiers in the streets of Bucha, Ukraine, by calling the images a "hoax."

"Russia's reach is broad," said Darren Linvill, a Clemson University professor who studies disinformation. "They have a lot of different outlets that they use — everything from state media, in Russian, English and especially Spanish."

The poll shows a majority of U.S. residents, about 57%, say they think Russian President Vladimir Putin has directed Russian troops to commit war crimes, while 6% say they think he has not done so. An additional 36% say they don't know enough to say.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, the AP and the PBS series "Frontline" have verified evidence of 178 potential war crimes.

The poll shows about 6 in 10 Americans say social media users have significant responsibility for the spread of misinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Roughly half also fault social media companies and the news media.

Retiree Kellie Carroll, 58, who lives outside Fresno, California, said she is sometimes frustrated by social media users who share posts about the Russia-Ukraine war but don't cite the source of their information.

"You'll see things that people are stating as fact, like they are there," Carroll said of posts she's seen on social media around the war.

Carroll, who watches local news and listens to conservative talk radio, added that she, too, finds fault with news reporting on the war. She described it as difficult to find news reports around the war that are not injected with opinion.

"I don't want the opinions, I just want the facts," she said.

Half of Americans also blame the Chinese government, which has refused to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, for spreading misinformation around the war.

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Indeed, China's state-run media outlets have made at least 74 English-language Facebook posts referencing a conspiracy theory that the U.S. is running secret biological warfare labs in Ukraine that have intentionally released deadly viruses, according to a new report from NewsGuard, a technology firm that monitors misinformation. (The U.S. runs biolabs in Ukraine. It's not a secret, and they're not crafting bio-weapons there.)

"A lot of this is definitely geared toward the United States," said Jack Brewster, an analyst for the firm. "They're echoing the same talking points that Russia is."

Somewhat fewer blame the spread of war misinformation on U.S. politicians, with 44% saying they bear significant responsibility and 32% saying the same about the U.S. government.

Roger Beaulieu, a 66-year-old New Yorker, said the Russian government is responsible for much of the misinformation around the war. But he's been surprised when he reads The New York Times or watches MSNBC or CNN to see what he describes as misinformation coming from some Republican lawmakers about the war. Beaulieu specifically mentioned Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., who last month said that Ukraine invited Russia's invasion by "poking the bear."

"It just seems that there's more support for Russia than I can possibly understand," Beaulieu said.

Large majorities of Democrats and Republicans say Russia has a large share of responsibility for spreading misinformation, and 70% of Democrats along with 55% of Republicans say Putin has directed Russian troops to commit war crimes. About a quarter of Democrats and roughly a third of Republicans say they don't know.

But Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say social media companies (63% vs. 50%), the news media (61% vs. 38%) and politicians in the U.S. (52% vs. 38%) also bear a significant amount of blame for misinformation about the war.

About a quarter of Americans overall said the Ukrainian government is significantly responsible for the spread of misinformation. Republicans were more likely to say the Ukrainian government had significant blame for spreading misinformation than Democrats, 32% to 15%. About 4 in 10 Americans say the Ukrainian government has little responsibility for the spread of misinformation.

Israel halts for Holocaust day, honors 6 million Jews killed

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press Writer

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Sirens blared across Israel early Thursday as the country came to a standstill in an annual ritual honoring the 6 million Jews murdered during the Holocaust.

People halted where they were walking, and drivers stopped their cars to get out of the vehicles as people bowed their heads in memory of the victims of the Nazi genocide. Ceremonies were planned throughout the day at Israel's national Holocaust memorial, parliament and elsewhere.

Israel was founded in 1948 as a sanctuary for Jews in the wake of the Holocaust. About 165,000 survivors live in Israel, a dwindling population that is widely honored but struggling with poverty.

Ushering in Holocaust memorial day at Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett late Wednesday called on the world to stop comparing the Holocaust to other events in history. He spoke after the presidents of both Ukraine and Russia drew parallels between their ongoing war and the genocide during World War II.

"As the years go by, there is more and more discourse in the world that compares other difficult events to the Holocaust. But no," he said. "No event in history, cruel as it may have been, is comparable to the extermination of Europe's Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators."

He also warned the country against allowing its deep differences to tear the nation apart. The speech, coming on one of Israel's most solemn days of the year, came in a deeply personal context as well. On Tuesday, his family received a letter with a live bullet and a death threat. Israeli authorities tightened security around the premier and his family and were investigating.

"My brothers and sisters, we cannot, we simply cannot allow the same dangerous gene of factionalism dismantle Israel from within," Bennett said.

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Israel makes great effort to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust and make heroes of those who survived. Restaurants and places of entertainment remain closed on Holocaust memorial day, radios play somber music and TV stations devote their programming to documentaries and other Holocaust-related material.

For them, challenges loom. This year's ceremony comes as Israel and much of the world emerges from the coronavirus pandemic, which confronted Holocaust survivors in particular with increased health risks as well as widespread loneliness and despair.

Additionally, about a third of Israel's Holocaust survivors live below the poverty line, with many sustained by government stipends and donations, according to a group that represents survivors.

Despite their experience and widespread education programs, antisemitism rose worldwide during the pandemic, according to a report released Wednesday.

It pinned the fuel for the anti-Jewish surge on lockdowns, social media and a backlash against Israel's punishing air raids on the Gaza Strip during last year's 11-day war.

In addition to speeches by Bennett, Israeli President Isaac Herzog and others, Wednesday's ceremony featured survivors lighting six torches — for the 6 million murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. The speaker of Germany's parliament, Bärbel Bas, also attended as a special guest.

Climate change may increase risk of new infectious diseases

BY DREW COSTLEY AP Science Writer

Climate change will result in thousands of new viruses spread among animal species by 2070 — and that's likely to increase the risk of emerging infectious diseases jumping from animals to humans, according to a new study.

This is especially true for Africa and Asia, continents that have been hotspots for deadly disease spread from humans to animals or vice versa over the last several decades, including the flu, HIV, Ebola and coronavirus.

Researchers, who published their findings Thursday in the journal *Nature*, used a model to examine how over 3,000 mammal species might migrate and share viruses over the next 50 years if the world warms by 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), which recent research shows is possible.

They found that cross-species virus spread will happen over 4,000 times among mammals alone. Birds and marine animals weren't included in the study.

Researchers said not all viruses will spread to humans or become pandemics the scale of the coronavirus but the number of cross-species viruses increases the risk of spread to humans.

The study highlights two global crises — climate change and infectious disease spread — as the world grapples with what to do about both.

Previous research has looked at how deforestation and extinction and wildlife trade lead to animal-human disease spread, but there's less research about how climate change could influence this type of disease transmission, the researchers said at a media briefing Wednesday.

"We don't talk about climate a lot in the context of zoonoses" — diseases that can spread from animals to people, said study co-author Colin Carlson, an assistant professor of biology at Georgetown University. "Our study ... brings together the two most pressing global crises we have."

Experts on climate change and infectious disease agreed that a warming planet will likely lead to increased risk for the emergence of new viruses.

Daniel R. Brooks, a biologist at University of Nebraska State Museum and co-author of the book "The Stockholm Paradigm: Climate Change and Emerging Disease," said the study acknowledges the threat posed by climate change in terms of increasing risk of infectious diseases.

"This particular contribution is an extremely conservative estimate for potential" emerging infectious disease spread caused by climate change, said Brooks.

Aaron Bernstein, a pediatrician and interim director of The Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, said the study confirms long-held suspicions

about the impact of warming on infectious disease emergence.

"Of particular note is that the study indicates that these encounters may already be happening with greater frequency and in places near where many people live," Bernstein said.

Study co-author Gregory Albery, a disease ecologist at Georgetown University, said that because climate-driven infectious disease emergence is likely already happening, the world should be doing more to learn about and prepare for it.

"It is not preventable, even in the best case climate change scenarios," Albery said.

Carlson, who was also an author on the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said we must cut greenhouse gas and phase out fossil fuels to reduce the risk of infectious disease spread.

Jaron Browne, organizing director of the climate justice group Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, said the study highlights climate injustices experienced by people living in African and Asian nations.

"African and Asian nations face the greatest threat of increased virus exposure, once again illustrating how those on the frontlines of the crisis have very often done the least to create climate change," Browne said.

A political reckoning in Sri Lanka as debt crisis grows

By KRUTIKA PATHI and KRISHAN FRANCIS Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Sherry Fonseka joined millions in 2019 in electing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a military strategist whose brutal campaign helped end Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war 10 years earlier.

Now he is one of thousands who, for weeks, have protested outside the president's office, calling on Rajapaksa and his brother, Mahinda, who is prime minister, to resign for leading the country into its worst economic crisis since its independence from Britain in 1948.

With the island teetering near bankruptcy, Fonseka, who owns a small garment business in the capital, Colombo, has resorted to spending his own savings to pay the salaries of his 30 employees. But he knows he will soon have to let them go and is clear about who is to blame.

"All of us thought we made the correct decision (to elect Rajapaksa), but we've realized we were wrong. We should have the backbone to tell people, and the world, that we made a mistake," he said.

In recent weeks, protests have erupted across the country demanding that Rajapaksa quit.

The protests highlight the dramatic fall of the Rajapaksas from Sri Lanka's most powerful political dynasty in decades to a family grasping to retain power. Despite accusations of atrocities during the civil war, Gotabaya and Mahinda, who was previously president, remained heroes to many of the island's Buddhist-Sinhalese majority and were firmly entrenched at the top of Sri Lankan politics before the revolt by previous supporters like Fonseka.

"The pendulum has swung from 'it's all about the Rajapaksas, they are the people who saved this country,' to 'it is because of the Rajapaksas that the country is now ruined,'" said Harsha de Silva, an economist and opposition lawmaker.

The unravelling of Sri Lanka's economy has been swift and painful. Imports of everything from milk to fuel have plunged, spawning dire food shortages and rolling power cuts. People have been forced to queue for hours every day to buy essentials. Doctors have warned of a crippling shortage of life-saving drugs in hospitals, and the government has suspended payments on \$7 billion in foreign debts due this year alone.

"The Rajapaksas, like an octopus, have held on to every aspect of public life in Sri Lanka," de Silva said. "They have been running it as if it was their kingdom. They wished and they did -- that's how it was and people were with them."

President Rajapaksa has defended his government, partly blaming the pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine. "This crisis was not created by me," he said in a speech last month, adding that his government was working hard on solutions. They include approaching the International Monetary Fund and World Bank for assistance, after repeated calls to do so.

But as protesters seethed, the president and prime minister have changed tact in recent weeks. They have admitted to mistakes they made that exacerbated the crisis, such as implementing a short-lived ban last year on importing chemical fertilizers that badly hurt farmers and conceding that they should have

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sought a bailout sooner.

Influential Buddhist monks have urged Rajapaksa to form an interim government under a new prime minister, signaling a further decline in the family's image as protectors of the country's 70% Buddhist-Sinhalese majority. Some observers say it's too soon to measure how much support for the Rajapaksas has fallen among their hardcore base, but for many their response has been too little and too late.

"There is now recognition across the government of several missteps, but it's one that's come at a huge cost to the people," said Bhavani Fonseka, a senior researcher at the Colombo-based Center for Policy Alternatives.

The Rajapaksas were a powerful land-owning family which for decades dominated local elections in their rural southern district, before rising to the helm of national politics in 2005 when Mahinda was elected president. He remained in power until 2015, overseeing the end of the civil war against ethnic Tamil rebels in 2009, before losing to the opposition led by his former aide.

Suicide bombings that killed 290 people on Easter Sunday in 2019 paved the way for the Rajapaksas' return, this time as Gotabaya launched a high-pitched nationalist campaign that tapped outrage and disillusionment with the previous government over the attacks.

He vowed a return to the muscular nationalism that had made his family popular with the Buddhist majority, and also to bring the country out of an economic slump with a message of stability and development.

Tourism had dropped sharply after the bomb attacks and Sri Lanka needed badly to boost revenue to service a slew of foreign loans for splashy infrastructure projects. Some involved Chinese money and were commissioned under his brother's presidency, but had failed to create profits, instead collecting debt.

Just days into his presidency, Rajapaksa pushed through the largest tax cuts in Sri Lanka's history to spur spending even as critics warned that it would shrink the government's finances. According to Nishan de Mel, executive director of Verité Research, Sri Lanka's tax base fell by 30%.

"When you do something like that, you have some kind of internal analysis or document that shows why these cuts could help the economy. There was nothing of that sort," de Mel said.

The move triggered immediate punishment from the global market as creditors downgraded Sri Lanka's ratings, making it impossible for it to borrow more money as its foreign exchange reserves continued to dwindle. Then the coronavirus hit, further crushing tourism as debts snowballed.

Analysts say the Rajapaksas' response to the economic challenges underscored the limitations of their strongman politics and their family's near-monopoly on decision making, heavily relying on the military to enforce policy and passing laws to weaken independent institutions.

Three other Rajapaksa family members were in the Cabinet until early April, when the Cabinet resigned en masse in response to the protests.

"Their entire political ideology and credibility is in serious crisis," said Jayadeva Uyangoda, a veteran political scientist.

But many fear that things will only get worse before improving. A divided and weak opposition without a majority in Parliament has kept the Rajapaksas in power. An IMF bailout could see austere measures intensifying hardships for people before there is relief.

Meanwhile, the focus remains on the protests, which are drawing people across ethnicities, religion and class. For the first time, middle-class Sri Lankans have taken to the streets in large numbers, Uyangoda said.

They include Wijaya Nanda Chandradewa, who joined the crowd outside the president's office on Saturday. A retired government employee, Chandradewa said he fell for Rajapaksa's promise to rebuild a Sri Lanka scarred by the 2019 bombings.

"He said there will be one country and one law -- now there is neither the law nor the country," Chandradewa said, adding that the only option now is for Rajapaksa to quit.

"He showed us a fairyland and cheated us and misled us," he said. "We have to fix our mistakes and build a system to bring in the right leader."

More Beijing classes go online in tightening of virus rules

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BEIJING (AP) — Beijing shifted more classes online Thursday in a further tightening of COVID-19 restrictions, as China's capital seeks to prevent a wider outbreak.

The city of 21 million has already ordered three rounds of mass testing this week for the virus, with the third due to take place on Friday, and closed down some communities where cases were found.

On Thursday, it moved most students in the sprawling Chaoyang district to online learning, with exceptions for middle and high school students who are preparing to take crucial exams that could determine their academic futures.

Beijing announced 50 new cases on Thursday, two of them asymptomatic, bringing its total in the latest wave of infections to around 150. Students make up more than 30% of total cases, with clusters linked to six schools and two kindergartens in Chaoyang.

At least three other districts had already moved students online, and officials on Thursday announced rules requiring residents to remain inside two housing compounds in Chaoyang where cases have been detected.

Beijing has moved more swiftly than many Chinese cities to impose restrictions while case numbers remain low and the scale of the outbreak is still manageable.

The goal is to avoid the sort of sweeping measures imposed on Shanghai, where the highly transmissible omicron variant has torn through the city of 25 million. Restrictions confining many Shanghai residents to their homes are now in their fourth week and all schools have been online since last month.

The strict measures have spurred anger and frustration over shortages of food and basic supplies, the inability of hospitals to deal with other health emergencies and poor conditions at centralized quarantine sites where anyone who tests positive — or even has contact with a positive case — is required to be sent.

The National Health Commission on Thursday reported 11,285 new cases across mainland China, most of them asymptomatic and the vast majority in Shanghai, where an additional 47 deaths were reported.

Shanghai city authorities said Wednesday they will analyze the results of new rounds of testing to determine which neighborhoods can safely expand freedom of movement for residents.

Shanghai is seeking to achieve "societal zero COVID" whereby new cases are found only in people who are already under surveillance, such as in centralized quarantine, or among those considered to be close contacts. That would indicate chains of transmission in the open community have been severed, reducing the risk of new clusters forming from previously undetected sources.

While China's overall vaccination rate stands at around 90%, just 62% of people over 60 have been vaccinated in Shanghai, the country's largest and wealthiest city. Health workers have been visiting elderly residents at home to administer vaccines in a bid to boost that figure, the city's Health Commission said Thursday.

The pandemic and stringent lockdown measures have taken a toll on the economy, especially in Shanghai, which is home to the world's busiest port and China's main stock market, along with a large international business community.

A full month's shutdown of the city will subtract 2% from China's annual economic growth, according to an analysis from ING bank earlier this month. Lockdowns could also affect spring planting, driving up food prices, while transport has also been badly hit.

Baiyun Airport, in the southern manufacturing hub of Guangzhou, saw 80% of flights canceled Thursday after "abnormal results" were found while testing airport staff, according to online state media source The Paper.

Travel, particularly between provinces and cities, is expected to fall during next week's May Day holiday. China's international borders have largely remained closed since the COVID-19 outbreak was first discovered in the central city of Wuhan.

Despite Beijing's promises to reduce the human and economic cost of its strict "zero-COVID" strategy, leaders from President Xi Jinping down have ruled out joining the United States and other governments that are dropping restrictions and trying to live with the virus.

All but 13 of China's 100 biggest cities by economic output were under some form of restrictions earlier this month, according to Gavekal Dragonomics, a research firm.

Occupied Ukrainian city fears sham Russian referendum plans

By FRANCESCA EBEL and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ever since Russian forces took the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson in early March, residents sensed the occupiers had a special plan for their town. Now, amid a crescendo of warnings from Ukraine that Russia plans to stage a sham referendum to transform the territory into a pro-Moscow “people’s republic,” it appears locals guessed right.

After Russian forces withdrew from occupied areas around Kyiv in early April, they left behind scenes of horror and traumatized communities. But in Kherson — a large city with a major ship-building industry, located at the confluence of the Dnieper River and the Black Sea near Russian-annexed Crimea — the occupying forces have taken a different tack.

