

Groton Daily Independent

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Emmanuel: Worship/Milestones, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Bethesda worship, 2 p.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

Methodist: Conde Worship at 9 a.m., Sunday school at 10 a.m., Groton worship at 11 a.m. (Sunday school sings at Groton service)

St. John's: Bible study, 8 a.m.; Worship, 9 a.m.; Graduation reception, 10 a.m.; Sunday school, 10 a.m.; Zion worship, 11 a.m.

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

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.

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

8 - MOTHER'S DAY

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



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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High School Spring Concert



Flex Band



High School Band



High School Chorus

Photos by Paul Kosel

Rural electric delegation carries legislative concerns to D.C.

PIERRE – A contingent of nearly 40 electric cooperative representatives from South Dakota and North Dakota participated in the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association’s Legislative Conference May 2-4 in Washington, D.C.

The group visited with congressional lawmakers and their staffs and expressed their views on several key issues that can potentially impact electric cooperative members back home both directly and indirectly.

Trevor Jones, general manager of the South Dakota Rural Electric Association, said the trip to Washington was an important part of carrying out the obligation of consumer-owned electric cooperative organizations to make sure the voices and concerns of co-op members are heard by lawmakers.

“The history of the electric cooperative movement is rooted in politics, going all the way back to 1935,” Jones said. “This trip to our nation’s capitol was time well spent for our group as we were able to have face-to-face conversations and let our elected officials know that the decisions they make can have a real effect on the lives of the individuals, businesses and families we represent. Electric vehicles and cybersecurity are just two prime examples of issues that are part of the changing cultural and political landscape that need to be addressed. Every time they take a vote, there are real consequences at stake.”

Leaders from the following South Dakota distribution cooperatives participated in the program: Bon Homme Yankton Electric, Central Electric, Clay-Union Electric, FEM Electric, Kingsbury Electric, Sioux Valley Energy, West River Electric and Whetstone Valley Electric.

Representatives from power generation and supply cooperatives Rushmore Electric (Rapid City), Easter River Electric (Madison) and Basin Electric (Bismarck, ND) were also part of the group.

Jones said discussions with lawmakers included: urging Congress to include direct pay tax incentives for electric cooperatives in any tax legislation proposals; supporting the Flexible Financing for Rural America Act, which will allow co-ops to refinance high-interest infrastructure loans; and supporting cooperatives in their efforts to access infrastructure funding opportunities as they become available.

Jones said he appreciated the time and attention provided by the state’s congressional delegation.

“Consistent and effective political engagement is critical to making sure that our cooperative members have a voice in legislative matters,” he said. “There are many concerns about taxation, protecting the environment, renewable power policies, affordability and service reliability that are in play. We’re fortunate that we have officials who are always responsive and listen with intention when we have the conversations that we need to have.”

Wiest named Groton bank manager

B.J. Wiest has been named Branch Manager for Dacotah Bank locations in Groton and Langford. B.J. is originally from Moberge and a graduate of Northern State University.

B.J. has 14 years of banking experience, joining Dacotah Bank in 2008 in Moberge as a Commercial/Consumer Banker. In 2017, B.J., his wife and daughter moved to Aberdeen to serve as Branch Manager for the Aberdeen Market.

In July 2020 Dacotah Bank purchased First State Bank of Claremont with locations in Groton and Langford. B.J. was a key member of the conversion team spending many hours in each location assisting in all phases of the transition to Dacotah Bank.

B.J. has been active in his communities throughout his time with Dacotah Bank including volunteering as Chamber of Commerce President, Tourism Committee member, 3B tax board member, and Park Board Chairman while in Moberge. In Aberdeen he served on the Junior Achievement Board and has volunteered for numerous causes.

B.J.'s office is in Groton and he can be reached at 605-397-2711 or bj.wiest@dacotahbank.com.



I would like to thank everyone for their thoughts, prayers, and the many meals delivered to my door while I recover from recent back surgery.

