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“
Self-compassion
is simply giving
the same
kindness to
ourselves that
we would give to
others.

Christopher Germer

Chicken Soup
for the Soul

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.

Saturday, April 30

Lynso Keller Benefit Auction, 5:30 p.m., Groton
American Legion

Sunday, May 1

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS
Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45
a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

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

Methodist: Communion Sunday: Conde Worship
at 9 a.m., Sunday school at 10 a.m., Groton wor-
ship at 11 a.m.

St. John's: Bible Study, 8 a.m.; Worship with
communion, 9 a.m.; Zion worship 11 a.m.; Sunday

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

school, 10 a.m.

2 p.m.: High School Baseball at Castlewood (V/JV)

Monday, May 2

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed pota-
toes/gravy, coleslaw, peaches, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Cheese sticks, marinara sauce,
corn.

6:30 a.m.: Emmanuel Bible Study

3:30 p.m.: Junior High Track Meet at Aberdeen
Roncalli

Tuesday, May 3

Senior Menu: Baked fish, au gratin potatoes,
3-bean salad, fruit cobbler, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Hashbrowns, pizza.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.

9:30 a.m.: Methodist Bible Study

1 p.m.: Track meet at Milbank

7 p.m.: Elementary Spring Concert

7 p.m.: City Council Meeting

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

Middle School Spring Concert



The sixth grade choir, under the direction of Amy Warrington, sang, "Crocodile Rock," and "Believer." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

GROTON WEATHER

GRADUATION

GDI LIVING HEART
FITNESS

SD PUBLIC NOTICES

PHOTO GALLERY

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The junior high choir, under the direction of Amy Warrington, sang, "Bring the House Down," "California Dreamin'" and "Ain't No Mountain High Enough." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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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The sixth grade band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "Let's Rock," "Smoke on the Water," and "Don't Stop Believin'". (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The junior high band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "Black Forest Overture," "60's Rock Mix," and "Honor March." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

**The middle school concert was livestreamed on [GDILIVE.COM](https://www.gdilive.com).
The video is archived under "Other Events."**

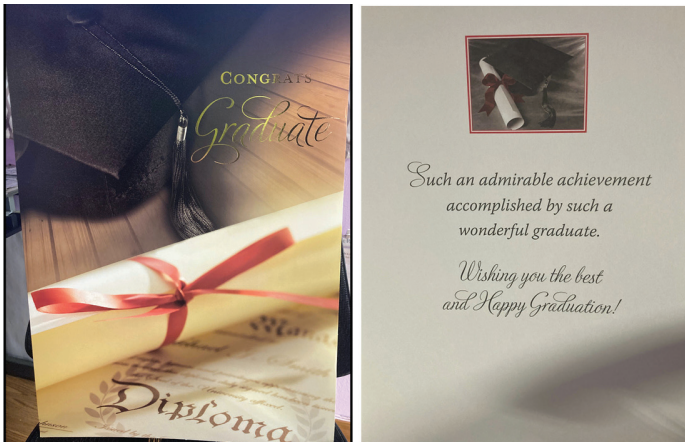
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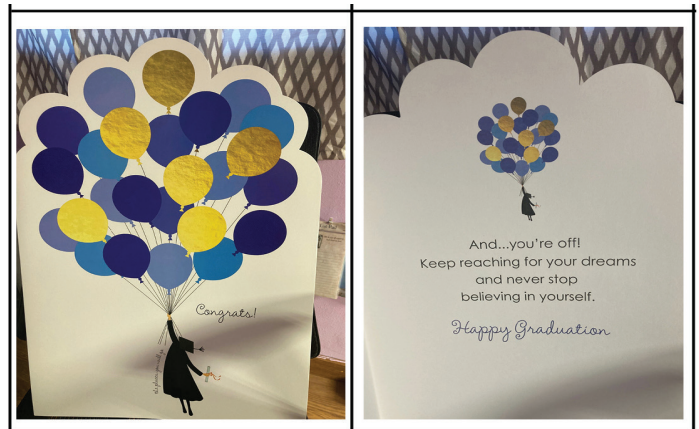
Jumbo Graduation Cards

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

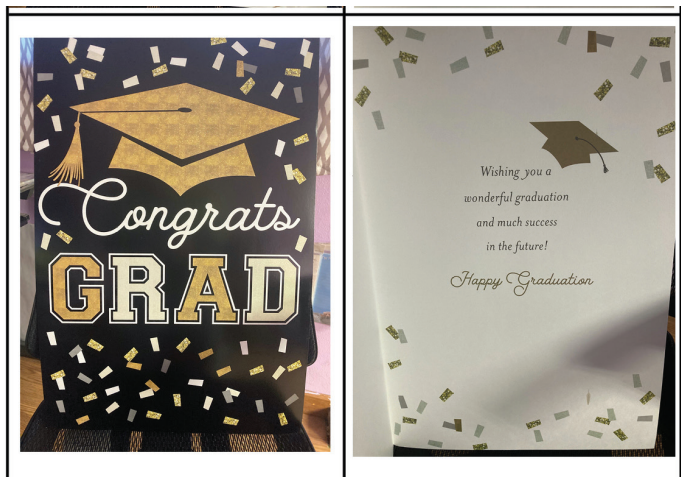
Can now be ordered on-line at 397news.com - Link on Black Bar
Or Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460 or Tina at 605-397-7285
to reserve your card(s)



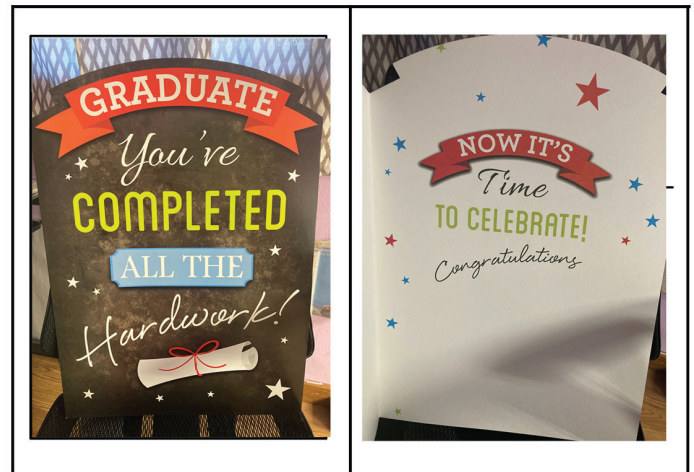
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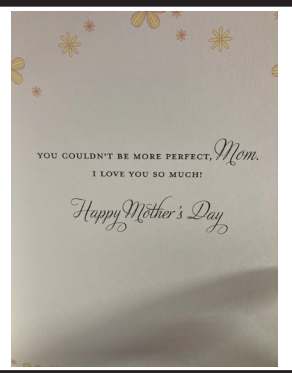
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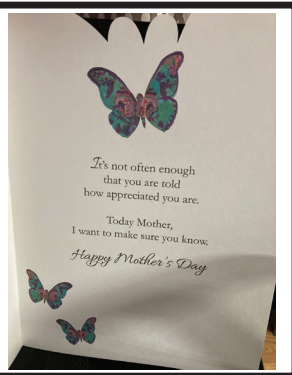
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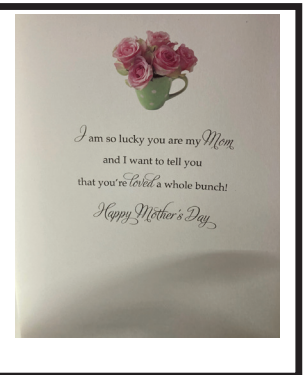
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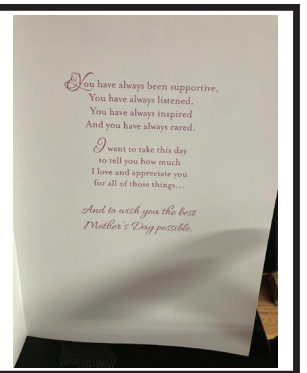
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- NEWS
- LIVE
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New at the
GDI FIT
 The Stairmaster
 and Air Bike



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Order your Graduation Balloons while we have a good supply!



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#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"



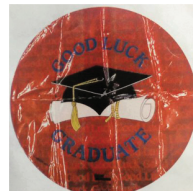
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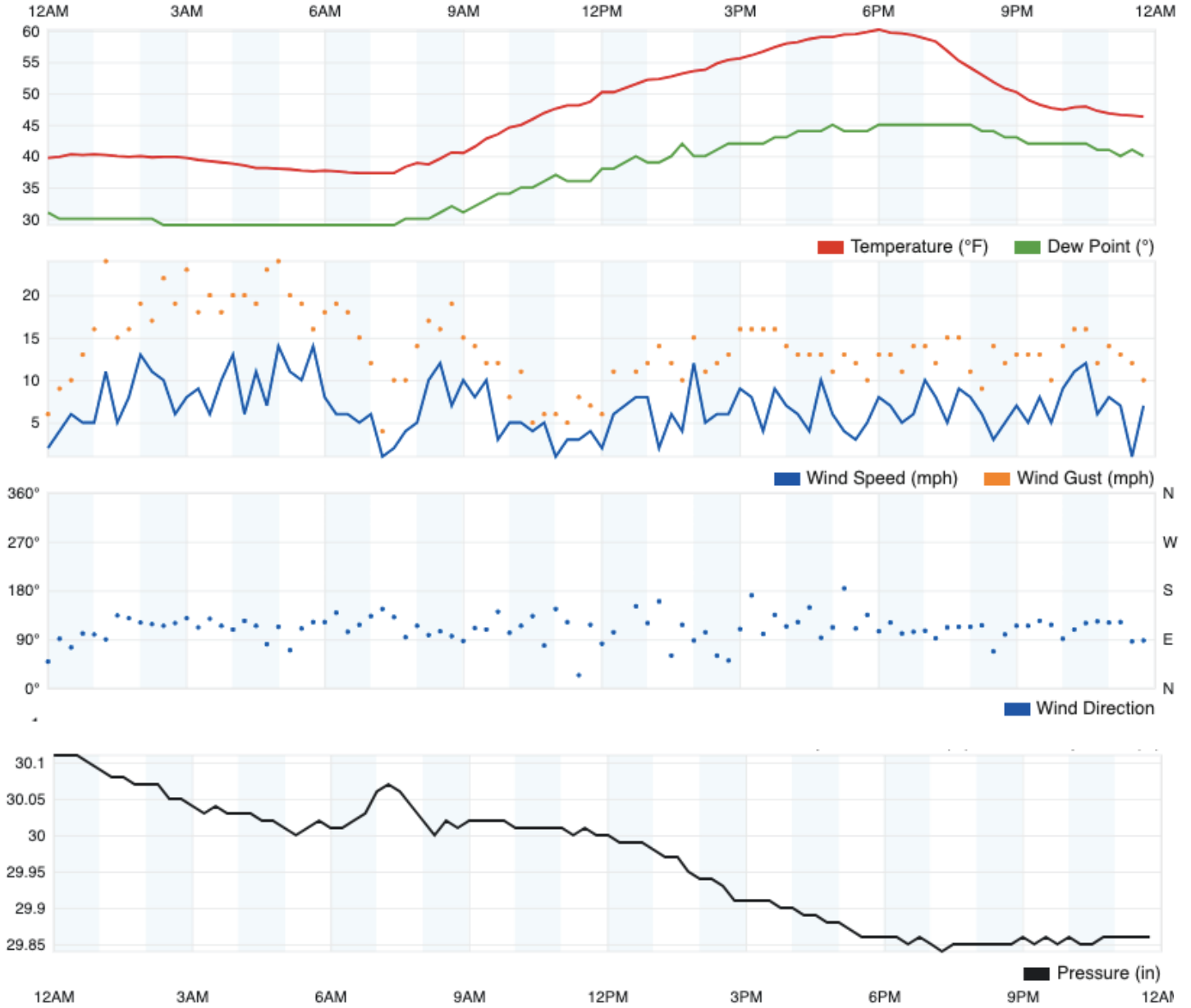
#20 - \$5

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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Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
 80%	 100%	 100%	 70%	
Rain	Rain and Breezy	Rain and Windy	Rain Likely and Breezy	Mostly Cloudy and Breezy
High: 56 °F	Low: 45 °F	High: 49 °F	Low: 37 °F	High: 48 °F



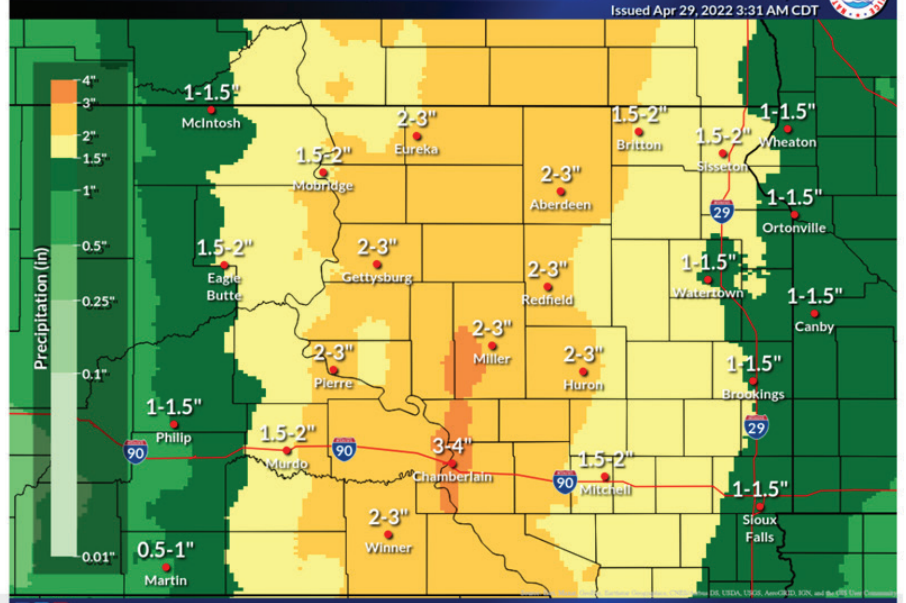
Moderate to Heavy Rain

April 29, 2022
4:14 AM

Rainfall Overview

- Storm total rain of 1 to 3" expected through Sunday morning
- Rain of 0.10 to 0.50" expected every 6 hours
- Focus for Moderate to Heavy Rain
 - ◆ Today: Central SD
 - ◆ Tonight: Entire area
 - ◆ Saturday: Eastern SD
 - ◆ Saturday Night-Sunday Morning: Northeastern SD & west central MN

Forecast Rainfall Totals through Sunday Morning



www.weather.gov/abr
Aberdeen, SD

Rain of around 0.10 to 0.50" can be expected every 6 hours through the day Sunday, before diminishing. The focus for moderate to heavy rain will be over central South Dakota today, the entire area tonight, and eastern South Dakota Saturday, before shifting to northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota Saturday night into Sunday morning. Strong winds are expected early Saturday morning through Saturday evening.

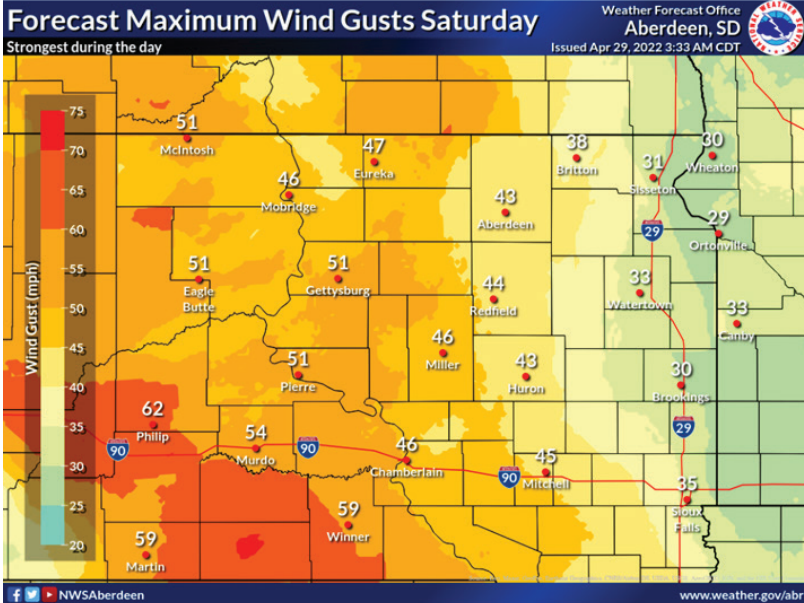
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Wind and Timing

April 29, 2022
4:31 AM



Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	4/29 Fri			4/30 Sat			5/1 Sun				
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm
Aberdeen	23	28	29	31	41	43	41	38	33	33	29
Britton	28	32	35	31	36	38	38	32	35	37	32
Eagle Butte	23	24	35	47	51	51	45	36	31	30	25
Eureka	24	29	29	38	47	47	43	36	35	36	29
Gettysburg	25	28	31	44	49	51	45	38	36	37	26
Kennebec	22	25	30	45	53	52	47	36	33	33	25
McIntosh	28	33	38	45	51	51	48	36	37	37	33
Milbank	21	29	31	29	26	29	29	29	30	32	26
Miller	20	25	25	33	45	46	45	36	32	33	24
Mobridge	23	26	31	40	46	44	40	35	31	31	26
Murdo	23	24	36	48	53	54	47	37	31	30	25
Pierre	18	22	29	44	49	49	44	35	30	30	24
Redfield	24	30	28	31	41	44	43	36	35	36	26
Sisseton	23	29	30	29	26	30	30	31	35	35	30
Watertown	25	32	33	30	29	31	32	32	33	33	29
Webster	28	36	36	33	32	38	37	36	36	37	32
Wheaton	24	30	30	30	28	26	26	26	29	30	25

*Table values in mph



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Strong winds are expected early Saturday morning through Saturday evening, strongest over central South Dakota.

Strong wind can be a hazard to high-profile vehicles

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Today in Weather History

April 29, 1942: An estimated F3 tornado moved east through Marshall County, destroying almost every building on a farm northeast of Kidder. Barns were heavily damaged on two other farms. One person was reported killed, with five others injured.

1905 - The town of Taylor, in southeastern Texas, was deluged with 2.4 inches of rain in fifteen minutes. (The Weather Channel)

1910 - The temperature at Kansas City, MO, soared to 95 degrees to establish a record for the month of April. Four days earlier the afternoon high in Kansas City was 44 degrees, following a record cold morning low of 34 degrees. (The Weather Channel) (The Kansas City Weather Almanac)

1963 - A tornado, as much as 100 yards in width, touched down south of Shannon, MS. The tornado destroyed twenty-seven homes along its eighteen mile path, killing three persons. Asphalt was torn from Highway 45 and thrown hundreds of yards away. Little rain or snow accompanied the tornado, so it was visible for miles. (The Weather Channel)

1973 - The Mississippi River reached a crest of 43.4 feet, breaking the previous record of 42 feet established in 1785. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm off the southeast coast of Massachusetts blanketed southern New England with heavy snow. Totals of three inches at Boston MA, 11 inches at Milton MA, and 17 inches at Worcester MA, were records for so late in the season. Princeton MA was buried under 25 inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced large hail and high winds in central Texas. Baseball size hail was reported at Nixon, and wind gusts to 70 mph were reported at Cotulla. Heavy rain in Maine caused flooding along the Pemigewasset and Ammonoosuc Rivers. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in Arkansas, Louisiana and eastern Texas, with more than 70 reports of large hail and damaging winds. Softball size hail was reported at Palestine TX. Hail as large as tennis balls caused ten million dollars damage around Pine Bluff AR. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A storm system crossing northern New Mexico blanketed parts of the Rocky Mountain Region and the Northern High Plains with heavy snow, and produced blizzard conditions in central Montana. Much of southern Colorado was buried under one to three feet of snow. Pueblo tied an April record with 16.8 inches of snow in 24 hours. Strong canyon winds in New Mexico, enhanced by local showers, gusted to 65 mph at Albuquerque. Afternoon temperatures across the Great Plains Region ranged from the 20s in North Dakota to 107 degrees at Laredo TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1991: Southeast Bangladesh was devastated by a tropical cyclone with sustained winds of approximately 155 mph in the during the late night hours. A 20-foot storm surge inundated the offshore islands south of Chittagong and pushed water from the Bay of Bengal inland for miles. Best estimated put the loss of life from this cyclone between 135,000 and 145,000 people.

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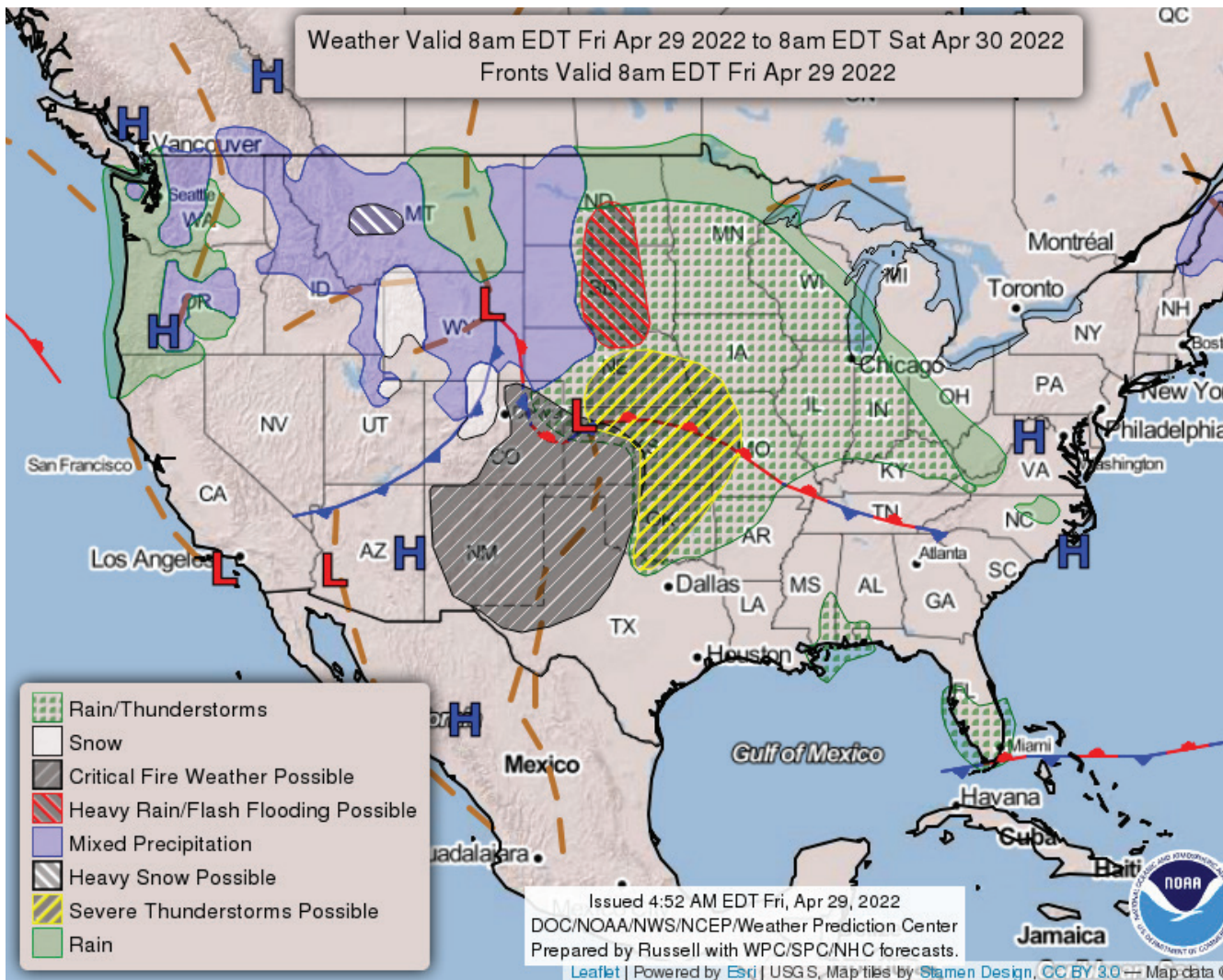
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 60 °F at 5:59 PM
Low Temp: 37 °F at 7:10 AM
Wind: 24 mph at 1:08 AM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 14 hours, 16 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 92 in 1934
Record Low: 16 in 1966
Average High: 64°F
Average Low: 37°F
Average Precip in April.: 1.82
Precip to date in April.: 3.15
Average Precip to date: 3.88
Precip Year to Date: 4.95
Sunset Tonight: 8:37:58 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:19:55 AM



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ASKING GOD FOR A FAVOR

Some time ago a clergyman shouted with all of his might, "God damn America!" Standing behind his pulpit, with his colorful clerical robe and embroidered stole, his rant and rage shocked many who saw him on television.

The longer I watched and wondered, the more his words confused and disturbed me. I could not help but think about the impact this would have on those who were in his congregation or watching him on television or read his words in newspapers and magazines. Surely some would be as disturbed as I was. But, there would be others who would agree with him and cheer for him.

Most often when we and others call on God, it is for a favor or something we cannot do. It could be for healing, a financial need, a loved one who has wandered from God, or insight or wisdom. Then there are others who call on God because they want Him to use His power to do things that are destructive - like "God, I hate America so much that I want You to use Your power to hurt the people I can't."

David spoke of them: "They speak of You with evil intent; Your adversaries misuse Your name." We need to remind ourselves that God will only answer our prayers if our requests are consistent with His name or in keeping with His character. He is not available to hurt or harm His children or His creation or to satisfy our anger or do our "dirty work" or evil intentions.

God is always there, willing to hear our requests and answer them in the way that will bring honor and glory to Him. If we call on Him "with evil intent," He will not hear us.

Prayer: Lord, grant us purity of heart and mind when we approach You in prayer. May our requests always honor You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: They speak of You with evil intent; Your adversaries misuse Your name. Psalm 139:20

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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

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News from the Associated Press

Groups from North Dakota, Iowa to co-develop CO2 storage

CENTER, N.D. (AP) — A North Dakota-based power cooperative and an Iowa company announced an agreement Thursday to co-develop carbon dioxide storage facilities.