“The soldiers patrol and walk around silently. They don’t shoot people in the streets,” said Olga, a local teacher, in a telephone interview last month after the region was sealed off by Russian forces. “They are trying to give the impression that they come in peace to liberate us from something.”

“It is a little scary,” said 63-year-old Alexander, who like other residents gave only his first name for fear of reprisals. “But there is no panic, people are helping each other. There is a very small minority of people who are happy that it is under Russian control, but mostly, nobody wants Kherson to become a part of Russia.”

While the city has so far been spared the atrocities committed elsewhere, daily life is far from normal. After Russia occupied Kherson and the surrounding region, all access was cut off. Kherson now suffers from a severe shortage of medicine, cash, dairy and other food products, and Ukrainian officials warn the region could face a “humanitarian catastrophe.”

Russia has blocked all humanitarian assistance except its own, which troops deliver before Russian state TV cameras, and which many residents refuse to accept. With no cash deliveries to Kherson’s banks, the circulation of Ukraine’s hryvnia currency is dwindling, and damaged communication networks mean credit card payments often fail to go through. Access to Ukrainian TV has been blocked and replaced by Russian state channels. A strict curfew has been imposed.

Residents believe Russian troops have not yet besieged or terrorized the city — as they did in Bucha and Mariupol — because they are planning to hold a referendum to create a so-called “People’s Republic of Kherson” like the pro-Russia breakaway territories in eastern Ukraine. Ballots are already being printed for a vote to be held by early May, Ukrainian human rights ombudsman Lyudmila Denisova warned this month.

In an address to the nation on Friday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke directly to residents of occupied Kherson, accusing Russia of planning an orchestrated referendum and urging residents to be careful about personal data they share with Russian soldiers, warning there could be attempts to falsify votes. “This is a reality. Be careful,” he said.

Kherson Mayor Igor Kolykhaiev joined the chorus of warnings, saying in a Zoom interview on Ukrainian TV that such a vote would be illegal since Kherson remains officially part of Ukraine.

Russia has been silent about any plans to hold a referendum in Kherson, with Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko saying this week he knew of no such proposal.

But there is reason for concern. In 2014, a disputed referendum in Crimea amid the Russian annexation was widely believed to be falsified, with results showing nearly 97% of voters supported joining Russia.

A series of Russian actions this week have added to the growing sense of panic in Kherson. The mayor reported on social media on Monday that Russian troops had seized City Hall, where the Ukrainian flag no longer flew. On Tuesday, the Russians replaced the mayor with their own appointee.

A prominent Russian commander, Maj. Gen. Rustam Minnekayev, announced plans to take “total control” of southern Ukraine and the Donbas, eastern Ukraine’s mostly Russian-speaking industrial heartland, with the aim of setting up a land corridor to Crimea. And Ukrainian military intelligence reported that Russia intends to forcibly mobilize the local population, including doctors, in the southern occupied territories to support the Russian war effort.

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Kherson is a strategically important city and the gateway to broader control of the south. From Kherson, Russia could launch a more powerful offensive against other southern cities, including Odesa and Kriviy Rih.

The occupation of the Kherson region would also maintain Russia's access to the North Crimean canal. After the annexation, Ukraine cut off water from the canal, which flows from the Dnieper River to Crimea and previously supplied 85% of the peninsula's needs.

Volodymyr Fesenko, a political analyst at the Penta Center think tank in Kyiv, says the Russian military's softer behavior in Kherson is because units from Crimea and separatists from Donetsk and Luhansk, who are either ethnic Ukrainians or have close connections to the region, are deployed there. "Therefore, there have been no atrocities," he said.

The situation in the surrounding Kherson region, however, tells a very different story — with daily reports of kidnappings, torture, killings or rape. Thousands of people have been deprived of electricity, water and gas.

"The situation in the Kherson region is much worse and much more tragic," said Oleh Baturin, a local journalist. "Kherson is a big city and there aren't that many soldiers. It is easier for them to take control of the villages; they are defenseless."

On April 19, Russian forces opened fire on the villages of Velyka Oleksandrivka and Rybalche, killing civilians and damaging homes, the Kherson Region Prosecutor's Office reported. A week earlier, Russian troops shot dead seven people in a residential building in the village of Pravdyne. "After that, intending to cover up the crime, the occupier blew up the house with the bodies of the executed people" inside, the report said.

Russian soldiers have also kidnapped local activists, journalists and war veterans, according to Kolykhaiev, the Kherson mayor, who said more than 200 people have been abducted.

Among them was Baturin, who was seized near his home in Kakhovka, 60 miles (90 kilometers) east of Kherson. The journalist was meeting an acquaintance from another village when a group of Russian soldiers attacked him at the train station. They held him in isolation for a week, Baturin said, interrogating him every day; the soldiers asked for the names of organizers of anti-occupation protests, as well as local soldiers and veterans. From other cells, he could hear sounds of torture.

After his release he fled the occupied territory with his family.

"If I had stayed, I am absolutely certain they would come for me again," Baturin said, speaking by phone last week from Ukrainian-controlled territory after his escape.

Fesenko, the analyst, says the referendum plan indicates Russia's intention to occupy the region long-term.

"In Crimea and Donbas, Russia had the support of the local population, but this is not the case in the south of Ukraine, where Ukrainians want to live in Ukraine. And this means that in the event of a long-term occupation, Russia risks facing a broad partisan movement," Fesenko said.

During the first weeks of occupation, thousands of protesters gathered daily on Kherson's main square, draped in Ukrainian flags and holding signs proclaiming, "This is Ukraine." Videos on social media showed people screaming at Russia's tanks and heavily armed soldiers. The protests are now held weekly. On Wednesday, Russian troops used tear gas and stun grenades to disperse the protesters.

Olga, the teacher, regularly takes part. Previously a Russian speaker, she now refuses to utter the language. "I will never be able to communicate with Russians ever again. How can I feel about people who bomb maternity hospitals and children?" she said. "We were flourishing — and now they have ruined our lives."

Mayor Kolykhaiev said that after the warnings about a Russian referendum and mobilization there has been a panicked rush to leave. "The queues of people who want to leave our city have grown to five kilometers," he said, adding that around a third of the city's pre-war population of 284,000 has fled.

Following Zelenskyy's address to the nation, Olga sent a WhatsApp message to the AP: "The situation in Kherson is tense. My family and I want to leave ... but now the Russian soldiers don't allow it at all. It's becoming more and more dangerous here."

Late Monday night, Kolykhaiev wrote on Facebook that armed Russian soldiers had entered the Kherson

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City Council building, took away the keys and replaced the guards with their own.

On Tuesday, the mayor posted again, saying he had refused to cooperate with the new administration appointed by the Russian regional military commander, Oleksandr Kobets.

"I am staying in Kherson with the people of Kherson," he wrote. "I am with you."

South Korean activist resumes flying anti-North leaflets

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A South Korean activist said Thursday he launched a million propaganda leaflets by balloon into North Korea this week, in his first such campaign while standing trial for past leafleting under a contentious new law that criminalizes such actions.

The law that took effect in March 2021 and punishes anti-Pyongyang leafleters with up to three years in prison has been hotly debated in South Korea, with critics saying Seoul's liberal government was sacrificing freedom of speech to improve ties with rival North Korea.

Park Sang-hak, a North Korean defector-turned-activist, said he resumed his leafleting campaign this week after halting such activities for a year during a police investigation and court trial for sending balloons across the border in April last year. The trial is continuing and no verdict has been issued.

On Monday and Tuesday, his group floated 20 huge balloons carrying leaflets critical of North Korea's nuclear program and the Kim family's hereditary rule across the tense Korean border, Park said.

Park said the balloons also contained pictures of South Korea's incoming conservative president, Yoon Suk Yeol, to show North Koreans the difference between the South's election system and the North's father-to-son successions. He said small books and USB sticks, which carry information about South Korea's economic and cultural development, were also put in the balloons.

"North Korea has deceived us. It once said it would scrap its nukes but its leader Kim Jong Un and (his sister) Kim Yo Jong are now threatening to launch preemptive nuclear strikes on South Korea and the international community. I want to condemn such acts," Park said by phone.

Police in Gyeonggi province, who have jurisdiction over the border areas where Park claimed to have launched the leaflets, said they were checking details about Park's activities. They said they weren't aware of Park's reported leafleting in advance.

Park said some of his leaflets flown this week reached Pyongyang and other North Korean cities. Experts say many leaflets launched in the past landed in frontline South Korean areas. North Korea hasn't reacted to any leafleting this week.

North Korea is extremely sensitive about any outside attempt to undermine Kim Jong Un's leadership and weaken his absolute control over the country's 26 million people, most of whom have little access to foreign news. In 2020, North Korea blew up an empty, South Korean-built liaison office on its territory after making a furious response to South Korean civilian leafleting campaigns. In 2014, North Korea fired at propaganda balloons flying toward its territory and South Korea returned fire, though there were no casualties.

In late 2020, South Korean lawmakers supporting outgoing, liberal President Moon Jae-in's appeasement policy on North Korea passed the anti-leafleting law, arguing it is meant to avoid unnecessarily provoking North Korea and ensure the safety of frontline South Korean residents.

Moon will be replaced by Yoon, a former top prosecutor who has promised to take a tougher line on North Korea, on May 10. Yoon's party has harshly criticized the anti-leafleting law.

In NYC, ads for jobs will have to say what they pay

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Help wanted. The job: putting one of the nation's most far-reaching salary disclosure laws into practice. Location: New York City.

Just four months ago, city lawmakers overwhelmingly voted to require many ads for jobs in the nation's most populous city to include salary ranges, in the name of giving job applicants — particularly women

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and people of color — a better shot at fair pay. But on the cusp of implementing the measure, lawmakers will likely vote Thursday to postpone it for five months after employers waved red flags.

The debate marks a prominent test for a burgeoning slate of U.S. “pay transparency” laws. And the answer seems simple to Brooklyn restaurant server Elizabeth Stone.

“I believe I deserve to know how much I can make as a waitress,” she said.

Stone has scoured job ads that are mum about pay, leaving her wondering whether to try to move on from an employer she likes but wishes paid more, and feeling like she has no leverage to push for a raise.

“You’re put in a really challenging position of not wanting to upset your employer and not wanting to scare away an opportunity, but also wanting to fight for what you know is what you deserve,” said Stone, 23, a member of restaurant workers’ advocacy group ROC United.

Over the last four years, at least seven states from California to Connecticut and at least two cities beyond New York — Cincinnati and Toledo, Ohio — have started demanding employers disclose salary information to job-seekers in some circumstances. In many cases, that means upon request and/or after an interview, and there are exemptions for small businesses.

Colorado broke new ground with a 2019 law requiring a pay range in all job postings.

New York City’s new law is similar but applies only to employers with four or more workers. That amounts to about 1/3 of employers but roughly 90% of workers in the city, according to state Labor Department statistics.

The law says any job notice, from an online ad to an internal company bulletin board, must give the minimum and maximum pay the employer “in good faith believes” it will pay. There’s no limit on how wide the range can be, nor a prohibition on deviating from it if the “good faith” plan changes.

The laws have been propelled by a gradually shrinking but stubborn discrepancy: The median pay for full-time female workers was about 83% what men made in 2021, according to federal data.

Women make less than their male colleagues in nearly all fields, with a few exceptions in areas like social work done in health care settings, federal statistics show.

Pay-transparency requirements are “one of the most powerful tools that we have to change those gaps,” said Beverly Neufeld, the president of PowHer New York, an economic equality advocacy group. Workers get a level playing field, she argues, while businesses increase efficiency by bringing in applicants amenable to the salary on offer.

Indeed, many employers already advertise what they pay.

Others say they have good reasons not to.

Political consultant Amelia Adams said she strives to make her small, minority-owned business a good place to work, offering health benefits, opportunities to work directly with clients and the best pay she can. But she often doesn’t advertise salaries for fear of putting off job-seekers before even getting a chance to talk.

“To publicly put salaries of small, minority-and-women-owned businesses gives a stigma that we are not competitive,” said Adams, whose New York City-based business has four employees.

Nonprofit organization consultant Yolanda F. Johnson fielded similar concerns after a professional group she founded, Women of Color in Fundraising and Philanthropy, began requiring pay information in its job board posts starting last fall.

Johnson argues the solution is fundraising and other work to build up budgets, rather than obscuring salaries.

“If you think people are going to pass you by,” she said, “there are lots of different things to have in place to be a successful nonprofit where, in turn, you can pay people equitably.”

While small companies and nonprofits worry they’ll lose applicants, some big corporations are uneasy about posting New York City salaries for jobs that could be done from lower-cost places. Some also fear a flood of resignations or demands for raises once current employees see what new hires can get.

“You have your existing population saying, ‘Well, if this is the range, why do I fall on the lower side or the medium side? ... (And) now I can see, as an employee of X firm, what an employee of Y firm is making,’” notes Ian Carleton Schaefer, a New York employment lawyer who represents sports, entertainment,

technology and other companies.

He counsels clients to prepare for the new law by making sure their current pay structure is fair, and giving raises if it isn't. Regardless, some sought-after employers could decide to stop advertising jobs and rely instead on unsolicited resumes and other recruiting methods, or to be choosier about which positions they post and where, Schaefer said.

After Colorado's law took effect last year, some big companies posted jobs for workers anywhere but Colorado. The state Labor and Employment Department didn't respond to inquiries about the law's effects.

New York lawmakers are now proposing to tweak their legislation to exempt jobs carried out entirely elsewhere and shift the effective date from May 15 to Nov. 1. A vote is scheduled Thursday in the City Council, where legislation generally doesn't come to the floor without enough support to pass.

But lawmakers have rebuffed other changes that business interests wanted, such as exempting general "help wanted" signs and businesses with under 15 employees.

Details aside, salary transparency goes only so far, notes Sian Beilock, the president of all-women's Barnard College.

"Moving towards gender parity, in terms of the workplace, is a really important goal," but it's important to consider promotions, management responsibilities and other aspects, she said. "I worry that focusing on salary misses a larger point."

Millionaire candidates pour cash into Ohio, Pa. Senate races

By JULIE CARR SMYTH and MARC LEVY Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Millionaire candidates and billionaire investors are harnessing their considerable personal wealth to try to win competitive Republican primaries for open U.S. Senate seats in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Mike Gibbons, an Ohio investment banker, leads the pack of self-funders in both states after lending his campaign almost \$17 million. Three other wealthy candidates in the Ohio race — state Sen. Matt Dolan, whose family owns the Cleveland Guardians baseball team; former Ohio Republican chair Jane Timken, whose husband's family founded the steel giant Timken Co.; and "Hillbilly Elegy" author JD Vance — have lent or contributed a combined \$14 million to their campaigns.

In Pennsylvania, heart surgeon-turned-TV celebrity Mehmet Oz, former hedge fund CEO David McCormick and former real estate investment firm CEO Carla Sands report that they have lent their campaigns more than \$20 million combined.

Billionaire tech investor Peter Thiel, the co-founder of PayPal, has poured money into a super PAC backing Vance, while hedge fund billionaire Ken Griffin has contributed millions to a super PAC supporting McCormick.

The influx of money into the Ohio and Pennsylvania primaries illustrates the importance of the two Senate seats, which could help determine party control of the chamber in November. The highly competitive races for the seats being vacated by Ohio GOP Sen. Rob Portman and Pennsylvania GOP Sen. Pat Toomey are expected to be among the most expensive contests in this year's midterm elections.

While the money alone may not determine who wins, it can definitely help.

Sheila Krumholz, executive director of OpenSecrets, a research group that tracks campaign spending, said self-funding has become an increasingly appealing option for wealthy candidates because the lack of limits on personal giving allows them to "fight fire with fire" against deep-pocketed super PACs and dark money groups.

"The massive spending by super PACs and outside groups with anonymous sources means that candidates really can never stop fundraising," Krumholz said. "They can never have enough money, so self-funded candidates have that built-in advantage. You're not only raising money to fight an opponent or opponents, you need money to fend off attacks that could come from anywhere, at any moment, in any amount of money."

Some of the less well-known candidates, such as Gibbons and McCormick, have spent some of their fortunes on TV advertising to introduce themselves to voters. More high-profile contenders, like Oz and

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Vance, have funneled money into ads to remind voters they have the endorsement of former President Donald Trump, who remains popular with the Republican base.

In Ohio, Mandel, the state's former treasurer, is the only Republican Senate candidate in the seven-person race who hasn't given himself a personal loan. But he is backed by Club for Growth Action, the super PAC of the conservative Club for Growth, which has spent more than \$4.6 million pillorying his rivals, particularly Vance, ahead of the state's May 3 primary.

For his part, Vance has the support of Protect Ohio Values, a super PAC into which Thiel has invested \$13.5 million.

In Pennsylvania, the state's seven-way Republican Senate primary election on May 17 has been transformed by three wealthy and well-connected candidates who moved from out of state — blue states, no less — to spend their riches on a campaign in the presidential battleground.

In their financial disclosures, Sands, Oz and McCormick report being worth tens of millions — if not hundreds of millions — and owning properties across the country.

McCormick, who resigned from his \$22 million-a-year job as CEO of a hedge fund in Connecticut to run for the Senate, grew up the son of a college professor, administrator and president who became the chancellor of the state's university system. McCormick often talks about working on a Christmas tree farm owned by his family.

But asked last week if someone as wealthy as he is can understand average Pennsylvanians, McCormick told KDKA-TV in Pittsburgh that "I didn't have anything" growing up.

His campaign later said McCormick had a "humble upbringing" and had been trying to explain that he worked for the wealth he has now.

A rival Republican candidate, Kathy Barnette, who has allied herself with pro-Trump arch-conservatives, took aim at what she called the GOP's habit of electing "the richest person."

