

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, May 7

- 10:30 a.m.: Track meet at Eureka.
- SEAS Confession: 3:45-4:15 p.m., SEAS Mass: 4:30 p.m.
- 8 a.m.: City-wide Rummage Sale

Thursday, May 5 - National Day of Prayer

- Senior Menu: Beef tips in gravy over noodles, peas, lettuce salad, fruit, whole wheat bread
- School Breakfast: Eggs and sausage.
- School Lunch: Taco burgers, spudsters
- 10 a.m.: Girls Golf at Moccasin Creek CC
- 2 p.m.: Emmanuel Nigeria Circle
- 7 p.m.: High School Spring Concert and Awards Night

Friday, May 6

- Senior Menu: Bratwurst with bun, mashed potatoes, sauerkraut, green beans, fruit.
- School Breakfast: Cinnamon roll bake.
- School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.
- 3 p.m.: Track Meet at Sisseton
- 6 p.m.: FFA Banquet at GHS Gym.

HELP
WANTED!Groton
Store

Part time cashier & part time deli.
Deli must be 18 years of age or older.
Apply at Ken's in Groton.

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

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

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With Brandon on the mound, Groton Area shuts out Hamlin Area

Bradin Althoff threw a shutout to lead Groton Area past Hamlin Area Varsity 16-0 on Thursday.

Althoff led Groton Area to victory by driving in four runs. Althoff went 3-for-4 at the plate. Althoff drove in runs on a single in the first and a single in the fifth.

Groton Area opened up scoring in the first inning. Althoff drove in two when Althoff singled.

Groton Area notched seven runs in the second inning. Groton Area's big bats in the inning were led by singles by Evin Nehls and Pierce Kettering, doubles by Dillon Abeln and Brevin Fliehs, and a walk by Kaleb Hoover.

A single by Riggs Prouty in the fourth inning was a positive for Hamlin Area Varsity.

Althoff led the Groton Area to victory on the pitcher's mound. The pitcher went five innings, allowing zero runs on two hits, striking out eight and walking one.

Kelby Hauck took the loss for Hamlin Area Varsity. The bulldog allowed nine hits and ten runs over two innings, striking out two.

Groton Area racked up 15 hits in the game. Althoff, Kettering, Fliehs, Nehls, and Colby Dunker all managed multiple hits for Groton Area. Kettering and Althoff each managed three hits to lead Groton Area. Althoff led Groton Area with two stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with nine stolen bases.

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Groton Area 16 - 0 Hamlin Area Varsity

📍 Away 📅 Wednesday May 04, 2022

	1	2	3	4	5	R	H	E
GRTN	3	7	0	0	6	16	15	1
HMLN	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3

BATTING

Groton Area	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
P Kettering (CF)	4	2	3	1	0	0
C Simon (2B)	2	3	1	0	1	0
D Abeln (C)	2	3	1	1	1	0
B Althoff (P)	4	3	3	4	0	0
K Hoover (SS)	3	2	1	3	1	0
C Dunker (1B)	4	0	2	1	0	2
B Flihs (3B)	4	1	2	2	0	0
E Nehls (LF)	4	1	2	1	0	2
K Antonsen (RF)	1	0	0	0	1	0
C Simon (RF)	1	1	0	0	0	0
Totals	29	16	15	13	4	4

2B: D Abeln, C Dunker, K Hoover, B Flihs, **3B:** B Flihs, **TB:** D Abeln 2, C Dunker 3, K Hoover 2, E Nehls 2, B Flihs 5, B Althoff 3, C Simon, P Kettering 3, **CS:** C Dunker, **HBP:** D Abeln, C Simon, **SB:** D Abeln 2, C Dunker, K Hoover, E Nehls, B Althoff 2, C Simon, P Kettering, **LOB:** 4

PITCHING

Groton Area	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
B Althoff	5.0	2	0	0	1	8	0
Totals	5.0	2	0	0	1	8	0

W: B Althoff, **P-S:** B Althoff 50-37, **BF:** B Althoff 17

Hamlin Area Varsit	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
G Picardo (CF)	2	0	0	0	0	1
R Prouty (3B)	2	0	1	0	0	1
X Sheehan (C)	2	0	0	0	0	2
W Grantham (SS)	1	0	0	0	1	0
C Sauder (LF)	2	0	0	0	0	0
T Smith (1B)	2	0	0	0	0	0
K Kutil (P)	2	0	1	0	0	1
C Jutting (RF)	2	0	0	0	0	2
B Rodriguez	1	0	0	0	0	1
Totals	16	0	2	0	1	8

TB: K Kutil, R Prouty, **CS:** C Sauder, **LOB:** 2

Hamlin Area \	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
K Hauck	2.0	9	10	10	4	2	0
K Kutil	3.0	6	6	6	0	2	0
Totals	5.0	15	16	16	4	4	0

L: K Hauck, **P-S:** K Kutil 44-25, K Hauck 79-39, **WP:** K Kutil, K Hauck 2, **HBP:** K Kutil 2, **BF:** K Kutil 17, K Hauck 18

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Groton Area JV 21 - 2 Hamlin Area JV

📍 Away 📅 Wednesday May 04, 2022

	1	2	R	H	E
GRTN	21	0	21	14	1
HMLN	1	1	2	2	2

BATTING

Groton Area JV	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
B Flihs (LF)	4	3	3	4	0	0
D Abeln (CF)	3	3	1	2	0	0
B Althoff (RF)	1	3	1	0	1	0
C Dunker (3B)	2	3	2	1	1	0
K Hoover (SS)	2	2	2	3	1	0
N Morris (C)	1	2	1	2	1	0
C Simon (P)	2	2	2	4	1	0
C McInerney (1B)	3	1	1	1	0	2
K Antonsen (2B)	2	2	1	2	1	0
Totals	20	21	14	19	6	2

2B: B Flihs, **3B:** B Flihs, **TB:** B Flihs 6, C Dunker 2, K Hoover 2, B Althoff, N Morris, C McInerney, D Abeln, C Simon 2, K Antonsen, **HBP:** B Althoff, N Morris, D Abeln, **SB:** D Abeln, **LOB:** 2

PITCHING

Groton Area	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
C Simon	2.0	2	2	2	3	0	0
Totals	2.0	2	2	2	3	0	0

W: C Simon, **P-S:** C Simon 39-19, **BF:** C Simon 12

Hamlin Area JV	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
G Maag (C)	2	0	0	0	0	0
C Driscoll (RF)	1	1	0	0	1	0
K Hauck (3B)	2	0	1	0	0	0
K Kutil (1B)	1	0	0	0	0	0
T Smith (P, CF)	1	0	1	1	0	0
M Kees	1	0	0	0	0	0
E Ruml	0	1	0	0	1	0
#84	0	0	0	0	1	0
#8	1	0	0	1	0	0
Totals	9	2	2	2	3	0

TB: K Hauck, T Smith, **SB:** T Smith, **LOB:** 4

Hamlin Area	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
T Smith	0.1	2	10	9	5	1	0
R Prouty	1.2	12	11	11	1	1	0
Totals	2.0	14	21	20	6	2	0

L: T Smith, **P-S:** R Prouty 52-29, T Smith 50-21, **HBP:** R Prouty, T Smith 2, **BF:** R Prouty 18, T Smith 11

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Weber Landscaping Greenhouse

204 N State St., Groton

Opening
for the
season
on Friday,
May 6th!



New products!
New Planters!



We have tons
of hanging
baskets,
vegetables,
annuals,
garden seeds,
gift cards and
much. much
more!



Livingston
garden seeds!!!!

Hours: M-F 10-6, Sat 10-4, Sun 12-4
Look for the green flags! Questions? Call 605-380-6587

THE PANTRY



Opening May 9th at the Groton Community Center

Mondays: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Tuesdays: 4 p.m. to 8 p.m

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Temporary Boat Ramp Closure – Walker’s Point Recreation Area, Lake Madison

MADISON, S.D. - The South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks Department (GFP) will be temporarily closing the boat ramp at Walker’s Point Recreation Area on Lake Madison.

The current ramp will be replaced and extended into slightly deeper water, allowing boat and watercraft launching in lower water conditions.

“GFP continues to see low-water challenges across the state,” said GFP Planning and Development Administrator, Adam Kulesa. “Access issues are a priority, and we will continue to address specific ramp issues as they are needed.”

While the ramp is closed, users are encouraged to use the Payne Waterfowl Production Area ramp located on the west end of Lake Madison. Current low-water conditions may create challenging launching conditions for some types of watercraft, so please use the proper precautions.

The Walker’s Point ramp project is estimated to take approximately 3 weeks weather permitting. The ramp will be closed beginning May 11.

“We want to thank users for their patience and understanding while this improvement project is being implemented,” Kulesa said. “If you have any questions, please contact me or our local department staff at 605-773-5526.”

Construction to Begin on U.S. Highway 12 in Waubay

ABERDEEN, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) will begin concrete repair work on U.S. Highway 12 in Waubay on Thursday, May 5, 2022.

The concrete repair operations will reduce traffic to one lane in each direction on Highway 12. Traffic will be controlled with lane closures

This project is part of a \$1.3 million contract with Diamond Surface, Inc. to do concrete repair work on Highway 12 and S.D. Highways 10 and 25 in the Aberdeen Region.

The expected completion date for the concrete repair work is mid-July, with an overall project completion date of Aug. 26, 2022.

Child Being Investigated for Hepatitis

PIERRE, S.D. The South Dakota Department of Health (DOH) is investigating a child with hepatitis of unknown origin. The child resides in Brown County and is under 10 years of age. South Dakota is among a growing list of states investigating children with hepatitis and adenovirus infection.

“We are asking medical providers to be on the lookout for hepatitis in children without a known cause,” said Dr. Josh Clayton, State Epidemiologist. “DOH is working with the CDC to identify the cause and to prevent additional illnesses from occurring.”

Symptoms of hepatitis, or inflammation of the liver, include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, light-colored stools, and jaundice, or yellow skin or eyes. Talk to your medical provider if your child is experiencing these symptoms. A link between cases of hepatitis and adenovirus infection is suspected. Adenovirus infections are common and occur among persons of all ages. Symptoms may include cold-like symptoms, fever, sore throat, pneumonia, diarrhea, or pink eye.

DOH encourages everyday precautions to keep children safe, including washing hands often, avoiding people who are sick, covering coughs and sneezes, avoiding touching the eyes, nose, or mouth, and staying up-to-date on routinely recommended vaccines.

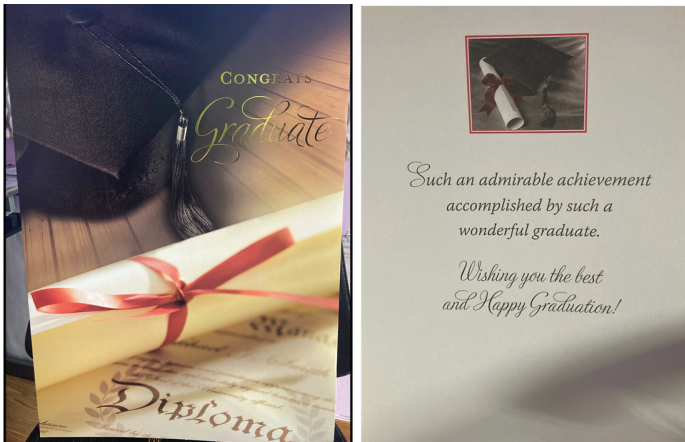
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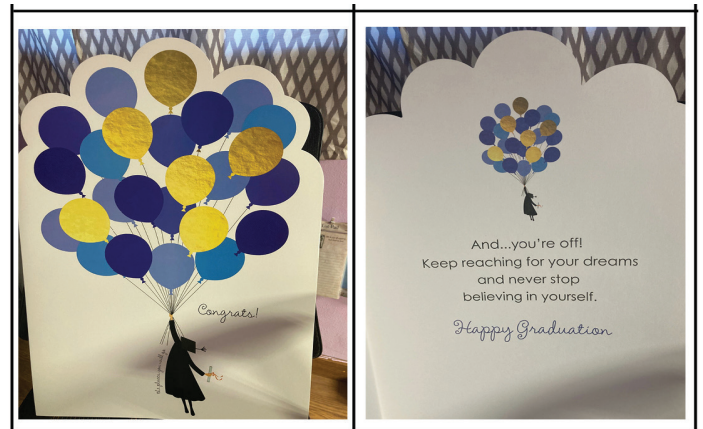
Jumbo Graduation Cards

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

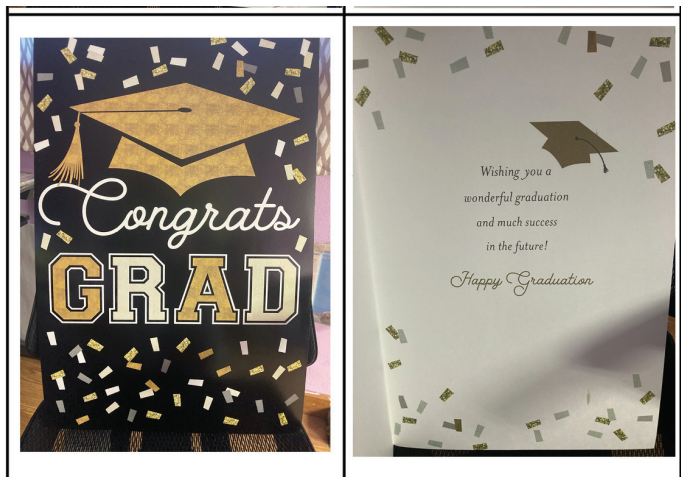
Can now be ordered on-line at 397news.com - Link on Black Bar
Or Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460 or Tina at 605-397-7285
to reserve your card(s)



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\$7.99



50-10977JM-C
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50-9360-C
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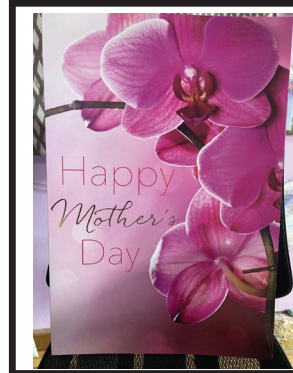
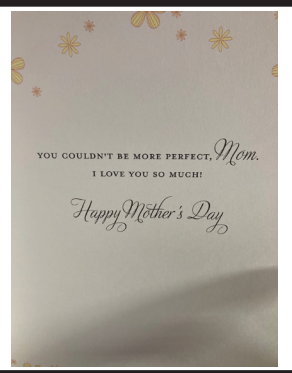
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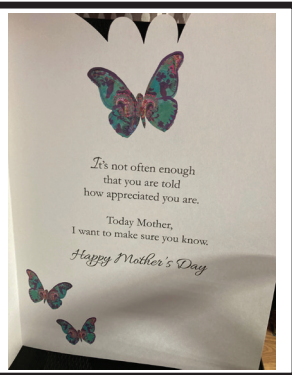
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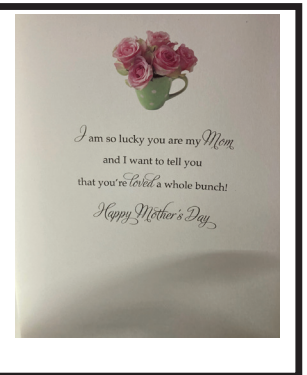
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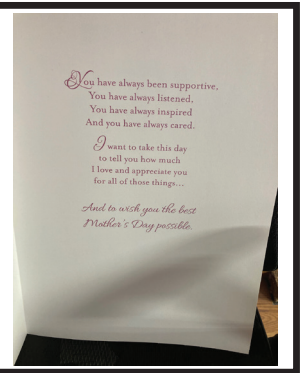
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- NEWS
- LIVE
- FIT
- CLEAN
- RENT

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PO Box 34, Groton, SD
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Call/Text Paul: 605/397-7460
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New at the
GDI FIT
The Stairmaster
and Air Bike



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

Order your Graduation Balloons while we have a good supply!



#1 - \$5



#2 - \$5



#3 - \$6



#4 - \$10 - 45"



#5 - \$5



#6 - \$6



\$3.50 - 9" on a stick



#7 - \$10 - 36"



#8 - \$5



#9 - \$5



#10 - \$5



#11 - \$5



#12 - \$5



#13 - \$8 35"



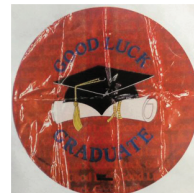
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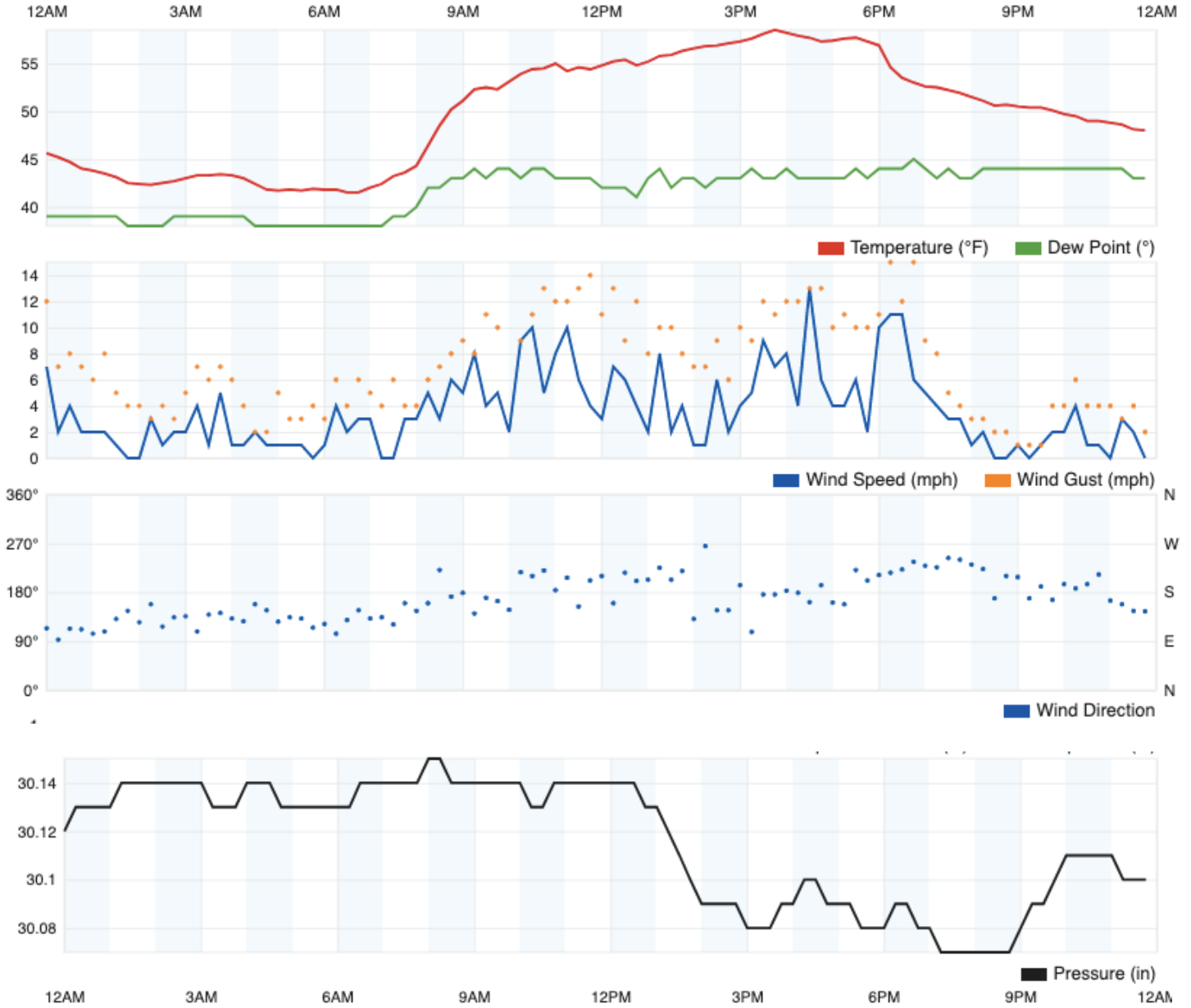
#20 - \$5

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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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Mostly Cloudy	Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny and Breezy
High: 61 °F	Low: 43 °F	High: 65 °F	Low: 48 °F	High: 73 °F

					Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
								
						<i>Breezy</i>	<i>Gusty</i>	
					60° 42° 3% 4%	62° 48° 1% 10%	67° 50° 15% 60%	72° 50° 35% 50%
					SE 7 - 11	SE 15 - 20 G30	S 20 - 25 G35	SW 10 - 15 G25
					5 Day Forecast - Aberdeen, SD			
					Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
								
						<i>Gusty</i>	<i>Breezy</i>	
					57° 43° 4% 3%	64° 49° 1% 4%	72° 48° 15% 30%	79° 50° 12% 45%
					SE 9 - 13	SE 15 - 20 G30	SE 15 - 20 G30	S 10 - 15 G25
					5 Day Forecast - Pierre, SD			
					National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota			
					Updated: 5/4/2022 3:49 PM Central			

Temperatures are in a warming trend. A low pressure system moving across the region through tomorrow, will probably continue to generate some isolated to widely scattered showers across the forecast area through tonight into Thursday. There will be a couple of cold fronts passing through the region to keep things from getting too warm. One of these cold fronts probably sweeps through the region Saturday night. The front could help force some thunderstorms to develop across the region mainly Saturday evening and Saturday night. Several other chances for precipitation show up between Sunday and Thursday of next week.

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Today in Weather History

May 5, 1964: A two-state, F3 tornado moved northeast from 4 miles WNW of Herreid to the south of Streeter, North Dakota, a distance of about 55 miles. Blacktop was ripped for 400 yards on Highway 10, five miles north of Herreid, South Dakota. Two barns were destroyed northeast of Hague, North Dakota, with a dozen cattle killed on one farm. The F3 damage occurred at one farm about midway between Wishek and Hogue. Other barns were destroyed south of Burnstad.

May 5, 1986: A tight pressure gradient produced winds over 60 mph in west central Minnesota. City officials in Browns Valley estimated a quarter of the city suffered damage. The roof of a grandstand was blown off and landed a quarter of a block away. Seventy-five homes and six businesses sustained roof damage. In nearby Dumont, Minnesota, the wind ripped a large grain bin off its foundation and tore open the top of another.

May 5, 2007: A north to south frontal boundary, powerful low-level winds, and abundant gulf moisture resulted in training thunderstorms across parts of central and northeast South Dakota. The training thunderstorms produced torrential rains from 3 to over 10 inches resulting in widespread flash flooding across Brown, Buffalo, Hand, Spink, Clark, Day, Marshall, and Roberts Counties. The counties of Brown, Buffalo, Clark, Day, Marshall, and Spink were declared disaster areas by President Bush. The Governor also declared a state of emergency for the flooded counties with Senator John Thune and Representative Stephanie Herseth surveying the flood damage. Eight damage assessment teams from local, state, and FEMA came to Brown and other counties.

Dozens of cities were affected by the flooding with several hundred homes, businesses, and countless roads affected and damaged or destroyed by the flooding. Aberdeen received the most extensive damage, especially the north side of Aberdeen. Seventy-five percent of the homes in Aberdeen received some water in their basements. Basement water levels ranged from a few inches to very deep water all the way up to the first floor of homes. Many homes had the basement walls collapse. The overwhelming load on the drainage systems caused sewage to back up into many homes across the region. Also, many vehicles stalled on the roads with many others damaged by the flooding. Power outages also occurred across the area. Many families were displaced from their homes with many living in emergency shelters. Countless homes were condemned across the region with many considered unlivable. Thousands of acres of crops were also flooded and damaged with many seeds, and large quantities of fertilizer washed away.

Rainfall amounts from this historic event included 3.65 inches in Miller, 3.82 inches in Britton, 4 inches in Eden, 4.47 inches in Andover, 4.90 inches in Webster, 5.68 inches west of Britton, 5.7 inches in Garden City, and 5.82 inches in Conde. Locations with 6 or more inches of rain included, 6 inches in Langford, 6.33 inches in Gann Valley, 6.72 inches in Clark, 7.41 inches in Ashton, 7.49 inches in Stratford, 7.55 inches near Mellette, 7.97 inches in Aberdeen, 8.02 inches in Redfield, 8.73 inches in Columbia, and 8.74 inches in Groton. The 8.74 inches of rainfall in Groton set a new 24-hour state rainfall record. Adding in the rainfall for the previous day, Aberdeen received a total of 9.00 inches; Columbia received a total of 10.19 inches; Groton received an astonishing two-day total rainfall of 10.74 inches.

1933: An estimated F4 tornado cut a 35-mile path from near Brent into Shelby County, Alabama. The town of Helena, AL was especially hard hit, as 14 people died. The tornado roared through Helena at 2:30 am.

1987: Unseasonably hot weather prevailed in the western U.S. A dozen cities in California reported record high temperatures for the date. Afternoon highs of 93 degrees at San Francisco, 98 degrees at San Jose, 100 degrees at Sacramento, and 101 degrees at Redding were the warmest on record for so early in the season. The high of 94 degrees at Medford, Oregon was also the warmest on record for so early in the season.

1995: A supercell thunderstorms brought torrential rains and large hail up to four inches in diameter to Fort Worth, Texas. This storm also struck a local outdoor festival known as the Fort Worth Mayfest. At the time the storm was the costliest hailstorm in the history of the US, causing more than \$2 billion in damage.

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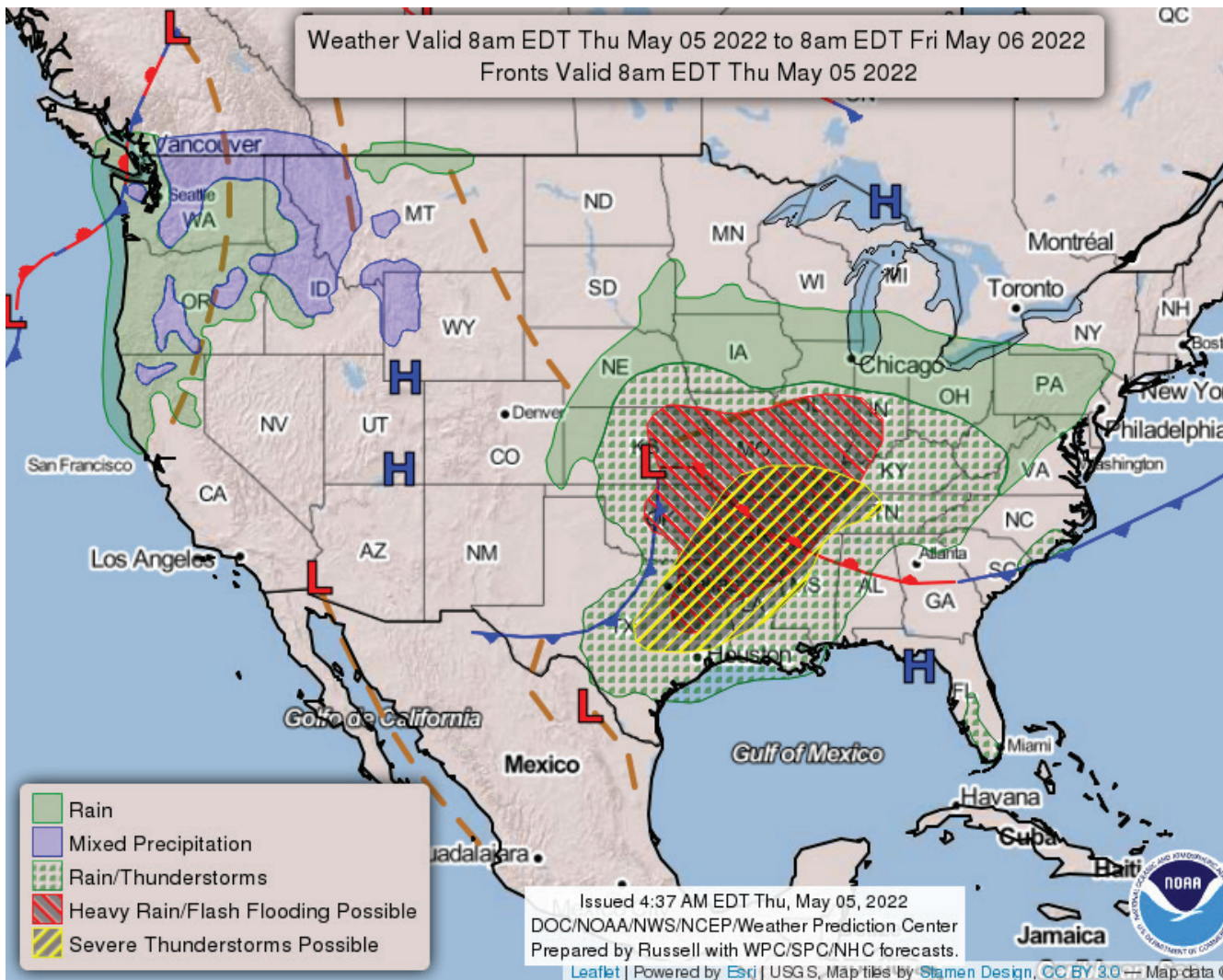
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 59 °F at 3:39 PM
Low Temp: 42 °F at 6:28 AM
Wind: 18 mph at 6:06 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 14 hours, 32 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 92 in 2000
Record Low: 24 in 1968
Average High: 66°F
Average Low: 39°F
Average Precip in May.: 0.54
Precip to date in May.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 4.51
Precip Year to Date: 6.50
Sunset Tonight: 8:45:33 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:11:11 AM



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OPEN FOR IMPROVEMENT

James had been working at his new job of delivering prescriptions for the local pharmacy. Feeling insecure, he called the pharmacist and asked, "I understand that you have a new delivery boy. How's he doing?"

After a brief pause, the pharmacist responded, "Oh, yes. James. He's doing great." After another pause, the pharmacist asked, "You know, you sound just like him." He thought for a moment and then asked, "James...is that you?"

"Yes, sir, it is. I was just wondering how I was doing," came the answer.

David did the same thing. "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts."

David went to God in a state of boldness and with a desire to honor the Lord. Whatever may have forced him to go to God with a desire to make things right with God does not matter to us personally. The fact that he did, however, does.