Dorene Nelson

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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

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

May 9, 2022 – 7:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of April 11, 2022 and April 25, 2022 school board meetings as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of April 2022 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
3. Approval of April 2022 School Lunch Report.
4. Approval of April 2022 School Transportation Report.
5. Approval of April 2022 District bills for payment.
6. Approval of open enrollment applications:
 - a. #23-01
 - b. #23-02
 - c. #23-03

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Preliminary FY2023 Budget.
2. Accept resignation of Jill Helvig, Title Math Interventionist, at the end of the 2021-22 school year.
3. Approve signed teacher contracts.
4. Approve summer employment agreements:
 - a. Connect 4 Ed Summer School
 - b. Special Education Extended School Year
 - c. Summer Library
 - d. Summer Custodial
5. Remove from table and consider action on SDHSAA Constitutional Amendment #7.
6. Discussion and action regarding Varsity Boys Soccer for 2022 season.
7. Review of COVID-19 Learn On Plan.
8. Executive session pursuant SDCL 1-25-2(4) negotiations and SDCL 1-25-2(1) personnel.
9. Approve re-assignment of Alexa Schuring from Junior Kindergarten/Kindergarten to Title Math/Reading Interventionist for 2022-2023 school year.

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10. Approve 2022-2023 GASA Negotiated Agreement.
11. Issue 2022-2023 auxiliary staff work agreements.
12. Issue off-staff extra-curricular agreements.
 - a. Chelsea Hanson, Head Girls Volleyball
 - b. Jenna Strom, Assistant Girls Volleyball
 - c. Chris Kucker, Head Girls Soccer
 - d. Seth Erickson, Assistant Football
 - e. Aubray Harry, Co-Cheerleading
 - f. Jasmine Schinkel, Co-Cheerleading
 - g. Matt Locke, Head Girls Basketball
 - h. Trent Traphagen, Assistant Girls Basketball
 - i. Darin Zoellner, Head Wrestling
 - j. Ryan Scepaniak, JH Football
 - k. Ryan Scepaniak, Assistant Wrestling
 - l. Kristi Peterson, Yearbook
 - m. Brenda Madsen, Senior Class Advisor
 - n. Brian Dolan, Head Boys Basketball
 - o. Brian Dolan, Athletic Director
 - p. Joni Groeblichhoff, Co-DI Coordinator

ADJOURN

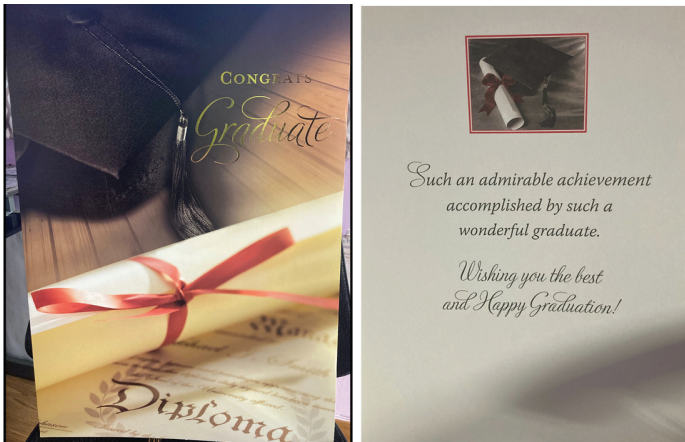
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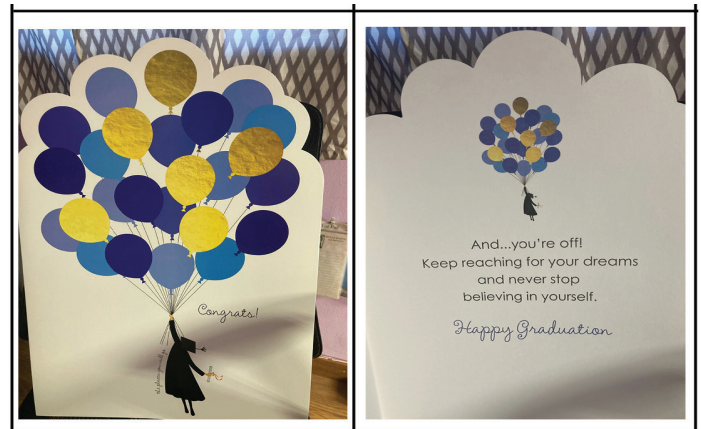
Jumbo Graduation Cards