Minnkota Power Cooperative, which operates out of Grand Forks, and Ames, Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions said the CO2 storage facilities would be located in western North Dakota, near the town of Center.

Minnkota and Summit said they have previously been working independently on the development of their respective carbon capture and storage projects.

The co-op's Project Tundra aims to install carbon capture technologies at the Milton R. Young Station, a coal-fired power plant in Center. The Summit project involves capturing the emissions of several ethanol plants across Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska and the Dakotas and pumping it thousands of feet underground in western North Dakota for permanent storage.

The agreement provides Summit access to Minnkota's 100-million-ton capacity CO2 storage site in Oliver County. It also creates the framework to jointly develop additional CO2 storage resources nearby, which are estimated to have aggregate CO2 storage exceeding 200 million tons.

Minnkota and Summit said the partnership "will more quickly, efficiently, and cost-effectively advance their projects to commercial operations."

8 Midwest states seek permanent waiver to sell E15 gas

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Governors from eight Midwest states asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Thursday for a permanent waiver that will allow each state to continue selling ethanol-blended gas year-round without restriction.

The EPA's decision last week to suspend restrictions of summer sales of the lower-carbon, lower-cost E15 gasoline is temporary and only applies to the 2022 summer driving season.

E15 is usually prohibited between June 1 and Sept. 15 because of concerns that it adds to smog in high temperatures.

The bipartisan group of governors from Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin sent a joint letter to EPA Administrator Michael Reagan formally requesting the waiver.

"This letter sends the clear message that renewable fuels are the immediate solution to high gas prices, lower emissions, and restoring our energy independence, and we are proud to stand up and take this historic action," said Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds.

The Renewable Fuels Association, which promotes use of ethanol, embraced the states' action.

"These governors should be applauded for pursuing a simple regulatory solution that will allow consumers in their states to benefit from E15's lower cost and lower emissions 365 days a year," said Geoff Cooper, the association's president and CEO. "Once this notification is approved by EPA, it will mean lower pump prices for drivers in these eight states, lower tailpipe pollution, a more secure energy supply, and a more vibrant rural economy."

Earlier this month, President Joe Biden traveled to corn-rich Iowa to announce that his administration will temporarily allow E15 gas, which is blended with 15% ethanol, to be sold this summer to help ease gas prices.

Biden administration officials said the action will save drivers an average of 10 cents per gallon based on current prices, but at just 2,300 gas stations out of the nation's more than 100,000. The affected stations are mostly in the Midwest and the South, including Texas, according to industry groups.

NFL draft class faced major challenges in COVID-19 battles

By MICHAEL MAROT AP Sports Writer

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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.

These players 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 Conference 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 NFL 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.

"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."

Prosecutors weigh death penalty in shooting that killed 3

TYNDALL, S.D. (AP) — Prosecutors are weighing whether to pursue the death penalty for a Scotland man if he's convicted of shooting five people, including three fatally, in Bon Homme County.

Francis Lange, 42, is scheduled for an October trial. He's accused of killing his former girlfriend, Angela Monclova, as well as her father, Librado Monclova, and Diane Akins. Vicki Monclova and a 5-year-old girl who has not been identified, were injured in the Nov. 9, 2021 shooting at a Scotland residence.

Circuit Judge Cheryle Gering has granted a second extension on the state's death penalty decision. She has received a request from both the prosecution and defense for more time to complete Lange's mental evaluation, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

"Both parties agree that, in order to determine whether or not to seek the death penalty, the state should have the completed competency evaluation," the judge wrote. "Both parties agree to allow the state to make its death penalty determination two weeks after the competency evaluation has been completed and disclosed to the state."

Lange faces nine felony counts in the case, including three counts of first-degree murder and two counts of attempted first-degree murder.

He remains in the Bon Homme County Jail in Tyndall on a \$2 million cash bond.

Ukraine slams Kyiv attack amid new Mariupol rescue effort

By DAVID KEYTON and INNA VARENYTSIA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's leader accused Russia of trying to humiliate the United Nations by raining missiles on Kyiv during a visit by Secretary-General António Guterres, an attack that shattered the capital's tentative return to normality as the focus of the war moved east.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine's forces were holding off Russia's attempted advance in the south and east, as efforts continued to secure safe passage for residents trapped in Mariupol, which has been largely reduced to rubble in a 2-month-long siege.

Russia pounded targets all over Ukraine on Thursday, including the attack on Kyiv that struck a residential high-rise and another building. U.S.-funded broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty said its journalist Vira Hyrych, who lives in one of the buildings hit, died. Her body was found in the rubble on Friday.

Ten people were wounded in the attack, including at least one who lost a leg, according to Ukraine's emergency services.

In an apparent reference to the same strike, Russia's Defense Ministry said Friday that it had destroyed "production buildings" at the Artem defense factory in Kyiv.

The attack on Kyiv came barely an hour after Zelenskyy held a news conference with Guterres, who toured some of the destruction in and around Kyiv and condemned attacks on civilians during his visit.

"This says a lot about Russia's true attitude towards global institutions, about attempts of Russian authorities to humiliate the U.N. and everything that the organization represents," Zelenskyy said in an overnight video address to the nation. "Therefore, it requires corresponding powerful reaction."

Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko derided the attack as equivalent to Russian President Vladimir Putin showing Guterres "his middle finger."

The strikes were the boldest Russian bombardment of the capital since Moscow's forces retreated weeks ago following their failure to take the city in what they hoped would be a lightning offensive. Instead,

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stiff Ukrainian resistance, bolstered by Western arms, stalled Putin's advance and forced his troops to pull back to regroup.

Some have now started to push into the country's eastern industrial heartland of the Donbas, which Moscow now says is its focus. Getting a full picture of the unfolding battle in the east has been difficult because airstrikes and artillery barrages have made it extremely dangerous for reporters to move around. Both Ukraine and the Moscow-backed rebels fighting in the east also have introduced tight restrictions on reporting from the combat zone.

But so far, Russia's troops and the separatist forces appear to have made only minor gains, and Britain's Defense Ministry said Friday that those have been achieved at significant cost to Russia's forces.

One aim of Guterres' visit was to secure the evacuation of people from the ruined southern port city of Mariupol, including a shattered steelworks where Ukrainian defenders are holed up and hundreds of civilians are also sheltering. Previous evacuation attempts have collapsed.

"I cannot confirm the exact details of the operation to make sure it is done with safety for our people and for civilians stranded in Mariupol" said Saviano Abreu, a spokesperson for the U.N.'s humanitarian office.

An official in Zelenskyy's office said negotiations were underway with U.N. mediation, and did not rule out an evacuation of the plant happening Friday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Mariupol has seen some of the most dramatic suffering of the war. Under siege since the early days of the invasion, many of its residents became trapped with scarce access to food, water, medicine or electricity.

An estimated 100,000 people are believed to still be in the city, and the city council warned Thursday that a lack of safe drinking water or a working sewer system could lead to outbreaks of deadly diseases such as cholera and dysentery. It added that bodies lay decaying under the rubble.

Russian forces largely control the city, but some 2,000 Ukrainian fighters are holed up at the steel plant, the last known pocket of resistance. About 1,000 civilians are with them, and the fighters said recent concentrated bombings killed and wounded people.

Video posted online by Ukraine's Azov Regiment inside the steel plant showed people combing through the rubble to remove the dead and help the wounded. The regiment said the Russians hit an improvised underground hospital and its operating room, killing an unspecified number of people. The video couldn't be independently verified.

Russia's invasion of its neighbor on Feb. 24 upended the post-Cold War security order. Putin, long irked by NATO's expansion to eastern Europe, says the operation seeks the "demilitarization" of Ukraine, aims to protect people in the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas and ensure Russia's own security. One of Moscow's demands has been that Ukraine drop its bid to join the western NATO alliance.

Ukraine and the West say it was an unprovoked and illegal invasion launched to topple the government in Kyiv.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba wrote Friday on Twitter that a "security vacuum" had led to the war.

"We have then been knocking on NATO's door, but it never opened," he wrote. "The world owes Ukraine security, and we ask states to decide which security guarantees they are ready to provide."

A day after Russia pounded a wide area of Ukraine, the governor of Ukraine's central Dnipropetrovsk region, Valentyn Reznichenko, said two towns there were hit by Russian Grad rockets on Friday. There was no immediate word on casualties or damage. Separately, the governor of Russia's Kursk region, Roman Starovoit, said that a border post came under mortar fire from Ukraine and that Russian border forces returned fire. He said there were no casualties on the Russian side.

Thursday's explosions in northwestern Kyiv's Shevchenkivsky district shook the city and flames poured out the windows of the residential high-rise and another building. The capital had been relatively unscathed in recent weeks, and cafes and other businesses have started to reopen, while a growing numbers of people have been out and about, enjoying the spring weather.

The terrible human cost of the war, which has driven more than 11 million Ukrainians from their homes,

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continues to climb.

In Lyman, a town in Donetsk where Russian forces are reportedly trying to advance as part of their Donbas push, shells rained on Tatiana Maksagory's home this week, devastating her family.

Maksagory's 14-year-old grandson, Igor, was declared dead after emergency services drove him to the hospital. Her daughter was in serious condition and her son-in-law was also killed.

"Grandma, will I live?" she said Igor asked her when they were in the basement waiting for help. "I said that he would live. But look what happened, I betrayed him."

Lawmaker: Sri Lanka president agrees to remove brother as PM

By KRISHAN FRANCIS Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Sri Lanka's president has agreed to replace his older brother as prime minister in a proposed interim government to solve a political impasse caused by the country's worst economic crisis in decades, a prominent lawmaker said Friday.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa agreed that a national council will be appointed to name a new prime minister and Cabinet comprised of all parties in Parliament, lawmaker Maithripala Sirisena said after meeting with the president.

Sirisena, who was president before Rajapaksa, was a governing party lawmaker before defecting earlier this month along with nearly 40 other legislators.

However, Rohan Weliwita, a spokesperson for Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, said the president has not communicated any intent to remove the prime minister and a decision will be announced if such a step is taken.

Sri Lanka is near bankruptcy and has announced it is suspending payments on its foreign loans until it negotiates a rescue plan with International Monetary Fund. It has to repay \$7 billion in foreign debt this year, and \$25 billion by 2026. Its foreign reserves stand at less than \$1 billion.

The foreign exchange shortage has severely limited imports, forcing people to wait in long lines to buy essentials such as food, fuel, cooking gas and medicine.

President Rajapaksa and his family have dominated nearly every aspect of life in Sri Lanka for most of the last 20 years. Protesters who have crowded the streets since March hold them responsible for the crisis and are demanding that they quit politics.

On Thursday, businesses were closed, teachers absent and public transportation interrupted as Sri Lankans joined a general strike to pressure the president to step down.

Rajapaksa earlier reshuffled his Cabinet and offered a unity government in an attempt to quell the protests, but opposition parties refused to join a government headed by the Rajapaksa brothers.

Both the president and prime minister have held on to their positions, while three other Rajapaksa family members resigned from the Cabinet earlier in April in what appeared an attempt to pacify angry protesters.

The weak, divided opposition has been unable to form a majority and take control of Parliament on its own.

An Oval Office visit and a Moscow trip: Inside the Reed deal

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The worst possible moment for bringing Trevor Reed home turned out to be the best.

With U.S.-Russian relations at their lowest point in decades, it seemed an improbable time to hope for the release of Reed, a former Marine detained in Russia for almost three years. Yet this week the Biden administration completed the type of transaction it had earlier seemed resistant to, exchanging Reed for Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot and convicted drug trafficker serving a 20-year prison sentence in Connecticut.

A series of events and considerations in the last two months helped facilitate the swap, including esca-

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lating concerns over Reed's health, a private Oval Office meeting between his parents and President Joe Biden and a secretive Moscow trip by a former diplomat on the cusp of Russia's war with Ukraine.

"All those three forced the White House to make a decision that they hadn't made before," said Mickey Bergman, vice president at the Richardson Center for Global Engagement.

How the war — and the breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations — affected the deal isn't clear. U.S. officials stressed that the negotiations for Reed's release were narrow in scope, focused squarely on the prisoners and not on Russia's war and not reflective of any broader diplomatic engagement. But while the timing of the deal was startling, it's also clear that the groundwork for it had been laid before the conflict had begun.

"I did it," Biden told reporters Wednesday about the deal. "I raised it. I raised it three months ago."

Just as the war was about to commence, Bergman and his colleague, Bill Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and ex-New Mexico governor, flew to Moscow on the plane of FedEx chief executive Fred Smith for a meeting with Russian government officials. It was a continuation of negotiations they'd been having for the release of Reed and another jailed American, corporate security executive Paul Whelan.

They left with the contours in place for the one-for-one swap that ultimately took place.

In Texas, Joey and Paula Reed were worrying that Russia's war with Ukraine, and resulting tensions with the U.S., could close off communication channels and prevent any common ground for negotiations. During meetings with administration officials in the last year — including with the Justice Department, which prosecuted Yaroshenko — the couple expressed support for a swap but say they weren't led to think that was a viable option.

"They didn't say: 'Oh, we agree with you, that's a great deal. That's a good point,'" Paula Reed said in a March interview with The Associated Press. "They didn't say anything like that. They just said: 'We hear you. Thank you very much.'"

But weeks into the war, the couple did something that got the White House's attention.

As Biden traveled to Texas to support veterans, the Reeds stood along the motorcade route in hopes of getting meaningful face-time with the president. That didn't happen, though he did speak by phone with the couple. Later that month, they arrived in Washington and stood with signs near the White House, hoping again to meet with the president.

This time, they were invited into the Oval Office for a sit-down with Biden and other administration officials. The White House issued a statement that night reiterating its commitment to getting Reed and Whelan home, an issue that senior officials had raised in private meetings with Russian leaders.

The meeting was a rare bit of presidential access for the family of an American detainee, especially since Biden himself has been less public than his predecessor, Donald Trump, about efforts to get Americans home.

Hovering in the background as well was Reed's health. In March, Reed told his parents that he'd been coughing up blood several times a day, had pain in his lung and a broken rib. Last year, he contracted COVID-19. Even on Wednesday, his parents were taken aback by how thin their son looked during video footage of the transfer. They said they expected that he'd need medical care before resuming his daily life in Texas.

Those health issues also alarmed U.S. officials.

"That, I think, contributed to really ratcheting up the conversations on this issue, getting to a point where we were able to make this arrangement, getting to a point where we were able to turn to some of the logistics of simply getting it done," a senior administration official told reporters in a background briefing this week.

Separately, a lawyer for Yaroshenko has said his client also suffered from multiple health problems, and tried unsuccessfully in 2020 to have him freed early from his 20-year prison sentence on compassionate release grounds because of the pandemic.

Left out of any deal were Whelan, who is serving a 16-year sentence on espionage-related charges that his family says are fabricated, and Brittney Griner, a WNBA star detained in February after Russian authorities said a search of her bag revealed a cannabis derivative.

The Whelan family said in a statement that it was happy about Reed's release but troubled that their loved one wasn't part of it.

"Paul has already spent 3 and a quarter years as a Russian hostage," the statement said. "Is President Biden's failure to bring Paul home an admission that some cases are too hard to solve? Is the Administration's piecemeal approach picking low-hanging fruit?"

Richardson, who has helped facilitate multiple releases of American detainees and hostages in recent years, said the Biden team deserves recognition for authorizing this particular swap at a time when U.S.-Russia relations were so low.

"It doesn't matter who gets credit," Richardson said, "as long as hostages like Trevor Reed are home."

Racial split on COVID-19 endures as restrictions ease in US

By ANNIE MA and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

Black and Hispanic Americans remain far more cautious in their approach to COVID-19 than white Americans, recent polls show, reflecting diverging preferences on how to deal with the pandemic as federal, state and local restrictions fall by the wayside.

Despite majority favorability among U.S. adults overall for measures like mask mandates, public health experts said divided opinions among racial groups reflect not only the unequal impact of the pandemic on people of color but also apathy among some white Americans.

Black Americans (63%) and Hispanic Americans (68%) continue to be more likely than white Americans (45%) to say they are at least somewhat worried about themselves or a family member being infected with COVID-19, according to an April poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Throughout the pandemic, Black and Hispanic communities have experienced higher rates of illness and death from COVID, said Amelia Burke-Garcia, public health program area director at NORC. Those experiences have resulted in greater levels of stress, anxiety and awareness of the risks of catching COVID-19, she said, which means people of color are more likely to feel measures like mask mandates are needed.

"We've seen these trends endure throughout the entire pandemic," Burke-Garcia said. "What we're seeing now as mitigation measures are being rolled back is there's still great concern amongst Black Americans and Hispanic Americans around the risk of getting sick."

Seventy-one percent of Black Americans say they favor requiring face masks for people traveling on airplanes, trains and other types of public transportation. That's more than the 52% of white Americans who support mask mandates for travelers; 29% of white Americans are opposed. Among Hispanic Americans, 59% are in favor and 20% are opposed. The poll was conducted before a ruling by a federal judge scuttled the government's mask mandate for travelers.

In Indiana, Tuwana Plant said she sees fewer and fewer people wearing masks in public, even though she said she has been diligent in always wearing one. Plant, who is Black, said she sees people treating the pandemic like it's over, and she wants the mask mandate to continue.

Plant, a 46-year-old sous chef, said she had some concerns about getting the vaccine and took every other precaution, such as cleaning and masking, to avoid getting sick but recently was hospitalized for COVID-19.

The experience scared her — she has a preexisting lung condition, and knew family members who died from COVID-19. She said she plans to get vaccinated as soon as she can.

"I called my children while I was in the emergency room," Plant said. "I didn't know ... if it was going to get better or worse, I didn't know. So it was the experience for me altogether."

Dr. Celine Gounder, an infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist and editor-at-large at Kaiser Health News, said people's lived experiences deeply shape how they perceive the pandemic. Anecdotes and personal experience can have a larger impact on behavior than numbers, she said, and people of color are more likely to have had negative experiences with health care prior to and during the pandemic.

While new medicines and vaccines have made it easier to treat COVID-19, Gounder said many people still face systemic barriers to accessing that medical care. Others risk losing their jobs or are unable to

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take time off if they do fall ill, she said, or cannot avoid things like public transit to reduce their exposures.

"When people argue that they don't have to mask on the plane, that means something very different for someone who has access to all of these new innovations than it does for somebody who has no health insurance, who struggles to care for an elderly parent and their children, who's maybe a single mom working in a job where she has no paid sick and family medical leave," Gounder said. "It's just a completely different calculation."

In January, an AP-NORC poll showed Black and Hispanic Americans were more likely than white Americans to feel certain things would be essential for getting back to life without feeling at risk of infection. For example, 76% of Black Americans and 55% of Hispanic Americans said it was essential for getting back to normal that most people regularly wear face masks in public indoor places, compared with 38% of white Americans.

Last month, an AP-NORC poll showed Black and Hispanic Americans, 69% and 49%, were more likely than white Americans, 35%, to say they always or often wear a face mask around others.

Lower support for mask mandates and other precautions among white Americans may also reflect less sensitivity towards what occurs in communities of color. In a 2021 study of mask wearing during the early part of the pandemic, researchers found that mask wearing among white people increased when white people were dying at greater rates in the surrounding community. When Black and Hispanic people were dying, mask usage was lower.

Berkeley Franz, a co-author of the paper, said that in addition to residential segregation that separates white people from communities of color, past research has shown that white people can display ambivalence toward policies that they believe mostly help people of color.

"Anti-Blackness is really pervasive and has tremendous consequences, both in terms of the policies that get passed, and what doesn't," Franz said. "White people can still have really racist actions without seeing themselves that way and understanding the consequences. It's largely below the surface and unintentional but has tremendous consequences in terms of equity."

Communities of color also have a different perception of risk from the pandemic than their white counterparts, said Michael Niño, a sociology professor at the University of Arkansas who co-authored a paper on race, gender and masking in the pandemic.

"Masking is something that is relatively cheap, it's effective, and it's something that can be easily done," he said. "It doesn't require any sort of governmental response. These broader histories of racism and sexism in the United States are most certainly shaping some of the patterns we're seeing."

Political stakes high as Beijing responds to virus outbreak

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Classes suspended. Buildings and communities sealed off. Mass testing of residents. A rush to stock up on food, just in case.

Beijing, China's sprawling capital, is starting to resemble other Chinese cities grappling with the latest wave of the omicron variant of the coronavirus.

Authorities are moving quickly to try to prevent a massive COVID-19 outbreak that could trigger a citywide lockdown like the one that has paralyzed Shanghai for more than three weeks. The political stakes are high as the ruling Communist Party prepares for a major congress this fall at which President Xi Jinping is seeking a third five-year term to reassert his position as China's unquestioned leader.

Xi and the party's main policymaking body, the Politburo, reaffirmed their commitment to a "zero-COVID" policy on Friday, putting China at odds with much of the world. While many countries are dropping restrictions and trying to live with the virus, China is keeping its international borders largely shut and closing off entire cities to all but essential travel.

The Politburo acknowledged the economic cost of lockdowns, saying efforts must be made to "minimize the impact of the epidemic on economic and social development," the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Despite the toll on the economy and everyday life, the zero-COVID approach is extolled by the Communist

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Party as a virtuous display of self-sacrifice under the slogan "Persistence is victory." Officials frequently point out China's relatively low death toll and have accused the U.S. and other countries of essentially giving up.

Li Bin, a vice minister of China's National Health Commission, cited China's vast population and insufficient medical resources.

"If the COVID response loosens to let the virus run free, it will definitely lead to a huge number of infections in a short period of time and a large number of severe and mortal cases," Li said at a media briefing Friday.

Shanghai reported 52 more deaths on Thursday, bringing the toll to 337 in its ongoing outbreak. Liang Wannian, the head of China's COVID-19 expert team, told the briefing there have been signs of improvement in Shanghai, but the situation remains serious. The city recorded about 15,000 cases on Thursday, accounting for the vast majority nationwide.

Beijing's strategy of early testing and isolation appears to be working so far. About 200 cases and no deaths have been reported since the outbreak started a week ago, though the daily number of new cases has crept up to nearly 50.

"I think Beijing can do better than other cities because Beijing is the capital city of China," said community worker Liu Xuan. "And my work is related to virus control and prevention so I feel confident."

A botched response to the Beijing outbreak may not impact Xi's plans for a third term, but it could dent the party's reputation and with it, Xi's room for maneuver on issues such as personnel appointments, experts said.

"Even if Xi Jinping himself is untouchable, a widespread sense of failure and disappointment is bad for a congress year," said Joseph Torigian, a Chinese politics expert at American University in Washington, D.C.

The pomp and circumstance in the run-up and during the meeting would contrast with the frustration, he said.

Liang, the COVID-19 expert team head, said citywide lockdowns can be avoided if early detection, reporting, isolation and treatment are done well. "Fighting omicron ... does not necessarily mean locking down the entire city," he said.

What remains unclear is whether the highly contagious variant will breach Beijing's defenses, and whether containment measures will be enforced in a way that minimizes disruption to daily life and the work of government and businesses.

Beijing is taking no chances. The government ordered the indefinite closure of schools and three rounds of testing of virtually all the capital's 21 million residents this week. When cases are uncovered, entire buildings and sometime neighborhoods are locked down.

Residents have generally complied with the demands, joining long lines for testing and food, some stretching outside supermarkets this week.

The cautionary tale for Beijing is Shanghai, China's largest city, where millions of residents have been under a lockdown for more than three weeks. Food has run low at times and heavy-handed enforcement and a lack of preparation have prompted heavy criticism, despite government efforts to censor it.

Images online have shown residents grappling with police and confronting health workers, kicking at barriers, screaming off their balconies and banging pots and pans to show their frustration.

The lockdown has dealt a blow to the economy at a time when growth was already slowing. The International Monetary Fund has reduced its forecast of Chinese growth this year to 4.4% because of the shutdowns of Shanghai and other industrial centers. That would be down from 8.1% growth last year and below the Communist Party's 5.5% target.

Liang said the short-term pain would be exchanged for long-term returns to normal production, life and economic development. "I think this is cost-effective and is also a kind of balance," Liang said.

Yu Changping, a doctor of respiratory medicine at People's Hospital of Wuhan University, concurred.

"Inconvenience to people's life or economic impact is the pain we have to suffer and a price we have to pay," Yu said. "But if we fail to prevent the spread of the virus, we will suffer heavier losses with larger and broader social and economic impact."

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Any shortcomings in the government's response could inspire the citizenry to take matters into their own hands, eroding party control, said June Teufel Dreyer, a Chinese politics specialist at the University of Miami.

Shanghai fell short in areas such as distribution of food and medicine and provisions for the elderly and pets. In response, residents banded together in ad hoc groups to provide relief, a development that the party may have found disturbing,

"Will the party-government be able to reimpose control once the feeling of crisis abates? I don't think they'll find it too easy to do so," Dreyer said.

An algorithm that screens for child neglect raises concerns

By SALLY HO and GARANCE BURKE Associated Press

Inside a cavernous stone fortress in downtown Pittsburgh, attorney Robin Frank defends parents at one of their lowest points – when they risk losing their children.

The job is never easy, but in the past she knew what she was up against when squaring off against child protective services in family court. Now, she worries she's fighting something she can't see: an opaque algorithm whose statistical calculations help social workers decide which families should be investigated in the first place.

"A lot of people don't know that it's even being used," Frank said. "Families should have the right to have all of the information in their file."

From Los Angeles to Colorado and throughout Oregon, as child welfare agencies use or consider tools similar to the one in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, an Associated Press review has identified a number of concerns about the technology, including questions about its reliability and its potential to harden racial disparities in the child welfare system. Related issues have already torpedoed some jurisdictions' plans to use predictive models, such as the tool notably dropped by the state of Illinois.

According to new research from a Carnegie Mellon University team obtained exclusively by AP, Allegheny's algorithm in its first years of operation showed a pattern of flagging a disproportionate number of Black children for a "mandatory" neglect investigation, when compared with white children. The independent researchers, who received data from the county, also found that social workers disagreed with the risk scores the algorithm produced about one-third of the time.

County officials said that social workers can always override the tool, and called the research "hypothetical."