"How has that served us? Picking the richest person, just because they are the richest person," Barnette said at a forum in late March while sitting just feet away from Oz and McCormick.

Addressing voters, she said: "How many times have you called your elected official who just so happened to be the richest person in the room and asked them to stand up for you? And how many of them over the past two years have stood up for you?"

McCormick and Oz are being boosted by super PACs and the airwaves are blanketed with their TV ads, helping put the men atop polls in the Republican primary. A super PAC supporting McCormick — and attacking Oz — has reported spending more than \$13 million so far, powered by \$7.5 million from Griffin, the hedge fund billionaire.

All the cash can concern voters, said Terry Casey, a Republican strategist in Ohio.

"The voters, with reason, are legitimately skeptical of candidates spending millions and millions, because who's giving it to them and why?" he said. "So there's an argument that if you're self-funding, maybe you're less tainted, but then it raises the question of, 'Is this an ego or vanity campaign?'"

Survivors unite to deliver message on Holocaust remembrance

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Holocaust survivors across the world have united to deliver a message on the dangers of unchecked hate and the importance of remembrance at a time of rising global antisemitism.

In a video released Thursday to mark Yom HaShoah -- Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day -- 100 Holocaust survivors asked people to stand with them and remember the Nazi genocide to avoid repeating the horrors of the past.

The 100 Words project video was released by the New York-based Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, also referred to as the Claims Conference. The group represents the world's Jews in negotiating for compensation and restitution for victims of Nazi persecution and their heirs, and provides welfare for Holocaust survivors around the globe.

"The world is full of strife – from the pandemic to the crisis happening in Ukraine – on remembrance

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days like Yom HaShoah, it is so important to stop and reflect," Gideon Taylor, president of the Claims Conference, said in a statement.

"The call to action these survivors put forth today is not only one of remembrance, but one of action, a reminder that we do not have to be bystanders. We can all stand up in our own way and we can choose to not let our collective history repeat itself."

The project is being released as Russia faces widespread revulsion and accusations of war crimes over attacks on civilians in its invasion of Ukraine. It also comes at a time when Holocaust survivors -- now in their 80s and 90s -- are dying, while studies show that younger generations lack even basic knowledge of the Nazi genocide, in which a third of the world's Jews were annihilated.

"If we do not remember them, we are murdering them twice because we have forgotten them. And we have forgotten the tragic travesty that was visited upon millions of people," said Ginger Lane, a Holocaust survivor who along with her siblings was hidden in a fruit orchard near Berlin by non-Jews.

"It is important to remember because it is a part of our heritage and our legacy that we pass on to the younger generation," said Lane, whose mother was killed at the Auschwitz death camp, and who has made it her lifelong mission to educate others.

"Holocaust denial, we know it has always existed, but it seems to be on the upswing and ... a huge number of young people don't even know what the word Holocaust means ... These young people are eager to move forward with their lives. But their lives today are shaped by the past. And they need to know what happened in the past."

In a 50-state study of Millennials and Generation Z-age people in the U.S. in 2020, researchers found that 63% of respondents did not know that 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust and 48% could not name a single death camp or concentration camp.

The 100 Word Project statement by Holocaust survivors says:

"Today is Holocaust Remembrance Day

We all survived the Holocaust

We are here to give voice to the six million Jews who were murdered

We are a reminder unchecked hatred can lead to actions, actions to genocide

Just over 75 years ago, one-third of the world's Jews were systematically murdered

Among them, over 1.5 million children were killed

in the name of indifference, intolerance, hate

Hatred for what was feared

Hatred for what was different

We must remember the past or it will become our future

On Holocaust Remembrance Day we ask the world to stand with us and remember."

The annual remembrance known as Yom HaShoah is one of the most solemn on Israel's calendar, with the nation coming to a standstill during a two-minute siren on Thursday morning. According to the Hebrew calendar, Holocaust Remembrance Day marks the anniversary of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising — the most significant act of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. Although the uprising ultimately failed, it is remembered in Israel as a symbol of strength and the struggle for freedom in the face of annihilation.

It means "resilience, tenacity, strength. It's the hallmark of being a Holocaust survivor, the very concept of surviving, of everyday problems, of fighting until the end," said Greg Schneider, executive vice president of the Claims Conference.

"And for some people, unfortunately, the end was the gas chamber. For other people the end was the Warsaw ghetto, where a very small group of people who weren't well-equipped held out for nearly a month," Schneider said.

"And that's why it's such an important day in Israel, and around the world for the Jewish community because it symbolizes the fight of certainly the Jewish people, but of any people facing this type of incredible adversity."

The Claims Conference is working with its partners, among them the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or JDC, to get as many Holocaust survivors out of Ukraine as possible. Thousands of people

have been killed and more than five million have fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion began on February 24.

Holocaust survivors from Canada, England, France, Germany, Israel, the United States and Ukraine were part of the video statement.

"Survivors from many different countries and languages who have vastly different persecution experiences -- some were in concentration camps, some were in ghettos, some fled, some were in hiding," Schneider said.

"And yet they come together to speak in one voice of the hope for the future."

Dem lawmaker: Biden suggests he'll ease student loan burden

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has signaled he might forgive some student loan debt and further extend the federal moratorium on repayments, a lawmaker who discussed the issue with him said Wednesday.

The White House was notably more measured about Biden's stance, but such moves would be a boon to many of the 43 million Americans carrying student loans worth \$1.6 trillion, according to federal figures. It would also be a win for Democratic and progressive leaders who have long pressed Biden to carry through on a 2020 campaign promise that as president he would "immediately" cancel up to \$10,000 in debt per student.

Biden's remarks came during a wide-ranging Monday meeting at the White House with seven members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, according to Rep. Tony Cardenas, D-Calif., who was among them. He said in an interview Wednesday that he asked Biden to extend the moratorium on debt payments through this year, instead of letting it expire Aug. 31.

"He immediately smiled and said, 'I've extended in the past, and you're going to like what I do next,'" Cardenas said. "So I said, 'Okay, wonderful. Next question.'"

Cardenas said he then asked about forgiving at least \$10,000 in debt for each student, which he said the caucus believes Biden can do using executive powers. That would preclude the need for legislation from Congress, where there is Republican opposition.

"He said, 'Yes, I'm exploring doing something on that front,'" said Cardenas. "And he also smiled and said, 'You're going to like what I do on that as well.'"

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., sounded a similar note of optimism Wednesday. "I think the president is moving in our direction. My talks with him and his staff have been very fruitful over the last little while," Schumer said.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday that during the meeting, "what he reiterated is that he will make a decision before" the current repayment suspension ends Aug. 31. She said Biden "is looking at other executive authority options he has to bring relief to people who have student loans."

Sweeping student loan forgiveness is anathema for many Republicans and others concerned about its costs to the government at a time of huge federal deficits.

"Desperate polls call for desperate measures: Dems consider forgiving trillions in student loans," Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, tweeted mockingly Wednesday. "Other bribe suggestions: Forgive auto loans? Forgive credit card debt? Forgive mortgages? And put a wealth tax on the super-rich to pay for it all. What could possibly go wrong?"

Cardenas said Biden didn't specify when he would take action or detail what he would do, beyond saying, "Soon."

"I got the strong feeling, and so did my colleagues, that he enjoyed answering those questions with his body language, with his words, with the smile on his face, and encouraging us that we're going to like what he's going to do," Cardenas said.

Cardenas said the question of whether debt forgiveness should be curbed for higher-income students, which could curb the costs of the proposal, did not come up during the White House meeting. He also

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said when Biden asked if forgiveness should apply to borrowers who attended private and public schools, he and other lawmakers said they wanted students from both types of institutions to be eligible.

Some Democrats fear providing loan relief to students who attended expensive private universities would provide an easy campaign target for Republicans in this fall's elections for control of Congress.

Even so, remarks by several Democrats suggest a broad effort to ease student debt could help the party with minority voters.

Cardenas said he told Biden that Hispanic students with college debt typically face higher long-term debt burdens than white students. "We're trying to help all former students, but Hispanic households and people trying to get back on their feet, it's affecting Hispanics at a higher level," Cardenas said.

Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Calif., chair of the caucus, said in a separate statement Wednesday that Hispanic students "disproportionately carry the burden of student debt in our nation." He said the caucus would continue working with Biden "to make sure our students have a seat at the table when it comes to their financial health and well-being."

Schumer sounded the same theme, saying that Black, Hispanic and other minority voters tend to carry more debt deeper into their lives. "This isn't just the right thing to do for our economy. It's the right thing to do for racial equity," he said.

The pandemic prompted then-President Donald Trump and Congress to begin providing student loan relief in March 2020.

After initially letting borrowers choose to suspend payments for at least 60 days, the moratorium was made automatic and eventually extended several times by Trump and later Biden. Interest rates during the suspension have been 0%.

Also at Monday's White House meeting, Rep. Nanette Barragan, D-Calif., said she told Biden he should let Trump-era restrictions letting authorities quickly expel migrants crossing from the Mexican border expire as planned on May 23. Other participants at that meeting said Biden expressed opposition to the restrictions but did not specifically say what he would do.

Many Democrats oppose those curbs, which let the government cite fears about spreading COVID-19 to reject asylum seekers. Republicans and significant numbers of Democrats want the procedures left in place, and letting them lapse is seen as a political vulnerability for Democrats among moderate voters.

EXPLAINER: What Twitter could do as privately held company

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — If Elon Musk and Twitter get their way, the company will soon be privately held and under his control.

The most obvious immediate change would likely be Twitter's stock being taken off the New York Stock Exchange. But the company would also likely get freed from having to give regular updates about its business to U.S. regulators and to Wall Street.

One important change for Twitter users is that the company would likely have more freedom to make big or unpopular changes. That's because it wouldn't have to worry about potential blowback from Wall Street.

Here's a look at what it means for a company to go private.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ITS STOCK?

If the merger closes as planned, Twitter investors would get \$54.20 in cash for each share they own. Those shares would then be canceled and cease to exist.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THAT MAKE?

Twitter would likely no longer have to file documents with U.S. regulators every three months to show how much money it's making. It also likely wouldn't have to announce changes to its strategy or operations that are big enough to materially change its fortunes. Now, it risks getting sued if it doesn't make such disclosures.

"The biggest distinction is that Musk as an owner would be beholden to his own desires or to his and whatever remaining shareholders are still around, rather than to the wide investor base that it has now,"

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said Eric Talley, a law professor at Columbia University.

WHO WOULD BE IN CHARGE?

The company would still have a board of directors, Talley said. It would also need to still follow state-level corporate governance rules, as well as all applicable tax, environmental and other laws.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING PRIVATELY HELD?

Going private removes the possibility of Twitter having to answer to angry shareholders if it makes big changes to its business. Musk has already floated the idea of depending less on advertising, which is Twitter's main way of making money.

Investors often send a stock price lower if they think a company's decision is wrong, or at least being made at the wrong time. And the fiduciary duty of the board of directors for a publicly traded company is to generate a return for its investors.

A privately held company, meanwhile, doesn't need to worry about short-term drops for its stock price. It can also jump more whole heartedly into plans, say by hiring slews of new workers to transform it, without having to explain the jump in expenses to shareholders in its next quarterly report.

Both private and public companies "can do whatever they want, but there will be less blowback for privately held companies because a shareholder can't complain because there are no other shareholders," said Harry Kraemer, a former CEO and chairman of Baxter International who is now a professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

HOW MUCH POTENTIAL BLOWBACK IS THERE, REALLY?

There's a lot more scrutiny on publicly held companies by not only shareholders and regulators but also by the media, said Kraemer, who currently sits on boards of both publicly held and privately held companies.

And the pressure to hit performance targets every three months is indeed high, he said.

"I often tease people who say I was at Baxter for 23 years," Kraemer said. "I tell them I was at Baxter for 92 quarters. And every quarter was the most critical of my life, until the next quarter started."

GETTING AWAY FROM SHORT-TERMISM IS A GOOD THING, RIGHT?

It does allow companies more freedom to make bold changes they believe in. But it also removes a source of accountability, said Columbia's Talley.

"If you're running the thing in a wasteful or slothful way, you're going to get called on it," he said.

WHAT DOES A COMPANY LOSE BY GOING PRIVATE?

A potentially quick way to raise cash. Companies that are publicly traded can sell more shares of their stock if they need to raise cash in a pinch.

COULD MUSK DECIDE NOT TO CARE ABOUT MAKING PROFITS AT ALL?

If he's the only shareholder, he could ostensibly do whatever he wants. But he is also borrowing up to \$25.5 billion from a slew of banks to pay for the takeover of Twitter. And they're going to want their money back, plus interest.

If Musk ends up having other shareholders along with him in Twitter, that could also up the pressure on profits. Talley pointed to a famous case brought against another iconic automaker, Henry Ford, who cut back on dividends to shareholders at one point.

"The moral of the whole lawsuit is that while you have a lot of discretion in how you go about maximizing shareholder returns, you don't get much discretion on whether to do so," he said.

DOES TWITTER HAVE TO STAY PRIVATE?

No, it can go back to selling its stock on the public market again. Going private itself would also give Twitter the opportunity to revamp its ownership structure and start offering dual classes of shares, including one that has much control over the company than the other, Talley said.

Russia cuts off gas to 2 NATO nations in bid to divide West

By YESICA FISCH, JON GAMBRELL and VANESSA GERA Associated Press

POKROVSK, Ukraine (AP) — Russia cut off natural gas to NATO members Poland and Bulgaria on Wednesday and threatened to do the same to other countries, using its most essential export in what was seen as a bid to punish and divide the West over its support for Ukraine.

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The move, condemned by European leaders as "blackmail," marked a dramatic escalation in the economic war of sanctions and countersanctions that has unfolded in parallel to the fighting on the battlefield.

The tactic, coming a day after the U.S. and other Western allies vowed to rush more and heavier weapons to Ukraine, could eventually force targeted nations to ration gas and could deal another blow to economies suffering from rising prices. At the same time, it could deprive Russia of badly needed income to fund its war effort.

Poland has been a major gateway for the delivery of weapons to Ukraine and confirmed this week that it is sending the country tanks. Just hours before Russia's state energy giant Gazprom acted, Poland announced a new set of sanctions against the company and other Russian businesses and oligarchs.

Bulgaria, under a new liberal government that took office last fall, has cut many of its old ties to Moscow and likewise supported punitive measures against the Kremlin. It has also hosted Western fighter jets at a new NATO outpost on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast.

The gas cuts do not immediately put the two countries in any dire trouble. Poland, especially, has been working for many years to line up other suppliers, and the continent is heading into summer, making gas less essential for households.

Also, Russian gas deliveries to both Poland and Bulgaria were expected to end later this year anyway.

Still, the cutoff and the Kremlin warning that other countries could be next sent shivers of worry through the 27-nation European Union. Germany, the largest economy on the continent, and Italy are among Europe's biggest consumers of Russian natural gas, though they, too, have been taking steps to reduce their dependence on Moscow.

"It comes as no surprise that the Kremlin uses fossil fuels to try to blackmail us," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. "Today, the Kremlin failed once again in his attempt to sow division amongst member states. The era of Russian fossil fuel in Europe is coming to an end."

Gazprom said it shut off the two countries because they refused to pay in rubles, as President Vladimir Putin has demanded of "unfriendly" nations. The Kremlin said other countries may be cut off if they don't agree to the payment arrangement.

Most European countries have publicly balked at Russia's demand for rubles, but it is not clear how many have actually faced the moment of decision so far. Greece's next scheduled payment to Gazprom is due on May 25, for example, and the government must decide then whether to comply.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told his country's parliament that he believes Poland's support for Ukraine — and the new sanctions imposed by Warsaw on Tuesday — were the real reasons behind the gas cutoff.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov called the suspension blackmail, adding: "We will not succumb to such a racket."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Russia views gas as a weapon for political blackmail and "sees a united Europe as a target."

On the battlefield, fighting continued in the country's east along a largely static front line some 300 miles (480 kilometers) long.

Russia claimed its missiles hit a batch of weapons that the U.S. and European nations had delivered to Ukraine. One person was killed and at least two were injured when rockets hit a residential neighborhood in Kharkiv.

Western officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence findings, said Russia has made slow progress in the eastern Donbas region, with "minor gains," including the capture of villages and small towns south of Izyum and on the outskirts of Rubizhne.

Serhiy Haidai, the governor of the Luhansk region, conceded that Russia has made minor progress in its advance on Rubizhne through its nearly constant bombardment, but that Ukrainian troops are fighting back and retreating only when there is nothing left to defend.

"There is no point in staying on territory that has been fired on so often that every meter is well known," he said.

The Western officials said some Russian troops have been shifted from the gutted southern port city of

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Mariupol to other parts of the Donbas. But some remain in Mariupol to fight Ukrainian forces holed up at the Azovstal steel plant, the last stronghold in the city. About 1,000 civilians were said to be taking shelter there with an estimated 2,000 Ukrainian defenders.

"The situation is very difficult. There are huge problems with water, food," Serhii Volynskyi, commander of the marine unit inside the plant, said in a Facebook video message. He said hundreds of fighters and civilians were wounded and in need of medical help, and those inside included children, older people and disabled people.

In the Black Sea port city of Kherson, which Russian forces have occupied since early in the war, a series of explosions boomed late Wednesday near the television tower and at least temporarily knocked Russian channels off the air, Ukrainian and Russian news organizations reported.

Just across the border in Russia, an ammunition depot in the Belgorod region burned after several explosions were heard, the governor said. Blasts were also reported in Russia's Kursk region near the border, and authorities in Russia's Voronezh region said an air defense system shot down a drone.

Earlier this week, an oil storage facility in the Russian city of Bryansk was engulfed by fire.

Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak hinted at the country's involvement in the fires, saying in a Telegram post that "karma (is) a harsh thing."