When I was twelve years old, my mother gave me a Christian Worker's New Testament. Underneath my name she wrote one of her favorite quotes: "God's Word will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from God's Word."

Over the years I have proven that statement to be true on more than one occasion. God gave us His Word to guard us, guide us and guarantee us safe passage through life's journey to our home with Him in heaven.

If, when we read His Word, we compare our deeds and thoughts to His laws and standards and allow them to "search, know and test us," His Word will do its work!

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the "directions" in Your Word that instruct us on how we are to live to please You. Keep us on Your path. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Psalm 139:23

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2022 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent

Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

03-05-17-27-31

(three, five, seventeen, twenty-seven, thirty-one)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

05-27-29-36-47, Star Ball: 7, ASB: 2

(five, twenty-seven, twenty-nine, thirty-six, forty-seven; Star Ball: seven; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$12.42 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$70 million

Powerball

37-39-55-63-69, Powerball: 23, Power Play: 2

(thirty-seven, thirty-nine, fifty-five, sixty-three, sixty-nine; Powerball: twenty-three; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$37 million

Next battle over access to abortion will focus on pills

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — It took two trips over state lines, navigating icy roads and a patchwork of state laws, for a 32-year-old South Dakota woman to get abortion pills last year.

For abortion-seekers like her, such journeys, along with pills sent through the mail, will grow in importance if the Supreme Court follows through with its leaked draft opinion that would overturn the landmark Roe v. Wade decision and allow individual states to ban the procedure. The woman, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because she was concerned for her family's safety, said the abortion pills allowed her to end an unexpected and high-risk pregnancy and remain devoted to her two children.

But anti-abortion activists and politicians say those cross-border trips, remote doctors' consultations and pill deliveries are what they will try to stop next.

"Medication abortion will be where access to abortion is decided," said Mary Ziegler, a professor at Florida State University College of Law who specializes in reproductive rights. "That's going to be the battleground that decides how enforceable abortion bans are."

Use of abortion pills has been rising in the U.S. since 2000 when the Food and Drug Administration approved mifepristone — the main drug used in medication abortions. More than half of U.S. abortions are now done with pills, rather than surgery, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research group that supports abortion rights.

The FDA last year lifted a long-standing requirement that women pick up abortion pills in person. Mail delivery is also now allowed nationwide.

Those moves have spurred online services that offer information on getting abortion pills and consultations to get a prescription. After the woman in South Dakota found that the state's only abortion clinic could not schedule her in time for a medication abortion, she found an online service, called Just The Pill, that advised her to drive across to Minnesota for a phone consultation with a doctor. A week later, she came back to Minnesota for the pills.

She took the first one almost immediately in her car, then cried as she drove home.

"I felt like I lost a pregnancy," she said. "I love my husband and I love my children and I knew exactly what I had to say goodbye to and that was a really horrible thing to have to do."

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South Dakota is among several states, including Texas, Kentucky, Arkansas, Ohio, Tennessee and Oklahoma, where Republicans have moved to restrict access to abortion pills in recent months. South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said additional, in-person visits for the pills and a ban on them being sent through the mail are needed to protect women and save "unborn children." A total of 19 states require a medical clinician to be physically present when abortion pills are given to a patient.

Besides crossing state lines, women can also turn to internationally-based online pharmacies, said Greer Donley, a professor specializing in reproductive health care at the University of Pittsburgh Law School. Some women also are having prescribed pills forwarded through states without restrictions.

"It allows for someone to have an abortion without a direct role of a provider. It's going to be much harder for states to control abortion access," she said, adding, "The question is how is it going to be enforced?"

Sue Leibel, the state policy director for Susan B. Anthony List, a prominent organization opposed to abortion, acknowledged it's an issue that "has crept up" on Republican state lawmakers.

"This is a new frontier and states are grappling with enforcement mechanisms," she said, adding, "The advice that I always give — if you shut the front door, the pills are going to come in the back door."

Abortion opponents maintain they have no intention of prosecuting women who seek abortions.

Instead, Leibel suggested the next target for state enforcement should be the pharmacies, organizations and clinics that provide the abortion pills. She also said abortion-rights opponents should focus on electing a presidential candidate who would work to reverse the FDA's decision.

The FDA said a scientific review supported broadening access to the drugs and found complications were rare. The agency has reported 26 deaths associated with the drug since 2000, though not all of those can be directly attributed to the medication due to existing health conditions and other factors.

However, with new legal battles on the horizon and abortion seekers going to greater lengths to obtain the procedure, Donley, the law school professor, worried that state lawmakers may eventually turn their attention toward the women who get the pills.

"Many anti-abortion legislators might realize the only way to enforce these laws is to prosecute the pregnant person themselves," she said.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Black Hills Pioneer. April 30, 2022.

Editorial: Amended minutes cloud governmental transparency

The recent action of the Butte County Commission to slash a portion of its meeting minutes following the objection of a board member flies in the face of governmental transparency.

Initiated Measure 26, which legalized medical cannabis, garnered the support of nearly 70% of votes cast in the 2020 General Election. In Butte County, 61%, or 2,888 residents, voted in favor of legalization.

It required municipality and county governments to offer the opportunity for at least one dispensary establishment license within its boundaries. However, the number of licenses and types of facility licensure permitted falls under an individual governmental entity's discretionary umbrella.

In recent months, a group comprised of more than two dozen Butte County residents have continued a sustained effort to fight the county commission's stance which led to the October 2021 adoption of its amended ordinance regulating medical cannabis establishments within the county.

First amassing at the Feb. 15 meeting, the group has made appearances in each of the five meetings since, sometimes only a handful attended, and others hosted more than two dozen members.

On at least two occasions, the group drew large numbers, necessitating last-minute changes in venue, moving the crowd from the smaller commission room adjacent to the county's second floor register of deeds office to the third-floor courtroom.

The ongoing dialogue between the commissioners and the concerned citizens at times got heated. When peppered with anxieties and queries from residents, the responses from the commissioners frequently turned defensive, reacting with justifications to rationalize their actions on the now six-month-old ordinance.

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None of the group's members attended any of the numerous meetings leading up to the commission's adoption of the ordinance.

The collection of county residents often responded antagonistically toward the board, tossing around accusations of rushing the ordinance through its paces and proceeding on the regulation armed with woe-ful misinformation. In fact, at the March 15 meeting, Butte County Sheriff Fred Lamphere attempted to deescalate some of the residents a handful of times, insisting those participating in misconduct behave in a respectful manner.

On March 15, Buck Casey, a resident who recently moved from California, was placed on the agenda to speak in opposition of the county's medical marijuana ordinance. He spoke for 43 minutes, fielding a handful of questions from commissioners.

With 12 years' worth of law enforcement experience under his belt, Casey pleaded with the county about the corrosive effect he believed legalized cannabis had on his home state.

At its subsequent meeting on April 5, Commissioner Karrol Herman, who was not present at the March 15 meeting, protested approval of the portion of the meeting minutes that detailed Casey's lengthy presentation. Alleging the 793-word thorough account of Casey's discussion was inappropriate as she believed his testimony was comprised of his opinion.

"We deal with facts here," Herman said, proposing the detailed account be stricken from the county's official record.

Additionally, she declared that publishing minutes of that length in the legal newspaper, the Black Hills Pioneer, as required by state law, constituted a "wasteful" expenditure of tax dollars. Meeting minutes are recorded in the legal newspaper which serve as the permanent record and an unbiased, third party.

So, what does state law say?

According to South Dakota Codified Law 7-18-3, the "board shall publish a full and complete report of all its official proceedings at all regular and special meetings and shall publish proceedings as soon after any meeting as practicable."

So, is publishing the more detailed minutes "wasteful?"

We don't think so. Butte County, from March 15, 2021, to March 31, 2022, spent \$6,992.14 on legal notices with the Black Hills Pioneer. Those legal notices included meeting minutes, notices of hearings, planning and zoning changes, highway bids, and so much more. All these critical informational items add up to 0.0013% of the county's \$5.35 million budget. That's thirteen-one-thousandths of 1%.

Although the specific extent of detail required to be recorded is moderately ambiguous, the law indicates that meeting minutes should give a complete and objective account of what happened at a particular meeting.

On April 19, the commission approved the amended minutes for its March 15 meeting, which contained 764 fewer words. The document was revised to an abridged 29 words, slashing the official record by 96.34%.

Where is the transparency in a 43-minute dialogue summarized by 29 words?

We have questions.

Why would the commission allow Casey to rant for nearly an hour? Especially as his agenda item was not slated as an action item.

Was it the commission's aim to provide Casey a platform from which he anticipated that his concerns would be heard and earnestly considered with open-mindedness, only to find that his passionate and time-consuming communication fell on deaf, unmoved ears?

Why did Herman not seek legal advice from the state's attorney as was requested she do?

Were 792 words really necessary to provide a "full and complete report" of the agenda item? Perhaps not. But 29 words certainly does not present a true account.

Yankton Press & Dakotan. May 3, 2022.

Editorial: Beds For Kids And What We Don't See
How well do you know your own hometown?

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That may have been the biggest underlying question that emanated from a story in Tuesday's Press & Dakotan about a generous local action that meets a local need that few people likely knew or dreamed existed locally.

The story profiled the work of a group called Sleep in Heavenly Peace (SHP), which spent part of last Saturday at Yankton High School's CMTEA/RTEC facility constructing beds to be distributed to local kids who otherwise don't have beds to call their own. The group's motto is simple and, when you ponder it, stark: "No kid sleeps on the floor in our town."

Since the fall of 2020, SHP has distributed 130 such beds to kids in Yankton.

"Believe me, going into these homes and seeing the children, they are really needing those beds," former Optimist Club President Mary Milroy, who is part of the local effort, told the P&D. "We're not there to upgrade (old) beds, but if a kid is sleeping on the floor, couch, on an air mattress, with a parent, anything like that, where they do not have a bed, automatically, they qualify."

This isn't a problem you might expect to see in Yankton, or in any other town or city where you live — a fact that Milroy noted. "Oh, my gosh, we have this in our community? This is a need? That's the remark I've heard from many people," she said.

It's a reminder not only that we tend to overlook these issues that fall through the cracks, but also that modern communities generally have become quite adept at hiding their problems, such as homelessness and hunger. It's not done out of unfeeling malevolence or indifference; rather, it's simply a means of coping with some social issues.

On the other hand, this matter is also a reminder that there are usually organizations, civil groups and volunteers working to address these problems that are otherwise swept out of sight and out of mind.

The local SHP group got its idea from the Brookings SHP chapter, the members of which have their own stories of the needs within their community. The Brookings group has provided indispensable help to Yankton's efforts.

Unfortunately, these efforts are needed.

And that need does give you another view of life in Yankton or Brookings or Sioux Falls or anywhere else where these issues exist.

We can be appreciative of the organizers and volunteers that work to address these needs that we didn't realize were even there.

And realizing that the problem exists is usually the first, best step in the right direction.

ND company scrubs plans for trans-state natural gas pipeline

By JAMES MacPHERSON Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Despite millions of dollars in promised subsidies, a unit of North Dakota's only Fortune 500 company says it won't pursue plans to build a natural gas pipeline from western North Dakota's oil patch to the eastern part of the state.

WBI Energy, a subsidiary of Bismarck-based MDU Resources Group, said the project is not viable due to regulatory uncertainty, limited in-state demand and rising construction, labor and land-acquisition costs.

In a letter to North Dakota Pipeline Authority Director Justin Kringstad, the company said materials and construction costs have risen up to 50% in just the past nine months.

"The recent and potential future inflationary pressure presents a significant challenge to a large-scale pipeline project from western to eastern North Dakota," the company said. "This challenge is further compounded by the fact that the actual construction of a major pipeline project, if it were to proceed, would occur four to five years in the future, following an uncertain siting/regulatory process."

The North Dakota Legislature in November set aside \$150 million in federal coronavirus aid to help construct such a trans-state pipeline for natural gas, which is a byproduct of oil production. The idea, backed by Republican Gov. Doug Burgum, was to help cut down on the wasteful flaring at well sites, and pipe it to communities in the gas-poor eastern part of the state, hoping to spur industrial development.

Applications for the money ended Monday.

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Only Viking Gas Transmission, a subsidiary of Tulsa, Oklahoma-based ONEOK, applied for the grants, Kringstad said. The company wants \$10 million to build a 12-mile pipeline that would link to its existing pipeline in western Minnesota to provide gas to the Grand Forks area.

Viking said the total cost of its project is \$26 million.

WBI Energy has not disclosed its estimate of building a trans-state natural gas pipeline.

Kringstad said the unused grant money likely will "go back to the Legislature for reappropriation."

Burgum spokesman Mike Nowatzki said the state "will continue working toward solutions to bring natural gas from western to eastern North Dakota."

WBI Energy owns and operates more than 3,700 miles of transmission and storage pipelines in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Montana and Wyoming. The company said 1,545 miles of its pipelines are in North Dakota.

WBI Energy said the costs of securing pipeline right-of-way are estimated to be 25% higher than its previous pipeline projects "and frequently exceed recent market values for the purchase and sale of land in rural North Dakota."

Ukraine repels Russian attacks; Mariupol plant battle rages

By JON GAMBRELL and CARA ANNA Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's military said Thursday that it recaptured some areas in the south and repelled Russian attacks in the east, as a bloody battle raged at a steel mill in Mariupol where Ukrainian troops are holed up in tunnels and bunkers, fending off a Russian onslaught.

Ten weeks into a devastating war, Ukrainian and Russian forces are fighting village by village, as Moscow struggles to gain momentum in the eastern industrial heartland of the Donbas. Russia switched its focus to that region — where Moscow-backed separatists have fought Ukrainian forces for years — after a stiffer than expected resistance bogged its troops down and thwarted its initial goal of overrunning the capital.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Thursday, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko said he hadn't expected the Russian offensive to "drag on this way." Some Russian troops used ally Belarus as a launch pad for the invasion on Feb. 24, and Lukashenko publicly supported the operation.

"But I am not immersed in this problem enough to say whether it goes according to plan, like the Russians say, or like I feel it," the authoritarian leader said. He added it would be "unacceptable" to use nuclear weapons, but he couldn't say if Russia has such plans.

In addition to heavy shelling of the Donbas, Russian forces also kept up their bombardment of railroad stations and other supply-line targets across the country — part of an effort to disrupt the supply of Western arms, which have been critical to Ukraine's defense.

Ukrainian forces said Thursday they made some gains on the border of the southern regions of Kherson and Mykolaiv and repelled 11 Russian attacks in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that make up the Donbas.

Five people were killed and at least 25 more wounded in shelling of cities in the Donbas over the past 24 hours, Ukrainian officials said. The attacks damaged houses and a school as well.

Air raid sirens sounded in cities across the country on Wednesday night, while Russian attacks were reported near Kyiv, the capital; in Cherkasy and Dnipro in central Ukraine; and in Zaporizhzhia in the southeast. In Dnipro, authorities said a rail facility was hit — following several earlier attacks on railway stations across the country. The sirens sounded anew early Thursday in the western city of Lviv, which has been a gateway for western arms and served as a relative safe haven for people fleeing fighting farther east.

An assessment by the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War said Russian forces were struggling to gain traction.

"Ukrainian defenses have largely stalled Russian advances in eastern Ukraine," it said late Wednesday.

"Russian forces intensified airstrikes against transportation infrastructure in western Ukraine (on Wednesday) but remain unable to interdict Western aid shipments to Ukraine," it added.

In the most searing example of how Ukrainian forces have slowed Russia's progress, Ukrainian fighters held out at the sprawling Azovstal steel mill in Mariupol — the last pocket of resistance in a city that is otherwise controlled by Moscow's forces.

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"With the support of aircraft, the enemy resumed the offensive in order to take control of the plant," the Ukrainian military's General Staff said Thursday. A stream of black smoke rose above the plant on Wednesday.

The Ukrainians said Russian forces have pushed into the plant's perimeter and were also bombing it from above. The Kremlin denied that there was any ground assault.

Denys Prokopenko, commander of the Ukrainian Azov regiment that's defending the plant, said in a video posted Wednesday that the incursions continued for a second day, "and there are heavy, bloody battles."

Mariupol's fall would deprive Ukraine of a vital port, allow Russia to establish a land corridor to the Crimean Peninsula, which it seized from Ukraine in 2014, and free up troops to fight elsewhere in the Donbas.

The city, and the plant in particular, have come to symbolize the misery inflicted by the war. The Russians have pulverized most of Mariupol in a two-month siege that has trapped civilians with little food, water, medicine or heat. Civilians holed up inside the plant have perhaps suffered even more. About 100 of them were evacuated over the weekend — the first time some saw daylight in months.

The Russian government said it would open another evacuation corridor from the plant during certain hours on Thursday through Saturday. But there was no immediate confirmation of those arrangements from other parties, and many previous assurances from the Kremlin have fallen through, with the Ukrainians blaming continued fighting by the Russians.

It is unclear how many Ukrainian fighters are still inside the plant, but the Russians put the number at about 2,000 in recent weeks, and 500 were reported to be wounded. A few hundred civilians also remain there, the Ukrainian side said this week.

The United Nations announced that more than 300 civilians were evacuated Wednesday from Mariupol and other nearby communities. The evacuees arrived in Zaporizhzhia, about 140 miles (230 kilometers) to the northwest, where they were receiving humanitarian assistance.

"Many came with nothing but the clothes they were wearing, and we will now support them during this difficult time, including with much-needed psychological support," said Osnat Lubrani, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator for Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Belarus announced the start of military exercises Wednesday. A top Ukrainian official said the country will be ready to act if Belarus joins the fighting.

The British Defense Ministry said Thursday that it does not anticipate that the drills currently posed a threat to Ukraine, but that Moscow will likely use them "to fix Ukrainian forces in the north, preventing them from being committed to the battle for the Donbas."

In addition to supplying weapons to Ukraine, Europe and the U.S. have sought to punish Moscow with sanctions, taking aim at the country's vital energy sector. The European Union's top official called on the 27-nation bloc on Wednesday to ban Russian oil imports, a crucial source of revenue.

The proposal needs unanimous approval from EU countries and is likely to be debated fiercely. Hungary and Slovakia have already said they won't take part in any oil sanctions, but they could be granted an exemption.

The EU is also talking about a possible embargo on Russian natural gas. The bloc has already approved a cutoff of coal imports.

The AP Interview: Belarus admits Russia's war 'drags on'

By IAN PHILLIPS Associated Press

MINSK, Belarus (AP) — Belarus' authoritarian leader said that he didn't expect Russia's "operation" in Ukraine to drag on for so long and claimed he was doing "everything" to stop the war, in an interview with The Associated Press on Thursday.

President Alexander Lukashenko defended Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began on Feb. 24. However, he said he didn't think it would "drag on this way."

"But I am not immersed in this problem enough to say whether it goes according to plan, like the Russians say, or like I feel it. I want to stress one more time, I feel like this operation has dragged on," Lukashenko

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said during the nearly 90-minute interview at the Independence Palace in Minsk.

He also alleged that Ukraine was “provoking Russia” and insisted that Belarus stands for peace.

“We categorically do not accept any war. We have done and are doing everything now so that there isn’t a war. Thanks to yours truly, me that is, negotiations between Ukraine and Russia have begun,” he said.

“But why is Ukraine, on whose territory a war in effect is ongoing, military action, people are dying — why is Ukraine not interested in these negotiations?”

Lukashenko also said it would be “unacceptable” to use nuclear weapons, but he couldn’t say if Russia has such plans.

“Not only is the use of nuclear weapons unacceptable because it’s right next to us — we are not across the ocean like the United States. It is also unacceptable because it might knock our terrestrial ball flying off the orbit to who knows where,” Lukashenko said. “Whether or not Russia is capable of that — is a question you need to ask the Russian leadership.”

Russia deployed forces to Belarusian territory under the pretext of military drills and then sent them rolling into Ukraine as part of the invasion that began on Feb. 24.

Lukashenko publicly supported the operation, alleging at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in early March that Ukraine planned to attack Belarus and that Moscow’s offensive prevented that. He said he brought a map to show Putin from where the alleged attack was supposed to take place, but offered no other evidence to back the claim.

Lukashenko also told the AP that Putin isn’t seeking a direct conflict with NATO, and urged the West to ensure that one doesn’t happen.

“He most likely does not want a global confrontation with NATO. Use it. Use it and do everything for that not to happen. Otherwise, even if Putin doesn’t want it, the military will react,” the Belarusian leader said.

Earlier this week, Belarusian military announced snap drills that raised concerns in Ukraine. However, Lukashenko assured the AP on Thursday that the drills didn’t threaten anyone.

“We do not threaten anyone and we are not going to threaten and will not do it. Moreover, we can’t threaten -- we know who opposes us, so to unleash some kind of a conflict, some kind of war here in the West is absolutely not in the interests of the Belarusian state. So the West can sleep peacefully.”

W.Va. House race pits Trump loyalty against infrastructure

By LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — One contender thinks West Virginia voters will see the value of federal spending on badly needed infrastructure in one of the nation’s poorest regions. The other is betting that loyalty to former President Donald Trump will matter more.

The May 10 primary in West Virginia’s 2nd Congressional District between Republican Reps. Alex Mooney and David McKinley will be a barometer of Trump’s clout in a state that wholeheartedly embraced him in two presidential elections.

The two incumbents were pitted against each other after population losses cost West Virginia a U.S. House seat. The divergent paths they’ve chosen as congressmen could give Republican candidates nationally an early sense of what resonates with hardcore conservative voters in 2022.

The contest comes during an intensifying stretch of the midterm election season as Trump aims to solidify his influence over the GOP. His preferred candidate in this week’s Ohio Republican primary, JD Vance, easily dispatched other rivals, but potentially tougher tests for the former president lie ahead this month in Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Georgia.

Enthusiasm for Trump remains high in West Virginia, where he prevailed in every county in 2016 and 2020, winning more than two-thirds of the state’s voters. But West Virginians are also desperate to see upgrades in a state that consistently ranks among the worst in the nation for infrastructure. The state’s rugged landscape is rife with failing bridges and crumbling roads, and thousands of its citizens live without access to safe drinking water or internet.

Trump has made his position clear, endorsing Mooney on the day President Joe Biden signed the infra-

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structure bill into law. He's repeatedly condemned McKinley and 12 other House Republicans for voting with the Democrats for Biden's \$1.2 trillion infrastructure law, saying, "Republicans who voted for Democrat longevity should be ashamed of themselves."

Mooney, a 50-year-old former Maryland state senator who moved to West Virginia to run for Congress in 2014 and is West Virginia's first Hispanic congressman, has doubled down on Trump's attacks. He called McKinley a RINO, or "Republican in Name Only," and a sellout who betrayed his constituents. But the 75-year-old McKinley, a seventh-generation West Virginian and a civil engineer by trade, says the state's infrastructure problems are too severe for anyone to be "playing party politics."

"There's no question that was the right vote," he said, noting the state's "D" infrastructure grade from the American Society of Civil Engineers. "West Virginia was rated last. Any commonsense, reasonable person would say, 'You got a problem, fix it.' I think it would have been a betrayal to do otherwise."

The infrastructure vote earned McKinley the endorsement of Republican Gov. Jim Justice, a fervent Trump supporter who said his infrastructure vote took "courage," as well as other government officials vying for infrastructure improvements, some of which are starting to take shape on the ground in West Virginia.

Paul Howe, president of the Clarksburg Water Board in Harrison County in northern West Virginia, called McKinley's infrastructure bill vote "tremendous" and said his community desperately needs to replace lead service lines.

In July, the municipal water system was placed under an administrative order by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency after three children were diagnosed with high lead blood levels. A subsequent study found that 4,000 customers have lead service lines. Replacing them would cost an estimated \$52 million or more — a large burden on any small city.

Howe said McKinley worked with city officials to provide residents with bottled water and filters and complete an engineering study on replacing the lines. The congressman has traveled to Clarksburg repeatedly to tour the water plant and strategize about how to apply for infrastructure money.

Howe said he likes both congressmen, but given the circumstances, Mooney's attacks on McKinley for his infrastructure vote helped make the choice clear.

"It's hard to defend that," he said. "If the government can do one thing right, it's reinvest in infrastructure."

Still, many of the infrastructure improvements that are expected to take place over the next few years won't be visible to West Virginians right away. Meanwhile, Trump's popularity in the state remains palpable.

"If you drive through West Virginia today, you'd think the (2020) election is still going on," Mooney said in an interview. "There's Trump flags everywhere. Trump signs — anti-Biden signs. It means a lot to voters."

Voter Ron Howell, a manager for a lumber company from Buckhannon, said his decision to support Mooney is "50% Trump" and 50% McKinley's decision to vote with Democrats.

"He supported President Donald Trump, whom I voted for and would again in a heartbeat," he said. "I feel like McKinley is a RINO and supports much of the left's agenda, and I don't want that for my state."

During their time representing West Virginia in Congress during Trump's last two years of presidency, Mooney and McKinley voted together 87% of the time. But Mooney says there's a consistent pattern of McKinley voting with Democrats on big votes, including his support for the creation of a commission to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

In Harrison County, where Clarksburg is, 20-year-old Drew Harbert said he thinks that will lose McKinley more voters than supporting infrastructure.

"I don't think people take it very kindly that he voted for that," said Harbert, a Fairmont State University student and president of the Harrison County Young Republicans. "I think that will definitely hurt McKinley probably more than anything else that he's done."

Harbert said he knows infrastructure repairs are needed in the state, but said he has serious concerns about the rising national debt and believes it was irresponsible for McKinley to vote for a bill with such a big price tag.

Harbert said Trump's endorsement bolstered his decision to back Mooney, but it was far from the only reason. He wanted a candidate who will defend gun owners' rights. McKinley has supported red-flag laws, which permit law enforcement or family members to petition a court to remove firearms from someone

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who presents a possible danger to themselves or others.

McKinley, who says he voted with Trump over 90% of the time when he was in office, said he believes Mooney has misled voters about his vote on the infrastructure bill. He cited a Mooney campaign ad that attacks him for "backing Biden for a trillion-dollar spending spree," but mentions infrastructure only in printed text.

Howell, the lumber company manager, said he thought McKinley voted for Biden's Build Back Better plan — a proposal McKinley vehemently opposed — and initially cited that vote as a reason for supporting Mooney. After doing more research on McKinley's voting record, he said the congressman voted the way he would have most of the time. But he said he couldn't forgive McKinley for his Jan. 6 and infrastructure votes.

"I wish we were in different times and I could be nonpartisan, but the Democrats have made that impossible," he said.

Nate Orders, a bridge-building contractor who is president of the Contractors Association of West Virginia, said there's a lot of hypocrisy in criticisms of the infrastructure bill and the Republicans who voted for it. Trump supporters were on board with infrastructure spending when the former president introduced his \$2 trillion proposal, which Democrats blocked.

"If Alex Mooney wins, it's another sign that our democracy continues down the road to dysfunction, where all that matters is party politics," he said. "If David McKinley wins, it shows me a little bit of hope that even though we can agree or disagree on some big issues, we can also agree on the things that really make a difference to Americans."

Russian war, China lockdowns roil oil markets as OPEC+ meets

LONDON (AP) — OPEC and allied oil-producing countries, including Russia, are weighing conflicting forces Thursday as they decide how much crude should flow to volatile global markets. Europe's proposal to phase out Russian oil and other Western sanctions are choking back supply, while COVID-19 shutdowns in China are cutting demand.

The result has been fluctuating and high oil prices, squeezing consumers in the U.S. and Europe with climbing inflation and the rising costs of driving and heating homes. That eats away people's ability to spend elsewhere, including at shops still rebounding from the pandemic.

Analysts expect the 23-country alliance known as OPEC+ to stick with a set schedule of modest increases in production, amounting to 432,000 additional barrels of oil per day in June. The gradual increases are aimed at making up deep production cuts made during the depths of the pandemic recession in 2020.

Oil prices have risen as the boost in production remains smaller than what countries like the U.S. are pressing for to ease high prices at the pump. Some OPEC+ members also haven't been able to reach their allotted quotas. Two members — Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — have almost all the group's spare capacity.

Increasing production beyond the quotas would complicate relations among members, and OPEC has made it clear to European officials that the oil cartel is not going to increase production to compensate for lost Russian oil.

The war in Ukraine has been a driving force in oil markets in recent days, and more so after the European Union's executive commission on Wednesday proposed phasing out Russian crude oil imports within six months.

Fears of a cutoff of Russian oil, natural gas or both have helped keep energy prices high. Russia is the world's largest oil exporter, with some 12% of global supply, and Europe is its biggest customer.

Beyond the EU oil boycott, Western financial sanctions have deterred banks and insurers from supporting the oil trade with Russia. Some buyers have shunned Russian oil because they don't want to be associated with the Kremlin.

The International Energy Agency has said some 3 million barrels a day of Russian oil could wind up being

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forced off the market starting this month "due to international sanctions and as the impact of a widening customer-driven embargo comes into full force."

The Paris-based organization said that "while some buyers, most notably in Asia, increased purchases of sharply discounted Russian barrels, traditional customers are cutting back."

Meanwhile, COVID-19 restrictions are weighing on fuel use in China and undermining oil demand. The government discouraged people from traveling over the May Day holiday, while in Beijing major tourist sites such as the Forbidden City and the Beijing Zoo have closed their indoor exhibition halls and are operating at partial capacity.

Also helping hold back bigger surges in oil prices is the release of oil from strategic reserves by the U.S. and other International Energy Agency member countries.

But "higher prices could be around the corner," said Bjornar Tonhaugen, head of oil markets research at Rystad Energy. "The oil market has not fully priced in the potential of an EU oil embargo, so higher crude prices are to be expected in the summer months if it's voted into law."

U.S. oil prices were little changed Thursday, up 0.1% ahead of the meeting to \$107.90 per barrel, which is more than 40% higher since the start of the year. International benchmark Brent crude rose 0.4%, to \$110.51 per barrel.

For U.S. consumers, average gasoline prices stood at \$4.19 per gallon Wednesday, up \$1.29 from a year ago. The price of crude oil accounts for about 60% of the price at the pump in the United States.

Diesel for trucks and farm equipment has risen even more, by \$2.34, to \$5.43 per gallon.

Drivers in Europe, where taxes make up a larger proportion of the price at the pump, are paying more, too. Gasoline prices are averaging 1.95 euros per liter in Germany, or the equivalent of \$7.77 per gallon, while diesel has been at 2.02 euros per liter, or \$8.05 per gallon.