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

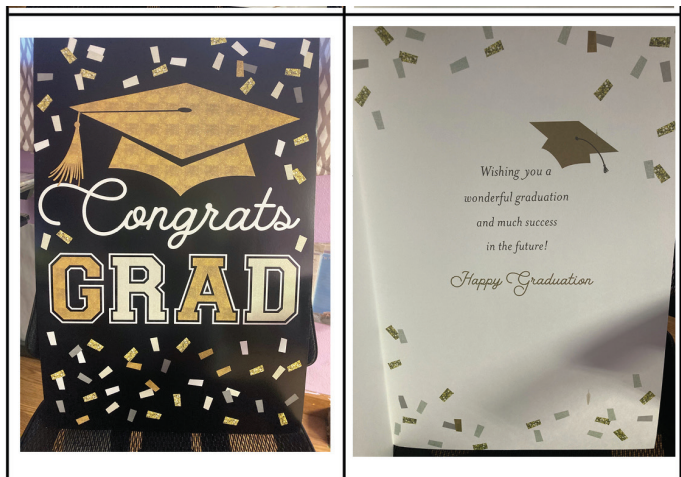
Can now be ordered on-line at 397news.com - Link on Black Bar
Or Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460 or Tina at 605-397-7285
to reserve your card(s)



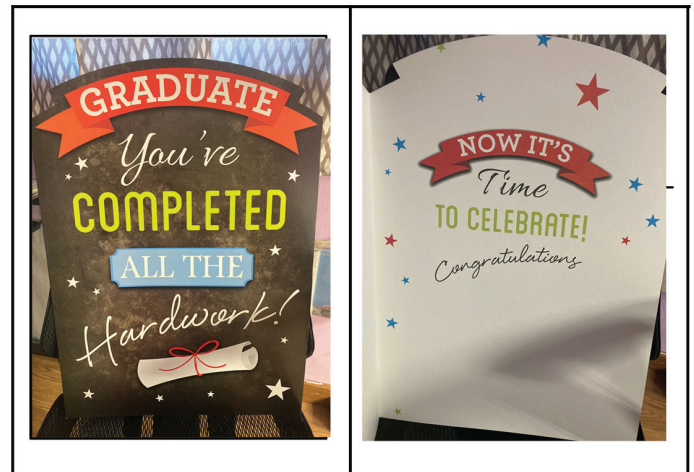
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\$7.99



50-9666-C
\$7.99



50-10977JM-C
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50-9360-C
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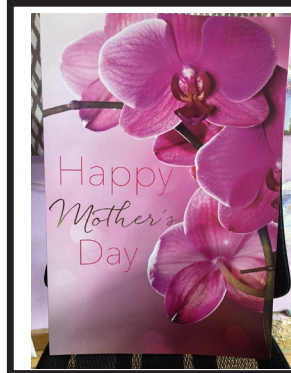
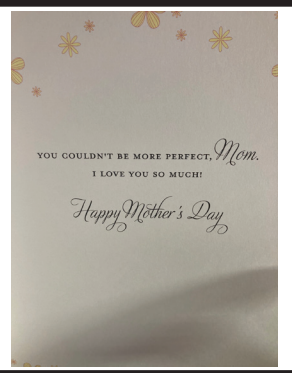
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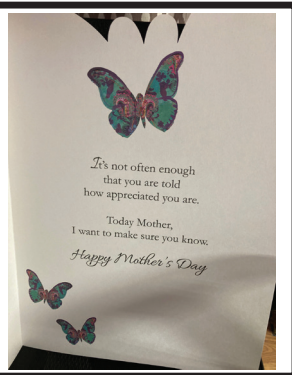
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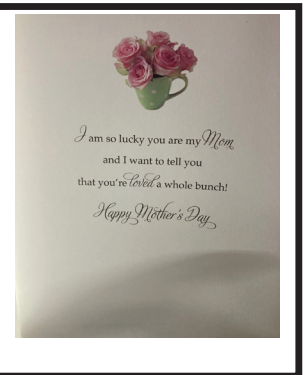
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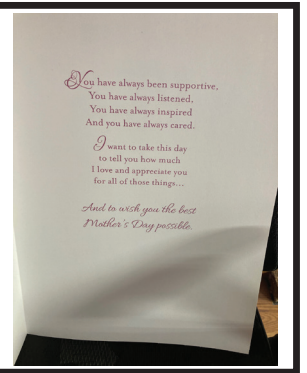
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15 N Main St., Groton
PO Box 34, Groton, SD
57445-0034
www.397news.com
Call/Text Paul: 605/397-7460
Call/Text Tina: 605/397-7285
paperpaul@grotonsd.net