In other developments:

— The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Grossi, said the safety level at Europe's largest nuclear plant, now under Russian occupation in Ukraine, is like a "red light blinking" as his organization tries in vain to get access to the Zaporizhzhia power station for repairs.

— Amid rising tensions over gas, Moscow and Washington carried out a dramatic prisoner exchange, trading a Marine veteran jailed in Moscow for a convicted Russian drug trafficker serving a long prison sentence in the U.S.

With the help of Western arms, Ukrainian forces managed to thwart Russian forces' attempt to storm Kyiv. Moscow now says its focus is the capture of the Donbas, Ukraine's mostly Russian-speaking industrial heartland.

A defiant Putin vowed Russia will achieve its military goals, telling parliament, "All the tasks of the special military operation we are conducting in the Donbas and Ukraine, launched on Feb. 24, will be unconditionally fulfilled."

Simone Tagliapietra, senior fellow at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels, said Russia's goal in cutting off the flow of gas is to "divide and rule" — pit European countries against one another as they cast about for energy.

While Poland gets around 45% of its gas from Russia, it relies overwhelmingly on coal and said it was well prepared for the cutoff. It has ample gas in storage and will soon benefit from two pipelines coming on line, analyst Emily McClain of Rystad Energy said.

Bulgaria gets over 90% of its gas from Russia, but it could increase imports from Azerbaijan, and a pipeline connection to Greece is set to be completed later this year.

Dobrin Todorov, a resident of Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, said the suspension is not a big problem.

"Ultimately, the choice between freedom and dignity or gas, the answer is clear, in favor of freedom and dignity," Todorov said, adding that a lack of gas "cannot be compared to the hardship and tribulations that the Ukrainian people are currently suffering."

Europe is not without its own leverage, since it is paying some \$400 million a day to Russia for gas, money Putin would lose in a complete cutoff. Russia can, in theory, sell oil elsewhere — to India and China, for instance. But it doesn't have the necessary pipelines in some cases, and it has only limited capacity to export gas by ship.

"The move that Russia did today is basically a move where Russia hurts itself," von der Leyen said.

Twitter abuse victims fear Musk's plans, but may not quit

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

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Perhaps no group of people is more alarmed about Elon Musk's apparent plan to make Twitter a free speech free-for-all than those most likely to be targeted for harassment: women, racial minorities and other marginalized groups.

They fear that a more hands-off approach to policing the platform will embolden purveyors of hate speech, bullying and disinformation to ratchet up their bad behavior — a possibility Musk has done little to dispel.

Yet even those who have faced extreme harassment on Twitter say they are unlikely to quit the platform. Despite the negative psychological toll, they value Twitter as a diverse forum to express their views and engage with others.

That could help explain why Musk shows little concern for the underbelly of unfettered free speech, although advertisers - who account for about 90% of Twitter's revenue - may not feel the same way.

Renee Bracey Sherman, a biracial abortion rights advocate, endures a steady stream of predictable criticism on Twitter and, occasionally, an eruption of vile tweets: messages calling for her death, photos of aborted fetuses and, recently, her likeness photo-shopped as a Nazi.

"It is a montage of hate and gore and violence," Bracey Sherman said.

But while some famous people threaten to quit Twitter because of Musk, more typical users like Bracey Sherman say it's not that simple. They cannot leave Twitter and expect their followers to join them.

To mitigate the hate, Bracey Sherman blocks thousands of people and uses filters to hide the most extreme messages. She also reports the most egregious messages to Twitter, although she says the platform rarely takes action.

Twitter did not immediately respond for comment. The company says on its site that it does not permit targeted harassment or intimidation that could make people afraid to speak up. And it says it does not tolerate violent threats.

Musk has called himself a "free-speech absolutist." In tweets to his 85 million followers since Twitter accepted his \$44 billion offer on Monday, Musk has made clear that he intends to regulate content with a much lighter touch, and that he isn't too concerned by the groundswell of criticism that it is likely to fuel harmful content.

"The extreme antibody reaction from those who fear free speech says it all," Musk tweeted Tuesday.

Playful, aggressive and often juvenile, Musk's tweets show how he has used social media to craft his public image as a brash billionaire unafraid to offend. They may also reveal clues as to how Musk will govern the platform he hopes to own.

On Tuesday, Musk aimed criticism at one of Twitter's top lawyers involved in content-moderation decisions. That led some of his followers to direct racist and misogynistic comments at the lawyer, Vijaya Gadde, who was born in India and immigrated to the U.S. as a child.

The uproar engulfing Twitter echoes what other social media companies have experienced in the recent past. When Facebook was slow to act to remove then-President Donald Trump from the platform for his role in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol, users called for a boycott, but there was no mass exodus.

Even when fed-up users do leave a social media platform, there's typically a stream of new users that come in right behind them. It's not the angriest users who leave, experts say, but those who simply find no use for the platform.

While polls show all types of people are susceptible to online harassment, extensive research has shown that women and people of color are far more likely to be targeted, something Twitter itself acknowledges. That targeting is also true for people with disabilities, people who belong to religious minorities and members of the LGBTQ community.

Michael Kleinman, who has studied online harassment for Amnesty International, said if Twitter allows more hateful and abusive speech, marginalized people who get attacked are likely to express themselves less.

"No one feels safe in a public square where as soon as you speak, a hostile mob screaming obscenities descends upon you. That's no longer a public square. That's an arena," Kleinman said.

Brianna Wu understands that arena as well as anybody.

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She has received sexual-assault and death threats on Twitter since 2014, when she created a video game, Revolution 60, that featured women as protagonists. The harassment was part of a larger online campaign targeting female game developers that became known as GamerGate.

Wu has since worked closely with Twitter's trust and safety team to improve the platform. She said "it terrifies me" to hear Musk talk about rolling back - if not completely wiping away - these efforts.

"We fought very, very hard to improve the platform for women, for LGBTQ people and people of color," said Wu, who is white and identifies as bisexual.

But Wu has no plans to leave Twitter, which she - a former candidate for Congress in Massachusetts - relies on for personal and professional relationships. "I've developed life-long friends on Twitter. I think it's really sad that to get that human connection I'm going to have to deal with harassment again that damages and deadens your humanity."

Not everyone is dead set on staying. Comic book writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, who has faced harassment as an advocate for gender equity in the entertainment industry, said she'll wait to see what changes Musk makes before deciding.

"If this just becomes a place where people scream at each other and call each other names and wish one another ill, I'm out," DeConnick said.

Bridget Todd, a spokeswoman for UltraViolet, an organization that advocates against discrimination in all forms, said that even though Twitter has managed to reduce harassment on its platform in recent years, she doesn't use it as much as she once did.

Todd said she is deeply worried about Musk guiding the company to eliminate the protections it does have - which she considers inadequate. But she doesn't intend to leave the platform.

"Our voices are so powerful on platforms like Twitter," she said. "I don't necessarily think that this signals the end of that, because I know our voices can really endure."

Evan Feeney, campaign director for Color of Change, an online racial justice organization that works to improve the lives of Black people in the United States, called Musk's push to relax content standards on Twitter "an alarming development." He predicted more coordinated attacks on Black people, particularly Black women.

"It is never good when a single billionaire who purposely conflates freedom to harm with freedom of speech controls one of the (largest) social media platforms in the world," Feeney said. "We've spent years pushing Twitter to implement policies we think have made the platform better. It's alarming that with a flip of a switch those could be rolled back."

Harassment on Twitter also spills over into the real world, and it highlights just how much victims sometimes are forced to put up with.

Bracey Sherman says people have placed stickers of racist symbols, including swastikas and monkeys, on her potted plants and the front door of her home. It is why she bristles at those who extol limitless free speech, and who suggest she should just toughen up and ignore it.

"What am I supposed to be able to handle?" she asked. "The fact that you are sending me photos of Nazis and telling me I should be raped over and over and over again?"

EXPLAINER: Brazil's Bolsonaro, top court on collision course

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and DÉBORA ÁLVARES Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro is once again at odds with the country's Supreme Court, pardoning a congressman who had just been convicted by high court justices for urging violence against one of them.

Justices may review the pardon, and the case threatens to become an institutional crisis as Bolsonaro is gearing up to seek a second term.

CONVICTION AND PARDON

In a nearly unanimous vote, Brazil's top court on April 20 sentenced freshman lawmaker Daniel Silveira to almost nine years in prison for inciting physical attacks against Supreme Court justices — particularly

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Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who presides over a separate investigation into the dissemination of fake news that had already led to a conviction of Silveira.

"May the people enter the Supreme Court, grab Alexandre de Moraes by his collar, shake his egghead and throw him in a garbage can," Silveira said in a broadcast on social media in February 2021.

The day after Silveira's conviction, Bolsonaro issued a decree pardoning him, citing the right to free speech. Three opposition parties have challenged the decree, claiming Brazil's constitution doesn't allow pardons based on personal motives, such as protecting an ally.

Brazilian presidents traditionally issue year-end pardons based on studies by legal experts at the Justice Ministry. Those have been criticized for freeing corrupt politicians along with other people convicted of nonviolent crimes. But it's almost unheard of to pardon a specific presidential ally in the way that U.S. leaders have sometimes done in cases such as those of Richard Nixon (by Gerald Ford), Marc Rich (by Bill Clinton) or Steve Bannon (by Donald Trump).

And Bolsonaro's move was especially provocative, according to Francisco Caputo, a constitutional law expert and member of the national council of Brazil's bar association. "The way this one was written, mentioning he was trying to correct the Supreme Court, is defiant. Bolsonaro's decree says he had better understanding of the case than the country's top court."

A commission of Brazil's bar association on Wednesday said that Bolsonaro's pardon is unconstitutional as it is not in the public interest. The commission also said it was biased and lacking in morality.

WHY MIGHT THIS ESCALATE?

The far-right president has long accused court justices — most of whom were confirmed during past leftist administrations — of trying improperly to frustrate his policies, and he has tried to stir up public opposition to them.

He rallied nationwide demonstrations in September in which protesters shouting "Let's invade!" pushed past police containment barriers at the Supreme Court, prompting justices to beef up their personal security.

Bolsonaro has been especially resentful of de Moraes, who will assume the presidency of the nation's top electoral court later this year — overseeing the upcoming presidential election. Last September, he threatened to ignore rulings by the justice, though he never did so.

Four of the justices, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to avoid further inflaming tensions, said they worry Bolsonaro could incite more violent demonstrations against the judiciary if they annul his pardon of Silveira.

An annulment may be a possibility in a Brazilian system whose courts appear to be more willing to intervene in pardon decisions than U.S. judges are.

HOW ARE SUPREME COURT JUSTICES RESPONDING?

So far, the Supreme Court's justices haven't publicly challenged the legality of Bolsonaro's pardon, though at least two have written that the pardon will be reviewed by the court, though no date for that has been set. One of them, Rosa Weber, ruled Monday that that Bolsonaro's administration must provide justification for the pardon within 10 days.

The other, de Moraes, wrote in a document sent to Silveira's defense team on Tuesday that the pardon, while wiping away his jail time, would not free him to run for another congressional term.

Further stoking tensions between the executive and the judiciary, Justice Luis Roberto Barroso said during an April 24 speech that the armed forces "are being directed to attack the (electoral) process and try to discredit it." He was referring to military leaders who had publicly echoed Bolsonaro's doubts about the reliability of Brazil's voting system.

HOW IS BOLSONARO'S ADMINISTRATION REACTING?

Brazil's Defense Ministry, which oversees the armed forces, issued a statement saying Barroso's comments were "irresponsible and constitute a grave offense."

The issue of the military's role hangs over the conflict in part because Bolsonaro has often praised the 1964 coup that put Brazil under military control until 1985. Bolsonaro's hard-core supporters frequently call on him to use a constitutional clause that lets presidents deploy the armed forces to enforce "law and

order" alongside police and other agencies.

Some have suggested troops should be used against the court in some way, though experts overwhelmingly say that would be unconstitutional.

With elections set for October, Bolsonaro has frequently attacked the reliability of the electronic voting machines and claimed the race will be rigged unless there are printed receipts for voters, though experts say there's no evidence for that. Brazil's electoral authority oversees the electronic system, and includes some Supreme Court justices among its members.

Two of Bolsonaro's Cabinet ministers as well as one close ally told the AP that the president has been privately discussing the possibility of invoking the constitutional clause to deploy the armed forces because of Supreme Court actions that have impeded or undermined his decisions, though it isn't clear what exactly the purpose would be. Two of them said they have relayed that information to Supreme Court justices. All spoke on condition of anonymity because they aren't authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Once dead, twice billed: GAO questions COVID funeral awards

By JENNIFER McDERMOTT Associated Press

The Federal Emergency Management Agency may have been double-billed for the funerals of hundreds of people who died of COVID-19, the Government Accountability Office said in a new report Wednesday.

The GAO identified 374 people who died and were listed on more than one application that received an award from the COVID-19 Funeral Assistance fund. That amounts to about \$4.8 million in assistance that could have been improper or potentially fraudulent payments, the report said.

FEMA spokesperson Jaclyn Rothenberg said Wednesday that this was not an example of large-scale fraud and the amount of funeral assistance identified as at-risk was relatively small, with FEMA's "multi-layered internal quality controls and fraud controls" resulting in improper payments of less than 1%.

"Unfortunately, fraud, particularly identity theft, is common. FEMA has controls in place to detect instances and can and will prosecute anyone who would apply for assistance fraudulently," Rothenberg said in a statement.

FEMA told the GAO that some duplicative applications were incorrectly awarded funeral assistance due to processing errors, not fraud, and benefits were not actually paid twice in some of the cases, the report said.

The cases have been sent to the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General to consider whether to launch any fraud investigations, said Chris Currie, who leads GAO's work on emergency management and disaster response and recovery, and Rebecca Shea, who oversees GAO audits to identify fraud, waste and abuse.

Shea said they could not confirm whether FEMA did or did not pay twice in all of the cases. She said she thinks fraudsters likely targeted the fund and some of it is data entry mistakes.

"Given everything we've seen in the pandemic programs over the past two years, if fraudsters did not try to gain from this system, that would be surprising to me," she said Wednesday.

As of late last year, FEMA had awarded about \$1.5 billion in assistance in response to about 235,000 applications for nearly 237,000 people who died due to COVID-19, the report said. While the duplicates are less than .2% of those applications, the GAO said the findings are significant due to the possibility of improper payments and potential fraud in this disaster and future disasters.

There were only about 6,000 applications for funeral assistance after other disasters in the decade before the pandemic. Use of the program "exploded" since Congress expanded it for COVID-19 by making the \$50 billion in the Disaster Relief Fund available for such assistance, prompting GAO to do a forensic audit, Currie said.

FEMA said Wednesday that it has now awarded more than \$2.1 billion to more than 355,000 recipients.

Most of the 374 deceased individuals identified on more than one application were listed by different applicants, the GAO said. The GAO provided three examples to FEMA. FEMA said there were processing errors and started trying to recoup the money in two of the cases in January, the report said.

About 50 deceased individuals were listed on multiple applications from the same applicant, the report

said. FEMA initially said there were duplicates in the system due to a change in geographic coding and only one of the applications was paid in each case, but when the GAO provided examples, FEMA confirmed the duplicative applications were paid, the report said.

In addition, the GAO said it identified another 400 applications that received more than the maximum benefit of \$9,000 for each person who died — some up to nearly \$20,000 — for another roughly \$4.7 million in assistance that could've been improper or potentially fraudulent payments.

There were thousands of awards given in instances where there was a missing or invalid death date according to the data that FEMA provided, the GAO said. Sometimes a deceased person was listed as the applicant or the date listed for the decedent was before the pandemic started, raising questions about how FEMA determined eligibility in those cases, Shea said.

"That shouldn't be happening," she said. "You know, dead can't apply for benefits."

The GAO is recommending FEMA put additional controls in place to prevent and detect improper payments and potential fraud, and address deficiencies in the data by updating records as data is verified and adding data fields where necessary.

Rothenberg said FEMA established additional controls prior to implementing COVID-19 Funeral Assistance to mitigate the risk of fraud and identity theft. She said FEMA requires verifiable documentation for funeral expenses, including funeral home contracts and receipts, and conducts multiple verification checks.

Federal judge halts preparations for end of US asylum limit

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A federal judge ordered a two-week halt Wednesday on the phasing out of pandemic-related restrictions on seeking asylum — and raised doubts about the Biden administration's plan to fully lift those restrictions on May 23.

For now, the decision is only a temporary setback for the administration. But the judge staked out a position that is highly sympathetic with Louisiana, Arizona and 19 other states that sued to preserve so-called Title 42 authority, which denies migrants a chance at asylum on grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19.

"(The states) have established a substantial threat of immediate and irreparable injury resulting from the early implementation of Title 42, including unrecoverable costs on healthcare, law enforcement, detention, education, and other services for migrants," wrote U.S. District Judge Robert Summerhays in Lafayette, Louisiana.

Summerhays, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump, said states were likely to succeed with their argument that the administration failed to adhere to federal procedures when it announced April 1 that it was ending Title 42 authority.

The judge has scheduled a critical hearing on May 13 in Lafayette to hear arguments on whether to block Title 42 from ending as planned 10 days later.

Texas filed a similar lawsuit filed Friday in federal court in Victoria, Texas.

The decision to end Title 42 authority was made by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It has come under growing criticism from elected officials in Biden's Democratic Party who contend the administration is unprepared for an anticipated increase in asylum-seekers.

The Justice Department declined to comment on the order but the administration has said it will comply, while contending it will hamper preparations for Title 42 to end on May 23.

About 14% of single adults from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were processed under immigration laws during a seven-day period ending last Thursday. That's up from only 5% in March, according to government figures.