Easy out from steel mill seen as unlikely for Ukraine troops

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — With the evacuation of some civilians from a steel mill besieged by Russian forces in the port of Mariupol, attention is turning to the fate of hundreds of Ukrainian troops still inside after weeks in the plant's warren of underground tunnels and bunkers.

Counting both able-bodied and wounded among their ranks, their choice seems to be either fighting to the death or surrendering in hopes of being spared under the terms of international humanitarian law. But experts say the troops are unlikely to be afforded any easy exit and may have difficulty getting out as free men or even alive.

"They have the right to fight until they are dead, but if they surrender to Russia, they can be detained," said Marco Sassoli, a professor of international law at the University of Geneva. "It's simply their choice."

Laurie Blank, a professor at Emory Law School in Atlanta who specializes in international humanitarian law and law of armed conflict, said injured fighters are considered "hors de combat" — literally "out of the fight" — and can be detained as prisoners of war.

"Russia could let the injured Ukrainian troops return to Ukrainian areas but is not required to," she said.

The sprawling, seaside Azovstal mill is a key war objective for Russian forces as the last holdout of resistance in coastal southeastern Ukraine, after a grueling, obliterating siege of Mariupol.

The wives of at least two Ukrainian soldiers inside Azovstal have been in Rome pleading with the international community for an evacuation of the soldiers there, arguing they deserve the same rights as civilians.

Kateryna Prokopenko, whose husband, Denys Prokopenko, commands the Azov Regiment at the plant, told The Associated Press she went without word from him for more than 36 hours before finally hearing from him Wednesday.

He told her that Russian soldiers had entered Azovstal and "our soldiers are fighting, it is crazy and difficult to describe."

"We don't want them to die, they won't surrender," Kateryna Prokopenko said. "They are waiting for the bravest countries to evacuate them. We won't let this tragedy happen after this long blockade."

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"We need to evacuate our men as well."

Ukrainian authorities have also demanded that Russia offer the Azovstal soldiers a safe exit — with their arms.

But experts say it would be nearly unprecedented for them to be simply allowed to walk free, not least because they could take up arms again and possibly cause Russian casualties.

"It is unlikely that Russia would allow Ukrainian troops to leave the plant with their weapons and nothing in the law would require that," Blank said via email.

Instead the Russian military has called on the troops inside Azovstal to lay down their weapons and come out with white flags. It says those who surrender will not be killed, in line with international law.

The commanders of the Ukrainian resistance at the plant have repeatedly rejected that, however. In one video recording from the plant, Sviatoslav Palamar, the Azov Regiment's deputy commander, said his forces were "exhausted" but vowed that "we have to hold the line."

In the event the Azovstal fighters were to be taken captive, it's not clear whether Russia would uphold its commitments under international law regarding POWs, given its alleged previous violations of rules governing war conduct and a lack of evidence for how it has been treating Ukrainian soldiers it already has in custody.

International humanitarian law "grants absolute protection to POWs against ill treatment and murder. Violations of these norms are war crimes," said Annyssa Bellal, senior researcher and international humanitarian law expert at the Geneva Graduate Institute. "The respect of the norms, though, is dependent on the will of the parties to the conflict."

International norms have allegedly been breached by both sides during two and a half months of war, as seen in evidence of execution-style killings of civilians that emerged following Russian withdrawals near Kyiv, and the desecration of corpses that may have been Russian troops outside Kharkiv.

Protections of POWs date back generations including to the 1863 Lieber Code, which was drafted during the U.S. Civil War. Moscow itself benefitted significantly from such rules during World War II, when Nazi forces applied them at times with respect to Russian detainees.

Under the Geneva Conventions, POWs "must at all times be humanely treated" and may not be "subjected to physical mutilation or to medical or scientific experiments" that aren't justified for health reasons. Members of armed forces who are wounded or sick, meanwhile, "shall be respected and protected in all circumstances."

Unlike civilians, prisoners of war may be forcibly sent to other countries in order to keep them from returning from the battlefield.

A 2016 interpretive document for the Geneva Conventions says medical treatment of POWs is fundamental and "the person of the soldier who is wounded or sick, and who is therefore hors de combat, is from that moment inviolable."

There are differences of interpretation, however, over whether injured combatants may be targeted in war, said Sassoli, who was on a three-person team commissioned by the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe that travelled to Ukraine in March.

The International Committee of the Red Cross plays a crucial and nearly exclusive role in conflicts around the world mediating between combatants on matters such as arranging prisoner swaps and monitoring detainee conditions. Among other things, the ICRC collects names of POWs and reports back to their governments and families.

Yet the ICRC has not said whether it has met with any POWs in Russian custody since the war began Feb. 24, a silence that Sassoli said could be a "bad sign."

Asked by AP whether ICRC has visited any war detainees, spokesman Jason Straziuso said briefly, "The issue of prisoners of war is extremely important and we are closely engaging with the parties to the conflict on the topic." He declined to comment further.

On Tuesday, Pascal Hundt, the ICRC's chief in Ukraine, told reporters that only civilians were covered in a Russian-Ukrainian deal that led to the recent evacuations from Azovstal. And he expressed uncertainty

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that anyone else might get out.

"The ICRC has little leverage when it comes to reaching a cease-fire agreement, and it is up to the parties to find agreement and to get these people out," Hundt said. "We'll continue to push even if the hope is close to zero, we'll just continue to push — and we stand ready to go there."

UK votes in local polls dominated by cost-of-living crisis

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — People in Britain are voting Thursday in local elections that will decide the makeup of local authorities across the country — and possibly the fate of embattled Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Polling stations opened at 7 a.m. in contests for thousands of local council seats in England, Scotland and Wales. Voting ends at 10 p.m. (2100GMT), with most of the counting taking place Friday. Opinion polls suggest the governing Conservatives will lose hundreds of seats in elections that are considered a barometer of public opinion.

In Northern Ireland, voters are electing a new 90-seat Assembly, with polls suggesting the Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein could win the largest number of seats, and the post of first minister, in what would be a historic first.

The local-authority elections will decide who collects garbage, fixes potholes and handles other essential services across the country. Conservative Party Chairman Oliver Dowden said the elections "are about one thing: who do you want running your council?"

But many voters also have other things on their mind. Across the U.K., the elections are dominated by increasing prices for food and fuel, which have sent household bills soaring.

Opposition parties are demanding the government do more to ease the cost-of-living crunch — driven by the war in Ukraine, COVID-19 pandemic disruption and economic aftershocks from Britain's exit from the European Union. Both left-of-center Labour and the centrist Liberal Democrats advocate a windfall tax on energy companies, which have reported record profits amid rocketing oil and gas prices.

Johnson's Conservative government argues taxing big firms like Shell and BP would deter much-needed investment in renewable energy that's key to meeting Britain's climate commitments.

The election also comes after months of turmoil for Johnson, in which he became the first prime minister to be sanctioned for breaking the law in office. He was fined 50 pounds (\$62) by police for attending his own surprise birthday party in June 2020 when lockdown rules barred social gatherings.

Johnson has apologized, but denies knowingly breaking the rules. He faces the possibility of more fines over other parties — police are investigating a dozen gatherings — and a parliamentary investigation into whether he misled lawmakers about his behavior.

The prime minister also faces discontent within his own party. A bad result for the governing party on Thursday could lead Conservatives to try to replace Johnson with a less tarnished leader.

Labour leader Keir Starmer said the government was consumed by "a constant drip-drip of sleaze and scandal."

"Their failure to get on with their jobs would be shameful at any time," Starmer wrote in the Daily Mirror newspaper. "But during a once in a lifetime cost-of-living crisis, it's a disgrace."

Hong Kong reopens beaches, Beijing relaxes quarantine rules

BEIJING (AP) — Hong Kong on Thursday reopened beaches and pools in a relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions, while China's capital Beijing began easing quarantine rules for arrivals from overseas.

Hong Kong had closed water sports venues amid an outbreak of the highly transmissible omicron variant but has been tailing off restrictions as new case numbers fall. Deaths from COVID-19 have fallen from a high of almost 300 per day in March to zero in recent days.

Restaurants are also allowed to seat up to eight customers to a table — from four previously — and masks will no longer be required during outdoor exercise, a change that's important mainly to organizers

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of group sporting events.

"We're looking forward to Mother's Day, and being able to have up to eight people sitting at a table," said William So, assistant general manager of the London Restaurant, a long-time destination for traditional dim sum.

"Business will go up, three generations of a family can sit down and eat together," said So, as carts piled high with steaming bamboo baskets full of savory dumplings circulated through the packed dining room. Already, bookings have more than doubled since the relaxed seating policy was announced, he said.

A further round of easing is scheduled to begin May 19, when bars and clubs will be allowed to reopen and restaurants in the southern Chinese city will be permitted to serve customers until midnight.

China has maintained its hardline "zero-COVID" approach but has imposed less onerous restrictions on the capital than in other cities such as Shanghai, where millions were placed under strict lockdown.

Beijing will now require arrivals from overseas to quarantine at a hotel for 10 days, followed by another week of home isolation.

Previous rules required 21 days of isolation, at least 14 of them at a hotel, followed by seven days of regular health reporting.

With only a handful of daily international flights into Beijing, the rule change is expected to have little practical effect. Symbolically, however, it appears to show a willingness to compromise with demands for a less intrusive and economically damaging policy.

Still, the capital is taking no chances and on Wednesday closed 60 subway stations, more than 10% of its vast system, to prevent the possibility of the virus spreading.

Restaurants and bars are limited to takeout, gyms are closed and classes are suspended for at least another week. Major tourist sites in the city, including the Forbidden City and the Beijing Zoo, have closed their indoor exhibition halls and are operating at only partial capacity.

Districts have been sorted according to the perceived level of COVID-19 risk in each, and people living in districts in the highest categories are barred from leaving the city. A few communities where cases were discovered have been isolated.

All residents are required to undergo three virus tests throughout the week as authorities seek to detect and isolate cases without imposing the sort of sweeping lockdowns seen in Shanghai and elsewhere. A negative test result obtained within the previous 48 hours is required to enter most public spaces.

Beijing on Thursday reported just 50 new cases, eight of them asymptomatic.

Shanghai also saw a drop to 4,651 new cases, all but 261 asymptomatic, with an additional 13 deaths. China's biggest city recorded a daily peak of 27,605 new cases on April 13.

Questions have arisen about the surprisingly low death toll amid an outbreak of more than 400,000 cases in the city that is home to China's main stock market and biggest port.

EXPLAINER: Why Victory Day in Russia is different this year

By The Associated Press undefined

The invasion of Ukraine means that fewer Russian tanks and other military hardware will rumble through Moscow's Red Square on Monday, when the country marks its victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. The patriotic fervor associated with the sacred holiday, however, could be as strong as ever.

This year's Victory Day won't just honor a conflict that ended 77 years ago. Many Russians will be thinking about the thousands of troops fighting in neighboring Ukraine, Signs of support for the military have grown across the country since the invasion began Feb. 24, with the letter "Z" appearing on billboards and signs in the streets and subways, and on television and social media.

The Kremlin has refused to refer to the fighting in Ukraine as a "war," instead calling it a "special military operation." Some observers believe that President Vladimir Putin could use the holiday to finally declare the operation to be a war in order to bolster Russia's national commitment to the effort.

A look at the significance of Victory Day in Russia:

WAR AND REMEMBRANCE

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The Soviet Union lost a staggering 27 million people in World War II, which it calls the Great Patriotic War. The conflict, which devastated cities and the countryside, caused enormous suffering and left a deep scar in the national psyche.

Victory Day is a rare event in the nation's divisive post-Soviet history that is revered by all political players, and the Kremlin has used that sentiment to encourage patriotic pride and underline Russia's role as a global power.

The annual celebrations feature a massive military parade on Red Square showcasing the latest armaments from tanks to fighter jets to nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles.

This year, the array of weapons to be displayed in the parade has been significantly curtailed from last year in an apparent reflection of the military's heavy engagement in Ukraine.

FIGHTING 'NEO-NAZIS'

In ordering the invasion, Putin declared that it was aimed at the "demilitarization" of Ukraine to remove a perceived military threat to Russia by "neo-Nazis" — rhetoric condemned by Ukraine and the West as a fictitious cover for a blunt act of aggression.

To try to back up the claim, Putin and his officials have pointed to the adulation by Ukraine's right-wing groups of nationalist leaders Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, who sided with the Nazis during World War II and their perceived use of Nazi units' symbols.

The rhetoric also has been used by the Kremlin to try to bolster public support for the war amid heavy losses of troops and equipment and massive economic damage from Western sanctions.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, has derided the Kremlin "denazification" claim. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov fired back by drawing a parallel between Zelenskyy and Adolf Hitler — a statement that has drawn sharp criticism from Israel.

RUSHING THE OFFENSIVE?

Some in Ukraine and the West expected Putin to try to seek quick gains before the May 9 holiday in a possible attempt to present it as a decisive victory and use it as an exit from what increasingly looks like a disastrous quagmire bleeding Russia's resources and threatening its stability.

After a failed attempt to storm Kyiv and other big cities in Ukraine's north in the early stages of the war, the Kremlin has shifted its focus to the eastern industrial heartland known as the Donbas, where Moscow-backed rebels have been fighting Ukrainian government forces since 2014. That conflict erupted weeks after Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

The Russian military has rearmed and resupplied its forces withdrawn from Kyiv and moved them to Donbas in an apparent attempt to encircle and destroy the most capable and seasoned Ukrainian troops concentrated there.

But that offensive in the east has faced staunch Ukrainian defenses and made only incremental advances, dashing Kremlin hopes for a quick victory. Significant gains look all but impossible before May 9.

In an interview this week, Lavrov said: "Our military isn't going to artificially link its action to any date, including Victory Day."

UPPING THE ANTE

Some Russian hard-liners have criticized the Kremlin for using only a limited force and urged a nationwide mobilization effort. Some Western officials and observers believe Putin may use May 9 to formally declare a war and announce a total mobilization of the population to boost troop numbers for an offensive.

"He's been rolling the pitch, laying the ground for being able to say, 'Look, this is now a war against Nazis, and what I need is more people,'" British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told LBC Radio last week.

Ukraine's intelligence chief, Kyrylo Budanov, issued a similar warning Monday, alleging that Russia has covertly begun preparations for a broad mobilization.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the claims as "nonsense" on Wednesday.

Russian authorities have claimed that only volunteer contract soldiers have been fighting in Ukraine, even though many conscripts were taken prisoner in the war's initial days.

Russia's military has about 1 million service personnel — 400,000 of them contract soldiers, including 147,000 in ground forces. Western officials estimated the initial strength of Russia's invasion force at about

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180,000.

The military acknowledged losing 1,351 soldiers as of March 25 and hasn't updated its casualty numbers since then. Western officials have said Russian losses were much heavier and estimated that up to a quarter of Moscow's initial attacking force was made unfit for combat.

If the war drags on, the current Russian troops numbers in Ukraine could be insufficient to sustain the operations, forcing the Kremlin to rely on poorly trained conscripts or call up reservists.

The Kremlin faces a stark choice between trying to win the war with a limited force or attempting to bolster its troops in Ukraine with draftees and reservists, a move that could bring public outrage and potentially destabilize the political situation.

Europeans weigh costs of cutting Russian energy over Ukraine

By COLLEEN BARRY, VESELIN TOSHKOV and JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — Across Europe, rising energy prices are testing the resolve of ordinary consumers and business owners who are caught between the continent's dependence on cheap Russian energy and its revulsion over President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Governments are trying to replace energy supplies from Russia, mindful that their regular payments are funding a war that has seen thousands of civilian deaths and widespread destruction. They also face a nerve-wracking showdown with Moscow over its demands for payments in rubles, and the possibility that Russia will block supplies, as it did to Bulgaria and Poland last week.

European Union countries import 40% of gas and 25% of oil from Russia, and the current EU timetable doesn't foresee energy independence from Moscow for another five years. As atrocities unfold, the EU is looking to sharpen sanctions.

The EU's executive commission on Wednesday proposed phasing out imports of crude oil within six months and refined products by the end of 2022. It must be approved by all 27 member countries, which will be a battle because some are more dependent on Russian oil than others. Still, oil is easier to replace than natural gas, which is used to generate electricity and power industries.

In a poll of 1,230 random voters published last month by German public broadcaster ZDF, 28% said the country should halt natural gas and oil imports immediately, even if it means supply problems, while 54% said it should only happen if the supply is largely secured, and 14% opposed a ban.

It shows how the economic blow is increasingly falling to consumers and businesses, who already saw natural gas prices start to soar last summer. Some of their stories:

HELP FOR THE POOR IN MILAN

Struggling residents of one of Italy's lowest-income neighborhoods on Milan's periphery line up twice a week to ask for help making ends meet. Increasingly, they come clutching utility bills.

Since energy prices began spiking, a kindly three-woman panel that adjudicates the requests at Santa Lucia parish in Quarto Oggiaro have another resource to help the needy: an energy packet funded by the A2A energy company that offers up to 300 euros a year to families who can't pay their higher utility bills. About 100 families have qualified since September.

Alessandra Travaglini, 54, hit the maximum even before the war as her utility bill doubled to over 120 euros. She has been out of work as an in-home caregiver for two months and hopes the parish can give her even more help.

There's not much room for cutting back on energy use.

"I don't cook a lot. I run the washing machine only in the evening or on weekends. I take short showers, I use the oven maybe once a month, and I iron once, maybe twice, a week," Travaglini said. "I am scared."

She worries that if Italy cuts off Russian energy or if Moscow halts supplies, her life will get even harder.

"I think they have to buy it from Russia, for now," she said. "But for me, Italy has adopted the wrong strategy, because we have become enemies. I think that if Mr. Putin pushes the button, we will be the first targets" in any nuclear attack.

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Roberto Bertolini can't cover his last bimonthly electricity bill of 180 euros on his monthly income of 550 euros, working just three hours a day caring for disabled adults.

The war feels especially close for Bertolini. As soon as he retires, the 66-year-old plans to join his wife in Hungary, which borders Ukraine. He does not think Italy should be buying gas from Russia.

"These sacrifices need to be made," he said. "When I see those images, I change the channel. It is too horrible — women raped, children attacked. They are not easy images. Not showing them isn't right. But for me, I just can't look."

BELT-TIGHTENING IN BUDAPEST

Kritzian Kobela-Piko, a gas fitter and plumber in the Hungarian capital of Budapest, sees his profession intimately connected with his country's relationship to Russian energy. And with the capital just a couple of hundred kilometers (miles) from Ukraine, the war is hardly a distant reality.

The 41-year-old independent contractor installs gas boilers, using materials that have become exponentially more expensive. He said he sympathizes with the war's victims and would be willing to make personal sacrifices if it meant Ukrainians could better defend themselves.

"At most, I will have to tighten my belt a little," Kobela-Piko said. "But these sacrifices are nothing compared to the situation of people living in Ukraine. I think that this sacrifice is the minimum, something I would do any time out of solidarity."

Since the war began, many clients have been converting their home heating systems to electricity, uncertain about the future of natural gas.

While Kobela-Piko believes harsher sanctions against Moscow is the right strategy, he said Hungary's geopolitical situation makes breaking its dependence on Russian energy nearly impossible. Hungary, a former member of the Soviet bloc, gets 85% of its gas and more than 60% of its oil from Russia.

Putting pressure on a country that Hungary depends on for its energy resources "is a very unpleasant situation," he said.

RUSSIAN GAS FOR GERMAN GLASS

Carletta Heinz is calculating the impact of a gas cutoff for the 400-year-old glass company she took over from her father as the 13th generation — and for communities in the heart of a glassmaking district in eastern Germany.

The Heinz-Glas Group, which makes bottles for international cosmetic and perfume brands, would have to close a gas-fired facility in the town of Piesau. That would ruin tanks that need to stay above 900 degrees Celsius (1,650 degrees Fahrenheit) to keep molten glass from solidifying. If Piesau has to shut down, it can't be restarted, and production would go elsewhere.

The company already has transitioned to electricity at headquarters in nearby Kleintettau to lower carbon emissions, but it still needs gas for some processes there.

If a gas boycott leads to government-imposed rationing, Heinz said, then Germany must ensure that glassmakers get at least 70% of their current energy to keep tanks hot and avoid widespread equipment losses. In case of a dire shortage, EU law requires governments to shut off gas to businesses to spare homes and hospitals.

Beyond her company, she is worried about the impact on glass-making companies near the border between the Thuringia and Bavaria regions, which employ 5,000 people directly and 8,000 others indirectly.

Job losses could mean higher carbon emissions if production shifts to countries with fewer environmental protections, said Heinz, 38.

"In Germany, we're more developed regarding environmental protection. Glass will still be needed and would be produced in other countries, which for our planet would be definitely worse," she said

"I am just of the opinion that you first need alternatives. Naturally I'm for everything that hurts Russia and helps Ukraine," Heinz added. "But we need to keep our industry in mind and see that we have a future, because if our industry is ruined then our country can't help anyone else."

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SANCTIONS BLOWBACK IN BULGARIA

Nikolay Belev's income as a construction worker in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia is not keeping pace with gas and oil prices. And he is not ready to take on more pain for Russian sanctions, which he thinks are improper and will only bring more inequity in the EU's poorest member state.

"These sanctions are meant to weaken Russia's economy, but in the end, they hit back on my country and particularly on the people with lower incomes, who are the real victims of these sanctions" said Belev. He also complained that higher energy prices have driven up the costs of his materials — as much as 30% in the last two months.

Bulgaria, a nation of 6.5 million people, once was among Moscow's closest allies during the Soviet era. Now a NATO and EU member, it is still heavily dependent on Russian energy. Its only oil refinery is owned by Russia's Lukoil, supplying nearly two-thirds of the country's energy needs.

The only nuclear power plant, generating over a third of Bulgaria's electricity, runs on uranium from Russia.

The current centrist coalition government is trying to get on a clearer pro-Western path by looking elsewhere for energy, including gas from Azerbaijan or liquefied natural gas via an pipeline with Greece. The LNG option will mean higher prices.

For Veselina Marinova, an editor who lives with her husband and 83-year-old mother, paying more for energy is a small sacrifice when weighed against the deaths of civilians in Ukraine.

"Nothing can justify the military aggression against a democratic country," she said. "Of course, my family's income will suffer because of the inflation fueled by the war. I am always aware that a severe crisis is looming, and that life will get harder. I do believe, however, that we must stay on the right track."

Israel tightens grip on West Bank with planned restrictions

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — If, during your travels in the Holy Land, you decide to take the next step with your Palestinian sweetheart, you should notify the Israeli military within 30 days.

That's what it says on page 30 of a new 97-page policy released by COGAT, the Israeli military body in charge of civilian affairs in the occupied West Bank. The policy, set to take effect later this year, specifies that the "start of the relationship" is the engagement, the wedding or when you move in together.

The wide-ranging policy imposes new restrictions on foreigners who marry Palestinians or who come to the West Bank to work, volunteer, study or teach, further extending Israel's nearly 55-year military rule into nearly every corner of Palestinian life. The rules do not apply to people visiting Israel or the more than 130 Jewish settlements scattered across the West Bank.

"It's outrageous that the Israeli military thinks it can micromanage Palestinian society to this extent, to decide who's qualified to teach at a university, who is entitled to have foreign volunteers," said Jessica Montell, director of the Israeli human rights group HaMoked.

Her group filed a legal petition with lengthy objections to the policy, leading Israeli authorities to delay its implementation from May 20 until early July.

The policy could also anger the U.S., which has long refused to enter into a visa waiver program with Israel, in part because Israel treats Palestinian-Americans differently than other U.S. citizens. The State Department said it was studying the new procedures and "engaging with Israeli authorities to understand their applications."

COGAT said the procedures formalize the application process and expand the "range of permitted purposes for entering the area." It said the procedures are part of a two-year pilot program and that "certain parts" are already being re-assessed.

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war, and Palestinians want it to form the main part of their future state. The new policy refers to the territory as Judea and Samaria, the biblical name favored by Israeli nationalists, including Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who consider it the historical heartland of the Jewish people.

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Palestinians from abroad who wish to visit the West Bank would have to list the names and ID numbers of family members — and say whether they themselves own property in the West Bank or stand to inherit any. Many fear that could pave the way for their land to be seized by settlers.

"It's like you're informing on your own family or friends that you visit. You could be giving information that would pave the way for Israel to steal your property," said Ahmed Abofoul, an international lawyer with the Al-Haq human rights group.

The policy would limit the number of visiting professors to 100 and the number of students to 150. A visiting lecturer would need to convince an Israeli military official that she "contributes significantly to academic learning, to the Area's economy, or to advancing regional cooperation and peace," the policy says.

In 2020, 366 European students and faculty secured grants to study or teach in the West Bank through the EU's Erasmus+ exchange program. More than 1,800 Israelis studied in Europe under the same program that year. The EU representative office in Jerusalem declined to comment on the new procedures.

COGAT said the quotas apply to teachers and students who want to stay longer than one semester and will be "re-evaluated from time to time."

Nearly all foreigners, including those in the private sector, would be forced to leave after 27 months and then wait another nine months before re-applying for entry. They would be limited to a total of five years in the territory, making long-term employment virtually impossible. Volunteers approved by the Israeli military could come for 12 months, but would then have to wait another year before applying for re-entry.

Birzeit University, one of the main institutions of higher education in the West Bank, said the policy "puts Palestinian universities under siege and divests them of basic control over their academic decisions."

The rules do not apply to Israeli institutions, including Ariel University, which is built in a sprawling settlement deep inside the West Bank.

For thousands of foreigners who have married Palestinians and started families in the West Bank, the policy threatens to further complicate an already precarious life in which they could be separated from their families at any time.

Israel, which controls the population registry, rarely approves residency applications submitted through the Palestinian Authority, which has limited self-rule in parts of the West Bank.

Under the new rules, most foreign spouses would only be able to enter the West Bank on visitor permits valid for three to six months. Then they would have to leave for six months — no matter if they have jobs or children in school. A small number may qualify for spousal permits renewable for up to 27 months.

California-born Morgan Cooper has been navigating the system for nearly 20 years, first as a teacher at Birzeit and then as the wife of a Palestinian and the mother of their two children. She applied for residency five and a half years ago, after her first child was born. But the application is still pending and she still relies on temporary visas approved by Israel's military to remain with her family.

Travel is never easy — she can recount story after story of permit delays, last-minute flight changes and being stranded in Jordan — and her return is never guaranteed.

"You normalize occupation," Cooper said, because if you don't, "it will overwhelm your mind with how unjust and absurd and cruel it is."

"This machine that is Israeli occupation is constantly shifting the way it works, and those rules are rarely published to us, and they're never clear."

On several occasions, Israeli border officers have suggested that she and her family, all of whom have American citizenship, simply move to the United States. Palestinians say that's the whole purpose of these rules — to force them out.

Even under the current system, Cooper could be deported and barred from returning at any time — for overstaying her visa, for alleged security violations, or at the discretion of COGAT.

"When I travel out, I leave my home as if I'm not ever coming back, as if I can call somebody and say here's where I put my valuables," she said. "Here's my valuable papers, here's jewelry I want, and please send me my aunt's hand-made quilt. It's all together."

Abuse-clouded prison gets attention, but will things change?

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

DUBLIN, Calif. (AP) — For months, inmates and staff say, their calls for help were ignored. And in this aging prison of deep despair — a place where sexual abuse has been rampant, authorities acted with utter indifference and the workforce was deeply demoralized — the cries for help had been many and varied.

Just weeks earlier, an Associated Press investigation had revealed a culture of abuse and cover-ups that had persisted for years at the Federal Correctional Institution in Dublin, California, a women-only facility called the “rape club” by many who know it. Because of AP reporting, the head of the federal Bureau of Prisons had submitted his resignation in January. Yet no one had been named to replace him, so he was still on the job.

Now he was responding to the problems in Dublin — but only after an angry congresswoman had called him to complain.

So early March found the lame-duck administrator, flanked by a task force of senior agency officials, arriving at the prison after flying in to meet inmates and staff in person. According to Dublin inmates, this was how he faced them as he toured the facility:

“You wanted my attention,” Michael Carvajal said, “so here I am.”

‘TRUST HAS BEEN BROKEN’

“It’s horrible. It’s absolutely horrible. I’ve never experienced anything like this. In my career, I’ve never been part of a situation like this. This is really unprecedented.”

Those words, spoken about the troubled Dublin facility, come not from an activist or inmate advocate, not from any elected official, not from anywhere outside the prison walls. They come from Thahesha Jusino, its newly installed warden.

Her predecessor, Ray J. Garcia, is one of five Dublin employees who have been charged since last June with sexually abusing inmates.

“We’ve really lost a lot of credibility through all of this, which is understandable, because it’s appalling what has happened,” Jusino said in an interview with the AP.

This story is based on interviews with more than a dozen people familiar with the visiting task force’s work, the prison’s operations and the abuse crisis. They include current and former inmates, employees, lawyers, government and union officials. Many spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation or because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The AP visited Dublin, about 21 miles (34 kilometers) east of Oakland, during the same time as the task force’s visit, the week of March 7. Lawmakers, disturbed by reports of abuse, also traveled there shortly after. Carvajal and some task force members returned to Dublin in April. In one sign of progress, the agency replaced both of the prison’s associate wardens.

Carvajal, a Trump administration holdover, submitted his resignation Jan. 5 but said he would stay on until a successor is named. He joined the task force for the first three days of its weeklong first visit to Dublin.

But even as the task force was arriving, and as scrutiny from the outside appeared finally to be at hand, things did not seem to be proceeding in a positive direction.

Officials moved inmates out of the special housing unit so it wouldn’t look as full when the task force got there. And they lied to Carvajal about COVID-19 contamination so inmates in a certain unit couldn’t speak to him about abuse.

Those who managed to get to Carvajal didn’t hold back. In one emotional scene, a woman who said she was abused by prison officials tearfully confronted him in a recreation area as he and members of the task force were meeting with inmates.

The woman shared graphic details of her alleged abuse. She spoke for about 15 minutes and grew increasingly upset, calming down only after prison officials brought her tissues. She was eventually taken out of the room and brought to a prison psychologist, where she was offered immediate release to a halfway house.