Child welfare officials in Allegheny County, the cradle of Mister Rogers' TV neighborhood and the icon's child-centric innovations, say the cutting-edge tool – which is capturing attention around the country – uses data to support agency workers as they try to protect children from neglect. That nuanced term can include everything from inadequate housing to poor hygiene, but is a different category from physical or sexual abuse, which is investigated separately in Pennsylvania and is not subject to the algorithm.

"Workers, whoever they are, shouldn't be asked to make, in a given year, 14, 15, 16,000 of these kinds of decisions with incredibly imperfect information," said Erin Dalton, director of the county's Department of Human Services and a pioneer in implementing the predictive child welfare algorithm.

This story, supported by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, is part of an ongoing Associated Press series, "Tracked," that investigates the power and consequences of decisions driven by algorithms on people's everyday lives.

Critics say it gives a program powered by data mostly collected about poor people an outsized role in deciding families' fates, and they warn against local officials' growing reliance on artificial intelligence tools.

If the tool had acted on its own to screen in a comparable rate of calls, it would have recommended that two-thirds of Black children be investigated, compared with about half of all other children reported, according to another study published last month and co-authored by a researcher who audited the county's algorithm.

Advocates worry that if similar tools are used in other child welfare systems with minimal or no human

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intervention—akin to how algorithms have been used to make decisions in the criminal justice system—they could reinforce existing racial disparities in the child welfare system.

“It’s not decreasing the impact among Black families,” said Logan Stapleton, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University. “On the point of accuracy and disparity, (the county is) making strong statements that I think are misleading.”

Because family court hearings are closed to the public and the records are sealed, AP wasn’t able to identify first-hand any families who the algorithm recommended be mandatorily investigated for child neglect, nor any cases that resulted in a child being sent to foster care. Families and their attorneys can never be sure of the algorithm’s role in their lives either because they aren’t allowed to know the scores.

SAFER, FASTER

Incidents of potential neglect are reported to Allegheny County’s child protection hotline. The reports go through a screening process where the algorithm calculates the child’s potential risk and assigns a score. Social workers then use their discretion to decide whether to investigate.

The Allegheny Family Screening Tool is specifically designed to predict the risk that a child will be placed in foster care in the two years after they are investigated. Using a trove of detailed personal data collected from birth, Medicaid, substance abuse, mental health, jail and probation records, among other government data sets, the algorithm calculates a risk score of 1 to 20: The higher the number, the greater the risk.

Given the high stakes – skipping a report of neglect could end with a child’s death but scrutinizing a family’s life could set them up for separation – the county and developers have suggested their tool can help “course correct” and make the agency’s work more thorough and efficient by weeding out meritless reports so that social workers can focus on children who truly need protection.

The developers have described using such tools as a moral imperative, saying child welfare officials should use whatever they have at their disposal to make sure children aren’t neglected.

“There are children in our communities who need protection,” said Emily Putnam-Hornstein, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s School of Social Work who helped develop the Allegheny tool, speaking at a virtual panel held by New York University in November.

Dalton said algorithms and other predictive technologies also provide a scientific check on call center workers’ personal biases because they see the risk score when deciding if the case merits an investigation. If the case is escalated, Dalton said the full investigation is carried out by a different social worker who probes in person, decides if the allegations are true and helps determine if the children should be placed in foster care.

CMU researchers found that from August 2016 to May 2018, the tool calculated scores that suggested 32.5% of Black children reported as being neglected should be subject to a “mandatory” investigation, compared with 20.8% of white children.

In addition, the county confirmed to the AP that for more than two years, a technical glitch in the tool sometimes presented social workers with the wrong scores, either underestimating or overestimating a child’s risk. County officials said the problem has since been fixed.

The county didn’t challenge the CMU researchers’ figures, but Dalton said the research paper represented a “hypothetical scenario that is so removed from the manner in which this tool has been implemented to support our workforce.”

The CMU research found no difference in the percentage of Black families investigated after the algorithm was adopted. The study found the workers were able to reduce this disparity produced by the algorithm.

The county says that social workers are always in the loop and are ultimately responsible for deciding which families are investigated because they can override the algorithm, even if it flags a case for mandatory investigation. Dalton said the tool would never be used on its own in Allegheny, and doubted any county would allow for completely automated decision-making about families’ lives.

“Of course, they could do that,” she said. “I think that they are less likely to, because it doesn’t make any actual sense to do that.”

Despite what the county describes as safeguards, one former contractor for the child welfare agency

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says there is still cause for concern.

"When you have technology designed by humans, the bias is going to show up in the algorithms," said Nico'Lee Biddle, who has worked for nearly a decade in child welfare, including as a family therapist and foster care placement specialist in Allegheny County. "If they designed a perfect tool, it really doesn't matter, because it's designed from very imperfect data systems."

Biddle is a former foster care kid turned therapist, social worker and policy advocate. In 2020, she quit, largely due to her growing frustrations with the child welfare system. She also said officials dismissed her concerns when she asked why families were originally referred for investigation.

"We could see the report and that decision, but we were never able to see the actual tool," she said. "I would be met with ... 'What does that have to do with now?'"

In recent years, movements to reshape – or dismantle – child protective services have grown, as generations of dire foster care outcomes have been shown to be rooted in racism.

In a memo last year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services cited racial disparities "at nearly every major decision-making point" of the child welfare system, an issue Aysha Schomburg, the associate commissioner of the U.S. Children's Bureau said leads more than half of all Black children nationwide to be investigated by social workers. "Over surveillance leads to mass family separation," Schomburg wrote in a recent blog post.

With discussions about race and equity looming large in child welfare circles, Putnam-Hornstein last fall took part in a roundtable of experts convened by the conservative American Enterprise Institute and co-authored a paper that slammed advocates who believe child welfare systems are inherently racist.

She said she collaborated with the group that suggested there are "racial disparities in the incidence of maltreatment" because she sees the need for reforms, and believes "that the adoption of algorithmic decision aids can help guard against subjectivity and bias."

Some researchers worry that as other government agencies implement similar tools, the algorithms could be allowed to make some decisions on their own.

"We know there are many other child welfare agencies that are looking into using risk assessment tools and their decisions about how much fully to automate really vary," said Stapleton. "Had Allegheny County used it as a fully automated tool, we would have seen a much higher racial disparity in the proportion of kids who are investigated."

'LAB RATS'

A decade ago, the developers of Allegheny's tool – Putnam-Hornstein and Rhema Vaithianathan, a professor of health economics at New Zealand's Auckland University of Technology – began collaborating on a project to design a predictive risk model for New Zealand's child welfare system.

Vaithianathan and colleagues prototyped a new child abuse screening model that proposed using national data to predict the risk that the child protection system would confirm allegations that a child had been mistreated by age 5. The plan was scrapped after documents revealed the Ministry of Social Development's head sharply opposed the project, declaring: "These are children, not lab rats."

The minister wasn't the only one concerned. Emily Keddell, a professor of social work at Otago University in New Zealand who analyzed the tool in the peer-reviewed *Critical Social Policy* journal, found that it would likely have resulted in more Māori families being tagged for investigation, reinforcing "existing structural inequalities by contributing to the ongoing stigmatisation of this population."

In response, Vaithianathan said that she and her collaborators are open to community criticism and committed to showing their work, even if jurisdictions decide against it. She added that she has worked extensively with Indigenous Māori researchers.

"We encourage agencies to listen to those critical voices and to make leadership decisions themselves," she said.

Vaithianathan and Putnam-Hornstein said they have since expanded their work to at least half a dozen cities and counties across the United States and have explored building tools in Chile and Australia.

Brian Chor, a clinical psychologist and child welfare researcher at the University of Chicago's Chapin

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Hall, said the pair are respected for confronting ethical and racial concerns in creating the tool. He also said that Pittsburgh was the perfect place to create a model algorithm for other public welfare agencies.

"Allegheny County is probably an early adopter where the stars seem to be aligned, where they have the data," Chor said. "They have a solid recipe that I think is replicable."

In several public presentations and media interviews, Vaithianathan and Putnam-Hornstein said they want to use public data to help families in need.

"We're researchers and we're trying to model what good, good approaches look like in this field," Vaithianathan said in an interview. The developers also noted in a document sent to Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services last year that demand for their tools had increased due to the pandemic, as the state weighed a proposal for a statewide tool that would cost \$520,000 to develop and implement.

Vaithianathan has said the tool ultimately can help address racial bias, and has pointed to a 2019 Stanford University evaluation commissioned by Allegheny County that suggests it may have had a modest impact on some disparities.

"I've always felt that these are tools that have the opportunity to improve the quality of decision making," Vaithianathan said at a November panel. "To the extent that they are used with careful guardrails around them, I think they also offer an opportunity for us to try and address some of those systemic biases."

But when AP asked county officials to address Carnegie Mellon's findings on the tool's pattern of flagging a disproportionate number of Black children for a "mandatory" child neglect investigation, Allegheny County questioned the researchers' methodology by saying they relied on old data.

The researchers reran the analysis using newer data to address the county's concerns and reached many of the same conclusions.

In response to AP, Allegheny County provided research that acknowledges the tool has not helped with combating disparities in the rates at which Black and white child neglect cases are investigated. A recent unpublished analysis written by the developers themselves determined "no statistically significant effect of the algorithm on this disparity."

"We don't frame the entire decision-making process around race, though clearly it's an important thing that we think about," Dalton said.

Dalton said her team wants to keep improving the tool and is considering new updates, including adding available private insurance data to capture more information about middle class and upper income families, as well as exploring other ways to avoid needless interventions.

Dalton also downplayed the algorithm's role in neglect investigations.

"If it goes into court, then there's attorneys on both sides and a judge," Dalton said. "They have evidence, right?"

Chor disagreed, saying Allegheny's tool is applied at the most important point of the child welfare system.

"The very front end of child protection decision-making is understandably the most impactful decision that you can make on a child's life, because once you come into contact with the hotline, with an investigator, then your chance of being removed, of course, is increased," Chor said.

The latest version of the tool excludes information about whether a family has received welfare dollars or food stamps, data that was initially included in calculating risk scores. It also stopped predicting whether a child would be reported again to the county in the two years that followed. However, much of the current algorithm's design remains the same, according to American Civil Liberties Union researchers who have studied both versions.

The county initially considered including race as a variable in its predictions about a family's relative risk but ultimately decided not to, according to a 2017 document. Critics say even if race is not measured outright, data from government programs used by many communities of color can be a proxy for race. In the document, the developers themselves urged continuing monitoring "with regard to racial disparities."

"If over a million dollars have been spent creating and maintaining this tool, only for call screeners to disagree with it, for racial disparities to stay essentially level, and for screen-ins to continue at unreasonably high rates, is that the best use of Allegheny County's resources?" asked Kath Xu, an attorney at the ACLU.

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Child welfare agencies in at least 26 states and Washington, D.C., have considered using algorithmic tools, and at least 11 have deployed them, according to a recent ACLU white paper by Xu and colleagues.

LITTLE TRANSPARENCY, GROWING INFLUENCE

Family law attorney Frank says she's always worried about the lack of due process and secrecy surrounding Allegheny County's child welfare algorithm. Some of her clients have asked if the system was surveilling them because they used public assistance or community programs, but she can't answer.

"I just don't understand why it's something that's kept in secret," Frank said.

Once, Frank recalled, a judge demanded to know a family's score, but the county resisted, claiming it didn't want to influence the legal proceeding with the numbers spat out by the algorithm.

Bruce Noel, who oversees call screeners using Allegheny's tool, said that while the risk score advises their decision on whether to launch an investigation, he is torn about sharing that information with families because of the tool's complexity. He added that he is cognizant of the racial disparities in the underlying data, and said his team didn't have much input into development.

"Given that our data is drawn from public records and involvement with public systems, we know that our population is going to garner scores that are higher than other demographics, such as white middle class folks who don't have as much involvement with public systems," Noel said.

Dalton said she personally doesn't support giving parents their score because she worries it could discourage people from seeking services when they need them.

"I do think there are risks and I want the community to also be on board with ... the risks and benefits of transparency," Dalton said.

Other counties using algorithms are taking a different approach. Larimer County, Colorado, home to Fort Collins, is now testing a tool modeled on Allegheny's and plans to share scores with families if it moves forward with the program.

"It's their life and their history," said Thad Paul, a manager with the county's Child, Youth & Family Services. "We want to minimize the power differential that comes with being involved in child welfare ... we just really think it is unethical not to share the score with families."

In the suburbs south of Denver, officials in Douglas County, Colorado, are using a similar tool and say they will share scores with families who request it.

Oregon does not share risk score numbers from its statewide screening tool, which was first implemented in 2018 and inspired by Allegheny's algorithm. The Oregon Department of Human Services – currently preparing to hire its eighth new child welfare director in six years – explored at least four other algorithms while the agency was under scrutiny by a crisis oversight board ordered by the governor.

It recently paused a pilot algorithm built to help decide when foster care children can be reunified with their families. Oregon also explored three other tools – predictive models to assess a child's risk for death and severe injury, whether children should be placed in foster care and if so, where.

For years, California explored data-driven approaches to the statewide child welfare system before abandoning a proposal to use a predictive risk modeling tool Putnam-Hornstein's team developed in 2019. The state's Department of Social Services spent \$195,273 on a two-year grant to develop the concept.

"During the project, the state also explored concerns about how the tool may impact racial equity. These findings resulted in the state ceasing exploration," department spokesman Scott Murray said in an email.

Putnam-Hornstein's team is currently working with one of the nation's largest local child welfare systems in Los Angeles County as it pilots a related tool.

The embattled agency is being audited following high-profile child deaths, and is currently seeking a new director after its previous one stepped down late last year. The "complex-risk algorithm" helps to isolate the highest-risk cases that are being investigated, according to the county's Department of Children and Family Services.

So far, the experiment has been limited to the Belvedere, Lancaster, and Santa Fe Springs offices, the agency said. The tool also has allowed the agency to generate and review reports about cases involving Black children and families who were deemed low-risk, but were still investigated and didn't result in any conclusive or substantiated allegations, the county said.

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In the Mojave Desert city of Lancaster, U.S. Census shows 22% of the city's child population is Black. In the first few months that social workers started using the tool, county data shows that Black children were the subject of nearly half of all the investigations flagged for additional scrutiny.

The county did not immediately say why, but said it will decide whether to expand the tool later this year. Back in Pittsburgh, family law attorney Frank is still trying to untangle how, exactly, the county's algorithm is impacting each client she shepherds through the system.

To find strength on the brutal days, she keeps a birthday calendar for the children she's helped and sends them handwritten cards to remember times when things went right.

She's still haunted by a case in which she says she heard a social worker discuss a mother's risk score in court around 2018. The case ultimately escalated to foster care, but Frank has never been able to understand how that number influenced the family's outcome.

County officials said they could not imagine how a risk score could end up in court.

"There's no way to prove it – that's the problem," Frank said.

New gas pipeline boosts Europe's bid to ease Russian supply

By DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Mountainous and remote, the Greek-Bulgaria border once formed the southern corner of the Iron Curtain. Today, it's where the European Union is redrawing the region's energy map to ease its heavy reliance on Russian natural gas.

A new pipeline — built during the COVID-19 pandemic, tested and due to start commercial operation in June — will ensure that large volumes of gas will flow between the two countries in both directions to generate electricity, fuel industry and heat homes.

The energy link takes on greater importance following Moscow's decision this week to cut off natural gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria over a demand for ruble payments stemming from Western sanctions over the war of Ukraine.

The 180-kilometer (110-mile) project is the first of several planned gas interconnectors that will allow eastern European Union members and countries hoping to join the 27-nation bloc access to the global gas market.

In the short term, it's Bulgaria's backup.

The pipeline connection will give the country access to ports in neighboring Greece that are importing liquefied natural gas, or LNG, and also will bring gas from Azerbaijan through a new pipeline system that ends in Italy.

It's one of many efforts as member states scramble to edit their energy mix, with some reverting back to emissions-heavy coal while also planning expanded output from renewables. Germany, the world's biggest buyer of Russian energy, is looking to build LNG import terminals that would take years, and Italy, another top Russian gas importer, has reached deals with Algeria, Azerbaijan, Angola and Congo for gas supplies.

The European Union wants ax its dependence on Russian oil and gas by two-thirds this year and completely over five years through alternative sources, wind and solar, and conservation.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is likely to accelerate changes in the EU's long-term strategy, adapting to energy that is more expensive but also more integrated among member states, said Simone Tagliapietra, an energy expert and research fellow at the Brussels-based think tank Bruegel.

"It's a new world," he said. "And in this new world, it's clear that Russia doesn't want to be part of an international order as we think of it."

Tagliapietra added: "The strategy — particularly by Germany — over the last 50 years was always one of engaging with Russia on energy. ... But given what we are seeing in Ukraine and given Russia's view of international relations, it's not the kind of country with which we would like to do business."

EU policymakers argue that while Eastern European members are some of the most dependent on Russian gas, the size of their markets makes the problem manageable. Bulgaria imported 90% of its gas from Russia but only consumes 3 billion cubic meters each year — thirty times less than lead consumer

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Germany, according to 2020 data from Eurostat, the EU statistics agency.

Officially called the Gas Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria, the new pipeline will complement the existing European network. Much of that dates to the Soviet era, transporting gas from vast energy fields in Russia westward, when Moscow sought badly needed funds for its faltering command economy and Western suppliers to help build its pipelines.

The link will run between the northeastern Greek city of Komotini and Stara Zagora, in central Bulgaria, and will give the country and neighbors with new grid connections access to the expanding global gas market. That includes a connection with the newly built Trans Adriatic Pipeline carrying gas from Azerbaijan as well as suppliers of liquefied natural gas that arrives by ship, likely to include Qatar, Algeria and the United States.

As many as eight additional interconnectors could be built in eastern Europe, reaching as far as Ukraine and Austria.

The 240 million euro (\$250 million) pipeline will carry 3 billion cubic meters of gas per year, with an option to be expanded to 5 billion. It received funding from Bulgaria, Greece and the EU and has strong political support from Brussels and the United States.

On the ground, the project faced multiple holdups because of supply chain snags during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Receiving specialized parts and moving personnel after construction got underway in early 2020 soon became increasingly difficult, said Antonis Mitzalis, executive director of the Greek contractor AVAX that oversaw the project.

Construction finished in early April, he said, while work and testing at two metering stations and software installation are in the final stages.

"We had a sequence in mind. But the fact that some materials did not arrive made us rework that sequence, sometimes with a cost effect," Mitzalis said.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis missed a tour of the site last month after contracting COVID-19. He spoke Wednesday with his Bulgarian counterpart, Kiril Petkov, to provide assurances of Greek support.

"Bulgaria and Greece will continue to work together for energy security and diversification — of strategic importance for both countries and the region," Petkov later tweeted. "We both are confident for the successful completion of the IGB on time."

Israeli police clash with rock-throwers at major holy site

JERUSALEM (AP) — Palestinians hurled stones and Israeli police fired rubber-coated bullets at a major Jerusalem holy site early Friday that has seen waves of unrest in recent weeks.

The police say Palestinians inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound began hurling stones and fireworks around dawn in the direction of a heavily guarded gate that leads to the Western Wall, the holiest place where Jews can pray. The police advanced into the compound, firing rubber-coated bullets.

The violence ended around an hour later after other Palestinians in the compound intervened, convincing the stone throwers and the police to pull back.

The Palestinian Red Crescent emergency service said more than 40 people were wounded, with 22 requiring treatment at local hospitals. It said Israeli forces prevented first responders from entering the compound during the clashes, and that one of its medics was beaten by police.

The police did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but said in a statement they had arrested three people.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque compound is the third holiest site in Islam. It is built on a hilltop that is the most sacred site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because it was the location of the Jewish temples in antiquity. It has long been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In recent weeks, Israeli police and Palestinians have clashed there on a number of occasions. Israeli authorities accuse the Hamas militant group ruling Gaza of inciting violence and say security forces were forced to intervene to halt stone-throwing.

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The Palestinians say the presence of Israeli police at the site, and regular visits by increasing numbers of nationalist and religious Jews, are a violation of decades-old informal arrangements governing the site. The visits were halted last week for the last 10 days of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which concludes this weekend.

Tens of thousands of Muslims are expected to attend the main Friday prayers at midday. Earlier this week, an estimated 250,000 worshippers gathered at the site for Laylat al-Qadr, a night of intense prayers that marks the culmination of Ramadan, with no reports of violence.

EXPLAINER: Why are foes Turkey and Saudi Arabia fixing ties?

By AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The killing of columnist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents in Istanbul sent an already tense and shaky relationship between Turkey and Saudi Arabia into complete free fall.

Fast-forward 3 1/2 years later and it appears Turkey and Saudi Arabia are attempting to build a bridge and move on.

In his first trip to Saudi Arabia in five years, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan embraced Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and sipped traditional Arabic coffee with King Salman before a state dinner and direct talks that ran into the early hours of Friday.

Here's a look at what's underpinning rapprochement between the two Sunni Muslim powerhouses:

WHAT'S BEHIND TURKEY'S DIPLOMATIC PIVOT?

Turkey's diplomatic drive coincides with the country's worst economic crisis in two decades. Having wealthy Gulf Arab states as allies can help draw investments. Turkey has also taken steps to improve relations with Egypt and Israel.

After mending ties with the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi announced a \$10 billion fund to support investments in Turkey and made other moves to support the economy.

Official inflation stands at a staggering 61% while the lira tumbled 44% in value against the dollar last year. These figures do not bode well for Erdogan, whose grip on power could be threatened by the country's economic woes. Turkey is scheduled to hold elections next year.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is enjoying a bumper economic year with its foreign reserves expected to climb. Higher energy prices are forecast to rake in more than \$400 billion of revenue this year for the kingdom. In other words, Saudi Arabia has capital to invest in Turkey.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR SAUDI ARABIA?

Saudi Arabia's change of heart comes as the kingdom seeks to broaden its alliances at a time when relations between Riyadh and Washington are strained.

The crown prince has yet to hold a direct call with President Joe Biden since he took office over a year ago. A number of lawmakers from Biden's Democratic party have openly called on him to get even tougher with Saudi Arabia, calling the kingdom a bad strategic partner as it sticks to an OPEC-led pact with Russia that critics say has worsened an oil supply crunch amid the war in Ukraine.

The timing for reconciliation also makes more sense now. Saudi Arabia ended a years-long embargo on Qatar over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist opposition groups. Although relations have been restored between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, they had yet to be fixed with Qatar's steadfast ally — Turkey — until now.

Possibly, the strongest impetus for reconciliation is that the crown prince wants to put a definitive end to the scandal of Khashoggi's killing that has loomed over him and cast a pall on his reputation.

Big name Western investors and politicians stayed away from Riyadh in the aftermath of the killing, though some have since returned to do business again in the kingdom.

Khashoggi had been writing columns in The Washington Post hailing the crown prince's social reforms while expressing concern over far-reaching arrests of perceived critics. The billionaire owner of the Post, Jeff Bezos, subsequently commissioned an investigation that concluded his phone was hacked after receiving a message from the crown prince, though many questions remain unanswered.

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HOW WAS TURKEY PRESSURING THE CROWN PRINCE?

Turkish authorities fanned the global outrage and suspicion directed at Prince Mohammed. Turkey shared audio of the gruesome slaying with Western intelligence agencies, a signal the Saudi consulate where he was killed had been bugged. U.S. intelligence subsequently concluded the operation could not have happened without the prince's go-ahead. Prince Mohammed has denied any involvement.

While never naming Prince Mohammed, Erdogan said the operation that killed Khashoggi was ordered by the "highest levels" of the Saudi government. Khashoggi had entered the consulate in October 2018 by appointment to obtain papers to allow him to wed his Turkish fiancée, who waited for him outside. He never emerged and his body was never found.

Turkey had a case open against 26 Saudi suspects in absentia, but three weeks to the day before Erdogan was set to land in Saudi Arabia, the Turkish prosecutor pulled the plug on the case by transferring it to the kingdom, which had already held its own widely-criticized trial. No officials overseeing the operation were ever convicted.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN TIES WERE STRAINED?

Saudi Arabia launched an unofficial embargo on Turkish exports, dramatically curbing around \$5 billion in bilateral trade. The kingdom also temporarily barred wildly popular Turkish soap operas that were dubbed into Arabic from airing on affiliated satellite television stations. Those soap operas had helped boost Turkey's cultural clout across the Mideast and drew tourism and investment to Turkey from viewers.

Before Khashoggi's slaying, Saudi investments had reached around \$2 billion and Turkey's investments in Saudi Arabia were valued at around \$660 million. More than 200 Turkish companies were operating in the country, according to Turkey's foreign ministry. A year before the killing, Saudi citizens had bought up more than 3,500 properties in Turkey.

WHAT ARE THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS NOW?

Following years of upheaval across the region, the Muslim Brotherhood group has largely been crushed by authoritarian states. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are once again most concerned with Iran, which has been inching toward a nuclear deal with the U.S. that could lift key sanctions.

Turkey and Iran, while not rivals, have competed for power in Syria and Iraq, though they maintain economic relations and share a border. Having Turkey closely aligned with Gulf Arab states could add pressure on Iran.

A detente could also diffuse tensions in Libya, where proxy battles have played out between the UAE and Turkey. It could further usher in a more pragmatic foreign policy approach by Gulf Arab states and help ease the diplomatic isolation Turkey has faced from some Western nations.

Still, mistrust is almost certain to feature below the surface between Prince Mohammed and Erdogan.

Echoes of 2006: Jazz Fest returns to New Orleans for 2022

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Once silenced by the pandemic, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival opens Friday for the first time in three years — a long awaited 2022 revival that holds echoes of 2006 when the annual celebration of music and culture went on even after Hurricane Katrina.

The two-weekend production draws tens of thousands to the city's Fair Grounds Race Course, where as many as 80 musical acts perform daily on more than a dozen stages, complemented by art and craft exhibits and an array of booths featuring foods from Louisiana and beyond.

Lionel Richie and Death Cab for Cutie are among Friday's draws. The Who headlines Saturday; the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Sunday. But the festival may be best known for showcasing a dizzying array of Louisiana musical talent, styles and genres — jazz, blues, Cajun, Zydeco and more.