Summerhays' order requires the Homeland Security Department to "return to policies and practices in place" before it announced plans to end Title 42 and to submit weekly reports that demonstrate it is acting "in good faith."

Migrants have been expelled more than 1.8 million times under the rule invoked in March 2020 by the

Trump administration. Migrants were stopped more than 221,000 times at the Mexico border in March, a 22-year-high that has raised concerns about the government's ability to handle even larger numbers when Title 42 is lifted.

Advocates for asylum-seekers say the restrictions endanger people fleeing persecution back home and violates rights to seek protection under U.S. law and international treaty. As the CDC acknowledged, the public health justification for the order has weakened as the threat of COVID-19 has waned.

At two often-contentious hearings Wednesday, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas sought to defend the administration's handling of an increase of migrants at the Southwest border and its plans to deal with the prospect of more with the potential end of Title 42.

Mayorkas sought to push back on Republican accusations that the Biden administration has encouraged irregular migration by allowing some people to seek asylum, blaming economic and political turmoil and violence throughout Latin America and the world.

"Some of the causes of irregular migration have only been heightened by years of distress preceding this administration," he said.

Mayorkas testified one day after Homeland Security released a plan with more details about how it was preparing for the end of Title 42 authority.

New York court rejects congressional maps drawn by Democrats

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York's highest court on Wednesday rejected new congressional maps that had widely been seen as favoring Democrats, largely agreeing with Republican voters who argued the district boundaries were unconstitutionally gerrymandered.

The decision may delay New York's primary elections by as much as two months and is likely a hammer-blow to Democrats' national redistricting hopes, which leaned heavily on their ability to gerrymander New York state to maximize the number of seats they could win in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The state's Court of Appeals said the Democratic-led Legislature lacked the authority to redraw congressional and state Senate maps after an independent redistricting commission charged with crafting new maps failed to reach a consensus.

The judges also said lawmakers gerrymandered the congressional maps to Democrats' favor, in violation of a 2014 constitutional amendment designed to rout out political gamesmanship in redistricting.

The Appeals Court handed authority to draw new district maps to an expert, known as a special court master, instead of the Legislature.

"Prompt judicial intervention is both necessary and appropriate to guarantee the People's right to a free and fair election," said the court's opinion, written by Chief Judge Janet DiFiore.

The ruling didn't specify a deadline for the adoption of new maps. But the judges said they were sending the matter to a lower state court, which "shall adopt constitutional maps with all due haste."

It will "likely be necessary," DiFiore wrote, to move the congressional and state Senate primary elections from June 28 to August, to give time for the maps to be redrawn and for candidates and elections officials to adapt their plans.

The state elections board said it didn't anticipate that the primary date would change for other races, including governor and assembly.

The decision comes as a major blow to Democrats in their struggle to prevent Republicans from retaking control of the U.S. House.

Because of new population data from the 2020 census, New York is set to lose one seat in Congress in 2021. The maps devised by the Legislature would have given Democrats a strong majority of registered voters in 22 of the state's 26 congressional districts. Right now, Republicans currently hold eight of the state's 27 seats.

Democrats hoped a redistricting map favorable to their party in New York might help offset expected losses in other states where Republicans control state government.

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"While we are disappointed with the Court's ruling, we remain confident in Democratic victories up and down the ballot this November," said Jay Jacobs, the chairman of the New York Democratic Party.

Former New York Republican Rep. John Faso called it a "landmark decision" and told reporters on a call Wednesday evening that the ruling is a signal to future legislatures to follow the letter of the state's voter-approved redistricting law.

"It'll force bipartisan cooperation and that's what the people voted for," he said.

Under a process passed by voters in 2014, New York's new district maps were supposed to have been drawn by an independent commission. But that body, made up of equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans, couldn't agree on one set of maps. The Democratic-controlled Legislature then stepped in and created its own maps, quickly signed into law by Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat.

The appeals court, made up of judges appointed entirely by Democratic governors, sided with the Republican plaintiffs who argued the Legislature sidestepped the process set forth in the 2014 reforms, including a provision in the state constitution barring the redrawing of districts for partisan gain.

"The legislature responded by creating and enacting maps in a nontransparent manner controlled exclusively by the dominant political party — doing exactly what they would have done had the 2014 constitutional reforms never been passed," DiFiore wrote.

Four out of seven judges on the Court of Appeals joined in the majority opinion, with a fifth agreeing that the Senate and congressional maps were unconstitutional on procedural grounds.

Attorneys for Democrats argued the Legislature was legally allowed to craft its own maps when the redistricting commission failed to reach a consensus. Democrats also said their maps reflected population shifts and united similar geographic and cultural communities, split apart by earlier rounds of gerrymandering.

But the judges took Democrats to task for crafting maps that reduced the number of competitive districts, and for asking the court to essentially "nullify" the 2014 reforms.

In the majority opinion, DiFiore said upholding the tainted process would only encourage partisans involved in the Independent Redistricting Commission process to avoid consensus in the future, too, "thereby permitting the legislature to step in and create new maps merely by engineering a stalemate at any stage of the IRC process."

Two lower-level courts had also ruled the maps were unconstitutional and gave the Legislature an April 30 deadline to draw new maps or else leave the task to a court-appointed expert. That deadline has now been set aside.

In the meantime, candidates have already begun campaigning in the new districts, despite being unsure whether those districts will still exist by the time voting begins.

Shares of Facebook parent Meta soar despite growth slowdown

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Facebook parent Meta's first quarter profit and its count of daily users jumped past Wall Street's expectations despite the company's slowest revenue growth since going public a decade ago. Shares were up sharply in after-hours trading.

Meta cut a sharp contrast with Google parent Alphabet, which on Monday reported what analysts called disappointing earnings, with profit below Wall Street's expectations. Google also reported a revenue growth slowdown, but for Meta this appeared to have been mitigated by an increase in daily active users that "was enough to send the shorts covering and the stock surging," said Jesse Cohen, senior analyst at Investing.com.

"That being said, it was a mixed report overall as the social media giant continues to struggle with slowing revenue growth amid reduced ad spending amid the current inflationary environment," Cohen said.

Apple's recent privacy changes to its iPhone software iOS have made it harder for companies like Meta to track people for advertising purposes, which also puts pressure on the company's revenue. For months now, Meta has been warning investors that its revenue can't continue to grow at the breakneck pace they are accustomed to, so it's likely that the quarter's single-digit revenue growth was already baked into

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investor expectations.

CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in a conference call with analysts that the revenue acceleration Meta saw during the pandemic has now tapered off and the company will now “slow the pace of some of our investments” so it can continue to grow profits. This mainly refers to Meta’s Reality Labs segment, which encompasses its futuristic “metaverse” project. The company, which changed its name to Meta Platforms last fall, invested more than \$10 billion in Reality Labs — which includes its virtual reality headsets and augmented reality technology — in 2021.

The company earned \$7.47 billion, or \$2.72 per share, in the January-March period. That’s down 21% from \$9.5 billion, or \$3.30 per share, in the same period a year earlier.

Revenue rose 7% to \$27.91 billion from \$26.17 billion — the slowest growth rate in a decade for the online advertising powerhouse that generally reports sales growth in the double digits.

Analysts, on average, were expecting earnings of \$2.56 per share on revenue of \$28.28 billion, according to a poll by FactSet.

“Meta’s ad business continues to face some very real challenges,” said Jasmine Enberg, an analyst at Insider Intelligence. Facebook, of course, is no stranger to obstacles, but the iOS changes are the first direct threat to its ad business.”

That’s in addition to competition from TikTok and changes in how people use social media that threatens Meta’s prospects.

In yet another sign that Meta is attempting to be more “TikTok-like,” Zuckerberg said during the call that users are starting to see “a lot of other interesting content” beyond posts from friends, family and accounts they follow on Facebook and Instagram as the platforms shift to AI-powered recommendations. In the past, users would only see posts from accounts they follow, but TikTok has shown that artificial intelligence can make for an effective recommendation engine that keeps people coming back for more.

Facebook had 1.96 billion daily active users on average for March 2022, an increase of 4% year-over-year. While this is a positive sign following last quarter’s dropoff, Insider Intelligence analyst Evelyn Mitchell pointed out that most of this growth came from outside the U.S. and Canada, which makes less money for the company.

Shares of the Menlo Park, California-based company rose \$32, or more than 18%, to \$207 in after-hours trading Wednesday. The stock has taken a hit this week amid news of Elon Musk’s Twitter buyout and ended regular trading down 3.3% at \$174.95.

Madeleine Albright honored by Biden, other world leaders

BY MATTHEW LEE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A veritable who’s who of Washington’s political and foreign policy elite gathered Wednesday to pay their last respects to the late Madeleine Albright, a child of conflict-ravaged Europe who arrived in the U.S. as an 11-year old girl and became America’s first female secretary of state.

The trailblazing diplomat and champion of her adopted country as the world’s “indispensable nation” was joyously remembered by President Joe Biden and former President Bill Clinton as a no-nonsense, valued adviser who did not suffer fools or tyrants and was most concerned about Russia’s war with Ukraine when she died last month of cancer at 84.

Biden said Albright’s name was synonymous with the idea that America is “a force for good in the world.” “In the 20th and 21st century, freedom had no greater champion than Madeleine Korbel Albright,” he said. “Today we honor a truly proud American who made all of us prouder to be Americans.”

He said he had learned of Albright’s death while flying to Brussels for an emergency NATO summit on Ukraine and was struck by the memory of her key role in pressing for the expansion of the alliance in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union to protect Europe from a repeat of the carnage of World War II and the Cold War ideological battle between communism and democracy.

And Clinton, the man who appointed her first as his U.N. ambassador in 1993 and then as secretary of state in 1996, said his last conversation with Albright just weeks before her passing were dominated by

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the situation in Ukraine and her fears about the future of democracy at home and abroad.

He recalled that Albright didn't want to talk about her declining health at a moment when the West is on edge following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Albright, Clinton recalled, assured him that she was getting the best care she could, but didn't want to "waste time" talking about that.

"The only thing that really matters is what kind of world we're going to leave to our grandchildren," Clinton recalled Albright told him. He added, "She made a decision with her last breath she would go out with her boots on."

Biden and Clinton, along with former President Barack Obama and several of Albright's successors as secretary of state, including Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, John Kerry and current office-holder Antony Blinken, were some 1,400 mourners who attended the funeral at Washington's National Cathedral.

The service was punctuated at points by tears, laughter and applause during reminiscences from Biden, Bill and Hillary Clinton and Albright's three daughters, Anne, Alice and Katharine, who remembered her as a doting "mom" and "Granny Maddy" to their own children even amid a hectic work schedule that often took her around the world.

That schedule didn't let up when she left government service in 2001 and returned to teaching at Georgetown University, started a successful international consulting company, served on the boards of numerous women's and human rights groups and became a best-selling author.

Hillary Clinton recalled stories that she had lobbied for Albright to serve as secretary of state, a role that Clinton would serve in herself during the Obama administration. "It's been said that I urged my husband to nominate her as our first female secretary of state," she said. "Unlike much that's said, this story was true."

The two developed a strong friendship over the years. and Hillary Clinton recalled a pair of stories about her and Albright on visits overseas during which they bonded.

Once on a walk in a drenching rainstorm in the Czech capital of Prague, Clinton said they laughed so hard they forgot they were wet. On another occasion in Beijing, Clinton recalled that she and Albright had marched through mud in a torrential downpour and confronted Chinese security forces to meet women's rights activists.

Clinton in her own tribute recalled some lighter memories of Albright, including the time she taught the foreign minister of Botswana the Macarena and danced the night away with a young, handsome man at her daughter Chelsea's wedding. She also remembered Albright as a fearless diplomat that broke barriers and then counseled, cajoled and inspired women to follow in her footsteps.

"The angels better be wearing their best pins and putting on their dancing shoes," Clinton said. "Because if as Madeleine believed there's a special place in hell for women who don't support other women, they haven't seen anyone like her yet."

On the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and one month before her death, The New York Times printed what would be Albright's last published writing. She wrote that Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion would be a "historic error" that would cement his legacy as one of "infamy." "Until the end, she was still in a hurry to do good," Clinton said.

Other top current officials who attended the service included Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, CIA Director Bill Burns, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Mark Milley and White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan. The members of the VIP audience were masked, as Albright's family had requested.

Foreign dignitaries invited to the funeral included the presidents of Georgia and Kosovo and senior officials from Colombia, Bosnia and the Czech Republic.

Albright was born in what was then Czechoslovakia, but her family fled twice, first from the Nazis and then from Soviet rule. They ended up in the United States, where she studied at Wellesley College and rose through the ranks of Democratic Party foreign policy circles to become ambassador to the United Nations. Bill Clinton selected her as secretary of state in 1996 for his second term.

Although never in line for the presidency because of her foreign birth, Albright was near universally admired for breaking a glass ceiling, even by her political detractors. Several senior Republican lawmakers, including Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, attended the service.

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As a Czech refugee who saw the horrors of both Nazi Germany and the Iron Curtain, she was not a dove. She played a leading role in pressing for the Clinton administration to get involved militarily in the conflict in Kosovo. "My mindset is Munich," she said frequently, referring to the German city where the Western allies abandoned her homeland to the Nazis.

As secretary of state, Albright played a key role in persuading Clinton to go to war against the Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic over his treatment of Kosovar Albanians in 1999. As U.N. ambassador, she advocated a tough U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the case of Milosevic's treatment of Bosnia. NATO's intervention in Kosovo was eventually dubbed "Madeleine's War."

She also took a hard line on Cuba, famously saying at the United Nations that the 1996 Cuban shootdown of a civilian plane was not "cojones" but rather "cowardice."

Bill Clinton recalled the moment in his tribute, remembering that Albright faced criticism at the time that the sharp barb was "undiplomatic" and "unladylike." He absolutely loved it.

"I called her and I said ... 'This is the best line developed and delivered by anybody in this administration,'" Clinton said.

In 2012, Obama awarded Albright the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, saying her life was an inspiration to all Americans.

Born Marie Jana Korbel in Prague on May 15, 1937, she was the daughter of a diplomat, Joseph Korbel. The family was Jewish and converted to Roman Catholicism when she was 5. Three of her Jewish grandparents died in concentration camps.

Albright was an internationalist whose point of view was shaped in part by her background. Her family fled Czechoslovakia in 1939 as the Nazis took over their country, and she spent the war years in London.

After the war, as the Soviet Union took over vast chunks of Eastern Europe, her father brought the family to the United States. They settled in Denver, where her father taught at the University of Denver. One of Korbel's best students was Condoleezza Rice, who would later succeed his daughter as secretary of state.

Albright graduated from Wellesley College in 1959. She worked as a journalist and later studied international relations at Columbia University, where she earned a master's degree in 1968 and a Ph.D. in 1976. She then entered politics and what was at the time the male-dominated world of foreign policy professionals.

Lawmakers scrutinize McKinsey's opioid, FDA consulting work

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats vowed to continue investigating consulting giant McKinsey's work with opioid drugmakers after a Wednesday hearing detailed how the firm had advised companies pushing painkillers as well as U.S. health regulators.

The hearing before a House committee is part of an ongoing probe into McKinsey's role in the U.S. opioid crisis that has been linked to over 500,000 overdose deaths from both prescription pain medications and illicit drugs like fentanyl.

McKinsey's top executive challenged some of the committee's findings but said the company has overhauled how it does business and no longer works with opioid manufacturers, including OxyContin-maker Purdue Pharma.

"I've apologized for our work for Purdue and other opioid manufacturers and we fully recognize it fell short of our standards," said Bob Sternfels in testimony before the House Oversight and Reform Committee. He said the company would continue cooperating with investigators.

Last year the consulting powerhouse agreed to pay \$600 million to settle lawsuits over its work advising opioid makers, though it admitted no wrongdoing.

Lawmakers questioned Sternfels for three hours about revelations that his company allowed consultants working for Purdue Pharma to simultaneously advise the Food and Drug Administration, the agency tasked with overseeing drug safety.

"McKinsey was advising both the fox and the hen-house — and getting paid by both," said Chairwoman Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y. "Clearly, McKinsey should not be setting strategy for both drug companies

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and the FDA.”

A preliminary report from the committee found 22 McKinsey consultants who worked for both the FDA and an opioid manufacturer over the span of a decade. The overlapping work included McKinsey staffers advising the FDA on overhauling its drug safety division, according to the committee’s review of thousands of company documents.

Meanwhile, McKinsey consultants recommended “cash prizes” and “unrivaled recognition” for top OxyContin sales reps to increase Purdue’s revenue, according to a 2013 strategy presentation released Wednesday.

Lawmakers heard conflicting accounts of whether McKinsey’s work helped Purdue avoid tighter FDA regulation.

Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey, testifying remotely, said that her state’s own investigation into McKinsey uncovered emails recommending Purdue “band together” with other drugmakers in 2009 to “defend against strict treatment by the FDA.”

Sternfeld said McKinsey did not share FDA documents or intelligence with Purdue and said claims of information sharing were inaccurate.

He also testified that McKinsey was open with FDA about its pharmaceutical consulting work.

“We made very clear that we were working both with the industry and with opioids in particular,” Sternfeld said. FDA officials have previously stated they were aware of McKinsey’s pharmaceutical consulting.

Maloney and other Democrats repeatedly suggested McKinsey’s work may have violated federal contracting rules on disclosing potential conflicts of interest.

On Wednesday, Maloney introduced legislation that would bolster requirements for contractors to disclose potential conflicts. A bipartisan group of Senators previously introduced similar legislation in their chamber.

The committee’s Republicans spent most of their allotted time undercutting the relevance of the hearing, noting the vast majority of opioid overdoses are now caused by fentanyl and heroin, not prescription drugs. They urged tighter border security, noting nearly all illicit opioids enter the U.S. through the southern border.