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She objected. She wanted to wait so she could tell her story publicly to congressional leaders expected at the prison. But people at the prison say she wasn't able to thoroughly express her concerns.

Bureau of Prisons and Justice Department officials told the woman that because she was a potential witness, she couldn't talk about the investigation, the people said. The woman was moved to a halfway house soon after the tour.

In another charged moment, a group of Dublin workers lashed out at Carvajal for putting Garcia in charge of a women's prison when he'd already had a reputation in prison circles as a misogynist.

"You created this monster," one worker told Carvajal. Asked another: "Why did you create this toxic environment? Why did you pick Garcia as the warden?"

Garcia is accused of molesting an inmate on multiple occasions from December 2019 to March 2020 and forcing her and another inmate to strip naked so he could take pictures while he made rounds. Investigators said they found the images on his government-issued cellphone. His lawyer refused an interview request.

Garcia is also accused of using his authority to intimidate one of his victims, telling her that he was "close friends" with the person investigating staff misconduct and boasting that he could not be fired. He has pleaded not guilty.

Carvajal promoted Garcia from associate warden to warden at Dublin in November 2020, after Garcia's alleged misconduct but before the agency said it knew about it. Carvajal told the workers that if he had known about Garcia's reputation or alleged abuse, he would've chosen a different warden.

Speaking to inmates about Garcia, however, Carvajal said something a bit different — that he believed in "innocent until proven guilty."

AN UNEASY HISTORY

FCI Dublin is one of just six women-only facilities in the U.S. federal prison system. As of Wednesday, Dublin had about 785 inmates, many serving sentences for drug crimes.

It opened in 1974 as a federal youth center in which men and women ages 18 to 26 lived in a campus-like setting. The concept was later abandoned.

In 1977, the Bureau of Prisons converted the facility into a traditional adult prison — first for female inmates like the high-profile heiress Patty Hearst and then, in 1980, for men and women. It went back to being a women's prison in 2012.

Throughout FCI Dublin's existence, it has been troubled by sexual abuse.

In 1996, three female inmates sued the Bureau of Prisons, alleging they were "sold like sex slaves" by correctional officers who placed them in a male unit, unlocked their cells and allowed male inmates to rape them. No one was arrested; the agency agreed to settle the lawsuit for \$500,000.

Separately, in the late 1990s, four officers were charged with engaging in sexual conduct with inmates. And in the early 2010s, about a dozen Dublin employees were quietly removed for sexually abusing inmates. None was arrested, according to a person working there at the time. One worker was allowed to retire after videotapes were found in his locker of him having sex with inmates.

More recently, two of the five employees charged since last June with sexually abusing inmates have pleaded guilty, and the investigation continues: On March 20, a food service foreman was arrested for allegedly touching an inmate's breasts, buttocks and genitals in October 2020.

Since March, nine other workers have been placed on administrative leave by the Bureau of Prisons. New inmate sexual abuse and staff employment discrimination complaints were filed during the task force's visit. FBI agents conducted searches at the prison and an employee's home in mid-April, and at least six internal affairs investigators have been on site investigating claims.

Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco, who is being briefed regularly on issues in the beleaguered federal prison system, said the Justice Department was committed to "holding BOP personnel accountable, including through criminal charges." Said Monaco: "Staff misconduct, at any level, will not be tolerated, and our efforts to root it out are far from over."

Attorney General Merrick Garland, asked about Dublin at a U.S. Senate budget hearing Tuesday, said it

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was Monaco's idea — not Carvajal's — to form a task force "to investigate and determine the procedural failures" at the prison. He cited the prosecution of accused employees, an ongoing internal investigation and the selection of Jusino as warden as steps toward improving conditions.

"This is another really terrible set of events," Garland said.

Justice Department spokesperson Kristina Mastropasqua said the task force that visited Dublin had reported allegations of misconduct to the prison system's internal affairs office, where investigators "opened a case file for each allegation."

Also during the task force's visit, numerous complaints were filed by inmates and staff members alleging sexual harassment, misconduct and violations of the Prison Rape Elimination Act and federal Equal Employment Opportunity laws.

How many complaints were received? Asked by the AP, the Bureau of Prisons said it couldn't say.

REAL CHANGE, OR PERFORMANCE?

For all the disturbing details the March task force took in, it was hardly the whole truth — partly because inmates and prison workers do not trust the leadership and refused to speak candidly, and partly because officials hid some of Dublin's problems.

Inmates who'd been in the special housing unit for disciplinary issues were returned to the general population so the place wouldn't look nearly as full. Officials also lied to Carvajal and told him he couldn't visit a particular housing unit where inmates wanted to talk to him about abuse. They claimed, falsely, that it was contaminated with COVID-19.

Carvajal did seem taken aback by the lack of security cameras in critical areas — an issue the prison's union had been raising for six years — and pledged to speed the process for installing them.

Though Dublin does have some cameras, there were none in some of the hallways and rooms that Carvajal toured, including areas where some inmates were sexually abused. Several times the director asked, "Where are the cameras?"

On a recent afternoon, inmates from Dublin's minimum-security prison camp could be seen congregating on a walking track outside the prison's fences with no visible supervision and no perimeter cameras. The Bureau of Prisons has faced scrutiny in the last few years after dozens of inmates escaped from its prisons, with many simply walking away from low-security areas.

"Making infrastructural improvements, such as adding additional cameras, to protect the safety and security of inmates and staff is a priority," the Bureau of Prisons said in response to questions about Carvajal's visit.

But seven weeks later, not one new camera has been installed.

Precisely what actual progress the task force's visit produced — and who ultimately had access to its members while they were there — is not entirely clear.

Susan Beaty, a lawyer for Dublin inmates, said advocates had information to share with the task force but were shut out of the visit. Beaty said several abused inmates were immigrants and that predatory prison employees were targeting women facing deportation.

The Bureau of Prisons "is never proactive. They're reactive. They're only doing this because Congress is on their ass and they know they have to act," Dublin union president Ed Canales said.

Canales said the prison's staff was "not impressed" with the visit and wasn't expecting any changes, in part because some senior managers who ignored or encouraged abuse are still working at the prison.

Beaty said correctional officers staged a charade during the visit, exhibiting their best behavior while the task force was present and cursing at inmates as soon as the visitors left the room.

Some inmates saw the task force's visit not as an actual, good-faith way to fix Dublin but as window-dressing ahead of U.S. Rep Jackie Speier's return to the prison with two other members of Congress on March 14.

One inmate asked: "Is this just for show so that you can say you came before the Congress comes back?" Observed another: "It is just as I thought. The task force was here to head them off and tell them that they were on top of issues that were raised."

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CONGRESS IS WATCHING

Congress has been increasingly critical of the Bureau of Prisons, an agency plagued by myriad problems in recent years, including many revealed by AP reporting.

The bureau formed its Dublin task force after the AP investigation in February revealed a toxic culture of sexual misconduct and cover-ups at the prison. Carvajal announced the task force in an internal memo on March 2, just days before its work began. But he did not disclose it publicly until the AP asked about it.

Carvajal wrote that the group — 18 women, including a warden and officials from human resources and internal affairs — was being sent to “observe and assess the climate of the institution” and “assist the agency in redressing identified issues and increasing performance.”

Speaking to inmates, Carvajal acknowledged that pressure from Congress prompted him to act.

He said Speier, D-Calif., had called him after she visited Dublin in the wake of the AP’s reporting. Speier, Carvajal said, was upset with how inmates were being treated and complained that prison officials stonewalled her when she tried to speak with them directly.

Dublin’s union and inmate advocate groups said the bureau and Justice Department had ignored their earlier cries for help. The union said it had been begging agency leaders to visit Dublin since FBI agents raided the former warden’s office last July.

In February, more than 100 inmate advocacy organizations sent a letter to the Justice Department calling for “swift, sweeping action” to address abuse at Dublin, including an independent investigation and the release of victimized inmates to prevent further trauma, but never got a response.

Speier and Reps. Karen Bass and Eric Swalwell, two other California Democrats, visited the facility after the task force and said they were encouraged by its work but still had concerns, including a lack of adequate medical and psychological services at the facility.

They applauded recommendations to add more security cameras and a dedicated email address for inmates to report abuse. They also called for special training for employees in women’s prisons.

“There is literally a culture there that is toxic and one that needs to be addressed,” Speier said in an interview.

Bass, Speier and Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., introduced legislation last month to improve the treatment of women in federal prisons such as Dublin, including providing adequate medical care and examining efforts to retain female officers.

Among other things, the Women in Criminal Justice Reform Act would require minimum standards of care and conditions for federal prison facilities where women are held, temporary release of inmates for medical services such as care from a sexual assault nurse examiner and training for federal prison workers in trauma-informed screening and care.

Each one of those changes would improve conditions at Dublin. Together, they could begin to overhaul it entirely.

WILL ANYTHING HAPPEN?

As the crisis continues at Dublin, questions remain about whether the Bureau of Prisons is serious about fixing it — or even capable of doing so. And the wake of the task force’s visit offers little in the way of optimism.

After the visitors left in March, Dublin officials started enforcing more exacting prison uniform rules and cracking down on inmates’ few luxuries.

Blankets, issued to keep inmates warm in drafty cells, were confiscated. Robes purchased from the prison commissary were banned. Inmates were told to wear bras, cover their bodies and avoid tight pants. Some felt they were being punished to keep prison workers from leering at them.

Inmate advocates say the task force ignored them entirely. Local union officials, seeing the whole trip as a smokescreen to placate Congress, said they’d been begging agency leaders to visit for months, to no avail. Prison workers came away from the week doubting anything would change.

Does the new person in charge offer any hope? Perhaps it’s too soon to tell. Jusino, Dublin’s first per-

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manent warden since Garcia was put on administrative leave prior to his arrest, started a week before Carvajal and the task force arrived.

The daughter of a former federal prison warden, she has worked in federal prisons since 1998. She was an associate warden at two prisons and was the warden at a federal prison in Victorville, California, about 71 miles northeast of Los Angeles, before being assigned to Dublin.

She is adamant that change will come — that it must.

"The trust has been broken with our inmate population, which is beyond unacceptable. It's been broken with our staff, and it has been broken with the public," Jusino says. "We need to show that we're committed to this."

President declares disaster in New Mexico wildfire zone

By CEDAR ATTANASIO and SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

LAS VEGAS, N.M. (AP) — Firefighters slowed the advance of the largest wildfire in the U.S. as heavy winds relented Wednesday, while President Joe Biden approved a disaster declaration that brings new financial resources to remote stretches of New Mexico devastated by fire since early April.

U.S. Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez announced the presidential disaster declaration during an evening briefing by the U.S. Forest Service about efforts to contain the sprawling wildfire in northeastern New Mexico, which has fanned out across 250 square miles (647 square kilometers) of high alpine forest and grasslands at the southern tip of the Rocky Mountains.

"It will help us do that rebuilding and it will help us with the expenses and the hardship that people are facing right now," the congresswoman said. "We're glad it happened this quickly."

Fire bosses said they are seizing upon an interlude of relatively calm and cool weather to keep the fire from pushing any closer to the small New Mexico city of Las Vegas and other villages scattered along the fire's shifting fronts. Airplanes and helicopters dropped slurries of red fire retardant from the sky, as ground crews cleared timber and brush to starve the fire along crucial fronts.

Bulldozers for days have been scraping fire lines on the outskirts of Las Vegas, population 13,000, while crews have been conducting burns to clear adjacent vegetation. Aircraft dropped more fire retardant as a second line of defense along a ridge just west of town in preparation for intense winds expected over the weekend.

An estimated 15,500 homes in outlying areas and in the valleys of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that border Las Vegas have been affected by mandatory evacuations. The tally of homes destroyed by the fire stands around 170.

The president's disaster declaration releases emergency funds to recovery efforts in three counties in northeastern New Mexico where fires still rage, as well as portions of southern New Mexico where wind-driven blazes killed two people and destroyed over 200 homes in mid-April.

The aid includes grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other relief programs for individuals and businesses, a statement from the White House said.

Local law enforcement officials acknowledged the physical and emotion toll of prolonged evacuations. Las Vegas Police Chief Antonio Salazar said his officers would provide "burglary patrols" of evacuated areas and help maintain order at a local Walmart as people line up to purchase supplies.

"Repopulation, that's one thing we're very interested in," San Miguel County Sheriff Chris Lopez said. "Everybody wants to get back home."

Dan Pearson, a fire behavior specialist with the federal government, said weather forecasters are anticipating two days of relatively light winds before the return of strong spring gales.

"Our prayers are working because we've had advantageous winds throughout the fire area today," he said. "We'll take advantage of this fact over the next few days. ... What we can do is build resilient pockets."

The fire was contained across just 20% of its perimeter. Its flames on Wednesday were about a mile (1.6 kilometers) away from Las Vegas, where schools were closed as residents braced for possible evacuation.

Officials at Los Alamos National Laboratory were warily tracking another wildfire that crept Wednesday within about 5 miles (8 kilometers) of facilities at the U.S. national defense laboratory based in Los Alamos.

Fire crews worked to widen a road that stands between the fire and Los Alamos while clearing out underbrush and treating the area with fire retardant.

Wildfires have become a year-round threat in the drought-stricken West — moving faster and burning hotter than ever due to climate change, scientists and fire experts say. Fire officials also point to overgrown areas where vegetation can worsen wildfire conditions.

Nationally, the National Interagency Fire Center reported Wednesday that a dozen uncontained large fires have burned about 436 square miles (1,129 square kilometers) in five states.

Telecom groups end fight against California net neutrality

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Telecommunications industry groups on Wednesday ended their bid to block California's net neutrality law that bars broadband providers from throttling service.

In a federal court filing in Sacramento, the groups and California Attorney General Rob Bonta jointly agreed to dismiss the case.

The move followed a January decision by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals allowing enforcement of the 2018 law, which bans internet providers from slowing down or blocking access to websites and applications that don't pay for premium service.

"The case is finally over," Bonta said in a statement. "With this victory, we've secured a free and open internet for California's 40 million residents once and for all."

Messages seeking comment from an attorney representing the groups weren't immediately returned.

The law was signed by former Gov. Jerry Brown after regulators during the Trump administration killed federal net neutrality rules designed to prevent AT&T, Comcast, Verizon and other major internet providers from exploiting their dominance to favor certain services or apps over others.

In response, seven states and Puerto Rico enacted their own net neutrality policies. The most expansive effort was in California, which started enforcing the law last year, with potentially significant consequences for the rest of the U.S.

In addition to barring internet providers from throttling service or charging companies like Netflix for a faster route to customers, the California law banned some forms of "zero rating" — a term for when a cable or phone company exempts a service from data caps.

Net-neutrality advocates say such programs undermine competition by potentially tilting users to the sponsored app and away from rivals.

Big telecom companies fought the measure fiercely in court. They argued that the regulations can undermine investment in broadband and introduce uncertainty about what were acceptable business practices.

The Trump administration sued to block California's 2018 law, preventing it from taking effect for years, but the Biden administration dropped that lawsuit.

What's next in the investigation of the Supreme Court leak?

By JESSICA GRESKO and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Chief Justice John Roberts, in ordering an investigation into an "egregious breach of trust" in the leak of a Supreme Court draft opinion on abortion, tasked a relatively unknown court official to carry out what could be one of the most high-profile investigations in decades.

The marshal of the Supreme Court has now undertaken the investigation to try to identify the source of the leak — a nearly unprecedented breach of protocol that sent shock waves through the Supreme Court and Washington legal community.

"This was a singular and egregious breach of that trust that is an affront to the Court and the community of public servants who work here," Roberts said in ordering the investigation.

But many questions remain about how the investigation will be carried out and whether a federal crime was committed. Separately, there are questions about what powers the Marshal may use to find the per-

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son who leaked the documents.

"To the extent this betrayal of the confidences of the Court was intended to undermine the integrity of our operations, it will not succeed," Roberts said. "The work of the Court will not be affected in any way."

Despite the Biden administration's curtailing the government's ability to seize records from reporters, the court's marshal operates outside of that chain of command, opening the possibility for an investigation without traditional guardrails to protect journalists' sources.

Here's a look at the investigation and how it could play out.

IS IT A CRIME?

That's a matter of legal dispute, but many experts say bringing a criminal case would be extremely difficult. "There is no special statute that makes it a crime to disseminate a draft Supreme Court opinion or other private court documents," Renato Mariotti, a former federal prosecutor, said in a tweet.

Nevertheless, some lawmakers, particularly Republicans in the Senate, have called for an extensive investigation and prosecution of the person who leaked the document.

Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., demanded the FBI investigate the leak. And Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., called for the Justice Department to "pursue charges if applicable." He said the "lawless action should be investigated and punished as fully as possible."

Generally, the Justice Department pursues leak investigations when classified information is unlawfully released to the public, but that isn't the case here. And while there may be an argument that the release of the draft could amount to the theft of government property, the Justice Department's guidelines suggest a prosecution would be unlikely.

Federal law prohibits the theft or receiving of stolen government information. But Justice Department guidelines say it is "inappropriate to bring a prosecution" under that law if the person had legitimate access to the information or documents and then used it "for the purpose of disseminating it to the public."

WHO IS THE MARSHAL DOING THE INVESTIGATION?

The court's marshal, Col. Gail A. Curley, came to the court from the U.S. Army and has been on the job for less than a year. As marshal, she wears several different hats in overseeing the administrative side of the court. She is the court's chief security officer, overseeing a staff of approximately 260 employees including the police force that provides security for the justices and the Supreme Court building. But she is also the building's facilities administrator. And when the court hears arguments it's her job to bang a gavel and announce the justices' entrance into the courtroom with a traditional cry that includes the phrase "Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!" which means "hear ye."

Curley began her job of marshal in the summer of 2021 following the retirement of the court's longtime Marshal Pamela Talkin. The court said then that while working for the Army, part of Curley's duties included providing legal advice and support on national security law to senior Army leadership. Her military career included time in Germany and Afghanistan.

Curley graduated from the U.S. Military Academy and has a law degree from the University of Illinois College of Law. She received two different master's degrees from military schools.

WHAT DOES AN INVESTIGATION LOOK LIKE?

It is very unclear at this point. The marshal could carry out the investigation herself, but she's perhaps more likely to bring on help.

The group of people that has access to a draft opinion includes the court's nine justices, a small number of staff and some three dozen law clerks, young lawyers who help the justices with their work for a year. The marshal could theoretically hire an outside law firm to assist in the probe. And in other cases involving judicial records, the FBI has sometimes been called in to help.

A Justice Department spokesman said Tuesday that the department had not been asked to help assist in finding the person who leaked the document.

All law clerks sign a code of conduct promising confidentiality. "The law clerk should take particular care that Court documents not available to the public are not taken from the Court building," a copy of the code from 1989 says.

An investigation is likely also to focus on how and why the information was leaked, whether it was in-

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entionally provided to Politico by a court employee or inadvertently made available to someone who then sent a copy of the draft to the news organization, or whether a different circumstance occurred.

CAN THE MARSHAL SEIZE THE RECORDS OF THE JOURNALISTS?

Maybe. In most cases, though, investigators need to spell out exactly why they believe a crime was committed in order to obtain the records from the companies who would hold telephone or email records.

The investigation is somewhat unprecedented, and the Supreme Court hasn't searched for anyone who leaked information on this scale in the digital age.

The Biden administration has significantly curtailed the use of subpoenas and warrants to seize the records of journalists in leak investigations. But the marshal of the Supreme Court doesn't report to the executive branch of the government, so those restrictions likely wouldn't apply in this investigation.

In July, Attorney General Merrick Garland formally prohibited prosecutors from seizing journalists' records as part of leak investigations after an outcry over revelations that the Justice Department — in the Trump administration — had obtained records belonging to journalists at The Washington Post, CNN and The New York Times as part of investigations into who had disclosed government secrets related to the Russia investigation and other national security matters.

Garland's policy — which includes limited exceptions when prosecutors could obtain the records — reversed years of Justice Department policy and aimed to resolve an issue that long vexed prosecutors trying to weigh the media's First Amendment rights against the government's desire to protect sensitive and classified information.

The marshal of the Supreme Court, however, reports directly to the court and the chief justice and wouldn't be subject to those restrictive guidelines. It isn't clear if the marshal or any others involved in the investigation could issue subpoenas or attempt to collect the records of the Politico journalists or others.

The marshal of the Supreme Court has served a subpoena before, though the one publicly known instance came in 1915 after a dispute where a Civil War soldier took Martha Washington's will, which was later sold to a wealthy New York banker. The state of Virginia later brought the case to the Supreme Court and the subpoena was issued in an effort to collect the will.

WHAT'S NEXT?

It's hard to say. Roberts said only that he had directed the marshal to investigate the source of the leak. He didn't say how long the investigation would take. He didn't say whether it would be limited to the court or extend to the journalists involved in the opinion's publication. And he didn't say whether the results would eventually be made public.

The beginning of the investigation comes during a particularly busy time of year for the court. The justices just finished hearing arguments in cases at the end of April. They spend May and June completing their work on opinions, and those are issued before they take a summer break. They return to the bench to begin hearing new cases in October.

Next battle over access to abortion will focus on pills

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — It took two trips over state lines, navigating icy roads and a patchwork of state laws, for a 32-year-old South Dakota woman to get abortion pills last year.

For abortion-seekers like her, such journeys, along with pills sent through the mail, will grow in importance if the Supreme Court follows through with its leaked draft opinion that would overturn the landmark Roe v. Wade decision and allow individual states to ban the procedure. The woman, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because she was concerned for her family's safety, said the abortion pills allowed her to end an unexpected and high-risk pregnancy and remain devoted to her two children.

But anti-abortion activists and politicians say those cross-border trips, remote doctors' consultations and pill deliveries are what they will try to stop next.

"Medication abortion will be where access to abortion is decided," said Mary Ziegler, a professor at Florida State University College of Law who specializes in reproductive rights. "That's going to be the battleground

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that decides how enforceable abortion bans are.”

Use of abortion pills has been rising in the U.S. since 2000 when the Food and Drug Administration approved mifepristone — the main drug used in medication abortions. More than half of U.S. abortions are now done with pills, rather than surgery, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research group that supports abortion rights.

The FDA last year lifted a long-standing requirement that women pick up abortion pills in person. Mail delivery is also now allowed nationwide.

Those moves have spurred online services that offer information on getting abortion pills and consultations to get a prescription. After the woman in South Dakota found that the state’s only abortion clinic could not schedule her in time for a medication abortion, she found an online service, called Just The Pill, that advised her to drive across to Minnesota for a phone consultation with a doctor. A week later, she came back to Minnesota for the pills.

She took the first one almost immediately in her car, then cried as she drove home.

“I felt like I lost a pregnancy,” she said. “I love my husband and I love my children and I knew exactly what I had to say goodbye to and that was a really horrible thing to have to do.”

South Dakota is among several states, including Texas, Kentucky, Arkansas, Ohio, Tennessee and Oklahoma, where Republicans have moved to restrict access to abortion pills in recent months. South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said additional, in-person visits for the pills and a ban on them being sent through the mail are needed to protect women and save “unborn children.” A total of 19 states require a medical clinician to be physically present when abortion pills are given to a patient.

Besides crossing state lines, women can also turn to internationally-based online pharmacies, said Greer Donley, a professor specializing in reproductive health care at the University of Pittsburgh Law School. Some women also are having prescribed pills forwarded through states without restrictions.

“It allows for someone to have an abortion without a direct role of a provider. It’s going to be much harder for states to control abortion access,” she said, adding, “The question is how is it going to be enforced?”

Sue Leibel, the state policy director for Susan B. Anthony List, a prominent organization opposed to abortion, acknowledged it’s an issue that “has crept up” on Republican state lawmakers.

“This is a new frontier and states are grappling with enforcement mechanisms,” she said, adding, “The advice that I always give — if you shut the front door, the pills are going to come in the back door.”

Abortion opponents maintain they have no intention of prosecuting women who seek abortions.

Instead, Leibel suggested the next target for state enforcement should be the pharmacies, organizations and clinics that provide the abortion pills. She also said abortion-rights opponents should focus on electing a presidential candidate who would work to reverse the FDA’s decision.

The FDA said a scientific review supported broadening access to the drugs and found complications were rare. The agency has reported 26 deaths associated with the drug since 2000, though not all of those can be directly attributed to the medication due to existing health conditions and other factors.

However, with new legal battles on the horizon and abortion seekers going to greater lengths to obtain the procedure, Donley, the law school professor, worried that state lawmakers may eventually turn their attention toward the women who get the pills.

“Many anti-abortion legislators might realize the only way to enforce these laws is to prosecute the pregnant person themselves,” she said.

Asian stocks rise after Fed chair downplays bigger rate hike

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Asian stock markets followed Wall Street higher on Thursday after the Federal Reserve chairman downplayed the likelihood of bigger rate hikes following the U.S. central bank’s biggest increase in two decades.

Shanghai, Hong Kong, Australia and Southeast Asian markets advanced. Markets in Japan and South Korea were closed for holidays.

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Wall Street's benchmark S&P 500 index climbed 3% on Wednesday for its best day in two years after the Fed raised its key interest rate by half a percentage point, or double its usual margin, but its chairman Jerome Powell said the U.S. central bank is "not actively considering" a bigger increase.

The Fed's rate hike and Powell's comments "demonstrate that the Fed continues to try and orchestrate a soft landing while tackling high levels of inflation," David Chao of Invesco said in a report.

The Shanghai Composite Index gained 0.7% to 3,068.10 and Hong Kong's Hang Seng rose 0.4% to 20,949.22.

Sydney's S&P-ASX 200 advanced 0.6% to 7,349.60. New Zealand and Singapore also gained.

The Fed raised its key rate to a range of 0.75% to 1%, the highest point since the coronavirus pandemic struck two years ago.

Powell's comments appeared to be aimed at easing fears the Fed, which was accused of reacting too slowly as inflation surged last year, might be headed for an unusually large rate hike of three-quarters of a percentage point at its June meeting.

Investors worry about whether the Fed can extinguish inflation without pushing the economy into a downturn.

The Fed announced details of how it will start reducing its holdings of Treasury debt and mortgage-backed securities. The central bank has been buying bonds to pump money into the financial system and push down long-term interest rates.

Powell said the U.S. economy can make it through rate increases without falling into a recession.

"The economy is strong and well positioned to handle tighter monetary policy," Powell said. "It's not going to be easy."

Wall Street's S&P 500 rose to 4,300.17. The Dow Jones Industrial Average jumped 2.8% to 34,061.06. The Nasdaq composite climbed 3.2% to 12,964.86.

Roughly 85% of the stocks in the S&P 500 rose. Tech companies provided much of the gains. Apple rose 4.1%.

Energy stocks were among the biggest gainers after Europe moved a step closer to placing an embargo on Russian oil in response to Moscow's war on Ukraine. An embargo would push oil prices higher, giving a windfall to other suppliers. Exxon Mobil rose 4%.

On Thursday, benchmark U.S. crude rose 38 cents to \$108.19 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. The contract jumped \$5.40 to \$107.81 on Wednesday. Brent crude, the price basis for international oils, advanced 52 cents to \$110.66 per barrel in London. It surged \$5.17 the previous session to \$110.14.

The dollar climbed to 129.14 yen from Wednesday's 128.87 yen. The euro rose to \$1.0623 from \$1.0613.

President declares disaster in New Mexico wildfire zone

By CEDAR ATTANASIO and SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

LAS VEGAS, N.M. (AP) — Firefighters slowed the advance of the largest wildfire in the U.S. as heavy winds relented Wednesday, while President Joe Biden approved a disaster declaration that brings new financial resources to remote stretches of New Mexico devastated by fire since early April.

U.S. Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez announced the presidential disaster declaration during an evening briefing by the U.S. Forest Service about efforts to contain the sprawling wildfire in northeastern New Mexico, which has fanned out across 250 square miles (647 square kilometers) of high alpine forest and grasslands at the southern tip of the Rocky Mountains.

"It will help us do that rebuilding and it will help us with the expenses and the hardship that people are facing right now," the congresswoman said. "We're glad it happened this quickly."

Fire bosses said they are seizing upon an interlude of relatively calm and cool weather to keep the fire from pushing any closer to the small New Mexico city of Las Vegas and other villages scattered along the fire's shifting fronts. Airplanes and helicopters dropped slurries of red fire retardant from the sky, as ground crews cleared timber and brush to starve the fire along crucial fronts.

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Bulldozers for days have been scraping fire lines on the outskirts of Las Vegas, population 13,000, while crews have been conducting burns to clear adjacent vegetation. Aircraft dropped more fire retardant as a second line of defense along a ridge just west of town in preparation for intense winds expected over the weekend.

An estimated 15,500 homes in outlying areas and in the valleys of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that border Las Vegas have been affected by mandatory evacuations. The tally of homes destroyed by the fire stands around 170.

The president's disaster declaration releases emergency funds to recovery efforts in three counties in northeastern New Mexico where fires still rage, as well as portions of southern New Mexico where wind-driven blazes killed two people and destroyed over 200 homes in mid-April.

The aid includes grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other relief programs for individuals and businesses, a statement from the White House said.

Local law enforcement officials acknowledged the physical and emotion toll of prolonged evacuations. Las Vegas Police Chief Antonio Salazar said his officers would provide "burglary patrols" of evacuated areas and help maintain order at a local Walmart as people line up to purchase supplies.

"Repopulation, that's one thing we're very interested in," San Miguel County Sheriff Chris Lopez said. "Everybody wants to get back home."

Dan Pearson, a fire behavior specialist with the federal government, said weather forecasters are anticipating two days of relatively light winds before the return of strong spring gales.

"Our prayers are working because we've had advantageous winds throughout the fire area today," he said. "We'll take advantage of this fact over the next few days. ... What we can do is build resilient pockets."

The fire was contained across just 20% of its perimeter. Its flames on Wednesday were about a mile (1.6 kilometers) away from Las Vegas, where schools were closed as residents braced for possible evacuation.

Officials at Los Alamos National Laboratory were warily tracking another wildfire that crept Wednesday within about 5 miles (8 kilometers) of facilities at the U.S. national defense laboratory based in Los Alamos.

Fire crews worked to widen a road that stands between the fire and Los Alamos while clearing out underbrush and treating the area with fire retardant.

Wildfires have become a year-round threat in the drought-stricken West — moving faster and burning hotter than ever due to climate change, scientists and fire experts say. Fire officials also point to overgrown areas where vegetation can worsen wildfire conditions.