Organizers pulled off the April 2006 show eight months after levees failed and the city flooded during Katrina, and as debris and water-damaged houses still marred the landscape. Longtime festival producer Quint Davis recounts two strong emotional memories from that festival: Bruce Springsteen bringing the local crowd to tears singing "My City of Ruins" to close the first weekend, and the joy at having crowds

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line up at the gates on opening day.

"It was just incredible energy, like a pilgrimage," Davis recalled Tuesday.

2020 marked the first time the festival had been canceled in its 50-year history, owing to COVID-19. "It was like a sword through the heart," Davis said, adding that the comeback has been more difficult in some ways than the post-Katrina festival because the pandemic has led to changes in vendors, higher costs and complications in rounding up equipment after a three-year lull.

The 2020 cancellation, plus cancellations of planned returns in spring and fall of 2021, were emotionally devastating for festival organizers and fans, said Davis. And they brought recurring economic shocks for the bars, restaurants and music venues that count on an influx of Jazz Fest visitors.

"It's our biggest two weekends of the year," said James Gonzci, a co-owner of Liuzza's by the Track, recalling the disappointment. The neighborhood bar and restaurant draws overflow crowds after each day of the festival.

Robert Mercurio can assess the comeback from two perspectives. As the bassist for the funk band Galactic, he credits the fest with helping the band build international renown after a 1996 performance. As part owner of the historic Tipitina's music club, he appreciates the business that Jazz Fest brings to live music venues as they regain their footing after pandemic shutdowns.

"I think that people who haven't been to New Orleans for a long time are looking forward to coming to Tipitina's to have that real New Orleans experience after the fest," Mercurio said Thursday.

Jazz Fest returns as COVID-19 cases are at a lower point than they've been in months and two-thirds of the U.S. population is vaccinated. Mask mandates, public gathering limits and proof-of-vaccine requirements have been lifted in New Orleans. Hospitalizations remain low in Louisiana after reaching dangerous peaks in 2020 and 2021.

Jazz Fest hotel occupancy rates haven't rebounded to the 2019 levels yet. Kelly Schulz of the tourism association New Orleans & Co., said downtown and French Quarter hotels so far project occupancy to be about 80%. It was around 90% three years ago.

But Schulz points to several signs of recovery, among them this year's return of the Mardi Gras season's parades and parties, the NCAA Final Four basketball tournament, a recent pro golf tournament, NBA playoff games and two major conventions.

Jazz fest, she said, has an estimated \$400 million impact on the local economy, akin to when the city hosts the Super Bowl.

"What we're seeing is the best period of time as an industry since the beginning of the pandemic," Schulz said.

"Comparing it to 2006 is meaningful," Schulz said of Jazz Fest's return. "Because I think that's how people feel about it, in terms of the return and what it means and how much people have waited for this day -- especially because people thought we were going to have it last year and it was canceled again."

Mercurio, too, says the return of Jazz Fest is reminiscent of 2006 after Katrina. "It feels like an awakening after a really dark time," he said. "Finally coming to a light at the end of the tunnel that we've all been looking for so long."

Jury still deliberating in rape trial of Idaho ex-lawmaker

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Jurors in the rape trial of a former Idaho lawmaker were to begin another day of deliberations Friday after a dramatic three-day trial in which the accuser, a 19-year-old intern, fled the witness stand during testimony, saying "I can't do this."

During closing arguments Thursday, the jury of six men and six women were asked to weigh whether the case involves "power in the wrong hands" used to harm a young legislative intern or consensual sex after a dinner date.

Aaron von Ehlinger, 39, has pleaded not guilty to felony charges of rape and sexual penetration with a foreign object — both charges carry a maximum penalty of up to life in prison — and maintains he had

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consensual sex with the young woman.

Deliberations stretched for seven hours until nearly 8 p.m. Thursday before the jury decided to break for the evening and start again Friday.

The Associated Press generally does not identify people who say they have been sexually assaulted, and has referred to the woman in this case as "Jane Doe" at her request.

Doe told her supervisors that von Ehlinger, who was then a Republican representative from Lewiston, raped her in March 2021 at his Boise apartment after the two had dinner at a restaurant. Von Ehlinger resigned from the House of Representatives last year after a legislative ethics committee recommended that he be banned from the Statehouse because of his conduct with Doe.

When the allegations became public — largely because of the legislative ethics investigation — Doe faced unrelenting harassment from some of von Ehlinger's supporters. Her name, photo and personal details about her life were repeatedly publicized in "doxxing" incidents. One of the people who frequently harassed her was in the courthouse to attend the trial, but law enforcement banned the man from the floor where where case was being heard.

Over the span of three days, jurors heard graphic and sometimes harrowing testimony, including from Doe, who briefly took the witness stand before abruptly standing and leaving the courtroom.

Doe haltingly described the moments the alleged assault began.

"He laid me down ... he removed his clothes ... he climbed on top of me ... in just his boxers. White T-shirt," Doe said. "He tried to put his fingers between my legs and I closed my knees."

At that, she stood up.

"I can't do this," she said, quickly walking out of the courtroom.

The judge instructed them not to consider her testimony after Doe fled before she could be questioned by the defense.

During closing arguments, Ada County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Katelyn Farley told jurors that the case was about "power in the wrong hands" used to the "great devastation" of Doe. Von Ehlinger had social, political and physical power over the petite intern, Farley said.

"He used that power to rape and forcibly penetrate her," Farley said, pointing at von Ehlinger. Doe resisted in several ways, she said, highlighting the testimony of law enforcement investigators and a nurse sexual assault examiner who interviewed Doe after the alleged assault.

"Words show lack of consent. Excuses of 'Why this shouldn't happen,' show lack of consent. Yanking your head back and getting an injury shows lack of consent," Farley said.

But von Ehlinger's defense attorney Jon Cox told jurors the prosecution's case was made up of "red herrings," and said von Ehlinger was a credible person who willingly took the stand to share his side of the story.

"Judge his credibility, that's all you can do," Cox said. "For every assertion that the state has made, or any evidence ... Aaron has given you a, 'This is what happened.' That, in and of itself, creates reasonable doubt."

During his testimony, von Ehlinger often spoke in a clear, loud voice directly to jurors, telling them the sexual contact was the culmination of a first date with the intern.

"She was flirting with me, so I thought, 'Why not? Go out to dinner with a person? Why not?'" he said.

After eating at a fancy Boise restaurant, he and Doe decided to return to his apartment, where they began making out on the couch, he said.

"Things were going well, and I asked (Doe) if she would like to move to the bedroom," von Ehlinger said. "She said 'Sure.' We got up, held hands and walked into the bedroom."

In the bedroom, things became "hot and heavy," von Ehlinger said, and he stepped away to disrobe behind his closet door, carefully hanging up his suit jacket, tie and slacks, before returning to the bed. At his suggestion, Doe briefly performed oral sex, he said. He also denied carrying a gun that night, and said he seldom carries one.

"Very rarely, and certainly not with a suit on," von Ehlinger said.

But while under questioning from Farley, he acknowledged that he described the events of that night differently in statements drafted by two different attorneys he previously hired to represent him. In those statements, he said he and Doe took each other's clothes off.

He also said he generally carried concealed weapons when he did carry guns, most often a small handgun that he would place in the front pocket of his jeans or suit pants.

Earlier this week, jurors heard from investigators and a nurse who performed a rape exam. They testified that Doe reported being pinned down while von Ehlinger forced her to perform oral sex, and that she knew he frequently carried a handgun and had placed it on a dresser near the bed at the time of the assault. A nurse also testified that Doe had a "goose egg" on the back of her head from striking the wall or a headboard while trying to jerk her head away from von Ehlinger's grip.

Defense 1st, then offense, with receivers a focal point

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — In an NFL draft focused early on stoppers, it was the goers — wide receivers — who stole the spotlight Thursday night.

Not simply prospects, either.

Yes, the first five selections came on the defensive side of the ball, including edge rushers Travon Walker of national champion Georgia to Jacksonville and Aidan Hutchinson of Michigan to Detroit at Nos. 1 and 2. It was the first time in 31 years that no player on offense went in the opening five picks.

So, naturally, the next five choices were on offense. And those kept coming: right through No. 12.

And the theme throughout the first 20 picks was to get guys who could catch the ball — including Philadelphia acquiring standout A.J. Brown from the Titans, and Arizona getting veteran Marquise Brown from the Ravens.

"The more playmakers we can have, the better," Cardinals coach Kliff Kingsbury said.

In all, six of the opening 18 selections were wideouts, starting with Southern California's Drake London at No. 8 to Atlanta. He'll team with tight end Kyle Pitts, the Falcons' first-rounder in 2021, on a rebuilding attack.

"I mean it's just two big dudes out there on the perimeter," London said. "... Obviously, I've got to earn my stripes to get out there on the field with him."

No quarterbacks went until 20th, when Pitt's Kenny Pickett found out he can simply switch to another side of the practice facility as he joins the Steelers and perhaps become Ben Roethlisberger's successor.

But this is a draft rich with linemen and defensive backs as well as wideouts.

The 6-foot-5, 275-pound Walker, who has some raw elements to his game but an extremely high ceiling for his skills, joins former Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence as the second straight top overall selection by the Jaguars.

"I'm definitely prepared for it, being the No. 1 pick," Walker said. "I have to say there's a lot of expectations behind that, but it's just the game of football to me."

Walker was a one-year starter whose production (13 tackles for loss and 9 1/2 sacks) doesn't jump out because he was part of a deep rotation at Georgia. His talent level certainly impressed the Jaguars, the NFL's worst team the past two years.

"He's an athletic freak," Georgia defensive coordinator Will Muschamp told The Associated Press. "I swear to God he could line up at middle linebacker and go be fine. I would take him at No. 1 and not even blink."

The Jaguars didn't blink.

Commissioner Roger Goodell began the proceedings by estimating more than 100,000 fans were on hand at the theater built specifically for the draft. Walker was not in Las Vegas.

Hutchinson, a sack-master whose consistency and relentlessness helped the Wolverines to their first College Football Playoff, is staying home as a pro. The 6-foot-6, 265-pounder whose father Chris was a star player at Michigan in the 1990s, was the Heisman Trophy runner-up last season.

"I always wanted to be at Detroit. I'm grateful to be a Lion," he said.

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Cornerbacks Derek Stingley Jr. and Ahmad "Sauce" Gardner went next, to the Texans and Jets, respectively.

LSU's Stingley is the grandson of former Patriots receiver Darryl Stingley, who was paralyzed in a 1978 preseason game. Gardner, of Cincinnati, was a major reason the Bearcats broke through into the College Football Playoff last season. He wore a brash bejeweled necklace proclaiming his nickname, and even an accessorized chain with a bejeweled sauce bottle.

"I know I'm going to be a great teammate and I'm going to be a sponge, somebody that's able to take information from everyone and not feeling like I'm too good for anyone," Gardner said. "Just being a hard worker."

The defensive run concluded with Oregon edge rusher Kayvon Thibodeaux to the New York Giants.

"I'm at this nirvana. I'm at peace," he said, noting that Hall of Famer Michael Strahan has been a mentor. "It's put up or shut up."

When teams got around to the other side of the ball, they couldn't stop. It began with North Carolina State tackle Ikem Ekwonu to Carolina and Alabama tackle Evan Neal to the Giants. Both teams are needy, to say the least, up front.

"It feels good legacy-wise," Ekwonu said. "You know, kind of cemented myself in history of this draft class. I know this class is gonna be special."

He loved the idea of staying in Carolina.

"My mom cried the second I picked the phone up," Ekwonu said. "Honestly, it was just like surreal. Growing up being a Panthers fan and being able to play on a team that you grew up being a fan is really almost like a movie almost. It's crazy."

Seattle went for tackle Charles Cross of Mississippi State at No. 9. Then came three more receivers: Garrett Wilson of Ohio State to the Jets and college teammate Chris Olave to New Orleans, which traded up with Washington for the 11th slot; and Alabama's Jameson Williams, coming off a serious knee injury, to Detroit, which moved up in a deal with division-rival Minnesota.

Another Georgia standout, defensive tackle Jordan Davis, was taken by Philadelphia at 13 after yet another deal, getting matters back to the defensive side. Later on, linebacker Quay Walker of the Bulldogs went to Green Bay, as did teammate Devante Wyatt. It's the first time four players from the same defense went so early. And it became five when Minnesota concluded the dizzying first round by getting Georgia safety Lewis Cine.

The Jets got three players when they traded back into the first round to get the 26th spot from Tennessee once they saw Florida State edge rusher Jermaine Johnson slipped. Johnson previously had been at Georgia.

Penn State's Jahan Dotson joined the receiving parade, going to Washington at No. 16, then the Titans added Arkansas WR Treyton Burks with the pick acquired for A.J. Brown.

"I think it's a really valuable position," Wilson said. "And I think the league is starting to show that in drafts and in the offseason. Being a receiver, I love to see it. You see people like Tyreek Hill and Davante Adams, I mean those people, they change offenses. You know, Ja'Marr Chase, they change offenses, and I'm happy that receivers are starting to get that love."

While passers went in the initial three spots of 2021, there was some thought none would go in the first round this year. But Pickett fell to the Steelers, which sure seems like a comfortable fit for both player and team.

Pickett came back for a fifth season and that decision certainly paid off. He took Pitt to its first ACC title.

Just after Pickett was, uh, picked, two players who were projected by many as second-rounders were chosen: Quay Walker and tackle Tyler Smith to Tulsa. So the Packers did not get an offensive helper for league MVP Aaron Rodgers on Thursday, but the Cowboys addressed a fading offensive line.

AFC champion Cincinnati got Michigan safety Dax Hill before Minnesota kept the Georgia connection going by taking Cine.

No wonder the Bulldogs won the national championship.

Overall 12 SEC players were chosen, with seven from the Big Ten, four from the ACC and Pac-12 each,

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and two from the AAC. There were two FCS players — Northern Iowa tackle Trevor Penning to New Orleans, Chattanooga guard Cole Strange to New England — and one from Notre Dame, safety Kyle Hamilton to Baltimore.

Georgia had its five defenders, while Michigan, Alabama and Ohio State each had two first-rounders.

Heat wave scorches India's wheat crop, snags export plans

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — An unusually early, record-shattering heat wave in India has reduced wheat yields, raising questions about how the country will balance its domestic needs with ambitions to increase exports and make up for shortfalls due to Russia's war in Ukraine.

Gigantic landfills in India's capital New Delhi have caught fire in recent weeks. Schools in eastern Indian state Odisha have been shut for a week and in neighboring West Bengal, schools are stocking up on oral rehydration salts for kids. On Tuesday, Rajgarh, a city of over 1.5 million people in central India, was the country's hottest, with daytime temperatures peaking at 46.5 degrees Celsius (114.08 Fahrenheit). Temperatures breached the 45 C (113 F) mark in nine other cities.

But it was the heat in March — the hottest in India since records first started being kept in 1901 — that stunted crops. Wheat is very sensitive to heat, especially during the final stage when its kernels mature and ripen. Indian farmers time their planting so that this stage coincides with India's usually cooler spring.

Climate change has made India's heat wave hotter, said Friederike Otto, a climate scientist at the Imperial College of London. She said that before human activities increased global temperatures, heat waves like this year's would have struck India once in about half a century.

"But now it is a much more common event — we can expect such high temperatures about once in every four years," she said.

India's vulnerability to extreme heat increased 15% from 1990 to 2019, according to a 2021 report by the medical journal *The Lancet*. It is among the top five countries where vulnerable people, like the old and the poor, have the highest exposure to heat. It and Brazil have the the highest heat-related mortality in the world, the report said.

Farm workers like Baldev Singh are among the most vulnerable. Singh, a farmer in Sangrur in northern India's Punjab state, watched his crop shrivel before his eyes as an usually cool spring quickly shifted to unrelenting heat. He lost about a fifth of his yield. Others lost more.

"I am afraid the worst is yet to come," Singh said.

Punjab is India's "grain bowl" and the government has encouraged cultivation of wheat and rice here since the 1960s. It is typically the biggest contributor to India's national reserves and the government had hoped to buy about a third of this year's stock from the region. But government assessments predict lower yields this year, and Devinder Sharma, an agriculture policy expert in northern Chandigarh city, said he expected to get 25% less.

The story is the same in other major wheat-producing states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

Overall, India purchased over 43 million metric tons (47.3 million U.S. tons) of wheat in 2021. Sharma estimates it will instead get 20% to nearly 50% less.

Even though it is the world's second-largest producer of wheat, India exports only a small fraction of its harvest. It had been looking to capitalize on the global disruption to wheat supplies from Russia's war in Ukraine and find new markets for its wheat in Europe, Africa, and Asia.

That looks uncertain given the tricky balance the government must maintain between demand and supply. It needs about 25 million tons (27.5 million U.S. tons) of wheat for the vast food welfare program that usually feeds more than 80 million people.

Before the pandemic, India had vast stocks that far exceeded its domestic needs — a buffer against the risk of famine.

Those reserves have been strained, Sharma said, by distribution of free grain during the pandemic to about 800 million people — vulnerable groups like migrant workers. The program was extended until

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September but it's unclear if it will continue beyond then.

"We are no longer with that kind of a surplus . . . with exports now picking up, there would be a lot of pressure on the domestic availability of wheat," Sharma said.

India's federal agriculture and commerce ministries didn't respond to questions sent to them via email.

Beyond India, other countries are also grappling with poor harvests that hinder their ability to help offset the potential shortfall of supplies from Russia and Ukraine, normally the world's largest and fifth-largest exporters of wheat.

China's agriculture minister, Tang Renjian, said last month that the winter wheat harvest was likely to be poor, hindered by flooding and by delays in planting.

EXPLAINER: Why US needs a law to sell off oligarchs' assets

By FATIMA HUSSEIN and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden doesn't want to just seize the yachts, luxury homes and other assets of Russian oligarchs, he wants to sell off the pricey goods and use the money to help rebuild Ukraine.

He's asking Congress to streamline the process to allow that to happen.

In the latest attempt to pressure Russia to end its war and to pay for the enormous costs of defending Ukraine, the Biden administration on Thursday called on Congress to enhance U.S. authority to liquidate assets seized from Russian elites — the "bad guys," as Biden called them.

A look at what's afoot:

WHAT'S ALREADY BEING DONE?

The House on Wednesday passed the Asset Seizure for Ukraine Reconstruction Act, with only four lawmakers voting against the measure. The bill, which now goes to the Senate, would allow the president to confiscate and liquidate property owned by sanctioned individuals. The money could only be used for specific purposes.

The package that Biden sent to Congress goes further to create a new criminal offense, making it unlawful for anyone to knowingly own proceeds directly obtained from corrupt dealings with the Russian government. Additionally, property used to facilitate sanctions violations would also be eligible for seizure.

The White House says the new tools make sanctions more difficult to evade and the administration said it wants to use the money "to remediate harms of Russian aggression toward Ukraine."

WHY DOES THE GOVERNMENT NEED LEGISLATION?

Under current federal law, only the Justice Department has the authority to determine how seized funds can be spent. And there are strict rules on who can benefit from seized proceeds. The Biden administration wants to make it easier for officials to decide how to use the proceeds of the blocked and seized property.

The White House proposal also wants to make forfeiture decisions reviewable in federal court on an expedited basis.

Ryan Fayhee, a former Justice Department prosecutor who now works in private practice on sanctions cases, said that because of the nature of the U.S. sanctions program, "we could see a lot of lawsuits as there's a process one could take to challenge the forfeiture itself and they absolutely will," anticipating sanctioned oligarchs' future litigation.

HOW MUCH HAS ALREADY BEEN SEIZED?

The White House says the Treasury Department has sanctioned and blocked vessels and aircraft worth over \$1 billion, and has frozen bank accounts containing hundreds of millions of dollars of assets belonging to Russian elites. During a House committee hearing Thursday, the Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network's acting director, Himamauli Das, said the agency has received 2,000 suspicious activity reports connected to Russian oligarchs. Of those, 271 were forwarded to intelligence and law enforcement and Treasury's sanctions arm.

HOW CAN THE MONEY FROM SEIZED ASSETS BE USED?

Among other proposals, the administration's package extends the statute of limitations of money laundering investigations based on foreign crimes from five years to 10 years, adds sanctions evasion to the definition of "racketeering activity" in the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act and would

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enhance the government's powers to work with other countries to recover assets linked to foreign corruption.

The House-passed Asset Seizure proposal is more limited than the president's proposal, where confiscated funds could only be used for specific purposes, including post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine, support for Ukrainian refugees, weapons for Ukraine's military and humanitarian support for the Russian people.

Additionally, the administration could only seize assets, within two years of the bill's enactment, if Russia remains engaged in its invasion of Ukraine, the president has imposed sanctions on the owner of the assets due to the ongoing conflict and the assets are worth more than \$5 million.

Attorneys have said the process of actually liquidating and using the funds could take years.

WHAT ABOUT RUSSIAN CENTRAL BANK ASSETS?

The package that Biden sent to Congress does not address Russian Central Bank assets.

However Russia's more than \$600 billion foreign reserve fund has been frozen by the U.S. and its allies.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said last week that the prospect of using frozen Russian Central Bank funds to support Ukraine should be considered but "I wouldn't want to do so lightly," adding that it would have to be done in consensus with U.S. allies and partners.

In a virtual address to International Monetary Fund and World Bank leaders last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the proceeds of sanctioned property and Central Bank reserves should be used to compensate Ukraine for its losses.

HOW WOULD THE NEW LAW ON PROCEEDS FROM CORRUPT DEALINGS WORK?

The Justice Department and Treasury are already targeting the assets of Russian oligarchs who they say have evaded sanctions, including a 254-foot yacht that was in Spain and owned by an oligarch with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said Thursday that the Justice Department's task force focusing on Russian oligarchs — known as KleptoCapture — anticipates taking on "at least 30 complex investigations over time."

In order for the Justice Department to seize a yacht, prosecutors must first spell out their case and obtain a seizure warrant from a federal judge. The U.S. government would then need to pay to maintain, transport and dock the mega yachts until they can be sold off at auction.

The funds from the sale flow into the Justice Department's asset forfeiture fund.

The government wants to use some of the forfeiture funds to support Ukraine, though the law doesn't currently easily allow for that to happen, Garland said at a House subcommittee hearing on Thursday.

2022 NFL Draft | First round features 5 Georgia defenders

By The Associated Press undefined

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The Latest on the NFL draft.

The first round of the NFL draft began and ended with the selections of former University of Georgia defenders.

The Minnesota Vikings drafted safety Lewis Cine with the final pick of the first round which began with Jacksonville selecting edge rusher Travon Walker.

In between, former Georgia defenders Jordan Davis went to the Eagles at No. 10 and Quay Walker and Devonte Wyatt were selected by the Green Bay Packers with picks 22 and 28, respectively.

The Bulldogs won the national championship on the strength of their defense.

The previous record was four defenders taken from the same school in the first round in 2004 (Miami) and 2006 (Florida State).

The Green Bay Packers have become the first team in the common draft era ever to select two players from the same school in the first round.

The Packers selected former University of Georgia teammates Quay Walker with the 22nd pick and Devonte Wyatt with the 28th selection.

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Four members of the national champion Bulldogs defense have been selected in the first round, tying for the most ever.

Former Georgia edge rusher Travon Walker was the first overall pick by Jacksonville and ex-Bulldogs defensive tackle Jordan Davis was the 13th overall pick.

The other schools that had four defensive players selected in the first round are the University of Miami in 2004 and Florida State University in 2006.

The New York Jets are loading up on first-round draft picks.

They moved up to No. 26 in a trade with the Tennessee Titans on Thursday night and selected Florida State defensive end Jermaine Johnson II.

The Jets also selected former University of Cincinnati cornerback Ahmad "Sauce" Gardner with the fourth overall pick and Ohio State wide receiver Garrett Wilson with the 10th overall pick.

Johnson had 70 tackles, including 18 for loss and a dozen tackles for Florida State last season. He was part of the University of Georgia's loaded defense until transferring to the Seminoles in 2021.

Three members of Georgia's defense that led the Bulldogs to the national championship have been selected in the first round of the NFL draft so far.

The Green Bay Packers selected linebacker Quay Walker at No. 22 sandwiched around picks of Washington cornerback Trent McDuffie by the Chiefs at 21 and cornerback Kaiir Elam of Florida by the Bills at No. 23.

The Jacksonville Jaguars selected Georgia edge rusher Travon Walker with the top overall pick and the Philadelphia Eagles drafted Georgia defensive tackle Jordan Davis at No. 13.

The most defensive players selected from one school is four set by the University of Miami in 2004 and tied by Florida State two years later.

Finally, a quarterback has been selected in the 2022 NFL draft.

The Pittsburgh Steelers selected University of Pittsburgh quarterback Kenny Pickett with the 20th overall selection Thursday night.

The Steelers were in the market for a quarterback after Ben Roethlisberger retired after last season.

Pickett set school records with 12,303 yards passing and 81 touchdowns, but his hand size — he measured 8 5/8 inches at his pro day after measuring 8 1/2 inches at the NFL combine — concerned some teams.

For the first time ever, six wide receivers have been selected in the top 20 picks of the first round.

The latest are Penn State's Jahan Dotson to Washington at No. 16 and Arkansas' Treyton Burks to Tennessee at No. 18.

The Titans traded former Pro Bowl receiver A.J. Brown to the Philadelphia Eagles to move up to the 18th pick.

Before that, the Texans selected Texas A&M guard Kenyon Green at No. 15, Baltimore took Notre Dame safety Kyle Hamilton at No. 14 and Philadelphia selected Georgia defensive tackle Jordan Davis with the 13th pick.

Picks 10, 11 and 12 were all pass catchers, starting with Garrett Wilson to the New York Jets at No. 10. USC's Drake London was the first wide receiver off the board when the Falcons selected him with the eighth overall pick.

There's a run on wide receivers in the NFL draft.

Picks 10, 11 and 12 were all pass catchers, starting with Garrett Wilson to the New York Jets at No. 10. His skills on sideline passes, plus breakaway speed and an ability to find the end zone all should help a young offense.