“We have a new opioid crisis, folks, and it’s not from big pharma in the United States— it’s from the drug cartels who operate sites in Mexico,” said Rep. Byron Donalds, R-Florida.

House Democrats spotlighted several examples of McKinsey touting its FDA connections when soliciting consulting business from drugmakers. The company also submitted advice on dealing with the opioid epidemic to members of the Trump administration, according to the report. It’s unclear if the information had any effect on federal policy.

For decades, McKinsey has been the preeminent corporate consulting firm, advising many of the world’s biggest companies on strategy and operations. The company has also made inroads into government consulting, receiving nearly \$1 billion in federal contracts.

The Oversight Committee scrutinized McKinsey’s work on three dozen FDA contracts worth more than \$65 million, stretching from 2008 to 2021.

At a separate Senate hearing Tuesday, the head of FDA’s drug center told lawmakers McKinsey’s work dealt with “organizational design and did not entail involvement in product regulation.” The agency currently has no contracts with McKinsey, she noted, and no new awards are expected while Congress investigates the firm.

The House report did not conclude that McKinsey’s FDA consulting resulted in lighter regulation of OxyContin or any other opioids.

For years the FDA has attempted to discourage doctors from overprescribing the drugs, mainly by adding starker warnings to their labeling. Prescriptions have fallen from their peak in 2012, but mainly due to new prescribing limits imposed by state and local governments, insurers and hospital systems.

Officers: No injuries on Amber Heard after fight with Depp

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (AP) — May 27, 2016, was the day that Johnny Depp and Amber Heard’s marriage went from private misery to public, career-killing spectacle.

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Heard, who had just filed for divorce, arrived at a Los Angeles courthouse that day to seek a temporary restraining order, showing up with a clear mark on her face, which she said Depp inflicted during a fight six days prior. Photographers captured the scene, and the allegations became tabloid fodder across the globe.

Depp says he never hit her, and now he's suing Heard for libel in Fairfax County Circuit Court. On Wednesday, jurors in the case heard from police officers who responded to the couple's penthouse immediately after the fight. None of the officers saw the red mark that was so prominent six days later.

Officer Tyler Hadden, one of the officers who responded to the couple's penthouse apartment on May 21, 2016, said Heard refused to talk to officers and had no signs of an injury, although he acknowledged she'd been crying and was red-faced.

"Just because I see a female with pink cheeks and pink eyes doesn't mean something happened," he said in a recorded deposition played for jurors Wednesday.

Depp had already left the penthouse by the time officers arrived. Officers said they had no idea who Heard was, or that she was married to Depp. He said neither Heard nor anyone at the penthouse complex was willing to tell him or the other officers who Heard's husband was.

Jurors heard similar testimony Tuesday from an officer who accompanied Hadden to the penthouse.

An officer who made a follow-up visit that night, William Gatlin, testified Wednesday that he saw no injuries either, though he acknowledged that his visit was brief and he got no closer than 10 feet (3 meters) from Heard. He said his check was a perfunctory one because it appeared that the call was just a duplicate to the one that Hadden had already responded to.

The jury saw bodycam video of Gatlin's response, which was less than two minutes. Heard could only be seen at a distance.

Heard's lawyers, in their questions, have suggested that Heard could have covered her injuries with makeup, because at that point she still wanted to protect Depp. They also asked officers why they didn't investigate a potential case of domestic violence more thoroughly.

The officers' testimony is some of Depp's best evidence that Heard contrived the allegations against her ex-husband. It complements earlier testimony from witnesses who say they saw Heard and her sister practicing fake punches in the days after the attack.

It's far from definitive, though. Heard's lawyers have yet to put on their case, and some of her friends say they were at the penthouse when Depp allegedly attacked her.

And even if jurors were to conclude that Depp never assaulted his wife on May 21, they have heard evidence of other alleged assaults before and during the couple's brief marriage.

Depp sued Heard for libel after she wrote an op-ed piece in The Washington Post in 2018 referring to herself as "a public figure representing domestic abuse." The article doesn't mention Depp by name, but his lawyers say the article defames him nevertheless because it's a clear reference to the highly publicized allegations Heard made when she filed for divorce in 2016 and obtained a temporary restraining order as well.

Jurors also heard recorded testimony Wednesday from Christian Carino, an agent who represented Depp and Heard and was friends with both. He said he believes the abuse allegations scuttled Depp's participation in a sixth "Pirates of the Caribbean" film, but he did not pin the loss of that film specifically on Heard's 2018 op-ed piece.

Heard's lawyers told jurors in opening statements that there must be proof that the Post article specifically damaged Depp's reputation for him to prevail in a libel case.

Carino also testified that Heard twice tried to reconcile with Depp, even after she filed for divorce — once in 2016 and again in 2017. At one point in 2016 he brokered a meeting between Heard and a reluctant Depp that ended in a fight.

He also testified briefly about Heard's subsequent relationship with tech entrepreneur Elon Musk. Heard texted Carino in 2017 professing sadness about her breakup with Musk. Carino seemed incredulous, and texted in response to Heard, "You told me a thousand times you were just filling space."

Disney government in dark about effect of law dissolving it

By MIKE SCHNEIDER and ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. (AP) — At the first meeting of Walt Disney World's private government since Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law a measure to dissolve it next year, officials said Wednesday they were still confused about what the new legislation meant, even as some ripple effects were starting to be felt.

The administrator of the government, called the Reedy Creek Improvement District, said the expansion of a solar power project could be delayed because of financing challenges linked to the legislation, and the union for the district's firefighters expressed concerns about what the dissolution might mean for members' lifetime benefits.

After the meeting, Donald Greer, who has been a member of Reedy Creek's board of supervisors since 1975, said the board could not provide clear answers on those issues because "we don't know where we are going."

"The district may have a response as soon as we know what it means, but I don't know if anybody knows what it means. I don't think anyone has deciphered it," Greer said.

The dissolution measure was passed quickly in the Republican-controlled statehouse without public study of its impact and was hastily signed into law by DeSantis. The move came in a GOP push to punish Disney over its opposition to another new law barring instruction on gender identity and sexual orientation in early grade school, which critics call "Don't Say Gay."

For the governor, the feud was the latest front in a culture war he has waged over policies involving race, gender and the coronavirus, battles DeSantis has harnessed to make himself one of the most popular Republicans in the country and a likely 2024 presidential candidate.

A day before DeSantis signed the bill into law, the Reedy Creek Improvement District sent a statement to investors that said it would continue its financial operations as usual. The district wrote that its agreement with the state forbids Florida from limiting or altering the district's ability to collect taxes or fulfill its bond obligations.

Critics of the dissolution bill have warned that taxpayers in neighboring counties could end up shouldering about \$1 billion in debts from the district. DeSantis has dismissed those concerns and said additional legislation would be drafted to clarify the future of such special districts in the state.

At the Reedy Creek meeting Wednesday, district administrator John Classe said a developer has experienced challenges financing a planned expansion of a solar power program, meaning it could be delayed.

Jon Shirey, the head of the union for Reedy Creek's firefighters, who make up around half of the private government's 400 employees, asked supervisors to give his members reassurances that their jobs and benefits would be preserved since they have been kept in the dark about what the effect is going to be. The firefighters, particularly retirees, are worried about losing their guaranteed lifetime health insurance, he said.

"We have been told to stay quiet, don't talk to the media, don't engage with current events," Shirey told supervisors. "We have been told the leadership of the district will tell the story. They will be the ones putting out the message. I ask you, 'What is that message?'"

The supervisors did not respond, and in fact spent little time devoted to the legislation which poses an existential threat to the 55-year-old Reedy Creek Improvement District. Classe told supervisors its workers would continue to function with the same "high standards and professionalism they always have done as we learn what this legally means."

Backers of the dissolution of Reedy Creek have argued it removes an unfair advantage the entertainment giant has over other theme parks, including allowing it to issue bonds and set its own zoning standards.

At an event Monday, the governor assured a cheering crowd that Disney's bond debts won't be dumped on taxpayers.

"Under no circumstances will Disney be able to not pay its debts, we will make sure of that," DeSantis said.

Credit rating agency Fitch Ratings has put Reedy Creek on a "negative watch" list, indicating that the

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private government's ratings could stay the same or potentially be downgraded. A downgrade would make borrowing more difficult for Reedy Creek.

Another ratings agency, S&P Global Ratings, said that among the questions left unanswered by the new law was whether Reedy Creek would reconstitute after it's dissolved next year, how utility operations and debt would be transferred to the neighboring governments if it came to that and how the neighboring governments would raise taxes to secure Reedy Creek's debt.

Under the law, Reedy Creek would expire by June 2023. The lack of public answers from Reedy Creek leaders about the new law may come from fear "the governor will find their statements unfriendly and that will complicate things," said Shirey, who added he is optimistic lawmakers will look after the interests of the district's first responders.

"We have 14 months, and a lot can change between now and then," Shirey said.

Microsoft: Russian hacks often accompany Ukraine attacks

By FRANK BAJAK Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Cyberattacks by state-backed Russian hackers have destroyed data across dozens of organizations in Ukraine and produced "a chaotic information environment," Microsoft says in a report released Wednesday.

Nearly half the destructive attacks were against critical infrastructure, many times simultaneous to physical attacks, the report notes.

A top Ukrainian cybersecurity official, Victor Zhora, told reporters in a news briefing on Wednesday that cyberattacks on telecommunications have sometimes coincided with artillery and other physical attacks.

Microsoft assessed that Russia-aligned threat groups were "pre-positioning for the conflict as early as March 2021," hacking into networks to obtain footholds they could later use to collect "strategic and battlefield intelligence or to facilitate future destructive attacks."

During the war, Russia's cyberattacks "have at times not only degraded the functions of the targeted organizations but sought to disrupt citizens' access to reliable information and critical life services, and to shake confidence in the country's leadership," the company's Digital Security Unit says in the 20-page report.

Kremlin cyber operations "have had an impact in terms of technical disruption of services and causing a chaotic information environment, but Microsoft is not able to evaluate their broader strategic impact," the report says.

Disruption from Russian cyber activity has been more modest than many anticipated ahead of the Feb. 24 invasion, and Microsoft said damaging attacks have "been accompanied by broad espionage and intelligence activities."

Early on, a cyberattack that also affected European broadband users knocked out satellite service to Ukrainian military, police and other institutions. But Ukrainian defenders, aided by outside cybersecurity firms, have also scored victories. Microsoft and Slovakia-based ESET helped them thwart an attempt earlier this month to cut power to millions of Ukrainians.

The report says groups with known or suspected ties with Russia's GRU military intelligence agency have used destructive "wiper" malware "at a pace of two to three incidents a week since the eve of the invasion."

It did not name specific targets but they are known to include telecommunications companies and local, regional and national agencies.

From the invasion onset until April 8, Microsoft said at least eight different malware strains were used in "nearly 40 discrete destructive attacks that permanently destroyed files in hundreds of systems across dozens of organizations in Ukraine."

In an accompanying blog, Microsoft executive Tom Burt noted that the company had also seen "limited espionage attack activity" targeting NATO member states.

EU nations accuse Russia of using natural gas as 'blackmail'

By VANESSA GERA and VESELIN TOSHKOV Associated Press

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WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Polish and Bulgarian leaders accused Moscow of using natural gas to blackmail their countries after Russia's state-controlled energy company stopped supplying them with gas Wednesday. European Union leaders echoed those comments and were holding an emergency meeting on the Russian move.

The gas cutoff to Poland and Bulgaria came after Russian President Vladimir Putin said that "unfriendly" countries would need to start paying for gas in rubles, Russia's currency, which Bulgaria and Poland refused to do.

Russian energy giant Gazprom said in a statement that it hadn't received any payments from Poland and Bulgaria since April 1 and was suspending their deliveries starting Wednesday. And if those countries siphon off Russian gas intended for other European customers, Gazprom said deliveries to Europe will be reduced by that amount.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the announcement by Gazprom "is yet another attempt by Russia to use gas as an instrument of blackmail."

Europe is not without some leverage in the dispute, since it pays Russia \$400 million a day for gas, money Putin would lose with a complete cutoff.

Russia, however, rejected the idea that it was using blackmail while warning it may halt gas supplies to other European customers if they also refuse to switch to paying in rubles.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, argued that the Russian demand to switch to paying for gas in rubles resulted from Western actions that froze Russian hard currency assets. He said those were effectively "stolen" by the West in an "unprecedented unfriendly action."

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told Poland's parliament that he thinks the suspension was revenge for new sanctions against Russia that Warsaw imposed over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Morawiecki called it an "attack on Poland" and an example of "gas imperialism" while vowing that Poland would not be cowed by the cutoff. He said the country was safe from an energy crisis thanks to years of efforts to secure gas from other countries.

"We will not succumb to Russia's gas blackmail," he told lawmakers, to applause. He also sought to assure citizens that the gas cutoff would not affect Polish households.

Some Poles and Bulgarians welcomed the cutoff for moving them closer to independence from Russian energy.

"I don't know what the results will be for regular citizens like myself," said Nina Rudnicka, a lecturer at Poznan University. "But I believe that one should not bow to Russia's blackmail. It was the right decision not to change to payment in rubles."

Dobrin Todorov, a resident of Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, said given a "choice between freedom and dignity or gas, the answer is clear, in favor of freedom and dignity."

"So we will go through this ordeal. It cannot be compared to the hardship and tribulations that the Ukrainian people are currently suffering," Todorov added.

The new Polish sanctions against Russia, announced Tuesday, targeted 50 Russian oligarchs and companies, including Gazprom. Hours later, Poland said it had received notice that Gazprom was cutting off its gas supplies for failing to pay in Russian rubles. Poland's gas company, PGNiG, said the gas supplies from the Yamal pipeline stopped early Wednesday.

Russian gas supplies to both Poland and Bulgaria already were expected to end later this year anyway.

Poland relies on coal for 70% of its energy needs, with gas only making up around 7% of its energy mix. Several years ago, the country opened its first terminal for liquefied natural gas, or LNG, in Swinoujscie, on the Baltic Sea coast. A pipeline from Norway is to due to start operating this year.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, whose government has been cutting many of the country's old ties with Russia, called Gazprom's suspension of gas deliveries "a gross violation of their contract" and "blackmail." He vowed to defend the country's interests and "support military-technical assistance to Ukraine."

"Unfortunately, in the recent past we were treated as Russia's fifth column. And there are many political and economic circles that protect Russia's interests," he said. "We and our party will protect only Bulgar-

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ian interests.”

In Bulgaria, the main consumers of gas are district heating companies. Bulgaria’s energy minister said his country can meet the needs of users for at least one month.

“Alternative supplies are available, and Bulgaria hopes that alternative routes and supplies will also be secured at the EU level,” Energy Minister Alexander Nikolov said.

Russia’s move raised wider concerns that other countries could be targeted next as Western countries increase their support for Ukraine amid a war now in its third month.

The Greek government held an emergency meeting Wednesday in Athens. Greece’s next scheduled payment to Gazprom is due on May 25, and the government must decide whether it will comply with the demand to pay in rubles.

Greece is ramping up its liquefied natural gas storage capacity, and has contingency plans to switch several industry sectors from gas to diesel as an emergency energy source. It has also reversed a program to reduce domestic coal production.

“It appears there is some posturing by Gazprom,” said Gianna Bern a University of Notre Dame finance professor. “There are probably fewer consequences to turning off natural gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria than larger countries in Europe. Russia is definitely sending a message.”

If European nations decide not to pay in rubles, Russia can sell its oil elsewhere, such as to India and China, because oil primarily moves by ship.

It has less options with natural gas, because the pipeline network that carries gas from Russia’s huge deposits in northwestern Siberia’s Yamal Peninsula does not connect with pipelines that run to China. And Russia only has limited facilities to export super-chilled liquefied gas by ship.

Fauci: US in ‘a different moment’ but pandemic not over

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Dr. Anthony Fauci said Wednesday the coronavirus is under better control in the United States. but the pandemic isn’t over — and the challenge is how to keep improving the situation.

“We are in a different moment of the pandemic,” said Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, in an interview with The Associated Press.

After a brutal winter surge, “we’ve now decelerated and transitioned into more of a controlled phase,” he said. “By no means does that mean the pandemic is over.”

His comments came a day after he said on the PBS “NewsHour” that the U.S. was “out of the pandemic phase” and also told The Washington Post that the country was finally “out of the full-blown explosive pandemic phase.”

Fauci’s remarks reflect how health authorities are wrestling with the next stage of the pandemic — how to keep COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations manageable and learn to live with what’s still a mutating and unpredictable virus.

Fauci said the U.S. appears to be out of what he called the “fulminant phase” of the pandemic, huge variant surges that at their worst sparked hundreds of thousands of infections daily, along with tens of thousands of hospitalizations and thousands of deaths.

COVID-19 cases are at a lower point than they’ve been in months and two-thirds of the U.S. population is vaccinated. Nearly half of those who need a booster dose have gotten the extra shot, and effective treatments are available.

“We are much, much better off than we were a year ago,” he said.

Still, there have been lulls before, and while cases are low, they are increasing in many parts of the country. Vaccination rates worldwide are far lower, especially in developing countries.

To keep improving, Fauci ticked off a to-do list: Get more people fully vaccinated; develop even better vaccines; figure out the best booster strategy to counter variants; and make sure people can access treatment as soon as they need it.

“We can’t take our foot off the pedal,” Fauci said. “There’s a lot of viral dynamics throughout the world

and we still may get another variant which could lead to another potential surge.”

Trump appeals New York contempt ruling, \$10K per day fine

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump has appealed a New York judge’s decision to hold the former president in contempt of court and fine him \$10,000 per day for failing to comply with a subpoena for evidence in the state attorney general’s civil investigation into his business dealings.