Scan Code Below for
More Details



New at the
GDI FIT
The Stairmaster
and Air Bike



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

Order your Graduation Balloons while we have a good supply!



#1 - \$5



#2 - \$5



#3 - \$6



#4 - \$10 - 45"



#5 - \$5



#6 - \$6



\$3.50 - 9" on a stick



#7 - \$10 - 36"



#8 - \$5



#9 - \$5



#10 - \$5



#11 - \$5



#12 - \$5



#13 - \$8 35"



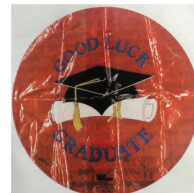
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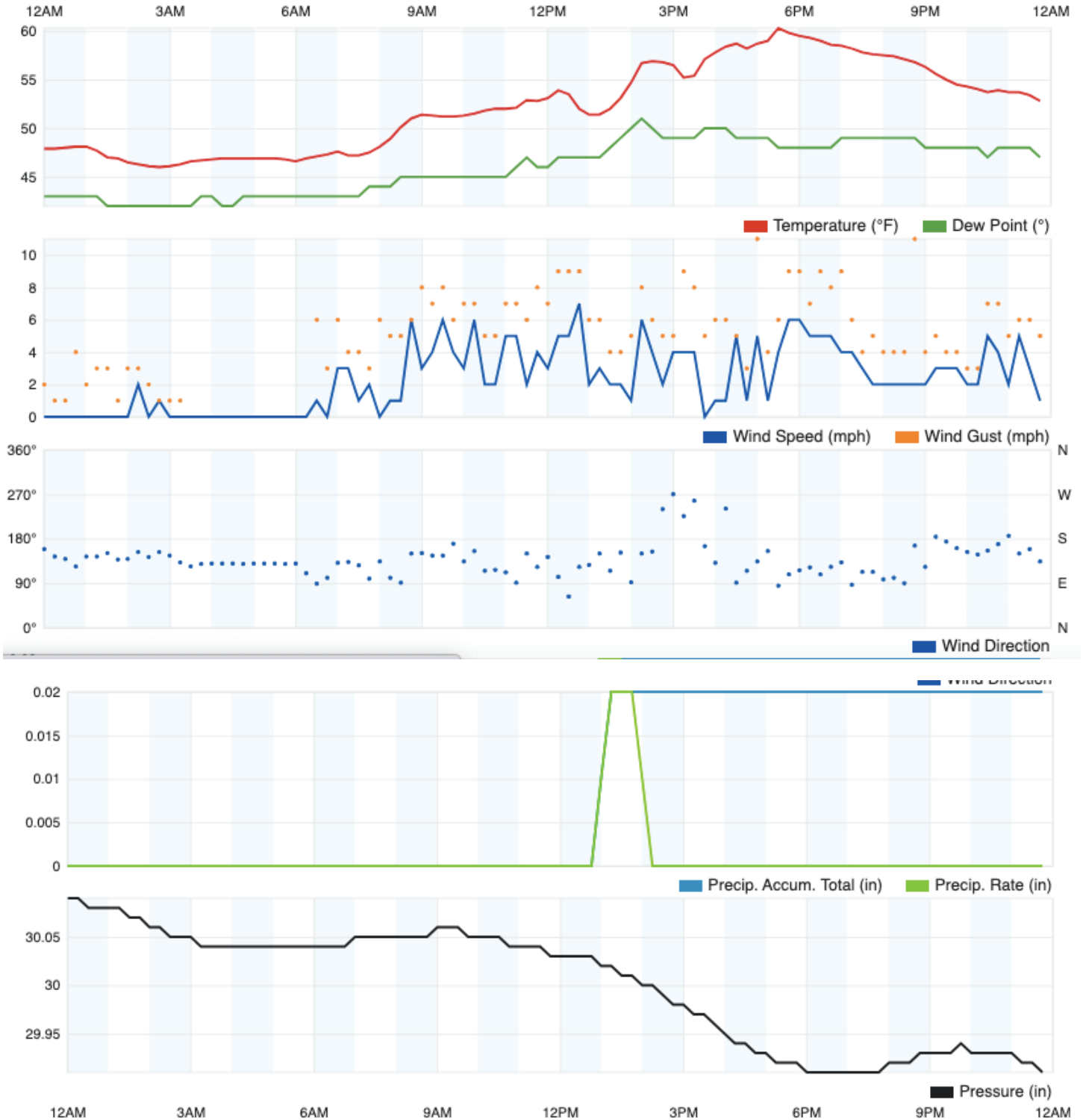
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We have many other balloons available as well. We now offer locker pickup in the laundromat so you can pick up your order ANY TIME once the order is completed!