Wilson's Ohio State teammate Chris Olave went next to the Saints after New Orleans swapped picks with Washington, which got New Orleans' pick at No. 16.

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The Lions moved up to 12 as they swapped picks with Minnesota and they selected Alabama wide receiver Jameson Williams, who played with Olave and Wilson in 2020 at Ohio State before transferring to the Crimson Tide.

Los Angeles Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert will visit Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs on Sept. 15 in the first game on Amazon Prime Video's "Thursday Night Football" package.

The Week 2 matchup between AFC West rivals was announced on Thursday during the first round of the NFL draft.

Amazon will pay \$1 billion a season to carry the games for 11 years. Prime Video will carry 15 regular-season and one preseason game. The league announced last week that the complete schedule will be released on May 12. However, international games will be revealed on May 4 with other notable matchups being announced the week of May 9.

Seattle has addressed issues on its offensive line with Mississippi tackle Charles Cross at ninth overall in the first round of the NFL draft.

With good size and length at 6-foot-5, 310, Cross is considered by some scouts the best pass blocker in this draft. The Seahawks like to emphasize the run and probably will need to with quarterback Russell Wilson now in Denver, but Cross is a quick learner.

The Jets used the 10th spot to add to their receiving group with Garrett Wilson of Ohio State. His skills on sideline passes, plus breakaway speed and an ability to find the end zone all should help a young offense.

Wilson caught 23 touchdown passes in 33 games with 19 starts.

Receiver Drake London of Southern California, built like a basketball player at 6-foot-5, 210, but truly a football guy, has been taken eighth overall by Atlanta.

The Falcons, who traded veteran quarterback Matt Ryan to Indianapolis in this offseason, are weak at wideout. London joins pass-catching tight end Kyle Pitts, Atlanta's first choice of 2021, in offering versatility and a wide catch radius.

Not considered a deep threat, he could wind up often in the slot. London had his '21 season shortened by a right ankle fracture.

He is the first receiver taken in what is considered a very deep group at the position.

Evan Neal, a mammoth 6-foot-7, 335-pounder who has played both tackle positions at Alabama, is the second opening-round pick by the Giants. He's likely to fit right in with a line that has been a weakness in New York for years.

Neal improved throughout his stay with the Crimson Tide, and his explosion off the snap is exemplary. He started 40 games and missed only one in his three-year career, which ended as an All-American.

He joins edge rusher Kayvon Thibodeaux of Oregon, whom the Giants took fifth overall.

The Giants got this spot in a trade last year with Chicago, which took quarterback Justin Fields.

North Carolina State's Ikem Ekwonu, considered the premier blocker in this draft, has been selected sixth in the first round by quarterback-hungry Carolina.

He is the first offensive player chosen. It's the first draft since 1991 that no player on offense went in the top five.

Using long arms and mobility at 6-foot-4, 310 pounds, Ekwonu has been a team leader for the Wolfpack. He should start immediately at tackle for the Panthers — and whomever is their starting QB.

Nicknamed "Ickey" after former Bengals running back Ickey Woods by a youth football coach, Ekwonu can get too aggressive at times and had 10 penalties in his career. He probably had three times as many pancake blocks.

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Edge rusher Kayvon Thibodeaux of Oregon will be bolstering the pass rush for the New York Giants after being chosen fifth overall in the NFL draft.

Thibodeaux, whose burst off the ball is spectacular, is the fifth straight defensive player taken at the top of these selections. The 6-foot-5, 258-pound mainstay of the Ducks regressed a bit since a terrific freshman season, and dealt with injuries.

But New York, which needs help on the offensive line, saw an opportunity for a disrupter on defense knowing there are plenty of blockers still available.

Ahmad Gardner is bringing the Sauce to the Big Apple.

The Cincinnati cornerback, a major reason the Bearcats broke through into the College Football Playoff last season, has been selected fourth overall by the New York Jets. He wore a brash bejeweled necklace proclaiming his nickname, and even an accessorized chain with a bejeweled sauce bottle.

"I'm the best cornerback in this draft," Gardner noted this week. He went second behind LSU's Derek Stingley Jr., but the Jets certainly liked him, knowing Gardner did not allow a TD reception in his three-year college career.

Derek Stingley Jr., yet another outstanding defensive back from LSU, has been selected third overall by the Houston Texans.

The 6-foot-1, 195-pound Stingley, who excels in man coverage, was an All-American as a freshman, but injuries, including to his foot in 2021, led to lesser numbers last season.

Still, the grandson of former Patriots receiver Darryl Stingley, who was paralyzed in a 1978 preseason game, has been a coveted cornerback throughout this draft process.

And the Texans need help everywhere.

Michigan's Aidan Hutchinson, a sack-master whose consistency and relentlessness helped the Wolverines to their first College Football Playoff, is the second overall pick in the NFL draft, by Detroit.

Yes, Hutchinson is staying home as a pro.

The 6-foot-6, 265-pound edge rusher, whose father Chris was a star player at Michigan in the 1990s, was the Heisman Trophy runner-up last season.

He said this week in Las Vegas that he "couldn't wait until the process is over and I get back to ball." He'll do so for one of the league's worst teams in recent seasons.

Edge rusher Travon Walker of national champion Georgia, a dynamic playmaker combining speed and athleticism, is the first overall pick in the NFL draft by Jacksonville.

The 6-foot-5, 275-pound Walker, who has some raw elements to his game but an extremely high ceiling for his skills, joins former Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence as the second straight top overall selection by the Jaguars.

Walker, one of several Bulldogs likely to be chosen in the opening round, was a one-year starter whose production (13 tackles for loss and 9 1/2 sacks) doesn't jump out because he was part of a deep rotation at Georgia. His talent level certainly impressed the Jaguars, the NFL's worst team the past two years.

Commissioner Roger Goodell began the proceedings by estimating more than 100,000 fans were on hand at the theater built specifically for the draft. Walker was not in Las Vegas.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says the league's competition committee has pondered an NBA-like lottery system for its annual draft but he likes it just the way it is.

In a draft-night interview with SiriusXM NFL Radio, host Pat Kirwan asked the commissioner if the league has ever considered a lottery system.

Goodell replied: "Yeah, the competition committee talks about it on a ... regular basis. I haven't heard it in the last couple years, but I never say never about any of those things. It may come a time where we

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think it's appropriate."

Goodell emphasized that the league believes the draft is working fine just the way it is with teams picking in reserve order of finish from the previous season.

Goodell says the NFL's 32 teams are "not into tanking" and that the "league's never been more competitive."

Aidan Hutchinson carried out a sweet surprise for his mother on draft day, gifting a Leo Frost-designed necklace with a dog tag to honor her grandfather and World War II veteran.

He handed Melissa Hutchinson the jewelry on Thursday at the Delano Hotel before hearing his name called at the NFL draft.

The former Michigan defensive tackle also had a matching necklace and dog tag created for himself. His full name is Aidan Joseph Bernardi Hutchinson with middle names that honor his late great-grandfather, who was part of the World War II jungle fighting unit known as "Merrill's Marauders."

Hutchinson wore Joseph Bernardi's dog tag against Ohio State during his freshman year, but was afraid of losing it and didn't wear the memento in a game again. Melissa Hutchinson had her grandfather's dog tag with her at every game the Wolverines played the past three seasons.

Some teams, including the Jets and Giants, will be particularly busy in the NFL draft Thursday night.

A record eight teams own two first-round picks. That's one more than the previous high of seven set four times before, including in 2019 and 2020.

The Jets have the fourth and 10th overall selections and the Giants own the fifth and the seventh overall picks.

The Texans are picking third and 13th.

The Eagles have picks 15 and 18.

The Saints own selections 16 and 19.

The Packers are picking 22nd and 28th.

The Chiefs own back-to-back picks at 29 and 30.

And the Lions own the second selection and the 32nd and final pick of Round 1, which they acquired from the Rams last year in the Matthew Stafford trade.

The Seattle Seahawks paid tribute to longtime NFL journalist John Clayton, leaving a designated spot in the team's draft media room on Thursday night.

Clayton died in March after a short illness at age 67. Nicknamed "The Professor," Clayton spent more than two decades covering the Pittsburgh Steelers for The Pittsburgh Press and the Seattle Seahawks for The News Tribune in Tacoma. Clayton moved to ESPN and spent more than 20 years working for the network. In recent years, Clayton worked for the Seahawks radio network on gameday broadcasts.

Clayton was awarded with what is now known as the Bill Nunn Memorial Award by the Professional Football Writers of America in 2007. The award is presented annually for long and distinguished reporting on football.

The NFL draft is kicking off in Las Vegas on Thursday night and a record eight teams won't make their first selections until Friday night unless they trade back into the first round.

The teams without first-round picks are the Rams, Bears, Browns, Broncos, Colts, Raiders, Dolphins and 49ers.

The Seahawks traded away their first-round pick last year, but jumped back into the first round in the blockbuster Russell Wilson trade with Denver last month.

Also this offseason:

— The Browns traded three first-rounders to Houston for quarterback Deshaun Watson.

— The Raiders traded a first- and a second-rounder to Green Bay for wide receiver Davante Adams.

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— And the Dolphins traded their 2022 first-rounder and four other picks to Kansas City for wide receiver Tyreek Hill.

Musk sells \$4B in Tesla shares, presumably for Twitter deal

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Elon Musk has sold 4.4 million shares of Tesla stock worth roughly \$4 billion, most likely to help fund his purchase of Twitter.

Musk reported the sale in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission on Thursday. The shares were sold over the past few days, at prices ranging from \$872.02 to \$999.13.

The world's richest man, who is the CEO of Tesla, tweeted that he doesn't plan any further sales of the company's shares.

Most of the sales took place on Tuesday, when Tesla shares closed down 12%, a huge single-day drop.

Analysts said Tesla investors fear Musk will be distracted by Twitter and less engaged in running the electric car company. Twitter agreed to be acquired by Musk on Monday for \$44 billion.

It appeared that Musk would borrow up to \$25.5 billion from a slew of banks to pay for the takeover of Twitter, but the stock sale potentially could fund some of that.

The deal to buy Twitter at \$54.20 per share was announced earlier this week and is expected to close sometime this year. But before the deal is completed, shareholders will have to weigh in. So will regulators in the U.S. and in countries where Twitter does business.

So far though, few hurdles are expected, despite objections from some of Twitter's own employees and from users who worry about Musk's stance on free speech and what it might mean for harassment and hate speech on the platform.

Tesla shares closed Thursday down slightly at \$877.51. They are down 17% so far this year.

Oklahoma House sends Texas-style abortion ban to governor

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press Writer

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — The Oklahoma House gave final approval Thursday to a Texas-style abortion ban that prohibits the procedure after about six weeks of pregnancy, before many women know they are pregnant.

The bill approved by the GOP-led House without discussion or debate now heads to Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt, who is expected to sign it within days. The assault on abortion rights is one of several culture-war issues conservatives in GOP-led states have embraced, like restricting LGBTQ rights, that drive the party's base in an election year.

A coalition of Oklahoma abortion providers and abortion rights advocates immediately filed separate legal challenges in state court to both the Texas-style ban and a separate bill Stitt signed earlier this month to make abortion a felony. Legal experts say it's likely both measures could be temporarily halted before they take effect.

House members also voted Thursday to adopt new language prohibiting transgender students from using school restrooms that match their gender identity and requiring parental notification ahead of any classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.

"They're all concerned about their elections coming up and making sure they have something they can put on a postcard to talk about," said Rep. Andy Fugate, D-Midwest City.

The abortion bill, dubbed the Oklahoma Heartbeat Act, prohibits the procedure once cardiac activity can be detected in an embryo, which experts say is roughly six weeks into a pregnancy. A similar bill approved in Texas last year led to a dramatic reduction in the number of abortions performed in that state, with many women going to Oklahoma and other surrounding states for the procedure.

Like the Texas law, the Oklahoma bill would allow private citizens to sue abortion providers or anyone who helps a woman obtain an abortion for up to \$10,000. After the U.S. Supreme Court allowed that mechanism to remain in place, other Republican-led states sought to copy Texas' ban. Idaho's governor signed the

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first copycat measure in March, although it has been temporarily blocked by the state's Supreme Court. Although Stitt already signed a bill this year to make performing an abortion a felony crime in Oklahoma, that measure is not set to take effect until this summer. But the ban approved by the House on a 68-12 vote Thursday has an "emergency" provision that allows it to take effect immediately after the governor signs it.

Abortion providers say it will immediately end most abortions in Oklahoma unless a court intervenes. "The Oklahoma Supreme Court has repeatedly found that the state legislature's extreme attempts to restrict abortion are unconstitutional, and these bans are some of the most extreme yet," Nancy Northup, president of the Center for Reproductive Rights, said in a statement.

A separate bill that uses the Texas-style enforcement mechanism to ban all abortions, not just after cardiac activity is detected, passed the Senate on Thursday and heads to the House for consideration. The bills are among more than a half-dozen anti-abortion measures introduced in the Legislature this year.

"We are more concerned at this point about these Texas-style bans because they have, at least recently, been able to continue and remain in effect," said Emily Wales, interim president and CEO at Planned Parenthood Great Plains, which operates two abortion clinics in Oklahoma. "We do intend to challenge those if they're passed, but because of the emergency clause provisions, there would be at least some period of time when we could not offer care."

Before the Texas ban took effect last year, about 40 women from Texas had abortions performed in Oklahoma each month, according to data from the Oklahoma State Department of Health. That number jumped to 222 Texas women in September and 243 in October, the agency reported.

"We're serving as many Texans as Oklahomans right now, in some cases more Texans than Oklahomans," Wales said.

Tony Lauinger, the chairman of Oklahomans for Life and a longtime anti-abortion advocate in the state, said he's optimistic the measure will be deemed constitutional.

"It's identical to the bill that was enacted by the Texas Legislature last year, and that bill has passed muster with the United States Supreme Court," Lauinger said. "We are hopeful that this bill will save the lives of more unborn children here in Oklahoma as well."

British Virgin Islands premier arrested on US drug charges

By DAVID FISCHER Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The premier of the British Virgin Islands and the director of the Caribbean territory's ports were arrested Thursday on drug smuggling charges in South Florida, federal authorities said.

Premier Andrew Alturo Fahie and Managing Director Oleanvine Maynard were taken into custody by U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents at Miami-Opa-locka Executive Airport and charged with conspiracy to import cocaine and conspiracy to launder money, according to a criminal complaint. Maynard's son, Kadeem Maynard, faces the same charges in the alleged scheme, according to the records.

"Anyone involved with bringing dangerous drugs into the United States will be held accountable, no matter their position," DEA Administrator Anne Milgram said in a statement. "Today is yet another example of DEA's resolve to hold corrupt members of government responsible for using their positions of power to provide a safe haven for drug traffickers and money launderers in exchange for their own financial and political gain."

Fahie and Oleanvine Maynard had been at the airport to meet Mexican drug traffickers, who in reality were undercover DEA agents, to see a shipment of \$700,000 in cash that BVI officials expected to receive for helping smuggle cocaine from Colombia to Miami and New York, the complaint said.

A DEA confidential source had previously met with Maynard and her son after being introduced by a group of self-proclaimed Lebanese Hezbollah operatives, according to the complaint. After Fahie became involved, it said, the BVI officials agreed to let the smugglers bring the cocaine through the port at Tortola before continuing on to the U.S.

Governor Of The British Virgin Islands John Rankin released a statement clarifying that Thursday's arrests

in Florida were not connected to a Commission of Inquiry issued last year in the territory. That investigation was meant to focus on governance and corruption, not a criminal investigation into the illegal drug trade, Rankin said in a statement posted online.

It isn't known whether the commission had found any suspected wrongdoing by Fahie or Maynard, but Rankin said he expects to have the results published urgently to avoid unnecessary speculation.

The British Virgin Islands, with a population about 35,000 people, is a British Overseas Territory in the Caribbean Sea, located east of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The governor is appointed by the queen, the territory's ultimate executive authority, and acts on her behalf. The premier is the head of the government and is elected in a general election along with the other members of the ruling government.

Explosions rock Kyiv again as Russians rain fire on Ukraine

By DAVID KEYTON and INNA VARENYTSIA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia pounded targets from practically one end of Ukraine to the other Thursday, including Kyiv, bombarding the city while the head of the United Nations was visiting in the boldest attack on the capital since Moscow's forces retreated weeks ago.

Nearly a dozen people were wounded in the attack on Kyiv, including one who lost a leg and others who were trapped in the rubble when two buildings were hit, rescue officials said.

The bombardment came barely an hour after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy held a news conference with U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, who said Ukraine has become "an epicenter of unbearable heartache and pain." A spokesperson said Guterres and his team were safe.

Meanwhile, explosions were reported across the country, in Polonne in the west, Chernihiv near the border with Belarus, and Fastiv, a large railway hub southwest of the capital. The mayor of Odesa, in southern Ukraine, said rockets were intercepted by air defenses.

Ukrainian authorities also reported intense Russian fire in the Donbas — the eastern industrial heartland that the Kremlin says is its main objective — and near Kharkiv, a northeastern city outside the Donbas that is seen as key to the offensive.

In the ruined southern port city of Mariupol, Ukrainian fighters holed up in the steel plant that represents the last pocket of resistance said concentrated bombing overnight killed and wounded more people. And authorities warned that a lack of safe drinking water inside the city could lead to outbreaks of deadly diseases such as cholera and dysentery.

In Zaporizhzhia, a crucial way station for tens of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing Mariupol, an 11-year-old boy was among at least three people wounded in a rocket attack that authorities said was the first to hit a residential area in the southern city since the war began. Shards of glass cut the boy's leg to the bone.

Vadym Vodostoyev, the boy's father, said: "It just takes one second and you're left with nothing."

The fresh attacks came as Guterres surveyed the destruction in small towns outside the capital that saw some of the worst horrors of the first onslaught of the war. He condemned the atrocities committed in towns like Bucha, where evidence of mass killings of civilians was found after Russia withdrew in early April in the face of unexpectedly stiff resistance.

"Wherever there is a war, the highest price is paid by civilians," the U.N. chief lamented.

Separately, Ukraine's prosecutor accused 10 Russian soldiers of being "involved in the torture of peaceful people" in Bucha. Prosecutor General Iryna Venediktova did not say her office had filed criminal charges, and she appealed to the public for help in gathering evidence. Russia denies it targets civilians.

During his nightly video address, Zelenskyy renewed his pledge to hold Russian soldiers accountable for crimes they commit and said about the 10 identified earlier Thursday: "Some of them may not, after all, live until a trial and fair punishment. But only for one reason: This Russian brigade has been transferred to the Kharkiv region. There they'll receive retribution from our military."

In the attack on Kyiv, explosions shook the city and flames poured out of windows in at least two buildings — including a residential one — in the capital, which has been relatively unscathed in recent weeks. Ukrainian emergency services said 10 people were wounded in the attack, which sent plumes of smoke

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billowing over the city.

The explosions in northwestern Kyiv's Shevchenkivsky district came as residents have been increasingly returning to the city. Cafes and other businesses have reopened, and a growing numbers of people have been out and about, enjoying the spring weather.

It was not immediately clear how far away the attack was from Guterres.

Getting a full picture of the unfolding battle in the east has been difficult because airstrikes and artillery barrages have made it extremely dangerous for reporters to move around. Several journalists have been killed in the war, now in its third month.

Also, both Ukraine and the Moscow-backed rebels fighting in the east have introduced tight restrictions on reporting from the combat zone.

Western officials say the Kremlin's apparent goal is to take the Donbas by encircling and crushing Ukrainian forces from the north, south and east.

But so far, Russia's troops and their allied separatist forces appear to have made only minor gains, taking several small towns as they try to advance in relatively small groups against staunch Ukrainian resistance.

Russian military units were mauled in the abortive bid to storm Kyiv and had to regroup and refit. Some analysts say the delay in launching a full-fledged offensive may reflect a decision by Russian President Vladimir Putin to wait until his forces are ready for a decisive battle, instead of rushing in and risking another failure that could shake his rule amid worsening economic conditions at home because of Western sanctions.

Many observers suspect Putin wants to be able to claim a big victory in the east by Victory Day, on May 9, one of the proudest holidays on the Russian calendar, marking the defeat of Nazi Germany during World War II.

As Russia presses its offensive, civilians again bear the brunt.

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

Ukraine's military said that Russian troops were subjecting several places in the Donbas to "intense fire" and that over the past 24 hours, Ukrainian forces had repelled six attacks in the region.

Four civilians were killed in heavy shelling of residential areas in the Luhansk region of the Donbas, according to the regional governor.

Columns of smoke could be seen rising at different points across the Donetsk region of the Donbas, and artillery and sirens were heard on and off.

Many of the Russian troops who were in Mariupol have been leaving and moving to the northwest, a senior U.S. defense official said Thursday. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the U.S. military assessment, didn't have exact numbers but said a "significant number" of the roughly one dozen battalion tactical groups that were in the city were moving out.

Russian forces are making slow, incremental progress in the Donbas — gaining only several kilometers on any given day, the official said. As of Thursday, Russia had launched about 1,900 missiles into Ukraine — the vast majority fired from outside Ukraine's borders. Most are strikes on Mariupol and the Donbas.

In Mariupol, video posted online by Ukraine's Azov Regiment inside the steel plant showed people combing through the rubble to remove the dead and help the wounded. The regiment said the Russians hit an improvised underground hospital and its surgery room, killing an unspecified number of people. The video couldn't be independently verified.

An estimated 100,000 people remained trapped in Mariupol.

"Deadly epidemics may break out in the city due to the lack of centralized water supply and sewers," the city council said on the messaging app Telegram. It reported bodies decaying under the rubble and a "catastrophic" shortage of drinking water and food.

Ukraine has urged its allies to send even more military equipment to fend off the Russians. U.S. President Joe Biden asked Congress for an additional \$33 billion to help Ukraine.

'Carpool Karaoke' king James Corden leaving late-night show

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — James Corden said he will be bowing out of his late-night CBS TV show next year, calling it a "good time to move on and see what else might be out there."

Corden announced his decision during the taping of Thursday's "The Late Late Show," which he began hosting in 2015.

"When I started this journey, it was always going to be just that. It was going to be a journey, an adventure. I never saw it as my final destination, you know?" he said. "And I never want this show to overstay its welcome in any way. I always want to love making it."

Corden, who didn't offer details on what course his career might take next, said the late-night show "has changed my life. ... I am so proud of what we've achieved. It's been beyond my wildest, wildest dreams."

He'll remain with the show for another year, he said, promising that it will "go out with a bang" and, he predicted, with "so many tears."

In a statement, CBS President and CEO George Cheeks lauded Corden for taking "huge creative and comedic swings," including the "Carpool Karaoke" videos in which Corden and pop stars including Adele and Paul McCartney performed sing-alongs on the road.

Corden's contract was to expire this August, but the London-born actor and writer extended the agreement for another season. He will leave the show that airs weeknights at 12:37 a.m. Eastern in spring 2023.

"We wish he could stay longer, but we are very proud he made CBS his American home and that this partnership will extend one more season on 'The Late Late Show,'" Cheeks said.

The network had no further comment, including on who might replace Corden. The show's previous host was Craig Ferguson.

Corden was considered an unlikely pick when he was named host of "The Late Late Show." He'd starred in the British sitcom "Gavin & Stacey" and was a Tony Award winner in 2012 for his Broadway performance in "One Man, Two Guv'nors," but wasn't widely known by U.S. viewers.

"Carpool Karaoke" and other comedy segments including "Crosswalk the Musical" proved popular online, building Corden and the show's reach beyond its broadcast home.

He has foreshadowed his decision, including in a December 2020 podcast episode of "Smartless." Corden said he had "an overwhelming feeling that my family has walked to the beat of my drum for a very long time."

Corden said he didn't have an end date for the show in mind and that it would "always be a bigger family decision than a professional one. It will be about people who we miss very very much who we are homesick for."

Big US energy transmission projects inch closer to approval

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — The federal government has finished another environmental review of a proposed transmission line that will carry wind-generated electricity from rural New Mexico to big cities in the West and similar reviews are planned for two more projects that would span parts of Utah and Nevada, the U.S. Interior Department announced Thursday.

The regulatory steps came a day after the Biden administration announced a \$2.5 billion initiative to make the nation's power grid more effective at withstanding catastrophic disasters caused by climate change. It's also part of the administration's goal to create a carbon pollution-free power sector by 2035.

The SunZia transmission project in New Mexico has been more than a decade in the making. After an initial review over several years, the Bureau of Land Management authorized a right-of-way grant on federal lands.

That had to be revisited when developers in 2021 submitted a new application modifying the route after the U.S. Defense Department and others raised concerns about the path of the high-voltage lines.

A final decision on the right of way application is expected this summer, following a public comment period.

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The Biden administration is just the latest to promise speeding up development and modernization of the nation's energy infrastructure through expedited federal permitting and regulatory reforms. Former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump also vowed to roll back bureaucracy.

While the other two transmission projects are in the early stages of the regulatory process, the experience in New Mexico illustrates the complicated nature of getting electricity from remote areas to population centers.

The siting of hundreds of miles of transmission lines, power poles and electric substations often involve a checkerboard of private, state and federal land that sometimes include environmentally sensitive areas.

Federal officials said Thursday that the projects have the potential to move 10,000 megawatts of electricity generated by wind and solar resources.

"Transmission projects like those advanced today offer a promising path for diversifying our national energy portfolio and connecting more renewable energy, while at the same time combatting climate change and investing in communities," Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said in a statement.

Aside from new transmission lines, maintenance and repair costs for existing electricity infrastructure have ballooned to more than \$40 billion annually as many utilities struggle to upgrade decades-old equipment. Customers usually bear the costs.

Ice storms, hurricanes, wildfires and other extreme weather have knocked out large parts of U.S. electrical networks with increasing frequency in recent years, according to an Associated Press analysis that found power outages from severe weather doubled over the past two decades.

New Mexico's renewable energy authority is among those invested in the SunZia project, which would include about 520 miles (836 kilometers) of transmission lines and a network of substations for getting wind and solar power to Arizona and California. The anchor tenant is Pattern Energy, which has been busy building massive wind farms in central New Mexico.