Trump’s lawyer, Alina Habba, filed a notice of appeal Wednesday with the appellate division of the state’s trial court — the second time in two months that Trump has sought to overturn Manhattan Judge Arthur Engoron’s ruling against him in a subpoena matter.

In court papers, Habba questioned the legal basis for Engoron’s contempt ruling Monday, arguing that Trump had responded properly to the subpoena and that Attorney General Letitia James’ office failed to show his conduct “was calculated to defeat, impair, impede, or prejudice” its investigation.

James’ office refused to engage in “good-faith discussions” before seeking to have Trump fined, Habba argued. In a statement after the ruling Monday, Habba said: “All documents responsive to the subpoena were produced to the attorney general months ago.”

In a statement Wednesday, James said Engoron’s order was clear on Trump being in contempt of court. “We’ve seen this playbook before, and it has never stopped our investigation of Mr. Trump and his organization,” James said. “This time is no different.”

In another subpoena fight, Trump is challenging Engoron’s Feb. 17 ruling requiring that he answer questions under oath. James has said that the probe uncovered evidence that Trump may have misstated the value of assets like skyscrapers and golf courses for more than a decade. Oral arguments in that appeal are scheduled for May 11.

Along with its subpoena for Trump’s testimony, James’ office issued a subpoena for numerous documents, including paperwork and communications pertaining to his financial statements, financing and debt for a Chicago hotel project and development plans for his Seven Springs Estate north of New York City, and even communications with Forbes magazine, where he sought to burnish his image as a wealthy businessman.

James, a Democrat, asked Engoron to hold Trump in contempt after he failed to produce any documents by a March 31 court deadline. In his ruling, Engoron said that Trump and his lawyers not only failed to meet the deadline, but also failed to document the steps they had taken to search for the documents.

Instead, “Trump produced 16 pages of boilerplate objections and a four-page affirmation by counsel that states, summarily, that Mr. Trump was unable to locate any responsive documents in his custody,” Engoron said in a written version of his ruling. “The affirmation fails to identify what search methods were employed, where they were employed, by whom they were employed, and where such searches took place.”

Habba, arguing at a hearing Monday, insisted that she went to great lengths to comply with the subpoena, even traveling to Trump’s home in Florida to ask him specifically whether he had in his possession any documents that would be responsive to the demand.

Habba noted that Trump does not send emails or text messages and has no work computer “at home or anywhere else.” She described the search for documents as “diligent,” but Engoron took issue with the lack of detail in her written response to the subpoena and questioned why it didn’t include an affidavit from Trump himself.

“You can’t just stand here and say I searched this and that,” Engoron said.

Trump, a Republican, is suing James in federal court in an effort to stop her investigation. He recently labeled her an “operative for the Democrat Party” and said her investigation and a parallel criminal probe overseen by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, another Democrat, are “a continuation of the greatest Witch Hunt of all time.”

Bragg said this month that the three-year-old criminal investigation he inherited in January from his predecessor, Cyrus Vance Jr., is continuing “without fear or favor” despite a recent shakeup in the probe’s leadership. Trump’s lawyers contend that James is using her civil investigation to gain access to informa-

tion that could then be used against him in the criminal probe.

So far, the district attorney's investigation has resulted only in tax fraud charges against Trump's company, the Trump Organization, and its longtime finance chief Allen Weisselberg relating to lucrative fringe benefits such as rent, car payments and school tuition. The company and Weisselberg have pleaded not guilty.

James' investigation is covering much of the same ground, focusing in part on what the attorney general said is a pattern of misleading banks and tax authorities about the value of his properties.

Assistant Attorney General Andrew Amer told Engoron that the probe was being hampered "because we don't have evidence from the person at the top of this organization." He said the failure to turn documents over in response to the subpoena was "effectively Mr. Trump thumbing his nose at this court's order."

Myanmar court sentences Suu Kyi to 5 years for corruption

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — A court in military-ruled Myanmar convicted former leader Aung San Suu Kyi of corruption and sentenced her to five years in prison Wednesday in the first of several corruption cases against her.

Suu Kyi, 76, who was ousted by an army takeover last year, has denied the allegation that she accepted gold and hundreds of thousands of dollars in a bribe from a top political colleague.

Her supporters and independent legal experts consider Suu Kyi's prosecution an unjust attempt to discredit her and legitimize the military's seizure of power while preventing her from returning to an active role in politics.

The daughter of Aung San, Myanmar's founding father, Suu Kyi became a public figure in 1988 during a failed uprising against a previous military government when she helped found the National League for Democracy party. She spent 15 of the next 21 years under house arrest for leading a nonviolent struggle for democracy that earned her the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize. When the army allowed an election in 2015, her party won a landslide victory and she became the de facto head of state. Her party won a greater majority in the 2020 polls.

Suu Kyi is widely revered at home for her role in the country's pro-democracy movement — and was long viewed abroad as an icon of that struggle, epitomized by her years under house arrest.

But she also has been heavily criticized for showing deference to the military while ignoring and, at times, even defending rights violations — most notably a 2017 crackdown on Rohingya Muslims that rights groups have labeled genocide. While she has disputed allegations that army personnel killed Rohingya civilians, torched houses and raped women and she remains immensely popular at home, that stance has tarnished her reputation abroad.

She has already been sentenced to six years' imprisonment in other cases and faces 10 more corruption charges. The maximum punishment under the Anti-Corruption Act is 15 years in prison and a fine for each charge. Convictions in the other cases could bring sentences of more than 100 years in prison in total.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reiterated his appeal Tuesday for Myanmar's military to release all political prisoners including Suu Kyi and his condemnation of the military takeover of the country on Feb. 1, 2021, U.N. deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said.

The U.N. chief also repeated his call for an immediate end to violence and repression in Myanmar and for respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "which enshrines the principles of equality before the law, the presumption of innocence, the right to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, and all the guarantees necessary for a person's defense," Haq said.

"These are trumped-up charges, politically motivated, to keep her inside prison for such a long time and also are designed to keep her away from the political limelight," said Wai Hnin Pwint Thon, a Geneva-based activist with the pro-democracy group Burma Campaign UK. "And I'm sure the military is also thinking, by sentencing her, they are grabbing the hope away from people but, in reality, it's doing completely the opposite because people haven't lost hope. They are still standing up against the military."

Suu Kyi's trial in the capital, Naypyitaw, was closed to the media, diplomats and spectators, and her lawyers were barred from speaking to the media. The evening newscast on state television confirmed

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the sentence.

Following the victory of Suu Kyi's party in the 2020 general election, lawmakers were not allowed to take their seats when the army seized power on Feb. 1, 2021, arresting Suu Kyi and many senior colleagues in her party and government. The army said it acted because there had been massive electoral fraud, but independent election observers didn't find any major irregularities.

The takeover was met with large nonviolent protests nationwide which security forces quashed with lethal force, killing almost 1,800 civilians, according to a watchdog group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

As repression escalated, armed resistance against the military government grew, and some U.N. experts now characterize the country as being in a state of civil war.

Suu Kyi has not been seen or allowed to speak in public since she was detained and is being held in an undisclosed location. However, at last week's final hearing in the case, she appeared to be in good health and asked her supporters to "stay united," said a legal official familiar with the proceedings who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to release information.

In earlier cases, Suu Kyi was sentenced to six years' imprisonment on charges of illegally importing and possessing walkie-talkies, violating coronavirus restrictions and sedition.

In the case decided Wednesday, she was accused of receiving \$600,000 and seven gold bars in 2017-18 from Phyoo Min Thein, the former chief minister of Yangon, the country's biggest city, and a senior member of her political party. Her lawyers, before they were served with gag orders late last year, said she rejected all his testimony against her as "absurd."

The nine other cases currently being tried under the Anti-Corruption Act include several related to the purchase and rental of a helicopter by one of her former Cabinet ministers.

Suu Kyi is also charged with diverting money meant as charitable donations to build a residence, and with misusing her position to obtain rental properties at lower-than-market prices for a foundation named after her mother. The state Anti-Corruption Commission has declared that several of her alleged actions deprived the state of revenue it would otherwise have earned.

Another corruption charge alleging that she accepted a bribe has not yet gone to trial.

Suu Kyi is also being tried on a charge of violating the Official Secrets Act, which carries a maximum sentence of 14 years, and on a charge alleging election fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of three years.

"The days of Aung San Suu Kyi as a free woman are effectively over. Myanmar's junta and the country's kangaroo courts are walking in lockstep to put Aung San Suu Kyi away for what could ultimately be the equivalent of a life sentence, given her advanced age," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch. "Destroying popular democracy in Myanmar also means getting rid of Aung San Suu Kyi, and the junta is leaving nothing to chance."

One-fifth of reptiles worldwide face risk of extinction

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Even the king cobra is "vulnerable." More than 1 in 5 species of reptiles worldwide are threatened with extinction, according to a comprehensive new assessment of thousands of species published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

Of 10,196 reptile species analyzed, 21% percent were classified as endangered, critically endangered or vulnerable to extinction — including the iconic hooded snakes of South and Southeast Asia.

"This work is a very significant achievement — it adds to our knowledge of where threatened species are, and where we must work to protect them," said Duke University ecologist Stuart Pimm, who was not involved in the study.

Similar prior assessments had been conducted for mammals, birds and amphibians, informing government decisions about how to draw boundaries of national parks and allocate environmental funds.

Work on the reptile study — which involved nearly 1,000 scientists and 52 co-authors — started in 2005. The project was slowed by challenges in fundraising, said co-author Bruce Young, a zoologist at the non-

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profit science organization NatureServe.

"There's a lot more focus on furrer, feathery species of vertebrates for conservation," Young said, lamenting the perceived charisma gap. But reptiles are also fascinating and essential to ecosystems, he said.

The Galapagos marine iguana, the world's only lizard adapted to marine life, is classified as "vulnerable" to extinction, said co-author Blair Hedges, a biologist at Temple University. It took 5 million years for the lizard to adapt to foraging in the sea, he said, lamenting "how much evolutionary history can be lost if this single species" goes extinct.

Six of the world's species of sea turtles are threatened. The seventh is likely also in trouble, but scientists lack data to make a classification.

Worldwide, the greatest threat to reptile life is habitat destruction. Hunting, invasive species and climate change also pose threats, said co-author Neil Cox, a manager at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's biodiversity assessment unit.

Reptiles that live in forest areas, such as the king cobra, are more likely to be threatened with extinction than desert-dwellers, in part because forests face greater human disruptions, the study found.

Older people fret less about aging in place: AP-NORC Poll

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The older you are, the less you fret about aging in your own home or community. That's a key insight from a new Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, which found that U.S. adults ages 65 or older feel much better prepared to "age in place" than those 50-64, who are mostly still in the final stretches of their working years.

The poll also documented greater insecurity around aging in place for older Black and Latino Americans, the likely result of a deep-rooted wealth gap that markedly favors white people.

Aging in one's own home, or with family or a close friend, is a widely held aspiration, with 88% of adults 50 and older saying it's their goal in an earlier AP-NORC poll.

The outlook among those 65 or older is upbeat, with nearly 8 in 10 saying they're extremely or very prepared to stay in their current home as long as possible.

But doubts creep in for those ages 50-64. Among that group, the majority who rate themselves as extremely or very prepared shrinks to about 6 in 10, according to the poll.

This relatively younger group is especially likely to say their financial situation is the main reason they don't feel very prepared to age in place. And they're also more likely to feel anxious about being able to stay in their communities, get care from medical providers and receive backup from family members or close friends, the poll found.

Part of it may be due to fear of the unknown among people who've relied on a paycheck all their lives.

"When you've never done it before, and you are only going to do it once, you're sort of flying by the seat of your pants," said Leigh Gerstenberger, in his late 60s and retired from a career in financial services. "I spent a lot of time talking to people ahead of me in the journey," says the Pittsburgh-area resident.

Also, people approaching their 60s may question if Social Security and Medicare will truly be there for them. Stacy Wiggins, an addiction medicine nurse who lives near Detroit, figures she'll probably work at least another 10 years into her late 60s — and maybe part-time after that. Older friends are already collecting Social Security.

"In my group, you wonder if it's going to be available," Wiggins said of government programs that support older people. "Maybe it's not. You will find people who are less apt to have a traditional pension. Those are things that leave you with a lot of trepidation toward the future."

Some people now in their 50s and early 60s may still be dealing with the overhang of the 2007-09 recession, when unemployment peaked at 10% and foreclosures soared, said Sarah Szanton, dean of the Johns Hopkins University nursing school. For an aging society, the U.S. does relatively little to prepare older adults to navigate the transition to retirement, she observed.

"As Americans, we've always idolized youth and we're notoriously underprepared for thinking about ag-

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ing,” Szanton said. “It often comes as a surprise to people.” Her involvement with aging-in-place issues started early in her career, when she made house calls to older people.

In the poll, people 50 and older reported that their communities do an uneven job of meeting basic needs. While access to health care, healthy food and high-speed internet were generally rated highly, only 36% said their community does a good job providing affordable housing. Just 44% were satisfied with access to transportation and to services that support older people in their homes.

Kym Harrelson-Pattishall is hoping that as more people retire to her coastal North Carolina community, health care facilities and other services will follow. As it stands now, a major medical issue can involve a car trip of up to an hour to the hospital.

A real estate agent in her early 50s, Pattishall shares the goal of aging at home, but her confidence level is not very high. “I think it would just eat away what savings I have,” she said.

It’s all about adjusting, says another small-town resident, about 20 years older than Pattishall. Shirley Hayden lives in Texas, near the Louisiana border and on the track of hurricanes from the Gulf of Mexico. She says she has no investments and only modest savings, but she rates herself as very prepared to continue aging in place.

“You have to learn to live within your means,” Hayden said. “I don’t charge things I can’t afford to pay for.

“My biggest thing I have to work around as far as expenses is insurance,” she added. “I don’t really need any new clothes. In Texas, you live in jeans and T-shirts and they don’t go out of style. Yeah, your shoes wear out, but how often do you buy a pair of shoes?”

Not so easy to work around is the well-documented racial wealth gap that constrains older Black people in particular. A Federal Reserve report notes that on average Black and Latino households own 15% to 20% as much net wealth as white households.

In the poll, 67% of Black Americans and 59% of Latino Americans ages 50 and older said they felt extremely or very prepared to stay in their homes as long as possible, compared with the 73% share of white Americans saying they feel confident.

Wiggins, the Detroit area nurse, is Black and says it’s a pattern she’s familiar with. “Part of it is generational wealth,” she said. “I have friends who are white, whose dad died and left them settled. I have friends who are Black whose parents died, and they left enough to bury them, but nothing substantial.”

Column: Draft cements the marriage of Las Vegas and NFL

By TIM DAHLBERG AP Sports Columnist

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The NFL brings the traveling circus that is its draft to a city where nothing — including 300-pound football players posing with showgirls and circus clowns above the Bellagio hotel fountains — is too outlandish.

As the draft begins Thursday, the marriage between the league and the gambling town it demonized for so long is nearly complete, with only a Super Bowl in 2024 remaining to formally complete the partnership.

The masses who will gather to see where their team might be heading in the next year will find the usual draft-day theatrics amid the bright lights of the casinos. Commissioner Roger Goodell will be on hand to announce and greet the first-rounders — dressed in their best suits and new team hats — and everyone watching will party like their team has just made the playoffs.

Interestingly enough, in a city built on betting, there will be little of it on the draft itself — and little at all on draft day. And, no, it’s not because the NFL objected to the idea of fans screaming in glee because they got good odds on the No. 5 pick.

Blame it on the caution of Nevada gambling authorities, who have never liked the idea of allowing betting on anything other than actual sporting contests at the sportsbooks that line the Strip. While other states new to sports betting offer more to bet on, Nevada has allowed bets on the draft only since 2017 — and all bets that include the name of a player must be made at least 24 hours before the draft.

Also, good luck finding a bookie willing to take more than a couple of hundred bucks on an event where inside information could potentially give a bettor a big edge.

“It might be my least favorite event to book,” said Jay Kornegay, a longtime oddsmaker who runs the

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Westgate SuperBook. "We've only done it a few years, but we haven't fared well on it at all."

That's largely, Kornegay said, because the so-called sharps in the past have gotten tips on picks before bookies themselves found out — the one thing every sportsbook operator fears most.

The guess is that, even in Las Vegas, betting on the draft isn't the top priority for most of the tens of thousands of fans who will gather over three days for the annual spectacle. They're there mostly to see who their team lands that might change its fortunes, and to be part of a scene that is becoming increasingly familiar since the NFL decided to take the draft on the road in 2015.

More than 600,000 showed up in Nashville in 2019 for the biggest draft party ever. Last year, Cleveland hosted a smaller but still respectable crowd of 140,000 over three days.

What happens in Vegas, though, will be tough for any future site to match. A city long used to hosting big events won't have any trouble making this a glittering spectacle.

The future stars of the NFL will be introduced on a stage adjacent to the Caesars High Roller observation wheel, where each night free concerts will feature acts like Weezer, Ice Cube and Marshmello. The red carpet walk will take place on a stage built over the spectacular fountains of the Bellagio resort, where performers from Cirque du Soleil and Blue Man Group will also do their thing.

There will even be a pop-up sportsbook on site, though fans will have to be content with betting on baseball and the NBA playoffs because they won't be able to bet on the number of quarterbacks taken in the first round.

Indeed, the draft highlights how the NFL and Las Vegas are intertwined so tightly that it's easy to forget the Supreme Court ruling that opened the path to legalized sports betting across the nation came just four years ago.

At that point, the NFL wouldn't even allow players inside casinos for events. Now fans not only can bet on their team but go inside a casino and play a slot machine emblazoned with their team's helmet.

The hypocrisy of the NFL for so many years about sports betting remains head shaking, though there was nothing surprising about how the league embraced it once the floodgates opened.