Nationally, the National Interagency Fire Center reported Wednesday that a dozen uncontained large fires have burned about 436 square miles (1,129 square kilometers) in five states.

Adebayo, Butler lead Heat past 76ers 119-103 in Game 2

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

MIAMI (AP) — Bam Adebayo caught a lob for an alley-oop dunk midway through the fourth quarter, then threw a lob to Jimmy Butler for another dunk about a minute later.

Both were very easy.

Joel Embiid could complicate those plays going forward — and the Miami Heat are heading north expecting that he might be waiting for them.

Adebayo scored 23 points, Butler had 22 points and 12 assists, and the Heat beat the Philadelphia 76ers 119-103 on Wednesday night for a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference semifinals.

"It's always nice to win," Butler said. "We just did what we're supposed to do at home."

Victor Oladipo scored 19 points on his 30th birthday and Tyler Herro added 18 for the Heat, the East's No. 1 seed. Oladipo had 10 of those points in the fourth quarter.

Tyrese Maxey scored 34 points for Philadelphia, which got 21 from Tobias Harris and 20 from James Harden.

"We've just got to go back to the drawing board and try to figure it out," Maxey said.

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A 10-0 run in the fourth turned an eight-point Miami lead into an 18-point edge, sealing the win and ensuring the Heat would hold home court before the series shifts north. Game 3 is Friday in Philadelphia. And now, the Heat will hope history holds — and the 76ers will hope it doesn't.

Miami has taken a 2-0 lead in 18 previous series, including the first round this season against Atlanta, and won the matchup every time. The 76ers' franchise has dropped the first two games of a matchup on 19 other occasions, never recovering to win the series.

The question going into Friday will revolve around whether Embiid could be ready for Game 3. The league's scoring champion and MVP finalist is recovering from an orbital fracture and concussion and has, not surprisingly, been big-time missed by the 76ers.

"We don't have a big man right now," Philadelphia coach Doc Rivers lamented.

Adebayo surely isn't complaining. He was 8 for 10 from the field and 8 for 8 from the line in Game 1; he followed that up with a 7-for-11 night from the floor on Wednesday.

But he said he's preparing as if Embiid will play Friday. And Butler, who is close with Embiid from their time together as teammates in Philadelphia, is hoping his MVP pick can play in the series.

"I want to compete against him," Butler said. "I really do."

Rivers, however, didn't sound optimistic about the possibility of Embiid being ready.

"He's got so many steps to go through," Rivers said. "I don't think he's cleared any of them right now."

It wasn't just the absence of Embiid, though, that hurt Philadelphia. The 76ers were awful again from 3-point range, shooting 8 for 30 in Game 2. They're now 14 for 64 from deep in the series.

"When it comes down to it, you've got to make shots, especially when you're on the road against a really good team," Harden said. "It's pretty simple."

Danny Green was 1 for 10 from the field — the second time in his playoff career that he had that many attempts and shot that poorly in a postseason game. The other? A 1-for-12 effort for San Antonio in 2013, also in Miami, the night the Heat won their third and most recent NBA title.

The Heat aren't close to that yet. But they are two wins from the East finals.

"It's not easy to get playoff wins." Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "We had some great stretches, particularly defensively. We had some really good stretches offensively. ... Our defense really carried us to the win, but we had some really timely offensive plays."

TIP-INS

76ers: Harden got fouled on a 3-point try with 0.1 seconds left in the half, making all three free throws to get Philadelphia within 60-52 at the break. ... Maxey got a cut on his right knee in the fourth quarter, the game stopping temporarily while the 76ers tended to him. He stayed in the game. ... Georges Niang had another unusual stat line. He was 0 for 7 — all 3-pointers — in Game 1, then fouled out in 10 minutes of Game 2. It was the fourth-fewest minutes played all season by anyone who fouled out.

Heat: PJ Tucker turns 37 on Thursday. ... It was the 497th consecutive sellout announced by the Heat, tying Sacramento for the fifth-longest streak in NBA history. The record is held by Dallas, which has 864 consecutive sellouts and counting. ... Miami held a 44-34 rebounding edge.

PASSING PAT

With the win, Spoelstra's postseason record improved to 91-59 (.607). Among coaches with at least 100 playoff games, he moved into fourth on the NBA's win-percentage list behind only Steve Kerr (.732), Phil Jackson (.688) and Billy Cunningham (.629). The coach Spoelstra passed in winning percentage Wednesday night? That would be his boss, Heat President Pat Riley, who went 171-111 (.606).

KENTUCKY SOUTH

The Kentucky ties ran deep Wednesday night. Wildcats coach John Calipari was at Game 2 to see Herro formally receive the Sixth Man award. Other former Kentucky players on the Heat and 76ers: Adebayo, Maxey and Heat two-way player Mychal Mulder. And Riley played at Kentucky.

UP NEXT

Game 3 is Friday in Philadelphia.

LA hospital sued for racism in death of Black mother

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The husband of a Black woman who died hours after childbirth in 2016 sued Cedars-Sinai Medical Center on Wednesday, saying she bled to death because of a culture of racism at the renowned Los Angeles hospital.

Charles Johnson IV said he discovered the disparity in care women of color receive at Cedars compared to white women during depositions in his wrongful death lawsuit that is scheduled to go to trial next week in Los Angeles Superior Court.

"There's no doubt in my mind that my wife would be here today and be here Sunday celebrating Mother's Day with her boys if she was a Caucasian woman," Johnson said at a news conference outside the hospital. "The reality is that on April 12, 2016, when we walked into Cedars-Sinai hospital for what we expected to be the happiest day of our lives, the greatest risk factor that Kira Dixon Johnson faced was racism."

Johnson died about 12 hours after having a scheduled cesarean section that was performed in 17 minutes to deliver the couple's second son, Langston.

"This is sloppy. It was butchery," attorney Nicholas Rowley said. "It shocked everybody that we deposed, all the health care providers, even the head of (obstetrics) here, the head of labor and delivery, looked at it and said 'No, I've never seen one done that fast.'"

Despite signs she was bleeding internally and over the desperate pleas of her husband, Kira Johnson languished for hours without being readmitted to the operating room until it was too late, the civil rights lawsuit said.

At one point, a nurse told Charles Johnson that his wife wasn't a priority, according to the lawsuit.

She died from internal bleeding — nearly 90% of her blood was later found in her stomach, Rowley said. Her bladder had been lacerated and she hadn't been sutured properly.

The hospital, which has fought the malpractice lawsuit, said in a statement that it was founded on principles of diversity and health care for all and it rejected "any mischaracterization of our culture and values."

"We are actively working to eradicate unconscious bias in health care and advance equity in health care more broadly," the statement said. "We commend Mr. Johnson for the attention he has brought to the important issue of racial disparities in maternal outcomes."

Kira Johnson's death led her husband on a crusade to advocate for reducing maternal mortality, which is especially high for Black women.

Before the pandemic, which increased deaths of women of color during childbirth, Black women died at 2.5 times the rate of white women, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

Charles Johnson has testified before Congress and at the state Capitol in Sacramento in support of a variety of bills, including a 2019 state law that requires doctors and nurses to identify implicit bias at work, and a recent bill that would lift the cap on medical malpractice awards.

Johnson would not benefit from a change in the malpractice law that currently caps awards at \$250,000. The case is scheduled to go to trial May 11, though recent court filings indicated the two sides were close to reaching a settlement.

The civil rights case would give Johnson another avenue to collect damages and hold Cedars-Sinai accountable. He's also seeking an injunction that would require the hospital to make changes to protect mothers and women of color.

But proving a civil rights violation in health care is difficult because most laws require showing discrimination was intentional, said Brietta Clark, a professor at Loyola Law School.

"Compared to when civil rights laws were enacted, a lot of the kind of unequal treatment that we see in health care today does not seem to be explicit," Clark said. "It does not seem to be conscious."

A judge had rejected Johnson's effort to change the malpractice case to add the civil rights action, partly because deposition excerpts did not show the hospital racially discriminated in the treatment it provided.

Dr. Kimberly Gregory, an obstetrician and gynecologist at the hospital, testified that she lives with "structural racism" every day and it prevents Black patients from receiving the same care as whites, according

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to court papers. She also said Kira Johnson should have gone back to the operating room sooner.

Dr. Sarah Kilpatrick, chair of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department, testified that she told Charles Johnson: "I'm sorry. We failed your family. ... This shouldn't have happened."

Angelique Washington, a Black surgical technologist, said "patient safety was out the door" when Kira Johnson came into the operating room.

Washington, who has more than 30 years of experience, said she routinely witnessed different treatment of Black women but was afraid to speak up.

"When I see my Black ... patients come in, I say an extra prayer," Washington said. "I say a silent prayer that all goes well. Because you do have racism very much so in the operating room."

Clark said the evidence identified by the judge as weak were more general statements and not specifically about discrimination by the provider. She said the key thing for Johnson's legal team will be to show a pattern of discrimination.

Rowley said the effort to amend the case was a long shot. He has since gathered other evidence from additional depositions and will be able to seek data — such as the number of Black women that have died at Cedars — to support his claim in the new lawsuit.

"Kira died because she's Black," he said. "Women of color don't get the same treatment as white women. That's a fact."

Ukraine: Russia using 'missile terrorism' in wide attacks

By JON GAMBRELL and CARA ANNA Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Complaining that the West is "stuffing Ukraine with weapons," Russia bombarded railroad stations and other supply-line targets across the country, as the European Union moved to further punish Moscow for the war Wednesday by proposing a ban on oil imports.

Heavy fighting also raged at the Azovstal steel mill in Mariupol that represented the last stronghold of Ukrainian resistance in the ruined southern port city, according to the mayor. A Russian official denied that Moscow's troops were storming the plant, but the commander of the main Ukrainian military unit inside said Russian troops had broken into the mill's territory.

The Russian military also said it used sea- and air-launched missiles to destroy electric power facilities at five railway stations across Ukraine, while artillery and aircraft also struck troop strongholds and fuel and ammunition depots.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba accused Russia of "resorting to the missile terrorism tactics in order to spread fear across Ukraine."

Air raid sirens sounded in cities across the country on Wednesday night, and attacks were reported near Kyiv, the capital; in Cherkasy and Dnipro in central Ukraine; and in Zaporizhzhia in the southeast. In Dnipro, authorities said a rail facility was hit. Videos on social media suggested a bridge there was attacked.

There was no immediate word on casualties or the extent of the damage.

Responding to the strikes in his nightly video address, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said: "All of these crimes will be answered, legally and quite practically – on the battlefield."

The flurry of attacks comes as Russia prepares to celebrate Victory Day on May 9, marking the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany. The world is watching for whether Russian President Vladimir Putin will use the occasion to declare a victory in Ukraine or expand what he calls the "special military operation."

A declaration of all-out war would allow Putin to introduce martial law and mobilize reservists to make up for significant troop losses.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the speculation as "nonsense."

Meanwhile, Belarus, which Russia used as a staging ground for its invasion, announced the start of military exercises Wednesday. A top Ukrainian official said the country will be ready to act if Belarus joins the fighting.

The attacks on rail infrastructure were meant to disrupt the delivery of Western weapons, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the West

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is "stuffing Ukraine with weapons."

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the Pentagon's assessment, said that while the Russians have tried to hit critical infrastructure around the western city of Lviv, specifically targeting railroads, there has been "no appreciable impact" on Ukraine's effort to resupply its forces. Lviv, close to the Polish border, has been a major gateway for NATO-supplied weapons.

Weaponry pouring into Ukraine helped its forces thwart Russia's initial drive to seize Kyiv and seems certain to play a central role in the growing battle for the Donbas, the eastern industrial region that Moscow now says is its main objective.

Ukraine has urged the West to ramp up the supply of weapons ahead of that potentially decisive clash. Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany, which had been slow at first to help arm Ukraine, said his government is considering supplying howitzers, in addition to Gepard anti-aircraft guns and other equipment it has agreed to send.

The governor of the eastern Donetsk region, which lies in the Donbas, said Russian attacks left 21 people dead on Tuesday, the highest number of known fatalities since April 8, when a missile attack on the railway station in Kramatorsk killed at least 59.

In addition to supplying weapons to Ukraine, Europe and the U.S. have sought to punish Moscow with sanctions. The EU's top official called on the 27-nation bloc on Wednesday to ban Russian oil imports, a crucial source of revenue.

"We will make sure that we phase out Russian oil in an orderly fashion, in a way that allows us and our partners to secure alternative supply routes and minimizes the impact on global markets," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France.

The proposal needs unanimous approval from EU countries and is likely to be the subject of fierce debate. Hungary and Slovakia have already said they won't take part in any oil sanctions. They could be granted an exemption.

The EU is also talking about a possible embargo on Russian natural gas. The bloc has already approved a cutoff of coal imports.

Russia's economy is heavily dependent on oil and natural gas exports. Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign minister, said European purchases of Russian energy produce billions in revenue and support the Kremlin's "war machine."

Von der Leyen also proposed that Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, and two other major banks be disconnected from the SWIFT international banking payment system.

In Mariupol, Mayor Vadym Boychenko said that Russian forces were targeting the already shattered Azovstal plant with heavy artillery, tanks, aircraft, warships and "heavy bombs that pierce concrete 3 to 5 meters thick."

"Our brave guys are defending this fortress, but it is very difficult," he said.

Ukrainian fighters said Tuesday that Russian forces had begun storming the plant. But the Kremlin said that was not true. "There is no assault," Peskov said.

Denys Prokopenko, commander of the Ukrainian Azov regiment that's defending the plant, said Russian forces have broken into the plant's territory.

Prokopenko said in a video that the incursions continued for a second day, "and there are heavy, bloody battles."

"The situation is extremely difficult, but in spite of everything, we continue to carry out the order to hold the defense," he added.

His wife, Kateryna Prokopenko, told The Associated Press: "We don't want them to die. They won't surrender. They are waiting for the bravest countries to evacuate them."

Meanwhile, the United Nations announced that more than 300 civilians were evacuated Wednesday from Mariupol and other nearby communities. The evacuees arrived in Zaporizhzhia, about 140 miles (230 kilometers) to the northwest, where they were receiving humanitarian assistance.

"Many came with nothing but the clothes they were wearing, and we will now support them during this

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difficult time, including with much-needed psychological support," said Osnat Lubrani, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator for Ukraine.

Over the weekend, more than 100 people — including women, the elderly and 17 children — were evacuated from the plant during a cease-fire in an operation overseen by the U.N. and the Red Cross. But the attacks on the plant soon resumed.

The Russian government said on the Telegram messaging app that it would open another evacuation corridor from the plant during certain hours on Thursday through Saturday. But there was no immediate confirmation of those arrangements from other parties, and many previous such assurances from the Kremlin have fallen through, with the Ukrainians blaming continued fighting by the Russians.

It was unclear how many Ukrainian fighters were still inside, but the Russians put the number at about 2,000 in recent weeks, and 500 were reported to be wounded. A few hundred civilians also remained there, the Ukrainian side said.

Mariupol, and the plant in particular, have come to symbolize the misery inflicted by the war. The Russians have pulverized most of the city in a two-month siege that has trapped civilians with little food, water, medicine or heat.

The city's fall would deprive Ukraine of a vital port, allow Russia to establish a land corridor to the Crimean Peninsula, which it seized from Ukraine in 2014, and free up troops to fight elsewhere in the Donbas.

Movies love a comeback story. This summer, it's their turn.

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

This summer at the movies, Tom Cruise is back in the cockpit behind those iconic aviators. Doctors Grant, Sattler and Ian Malcolm are returning for another round with the dinosaurs. Natalie Portman is picking up Thor's hammer. And Jordan Peele is poised to terrify us with the unknown. Again.

Hollywood is bringing out some of its biggest and most reliable players for the 2022 summer movie season, which unofficially kicks off this weekend with the help of Marvel and Disney's "Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness" and runs through the end of August. It's an uncertain time for the movie business as studios and exhibitors are still making up for losses incurred during the pandemic and adjusting to new ways of doing business, including shortened release windows, competition from streaming and the need to feed their own services. And everyone is wondering if moviegoing will ever return to pre-pandemic levels.

But though the pandemic lingers on, there is optimism in the air.

"We're still waiting for older audiences to come back. But it really feels like we've turned a corner," said Jim Orr, the head of domestic distribution for Universal Pictures. "You get the impression that audiences want to be out, they want to be in theaters. I think it's going to be an extraordinary summer."

Last week, studio executives and movie stars schmoozed with theater owners and exhibitors at a convention in Las Vegas, proudly hyping films that they promise will get audiences back to the movie theaters week after week.

Expectations are particularly high for "Top Gun: Maverick," which Paramount Pictures will release on May 27 after two years of pandemic postponements. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer says he never waived for a moment in wanting to release "Top Gun: Maverick" — a full-throttle action film made with extensive aerial photography, practical effects and up to six cameras inside fighter-jet cockpits — exclusively in theaters.

"It's the kind of movie that embraces the experience of going to the theater. It takes you away. It transports you. We always say: We're in the transportation business. We transport you from one place to another, and that's what 'Top Gun' does," Bruckheimer said. "There's a lot of built-up demand for some movies and hopefully we're one of them."

The movie industry has already had several notable hits in the past six months too, including "Spider-Man: No Way Home," now the third highest grossing film of all time, "The Batman," "The Lost City" and, though smaller, "Everything Everywhere All At Once." The hope is that the momentum will only pick up in the coming months.

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Before the pandemic, the summer movie season could reliably produce over \$4 billion in ticket sales, or about 40% of the year's grosses according to Comscore. But in 2020, with theaters closed for the majority of the season and most releases pushed, that total plummeted to \$176 million. Last summer presented a marked improvement with \$1.7 billion, but things were hardly back to normal — many chose to either delay releases further or employ hybrid strategies.

Now everyone is refocusing on theatrical, though slates are slimmer. The ticketing service Fandango surveyed more than 6,000 ticket-buyers recently and 83% said they planned to see three or more movies on the big screen this summer. And, not insignificantly, Netflix last month also reported its first subscriber loss in 10 years and expects to lose two million more this quarter.

"Finally, it is movie time, with blockbuster after blockbuster after blockbuster after blockbuster," said Adam Aron, chairman and CEO of AMC Theatres, the nation's largest theater chain. He touted franchises like "Doctor Strange 2," "Top Gun 2," "Jurassic World: Dominion," (June 10) and "Thor: Love and Thunder" (July 8), "new film concepts" like Jordan Peele's "Nope" (July 22) and "Elvis" (June 24) and family friendly offerings from "Lightyear" (June 17) to "Minions: The Rise of Gru" (July 1).

"It's a bold statement, but this summer could potentially be on par with 2019, which would be monumental for the movie industry," said Paul Dergarabedian, the senior media analyst for Comscore.

Analysts are predicting "Doctor Strange 2" could open to \$170 million this weekend, double that of the first film. Marvel and Disney then follow that with the new Thor, which picks up with Hemsworth's character traveling around with the Guardians of the Galaxy after "Endgame" and wondering "what now?"

"Thor is just trying to figure out his purpose, trying to figure out exactly who he is and why he's a hero or whether he should be a hero," said director Taika Waititi. "I guess you could call it a midlife crisis."

The film brings back Portman's Jane Foster, who becomes The Mighty Thor, Waititi's Korg and Tessa Thompson's Valkyrie, and adds Russell Crowe as Zeus and Christian Bale as Gorr the God Butcher. Waititi has said that it's the craziest film he's ever made.

"It's a great, really fun, weird little group of heroes, a new team for Thor with Korg, Valkyrie and The Mighty Thor," Waititi said. "And, in my humble opinion, we have probably the best villain that Marvel's ever had in Christian Bale."

But superhero movies alone don't make for a healthy or particularly compelling cinematic landscape. There have to be options for theaters to survive.

"Our business can't devolve into just tentpoles and branded IP. We really need to continue to serve up as broad a slate as we possibly can," Orr said. "We have something for every audience segment. Audiences are craving that and exhibitors are craving that."

Universal is proud of their diverse summer slate that includes a certain dinosaur tentpole, family animation, thrillers and horrors, comedies like "Easter Sunday" (Aug. 5) and period charmers from Focus Features like "Downton Abbey: A New Era" (May 20) and "Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris" (July 15).

Jason Blum, the powerhouse producer and head of Blumhouse, hopes that Scott Derrickson's supernatural horror "The Black Phone," featuring Ethan Hawke in a rare villain role, is going to be the special "not superhero movie of the summer" when it hits theaters on June 24.

There's more coming to theaters than just franchises. There are literary adaptations, like "Where the Crawdads Sing," with Daisy Edgar-Jones, non-stop action rides like "Bullet Train" (July 29), with Brad Pitt and Sandra Bullock, Baz Luhrmann's drama about the life and music of Elvis Presley, a mockumentary about a tiny seashell ("Marcel the Shell With Shoes On," June 24), Regency-era fun in "Mr. Malcolm's List" (July 1) and creepy hair-raisers like "Watcher" (June 3), "Bodies, Bodies, Bodies" and "Resurrection" (both Aug. 5).

"Annihilation" writer-director Alex Garland also has a new thriller, "Men," coming to theaters May 20. Jessie Buckley plays a woman who retreats to the English countryside for some peace following a personal tragedy only to be confronted by more horrors from the men in this quaint town, all of whom are played by Rory Kinnear.

As someone who makes challenging, original films for the big screen, Garland is a little worried about the movie industry and the seismic shifts that are happening under the surface that are "partly cultural

and partly economic.”

“Every time an interesting film comes out and underperforms, I get a kind of gnawing anxiety about it,” Garland said. “If the only films that make money are for younger audiences, something cultural changes. Something changes about the sorts of films that get financed, why they get financed.”

“It almost feels old fashioned or actually rather boring, but I do think there’s a value in cinema,” he added. “A film like ‘Men’ functions differently in a cinema. Not being able to stop it until it’s ended means that it has a qualitatively different effect.”

Streaming companies, meanwhile, are still going strong. Netflix has a massive 35+ film summer slate, including the spy thriller “The Gray Man” (July 22), directed by the Russo brothers and starring Ryan Gosling and Chris Evans and “Spiderhead” (June 17), with Chris Hemsworth. There’s a documentary about Jennifer Lopez (“Halftime,” June 14), an Adam Sandler basketball joint (“Hustle,” June 8) and a Kevin Hart/Mark Wahlberg buddy pic (“Me Time,” Aug. 26).

Some of the most interesting titles from this year’s Sundance Film Festival are being released by streamers too, including “Good Luck To You, Leo Grande” (Hulu), “Cha Cha Real Smooth” (Apple TV+), “Emergency” (Amazon,) and “AM I OK?” (HBO Max).

“Streaming has a place in the world, but it’s not the only thing in the world,” said Blum, who is convinced that there is still an appetite for going to theaters. “There were people out there saying the movies were over. I never thought that, but I was concerned about how much demand was left. But it appears that that part of our world is not going to disappear anytime soon.”

For Bruckheimer, the equation is perhaps even more simple.

“It all depends on the movies. It’s always about the movies. If there’s stuff people want to see, they’re going to show up,” Bruckheimer said. “I always use the analogy: You have a kitchen in your apartment or home, but you like to go out to eat. You want a different meal.”

US quietly expands asylum limits while preparing to end them

By ELLIOT SPAGAT and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Biden administration has begun expelling Cubans and Nicaraguans to Mexico under pandemic-related powers to deny migrants a chance to seek asylum, expanding use of the rule even as it publicly says it has been trying to unwind it, officials said Wednesday.

The U.S. struck an agreement with Mexico to expel up to 100 Cubans and 20 Nicaraguans a day from three locations: San Diego; El Paso, Texas; and Rio Grande Valley, Texas, according to a U.S. official with direct knowledge of the effort.

The expulsions began April 27 and will end May 22, the official told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the agreement has not been made public. They are carried out under Title 42 authority, which was named for a public health law and used to expel migrants on the grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Title 42 is due to expire May 23.

The U.S. and Mexico agreed April 26 to very limited expulsions of Cubans and Nicaraguans, according to a high-level Mexican official who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly. It was prompted by higher numbers of migrants from those two countries coming to the U.S. border.

Another Mexican official, also not authorized to comment publicly, confirmed that up to 100 Cubans and 20 Nicaraguans were being expelled from San Diego under Title 42 under an agreement that runs through May 22.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Until last week, Mexico only agreed to take Guatemalans, Hondurans and El Salvadorans — in addition to Mexicans — under Title 42 authority. Other nationalities are subject to Title 42 but costs, strained diplomatic ties and other considerations often make it difficult to send them back to their home countries.

It’s next to impossible for the U.S. to expel migrants to Cuba or Nicaragua due to poor relations with those governments. That has posed an acute challenge for the Biden administration as more people from

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those countries seek haven in the United States.

Cubans were stopped by U.S. authorities more than 32,000 times on the Mexican border in March, double the number in February and more than five times October's count, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Nicaragua eased travel restrictions from Cuba in November, making it easier for Cubans to continue by land to the U.S. border. Most enter the U.S. in or near Yuma, Arizona, and Del Rio, Texas.

Last month, Cuba and the United States took a tentative step toward thawing relations and resuming joint efforts to address irregular migration during the highest-level talks between the two countries in four years.

There were no major breakthroughs, but the mere fact that the U.S. was holding substantive talks was a sign relations might be looking better under President Joe Biden after going into deep freeze under his predecessor, Deputy Foreign Minister Carlos Fernandez de Cossio said Friday.

"They seem committed. They ratified that they are committed to the agreements in place," Fernandez de Cossio said. "So we have no reason to mistrust what they're saying, but time will tell."

Nicaraguans were stopped more than 16,000 times in March, more than double September's level. The vast majority enter in South Texas.

Lifting Title 42 has proven controversial as midterm elections near, even for Biden's Democratic Party, amid concerns that the U.S. is unprepared for an anticipated increase in migrants seeking asylum. Authorities stopped migrants more than 221,000 times in March, the highest mark in 22 years.

The White House and Homeland Security Department have publicly stood behind the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's decision to end the measure because it could no longer be justified on grounds of protecting public health.

But the practice of expelling Cubans and Nicaraguans runs counter to the administration's public statements that it was phasing out use of the pandemic powers to prepare for May 23. The Washington Post reported earlier Wednesday that U.S. and Mexico struck an agreement to do so for Cubans and Nicaraguans.

The U.S. has expelled migrants more than 1.8 million times under Title 42 authority since March 2020, effectively overriding rights to seek asylum under U.S. law and international treaty. In doing so, migrants are not subject to immigration law, which include rights to seek protection from persecution at home.

The administration said in court filings that it began processing more Central American adults under immigration laws after the CDC's announcement on April 1. But a federal judge in Louisiana ruled last week that it couldn't start unwinding Title 42 while it was still in effect.

U.S. District Judge Robert Summerhays strongly criticized the CDC's decision, suggesting he would try to keep Title 42 in effect after May 23. A hearing is scheduled May 13 for oral arguments.

Marisa Limón, senior director of advocacy and planning at the Hope Border Institute, said advocates began learning about expulsions of Cubans and Nicaraguans from El Paso on Monday and later confirmed the new practice with U.S. officials.

Limón said the administration is "trying to get every last bit out of Title 42" before it expires. She called it "sobering" but consistent with the administration's efforts to have other countries in the Western hemisphere take more responsibility for hosting people fleeing their homes.

For marine biologist, Haitian gangs make work dangerous

By TRENTON DANIEL and PIERRE-RICHARD LUXAMA Associated Press

PEPILLO SALCEDO, Dominican Republic (AP) — In a blue bay that spans the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, fishermen from both countries recently aired grievances in a rare face-to-face meeting thanks to the efforts of marine biologist Jean Wiener.

The meeting, overseen by Dominican naval officers with rifles, was no small feat for Wiener, who has been forced to work on conserving this biologically sensitive region from afar — his house in Bethesda, Maryland — because of rampant violence in Haiti, his homeland. Now the prize-winning biologist stood in the steaming Caribbean heat at the mouth of an ominously named spot called the Massacre River, trying to bring together the two sides and find a solution that will not only save their livelihoods but also vital marine resources in a region under extreme pressures from climate change.

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"The constant fishing, or overfishing, in these areas has decimated an entire ecosystem," said Rodolfo Jimenez, director of an agricultural border project in the Dominican Republic.

The Haitian fishermen, standing across from Jimenez on the beach, agreed. But they also said they were not to blame for the damage in the Monte Cristi National Park in northwestern Dominican Republic.

Wiener's work has grown in significance over the years in large part because of charcoal vendors in Haiti who hack down trees for cooking fuel and, more recently, wade into the country's mangroves, the tropical vegetation that is a natural barrier against the Caribbean's increasingly destructive hurricanes. With ocean storms becoming more severe, Haiti's coastline and its biodiversity are becoming even more vulnerable.

It was the first trip for Wiener, leader of Foundation for the Protection of Marine Biodiversity, since November 2021, his absence largely attributed to the violent gangs that have engulfed the Haitian capital in recent years and reached parts of the countryside. Nominally present already and undermined further with the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moise in the bedroom of his home, the government has done little to wrest control from the brazen gangs.

For years, Wiener used to visit Haiti every month or so, but now restricts his trips to only a few times a year while being compelled to work remotely and delegate more responsibility to staff members dispersed throughout the country. Haiti is just too dangerous otherwise. So when he does come, as he did for three weeks in March, he hopscoches the country via puddle-jumper plane; travel by road is too perilous, with major thoroughfares blocked by gangs fond of extortion. Many passengers hide in their cars by lying on the backseat.

It's a conundrum that bedevils Jean and others like him around the world. As climate change plays a greater role in contributing to conflicts, that in turns makes it more difficult to carry out scientific research and work on environmental projects that seek to offset the effects of climate change. The environmental group Global Witness released a report last year noting that 2020 saw a record number of environmental activists killed around the world; the death toll of 227 was the highest number recorded for a second consecutive year, with Colombia having the highest number of recorded attacks, with 65, and Mexico second, with 30.

"The extent to which failed states make it difficult for scientists and the international scientific community to work on these issues simply means it will be more difficult to solve these problems," said Peter Gleick, president emeritus and a senior fellow with the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based research group that focuses on water issues around the world.