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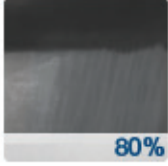

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Patchy Fog then Partly Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Breezy. Mostly Sunny then Slight Chance Showers	Showers and Breezy	Chance T-storms
High: 67 °F	Low: 50 °F	High: 74 °F	Low: 54 °F	High: 69 °F



High Temp/Rain Chances This Weekend

May 6, 2022
3:35 AM

Maximum Temperature Forecast

	5/6 Fri	5/7 Sat	5/8 Sun
Aberdeen	67	74	68
Britton	65	73	65
Eagle Butte	70	78	67
Eureka	66	74	68
Gettysburg	68	73	68
Kennebec	74	78	73
McIntosh	69	75	64
Milbank	67	73	63
Miller	68	74	71
Mobridge	70	76	71
Murdo	76	81	71
Pierre	75	79	72
Redfield	68	74	70
Sisseton	66	73	64
Watertown	63	71	62
Webster	62	70	63
Wheaton	67	73	61

Probability of Precipitation Forecast

	5/6 Fri		5/7 Sat				5/8 Sun				5/9 Mon	
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am
Aberdeen	0	4	6	4	2	21	75	75	47	34	41	71
Britton	0	4	9	5	1	17	87	87	71	49	47	74
Eagle Butte	4	5	4	2	12	19	20	20	7	18	56	65
Eureka	0	8	9	8	4	29	53	53	21	28	49	67
Gettysburg	0	7	4	3	5	24	46	46	18	24	55	73
Kennebec	1	2	1	1	7	33	56	56	24	19	60	74
McIntosh	3	10	10	10	3	28	28	18	10	18	47	59
Milbank	0	1	3	3	1	5	58	88	88	56	38	72
Miller	1	2	2	0	1	15	71	71	41	28	52	79
Mobridge	1	10	6	6	4	20	34	34	11	20	51	64
Murdo	2	3	3	1	10	31	41	41	14	18	70	75
Pierre	1	3	2	1	7	26	41	41	15	19	61	75
Redfield	0	1	2	0	1	12	76	76	51	31	44	76
Sisseton	0	2	6	6	1	9	78	89	89	55	43	74
Watertown	0	0	1	2	0	5	65	86	86	40	30	69
Webster	0	2	4	5	1	9	82	82	82	42	36	72
Wheaton	0	2	4	5	2	6	60	88	88	61	44	71



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



A relatively mild weekend is on tap for the area, along with some chances for showers/thunderstorms.
#sdwx #mnwx

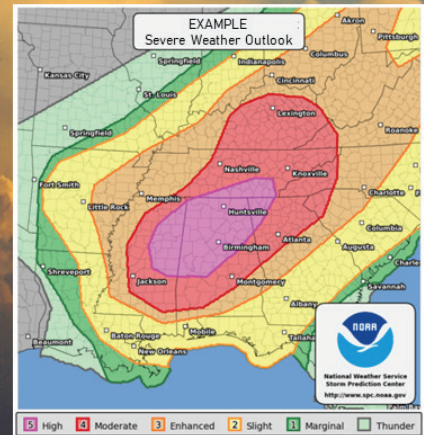
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We frequently talk about severe weather, but...