The proposed Greenlink West Transmission Project in Nevada would run through seven counties from Las Vegas to Reno.

NV Energy has said its investment of more than \$2.5 billion in the project is expected to generate \$690 million in economic activity and generate thousands of construction jobs.

And the proposed Cross-Tie Transmission Project would be made up of 214 miles (344 kilometers) of high-voltage lines between central Utah and east-central Nevada within federally designated utility corridors or parallel to existing transmission facilities.

Developers have said the project would relieve congestion on other key regional transmission lines and increase the ability for California, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming to import and export renewable energy.

Raiders' Waller, Ferrell meet Air Force members before draft

LAS VEGAS (AP) — At their place of business, which just happens to be Allegiant Stadium, Darren Waller and Clelin Ferrell welcomed 100 members of nearby Air Force bases for a Thursday pre-draft luncheon and discussion.

Waller and Ferrell seemed as much — or more — in awe of the service members as the men and women of the military were of the two Las Vegas Raiders.

Brought together by USAA, which sponsors the Salute to Service award given annually to an NFL player for his dedication to the military, both players spoke of their deep appreciation for what American soldiers do on a daily basis.

"There's the type of composure you have to have when danger is present," said defensive end Ferrell, the youngest of nine children of two military officers. "The experience of meeting people in the services, I'm a product of it. My dad would put on his uniform and shine his shoes daily, and then train soldiers to go to war.

"When I meet people in the military, they open up (because of his background) and it puts a good presence on the experience."

Waller, one of the NFL's finest tight ends, spoke of being at an Air Force base and hearing explosives go

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off during training exercises.

"And loud. I asked, 'How do you put up with that on a day-to-day basis,'" he said. "You can see how that can take a toll on them in later life."

Waller plans to be involved in wellness and personal health care after his career. Because of some similarities between the military and football such as teamwork, competitiveness, work ethic, and always having an opponent, he feels he has much to offer service members and their families — particularly when their military careers end.

"It's OK for it to be hard, to not know what you're going to do," he said. "People are there to support you."

A VISION REALIZED

The smile on Peter O'Reilly's face was as bright as the desert sun.

The man in charge of putting together the NFL draft, an event in some ways as difficult as staging a Super Bowl, stood Wednesday near the theater built exclusively for these proceedings. Nearby, 20 prospects were involved in football activities with youngsters from the area. Behind O'Reilly, the NFL executive vice president of club business and league events, was the High Roller, an iconic Ferris wheel just off the Las Vegas Strip.

"This feels great and we couldn't be more appreciative," O'Reilly said. "We've had a core vision that has been three years in place. We've learned a ton on how it can evolve and grow.

"There will be a sense of accomplishment and some relief when we are past Mr. Irrelevant (the final pick in the draft on Saturday) and the Marshmello concert."

In 2015, after a dispute with Radio City Music Hall in New York, the league opted to turn the draft into a road show.

From Chicago to Philadelphia, from the Cowboys' stadium near Dallas to Nashville, it has turned into a massive party.

Two years ago, that party was held virtually, hosted by Commissioner Roger Goodell from his home because of the coronavirus pandemic. Last year, it was held in Cleveland but was not a full-scale operation.

This one appears to be no holds barred, from adopting the character of Las Vegas to the entertainment that seems to be a part of all major NFL events these days.

"It's become a pilgrimage event by NFL fans," O'Reilly said. "And we're in a destination market. The fans come in and connect with each other, and they all feel that hope, which is the single most (accurate) word for a draft."

O'Reilly hopes to enjoy the three days while always looking ahead. The 2023 draft in Kansas City, Missouri, already is deep into the developmental stages. Plans for 2024 in Detroit also are being formulated.

And, he points out, 20 NFL cities have expressed interest in hosting, including several that already have done so.

MATTHEW AND AIDAN

Super Bowl champion quarterback Matthew Stafford was the top overall choice in the 2009 NFL draft. Michigan edge rusher Aidan Hutchinson just might go No. 1 on Thursday night.

So it seemed natural that Stafford, who spent his first 12 pro seasons with Detroit before joining the Los Angeles Rams last year — and winning a title — would be offering some advice to Hutchinson when the two held a question-and-answer session with fans.

"Aidan seems to have a good head on his shoulders," Stafford said at the Courtyard by Marriott "Bistro & Banter" event with fans. "I would tell him to enjoy, it's a special day for him and his family. Embrace where you are going, there will be good and bad times, like I have gone through on the journey. It's kind of the beginning of a journey of something really special."

Hutchinson listened intently as Stafford spoke, then broke into a smile while offering that "maybe me and Matt will get together soon." Meaning, of course, Stafford getting sacked by the rookie.

Unlike Stafford, Hutchinson had a star player as a father. His dad, Chris, made some All-America teams at Michigan in 1992 and was inducted into the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame as a scholar-athlete that year.

"I never thought of measuring up to his legacy, and I had fun with it," Hutchinson said. "So that way,

no pressure. It was one nice thing we had as father and son.”

He then acknowledged that while in elementary school, he danced. His sisters and he danced competitively, though he made football his main commitment after five years of dancing.

“It definitely helped with balance and flexibility,” he said. “I can bust some moves.”

Astroworld movie set for release despite lawyers’ concerns

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — The experiences of panicked concertgoers who couldn’t breathe and had no clear path to escape a massive crowd surge at last year’s deadly Astroworld music festival in Houston are featured in a documentary set for release Friday.

But lawyers for Live Nation, which is being sued for its role as the festival’s promoter, say they’re concerned that publicity from the documentary, “Concert Crush: The Travis Scott Festival Tragedy,” could “taint the jury pool.” A gag order has been issued in the case, but Live Nation’s lawyers say an attorney who filed lawsuits related to the tragedy also co-produced the documentary.

Charlie Minn, the film’s director, said he believes he has made a balanced and fair film that tries to show the public what happened.

“My job is to make the most truthful, honest, sincere documentary from the victim’s point of view ... We need to know about these stories to prevent it from happening again,” Minn told The Associated Press.

Around 500 lawsuits have been filed following the Nov. 5 concert headlined by Scott, a popular rapper. Ten people died and hundreds of others were injured during the massive crowd surge. Scott is also being sued.

The documentary, opening in 11 Texas cities including Austin, Dallas and Houston, includes interviews with several people who survived the crowd surge. The film also features cellphone video shot by concertgoers in which people can be heard repeatedly screaming for help.

“It’s hard to explain to friends and family what we saw and what we actually went through and I think (the documentary) will give a lot of people the opportunity, if you weren’t there, to understand,” said Frank Alvarez, who attended the concert but does not appear in the film.

The film highlights what concertgoers experienced and what led to the tragedy, said Minn, who has also made documentaries about the deadly 2018 shooting at a suburban Houston high school and violence along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The film suggests Scott could have done more to prevent the conditions that led to the casualties, but Minn said it isn’t a “hit piece toward Travis Scott.” He said it also questions whether others, including Live Nation and Houston police, could have done more to improve safety or respond more quickly to the danger. Minn said Scott, Live Nation and Houston police declined to be interviewed for the documentary. Houston police are investigating the disaster.

In a report released this month, a task force created by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott uncovered problems with permits for such events and called for “clearly outlined triggers” for stopping such a show.

Attorneys for Live Nation expressed their concerns in a letter this month to state District Judge Kristen Hawkins, who is handling all pretrial matters in the lawsuits.

“The involvement of plaintiffs’ lawyers in the film, and the publicity the filmmakers and producers are trying to generate for it raise significant issues about efforts to taint the jury pool,” Neal Manne and Kevin Yankowsky, two of Live Nation’s attorneys, wrote in the letter.

But the attorneys have not asked Hawkins to take any specific action regarding the documentary.

Manne and Yankowsky did not respond to emails seeking comment. Live Nation has said it’s “heartbroken” by what happened but has denied responsibility.

Scott’s attorneys said in an email Thursday that they don’t know if he has seen the documentary, and referred to the concerns raised by Live Nation when asked if they had any issues with it.

“Mr. Scott remains focused on his philanthropic work in his hometown of Houston and in lower-income communities of color across the country, both of which are longstanding efforts,” his attorneys said.

Cassandra Burke Robertson, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, said she

would be shocked if the judge would take any action regarding the documentary because of First Amendment concerns, even with the gag order.

"I think the public interest here in exploring what happened and avoiding similar tragedies in the future, that's a really big interest. That is likely to outweigh the interests of the particular outcome of the particular lawsuit," Robertson said.

Brent Coon, an attorney representing about 1,500 concertgoers who was interviewed in the documentary, said he doesn't think the film would impact the ability to choose an impartial jury if the case goes to trial, which could be years away.

"I don't think any lawyer in this case could fan the flames much to change ... what the public's perception of all this is going to be," Coon said.

Robertson, who is not involved in the litigation, said the fact that one of the film's co-producers, Rick Ramos, is representing concertgoers who have filed lawsuits could raise some ethical concerns. It was unclear how Ramos was benefitting financially from his involvement in the documentary.

Ramos declined to comment Thursday.

"I personally would not co-sponsor something like that during pending civil litigation. I don't think there's anything wrong with it. It's just something I wouldn't do," Coon said.

Minn said the questions asked about Ramos' participation are valid but he never hid his involvement.

"People have to watch the film and judge it for what that is," Minn said.

Your dog's personality may have little to do with its breed

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Research confirms what dog lovers know — every pup is truly an individual.

Many of the popular stereotypes about the behavior of golden retrievers, poodles or schnauzers, for example, aren't supported by science, according to a new study.

"There is a huge amount of behavioral variation in every breed, and at the end of the day, every dog really is an individual," said study co-author and University of Massachusetts geneticist Elinor Karlsson.

She said pet owners love to talk about their dog's personality, as illustrated by some owners at a New York dog park.

Elizabeth Kelly said her English springer spaniel was "friendly, but she's also kind of the queen bee." Suly Ortiz described her yellow Lab as "really calm, lazy and shy."

And Rachel Kim's mixed-breed dog is "a lot of different dogs, personality wise — super independent, really affectionate with me and my husband, but pretty, pretty suspicious of other people, other dogs."

That kind of enthusiasm from pet owners inspired Karlsson's latest scientific inquiry. She wanted to know to what extent are behavioral patterns inherited — and how much are dog breeds associated with distinctive and predictable behaviors?

The answer: While physical traits such as a greyhound's long legs or a Dalmatian's spots are clearly inherited, breed is not a strong predictor of any individual dog's personality.

The researchers' work, published Thursday in the journal *Science*, marshals a massive dataset to reach these conclusions — the most ever compiled, said Adam Boyko, a geneticist at Cornell University, who was not involved in the study.

Dogs became humanity's best friend more than 14,000 years ago, as the only animal domesticated before the advent of agriculture.

But the concept of dog breeds is much more recent. Around 160 years ago, people began to selectively breed dogs to have certain consistent physical traits, like coat texture and color and ear shape.

The researchers surveyed more than 18,000 dog owners and analyzed the genomes of about 2,150 of their dogs to look for patterns.

They found that some behaviors — such as howling, pointing and showing friendliness to human strangers — do have at least some genetic basis. But that inheritance isn't strictly passed down along breed lines.

For example, they found golden retrievers that don't retrieve, said co-author Kathryn Lord, who studies

animal behavior with Karlsson.

Some breeds, such as huskies and beagles, may show a greater tendency to howl. But many of these dogs don't, as both the owner survey and genetic data showed.

The researchers could find no genetic basis for aggressive behaviors nor a link to specific breeds.

"The correlation between dog behavior and dog breed is much lower than most expected," said Jeff Kidd, a geneticist at the University of Michigan, who had no role in the research.

Amber Heard's lawyers revised article Johnny Depp sued over

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (AP) — Amber Heard pushed to have details of her marriage with fellow actor Johnny Depp included in an op-ed piece that she wrote about domestic violence, even though her lawyers wanted those passages removed from the article, which is now the subject of a libel lawsuit, according to evidence introduced Thursday at the trial.

Jurors in the libel lawsuit Depp filed against Heard heard testimony Thursday from Terence Dougherty, general counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union. It was the ACLU that drafted the article under Heard's name, reflecting her role as an ACLU ambassador on gender violence issues.

Dougherty testified about the push-and-pull that occurred between first draft and publication of the op-ed piece in The Washington Post in December 2018 — strategically timed by both the ACLU and Heard to coincide with the release of "Aquaman," a movie in which she played a prominent role.

Depp sued in Fairfax County Circuit Court after the article was published, in which Heard says that "two years ago, I became a public figure representing domestic abuse, and I felt the full force of our culture's wrath for women who speak out." Depp's lawyers say that's a clear reference to abuse allegations she levied against Depp in 2016 that Depp says are untrue.

Dougherty testified that numerous ACLU lawyers reviewed the article at various stages, and asked Heard's lawyers to review the piece as well to ensure it did not run afoul of a non-disclosure agreement she had with Depp in connection with the couple's 2016 divorce.

During those discussions, Heard sent back an edited version approved by her lawyers that "specifically neutered much of the copy regarding her marriage," according to an email from Jessica Weitz, an ACLU employee who coordinated with Heard.

According to the email, though, Heard was looking for a way to have a deleted passage restored to the article.

The various drafts of the articles were not shown to the jury so it's not clear how many personal details were in the first draft and how much Heard's lawyers had excised.

But the final version contains very little about Heard's personal experiences. It doesn't mention Depp at all. In addition to the passage about "a public figure representing domestic abuse," in another passage she writes, "I had the rare vantage point of seeing, in real time, how institutions protect men accused of abuse."

Much of the article talks about legislative priorities for advocates of domestic abuse prevention. Other passages refer to parts of her personal life unrelated to Depp.

Dougherty testified that "the language that wound up in the final op-ed piece was very different from the original language" in the draft, Dougherty said. "It did not refer directly to Ms. Heard's relationship with Johnny Depp."

While the trial is supposed to be over whether Depp was defamed in the article, very little testimony in the first three weeks, leading up to Thursday, has related to the article itself or its contents. Heard's lawyers predicted at the outset of the trial that it would become a mudslinging soap opera that would delve into messy details of Depp and Heard's personal lives.

Heard's lawyers, though, have said that even if the jury were to believe that she was never abused by Depp, Heard should still prevail in the lawsuit because the article is not about Depp, does not defame him, and Heard's free-speech rights allow her to weigh in on matters of public importance like domestic violence.

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Much of Dougherty's testimony also centered on whether Heard has fulfilled a promise to donate \$3.5 million — half of her \$7 million divorce settlement with Depp — to the ACLU. Dougherty testified that the ACLU credits her with contributing \$1.3 million so far and expected the money to come in over a 10-year period, but that she has made no contributions since 2018.

Jurors also heard briefly from Depp's business manager, Ed White. White said he intervened in 2016 to resolve financial difficulties for Depp, including unpaid taxes and a cash crunch. When he blamed Heard for an excessive wine bill that featured multiple \$500 bottles of Spanish Vega Sicilia wine, Heard's lawyers responded with a barrage of questions over Depp's spending excesses, including spending millions of dollars to shoot journalist Hunter S. Thompson's ashes out of a cannon.

Depp and Heard met during filming of "The Rum Diary," an adaptation of a Thompson novel. Depp testified earlier that he and Thompson were friends, and that Depp actually found the lost "Rum Diary" manuscript when he was going through Thompson's papers.

Biden taking 'hard look' at student loan forgiveness

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Thursday that he's "taking a hard look" at canceling additional federal student loan debt and will reach a decision within a month.

"I am considering dealing with some debt reduction," Biden told reporters in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

The comments came days after Biden had a private meeting with Democratic lawmakers who pressed him on the issue. One of the lawmakers, Rep. Tony Cardenas, D-Calif., said afterwards that Biden disclosed he was exploring the possibility.

However, Biden signaled in his Thursday remarks that he wouldn't go as far as some activists want, saying \$50,000 in debt forgiveness was not under consideration. He did not give a number for what he was considering.

"I'm in the process of taking a hard look at whether or not there will be additional debt forgiveness," he said. "And I'll have an answer on that in the next couple of weeks."

During his campaign, Biden said he wanted to "immediately cancel" at least \$10,000 in student debt per person. So far he's repeatedly extended a pause on requiring borrowers to repay their loans, a moratorium that was put in place under then-President Donald Trump near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although activists have been encouraged by their increasing traction on this issue, some said they were concerned that Biden wouldn't go far enough.

"President Biden, we agree that we shouldn't cancel \$50,000 in student loan debt. We should cancel all of it," said Wisdom Cole, national director of the NAACP Youth & College Division. "\$50,000 was just the bottom line."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday that Biden was still considering whether to tie debt relief to borrowers' income levels, an idea he's floated in the past. She said it's "certainly something he would be looking at."

She rejected criticism from Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, and others that debt relief amounts to a political giveaway.

Biden's goal, Psaki said, is to "continue to provide relief to people who need it most, to help people get some extra breathing room."

US economy shrinks, threats loom, but growth likely to last

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. economy shrank in the first three months of the year, and faces threats from high inflation and rising interest rates, yet economists foresee a return to growth for the rest of 2022 based on the strength of the job market and consumer spending.

The first quarterly decline in gross domestic product since the pandemic hit in 2020 - a 1.4% drop on

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an annualized basis - is not likely a prelude to recession, economists say. That may bring little comfort to President Joe Biden and Democrats, who face mid-term elections this year in which rising prices for food, energy and other essentials will be a major theme of Republican opposition.

Two trends were key drivers of the U.S. economy's decline last quarter, according to Thursday's report from the Commerce Department:

— Imports soared nearly 20% as Americans spent heavily on foreign-made goods, while exports fell almost 6% as growth slowed overseas — a widening of the trade deficit that subtracted 3.2 percentage points from GDP.

— Businesses had built inventories aggressively ahead of last year's holiday shopping season, when they feared pandemic-related supply shortages, so they restocked more slowly at the start of 2022, denting GDP by 0.8 percentage points.

As a result, the nation's total output of goods and services fell far below the 6.9% annual growth rate in the fourth quarter of 2021.

However, rising wages supported robust spending by households, and higher profits drove investment by companies. These factors suggest strong fundamentals for the U.S. economy, even in the face of challenges from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the Federal Reserve's plans to raise interest rates to fight inflation.

"The report isn't as worrisome as it looks," said Lydia Boussour, lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics. "The details point to an economy with solid underlying strength that demonstrated resilience in the face of Omicron, lingering supply constraints and high inflation."

The U.S. economy is in an unusual and challenging position.

The job market — the most important pillar of the economy — remains robust, with the unemployment rate near a 50-year low of 3.6%, and wages rising steadily. And in the January-March quarter, businesses and consumers increased their spending at a 3.7% annual rate after adjusting for inflation.

Economists consider these trends a better gauge of the economy's core strength than the latest GDP figure.

Still, serious threats have emerged. Supply chain disruptions in China and elsewhere are still a pandemic-era reality, and the war in Ukraine is contributing to higher inflation, which erodes consumers' spending power. Last month, prices jumped 8.5% from a year earlier, the fastest such rise in four decades.

"We are at a turning point in the economy," said Gregory Daco, chief economist at tax advisory firm EY-Parthenon. "The pace of growth is moderating."

The first quarter's weak showing contrasts with last year's robust rebound from the pandemic, which was fueled in part by vast government aid and ultra-low interest rates. With stimulus checks and other government supports having ended, consumer spending has slowed from its blistering pace in the first half of last year.

Last quarter's negative GDP number also undercuts a key political message of President Biden. The president has pointed to rapid growth as a counterpoint to soaring inflation. Compounding Biden's difficulties, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and rising COVID cases overseas are weighing on the economy and heightening inflation pressures. Many companies are also still struggling to obtain the parts and supplies they need from tangled supply chains.

The Plano, Texas-based burger chain MOOYAH faces higher costs for meat, buns and packaging supplies, and has raised wages to attract and keep workers.

"Just about every aspect of doing business has gotten significantly more expensive," said Doug Willmarth, the company's president.

Yet despite supply chain snags tied to the pandemic, MOOYAH still plans to open 20 more restaurants this year. "We are big believers in American consumers and the American economy," he said.

Although imports surged in the first quarter, COVID lockdowns in China are likely to perpetuate supply shortages this year. Ford and General Motors said this week that they still can't get all the computer chips they need, costing them sales and forcing temporary plant closures.

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The global economy is expected to grow more slowly this year, according to the International Monetary Fund. It foresees the Ukraine war and COVID slowing global growth to 3.6% this year, down from 6.1% last year.

Thursday's GDP report showed that consumers are adjusting their spending patterns as the pandemic fades and as higher costs for food and gas eat into household budgets. Adjusting for inflation, spending on clothes, gasoline, and groceries fell in the first quarter. But Americans spent more on services, including travel and dining out.

The Fed had hoped that such a shift would bring down inflation, as goods prices have shot up more than services in the past year. But now prices for airline tickets, hotels, and restaurant meals are also rising.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell has signaled plans for a rapid series of rate increases to combat higher prices. The Fed is set to raise its key short-term rate by a half-percentage point next week, the first hike that large since 2000. At least two more half-point increases – twice the more typical quarter-point hike -- are expected at subsequent Fed meetings. They would amount to one of the fastest series of Fed rate hikes in decades.

Powell is betting that with job openings at near-record levels, consumer spending healthy and unemployment unusually low, the Fed can slow the economy enough to tame inflation without causing a recession. Whether the Fed can pull that off is one of the major tests for the U.S. economy in 2022.

Key players urge accountability for atrocities in Ukraine

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — For the first time, key players seeking accountability for atrocities during the Ukraine war have come together at an informal meeting of the U.N. Security Council to spur investigations into abuses that many Western countries blame on Russia.

The session Wednesday included the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor, the chair of the U.N. Commission of Inquiry, Ukraine's top prosecutor and human rights lawyer Amal Clooney.

Ukrainian Prosecutor General Iryna Venediktova, who has opened over 8,000 investigations into alleged violations of the laws and customs of war, said that "Russia's actions amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes" and the pattern "resembles the crime of genocide."

Albanian Foreign Minister Olta Xhacka, who co-sponsored and chaired the meeting, said that as a veto-holding member of the Security Council, Russia is supposed to be a guardian of international peace but has "embarked on a war of choice against a neighbor committing immeasurable crimes in the process."

France's deputy U.N. ambassador, Nathalie Broadhurst, the other co-sponsor, said the images of atrocities in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha and other areas after Russian forces withdrew "are unbearable" and may amount to war crimes.

Beth Van Schaack, the U.S. ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, said the United States has concluded Russia committed war crimes, pointing to credible reports of individuals killed execution-style, bodies showing signs of torture and "horrific accounts of sexual violence against women and girls." She said Russia's political and military leadership and rank and file will be held accountable.

The legal chief at Russia's U.N. Mission, Sergey Leonidchenko, dismissed their statements, saying: "What we heard today was another portion of unsubstantiated claims and even fakes seasoned with lies, hypocrisy and pompous rhetoric."

Russia has denied responsibility for any atrocities and repeatedly blamed Ukrainian nationalists and "neo-Nazis."

Leonidchenko said Ukrainians responsible for all these "heinous crimes will be brought to justice." He said Russia is collecting witness statements and evidence across Ukraine, including in the besieged city of Mariupol. He said Russia plans to hold an informal council meeting May 6 to present what he claimed will be "facts not fakes."

Other council members — Mexico, Gabon, Ghana, Brazil, India, Kenya and the United Arab Emirates — didn't seek to lay any blame. They said investigations need to establish the facts behind the killings and

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attacks.

China, which is close to Russia, said the cause of civilian deaths should be established and verified. "Any accusations should be based on facts before the full picture is clear," Chinese diplomat Huang Lijin said.

ICC prosecutor Karim Khan said a record 43 countries have referred the Ukraine situation to the court, which is responsible for prosecuting war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. He opened an investigation March 2, and said nine other European nations are also conducting probes. On Monday, he said, the ICC signed an agreement for the first time for a joint investigative team with Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania.

"This is a time when we need to mobilize the law and send it into battle, not on the side of Ukraine against the Russian Federation or on the side of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, but on the side of humanity to protect, to preserve, to shield people ... who have certain basic rights," Khan said.

Calling this "a critical juncture," he said it's time to uphold the law and move quickly on collecting evidence. He said he deployed a team to the region immediately after announcing the investigation and has visited Ukraine twice and will do so again.

Khan told the council he sent three communications to Russia and had not received a reply, and he welcomed Leonidchenko's presence before the Russian spoke. "My door is open," Khan told him.

Leonidchenko was critical of the ICC, claiming the court is not impartial. Khan told reporters afterward that he is not for or against Russia or Ukraine, saying the court is interested only in upholding the law.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres voiced strong support for the ICC after seeing the devastation in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha on Thursday and appealed to Russia to cooperate with the court. He said the "horrendous" scene in Bucha, where tortured bodies and mass graves were found after Russian troops withdrew, made him feel how important it is to have "a thorough investigation and accountability."

British Ambassador Barbara Woodward said the United Kingdom "is supporting international efforts to see justice delivered" and will provide 1 million pounds (\$1.25 million) in additional funding to the ICC.

France's Broadhurst said her government has sent two judges and 10 investigators to join the ICC team in Ukraine and made an additional 500,000 euro (\$525,000) contribution to support its work.

Van Schaack said the United States, which is not a party to the ICC, is supporting its investigation into atrocities in Ukraine.

Norwegian judge Erik Mose, who chairs the U.N. Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry, said it is recruiting staff and will investigate all alleged violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, building on the work of U.N. human rights monitors in Ukraine. He said it will establish contact with the ICC "in the near future" and will seek to contact Russia and Ukraine, victims, civil society groups, governments and others.

"Mose stressed his commission's independence and its mandate "to identify where possible individuals and entities responsible for violation or abuses of human rights of international humanitarian law or other related crimes."

Michelle Bachelet, the U.N. human rights chief, reiterated that war crimes may have taken place "and efforts aimed at redressing violations must begin now." As of Wednesday, she said, her office had documented and verified 2,787 civilians killed and 3,152 injured, with actual numbers "considerably higher" and rising.