Said Jessica Olcott Yllemo, senior fellow for climate security at the American Security Project, a nonpartisan group in Washington, D.C.: "If the temperatures continue to rise and you don't have basic functions because you don't have a functioning government, climate sort of just exacerbates all of those different threats and hazards."

In several reports released in October, the U.S. signaled that climate change would occupy a central role in security strategy, a policy shift that underscores how climatic changes are exacerbating long-standing problems. One of the studies identified 11 countries that were of "greatest concern," because they were especially vulnerable to climate change and unable to deal with the attendant problems. Haiti was among them.

The Caribbean nation has the highest travel advisory—"Level 4: Do Not Travel"—from the U.S. State Department due to kidnapping, crime and civil unrest. Kidnapping, the State Department says, "is widespread and victims regularly include U.S. citizens." In a March newsletter, the U.S. Embassy offered U.S. citizens in Haiti a tip sheet on ways to avoid being kidnapped.

The kidnappings have persisted for years, rising significantly after the 2017 departure of a U.N. peacekeeping mission. In October, 16 U.S. citizens, including five children, and one Canadian, were part of a group of missionaries who were abducted by the dreaded 400 Mawozo gang and held for ransom for two months. An untold number of Haitian Americans have also been kidnapped.

This past week, north of the Port-au-Prince capital, fighting between 400 Mawozo and a rival gang led to the displacement of thousands of people and the killing of at least 20, including six children. Officials

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warned that the main roads leading to Haiti's northern region could be cut off as a result of the fighting, as has already happened to a thoroughfare heading south.

The March meeting Wiener set up was held at the beach of an estuary meant to be easy to reach for both parties, just a few steps on the Dominican side of the border. It was a Thursday morning, and a white mangrove provided shade to Wiener, the fishermen and their associations, a few environmental officials from the two countries and the Dominican naval officers. On the shore behind them stood a string of wooden posts used to hold seines for catching eels.

A big part of the two sides' discussion was over the exact location of the border above Hispaniola, the name of the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

"The marine border is not completely north, it is northwest," Cmdr. Irving Cabrera, of the Dominican Navy, said in the meeting.

The meeting took place at the mouth of a river with a name that harkens back to a bloody episode on the island of Hispaniola: The Massacre River, also the Dajabón River. Though named for an earlier massacre, it's mostly known for when Dominican soldiers, under the orders of dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1937, executed thousands of Haitian families and Dominicans of Haitian descent. The weapon of choice was a machete.

"I don't think it was lost on either side of the border," said Frederick Payton, of AgroFrontera, the Dominican environmental group that worked with Wiener to organize the March meeting. Payton also helped lead the meeting. "The Río Massacre kind of represents both the tension and the integration of the economies in the border region."

The antipathy toward Haitians persists today, not least with Dominican President Luis Abinader's newly launched plan to build a multimillion-dollar, 118-mile (190-kilometer) wall along the border. Construction has already begun.

Bereft of the usual tension, let alone animosity, the beach meeting lasted a few hours, with both sides able to voice their concerns as Payton and Wiener served as peacekeepers of sorts in the absence of a strong border state. Both stressed the importance of seeking solutions instead of dwelling on problems.

"We were trying to frame the meeting not just as a session to complain and to point fingers, but to try to look for some possible solutions that will take time," Payton said. "But will give each side hope and expectation that something will be done in the future."

Out of the meeting came the idea of creating a boat registration and a licensing for fisheries so Haitian and Dominican authorities know who is in the water and where they're going.

Perhaps Wiener's biggest achievement has been creating Haiti's first protected marine areas, including the Three Bays National Park known for its mangrove forests, coral reefs and seagrass beds, but he concedes that his work has become more difficult working remotely. Josué Celiscar, field operations director for Wiener's foundation and a graduate student in agronomy, says the same, noting the inevitable delays that accompany projects.

"When you are the director, when you are present, you are executing the project," Celiscar said. "When you aren't there, you're left with the assistant. It's not going to be the same thing."

In recent years, Wiener has seen the brother of his assistant director kidnapped and later released and spends considerable time making sure his staff is safe.

Born in Haiti, Wiener and his family fled the Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier regime when he was six months old for Queens, New York. He went back to Haiti at six while Duvalier's son and successor, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc," was in power and left again for college, studying biology at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. Haiti came calling once more, and Wiener returned at 23 and, in 1992 started his foundation. Now 57, Wiener is a married father of two children, a boy and a girl.

In the end, the March trip to Haiti proved fortuitously uneventful—though danger wasn't far away.

When Wiener visited the southwestern part of the country, in the coastal town of Les Cayes, his driver got wind of protesters' plans to storm the local airport. The attack didn't happen until after Wiener flew out, a few days later: People ran onto the tarmac and torched a small plane owned by a U.S. missionary

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group. One person died and five others were injured, including four police officers, according to a police official working at the airport.

One day during his recent visit to northern Haiti, Wiener brought to the beach a group that included game wardens and university students with an interest in the environment. The idea was to get them in the water, make them feel comfortable and learn the basics of snorkeling.

Standing on the sand, Wiener gave a brief lesson on how to use a snorkel, explaining how to expel water from the breathing device. Minutes later they waded into the surf. A pufferfish floated toward them.

One man picked up the blowfish and studied it. Wiener told him to put the fish back in the water, which he did. Inflated like a ball as it bobbed supine, the puffer looked as if it were playing dead.

Wiener sloshed knee-high through the shore's lucent water, and gently picked up the prickly fish with both hands. He then walked a few steps out, toward the northern horizon, and sent the pufferfish into the ocean.

"We really know that there's a part, you know, where you can be in a classroom," Wiener said later from the hotel, where a few security guards patrolled the grounds with rifles. "But it is critically important that people actually get out and touch and see and feel the environment."

Late US Sen. Orrin Hatch honored at Utah Capitol

By SAM METZ Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A procession of family, friends and colleagues gathered to honor late U.S. Sen. Orrin G. Hatch, who is lying in state in Salt Lake City on Wednesday.

Hatch died on April 23 in Salt Lake City at age 88 from complications stemming from a stroke. A broad range of relatives, legal clients, campaign staffers, constituents and a friend from the mission he served for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1954 paid their respects at an open-casket ceremony held in the rotunda of the marble-floored Utah Capitol.

Hatch's funeral is scheduled for Friday at a Latter-day Saints chapel in Salt Lake City.

Born in poverty in Pennsylvania, Orrin Hatch rose to one of the highest echelons of politics, representing Utah in the Senate for more than four decades and at one point serving as the chamber's president pro tempore, third in the line of succession to the presidency.

Hatch ended his seven-term tenure as the Senate's longest-serving Republican in 2019. South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond served longer, yet only part of his tenure was as a Republican due to party-switching.

Hatch was known to constituents and colleagues as a steadfast conservative who opposed abortion, took a particular interest in the Supreme Court and supported tax and spending cuts. Throughout his career as senator, he also repeatedly brokered compromises with Democrats on policies including protections for people with disabilities, health insurance for children and on their nominees for the Supreme Court. As the one-time chair and longtime member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he was part of the confirmation processes for more than half of the federal judges sat in U.S. history, according to his son, Brent Hatch.

A staunch opponent of abortion, Hatch helped shape the composition of the current court, which contains six justices nominated by Republican presidents and three nominated by Democratic presidents. He supported justices nominated by both Republican and Democratic presidents, including Justices Clarence Thomas, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer.

"He understood how important the judiciary was," Brent Hatch said.

In his final term in office before deciding not to run for reelection in 2018, Hatch became an close ally of President Donald Trump, helping shepherd to passage a major rewrite of the tax code and working on downsizing two national monuments in Utah, which had long been a top priority for the state's Republicans.

Hatch was also noted for his side career as a singer and recording artist of music with themes of his religious faith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

He is survived by his wife, Elaine, and their six children.

Brent Hatch said the family chose to hold Hatch's lie in state ceremony in Utah — rather than in Washington, D.C., like his recently deceased colleagues Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nevada, and Bob Dole, R-Kansas

— in recognition of his commitment to his constituents.

He said he heard an abundance of stories over the past week and a half about the encounters people had with his father, both politically and on a personal level, where he offered advice and encouragement to constituents that transcended politics.

Mark and Kris Egan of Salt Lake City said Hatch had friendships that lasted decades, including theirs. Before elected senator, then-attorney Hatch helped the couple adopt their son, Mark Egan said.

"He was empathetic, sympathetic, concerned and did a fine job," Egan said.

Young Yankees fan given Judge HR ball meets his hero

TORONTO (AP) — The young Yankees fan who became a viral sensation this week shed more tears of joy on Wednesday when he met his hero, New York slugger Aaron Judge.

It came hours after cameras captured Derek Rodriguez, 9, tearfully hugging Blue Jays fan Mike Lanzillotta after Lanzillotta snagged Judge's sixth-inning home run ball and handed it to Derek.

Rodriguez, his family and Lanzillotta were invited onto the field and into the Yankees dugout before Wednesday's series finale against the Blue Jays.

Derek teared up again when Judge stopped by for a quick chat, signed the home run ball and handed over a pair of his batting gloves.

"That's a moment that's been seen around the world now," Judge said of the emotional exchange. "It just speaks volumes to the Blue Jays fans they have here. It's a cool little connection they've got."

Yankees manager Aaron Boone said he was touched by Lanzillotta's gesture.

"Frankly, watching it last night really warmed my heart," Boone said.

Yankees second baseman Gleyber Torres also spoke to Derek in Spanish. Derek was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and his family moved to Canada about five years ago.

Derek, who plays shortstop and right field, is named after Yankees Hall of Fame shortstop Derek Jeter. The youngster said he took his prized ball to school Wednesday.

"My friends and my teacher were really happy and they congratulated me," he said. "My teacher even made a presentation where she showed what happened, and people got to touch the ball. It was just amazing."

Yankees spokesperson Jason Zillo said the Rodriguez family and Lanzillotta have been invited to bring a group of nine people each to New York later this season to watch a Yankees game from The Judge's Chambers seats in right field.

Oklahoma joins Texas in offering glimpse of "post-Roe" world

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Oklahoma joined Texas this week to form a region that parts of a nation divided over abortion care might look like if the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down its landmark Roe v. Wade ruling.

While abortion providers across the country have been bracing for the possibility that the high court's new conservative majority might further restrict abortion, that has especially been the case in Oklahoma, where lawmakers have passed a half-dozen anti-abortion measures this year.

A bill signed into law on Tuesday by Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt is similar to the law passed in Texas last year that led to a marked increase in women going to neighboring states, including Oklahoma, to get abortions. It prohibits doctors from performing an abortion after fetal activity is detected in the embryo, which experts say is typically after about six weeks and before many women even know they are pregnant. And like Texas' law, it is enforced through civil, not criminal, courts and relies on civilians to inform on one another.

Abortion providers in Oklahoma said they are prepared for the law to take effect and have been helping women get appointments at clinics in neighboring states.

"I think something we realized in September (when the Texas law took effect) is that we are already

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living in a virtual post-Roe world in our region," said Dr. Iman Alsaden, the medical director of Planned Parenthood Great Plains, which operates clinics in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma.

"We have seen people go to extreme lengths to access abortion care: driving all night, doing whatever they can to get the basic health care they need for them and their families. We have been seeing what a post-Roe future looks like in this region of the country already, and it's unbelievable."

The Oklahoma Supreme Court declined to temporarily stop the law from taking effect, although the court is still considering a legal challenge.

Stitt's signing of the bill, along with the leaked draft opinion suggesting the U.S. Supreme Court is considering weakening or overturning its Roe v. Wade decision, led more than 100 people to protest on Tuesday at the Oklahoma Capitol.

"I honestly and truly never thought we would actually get here," said Sophia Fults, 22, a University of Oklahoma student from Tulsa who held a sign that read: "Keep abortion safe, legal and accessible."

"Honestly, I was just shocked and I'm still kind of shocked and disgusted. So many women are going to be harmed because of this. It's just horrendous."

The new law authorizes abortions if they are performed as the result of a medical emergency, but there are no exceptions for if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.

Like the Texas law, the Oklahoma bill would allow private citizens to sue abortion providers or anyone who helps a woman obtain an abortion. 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 first copycat measure in March, although it has been temporarily blocked by the state's Supreme Court.

Stitt earlier this year signed a bill to make performing an abortion a felony in Oklahoma, but that measure is not set to take effect until this summer, and legal experts say it's likely to be blocked because Roe still remains the law of the land.

"One of our main responsibilities in government is to protect life, and that has been our deliberate intention," said state Sen. Nathan Dahm, a Republican who wrote the bill to make abortion illegal. "I believe here in Oklahoma we'll do everything we can to protect life from conception."

The number of abortions performed each year in Oklahoma, which has four abortion clinics, has declined steadily over the last two decades, from more than 6,200 in 2002 to 3,737 in 2020, which were the fewest in more than 20 years, according to data from the Oklahoma State Department of Health. In 2020, before the Texas law was passed, about 9% of the abortions performed in Oklahoma involved women from Texas.

Before the Texas ban took effect on Sept. 1, about 40 women from Texas had abortions performed in Oklahoma each month, the data shows. That number jumped to 222 in September and 243 in October, according to the most recent data available.

Clinic operators in Texas saw about a 40% decrease in the number of abortions performed there after the law took effect, and Oklahoma operators say they expect similar declines, said Zachary Gingrich-Gaylord, a spokesman for Trust Women, which operates clinics in Oklahoma City and Wichita, Kansas.

"In Texas, we've seen that many clinics were able to retain around 60% of their pre-SB 8 patient volume, and it seems reasonable to expect something similar in Oklahoma," Gingrich-Gaylord said, referring to the Texas law by its state Senate bill name. "The primary reason to think that we may see far less volume than that is the chilling effect caused by the (Supreme Court) leak that may add to confusion for patients seeking abortions."

According to state health department data, about 47% of abortions performed in Oklahoma in 2020 were for women who were less than six weeks pregnant.

Amber Heard testifies she was assaulted by Johnny Depp

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

FAIRFAX, Va. (AP) — Amber Heard said she knew she should leave Johnny Depp the first time he hit her, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I knew I couldn't just forgive him, right, because that means it will happen again. Like, I've seen the

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health class videos," Heard told jurors through tears as she took the stand in Depp's libel lawsuit against her. "I was heartbroken."

Heard said she walked away after being slapped, but a few days later Depp came back with an apology, a few cases of her favorite wine, and a promise he'd never do it again.

"I wanted to believe him, so I chose to," she said.

Depp, 58, is suing Heard for libel in Fairfax County Circuit Court after she wrote a December 2018 op-ed in The Washington Post describing herself as "a public figure representing domestic abuse." The article never mentions Depp by name, but Depp's lawyers say he was defamed nevertheless because it clearly referred to accusations she made in 2016 during their divorce proceedings.

Much of the trial has focused on whether Heard was in fact abused, something Depp denies.

Heard took the stand for the first time Wednesday. She also described a time she said she was sexually assaulted by Depp as he angrily performed what he called a "cavity search."

She said the two of them and some friends had gone to the Hicksville Trailer Palace in Joshua Tree, California, in May 2013 for what was going to be a nice night in the desert. They ingested psychotropic mushrooms, and Depp became jealous when he saw another woman acting in what he perceived as a flirtatious manner with Heard.

Heard said she and Depp went into one of the trailers, which he promptly trashed. He then accused her of hiding his drugs, ripped her dress and started patting her down, she said.

"He was telling me, 'We're going to do a cavity search,'" she said through tears. "He just shoved his fingers inside me. I just stood there, staring at the lights."

Heard began her testimony describing to jurors how they met filming a movie and fell in love.

Despite their 22-year age difference, Heard said there was an instant connection when Depp met with her as he considered her for a role in his film "The Rum Diary."

"I was a no-name actor. I was 22. He was twice my age. He's this world famous actor and here we are getting along about obscure books, old blues" music, said Heard, now 36.

While they had chemistry during filming of the movie, she said they didn't begin dating until doing a press tour for the film's release in 2011. At the outset, they kept their relationship a secret.

"We weren't doing normal life stuff. ... We were in this bubble of secrecy, and it felt like a warm glow," she said.

She said that first act of physical violence came in 2013 as she was looking at one of his tattoos and couldn't read it. She laughed when Depp told her it said "Wino" — an alteration to a tattoo he had made when he'd been dating actor Winona Ryder.

Heard said she laughed again after he slapped her, thinking it must be a joke. He then slapped her two more times, the third time knocking her off balance, Heard said.

Depp, who has already taken the stand and testified for four days, told jurors a different version of the story.

"It didn't happen," he said of the alleged assault. "Why would I take such great offense to someone making fun of a tattoo on my body? That allegation never made any sense to me."

Through most of Heard's testimony, Depp stared down at the table in front of him.

Heard said Depp's violent episodes were usually triggered by some combination of jealousy and drug or alcohol use.

"Johnny on speed is very different from Johnny on opiates. Johnny on opiates is very different from Ad-derall and cocaine Johnny, which is very different from quaaludes Johnny, but I had to get good at paying attention to the different versions of him," she said.

Depp has testified that he doesn't have a problem with alcohol and is famously capable of handling his liquor. He admitted to a problem with prescription pills but said he overcame it.

Depp's family, friends and employees have similarly downplayed the notion that Depp struggled with alcohol. On Wednesday, Heard said that was a big part of the problem. She said almost everyone around Johnny was charmed by him and excused his bad behavior.

"No one told him. No one was honest with him," she said. "He passed out in his own vomit, he'd lose

control of his body and everyone cleaned up after him. I cleaned up after him.”

Heard’s testimony has been highly anticipated in a trial that has reached its fourth week. Depp’s legions of supporters have questioned, among other things, why Heard would have stayed in a relationship where she was a victim of abuse. Heard addressed that question multiple times Wednesday.

“When it was good, it was so good. I’d never felt love like that,” she said. “But he was also this other thing. And that other thing was awful.”

‘Corrupt to core’ Caribbean premier gets bond in drug case

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The premier of the British Virgin Islands, whom U.S. prosecutors described as “corrupt to the core,” was given a \$500,000 bond that could see him released from prison as he awaits trial on charges tied to a U.S. narcotics sting.

In a surprise decision, federal court Judge Alicia Otazo-Reyes rejected prosecutors’ argument that Andrew Fahie may flee the U.S. and possibly engage in criminal activity if he is freed.

Instead, she said he could remain in Miami, confined to the rented apartment of his two college-age daughters, if he and his family surrender their passports and he wears an ankle bracelet monitor in addition to paying the sizable corporate surety bond.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Frederic Shadley said the government would appeal the decision, meaning it’s unclear when and if Fahie would be released.

Fahie, 51, was arrested last week at a Miami airport during a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration sting after being given what looked like \$700,000 in cash, but what was in reality fake bill notes, that were to be flown back on a private jet to the British Virgin Islands on Fahie’s behalf. Also arrested was his ports director, Oleanvine Maynard.

Fahie stood handcuffed shaking his head in disagreement as Shadley described in court how the politician had bragged in recorded conversations with a DEA informant that he had 15-20 years of criminal activity under his belt.

“Oh, no no no, not my first rodeo at all, NOT, MY FIRST RODEO, AT ALL,” Fahie can be heard laughing in the recording, according to a government filing prior to Wednesday’s bond hearing.

Posing as a member of Mexico’s Sinaloa cartel, a DEA informant met on several occasions with Fahie, Maynard and Maynard’s son to discuss a deal that would send thousands of kilograms of cocaine from Colombia through the British Virgin Islands and on to Puerto Rico, Miami and New York, according to the complaint.

In exchange for bribes and 10% — or about \$7.8 million — for each 3,000-kilogram (6,600-pound) load of cocaine sold in Miami, Fahie and his co-defendants allegedly agreed to provide safe passage for the drug shipments and create a network of shell companies to launder the proceeds.

“So, this is the full seven?” Fahie allegedly asked the DEA informant who accompanied him to the Miami airport where he was arrested.

According to the criminal complaint, Fahie told the DEA informant that he was close to a known drug smuggler on the Caribbean island as well as an unidentified political associate from Senegal whom he agreed to approach about smuggling firearms. In the course of those conversations, he asked the DEA informant to pay upward of \$100,000 to settle a debt with the Senegalese man, the complaint says.

“He’s shown in this case that he’s corrupt to the core and believes he’s above the law,” Shadley said. “He was a public servant sworn to uphold those laws but he broke them over and over again.”

Fahie’s attorney, Theresa Van Vliet, disputed that characterization and said her client would plead not guilty when he’s arraigned later this month.

She asserted that because the British Virgin Islands are a British overseas territory, U.S. courts have no jurisdiction over Fahie.

To back up the assertion, she entered as evidence what she called a “diplomatic note,” signed by an unidentified official from the premier’s office in Road Town requesting his “immediate and unconditional

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release." The request was sent to the Justice Department's office of international affairs.

Fahie's former allies appear to have disavowed the letter, however.

In a brief announcement Wednesday, acting Premier Natalio Wheatley said the letter was sent erroneously by a "rogue" official, and did not reflect the government's position.

Van Vliet also presented copies of correspondence showing that the premier's office had asked Miami International Airport to provide protocol assistance to Fahie and his wife when they traveled to the U.S. on April 24 for "official business."

Prior to arriving in Miami, Fahie was scheduled to travel to Barbados to attend a banking conference alongside Rep. Maxine Waters, chairwoman of the U.S. House Financial Services Committee, and other unidentified members of Congress, according to the correspondence.

While Judge Otazo-Reyes sidestepped the immunity issue, she seemed convinced by Van Vliet's argument that Fahie's continued detention would make it impossible for him to carry out his official duties at a critical juncture for the islands, as officials weigh suspending the territory's constitution in an attempt to clean up rampant corruption.

"These are the most serious of duties that he could and should be performing," said Van Vliet, the former head of the Justice Department's narcotics division in Washington.

Even before his arrest, Fahie was under pressure from a special United Kingdom-led commission of inquiry investigating corruption on the string of islands east of Puerto Rico home to about 35,000 people.

Gov. John Rankin, who is Queen Elizabeth II's representative to the islands and its ultimate executive authority, said the arrests prompted him to release — earlier than originally intended — the commission's report, which concluded that officials, including allies of the premier, fraudulently spent millions of dollars on projects of no public benefit.

In a bid to clean up the government, the commission recommended suspending the islands' constitution for two years and returning the territory to home rule by officials in London.

In an address over the weekend, Wheatley said he wants to avoid direct rule by Britain but supports working swiftly with Rankin and opposition lawmakers in the islands to address concerns about good governance.

"Direct rule is not an acceptable option to us," Wheatley said. He said it "would undermine all the progress that our people have made over generations" since 1950, when a local legislative body was launched.

If convicted, Fahie faces a minimum of nearly 20 years in prison.

AP sources: Donald Trump Jr. speaks with Jan. 6 committee

By ERIC TUCKER and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The oldest son of former President Donald Trump has met with the congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, according to two people familiar with the matter.

The interview Tuesday with Donald Trump Jr. comes as the bipartisan House committee moves closer to the former president's inner circle of family members and political advisers.

The younger Trump is of likely interest to the committee because of his proximity to his father on the day of the riot. Donald Trump Jr. was seen backstage at the rally on the White House Ellipse that took place shortly before supporters of the then-president marched to the Capitol and breached the building.

In several social media videos posted at the time of the Jan. 6 attack, Trump Jr. was seen with Kimberly Guilfoyle — then his girlfriend, now his fiancée — and other members of his family as his father prepared to make a speech that investigators believed rallied supporters to act violently that day.

The House committee has also released text messages from Jan. 6 in which Trump Jr. pleaded with the White House to get his father to forcefully condemn the riot.

"We need an Oval address. He has to lead now. It has gone too far and gotten out of hand," Trump Jr. wrote to then-White House chief of staff Mark Meadows.

Trump Jr. is one of nearly 1,000 witnesses the committee has interviewed as it works to compile a record of the worst attack on the Capitol in more than two centuries. He is the second of Trump's children

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known to speak to the committee; sister Ivanka Trump sat down with lawmakers for eight hours in early April. Her husband, Jared Kushner, has also been interviewed by the committee.

Other allies of the former president have defied subpoenas from the committee and been referred to the Justice Department for potential prosecution on contempt of Congress charges. One of them, Stephen Bannon, was indicted last year after he refused to cooperate. That case is pending.

The committee of seven Democrats and two Republicans is looking to wrap up its nearly 11-month investigation and shift into the public hearing phase. Hearings are set to begin June 9 and go on for four weeks. Lawmakers expect to bring out witnesses and present evidence in an effort to educate the public on the full scope of the attack and Donald Trump's role in it.

Trump Jr. is no stranger to congressional investigations, having testified at least three times in House and Senate investigations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

The two people who confirmed Trump Jr.'s interview with the Jan. 6 committee were granted anonymity to discuss the private session, which was not announced by the committee.

Fed raises key rate by a half-point in bid to tame inflation

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve intensified its fight against the worst inflation in 40 years by raising its benchmark interest rate by a half-percentage point Wednesday — its most aggressive move since 2000 — and signaling further large rate hikes to come.

The increase in the Fed's key short-term rate raised it to a range of 0.75% to 1%, the highest point since the pandemic struck two years ago.

The Fed also announced that it will start reducing its huge \$9 trillion balance sheet, made up mainly of Treasury and mortgage bonds. Reducing those holdings will have the effect of further raising borrowing costs throughout the economy.

Speaking at a news conference after the Fed's latest meeting, Chair Jerome Powell took the unusual step of saying the central bank's officials understood the financial pain that high inflation is causing ordinary Americans. But Powell stressed that the Fed is sharply raising rates for that very reason — to rein in high inflation, sustain the economy's health and ease the stress that millions of households are facing.

"Inflation is much too high," he said, "and we understand the hardship it is causing."

With prices for food, energy and consumer goods accelerating, the Fed's goal is to cool spending — and economic growth — by making it more expensive for individuals and businesses to borrow. The central bank hopes that higher costs for mortgages, credit cards and auto loans will slow spending enough to tame inflation yet not so much as to cause a recession.

It will be a delicate balancing act. The Fed has endured widespread criticism that it was too slow to start tightening credit, and many economists are skeptical that it can avoid causing a recession.

At his news conference, Powell said he was confident that the economy is resilient enough to withstand higher borrowing rates. Job openings are at a record high. There are two available jobs, on average, for each unemployed person. Wages are rising at a historically rapid pace, and businesses are continuing to invest in equipment and software.

"I see a strong economy," he said. "Nothing about it says it's close to or vulnerable to a recession."

Powell also made clear that further large rate hikes are coming. He said that additional half-point increases in the Fed's key rate "should be on the table in the next couple of meetings" in June and July.

But he also sought to downplay any speculation that the Fed might be considering a rate hike as high as three-quarters of a percentage point.

"A (three-quarters of a point) hike is not something that the committee is actively considering," he said — a remark that caused stock indexes to jump. Before he spoke, the Dow Jones Industrial Average was up only modestly. By the close of trading, the Dow had soared 930 points, or 2.8% — its best single-day gain since May 2020.

In their statement, the central bank's policymakers noted that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is worsening

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inflation pressures by raising oil and food prices. It added that "COVID-related lockdowns in China are likely to exacerbate supply chain disruptions," which could further boost prices.

Inflation, according to the Fed's preferred gauge, reached 6.6% last month, the highest in four decades. It has been accelerated by a combination of robust consumer spending, chronic supply bottlenecks and sharply higher gas and food prices.

Starting June 1, the Fed said it would allow up to \$48 billion in bonds to mature without replacing them for three months, then shift to \$95 billion by September. At September's pace, its balance sheet would shrink by about \$1 trillion a year. The balance sheet more than doubled after the pandemic recession hit as the Fed bought trillions in bonds to try to hold down long-term borrowing rates.

At the news conference, Powell said the Fed wants to "expeditiously" raise its key rate to a level that neither stimulates nor restrains economic growth, which the Fed has said is about 2.4%. The central bank's policymakers have suggested that they will reach that point by year's end.

Once the rate reaches that level, Powell said that "if we do believe that it's appropriate" to raise their short-term rate further, to a level that would restrict growth, "we won't hesitate."

Economists warn that some of the factors fueling inflation — notably, shortages of supplies and workers — are outside the Fed's ability to solve.

"The Fed can't fix supply-side challenges with higher interest rates," said Jim Baird, chief investment officer at Plante Moran Financial Advisors. "Fed tightening doesn't re-open Chinese factories, increase grain shipments from Ukraine, re-position container ships to where they are needed or hire truckers to move goods."

Powell said, however, that he thinks the Fed can cool booming demand and thereby help slow inflation.

The Fed's credit tightening is already having some effect on the economy. Sales of existing homes sank 2.7% from February to March, reflecting a surge in mortgage rates related, in part, to the Fed's planned rate hikes. The average rate on a 30-year mortgage has jumped 2 percentage points just since the start of the year, to 5.1%.

Powell has pointed to the widespread availability of jobs as evidence that the labor market is tight "to an unhealthy level" and that fuels inflation. The Fed chair is betting that higher rates can reduce those openings, which would presumably slow wage increases and ease inflationary pressures, without triggering mass layoffs.

For now, with hiring robust — the economy has added at least 400,000 jobs for 11 straight months — and employers grappling with labor shortages, wages are rising at a roughly 5% annual pace. Those pay raises are driving steady consumer spending despite spiking prices. In March, consumers increased their spending 0.2% even after adjusting for inflation.

Financial markets are pricing in a Fed rate as high as 3.6% by mid-2023, which would be the highest in 15 years. Shrinking the Fed's balance sheet will add another layer of uncertainty surrounding how much the Fed's actions may weaken the economy.

Complicating the Fed's task is a slowdown in global growth. COVID-19 lockdowns in China are threatening to cause a recession in the world's second-largest economy. And the European Union is facing higher energy prices and supply chain disruptions after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

What's more, other central banks around the world are also raising rates, a trend that could further imperil global growth. On Thursday, the Bank of England is expected to raise its key rate for the fourth straight time. The Reserve Bank of Australia increased its rate Tuesday for the first time in 11 years.

And the European Central Bank, which is grappling with slower growth than in the United States or the United Kingdom, may raise rates in July, economists expect.

Abortion battles in states fire up after Supreme Court leak

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST, HOLLY RAMER and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

The Supreme Court's apparent intention to abolish a nationwide right to abortion, spelled out in a draft opinion leaked this week, will expand the battlefield of the nation's most highly charged culture war, taking it to states where abortion access has long been assured.