What do we mean by the risk for Severe Storms?

THUNDERSTORMS (no label)	1 - MARGINAL (MRGL)	2 - SLIGHT (SLGT)	3 - ENHANCED (ENH)	4 - MODERATE (MDT)	5 - HIGH (HIGH)
No severe* thunderstorms expected	Isolated severe thunderstorms possible	Scattered severe storms possible	Numerous severe storms possible	Widespread severe storms likely	Widespread severe storms expected
Lightning/flooding threats exist with all thunderstorms	Limited in duration and/or coverage and/or intensity	Short-lived and/or not widespread, isolated intense storms possible	More persistent and/or widespread, a few intense	Long-lived, widespread and intense	Long-lived, very widespread and particularly intense
					
• Winds to 40 mph • Small hail	• Winds 40-60 mph • Hail up to 1" • Low tornado risk	• One or two tornadoes • Reports of strong winds/wind damage • Hail ~1", isolated 2"	• A few tornadoes • Several reports of wind damage • Damaging hail, 1 - 2"	• Strong tornadoes • Widespread wind damage • Destructive hail, 2" +	• Tornado outbreak • Derecho



The Storm Prediction Center creates daily Severe Weather Outlook graphics:

<https://www.spc.noaa.gov>

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
Aberdeen, SD 5/5/2022 6:05 AM  

We frequently talk about the risk for severe storms. These daily graphics are created by the Storm Prediction Center, and highlight the potential for non-severe storms to widespread and intense storms...
<https://www.spc.noaa.gov/products/outlook/> Learn more about these thunderstorm risk graphics here...
<https://www.spc.noaa.gov/misc/about.html#Severe%20Weather%20Risks>

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Today in Weather History

May 6, 1988: High winds produced blowing dust which reduced visibilities to less than one-half mile in northeastern South Dakota. Wind gusts of 62 mph were reported at Aberdeen. A small building was destroyed in Gettysburg, and a building was damaged near Timber Lake. Winds also blew over a tractor-trailer injuring a man in Okaton.

May 6, 1999: High winds of 35 to 50 mph, gusting to over 60 mph blew across central and north central South Dakota from the early morning to the late evening hours causing some damage. In Pierre, the high winds blew a large tree down and tore loose a piece of the sheet metal cornice atop a downtown building. At the Legion Memorial Park in Moberge, the high winds knocked the centerfield lights to the ground. In Jones County, a semi-tractor trailer was blown over and damaged. A fishing tournament at Lake Oahe had to be postponed as a result of the high winds.

1876: A tornado, estimated at F3 intensity, tracked four miles across Chicago, Illinois. The damaged buildings included a candy factory, a hospital, a freight depot, and a church. The tornado moved out over Lake Michigan and was observed to have multiple vortices by a reporter. Further south in Illinois, a tornado blew a moving passenger train off the tracks near Neoga, injuring all 19 people aboard.

1933 - Charleston, SC, was deluged with 10.57 inches of rain, an all-time 24 hour record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1937: The German passenger airship LZ 129 Hindenburg caught fire and was destroyed during its attempt to dock with its mooring mast at Naval Air Station Lakehurst in Manchester Township, New Jersey, United States. Of the 97 people on board (36 passengers and 61 crewmen), there were 35 fatalities (13 passengers and 22 crewmen). One worker on the ground was also killed, making a total of 36 deaths. The Hindenburg was delayed two hours from docking due to thunderstorms in the area.

1975: A massive tornado hit Omaha, Nebraska killing three persons, injuring 133 others, and causing over 250 million dollars damage. The tornado struck during the late afternoon moving northeastward through the industrial and residential areas of west-central Omaha and lifting over the northern section of the city. The twister, which cut a swath ten miles long and as much as a quarter of a mile wide. It was the most costly in U.S. history up till that time.