Caesars, the de facto sponsor of the draft, is a prime NFL sponsor and one of three gambling companies that jumped on board when the league added sports betting as a sponsor category. There are sportsbooks being built at NFL stadiums and there isn't an NFL game that goes by without reminders to viewers about the point spread or odds on either team winning.

It's easy money for the NFL. But it's also payback for a city that helped build the league to what it is today by offering easily understandable point spreads for years that were used by fans and their favorite illegal bookies across the nation.

Now Las Vegas and the NFL are joined together for good in the common pursuit of the fan dollar.

The only real surprise is how normal it all seems.

Ideas on mute? Study: Remote meetings dampen brainstorming

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Video meetings dampen brainstorming because we are so hyper-focused on the face in that box that we don't let our eyes and minds wander as much, a new study found.

Staring isn't good for creativity. While it's rude to stare at someone in real life, it's expected when on a video call, researchers said.

When it comes to evaluating those new ideas, though, that focus, at least in one-on-one chats, seems to make remote meetings slightly better than in-person chats, Wednesday's study in the journal *Nature* said.

Researchers watched 745 pairs of engineers in five different countries try to come up with creative ideas for using a Frisbee or bubble wrap. Those in the same room generated on average one more idea, which is about 17% more than those in remote meetings. And those in-person ideas were judged by outside experts to be more creative, the study found.

Study author Melanie Brucks, an applied psychology professor at Columbia University's business school, said it was the outcome she expected — but not the reason she expected.

At first she figured it had to be the social and physical distance — maybe the two people just didn't connect as well or people didn't know who speaks when. But several different tests for social connectedness found that the remote meeting pairs were connecting with each other in the same way as people in the same room.

Then the eyes gave it away. When Brucks tracked eye movement she found that people in the same room gazed away more often, looked around. But the remote meeting pairs didn't.

"They were too focused on specifically the task at hand and that made them narrower in their thinking," Brucks said — in an interview over Zoom.

This makes sense because faces draw our focus, said Georgetown University psychology professor Adam Green, who wasn't part of the research.

"Faces really matter to our brains and we devote a lot of attention to looking at faces," said Green, president of the Society for the Neuroscience of Creativity. "When we are with someone in person, it is not considered polite to stare directly at their face for an extended period of time."

Remote meetings work otherwise, Brucks said.

"It's not that Zoom's bad, everything's worse. It seems like (the problem) is unique to the more generative, creative process," Brucks said.

When it was time to evaluate those options, the remote meeting engineers picked out the better choice -- as judged by a team of outside experts -- slightly more than those in person, the study found.

The experiment started before the pandemic and was done using WebEx with one company in offices in Portugal, Israel, Finland, Hungary and India. The results were about the same across the different locations.

"When I brainstorm now on Zoom, I turn off my camera," Brucks said. She notes that's no different than talking on the telephone, except she establishes a personal connection by starting with the camera on.

Katrina Lenk takes two bows on stage and screen

By BROOKE LEFFERTS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — From joking on the "Ozark" set with Jason Bateman, to getting show notes from Stephen Sondheim, Katrina Lenk's career has hit a sweet spot.

The actor is in the enviable position of starring in the popular Netflix show and the hit Broadway musical "Company" simultaneously. Lenk plays Clare Shaw, the head of a family-owned pharmaceutical company with some shady dealings on "Ozark," which begins airing the last seven episodes of the series April 29.

Lenk said shooting the final season of "Ozark" took an entire year due to pandemic delays, but she was grateful to have a job when Broadway shut down. Once theater started up again, the Tony-winning actor returned to star in "Company" as Bobbie, a single woman surrounded by married friends and contemplating commitment on her 35th birthday. Before he died in 2021, Sondheim was on hand to help update the revival — changing the main character from male to female.

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Lenk discusses the "Ozark" set mood, gratitude for Broadway's return and why she loves rehearsal. Responses have been edited for brevity and clarity.

AP: What was it like joining the cast of "Ozark" for the last season?

LENK: I had been obsessed with the show before and was a big fan so then to get to step onto the casino set, or drive past Marty and Wendy's house was super surreal. But it was a fantastic vibe on set and very professional. Everyone knows what they're doing and it's very friendly and open and relaxed, and celebratory as well, because everyone knew this was the last season, so nothing was being taken for granted. It was really wonderful.

AP: How was working with "Ozark" stars Jason Bateman and Laura Linney?

LENK: They're wonderful and warm and generous, and you feel like instantly one of the family. Jason's cracking jokes and just keeping the feeling sort of light on set. And he's kind of how you would imagine he would be, just great.

AP: Describe the first preview show for "Company" after theater reopened post-lockdown?

LENK: There's still that huge sense of gratitude, and definitely not taking it for granted that we get to do

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this thing that we love doing. Our first preview particularly was one of those moments that I don't think any of us will forget. The audience came in with such energy and seemed like they were super appreciative and excited to be there and share this moment with other people. And we were so happy to be there to get to share it with a live audience. And it was just this huge celebration of live theater and that sense of connection with other human beings, and that continues to happen.

AP: Stephen Sondheim came to the show opening less than two weeks before he died — how was that?

LENK: We got to hang out with him a little bit afterwards, and he was just smiling and so happy and pleased, and I think thrilled with the show and also just the response to his show. What a thing to be a part of, for us to share this with him and for him to hear all of the appreciation for his work in the audience.... And he said to us afterwards something like, "This is a kind of a once-in-a-lifetime night. This is an experience to cherish. When things are getting rough — and they're not always going to be like this — when things are hard and you feel like, 'Why am I doing this?' or just kind of feel downtrodden, remember this. Cherish this." Wise words.

AP: Did he ever give you notes on your performance?

LENK: During the process, he did come to rehearsals a couple of times and when he would give notes, he was very specific. Even a small little thing, then you would do the note and then, of course, he was right, and that just opened up all kinds of other things from just a tiny, detailed note. He was always so interested in improving whatever was there and his own work... He was involved in the slight changes that we did in the script and the modifications. He was part of the whole production... he was a collaborator in this revival, which is a really wonderful thing.

AP: What's the biggest difference between working in theater and TV?

LENK: Something I still haven't quite figured out how to master is the waiting that is required. When you are on set, you get there for your call and sometimes you might be there for five, six hours before you get to do the work. On stage, you get there at this time and you're going to be in rehearsal, so managing energy during the waiting and also managing the energy during takes — like knowing when to be fully there and when to ease up so that you can be there later.

AP: When do you feel most yourself?

LENK: In rehearsal, I think. I love rehearsal. I love exploring things and trying things out and getting inspired by other people who are in the scenes with you, or even just watching someone else's work and that sort of exploratory investigative stuff. I just I get a real kick out of it.

Police union backs officer in Patrick Lyoya killing

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — The union representing police officers in a Michigan city is defending the officer who shot Patrick Lyoya in the back of the head.

The Grand Rapids Police Officers Association called Lyoya's death "tragic" but said an "officer has the legal right to protect themselves and community in a volatile dangerous situation such as this, in order to return to his/her family at the end of their shift."

Meanwhile, a City Commission meeting abruptly ended Tuesday night as residents used profanities and expressed anger over Lyoya's killing. Police Chief Eric Winstrom watched from the rear of the room.

"Whose city? Our city! Whose streets? Our streets!" people chanted.

Lyoya, 26, was killed by Officer Christopher Schurr at the end of a brief foot chase and physical struggle that followed a traffic stop in Grand Rapids on April 4.

Lyoya was on the ground when Schurr ordered him to take his hands off the officer's Taser, according to video of the incident.

Schurr told Lyoya that he had stopped the vehicle because the license plate didn't match the car.

The union said on Facebook that it "stands with Officer Schurr and will continue to give him and his family whatever support they need."

Lyoya's family wants Schurr fired and charged with crimes. State police are investigating the shooting. Kent County prosecutor Chris Becker said he will not give up the case, despite calls by civil rights activists

to recuse himself.

Earlier Tuesday, Winstrom told a community forum that he wants to put more emphasis on officers knowing how to turn down the heat during tense situations. Some experts believe Schurr should have stopped trying to subdue Lyoya when he resisted.

"I guarantee that we can do more," said Winstrom, who has been chief for less than two months. "Actually, that's one of the things I've already reached out to my colleagues to say, 'Hey, I need some curriculum, because we are going to beef it up.'"

Helen Mirren graces cover of People's 'Beautiful Issue'

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Helen Mirren graces People magazine's "The Beautiful Issue" in a cover story that touches on her thoughts of beauty and how the Oscar winner still gets nervous before filming a role.

The magazine on Wednesday revealed the cover of the annual issue, which hits newsstands Friday.

The 76-year-old Mirren said she was "gobstruck" after learning about her honor and never considered herself beautiful — especially at her age. From her perspective, the word beauty should be dubbed another word: swagger.

"I love the word swagger because I think swagger means I'm confident in myself, I'm presenting myself to the world, I'm enjoying the world around me," said Mirren, who won an Academy Award for best actress for her role in the 2006 film "The Queen." The actor, who has been a L'Oreal Paris spokesperson since 2014, has built an impressive acting career with more than 140 credits in 55 years.

"I think what is called the beauty industry should be called the swagger industry," she continued. "We're giving people swagger."

Despite her revered career, she still finds herself nervous before starting a new project.

"I get very nervous about the day-to-day process," said Mirren, who starred in films including "The Long Good Friday," "Elizabeth I" and "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, & Her Lover." "And meeting and dealing with new people. And not knowing whether I am going to remember my lines or not. I just get very frightened until I get into the swing of things and then I kind of relax."

After a film wraps, Mirren said her nerves are calmed and she doesn't read any reviews — good or bad.

While Mirren is hesitant to call herself beautiful, Vin Diesel believes the word perfectly suits her.

"She has a charisma that is timeless. She has looks to kill and always has. She has a jovial spirit," said Diesel, who starred in the 2021 film "F9" with Mirren. "But I think the thing that is most attractive about Dame Helen Mirren is the way she makes you feel. She always makes you feel appreciated and loved. And for that, I love her forever."

Musk's Twitter ambitions to collide with Europe's tech rules

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — A hands-off approach to moderating content at Elon Musk's Twitter could clash with ambitious new laws in Europe meant to protect users from disinformation, hate speech and other harmful material.

Musk, who describes himself as a "free speech absolutist," pledged to buy Twitter for \$44 billion this week, with European Union officials and digital campaigners quick to say that any focus on free speech to the detriment of online safety would not fly after the 27-nation bloc solidified its status as a global leader in the effort to rein in the power of tech giants.

"If his approach will be 'just stop moderating it,' he will likely find himself in a lot of legal trouble in the EU," said Jan Penfrat, senior policy adviser at digital rights group EDRI.

Musk will soon be confronted with Europe's Digital Services Act, which will require big tech companies like Twitter, Google and Facebook parent Meta to police their platforms more strictly or face billions in fines.

Officials agreed just days ago on the landmark legislation, expected to take effect by 2024. It's unclear

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how soon it could spark a similar crackdown elsewhere, with U.S. lawmakers divided on efforts to address competition, online privacy, disinformation and more.

That means the job of reining in a Musk-led Twitter could fall to Europe — something officials signaled they're ready for.

"Be it cars or social media, any company operating in Europe needs to comply with our rules — regardless of their shareholding," Thierry Breton, the EU's internal market commissioner, tweeted Tuesday. "Mr Musk knows this well. He is familiar with European rules on automotive, and will quickly adapt to the Digital Services Act."

Musk's plans for Twitter haven't been fleshed out beyond a few ideas for new features, opening its algorithm to public inspection and defeating "bots" posing as real users.

France's digital minister, Cedric O, said Musk has "interesting things" that he wants to push for Twitter, "but let's remember that #DigitalServicesAct — and therefore the obligation to fight misinformation, online hate, etc. — will apply regardless of the ideology of its owner."

EU Green Party lawmaker Alexandra Geese, who was involved in negotiating the law, said, "Elon Musk's idea of free speech without content moderation would exclude large parts of the population from public discourse," such as women and people of color.

Twitter declined to comment. Musk tweeted that "the extreme antibody reaction from those who fear free speech says it all." He added that by free speech, he means "that which matches the law" and that he's against censorship going "far beyond the law."

The United Kingdom also has an online safety law in the works that threatens senior managers at tech companies with prison if they don't comply. Users would get more power to block anonymous trolls, and tech companies would be forced to proactively take down illegal content.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's office stressed the need for Twitter to remain "responsible" and protect users.

"Regardless of ownership, all social media platforms must be responsible," Johnson's spokesman Max Blain said Tuesday.

Damian Collins, a British lawmaker who led a parliamentary committee working on the bill, said that if Musk really wants to make Twitter a free speech haven, "he will need to clean up the digital town square."

Collins said Twitter has become a place where users are drowned out by coordinated armies of "bot" accounts spreading disinformation and division and that users refrain from expressing themselves "because of the hate and abuse they will receive."

The laws in the U.K. and EU target such abuse. Under the EU's Digital Services Act, tech companies must put in place systems so illegal content can be easily flagged for swift removal.

Experts said Twitter will have to go beyond taking down clearly defined illegal content like hate speech, terrorism and child sexual abuse and grapple with material that falls into a gray zone.

The law includes requirements for big tech platforms to carry out annual risk assessments to determine how much their products and design choices contribute to the spread of divisive material that can affect issues like health or public debate.

"This is all about assessing to what extent your users are seeing, for example, Russian propaganda in the context of the Ukraine war," online harassment or COVID-19 misinformation, said Mathias Vermeulen, public policy director at data rights agency AWO.

Violations would incur fines of up to 6% of a company's global annual revenue. Repeat offenders can be banned from the EU.

The Digital Services Act also requires tech companies to be more transparent by giving regulators and researchers access to data on how their systems recommend content to users.

Musk has similar thoughts, saying his plans include "making the algorithms open source to increase trust."

Penfrat said it's a great idea that could pave the way to a new ecosystem of ranking and recommendation options.

But he panned another Musk idea — "authenticating all humans" — saying that taking away anonym-

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ity or pseudonyms from people, including society's most marginalized, was the dream of every autocrat.

Today in History: April 28, Mussolini is executed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, April 28, the 118th day of 2022. There are 247 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 28, 1954, former CIA official Aldrich Ames, who had passed U.S. secrets to the Soviet Union and then Russia, pleaded guilty to espionage and tax evasion, and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

On this date:

In 1788, Maryland became the seventh state to ratify the Constitution of the United States.

In 1945, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petacci, were executed by Italian partisans as they attempted to flee the country.

In 1947, a six-man expedition set out from Peru aboard a balsa wood raft named the Kon-Tiki on a 101-day journey across the Pacific Ocean to the Polynesian Islands.

In 1952, war with Japan officially ended as a treaty signed in San Francisco the year before took effect. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower resigned as Supreme Allied commander in Europe; he was succeeded by Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered U.S. Marines to the Dominican Republic to protect American citizens and interests in the face of a civil war.

In 1967, heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali was stripped of his title after he refused to be inducted into the armed forces.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter accepted the resignation of Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, who had opposed the failed rescue mission aimed at freeing American hostages in Iran. (Vance was succeeded by Edmund Muskie.)

In 1986, the Soviet Union informed the world of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl.

In 1990, the musical "A Chorus Line" closed after 6,137 performances on Broadway.

In 2001, a Russian rocket lifted off from Central Asia bearing the first space tourist, California businessman Dennis Tito, and two cosmonauts on a journey to the international space station.

In 2011, convicted sex offender Phillip Garrido and his wife, Nancy, pleaded guilty to kidnapping and raping a California girl, Jaycee Dugard, who was abducted in 1991 at the age of 11 and rescued 18 years later. (Phillip Garrido was sentenced to 431 years to life in prison; Nancy Garrido was sentenced to 36 years to life in prison.)

In 2015, urging Americans to "do some soul-searching," President Barack Obama expressed deep frustration over recurring Black deaths at the hands of police, rioters who responded with senseless violence and a society that would only "feign concern" without addressing the root causes.

Ten years ago: Syria derided United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as biased and called his comments "outrageous" after he blamed the regime for widespread cease-fire violations.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump reaffirmed his support for gun rights, telling attendees of a National Rifle Association convention in Atlanta that "the eight-year assault on your Second Amendment freedoms has come to a crashing end."

One year ago: In his first address to Congress, President Joe Biden called for an expansion of federal programs to drive the economy past the pandemic and broadly extend the social safety net on a scale not seen in decades. Federal agents raided the New York home and office of Rudy Giuliani, former President Donald Trump's personal lawyer; they seized computers and cellphones. The Justice Department brought federal hate crimes charges in the death of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man who was pursued and then killed by white men who spotted him running in their Georgia neighborhood. (Three white men were found guilty of federal hate crimes after being convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison in Arbery's shooting

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death.) Apollo 11 astronaut Michael Collins, who orbited the moon alone while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made their first steps on the lunar surface, died of cancer in Florida; he was 90.

Today's Birthdays: Former Secretary of State James A. Baker III is 92. Actor-singer Ann-Margret is 81. Actor Paul Guilfoyle is 73. Former "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno is 72. Rock musician Chuck Leavell is 70. Actor Mary McDonnell is 70. Rock singer-musician Kim Gordon (Sonic Youth) is 69. Actor Nancy Lee Grahn is 66. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan is 62. Rapper Too Short is 56. Actor Bridget Moynahan is 51. Actor Chris Young is 51. Rapper Big Gipp is 50. Actor Jorge Garcia is 49. Actor Elisabeth Rohm is 49. Actor Penelope Cruz is 48. Actor Nate Richert is 44. TV personalities Drew and Jonathan Scott are 44. Actor Jessica Alba is 41. Actor Harry Shum Jr. is 40. Actor Jenna Ushkowitz is 36. Actor Aleisha Allen is 31.