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Democrats in blue states are bracing for a wave of legal attacks and other maneuvers seeking to undermine access, and some are even taking steps to enshrine the right to abortion in their constitutions, making it much more difficult to impose a ban in the future.

Republican states are expected to ban or restrict abortion, but tactics also could include an aggressive effort to go beyond their borders to sue abortion providers and find other ways to punish those who assist a woman in securing an abortion.

The potential to roll back established abortion rights already has emerged in states with divided political control, including Pennsylvania and Virginia. California and Colorado are pushing to protect abortion access in their constitutions, a stronger step than passing a law. Connecticut and Washington state have already taken steps to shield providers from possible lawsuits as they anticipate women seeking abortions would cross state lines.

"We will not allow the tentacles of Texas to get into Washington state," said Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee, who vowed to make Washington a sanctuary for those seeking abortion.

Oregon lawmakers included \$15 million in their state budget to help pay for people to travel to the state to get abortions and California has a similar bill.

The rhetoric on both sides points to a growing fight over access, with anti-abortion advocates hoping to shrink the number of states where the procedure remains legal if Roe is overturned. Roughly half of U.S. states are expected to move quickly to ban or greatly restrict abortion if that happens.

A new law in Idaho, currently blocked by the state Supreme Court, would allow family members of all involved to sue abortion providers, an example of the tactics to come.

"The next chapter of the conflict is really going to be about essentially what happens with interstate conflicts," said Mary Ziegler, a legal historian at Florida State University's law school.

Many states with one-party control of government already have chosen their side. The handful of states with divided politics are up for grabs.

In Pennsylvania, abortion is legal under state law for the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. The law's survival is on the line in this year's race for governor.

Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat who has vetoed recent legislation restricting abortion, is not running because of term limits. The race to replace him is between a similarly minded Democrat, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro, and a primary field of nine Republicans who all say they would sign restrictions passed by the Legislature, which is likely to remain under GOP control.

One Republican candidate, state Sen. Doug Mastriano, supports a ban at six weeks of pregnancy without exceptions for rape, incest or saving the life of the mother.

"There is one way and one way only for us to ensure that women have the legal right to continue to make decisions over their own bodies in Pennsylvania and that is winning this governor's race," Shapiro said during a conference call with reporters this week.

In North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper and other state Democrats have framed the November election as one in which they must prevent the GOP from winning back veto-proof majorities in the Legislature. With every seat up for election in November, Republicans need to gain five seats to restore that control.

"Republicans in our state are on the verge of gaining veto-proof supermajorities in Raleigh. If they succeed, you can add North Carolina to the list of states that will ban abortions," Cooper, who has vetoed efforts to limit abortion since 2019, said in a recent fundraising letter.

Campaigns for two state Supreme Court seats are expected to be even more intense because the court could hear challenges to any new abortion restrictions. Democrats currently hold four of the seven seats, including two on the ballot this year.

Republican Party Chairman Michael Whatley said in a release that the balance of the General Assembly and the Supreme Court "has never been more important" to ensure that "pro-life majorities" are in charge in a post-Roe future.

The potential to undermine abortion access also is surfacing in Virginia, where Democrats lost their total hold on state government last November when Republicans flipped the House of Delegates and won the governor's office. Democrats control the state Senate by only one vote and have one caucus member who

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opposes abortion and has indicated an openness to new restrictions.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin describes himself as "pro-life," though he has said he supports exceptions in cases of rape, incest or to save a woman's life. He said this week that it was premature to speculate on what the Supreme Court's final decision would be or how he and lawmakers might proceed.

In Minnesota, where control of the legislative chambers is divided between the parties, two anti-abortion amendments to a health and human services bill narrowly failed on procedural votes in the Democrat-controlled House. Democratic Gov. Tim Walz vowed in an email to supporters this week that "no abortion ban will ever become law" as long as he's governor; the Republican candidates vying to challenge his re-election bid all support a ban.

Michigan and Wisconsin, states with Democratic governors and legislatures controlled by Republicans, have pre-Roe abortion bans in state law. Michigan's governor already has filed a legal challenge to the law, while Wisconsin's attorney general, Democrat Josh Kaul, said he expects litigation as well.

"(The) ban wasn't just dormant," he said. "It was unconstitutional for 50 years."

Some deeply Democratic states are moving quickly to try to shore up abortion rights. California Gov. Gavin Newsom and top Democratic leaders in the Legislature committed to asking voters to "enshrine the right to choose" in the state constitution, steps also in the works in Vermont and Colorado.

California already has some of the most expansive abortion protections in the country. But legislative leaders say the amendment would make it much harder to repeal those protections should the political winds change and future lawmakers seek to impose restrictions.

Democrats also believe it would shield the state from any adverse state court decisions or federal abortion bans if Republicans were to win control of Congress.

"The unimaginable can happen," said state Sen. Nancy Skinner, a Democrat from Berkeley. "Unless we are explicit about what we are protecting ... some day some court could interpret privacy as not including my right to an abortion. And that's what we're trying to protect against."

Colorado Democrats and advocates say they will seek a ballot measure in 2024 to enshrine abortion access in the constitution and repeal a 1980s constitutional amendment that bans public funding for abortion.

Democratic House Majority Leader Daneya Espar said an amendment is needed "because state legislatures can change, and depending on who has the majority, they can write into law their ideologies. This is fundamental for Colorado women, no matter who's in charge."

Abortion draft puts unusual public pressure on Supreme Court

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The traditionally insular Supreme Court is about to face the full force of public pressure and abortion politics as justices make a final decision on whether to throw out the landmark Roe v. Wade ruling.

The justices are entering a politically explosive new era, drafting what may well be the most consequential opinion on women's health and privacy in 50 years, while a watchful public primed by the nation's culture wars looks over their shoulders and tries furiously to influence the outcome.

Justice Samuel Alito appeared to be bracing for the onslaught, stiffening the spines of his conservative court colleagues in his leaked draft opinion for the court's majority that would overturn the 1973 ruling and its constitutional right to abortion.

"We cannot allow our decisions to be affected by any extraneous influences such as concern about the public's reaction to our work," Alito wrote in the February draft document that was circulated to fellow justices as they prepare a final decision, expected by June.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi often says, quoting Abraham Lincoln, public sentiment is everything. But justices, unlike lawmakers, don't have to run for reelection.

At one point this week, more than 1,000 people flooded to the steps of the Supreme Court. In Los Angeles, police put the city on tactical alert after a confrontation between abortion rights supporters and police downtown. Fresh polling showed most Americans support preserving some access to abortion services.

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"Let us fight with everything we've got," Vice President Kamala Harris said in a speech at the EMILY's List political action committee's national conference.

While President Joe Biden and fellow proponents of abortion access are fired up to defend *Roe v. Wade*, the pushing is far from one-sided. Republicans who have labored toward this moment for decades with efforts to fill the court with conservative justices — gaining three during the four years of the Trump administration — are determined to finally accomplish their goal.

Urging the justices to stick to their process, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell promised that senators would "have their backs, no matter what."

In a televised speech from the Capitol just across the street from the court, McConnell, who is a chief architect of a campaign to confirm conservative judges, encouraged the justices to "tune out the bad faith noise and feel completely free to do their jobs."

The leaked draft gave Americans a rare, up-close sneak preview of the typically private, hidden deliberations of the high court, and the disclosure is propelling a public outpouring of opinion and protest reflective of the nation's long debate over abortion policy — all in the run-up to the fall's contested congressional elections.

It's unclear if the justices will be swayed by the intense public scrutiny. But the disclosure has launched the most dramatic pulling back of the curtain on the high court's work in modern memory. Not since the 1970s have the Supreme Court's private deliberations become so public — in fact, the final *Roe v. Wade* decision leaked hours before it was announced.

Political pressure campaigns are being launched and millions of dollars unleashed on all sides, to save or end abortion access in the U.S., all while the justices privately draft their final opinion.

While the justices themselves have lifetime appointments and are shielded from the need for campaign contributions that can influence views, elected officials and candidates running for the House, Senate and offices throughout the states will be confronted with untold efforts to force them to take sides.

"Every single American is going to see where every single senator stands on protecting a woman's right to choose," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer promised. "Americans will be watching."

To be sure, for Democrats and others trying to preserve abortion access, public opinion is about the only tool on their side, with Congress very unlikely to salvage the *Roe v. Wade* ruling on its own.

The House, led by Democrats, has already approved legislation that would protect abortion access by putting the *Roe* ruling into law. But the narrowly split Democratic Senate will not have the votes to follow suit without support from Republicans.

Just two Republican senators, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine, publicly support abortion access. And while they have introduced their own bill to keep abortion legal, it is not at all clear they would buck their own party leadership to help pass a Democratic measure.

Other Republicans, following McConnell's lead, have been quick to focus on the leaking of the high court's private draft, rather than the prospect that millions of American women could lose access to abortion services if *Roe v. Wade* is struck down.

Speculation is swirling over the rare leak and whether it was meant to build pressure for the outcome that Alito was proposing or against it.

Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, a former law clerk to Alito, described the security around the court's work, complete with "burn bags" to collect and double-shred the day's discarded documents. He decried the breach even as he welcomed the direction the court was taking under the draft opinion.

"While I'm convinced this leak may have been an attempt to intimidate the justices in the majority, perhaps an effort to try to get them to change their positions, I'm also confident this attempt will not succeed and it must not succeed," Lee said on the Senate floor.

Chief Justice John Roberts has ordered an investigation into the leak, but it is unclear how long that will take and whether it would be resolved before the court issues its rulings at the end of June or early July.

Republican Sen. Ron Johnson, who has supported bills to limit abortion and is up for reelection in Wisconsin, said in a statement that neither personal beliefs nor "pressure from the radical left to intimidate sitting Supreme Court justices, should be the basis on which this profound moral issue should be decided

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for all of society.”

Griner’s absence, Hammon’s return headline WNBA’s new season

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The WNBA will begin its 26th season this weekend with several intriguing storylines, including the potential retirement of Sue Bird and Sylvia Fowles, the return of Becky Hammon as a coach and the absence of Brittney Griner.

There is no bigger headline engulfing the league than Griner.

The Mercury’s All-Star center remains in Russia after being detained following her arrival at a Moscow airport on Feb. 17. Russian authorities said a search of her luggage revealed vape cartridges that allegedly contained oil derived from cannabis, which could carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. Griner’s status has been changed to “wrongfully detained” and she has a hearing scheduled for May 19.

But Griner’s presence will be felt even in her absence.

The league plans to honor Griner and keep her ongoing situation front and center with a floor decal that will feature her initials along with her number 42. It will appear on the home court of all 12 teams starting with Friday’s season openers. The regular season ends Aug. 14.

Teams will play a record 36 games this year.

“The 36-game schedule will provide fans greater opportunities to see the best players in the world compete at the highest level,” WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert said when the schedule was announced in December.

Before Griner’s arrest the Mercury made many moves in the offseason to put the team in contention to win another championship after losing to Chicago last season in the Finals. Phoenix added Tina Charles and Diamond DeShields to the roster to compliment Diana Taurasi and Skylar Diggins-Smith.

DeShields joins the Mercury from the Sky, who will try and become the first team to repeat as champions since the Los Angeles Sparks did it in 2001-02. Chicago added Emma Meesseman — the 2019 WNBA Finals MVP — to its roster.

Then there is the looming retirement of All-Stars Bird and Fowles.

Bird, the league’s all-time assist leader, has said all signs are pointing toward this year being her last with the Seattle Storm, but she does not want the upcoming season to be a farewell tour.

Fowles has stated she will retire after this season. The WNBA’s all-time leading rebounder said it was a tough decision whether to come back for a 15th season or not.

With Fowles and Bird having a foot out the door, the league welcomes back Hammon this season.

Hammon took over as coach of the Las Vegas Aces, replacing Bill Laimbeer, after serving as an NBA assistant coach for the San Antonio Spurs since 2014. She’s one of six former players who are now head coaches in the league.

A few other storylines to follow this season:

HEALTHY MYSTICS

No team went through more injury problems the last two seasons than the Washington Mystics. Coach Mike Thibault hopes his team has finally put all that bad luck in the rearview mirror and is looking forward to having Elena Delle Donne and Alysha Clark in the lineup.

Delle Donne has only played in three games the last two seasons because of COVID-19 concerns and back issues. The former league MVP last was on the court fulltime in 2019 when the Mystics won their first championship. Clark missed last season, which would have been her first in Washington, due to a Lisfranc injury in her right foot.

REBUILDING FEVER

Indiana used four first-round picks in the draft to try and rebuild its roster, taking NaLyssa Smith (2nd), Emily Engster (4th), Lexie Hull (6th) and Queen Egbo (10th). The Fever also drafted Destanni Henderson (20th). Draft choices haven’t worked out so well for Indiana the last few years as the Fever selected Lauren Cox third in 2020 and she was cut last season. Last year Indiana took Kysre Gondrezick fourth. She is also

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no longer with the franchise.

RETURN OF THE COMMISSIONER'S CUP

The league is bringing back the Commissioner's Cup for the second year. The in-season tournament was won by Seattle last year. The Storm beat the Connecticut Sun in the championship game, which was played in Phoenix. There are 10 designated "Cup games" per team – the first home game and first road game each team plays against its five conference rivals.

FRESH STARTS

Meesseman, Charles and DeShields aren't the only players in new places this season. Liz Cambage now calls Los Angeles home after leaving Las Vegas. The 6-foot-8 Australian center will try and get the Sparks back into being championship contenders. Courtney Williams returned to Connecticut after spending two seasons with the Atlanta Dream. The Dream picked up former WNBA All-Star MVP Erica Wheeler.

Biden showcases deficit progress in bid to counter critics

By JOSH BOAK and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday highlighted new figures showing the government's red ink will grow less than expected this year and the national debt will shrink this quarter as he tried to counter criticism of his economic leadership amid growing dismay over inflation going into midterm elections that will decide control of Congress.

Biden, embracing deficit reduction as a way to fight inflation, stressed that the dip in the national debt would be the first in six years, an achievement that eluded former President Donald Trump despite his promises to improve the federal balance sheet.

"The bottom line is the deficit went up every year under my predecessor before the pandemic and during the pandemic. It has gone down both years since I've been here," Biden said. "Why is it important? Because bringing down the deficit is one way to ease inflationary pressures."

The president is placing a renewed emphasis on reducing the deficit — which is the gap between what the nation spends and what it takes in — in order to blunt Republican criticism that the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package has left the U.S. economy worse off. It's an attempt to burnish his credentials as a responsible steward of the economy while trying to fend off criticism about inflation at a 40-year high. The reopening of the economy coming out of the coronavirus pandemic and the commodity squeeze resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war has made high prices a key political risk for Democrats.

But it is unclear if greater fiscal responsibility can deliver politically for Biden as Democrats try to defend their control of the House and Senate. His two most recent Democratic predecessors, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, also cut budget deficits, only to leave office and see their Republican successors use the savings on tax cuts.

When reporters tried to question Biden about other topics after his remarks, the president prodded, "You don't want to ask about deficits?"

Biden is making a nuanced argument about how the financial outlook has improved: Strong job gains over the past 16 months have increased total incomes and led to additional tax revenues. That means that this fiscal year's budget deficit will decline \$1.5 trillion, much better than the \$1.3 trillion that was initially forecast. Less government borrowing will, in turn, limit the financial sources of inflation.

But the expected \$26 billion drop this quarter in the national debt — which is money the U.S. owes due to accumulated deficits over time — will be short-lived, as the debt already totals \$23.9 trillion and will continue to rise in the second half of this year. And while Biden expects his plans will improve the outlook for budget deficits over the next decade, the national debt would continue to climb. The Biden administration believes that the cost of servicing the debt is low enough to sustain the borrowing, while critics say structural changes are needed to improve the long-term outlook.

"There needs to be a real fiscal restructuring because we continue to see these trillion-dollar deficits as far as the eye can see," said Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a former director of the Congressional Budget Office who now leads the center-right American Action Forum.

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Holtz-Eakin said the Biden administration is taking credit for lower deficits over the past two years that largely occurred due to the end of coronavirus-related spending, rather than fixing the finances of Medicare and Social Security that will determine the long-term budget outlook.

"That doesn't seem to be the right aspiration for a great country," Holtz-Eakin said. "What they're doing is essentially deferring the need to do anything real and genuinely fix the programs that are important to people."

Deficit reduction also matches a priority of Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, the key Democratic vote in the evenly split Senate who blocked the passage of Biden's domestic and environmental agenda in December. The reduction also occurs amid rising interest rates on U.S. Treasury notes, a consequence of inflation running at 8.5% and the Federal Reserve's efforts to reduce price pressures.

Within an hour of Biden's remarks, Senate Republicans gathered to challenge Biden's economic policies. Their core critique is that overspending in response to COVID-19 was paired with restrictions on domestic oil and natural gas production, leading to higher gasoline prices than under Trump.

"The biggest drag on the U.S. economy right now involves the rising energy costs," said Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska. "This is purely a self-inflicted wound by the Biden administration."

One of the challenges for Biden is that voters have largely shrugged off deficit increases and seldom rewarded deficit cuts. Voters might discuss the idea of reducing deficits with pollsters, yet health care, incomes and inflation are often top of mind when casting their ballots.

Norman Ornstein, an emeritus scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, noted that deficits are often "abstract" for voters. The recent low interest rates have also muted any potential economic drags from higher deficits, which have risen following the COVID-19 pandemic and, separately, the 2008 financial crisis, to help the economy recover.

"They're more likely to respond to things that are in their wheelhouse or that they believe will have a more direct effect on their lives," Ornstein said. Deficits are "a step removed for most voters, and we've been through periods where we've had the big deficits and debt and it's not like it devastated directly people's lives."

Sinn Fein eyes historic win in Northern Ireland election

By JILL LAWLESS and PETER MORRISON Associated Press

BELFAST, Northern Ireland (AP) — Ever since Northern Ireland was founded as a Protestant-majority state a century ago, its governments have been led by unionist politicians who defined themselves as British.

But if opinion polls are right, an election Thursday will see Sinn Fein, an Irish nationalist party that seeks union with Ireland, become the largest group in the 90-seat Northern Ireland Assembly. That would give Sinn Fein the post of first minister in the Belfast government for the first time.

It would be a milestone for a party long linked to the Irish Republican Army, a paramilitary group that used bombs and bullets to try to take Northern Ireland out of U.K. rule during decades of violence — in which the British Army and Royal Ulster Constabulary, as well as Protestant Loyalist paramilitaries, were also strongly involved.

It would also bring Sinn Fein's ultimate goal of a united Ireland a step closer.

But it's not what the party — or voters — want to talk about in a campaign that has been dominated by more immediate worries: long waiting lists for medical care and the soaring cost of food and fuel.

"I now ration my heat to one hour a day," said Sinead Quinn, who set up the group Derry Against Food Poverty to press politicians to act on the cost-of-living crisis.

"My entire circle of friends is affected by this. I don't think you can throw a stone in Northern Ireland and miss a community that being affected by it."

The economic crunch — driven by the war in Ukraine, COVID-19 pandemic disruption and Britain's exit from the European Union — is also dominating election debate elsewhere in the U.K. Votes Thursday to elect local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales are a test for beleaguered British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose popularity has been battered by scandals over lockdown rule-breaking.

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In Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein has downplayed talk of a united Ireland in its campaign to focus on bread-and-butter issues.

"The things that the public want us to respond to is trying to put money in their pockets to help them deal with the cost-of-living crisis," Michelle O'Neill, the party's leader in Northern Ireland, said Tuesday during a televised election debate. She said she was not "fixated on a date" for a unification referendum.

Even so, Katy Hayward, professor of political sociology at Queen's University Belfast, said Sinn Fein taking the top spot would be a "very significant" moment.

"And we know that nationalists will recognize it as being so, even if they don't necessarily want an imminent border poll," she said. "And of course unionists will also see it as being a significant, critical moment."

"In terms of what the election outcome will mean, it's very much about how the other parties respond to this scenario."

Many voters simply hope the election will produce a functioning government, but that appears unlikely in the short term.

Under Northern Ireland's power-sharing system, created by the 1998 peace agreement that ended decades of Catholic-Protestant conflict, the jobs of first minister and deputy first minister are split between the biggest unionist party and the largest nationalist one.

Both posts must be filled for a government to function. The Democratic Unionist Party, which has been the largest in the Northern Ireland Assembly for two decades, has suggested it might not serve under a Sinn Fein first minister.

The DUP also says it will refuse to join a new government unless there are major changes to post-Brexit border arrangements, known as the Northern Ireland Protocol, that are opposed by many unionists.

"The political institutions must be sustainable." DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said during Tuesday's debate. "And that means we have got to deal with the big issues that are in front of us, not least the harm that the Northern Ireland Protocol is doing to undermine political stability in Northern Ireland."

The post-Brexit rules have imposed customs and border checks on some goods entering Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K. The arrangement was designed to maintain an open border between Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland, a key pillar of the peace process.

But unionists say the new checks have created a barrier between Northern Ireland and the rest of the U.K. that undermines their British identity.

The instability has led to rising tensions and sporadic violence, including a week of rioting in Protestant Loyalist areas a year ago. Last month, police were pelted with petrol bombs after a dissident Irish Republican parade in Derry, also known as Londonderry.

The British government is pressing the EU to agree to major changes — scrapping most checks — and is threatening to unilaterally suspend the rules if the bloc refuses.

Negotiations have reached an impasse, with the bloc accusing Johnson of refusing to implement rules he agreed to in a legally binding treaty.

Meanwhile, politics in Northern Ireland is changing. More support is going to parties that identify as neither nationalist nor unionist, with young people increasingly rejecting the traditional labels. Polls suggest the centrist Alliance Party is vying for second place with the DUP, another potentially seismic development.

Full results of the election, which uses a system of proportional representation, are not expected until the weekend at the earliest.

The new legislators will meet next week to try to form an executive. If none can be formed within six months, the administration will collapse, triggering a new election and more uncertainty.

Quinn, the anti-poverty activist, said that would be a "dereliction of duty."

"Both communities — all communities and none — are struggling here," she said.

"I'm really hoping that the politicians are listening."

With abortion in jeopardy, minority women have most to lose

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS and LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press

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JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — If you are Black or Hispanic in a conservative state that already limits access to abortions, you are far more likely than a white woman to have one.

And if the U.S. Supreme Court allows states to further restrict or even ban abortions, minority women who already face limited access to health care will bear the brunt of it, according to statistics analyzed by The Associated Press.

The potential impact on minority women became all the more clear on Monday with the leak of a draft Supreme Court opinion suggesting the court's conservative majority is poised to overturn the landmark 1973 decision legalizing abortion. The draft decision is not yet final but it sent shockwaves through the country. Overturning the Roe v. Wade decision would give states authority to decide abortion's legality. Roughly half, largely in the South and Midwest, are likely to quickly ban abortion.

EDITOR'S NOTE — This is an updated version of a story released earlier this year.

When it comes to the effect on minority women, the numbers are unambiguous. In Mississippi, people of color comprise 44% of the population but 81% of women receiving abortions, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, which tracks health statistics.

In Texas, they're 59% of the population and 74% of those receiving abortions. The numbers in Alabama are 35% and 69%. In Louisiana, people of color represent 42% of the population, according to the state Health Department, and about 72% of those receiving abortions.

"Abortion restrictions are racist," said Cathy Torres, an organizing manager with Frontera Fund, a Texas organization that helps women pay for abortions. "They directly impact people of color, Black, brown, Indigenous people ... people who are trying to make ends meet."

Why the great disparities? Laurie Bertram Roberts, executive director of the Alabama-based Yellowhammer Fund, which provides financial support for women seeking abortion, said women of color in states with restrictive abortion laws often have limited access to health care and a lack of choices for effective birth control. Schools often have ineffective or inadequate sex education.

If abortions are outlawed, those same women — often poor — will likely have the hardest time traveling to distant parts of the country to terminate pregnancies or raising children they might struggle to afford, said Roberts, who is Black and once volunteered at Mississippi's only abortion clinic.

"We're talking about folks who are already marginalized," Roberts said.

Amanda Furdge, who is Black, was one of those women. She was a single, unemployed college student already raising one baby in 2014 when she found out she was pregnant with another. She said she didn't know how she could afford another child.

She'd had two abortions in Chicago. Getting access to an abortion provider there was no problem, Furdge said. But now she was in Mississippi, having moved home to escape an abusive relationship. Misled by advertising, she first went to a crisis pregnancy center that tried to talk her out of an abortion. By the time she found the abortion clinic, she was too far along to have the procedure.

She's not surprised by the latest news on the Supreme Court's likely decision. Most people who aren't affected don't consider the stakes.

"People are going to have to vote," said Furdge, 34, who is happily raising her now 7-year-old son but continues to advocate for women having the right to choose. "People are going to have to put the people in place to make the decisions that align with their values. When they don't, things like this happen."

Torres said historically, anti-abortion laws have been crafted in ways that hurt low-income women. She pointed to the Hyde Amendment, a 1980 law that prevents the use of federal funds to pay for abortions except in rare cases.

She also cited the 2021 Texas law that bans abortion after around six weeks of pregnancy. Where she lives, near the U.S.-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley, women are forced to travel to obtain abortions and must pass in-state border patrol checkpoints where they have to disclose their citizenship status, she said.

Regardless of what legislators say, Torres insisted, the intent is to target women of color, to control their

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bodies: "They know who these restrictions are going to affect. They know that, but they don't care."

But Andy Gipson, a former member of the Mississippi Legislature who is now the state's agriculture and commerce commissioner, said race had nothing to do with passage of Mississippi's law against abortion after the 15th week. That law is the one now before the Supreme Court in a direct challenge to Roe v. Wade.

Gipson, a Baptist minister who is white, said he believes all people are created in the image of God and have an "innate value" that starts at conception. Mississippi legislators were trying to protect women and babies by putting limits on abortion, he said.

"I absolutely disagree with the concept that it's racist or about anything other than saving babies' lives," said Gipson, a Republican. "It's about saving lives of the unborn and the lives and health of the mother, regardless of what color they are."

To those who say that forcing women to have babies will subject them to hardships, Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch, a white Republican, said it is "easier for working mothers to balance professional success and family life" than it was 49 years ago when Roe was decided.

Fitch, who is divorced, often points to her own experience of working outside the home while raising three children. But Fitch grew up in an affluent family and has worked in the legal profession — both factors that can give working women the means and the flexibility to get help raising children.

That's not the case for many minority women in Mississippi or elsewhere. Advocates say in many places where abortion services are being curtailed, there's little support for women who carry a baby to term.

Mississippi is one of the poorest states, and people in low-wage jobs often don't receive health insurance. Women can enroll in Medicaid during pregnancy, but that coverage disappears soon after they give birth.

Mississippi has the highest infant mortality rate in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Black infants were about twice as likely as white infants to die during the first year of life in Mississippi, according to the March of Dimes.

Across the country, U.S. Census Bureau information analyzed by The Associated Press shows fewer Black and Hispanic women have health insurance, especially in states with tight abortion restrictions. For example, in Texas, Mississippi and Georgia, at least 16% of Black women and 36% of Latinas were uninsured in 2019, some of the highest such rates in the country.

Problems are compounded in states without effective education programs about reproduction. Mississippi law says sex education in public schools must emphasize abstinence to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Discussion of abortion is forbidden, and instructors may not demonstrate how to use condoms or other contraception.

The Mississippi director for Planned Parenthood Southeast, Tyler Harden, is a 26-year-old Black woman who had an abortion about five years ago, an experience that drove her to a career supporting pregnant women and preserving abortion rights.

She said when she was attending public school in rural Mississippi, she didn't learn about birth control. Instead, a teacher stuck clear tape on students' arms. The girls were told to put it on another classmate's arm, and another, and watch how it lost the ability to form a bond.

"They'd tell you, 'If you have sex, this is who you are now: You're just like this piece of tape — all used up and washed up and nobody would want it,'" Harden said.

When she became pregnant at 21, she knew she wanted an abortion. Her mother was battling cancer and Harden was in her last semester of college without a job or a place to live after graduation.

She said she was made to feel fear and shame, just as she had during sex ed classes. When she went to the clinic, she said protesters told her she was "killing the most precious gift" from God and that she was "killing a Black baby, playing into what white supremacists want."

Harden's experience is not uncommon. The anti-abortion movement has often portrayed the abortion fight in racial terms.

Outside the only abortion clinic operating in Mississippi, protesters hand out brochures that refer to abortion as Black "genocide" and say the late Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood and a proponent of eugenics, "desired to eradicate minorities." The brochures compare Sanger to Adolf Hitler

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and proclaim: "Black lives did not matter to Margaret Sanger!"

The Mississippi clinic is not affiliated with Planned Parenthood, and Planned Parenthood itself denounces Sanger's belief in eugenics.

White people are not alone in making this argument. Alveda King, an evangelist who is a niece of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., is among the Black opponents of abortion who, for years, have been portraying abortion as a way to wipe out people of their race.

Tanya Britton, a former president of Pro-Life Mississippi, often drives three hours from her home in the northern part of the state to pray outside the abortion clinic in Jackson. Britton is Black, and she said it's a tragedy that the number of Black babies aborted since Roe would equal the population of several large cities. She also said people are too casual about terminating pregnancies.

"You just can't take the life of someone because this is not convenient — 'I want to finish my education,'" Britton said. "You wouldn't kill your 2-year-old because you were in graduate school."

But state Rep. Zakiya Summers of Jackson, who is Black and a mother, suggested there's nothing casual about what poor women are doing. Receiving little support in Mississippi — for example, the Legislature killed a proposal to expand postpartum Medicaid coverage in 2021 -- they are sometimes forced to make hard decisions.

"Women are just out here trying to survive, you know?" she said. "And Mississippi doesn't make it any easier."

To refine water forecasts, Western cities map snow by plane

By BRITTANY PETERSON Associated Press

GUNNISON, Colo. (AP) — At a tiny airport surrounded by mountains, a three-person crew takes off for the inaugural flight above the headwaters of the Colorado River to measure the region's snow by air.

Under the plane is a device that uses lasers, cameras and sensors to map snow and help drought-prone communities improve forecasts of how much water will later fill reservoirs.