1987 - Eighteen cities in California and Oregon reported record high temperatures for the date. Highs of 91 degrees at Portland OR, 101 degrees at Medford OR, and 104 degrees at Sacramento CA, were the warmest of record for so early in the season. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A major storm brought high winds to the western half of the country. A wind gust of 74 mph at Pueblo CO broke their May record established just four days earlier, and winds in the Arapahoe Ski Basin area of Colorado reached 85 mph. In North Dakota, the high winds reduced visibilities to near zero in blowing dust closing many roads. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Sixteen cities in the north central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Morning lows of 17 at Bismarck ND and 26 at Minneapolis MN were the coldest of record for so late in the season. A reading of 43 degrees at the start of the Kentucky Derby was the coldest in 115 years of records. Light snow was reported in the Upper Midwest, with an inch reported at Chicago IL. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Snow and high winds prevailed behind a Pacific cold front crossing the northwestern U.S. Wind gusts above 50 mph were reported in southeastern Idaho, and heavy snow blanketed the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, with twelve inches reported at Stampede Pass. (The National Weather Summary)

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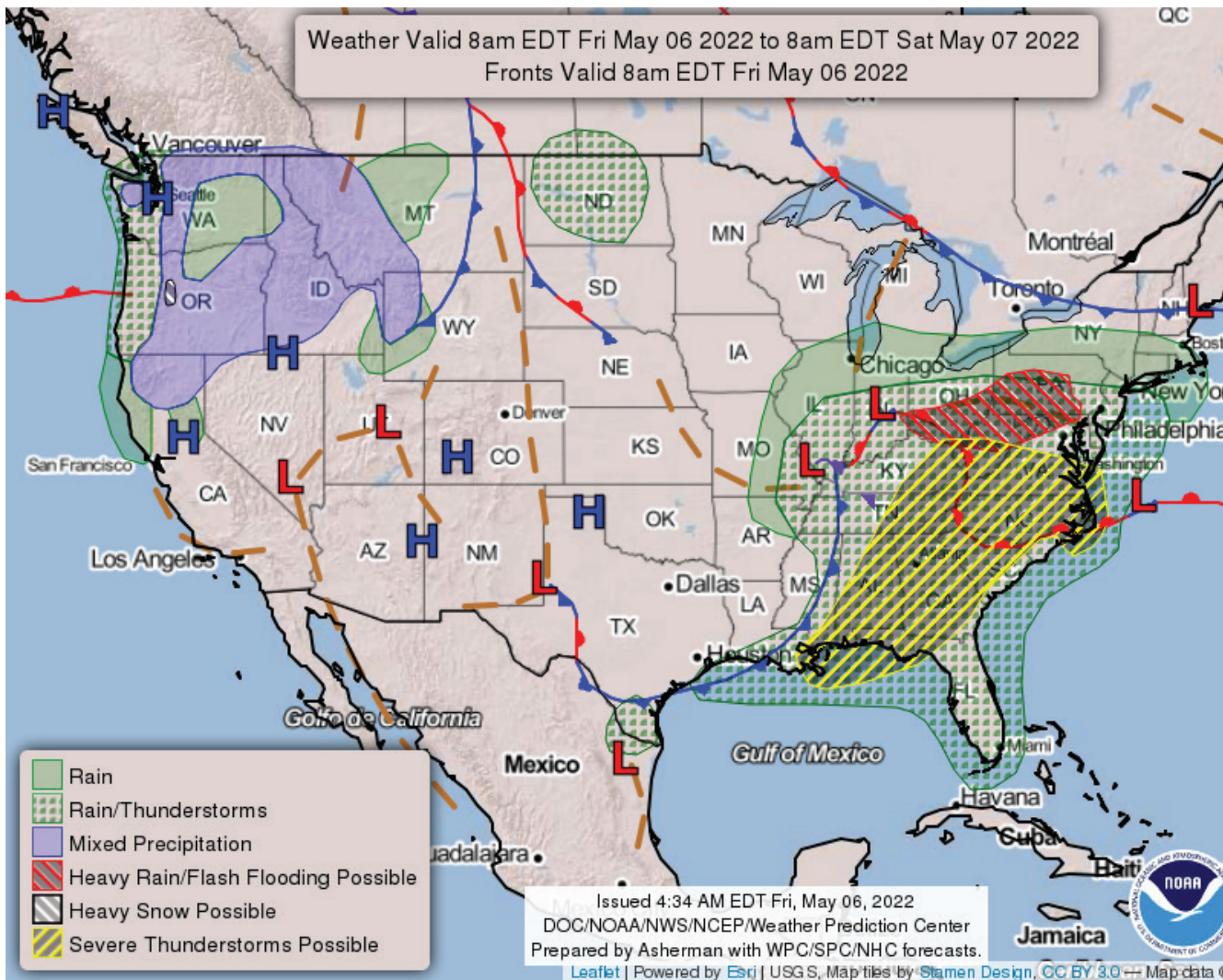
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 60 °F at 5:27 PM
Low Temp: 46 °F at 2:38 AM
Wind: 11 mph at 4:56 PM
Precip: 0.02