Amal Clooney, who was representing the Clooney Foundation for Justice, urged the council not to let the efforts lose steam.

"What worries me as I sit here today is that the resolute action we've seen in the first 50 days of this war will turn out to be the high point instead of the starting point of the legal and diplomatic response -- that your actions will slowly fade into a predictable pattern, a wealth of investigations and committees and reports and a dearth of prosecutions and convictions and sentences, politicians calling for justice but not delivering it.

"We cannot let that happen," she said.

Drop in US GDP challenges Biden's pitch to voters

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By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's upbeat message that the economy is cruising along hit a troublesome speed bump on Thursday when the federal government reported that U.S. gross domestic product shrank during the first three months of 2022.

Economic activity declined at annual rate of 1.4%, a sharp reversal from last year when growth was the strongest since 1984. There were technical reasons for the decline that likely obscured the actual health of the economy, yet the drop clearly put the president on the defensive after he has said repeatedly that the booming job market means the U.S. can withstand inflation at a 40-year high.

Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package was supposed to propel the economy to new heights that Democrats could then sell to voters in this year's midterm elections. But the muddled data has weakened the clarity of Biden's pitch and emboldened Republican criticism.

The president told reporters at the White House that the consumer spending and business investment portions of the GDP report were solid, evidence that growth should resume in the months to come. The biggest drag on GDP was an increase in imports, but a one-off glitch — a sharp drop in business inventories — was a key contributor to the overall drop. The inventory decline reflected the aftershocks of the pandemic, rather than the underlying health of the economy, the president said.

"What you're seeing is enormous growth in the country that was affected by everything from COVID and the COVID blockages that occurred along the way," Biden said.

While the president maintained that there would not be a recession this year, he conceded that it was a concern.

"You're always worried about a recession," he said.

To Republican lawmakers and some economists, the drop in GDP hinted at the risk posed by surging inflation. Consumers have grown skittish despite increases in their net worth. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created the risk of oil, natural gas and food shortages. Pandemic-related lockdowns in China indicate that supplies chains troubles will persist.

Following last year's coronavirus relief package, the government is now trying to calm the economy. There is less fiscal support as the federal deficit will likely be lower this year. At the same time, the Federal Reserve is trying to raise benchmark interest rates to reduce inflation without causing a downturn.

But Thursday's report gave Republican lawmakers a direct line of attack.

"Under President Biden's leadership, our economy is actually shrinking," Texas Rep. Kevin Brady said at the start of a House Ways & Means Committee hearing on Thursday. "The president has missed four of the five quarterly economic projections. So Americans ought to brace for slower job growth and higher prices ahead."

What the GDP report actually reveals about the months ahead may be more complicated. Some economists see the consumer spending and business investment as signs of a quick rebound, while others fear that consumer spending could weaken because of high prices and the efforts to reduce inflation.

"Underlying demand remains strong, and the labor market is in excellent shape," said Gus Faucher, chief economist of PNC Financial Services. "Growth will resume in the second quarter."

But Joe Brusuelas, chief economist at the consultancy RSM, said that the strengths observed by others could fade as policymakers tackle inflation because sustained economic growth depends on having stable prices.

"The price of oil and gasoline and food are all increasing faster than your paycheck," Brusuelas said. "Therefore, we need to slow down the economy and demand with it, and that likely means slower growth and a slightly higher level of unemployment over the next two years. And it will be done with intent and purposefully. The problem is we could cause a recession in the process."

One senior White House official said the various disruptions of the past two years have hurt the reliability of traditional economic indicators, masking what the administration sees as a solid economy.

The official, who insisted on anonymity to discuss the GDP report, said the key to overcoming this challenge will be to get the American people to focus on the bigger picture instead of monthly and quarterly reports.

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On Thursday afternoon, Biden tried to pull attention back to that bigger picture by inviting small business owners to the White House. He noted that Americans have emerged from the pandemic as more entrepreneurial with 5.4 million applying last year to start new businesses. That's 20% higher than any other year on record.

"We have every indication that this trend is going to continue," Biden said, putting the morning's GDP report behind him. "The reason for that is because we're giving people financial security to take a risk and pursue their small business dreams."

Girls hockey programs show promise in nontraditional markets

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writer

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) — Megan Grenon stretched outside the rink before a rare showcase of women's hockey in the Washington, D.C., area when a young girl approached with her parents.

"Are you a hockey player? Are you playing today?" the girl asked.

"Yeah," Grenon replied. "Are you here to watch me?"

Grenon plays for Calgary with the Professional Women's Hockey Players Association, which has set a goal of establishing a sustainable professional league in North America after years without one. Grenon said she would be wearing No. 5 in white that day, and the young girl jumped up and down in excitement.

"You can cheer for me," Grenon said. "You can cheer for whoever you want."

Scenes like that are playing out more often across the country since the U.S. women's national team won gold at the 2018 Olympics and generated more exposure for the sport. There will be NHL playoff hockey starting next week in Dallas, Tampa, Nashville, Raleigh and Washington, D.C., where girls hockey has expanded over the past decade but still lags far behind traditional hotbeds like Massachusetts, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

Because of logistical hurdles, from a shortage of rinks and ice time to a lack of college and varsity high school programs and the need for more education, growing girls hockey in nontraditional markets remains a challenge. The 3,177 female players aged 18 and younger registered by USA Hockey in Texas, Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia combined is still fewer than in Wisconsin alone.

"It's been like a slow buildup," said Kush Sidhu, director and under-19 college prep team coach for the only top-tier junior women's hockey team in Washington area. "It's always hard. It's a struggle, I guess, but it's a good struggle and we're happy to do our part."

The NHL's Dallas Stars, Tampa Bay Lightning, Carolina Hurricanes, Nashville Predators and Washington Capitals are also trying to do their part to get participation numbers up in those areas — and similar efforts are taking place in Arizona and elsewhere around the league. The number of girls playing hockey in those states is up 71.3% from 2011 to 2021.

But the raw numbers still show a need for growth. Minnesota reported almost 13,000 girls playing hockey last year, and that total reaches 28,206 combined with Massachusetts, Wisconsin and Michigan.

USA Hockey regional manager of female hockey Kristen Wright, who spent five years as manager of girls player development, is proud of the sport's rapid growth at the youth level in nontraditional markets and thinks it can be even better with more exposure and ice time.

"Some of the challenges that come with that are female role models: Convincing girls that hockey is for them," Wright said. "They need to see it. You really need to see different female hockey players have female coaches and have that engagement there. And the other challenge, I would say, in some of those markets, there just aren't as many ice rinks, so now instead of it being a soccer field that's attached to your middle school or your elementary school, where you learned to run and kick a ball, well, you need to go to an ice rink."

Nashville director of amateur hockey Kristen Bowness, Tampa Bay hockey development ambassador Kelley Steadman and Carolina girls' and women's youth and amateur hockey specialist Alyssa Gagliardi all cited a lack of ice rinks as one of the major hurdles. While watching a women's hockey event at the Washington Capitals practice facility last month, Sidhu echoed those concerns.

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"Where do we put new girls or new kids that want to play?" said Sidhu, who has coached girls and women's hockey since the late 1980s and is director of the Washington Pride program in the D.C. area. "We're pretty maxed out on all our ice time at every rink that we have, so that's a bit of a challenge. When you compare us to other big metropolitan areas, we're still pretty low, infrastructure-wise, on rinks."

Getting girls to get on the ice is the first step, and in a lot of places it starts with ball or street hockey. The Stars, Capitals and Hurricanes have all won the Stanley Cup, the Predators reached a final and the Lightning are back-to-back defending champions, and yet there can still be some hesitation for girls taking up hockey.

"I'll go to schools and we'll do ball hockey and stuff like that and so many girls are still so surprised that I actually played," said Steadman, the Lightning's hockey development ambassador who won two world championships with the U.S. and played in the Canadian Women's Hockey League and National Women's Hockey League that has since been renamed Premier Hockey Federation.

"They'll be like: 'Oh, did you play, too? The boys played, but do you play?' So here we're still kind of in that grassroots (level) for some of these girls, where they're not even aware of what women's hockey is."

Hence the need for programs like Canes Girls Youth Hockey and All Caps All Her, launched by the Carolina Hurricanes and Washington Capitals, respectively, last year.

The Capitals have seen an influx of youth hockey since Alex Ovechkin became the face of the franchise in 2005 and ushered in an era of success culminating with the organization's first championship in 2018. While Capitals VP of marketing Amanda Tischler said the "Ovechkin Effect" is real in boosting participation, the team needed to go further than the learn-to-play programs that were in place.

"What we were finding out is all these girls wanted to continue to play hockey," Tischler said. "And there was this other age group of 10-14, which is why we recently launched an all-girls learn-to-play for that age group, as well as an all-female adult learn-to-skate and adult learn-to-play."

Canes Girls Youth Hockey is similarly providing a pathway in North Carolina, where players can go into a development program and play in house leagues or at the junior level to stay in the game. There's also an under-19 team that can keep girls around longer instead of forcing them to leave the area to go to prep school for hockey.

"It's cool to see it go from basically nothing to we've got kids coming into the sport at 5-, 6-years old and now they could stay here all the way to going to play college hockey," Gagliardi said.

A lack of high school varsity girls and college women's hockey programs in nontraditional markets is also an issue. Given the lack of one major women's pro league, like the WNBA or National Women's Soccer League, colleges provide the most consistent action aside from the Olympics every four years and the annual world championship.

USA Hockey started a national high school tournament to prompt more growth at that level. Wright said college programs are going west to places like Arizona, Colorado and Utah faster than they're moving south, so more players are leaving home to stay on the ice and continue their advancement.

Bowness, whose father Rick coaches the Stars, has spent time with the Coyotes, Lightning and now Predators and put a lot of time into growing hockey in nontraditional places. While in Tampa, she said there was a junior varsity team that had to play against the boys and points out there's a need for more girls in the pipeline overall.

"Right now I think it's more of a numbers thing," Bowness said. "We just need more girls playing in order to get leagues up and running."

Haley Skarupa, who grew up in Rockville, Maryland, and won gold with the U.S. at the 2018 Olympics knows all about a numbers game. After being the only girl on her team as a kid, she's impressed by the options available in the Washington area.

"They're not limited just to that option to play boys hockey," said Skarupa, who played for the Pride and is now an ambassador for the Capitals. "They can be on their own team with other girls, and that's just grown so much."

The Olympics and events put on by the Professional Women's Hockey Players Association, Premier Hockey Federation, USA Hockey and the NHL are in place to spur more growth and yet, Wright said there

are many pieces that need to come together on that front. Now, more than two decades since women's hockey debuted at the Olympics in 1998, when college programs weren't even in existence, generations of players are back in the community as role models and it could take years for the fruits of their efforts to take shape.

"Part of it is time," Wright said. "We don't like to talk about time, but some of it takes time."

FDA issues plan to ban menthol in cigarettes, cigars

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. government on Thursday released its long-awaited plan to ban menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars, citing the toll on Black smokers and young people.

"The proposed rules would help prevent children from becoming the next generation of smokers and help adult smokers quit," said Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, in a statement.

He added that the ban would also be an "important step to advance health equity" by reducing disparities in tobacco-related diseases.

The Food and Drug Administration said eliminating menthol cigarettes could prevent between 300,000 and 650,000 smoking deaths over 40 years.

Menthol accounts for more than a third of cigarettes sold in the U.S, and the mint flavor is favored by Black smokers and young people. Menthol's cooling effect has been shown to mask the throat harshness of smoking, making it easier to start and harder to quit.

The FDA said it will also seek to ban menthol and dozens of other flavors like grape and strawberry from cigars, which are increasingly popular with young people, especially Black teens.

The agency's proposals on both cigarettes and cigars are only initial drafts and are unlikely to be finalized before next year. Companies would then have one additional year to phase out their products. Tobacco industry lawsuits could delay the prohibition for several more years, according to experts. For now, FDA leaders said they will take comments for two months and then proceed "as expeditiously as possible."

Altria, which sells menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars, said it disagreed with the ban.

"Taking these products out of the legal marketplace will push them into unregulated, criminal markets," the company said in a statement. "We will continue to engage in this long-term regulatory process."

The FDA has attempted several times to get rid of menthol but faced pushback from Big Tobacco, members of Congress and competing political interests under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Regulators have been under legal pressure to issue a decision after anti-smoking and civil rights groups sued the FDA for "unreasonably" delaying action on earlier requests to ban menthol.

Menthol is the only cigarette flavor that was not prohibited under the 2009 law that gave the FDA authority over tobacco products, an exemption negotiated by industry lobbyists. The act did, though, instruct the agency to continue to weigh a ban. To date, the FDA has yet to eliminate any traditional tobacco product, though it has had that authority for over a decade.

Last April, the Biden administration pledged to try to ban menthol within the year, responding in part to African American groups who say menthol has led to lower quit rates and higher rates of death among Black people. Menthols are used by 85% of Black smokers.

"Black folks die disproportionately of heart disease, lung cancer and stroke," said Phillip Gardiner of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council. "Menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars are the main vectors of those diseases in the Black and brown communities, and have been for a long time."

In 2020, Gardiner's group and several others sued to compel the FDA to make a decision on a ban.

More than 12% of Americans smoke cigarettes, with rates roughly even between white and Black populations.

In 2019, more than 18 million Americans smoked menthol cigarettes, with higher rates among young people, African Americans and other racial groups, according to the FDA. Menthol smoking declined among white teenagers between 2011 and 2018, but not among Black and Hispanic youth, the agency noted.

Thursday's proposals would not apply to electronic cigarettes, including leading brands like Juul and Vuse, which come in menthol. The FDA has been conducting a separate review of vaping products and has so

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far authorized a handful of tobacco-flavored products from smaller manufacturers.

The FDA made several efforts to begin eliminating menthol cigarettes under both the Obama and Trump administrations, but had never previously released a formal roadmap of how to accomplish the ban.

"This is the first time there's been support from an administration," said Mitch Zeller, who recently retired after nine years leading FDA's tobacco center. "If these rules are finalized they become the law of the land and it becomes illegal for menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars to be sold."

In recent weeks, dozens of interest groups — for and against the ban — met with Biden administration officials to try and influence the proposed rules, which would wipe out billions in tobacco sales. Conservative and civil rights groups that accept tobacco funding warned officials that banning menthol could result in increased policing in Black communities.

While acknowledging those concerns, FDA Commissioner Robert Califf stressed that the agency's rules would target companies, not smokers.

"These measures and related enforcement would be on the tobacco industry, not individuals who possess or use these products," Califf told reporters.

For decades, tobacco companies focused menthol advertising and promotions in Black communities, sponsoring music festivals and neighborhood events. Industry documents released via litigation show companies viewed menthol cigarettes as a good "starter product" because they were more palatable to teens.

Menthol's elimination would be a huge blow to tobacco companies, including Reynolds American, which sells the leading menthol brands, Newport and Kool. With the slow decline of smoking, tobacco companies have been diversifying into alternative products, including electronic cigarettes and tobacco pouches. But those ventures still account for a tiny slice of industry sales.

Democrats face worsening legal environment on redistricting

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

After New York state's top court this week crushed Democratic hopes of coming out ahead in this decade's redistricting cycle, the party faces an increasingly precarious legal environment in the hyper-partisan battle over drawing legislative lines.

New York's Court of Appeals on Wednesday overturned a map that Democrats muscled through the state legislature there, deciding that a nonpartisan expert will instead draw the lines for the state's 26 congressional districts. It was at least the fifth time this cycle a state court has ruled that maps drawn by its state legislature were too partisan, with a Democratic map in Maryland also falling and Republican-drawn ones in Kansas, North Carolina and Ohio being tossed out as well.

Still, Republicans are favored to win state Supreme Court races in North Carolina and Ohio in November that'd enable those GOP-controlled legislatures to implement more partisan maps before 2024. In contrast, the 4-3 New York decision came from a court appointed entirely by Democrats, a party that now finds itself bound to a bipartisan process written into the state's constitution.

"Democratic judges are not really as inclined to excuse extreme partisan gerrymandering as Republican ones are," said Lakshya Jain, a lecturer at the University of California-Berkeley who writes on redistricting at the website Split Ticket. "Democrats for a long time have been pushing for redistricting reform and anti-gerrymandering legislation," Jain noted, and that seeps into their judges' preferences.

The biggest test of this potential legal asymmetry comes in Florida, where Democrats and civil rights groups are challenging a congressional map that Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis pushed through the GOP-controlled legislature there. Legislators had initially balked at the map, which aggressively favors their party, because it dismantles two plurality-Black districts in possible violation of the state's Fair Districts Amendment, which requires lawmakers to draw districts that let racial and linguistic minorities pick their chosen representatives.

Republicans insist they've followed the law in Florida, though many legal experts disagree.

"This is not a difficult legal question," said Douglas Spencer, a law professor at the University of Colorado-Boulder. "It would be a complete abdication of the rule of law if they take the most gerrymandered map

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in American history and let it stand.”

Spencer said he’s optimistic Florida’s state supreme court will ultimately strike down the map but notes he’s in a minority among redistricting experts. That’s because six of the seven members of the state supreme court were appointed by Republican governors.

Democrats began the once-a-decade redistricting cycle anxiously, with Republicans in control of drawing vastly more congressional seats. That’s due to a combination of GOP success in state elections and that Democrats’ reform push has led them to cede line-drawing power to independent commissions in states they control, like Colorado.

But Democrats were relatively successful, shifting the typical House seat close to President Joe Biden’s five-point margin of victory in 2020. Until the end of the New York and Florida litigation, it’s impossible to precisely evaluate how the party did, but it’s likely the map will still lean more toward Democrats than after 2010, when Republicans used their statehouse dominance to try to lock in a House majority through partisan maps. But much of Democrats’ gains came in New York, the most populous state where the party controlled line-drawing and one where it stood to net as many as four House seats in its partisan map.

The recent flurry of state court actions are due to a legal ruling at the tail end of the last redistricting cycle. In 2019, the U.S. Supreme Court’s conservative majority ruled that federal courts have no role in policing partisan gerrymanders, or maps drawn explicitly to benefit one party by contorting lines to capture enough of its voters to reliably win elections.

That kicked redistricting litigation into state courts. “State courts have in a lot of ways been the hero this cycle,” said Michael Li of the Brennan Center for Social Justice, which argues against gerrymandering and for redistricting reform.

But Li noted state courts have vulnerabilities that the federal system doesn’t have. The composition of many state courts change from election to election, making rulings in places like North Carolina and Ohio dependent on whichever party has the political winds at its back in November. State courts are also uneven — in some states such as New York they aggressively strike down gerrymanders, while in places like Texas, the state supreme court is so conservative that civil rights groups have routinely not even bothered to ask it for help, instead going to federal courts to challenge maps drawn by the GOP-controlled legislature in recent decades.

There’s even more uncertainty over the legal landscape of redistricting this cycle because the conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court has indicated it may rewrite the rules that govern the drawing of legislative districts. In February, conservatives on the court said they may revise the standards on how to draw districts that comply with the Voting Right Act’s requirement that minorities get a chance to choose their own representatives and are not simply scattered among voters of other races. And in March, four conservative justices indicated they wanted to consider Republican lawyers’ arguments that only state legislatures — and not state courts — have the say in drawing congressional maps.

Still, redistricting reformers said they remain heartened by how courts performed in this cycle so far. Suzanne Almeida of Common Cause, a frequent litigant opposing gerrymanders, noted that courts in Republican states like Ohio have joined ones in deep Democratic states like New York in striking down partisan maps.

“If I ran the world,” Almeida said, there’d be national standards against gerrymandering to ensure skewed maps in one big state don’t tilt the entire congressional map. But a Democratic proposal for just that foundered in Congress earlier this year. So, Almeida said, “we are taking the wins that we can take.”

Chauvin appeals murder conviction for killing George Floyd

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin is appealing his conviction for murder in the killing of George Floyd, arguing that jurors were intimidated by the protests that followed and prejudiced by heavy pretrial publicity.

Chauvin asked the Minnesota Court of Appeals in a court filing Monday to reverse his conviction, reverse and remand for a new trial in a new venue, or order a resentencing.

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Last June, Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill sentenced Chauvin to 22 1/2 years in prison after jurors found him guilty of second-degree murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

Floyd died on May 25, 2020, after Chauvin pinned the Black man to the ground with his knee on his neck for 9 minutes, 29 seconds. Floyd had been accused of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store. Three other fired officers face state trial this summer after being convicted in federal court earlier this year of violating Floyd's civil rights.

Chauvin's attorney, William Mohrman, laid out a number of challenges to his conviction, including that the trial should not have been held in Hennepin County, where Floyd was killed.

"The overwhelming media coverage exposed the jurors — literally every day — to news demonizing Chauvin and glorifying Floyd which was more than sufficient to presume prejudice," the brief said.

In the months that followed Floyd's killing, protesters took to the streets in Minneapolis and around the country to protest police brutality and racism. Some of that unrest was violent.

Mohrman said several potential jurors expressed concerns during jury selection that if Chauvin was acquitted they would fear for their personal safety and worried about more violence. He said several of them said they were intimidated by the security measures implemented at the courthouse to protect trial participants from protesters.

The filing also cited the fatal shooting of Daunte Wright by a police officer in nearby Brooklyn Center that sparked more protests during Chauvin's trial. It says jurors should have been sequestered after selection to avoid being prejudiced by reports of that slaying. It also cited a \$27 million settlement reached between the city and Floyd's family that was announced during jury selection, saying the timing of that prejudiced jurors in the case.

Mohrman cited several instances of alleged prosecutorial misconduct, claiming untimely sharing of evidence, failure to disclose and document dumping by the government.

The filing also says the judge did not apply the sentencing guidelines correctly and should not have included "abuse of a position of authority" as an aggravating sentencing factor for the former police officer.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison has 45 days to respond to Chauvin's brief.

The appeal came as the Minnesota Department of Human Rights released the results of a nearly two-year investigation launched after Floyd's slaying. It found the Minneapolis Police Department has engaged in a pattern of race discrimination for at least a decade, including stopping and arresting Black people at a higher rate than white people, using force more often on people of color and maintaining a culture where racist language is tolerated.

Putin gas cutoff shakes up Europe at little cost to Kremlin

By LORNE COOK, DANICA KIRKA and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Cutting off natural gas to Poland and Bulgaria cost Russian President Vladimir Putin very little — but it is adding stress on European countries wrestling with how to reduce the energy imports feeding the Kremlin's war chest and how to keep a united front on the war in Ukraine.

European Union officials say yielding to Putin's demand to pay for gas in rubles would violate Western sanctions imposed over the invasion. Poland and Bulgaria were cut off after refusing the demand and say they will manage because they were already working to end their dependence on Russian energy supplies.

Analysts say there is enough ambiguity in the European stance to allow the Kremlin to keep trying to undermine unity among the 27 member countries — even if an implied threat to cut off major customers such as Germany and Italy may turn out to be an empty one because it would cost Russia heavily.

The cutoff sent a chill through EU officials wondering how their utility companies will heat homes and generate electricity next winter. Putin got maximum disruption of what he regards as a hostile alliance for minimal costs because Poland and Bulgaria are relatively minor customers who were about to end their contracts at year's end anyway.

Poland's entire gas import was only 10 billion cubic meters per year, out of total European imports of 155 billion from Russia. Gas in roughly that amount is already flowing to Poland from other European

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countries pitching in to help.

Russian energy giant Gazprom has lost relatively little revenue but opened a new front in its confrontation with Europe.

Putin is creating "a system where he can basically divide countries — as we are seeing — for the ones that don't want to comply with this new scheme will be cut off, while others will try to comply and essentially go against the European Union indication," said Simone Tagliapietra, an energy expert and senior fellow at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels.

European payments for Russian oil and gas amount to \$850 million a day even as governments condemn the war. It's the result of decades in which Russia was regarded as a reliable supplier of cheap gas despite warnings from Poland and other central and Eastern European countries that Russia could use energy as a weapon. While Europe needs the oil and gas, those sales are the main pillar of the Kremlin's budget.

John Lough, an associate fellow in the Russian and Eurasia program at the Chatham House think tank, said Russia's cutoff of Poland and Bulgaria was meant as a signal to major importers Germany and Italy, which both get 40% of their gas from Russia.

"But if they have to follow through on their threats, then they have to cut off the nose to spite their face," he said of Russian officials. "And that's a big problem. So it's a kind of game of chicken."

A wide-ranging gas cutoff would hit industrial users that can't easily substitute other energy sources. Liberty Ostrava steel works in the Czech Republic has "no short-term solution to replace natural gas" because a changeover would take nine to 12 months, spokeswoman Barbora Cerna Dvorakova said.

European Union countries or companies that agree to the terms of a Russian presidential decree insisting they pay their gas bills in rubles will be in breach of the bloc's sanctions, senior EU officials said Thursday. Around 97% of European gas contracts with Russia are in euros or dollars.

Under Putin's new payment system, the Kremlin has said importers would have to establish an account in dollars or euros at Russia's third-largest bank, Gazprombank, then a second account in rubles. The importer would pay the gas bill in euros or dollars and direct the bank to exchange the money for rubles.

The sanctions violation essentially comes with the use of the second bank account because the ruble conversion involves a transaction involving Russia's sanctioned central bank.

The EU's executive branch, the European Commission, says companies could remain in compliance by paying in euros or dollars per their contract, then making a "clear statement" to Gazprombank that their payment obligations are over.

That leaves an opening for the Kremlin to accept the statement or not — a potential pressure point for member countries.

Russia has Europe "over a barrel in the sense of making it a requirement that if they want any gas, then they'll have to break their own sanctions by paying for it in rubles," said David Elmes, an energy expert at Warwick Business School. "And so they're calling Europe's bluff, if you like. Which do you want to do on the gas — or do you want the sanctions?"

Uniper, Germany's biggest importer of Russian gas, said it has been paying in euros and will continue to do so but indicated that it would be prepared to open a second account in rubles.

"We believe that a change of payments which conforms to sanctions laws and the Russian decree is possible," the company said in a statement. "What's clear is that Uniper will continue to pay in euros."