The method, developed nearly a decade ago at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, "is the gold standard of snow measurement," said Emily Carbone of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, one of Colorado's largest water providers and the primary funder for the flight.

For decades, Western U.S. states have been measuring snow through hundreds of remote sensing sites known as SNOTEL stations, which are operated by the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service. But as climate change causes rising temperatures, snow at those sites — at around 9,000 feet above sea level — is melting earlier than normal and pushing water managers to look for other ways to finetune forecasting methods.

Among the options is a method of aerial snow mapping, which gives precise snow measurements across an entire basin.

The flight by Airborne Snow Observatories in mid-April measured the area around the headwaters of the Colorado River. But the hope is to expand the work along the stressed river, which 40 million people rely on, said Jeffrey Deems, co-founder of the company.

Paul Miller, a hydrologist at the Colorado Basin River Forecast Center, said "removing uncertainty in one of the data points" can be critical in a water-stressed region.

But Miller noted the limitations of even aerial snow mapping, which can cost tens of thousands of dollars or more per flight and only provide measurements for the day flown. The technology also doesn't account for variables such as air temperature and late-season storms that can affect water supplies.

Others are working on ways to improve snow measurements too.

On the same day the plane scans the river's headwaters, the U.S. Geological Survey is on the ground researching an option that could be more affordable, even if it's not as precise. The agency installed its own remote sensing stations above and below the typical elevation of SNOTEL sites and its laser-equipped drones measured the surrounding area.

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Those results could take a couple of months to process since they're still in the testing phase, said Suzanne Paschke, who is managing the project for USGS. The agency also paid for a segment of the headwaters snow mapping flight so it could cross-check its measurements.

Meanwhile, SNOTEL sites are also undergoing upgrades that could result in more accurate modeling, said Karl Wetlaufer, who helps run the program. In coming years, the federal agency plans to expand the number of sites that include sensors for solar radiation, wind and soil moisture. But the stations still can't be moved to higher elevations, where wind can whip snow around exposed mountaintops and make it hard to measure, Wetlaufer said.

The newer methods help fill in those data gaps at high elevations.

In June 2019, four SNOTEL stations showed snow had largely melted out in the Blue River basin, which feeds into the Dillon Reservoir that provides water to the Denver area. But mapping by Airborne Snow Observatories showed significant snow remained at higher elevations — giving water managers enough time to make room in the reservoir for the incoming runoff.

"That information allowed us to prepare for a second peak of runoff and accurately lower our reservoirs to capture that water and avoid any flooding impacts downstream," said Taylor Winchell, climate adaptation strategist at Denver Water.

The event and other success stories from California water managers who had been using the technology for several years prompted the formation of a coalition of Colorado water agencies, nonprofits and local governments to pursue more snow mapping flights.

"We think it's worth it to get more valuable and detailed information, but we can't afford to fly as often as we'd like," said Northern Water's Emily Carbone, who is heading up the group.

The group developed a plan to seek outside funding for flights and in March won a grant to help cover some of the costs from the Colorado Water Conservation Board.

After her agency's first snow mapping flight last month over the headwaters of the Colorado River, Carbone was eager to get her hands on the results.

The data indicated that as of mid-April, there was 369,000 acre-feet of water stored in snow above the reservoirs at the head of the Colorado River. Since it was the first time that region's snow was mapped by air, there are no historical trends for comparison. Carbone is still working to calculate how much of it could make it into the reservoir.

Northern Water has commissioned another flight in May over the same area, which will reveal how much snow has melted since the April flight and how efficient it is at running off into reservoirs.

"We have a lot to learn but it's cool to get this data and really get a better picture of what's going on in our basin snowpack," she said.

Goal! Maradona's 'Hand of God' shirt sets auction record

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The shirt worn by Diego Maradona when he scored the controversial "Hand of God" goal against England in the 1986 World Cup has sold for 7.1 million pounds (\$9.3 million), the highest price ever paid at auction for a piece of sports memorabilia.

Auctioneer Sotheby's sold the shirt in an online auction that closed Wednesday. It did not identify the buyer.

Maradona scored two goals during the quarter-final game in Mexico City on June 22, 1986, just four years after Britain and Argentina had fought a war over the Falkland Islands. The Argentine great's first goal was ruled a header, but the ball had bounced off Maradona's fist, out of sight of the referee.

Maradona said afterward that it had been scored "a little with the head of Maradona, and a little with the hand of God."

Maradona's second goal saw him dribble the ball past almost the entire English team before beating goalkeeper Peter Shilton. In 2002, it was voted "goal of the century" in a FIFA poll.

Argentina won the game 2-1 and went on to win the World Cup.

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After the game Maradona swapped shirts with England midfielder Steve Hodge, who loaned it long-term to England's National Football Museum in Manchester before putting it up for sale.

Maradona, considered by many to be the greatest player of all time, struggled with cocaine abuse and other excesses and died in November 2020 at age 60.

After Sotheby's announced the coming sale last month, relatives of Maradona expressed doubt the blue No. 10 jersey was the shirt the soccer star had worn in the second half of the game, when he scored both goals. The auction house said the shirt's identify was confirmed by sports memorabilia photo-matching firm Resolution Photomatching and confirmed by Sotheby's chief science officer.

Brahm Wachter, Sotheby's head of streetwear and modern collectables, said the shirt was "a tangible reminder of an important moment not only in the history of sports, but in the history of the 20th century."

The previous record for sports memorabilia was \$8.8 million paid at a December 2019 auction for the manifesto that launched the modern Olympic movement. The previous record for a piece of sportswear was \$5.64 million for a Babe Ruth New York Yankees jersey in 2019.

The sale prices include an auction house charge known as the buyer's premium.

Pope's Ukraine diplomacy a political and spiritual tightrope

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — His appeals for an Orthodox Easter truce in Ukraine went unheeded. His planned meeting with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church was canceled. A proposed visit to Moscow? Nyet. Even his attempt to showcase Russian-Ukrainian friendship fell flat.

Pope Francis hasn't made much of a diplomatic mark in Russia's war in Ukraine, seemingly unable to capitalize on his moral authority, soft power or direct line to Moscow to nudge an end to the bloodshed or at least a cease-fire.

Rather, Francis has found himself in the unusual position of having to explain his refusal to call out Russia or President Vladimir Putin by name — popes don't do that, he said — and to defend his "very good" relations with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who has justified the war on spiritual grounds.

While the long list of dead ends would indicate a certain ineffectiveness, it is par for the course for the Vatican's unique brand of diplomacy that straddles geopolitical realities with spiritual priorities, even when they conflict.

And in the case of Ukraine, they have: Francis has sought to be a pastor to his local flock in Ukraine, incessantly calling for peace, sending cardinals in with humanitarian aid and even reportedly proposing that a Vatican-flagged ship evacuate civilians from the besieged port of Mariupol.

But he has also kept alive the Holy See's longer-term policy goal of healing relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, which like the rest of Eastern Orthodoxy is separated from the Catholic Church. Up until recently, Francis held out hope that he would secure a second meeting with Russian Patriarch Kirill, even while Moscow bombed Ukrainian civilians.

Francis recently revealed that their planned June meeting in Jerusalem had been called off, because Vatican diplomats thought it would send a "confusing" message. Indeed, on Wednesday EU diplomats said they plan to sanction Kirill in the bloc's next round of measures against Russia, further complicating Francis' relationship with him.

To his critics, Francis' continued outreach to Moscow even amid reported atrocities harks back to the perceived silence of Pope Pius XII, criticized by some Jewish groups for failing to speak out sufficiently against the Holocaust. The Vatican and insists Pius' quiet diplomacy helped save lives.

"Francis is doing what he can, with the right priorities, to stop the war, stop people from suffering," said Anne Leahy, who was Canada's ambassador to the Holy See from 2008-12 and ambassador to Russia in the late 1990s.

"But he's keeping channels of communication open in every way he can. Even if it doesn't work, I think the idea is to keep trying," she said.

Leahy noted that a pope must have as a top priority this Gospel-mandated objective to unify Christians,

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and that relations with the Orthodox therefore must remain at the forefront.

"Diplomacy is at the service of the church's mission, and not the other way around," she said in a telephone interview.

At times, Francis' words and gestures seem contradictory: One day he sits down for a videoconference with Kirill that is prominently featured on the website of the Russian Orthodox Church with a statement saying both sides had expressed hope for a "just peace." Three weeks later, he kisses a battered Ukrainian flag brought to him from Bucha, where Ukrainian civilians were found shot to death with their hands bound.

The Vatican has a long tradition of this dual-faceted diplomacy. During the Cold War, the policy of "Ostpolitik" meant that the Vatican kept up channels of communication with the same Communist governments that were persecuting the faithful on the ground, often to the dismay of the local church.

Francis' decision to continue with the "classic Vatican diplomacy of Ostpolitik, of dialoguing with the enemy and not closing the door, is debatable," said the Rev. Stefano Caprio, professor of church history at the Pontifical Oriental Institute.

"Those who are upset that the pope isn't defending them more are right, but those from the diplomatic side who say 'We can't throw away these relations' are also right. They are obviously in contradiction," he said.

"But since we're not talking about an argument of faith — we aren't talking about the persons of the Holy Trinity — you can have opinions that differ from the pope," he added.

In some ways, Francis' role on the sidelines of the Ukraine conflict can be traced to his position when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the Holy See appeared at least publicly neutral, despite appeals from Ukrainian Greek Catholics, who are a minority in the majority Orthodox country, for Francis to strongly condemn Moscow.

Instead, Francis described the ensuing conflict as the fruit of "fratricidal violence," as if both sides were equally to blame and that the conflict was an internal Ukrainian matter.

"My experience in 2014 is that the existence of the (Ukrainian) Greek Catholics was seemingly an embarrassment and a frustration with the Holy Father and the Holy See," said John McCarthy, who was Australia's ambassador to the Vatican at the time. "Their priority was the relationship with the Russian Orthodox" and securing a meeting with Kirill.

Francis eventually obtained that long-sought meeting, embracing Kirill in a VIP room of the Havana, Cuba, airport on Feb. 12, 2016, in the first meeting between a pope with the Russian patriarch in over a millennium.

The two men signed a joint statement that was hailed by the Holy See at the time as a breakthrough in ecumenical relations. But it enraged Ukraine's Greek Catholics because, among other things, it referred to them as an "ecclesial community" as if they were a separate church not in communion with Rome, and didn't mention Russia's role in the separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Fast forward to 2022, and Francis again upset the local Ukrainian church: The Vatican had proposed that a Ukrainian and Russian woman carry the cross together during the Vatican's torchlit Good Friday procession at the Colosseum. The gesture, which preceded Francis' unheeded Easter appeal for a truce, was an attempt to show the possibility of future Russian-Ukrainian reconciliation.

But the Ukrainian ambassador objected, and the head of Ukraine's Greek Orthodox faithful, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, decried the proposal as "inopportune and ambiguous," since it didn't take into consideration the fact that Russia had invaded Ukraine.

In the end, the Vatican compromised: The women carried the cross but instead of reading aloud a meditation that had called for reconciliation, stood together in silent prayer.

Leahy, the former Canadian ambassador, said the outcome was a classic example of papal pastoral care bridging Vatican diplomacy: Francis listened to Shevchuk's complaint and modified the ritual, while keeping his broader agenda of dialogue with Russia alive.

Recalling the word "pontiff" derives from the Italian word for "bridge," she said: "It's the job of a diplomat, and certainly of a supreme pontiff who has the word 'bridge' written in his name, to keep the channels

open.”

The Rev. Roberto Regoli, a professor of church history and an expert in papal diplomacy at the Pontifical Gregorian University, said those diplomatic channels with the Orthodox are important now, but also in the future when eventually Ukraine will have to be rebuilt.

“The reconstruction of a country ... requires the involvement of all forces, even religious ones,” he said. “So keeping these channels open is useful for the present but even more for the future, because it will take decades to rebuild.”

Beijing shuts 10% of subway stations to stem COVID-19 spread

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The rigid and widely derided restrictions have led to shortages of food and medical aid along with a wider — though likely temporary — impact on the national economy. Desperate, outraged citizens have confronted authorities at barricades and online, screamed out of their windows and banged pots and pans in a sign of frustration and anger.

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"I'm hoping it won't cause congestion. Each community has two to four hours to go out for shopping, so most members will complete that within one hour," Ling said.

Pope's Ukraine diplomacy a political and spiritual tightrope

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — His appeals for an Orthodox Easter truce in Ukraine went unheeded. His planned meeting with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church was canceled. A proposed visit to Moscow? Nyet. Even his attempt to showcase Russian-Ukrainian friendship fell flat.

Pope Francis hasn't made much of a diplomatic mark in Russia's war in Ukraine, seemingly unable to capitalize on his moral authority, soft power or direct line to Moscow to nudge an end to the bloodshed or at least a cease-fire.

Rather, Francis has found himself in the unusual position of having to explain his refusal to call out Russia or President Vladimir Putin by name — popes don't do that, he said — and to defend his "very good" relations with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who has justified the war on spiritual grounds.

While the long list of dead ends would indicate a certain ineffectiveness, it is par for the course for the Vatican's unique brand of diplomacy that straddles geopolitical realities with spiritual priorities, even when they conflict.

And in the case of Ukraine, they have: Francis has sought to be a pastor to his local flock in Ukraine, incessantly calling for peace, sending cardinals in with humanitarian aid and even reportedly proposing that a Vatican-flagged ship evacuate civilians from the besieged port of Mariupol.

But he has also kept alive the Holy See's longer-term policy goal of healing relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, which like the rest of Eastern Orthodoxy is separated from the Catholic Church. Up until recently, Francis held out hope that he would secure a second meeting with Russian Patriarch Kirill, even while Moscow bombed Ukrainian civilians.

Francis recently revealed that their planned June meeting in Jerusalem had been called off, because Vatican diplomats thought it would send a "confusing" message. Indeed, on Wednesday EU diplomats said they plan to sanction Kirill in the bloc's next round of measures against Russia, further complicating Francis' relationship with him.

To his critics, Francis' continued outreach to Moscow even amid reported atrocities harks back to the perceived silence of Pope Pius XII, criticized by some Jewish groups for failing to speak out sufficiently against the Holocaust. The Vatican insists Pius' quiet diplomacy helped save lives.

"Francis is doing what he can, with the right priorities, to stop the war, stop people from suffering," said Anne Leahy, who was Canada's ambassador to the Holy See from 2008-12 and ambassador to Russia in the late 1990s.

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"But he's keeping channels of communication open in every way he can. Even if it doesn't work, I think the idea is to keep trying," she said.

Leahy noted that a pope must have as a top priority this Gospel-mandated objective to unify Christians, and that relations with the Orthodox therefore must remain at the forefront.

"Diplomacy is at the service of the church's mission, and not the other way around," she said in a telephone interview.

At times, Francis' words and gestures seem contradictory: One day he sits down for a videoconference with Kirill that is prominently featured on the website of the Russian Orthodox Church with a statement saying both sides had expressed hope for a "just peace." Three weeks later, he kisses a battered Ukrainian flag brought to him from Bucha, where Ukrainian civilians were found shot to death with their hands bound.

The Vatican has a long tradition of this dual-faceted diplomacy. During the Cold War, the policy of "Ostpolitik" meant that the Vatican kept up channels of communication with the same Communist governments that were persecuting the faithful on the ground, often to the dismay of the local church.

Francis' decision to continue with the "classic Vatican diplomacy of Ostpolitik, of dialoguing with the enemy and not closing the door, is debatable," said the Rev. Stefano Caprio, professor of church history at the Pontifical Oriental Institute.

"Those who are upset that the pope isn't defending them more are right, but those from the diplomatic side who say 'We can't throw away these relations' are also right. They are obviously in contradiction," he said.

"But since we're not talking about an argument of faith — we aren't talking about the persons of the Holy Trinity — you can have opinions that differ from the pope," he added.

In some ways, Francis' role on the sidelines of the Ukraine conflict can be traced to his position when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the Holy See appeared at least publicly neutral, despite appeals from Ukrainian Greek Catholics, who are a minority in the majority Orthodox country, for Francis to strongly condemn Moscow.

Instead, Francis described the ensuing conflict as the fruit of "fratricidal violence," as if both sides were equally to blame and that the conflict was an internal Ukrainian matter.

"My experience in 2014 is that the existence of the (Ukrainian) Greek Catholics was seemingly an embarrassment and a frustration with the Holy Father and the Holy See," said John McCarthy, who was Australia's ambassador to the Vatican at the time. "Their priority was the relationship with the Russian Orthodox" and securing a meeting with Kirill.

Francis eventually obtained that long-sought meeting, embracing Kirill in a VIP room of the Havana, Cuba, airport on Feb. 12, 2016, in the first meeting between a pope with the Russian patriarch in over a millennium.

The two men signed a joint statement that was hailed by the Holy See at the time as a breakthrough in ecumenical relations. But it enraged Ukraine's Greek Catholics because, among other things, it referred to them as an "ecclesial community" as if they were a separate church not in communion with Rome, and didn't mention Russia's role in the separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Fast forward to 2022, and Francis again upset the local Ukrainian church: The Vatican had proposed that a Ukrainian and Russian woman carry the cross together during the Vatican's torchlit Good Friday procession at the Colosseum. The gesture, which preceded Francis' unheeded Easter appeal for a truce, was an attempt to show the possibility of future Russian-Ukrainian reconciliation.

But the Ukrainian ambassador objected, and the head of Ukraine's Greek Orthodox faithful, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, decried the proposal as "inopportune and ambiguous," since it didn't take into consideration the fact that Russia had invaded Ukraine.

In the end, the Vatican compromised: The women carried the cross but instead of reading aloud a meditation that had called for reconciliation, stood together in silent prayer.

Leahy, the former Canadian ambassador, said the outcome was a classic example of papal pastoral care bridging Vatican diplomacy: Francis listened to Shevchuk's complaint and modified the ritual, while keeping

his broader agenda of dialogue with Russia alive.

Recalling the word "pontiff" derives from the Italian word for "bridge," she said: "It's the job of a diplomat, and certainly of a supreme pontiff who has the word 'bridge' written in his name, to keep the channels open."

The Rev. Roberto Regoli, a professor of church history and an expert in papal diplomacy at the Pontifical Gregorian University, said those diplomatic channels with the Orthodox are important now, but also in the future when eventually Ukraine will have to be rebuilt.

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As US poised to restrict abortion, other nations ease access

By ASTRID SUAREZ and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — As women in the United States find themselves on the verge of possibly losing the constitutional right to abortion, courts in many other parts of the world have been moving in the opposite direction.

That includes in a number of traditionally conservative societies — such as recently in Colombia, where the Constitutional Court in February legalized the procedure until the 24th week of pregnancy, part of a broader trend seen in parts of heavily Catholic Latin America.

It's not yet clear what impact there will be outside the United States from the leaked draft opinion suggesting the U.S. Supreme Court could overturn the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision.

But for women's activists who for years have led grinding campaigns demanding open access to abortion, often looking to the United States as a model, it's a discouraging sign and a reminder that hard-won gains can be impermanent.

"It is an awful precedent for the coming years for the region and the world," said Colombian Catalina Martínez Coral, Latin America and Caribbean director for the New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights, which was among the groups that litigated the abortion case in Colombia's high court.

The February ruling there established a broad right for women to have abortions within the 24-week period, whereas previously they could do so only in specific cases such as if a fetus presented malformations or a pregnancy resulted from rape. Abortion is still allowed after that period under those special circumstances.

The decision fell short of advocates' hopes for a complete decriminalization, but Martínez Coral said it still left Colombia with the "most progressive legal framework in Latin America."

Similarly, Mexico's Supreme Court held last year that it was unconstitutional to punish abortion. As the country's highest court, its ruling bars all jurisdictions from charging a woman with a crime for terminating a pregnancy.

Statutes outlawing abortion are still on the books in most of Mexico's 32 states, however, and nongovernmental organizations that have long pushed for decriminalization are pressing state legislatures to reform them. Abortion was already readily available in Mexico City and some states.

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To the south in Argentina, lawmakers in late 2020 passed a bill legalizing abortion until the 14th week and after that for circumstances similar to those described in the Colombia ruling.

It's also widely available in Cuba and Uruguay.

But expansion of abortion access has not extended to all of Latin America, with many countries restricting it to certain circumstances — such as Brazil, the region's most populous nation, where it's permissible only in cases of rape, risk to the woman's life and certified cases of the birth defect anencephaly. Former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is seeking a new term in October, recently said he sees legalizing abortion as a public health issue, eliciting criticism in a country where few approve of the procedure.

Other places have total bans with no exceptions, such as Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Courts in the latter have given women long prison sentences for aggravated homicide even in cases where prosecutors suspect a miscarriage was actually an abortion.

Many African nations also maintain complete bans, but in October 2021, Benin legalized abortion in most circumstances up to 12 weeks. That significantly increased safe access to the procedure after the health minister reported that nearly 200 women were dying each year of complications from clandestine abortions. Previously abortion was permitted in cases of rape or incest; risk to the woman's life; or severe fetal malformation.

Most European countries have legalized abortion, including predominantly Catholic ones. Ireland did so in 2018, followed by tiny San Marino in a voter referendum last fall. It remains illegal in Andorra, Malta and Vatican City, while Poland last year tightened its abortion laws.

It's also been widely available in Israel since 1978 and relatively uncontroversial, allowed by law before the 24th week with the approval of hospital "termination committees" that consist of medical professionals including at least one woman.

Laws and interpretations vary across the Muslim world.

Abortion has been legal up to 12 weeks in Tunisia for decades, but in Iran it's been forbidden since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Last year the leader of Cairo's top institution of Islamic clerics, Al-Azhar, said abortion is not the solution even in cases where a child is likely to be seriously ill or disabled.

In Japan, abortion is allowed only for economic and health reasons, and requires partners' consent, making Japan one of a handful of countries in the world to do so. Victims of sexual violence are excluded from the requirement.

While there is a growing call for women to have the right to make their own decision, Japan's government, led by the ultra-conservative Liberal Democratic Party, has long focused on traditional gender roles of women to give birth and raise children.

Japan has not approved abortion pills, though an application for one by a British company is pending at the health ministry.

Abortion has been legal in India since 1971. Women can terminate pregnancy up to 20 weeks, but only on a doctor's advice. Under changes in 2021, a woman can also seek an abortion up to 24 weeks under certain circumstances such as rape or incest, though it requires approval from two doctors.

China is moving to limit abortions, but that's because it has one of the highest rates of abortions in the world.

Last September, the Chinese cabinet, known as the State Council, published new national guidelines that require hospitals to "reduce non-medically necessary abortions." In February, China's family planning association announced it would launch a campaign to reduce teenage abortions.

When the U.S. Supreme Court's final decision is handed down, expected in late June or early July, the world will be watching.

"While moves to decriminalize and legalize abortion in places like Argentina, Ireland, Mexico and Colombia in the last few years have been a huge win for the global community," Agnes Callamard, secretary-general of the human rights group Amnesty International, said in a statement, "there are grim signs that the United States is out of step with the progress that the rest of the world is making in protecting sexual and reproductive rights."

Alabama church of 'Bloody Sunday' on endangered places list

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

Like religious congregants all over, the people of historic Brown Chapel AME Church turned off the lights and locked the doors at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic because it wasn't safe to gather for worship with a deadly virus circulating. For a time, the landmark church that launched a national voting rights movement in Selma, Alabama, was off limits.

What members found when they returned was heartbreaking: Termites had eaten so much wood that parts of the structure weren't stable anymore, said member Juanda Maxwell, and water leaks damaged walls. Mold was growing in parts of the building, where hundreds met before Alabama state troopers attacked voting rights demonstrators on Bloody Sunday in 1965 at the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

"It's in horrible shape," said Maxwell. "It's a tough time. Because we were closed for a year it exacerbated the problem with water coming in."

The red brick church, with distinctive twin bell towers and a domed ceiling, tops this year's list of the nation's most endangered historic places, according to the Washington, D.C.-based, National Trust for Historic Preservation, a nonprofit organization which works to highlight and preserve sites that are in danger of being lost. Other places on the list include:

— Chicano/a Murals painted on the sides of buildings in Colorado and inspired by the human rights and cultural movements of the 1960s and '70s.

— The Deborah Chapel, a Jewish mortuary building established in 1886 in Hartford, Connecticut.

— Francisco Sanchez Elementary School, the closed centerpiece of the town in Umatac, Guam.

— Minidoka National Historic Site, where more than 13,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II in Jerome, Idaho.

— Camp Naco, a base for Black Buffalo Soldiers dating back to 1919 along the U.S.-Mexican border in Naco, Arizona.

— Picture Cave in Warrenton, Missouri, which holds indigenous artwork dating as far back more than 1,200 years by the Osage Nation.

— Brooks Park Art and Nature Center, the home and art studio in East Hampton, New York, of James Brooks and Charlotte Park, who were important in the abstract expressionism movement in American art.

— Palmer Memorial Institute, a boarding school built in 1902 for Black youths in Greensboro, North Carolina.

— Olivewood Cemetery, an African American burial ground in Houston, Texas, dating to 1875 and containing more than 4,000 graves.

— Jamestown, the site in Jamestown, Virginia, where enslaved people first arrived in America and where the first publicly elected assembly in the United States met.

Brown Chapel, the first African Methodist Episcopal church in Alabama, was the site of preparations for a voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery on March 7, 1965, when police beat marchers led by the late Rep. John Lewis, then a young activist. Weeks later, thousands gathered there before the Selma-to-Montgomery march led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Maxwell is part of a group of Brown Chapel members serving on a foundation that's trying to raise money for repairs estimated to exceed \$4 million, she said. The church, located in a public housing community, has only a few dozen members in regular attendance, so it's relying on grants and outside donations to fund the work.

The National Park Service already has provided a grant of \$1.3 million for restoration of the church, which was constructed in 1908 by a formerly enslaved Black builder, A.J. Farley, and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1997.

"Our goal is to try to receive over \$3 million in grants to do the foundational work. After that we hope to get in more private donations," Maxwell said.

With members unable to gather in the building since repair work began in October, Maxwell said, the few who still attend continue meeting online.

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"We're Zooming. The pastor is searching for a place," she said.

Today in History: May 5, Shepard is first American in space

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, May 5, the 125th day of 2022. There are 240 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 5, 1961, astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. became America's first space traveler as he made a 15-minute suborbital flight aboard Mercury capsule Freedom 7.

On this date:

In 1494, during his second voyage to the Western Hemisphere, Christopher Columbus landed in Jamaica.

In 1821, Napoleon Bonaparte, 51, died in exile on the island of St. Helena.

In 1925, schoolteacher John T. Scopes was charged in Tennessee with violating a state law that prohibited teaching the theory of evolution. (Scopes was found guilty, but his conviction was later set aside.)

In 1942, wartime sugar rationing began in the United States.

In 1945, in the only fatal attack of its kind during World War II, a Japanese balloon bomb exploded on Gearhart Mountain in Oregon, killing the pregnant wife of a minister and five children. Denmark and the Netherlands were liberated as a German surrender went into effect.

In 1973, Secretariat won the Kentucky Derby, the first of his Triple Crown victories.

In 1981, Irish Republican Army hunger-striker Bobby Sands died at the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland on his 66th day without food.

In 1994, Singapore caned American teenager Michael Fay for vandalism, a day after the sentence was reduced from six lashes to four in response to an appeal by President Bill Clinton.

In 2009, Texas health officials confirmed the first death of a U.S. resident with swine flu.

In 2014, a narrowly divided Supreme Court upheld Christian prayers at the start of local council meetings.

In 2016, former Los Angeles trash collector Lonnie Franklin Jr. was convicted of 10 counts of murder in the "Grim Sleeper" serial killings that targeted poor, young Black women over two decades.

In 2020, Tyson Foods said it would resume limited operation of its huge pork processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa, with enhanced safety measures, more than two weeks after closing the facility because of a coronavirus outbreak among workers. Facebook said it had removed several accounts and pages linked to QAnon, taking action for the first time against the far-right conspiracy theory circulated among Trump supporters.

Ten years ago: Five Guantanamo Bay prisoners, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (HAH'-leed shayk moh-HAH'-mehd), the self-proclaimed mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, were arraigned in a proceeding that dragged on for 13 hours due to stalling tactics by the defendants.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump signed his first piece of major legislation, a \$1 trillion spending bill to keep the government operating through September. The Labor Department reported a burst of hiring in April 2017 as employers added 211,000 jobs, more than double the weak showing in March.

One year ago: A federal judge in Washington ruled that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention exceeded its authority when it imposed a national eviction moratorium. (The moratorium would remain in place during a Justice Department appeal; it was allowed to expire at the end of July.) The Biden administration joined calls for lifting patent protections on COVID-19 vaccines to help poor parts of the world get more doses. Four months after Facebook suspended the accounts of former President Donald Trump, the company's quasi-independent oversight board upheld the bans, but told Facebook to specify how long they would last. Peloton recalled about 125,000 treadmills; the Tread+ treadmills had been linked to the death of one child and injuries to 29 others. A government report said the U.S. birth rate had fallen by 4% in 2021, the largest single-year decrease in nearly 50 years.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Pat Carroll is 95. Country singer-musician Roni Stoneman is 84. Actor Michael

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Murphy is 84. Actor Lance Henriksen is 82. Comedian-actor Michael Palin is 79. Actor John Rhys-Davies is 78. Rock correspondent Kurt Loder is 77. Rock musician Bill Ward (Black Sabbath) is 74. Actor Melinda Culea is 67. Actor Lisa Eilbacher is 65. Actor Richard E. Grant is 65. Former broadcast journalist John Miller is 64. Rock singer Ian McCulloch (Echo and the Bunnymen) is 63. Broadcast journalist Brian Williams is 63. Rock musician Shawn Drover (Megadeth) is 56. TV personality Kyan (KY'-ihn) Douglas is 52. Actor Tina Yothers is 49. R&B singer Raheem DeVaughn is 47. Actor Santiago Cabrera is 44. Actor Vincent Kartheiser is 43. Singer Craig David is 41. Actor Danielle Fishel is 41. Actor Henry Cavill is 39. Actor Clark Duke is 37. Soul singer Adele is 34. Rock singer Skye Sweetnam is 34. R&B singer Chris Brown is 33. Figure skater Nathan Chen is 23.