The company declined to say when and under what conditions it would open the ruble account. It said "doing without Russian gas at short notice isn't possible, it would have dramatic consequences for our national economy."

That's why EU sanctions so far have avoided Russian oil and gas. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz acknowledged Thursday that "any interruption would have consequences for the economic situation."

Italian officials said they were waiting for further guidance from the EU on whether the payment work-around violates sanctions. Carlo Bonomi, head of Italy's main business lobby Confindustria, said he didn't think Russia would cut natural gas deliveries to Italy.

"Obviously, it's a situation in continuous evolution, but regardless, the government is working with the

aim of making Italy independent in case of any escalation," he said. We are optimistic."

But Putin may be playing a longer game, knowing that next winter will put more pressure on gas supplies. The European Union's executive commission has unveiled proposals to cut reliance on Russian gas by two-thirds by the end of the year through additional supplies of liquefied gas by ship, faster rollout of wind and solar, and tough conservation measures.

Coordinated action on diversifying energy sources could be a victim of Putin's ruble payment demand as some countries get exemptions and other don't, Tagliapietra said.

"How can we have a joint energy response if different countries are doing, or not, business with Putin?" he said.

Moderna seeks to be 1st with COVID shots for littlest kids

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Moderna is seeking to be the first to offer COVID-19 vaccine for the youngest American children, as it asked the Food and Drug Administration Thursday to clear low-dose shots for babies, toddlers and preschoolers.

Frustrated families are waiting impatiently for a chance to protect the nation's littlest kids as all around them people shed masks and other public health precautions -- even though highly contagious coronavirus mutants continue to spread. Already about three-quarters of children of all ages show signs they've been infected at some point during the pandemic.

Moderna submitted data to the Food and Drug Administration that it hopes will prove two low-dose shots can protect children younger than 6 -- although the effectiveness wasn't nearly as high in kids tested during the omicron surge as earlier in the pandemic.

"There is an important unmet medical need here with these youngest kids," Dr. Paul Burton, Moderna's chief medical officer, told The Associated Press. Two kid-size shots "will safely protect them. I think it is likely that over time they will need additional doses. But we're working on that."

Moderna said two kid doses were about 40% to 50% effective at preventing symptomatic COVID-19, not a home run but for many parents, any protection would be better than none.

That effectiveness is "less than optimal. We were hoping for better efficacy but this is a first step," said Dr. Nimmi Rajagopal of Cook County Health in Chicago. She's anxiously awaiting vaccinations for her youngest patients and her own 3-year-old son who's ready to enter preschool.

"It gives me such peace of mind to know that hopefully by fall I'll get him in school and he'll be fully vaccinated," she said.

Now, only children ages 5 or older can be vaccinated in the U.S., using rival Pfizer's vaccine, leaving 18 million younger tots unprotected.

Moderna's vaccine isn't the only one in the race. Pfizer is soon expected to announce if three of its even smaller-dose shots work for the littlest kids, months after the disappointing discovery that two doses weren't quite strong enough.

Whether it's one company's shots or both, FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks said the agency will "move quickly without sacrificing our standards" in deciding if tot-sized doses are safe and effective.

While questions are swirling about what's taking so long, Marks pointedly told lawmakers earlier this week that the FDA can't evaluate a product until a manufacturer completes its application. In a statement Thursday, the FDA said it will schedule a meeting to publicly debate Moderna's evidence with its independent scientific advisers but that the company still must submit some additional data. Moderna expects to do so next week.

"It's critically important that we have the proper evaluation so that parents will have trust in any vaccines that we authorize," Marks told a Senate committee.

If FDA clears vaccinations for the littlest, next the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would have to recommend who needs them -- all tots or just those at higher risk from COVID-19.

"It's very important to get the youngest children vaccinated" but "moving quickly doesn't mean moving

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sloppily," said Dr. Philip Landrigan, a pediatrician and public health expert at Boston College. FDA must "see if it's safe. They need to see if it's effective. And they need to do so swiftly. But they won't cut corners."

Many parents are desperate for whichever vaccine gets to the scientific finish line first.

"We've been kind of left behind as everybody else moves on," said Meagan Dunphy-Daly, a Duke University marine biologist whose 6-year-old daughter is vaccinated -- but whose 3-year-old and 18-month-old sons are part of Pfizer's trial.

The family continues to mask and take other precautions until it's clear if the boys got real vaccine or dummy shots. If it turns out they weren't protected in the Pfizer study and Moderna's shots are cleared first, Dunphy-Daly said she'd seek them for her sons.

"I will feel such a sense of relief when I know my boys are vaccinated and that the risk of them getting a serious infection is so low," she said.

The FDA will face some complex questions.

In a study of 6,700 kids ages 6 months through 5 years, two Moderna shots — each a quarter of the regular dose — triggered high levels of virus-fighting antibodies, the same amount proven to protect young adults, Burton said. There were no serious side effects, and the shots triggered fewer high fevers than other routine vaccinations.

But depending on how researchers measured, the vaccine proved at best about 51% effective at preventing COVID-19 cases in babies and toddlers and about 37% effective in the 2- to 5-year-olds. Burton blamed the omicron variant's ability to partially evade vaccine immunity, noting that unboosted adults showed similarly less effectiveness against milder omicron infections. While no children became severely ill during the study, he said high antibody levels are a proxy for protection against more serious illness — and the company will test a child booster dose.

"That's not totally out of the realm of what we would have expected," said Dr. Bill Muller of Northwestern University, who helped with Moderna's child studies. "Down the road I would anticipate it's going to be a three-shot series."

Another issue: So far in the U.S., Moderna's vaccine is restricted to adults. Other countries have expanded the shot to kids as young as 6. But while Moderna has filed FDA applications for older kids, too, the FDA hasn't ruled on them. Months ago the agency cited concern about a rare side effect, heart inflammation, in teen boys, a concern that hasn't been reported in much younger children.

It's not clear if FDA will consider Moderna's vaccine for children of all ages now or focus first on the youngest. But Muller already has had lots of parents ask why shots were being tested in tots before older kids were vaccinated — and says pediatricians and pharmacists must be ready with answers.

Burton said safety data from millions of older children given Moderna vaccinations abroad should help reassure parents.

While COVID-19 generally isn't as dangerous in youngsters as adults, some do become severely ill or even die. About 475 children younger than 5 have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic's start, according to the CDC, and child hospitalizations soared at omicron's peak.

Yet it's not clear how many parents intend to vaccinate the youngest kids. Less than a third of children ages 5 to 11 have had two vaccinations, and 58% of those ages 12 to 17.

US Army 'returns' cake to Italian woman for 90th birthday

ROME (AP) — With a round of "Happy Birthday" in Italian and English, the U.S. Army toasted an Italian woman with a birthday cake Thursday to replace the one that U.S. soldiers ate as they entered her hometown during one of the final battles of World War II.

Meri Mion, who turns 90 on Friday, wiped away tears as she was presented with the cake during a ceremony in Vicenza, northwest of Venice. The event marked the anniversary of the day the 88th Infantry Division fought its way into the city on April 28, 1945.

According to the U.S. Army, Mion spent that night with her mother hiding in the attic of their farm in the nearby village of San Pietro in Gù. Retreating German soldiers had fired on the house, but when Mion

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awoke on the morning of her 13th birthday, American soldiers were nearby.

In a statement, the U.S. Army Garrison Italy said Mion's mother baked her a birthday cake and left it on the windowsill to cool. But it disappeared — apparently nicked by hungry American soldiers who had already been feted by grateful Italians with wine and bread as they entered Vicenza along its main thoroughfare.

Mion seemed genuinely surprised that U.S. soldiers had returned the cake 77 years later. She marveled "Mama mia" and "Grazie" as a small crowd featuring U.S. commanders and Italian officials sang "Happy Birthday."

"Tomorrow, we will eat that dessert, with all my family remembering this wonderful day that I will never forget," Mion said, according to the U.S. Army.

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

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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.

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 Krivy 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.

Despite the great risk, thousands of protesters gathered daily on Kherson's main square during the first weeks of the occupation, 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 and on Wednesday, Russian troops used tear gas and stun grenades to disperse them.

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."

There has also been some Ukrainian resistance as well. In what appeared to be a Ukrainian counterattack, a series of explosions rocked the television tower late Wednesday, temporarily knocking Russian channels off the air, both Ukrainian and Russian news organizations reported.

Still, there is a palpable sense of growing trepidation among the city's residents. Mayor Kolykhaiev said that after the warnings about a Russian referendum and mobilization there's 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 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."

After a rocket: 'One second and you are left with nothing'

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

ZAPORIZHZHIA, Ukraine (AP) — The boy was at home when the rocket struck across the street and the window shattered. Stunned, he found his father and crawled under his blanket. They clung to each other and asked, "Are you still alive?"

Then the father noticed blood. Glass shards had cut the boy's right leg to the bone.

The 11-year-old Ukrainian boy was one of at least three people wounded Thursday morning in what emergency officials called the first strike in a residential area of the southern city of Zaporizhzhia since Russia's invasion began. The city has been a crucial waypoint for tens of thousands of people fleeing the besieged southern port of Mariupol and is home to Europe's largest nuclear plant.

The rocket strike came as parts of southern Ukraine are preparing for a further onslaught by Russian forces who seek to strip the country of its Black Sea and Sea of Azov coasts.

Residents said at least eight homes in the modest neighborhood of cherry trees and wooden fences were damaged or destroyed.

The rocket had been hit by Ukraine's anti-aircraft system, emergency services official Pavlo Zhukov told The Associated Press at the scene, adding that a direct hit on the neighborhood would have been far worse.

The boy's father, Vadym Vodostoyev, stood in the courtyard and held up his still-shaking hands.

"There's no military here, no strategic facilities," he said. "We were no threat to them."

He thought of his son and came close to tears.

"It just takes one second and you're left with nothing," he said.

Ukrainians have been living with that fear for two months now.

The rocket stripped the ordinary from a sunny morning. It bent a metal garage door inward, rippled ceilings and cracked walls. It killed a neighbor's dog.

Katerina Klimasheva, 68, was standing in her kitchen making coffee. The shock wave from the rocket slammed the door of her cupboard into her. It left glass shards embedded in the chest of one of her sons.

She opened the refrigerator, which was pierced by shrapnel, and smashed egg yolks dribbled out.

"Fascists," she said of the Russian leadership in Moscow. "I'm Russian. We're Russian. But I've lived here all my life. I've not seen such people. And then they say attacks like these are false."

Klimasheva said she assumed the rocket had been meant for the railway nearby or for the local steel plant. Russia has been targeting Ukraine's infrastructure for weeks, smashing factories, fuel depots, bridges and highways in a destructive fury that will take billions to rebuild.

Another of her sons, Anatoly Kongurtsev, waved a hammer through the broken kitchen window in anger.

"Attacking children? What can I say?" he said. "They're swine."

Across the street, steps from the rocket's crater, Artem Lazarenko was thankful he had woken up when he did and wandered into a back room of his now-destroyed house. Dried blood crusted in his left ear where his eardrum had burst.

"Nobody knows what's inside their heads," he said of the Russians. "Nobody wants to fight, but I will if I have to."

The 26-year-old construction worker was already planning to rebuild. But the crushed yellow Lada parked next to the house was a total loss.

"It was broken anyway," Lazarenko said. "But not like this."

Israeli PM's family receives death threat and bullet in mail

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's teenage son has received a death threat and bullet in the mail, Israeli officials said Thursday, the second such warning against the Israeli leader's family this week.

The threats have come at a time of deep political divisions in Israel. In a major speech on Wednesday night marking Israel's Holocaust memorial day, Bennett had spoken out against the polarization in Israel, urging citizens not to let internal divisions rip society apart.

Israeli police said that both incidents were being investigated, but gave few other details, including where the items were sent and who might have sent them.

Bennett has been the target of fierce criticism from Israel's hard-line right wing since forming his governing coalition last year. In 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish ultranationalist opposed to his peacemaking efforts with the Palestinians.

Bennett's government is made up of eight parties from across the political spectrum, including religious nationalists, centrists and an Islamic party. It is the first Arab party to be part of a governing coalition.

These parties have little in common beyond their shared animosity to former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. They have agreed to put aside many of their differences while focusing on common ground, such as the economy, managing the coronavirus crisis and spending on education and social services.

Netanyahu, now the opposition leader, has worked hard to undermine the coalition.

Critics have accused Bennett, who leads a small, religious nationalist party, of abandoning his core hard-line beliefs. One member of his Yamina party was sanctioned this week as a "defector" for repeatedly supporting the opposition in hundreds of votes. Another member of his party recently resigned from the coalition, leaving the fragile alliance without a parliamentary majority.

Bennett formed the coalition last June after four inconclusive elections that underscored the fissures in society over key issues as well as the polarizing effects of Netanyahu's 12-year rule.

In Wednesday's speech, coming on one of the most solemn days of the year, Bennett implored the nation to put aside its differences.

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

That speech came a day after his family received a bullet in the mail for the first time. The episode prompted his 17-year-old son Yoni to express his sadness in an Instagram post.

"It's just sad to see that real people write such horrible things," he said. "To think that he lives and breathes like me but has a brain that was created by the devil is crazy."

Bennett is a former top aide to Netanyahu, and Yoni is named after Netanyahu's older brother, who was killed in a famous 1976 Israeli commando raid while rescuing a hijacked airplane in Uganda.

An Israeli official familiar with the matter confirmed on Thursday that the second threatening letter and bullet had been sent to Yoni Bennett. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Police have imposed a gag order on their investigation, and officials declined to say whether there were any suspects.

While many indications pointed to Jewish extremists, the threats also come at a time of heightened ten-

sions with the Palestinians following a series of deadly Palestinian attacks in Israeli cities, Israeli military raids in the occupied West Bank, and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site and cross-border fighting with Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

Buffeted by weather, a historic Black town strives to endure

By TOM FOREMAN Jr. Associated Press

PRINCEVILLE, N.C. (AP) — As she exits her hometown's only restaurant clutching an order of cabbage and hush puppies, Carolyn Suggs Bandy pauses to boast about a place that stakes its claim as the oldest town chartered by Black Americans nearly 140 years ago.

"It is sacred to me," says Bandy, 65. "We got roots in this town."

Yet Princeville, on the banks of the Tar River in eastern North Carolina, is one hurricane away from disaster. The land has flooded many times. Two hurricanes 17 years apart created catastrophic flooding in the town, which was built on swampy, low-lying land in a bend in the river. And weather is hardly the only thing buffeting Princeville through the decades. It has endured racism, bigotry and attempts by white neighbors to erase it from the map, and from existence.

Now, with a changing climate, the future is more uncertain than ever. Hurricanes are likely to be more intense. Melting glaciers are causing sea levels to rise, making more flooding inevitable.

With each calamity comes a suggestion: Maybe the town should pick up and relocate to safer ground. Many residents, though, say Princeville should — must — stay put. On this land, they see connections — to both a shared history and a continuing fight for survival.

"These are sacred African-American grounds," says Bobbie Jones, Princeville's two-term mayor, using words that echo Bandy's. "How dare we be asked to move our town?"

When freed slaves settled the land that is now Princeville, they didn't choose the site because it was the best land. It was all the former slaves could afford.

"It was absolutely worthless," says Jones, who grew up just outside the town limits. "Nobody wanted it. Nobody could see anything positive for the future of the swampland."

Despite the poor location, the town thrived, growing from a population of 379 in 1880 to 552 at the turn of the 20th century. It had a school, churches and numerous businesses. The 2020 U.S. Census put the town's population at 1,254, a steep decline from a decade earlier.

The town, incorporated in 1885, calls itself the oldest town chartered by Black Americans. Other towns also make that claim. Princeville — named in honor of Turner Prince, an African American carpenter who was born a slave and became one of the town's first residents — survived multiple attempts by white neighbors to have its charter revoked.

But most dangerous to Princeville's survival today is its unfortunate location. The town sits in a bend in the Tar River, 124 miles from the Atlantic Ocean at the edge of North Carolina's coastal plain. When slow-moving storms come ashore and move inland, drenching rains drain into the rivers and flood towns along the banks.

An earthen dike surrounds the town on three sides, and it held nature at bay for more than 30 years. Then, in September 1999, Hurricane Floyd hit. Swollen by rain, pushed by winds, the Tar surged over, around and even under the dike, washing homes from their foundations and the dead from their graves.

"When Floyd came, it seemed like the end of the world," says Navy veteran Alex Noble, 84, whose house took on several feet of water despite being about a mile from the river. "It seemed like you just were turned outdoors. You know, everything was wide open."

Firefighter Kermit Perkins, whose mother was mayor at the time, remembers floating past utility poles, the power lines within easy reach of the wooden stick he was carrying.

"In that moment, in that boat, you didn't know what the future was going to hold," he says. "You didn't know whether there was going to be a Princeville or not."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers made plans to expand the levee to better protect the town. But then,

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in 2016, Hurricane Matthew struck, bringing more devastating flooding that left an estimated 80% of the town underwater, according to the Coastal Dynamics Design Lab.

Flooding is likely to get worse. Hurricanes will be “wetter and are likely to be more intense,” according a summary of the state’s climate written by N.C. State University, and melting glaciers are likely to increase sea levels.

Now, with a nearly \$40 million plan to improve the levee, people hope for respite from the flooding. But as another hurricane season approaches, work has yet to begin. Updated computer modeling revealed that the original plan would have caused flooding in other areas. The corps is trying to come up with a better design.

The delay has frustrated Jones, as he said during the recent virtual celebration of Founders Day.

“If they can do it in the 1800s, certainly we can do it in 2022,” Jones said that day. “Our forefathers didn’t quit. Therefore, we can never quit.”

If there is to be a tomorrow for Princeville, it will rely on two accomplishments: restoring its history and bringing in new blood.

The town is full of single-family homes and an apartment complex interspersed with empty buildings that have been boarded up and abandoned as a result of the two latest floods. A church sits with its windows covered in plywood.

Commerce focuses on a small strip with a barber shop and a liquor store flanking a convenience store where residents can get snack foods, buy lottery tickets and fill up with gas. A separate building holds the small sit-down restaurant where Bandy got her food.

There’s no boat access to the river, and an old baptismal site is blocked off by a chain-link fence. The town park consists of a few outbuildings and a football field with old-style goalposts. It currently serves as a COVID-19 vaccination site.

As for basic services, you can’t bank, and the last grocery — called “New Beginnings” — closed in 2017, two years after it opened. There’s also a Dollar General store. Though the firehouse was rebuilt, the town no longer has its own police force and instead relies on deputies from the Edgecombe County Sheriff’s Office.

Jones thinks the town’s compelling past could be a lure for tourism. Theming a community around its history, after all, has proved lucrative and restorative for many places. But after so much flooding, very little of historic Princeville is left.

The clapboard, double-chimneyed town hall stands next to the rebuilt fire station with bits of tattered insulation flapping in the breeze. It’s hoped the building can be converted into a museum.

The Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church, with its two front doors and original stained-glass windows, was restored after Floyd but inundated again during Matthew. It remains shuttered, its walls still ripped out several feet high, its congregation worshipping at a nearby sanctuary.

In front of the church stands a marble monument to co-founder Abraham Wooten, whose house on Mutual Boulevard, is believed to be the oldest structure in town — with parts of it thought to date to the 1870s. But it remains exposed to the elements, vines creeping along the eaves and choking the old stove pipe on the roof.

Historical consultant Kelsi Dew says the town is seeking funds to preserve the house and would like to see it placed on the National Register of Historic Places. But in another irony for Princeville, Dew says raising the house above flood levels would make it ineligible for a listing, “as it would compromise the historical context.”

Luring new business into Princeville will likely involve offering incentives such as tax breaks, the kind that are offered by state governments seeking to land a major manufacturer. Housing is an issue, too: While some homes are being elevated, other homeowners have accepted buyouts from the N.C. Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.

The town has purchased two tracts of land totaling 141 acres. There, its leaders hope, will rise new homes and businesses, possibly a hotel and a truck stop — all located near the proposed Interstate 87,

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which is set to connect the state capital of Raleigh to Norfolk, Virginia.

Even with an improved levee, no one can guarantee the town won't flood again. It would cost some \$200 million, according to a 2014 Corps draft study, to truly protect the town from a Floyd-level storm, "more than can be justified and more than the state or community can afford."

And many struggling towns trying to keep and attract young people have found their efforts insufficient. Betty Cobb, 74 and another lifelong resident, knows that young people graduate from high school or college and aren't looking to come back.

"Now, my grandson and my granddaughter, who's graduating this year, have grown up over here. Anything they want to do, they had to leave Princeville," Cobb says. "So, I'm thinking as long as we don't have things of that nature in place, they're not going to, people are not going to come back here and raise their children."

The challenges are obvious. But give up? Those who live in Princeville aren't there. Not yet.

Deborah Shaw has lived all 61 of her years in Princeville, 31 of them working for the sheriff's office. Even with the lure of a new town and new surroundings, Shaw says, Princeville calls her back.

"You always get an itch to go other places," Shaw says. "But you're always going to return back to your original spot. And Princeville is my original spot."

Tracey Knight was in Princeville in 1999 when her family's trailer park was flooded. Knight moved to Georgia in 2005 and came back to the area in 2013. When she opened Tray-Seas Soul Food on Main Street last November, in "one of the failingest" spots in town, people thought she was crazy.

"They said that no one ever makes it here in this building," says Knight. "And I was like, 'Wow. Well, I'm going to be the one that makes it here.'"

Why take the risk? "Faith," she says. "You've got to keep the faith."

And Noble, who came to Princeville with his wife in 1963, thinks of the freed slaves who built Princeville, and what they might say to today's residents.

"You know, they always said, 'Don't give up. Don't give up,'" he says. "And that's what we got to do. Stick with it. ... You know, we didn't come this far to turn around."

Beijing orders schools closed in tightening of virus rules

BEIJING (AP) — Beijing is closing all city schools 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, with the third coming Friday.

On Thursday, the city's Education Bureau ordered all schools to end classes from Friday and said it hadn't determined when they would resume.

It also wasn't clear whether schools would be able to offer classes online or allow students facing crucial exams to return to class.

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.

Also Thursday, residents of two housing compounds in Beijing's Chaoyang district were ordered to stay inside and some clinics and businesses shut down.

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

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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.

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.

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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.

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

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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.

Today in History: April 29, Dachau is liberated

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, April 29, the 119th day of 2022. There are 246 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 29, 1946, 28 former Japanese officials went on trial in Tokyo as war criminals; seven ended up being sentenced to death.

On this date:

In 1429, Joan of Arc entered the besieged city of Orleans to lead a French victory over the English.

In 1916, the Easter Rising in Dublin collapsed as Irish nationalists surrendered to British authorities.

In 1945, during World War II, American soldiers liberated the Dachau (DAH'-khow) concentration camp. Adolf Hitler married Eva Braun inside his "Führerbunker" and designated Adm. Karl Doenitz (DUHR'-nihtz) president.

In 1957, the SM-1, the first military nuclear power plant, was dedicated at Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

In 1967, Aretha Franklin's cover of Otis Redding's "Respect" was released as a single by Atlantic Records.

In 1991, a cyclone began striking the South Asian country of Bangladesh; it ended up killing more than 138,000 people, according to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

In 1992, a jury in Simi Valley, California, acquitted four Los Angeles police officers of almost all state charges in the videotaped beating of motorist Rodney King; the verdicts were followed by rioting in Los Angeles resulting in 55 deaths.

In 1997, a worldwide treaty to ban chemical weapons went into effect.

In 2008, Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama denounced his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, for what he termed "divisive and destructive" remarks on race.

In 2010, the U.S. Navy officially ended a ban on women serving on submarines, saying the first women would be reporting for duty by 2012. The NCAA's Board of Directors approved a 68-team format for the men's basketball tournament beginning the next season.

In 2011, Britain's Prince William and Kate Middleton were married in an opulent ceremony at London's Westminster Abbey.

In 2020, scientists announced the first effective treatment against the coronavirus, the experimental antiviral medication remdesivir, which they said could speed the recovery of COVID-19 patients.

Ten years ago: Despite past differences, President Barack Obama and former President Bill Clinton began a summer fundraising blitz with an event in McLean, Virginia. An out-of-control SUV plunged more than 50 feet off the side of a New York City highway overpass and landed on the grounds of the Bronx Zoo, killing all seven people aboard, including three children.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump marked his 100th day in office with a rally in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. A white suburban Dallas policeman fired into a moving car carrying five Black teenagers, killing 15-year-old Jordan Edwards. (Balch Springs officer Roy Oliver would be convicted of murder and sentenced to 15 years in prison.)

One year ago: Brazil became the second country to officially top 400,000 COVID-19 deaths. Police in Los Angeles said the woman who had returned Lady Gaga's stolen French bulldogs was among five people arrested in connection with the theft and the shooting of the music superstar's dog walker. The Jacksonville Jaguars made Clemson's Trevor Lawrence the first pick in the NFL draft; the first three selections were all quarterbacks.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Keith Baxter is 89. Conductor Zubin Mehta is 86. Pop singer Bob Miranda (The Happenings) is 80. Country singer Duane Allen (The Oak Ridge Boys) is 79. Singer Tommy James is 75. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., is 72. Movie director Phillip Noyce is 72. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld is 68.

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Actor Leslie Jordan is 67. Actor Kate Mulgrew is 67. Actor Daniel Day-Lewis is 65. Actor Michelle Pfeiffer is 64. Actor Eve Plumb is 64. Rock musician Phil King is 62. Country singer Stephanie Bentley is 59. Actor Vincent Ventresca is 56. Singer Carnie Wilson (Wilson Phillips) is 54. Actor Paul Adelstein is 53. Actor Uma Thurman is 52. International Tennis Hall of Famer Andre Agassi is 52. Rapper Master P is 52. Actor Darby Stanchfield is 51. Country singer James Bonamy is 50. Gospel/R&B singer Erica Campbell (Mary Mary) is 50. Rock musician Mike Hogan (The Cranberries) is 49. Actor Tyler Labine is 44. Actor Megan Boone is 39. Actor-model Taylor Cole is 38. NHL center Jonathan Toews is 34. Pop singer Foxes is 33. Actor Grace Kaufman is 20.