Day length: 14 hours, 35 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 93 in 2016
Record Low: 23 in 1931
Average High: 67°F
Average Low: 40°F
Average Precip in May.: 0.65
Precip to date in May.: 0.02
Average Precip to date: 4.62
Precip Year to Date: 6.52
Sunset Tonight: 8:46:48 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:09:49 AM



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TIME TO GET GOING

We've all heard phrases like, "Wow, that company is going places," or "That person is going to the top of the ladder," or "I wonder where they are going." Everyone seems to be going someplace to do something. But, what matters most is where they are going and what they are going to do when they get there.

Christians have responded to Christ's "come." Now that we have, we are commanded to "go!" with the specific responsibility to "make disciples."

The Psalmist was very direct when he addressed this "come" and then "go." He described it in these terms: "Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them."

When we "go," we are to "sow." God gave us the "seed" which is His Word for a purpose: We are not to store it in sacks in a warehouse, but to plant it in the hearts of those who are still seeking Him. Our hearts may become heavy, and tears may fill our eyes. But there is the assurance that our tears will be changed into songs of joy because His Word is true and will not return to Him void or without results. We are to sow the seed He gives us and allow Him the honor of the harvest - whatever that may be. Because it is His seed, we may never understand or know what the harvest will be. Though the work may be difficult and the results uncertain, the Lord is with us, and wherever He leads us, He will bless what we do for Him.

The assurance of God's blessing is a word of encouragement He offers us to be "sowers of His seed." We are not to sit idly by and wait for the results. We are to go and sow and pray and leave the harvest to Him. And, there will be a harvest if we are faithful "sowers." He promises that we will return from the field singing songs of joy bringing His sheaves with us.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to follow Your command - Your orders - to be faithful "sowers" of the "seed" and trust You for the results. Thank You for letting us be part of Your work. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. Psalm 126:6

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2022 Community Events

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

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News from the Associated Press

Major companies stay mum on thorny abortion issue - for now

By HALELUYA HADERO and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A leaked draft of a Supreme Court opinion that would abolish a nationwide right to abortion has thrust major companies into what's arguably the most divisive issue in American politics.

But while some are signaling support for abortion rights, many want to stay out of it — at least for now.

Experts say it's tough to navigate these waters. Companies are facing increasing pressure from social media and their own employees to speak out. And while some of them have weighed in on issues like LGBTQ rights, voting rights and gun control, the thorny issue of abortion could prove to be more challenging.

"This is the hottest of the hot potatoes," said Allen Adamson, co-founder of marketing consultancy Metaforce. "While lots of issues are polarizing, this is ground zero for polarization. People are fanatically passionate one way or another."

Despite the risks, major companies have waded into the abortion issue in the past. In 2019, more than 180 of them — including H&M, Slack and Glossier — signed an open letter that said restrictive abortion laws were against their values and "bad for business."

A similar letter was signed by more than 60 companies last year in response to a Texas law banning abortions after roughly six weeks of pregnancy, forcing some women to travel out-of-state to access the procedure. Among others, jeans maker Levi Strauss & Co., the online reviews site Yelp, banking giant Citigroup and ride-hailing company Lyft pledged to cover travel costs for employees who have to travel long distances to access an abortion.

When the report of the draft court opinion set off a political firestorm this week, a few companies issued statements supporting abortion rights but stopped short of taking further action themselves.

"Overturning Roe v. Wade will jeopardize the human rights of millions of women who stand to lose the liberty to make decisions over their own bodies," Yelp said in a statement. "Turning back the clock on the progress women have made over the past 50 years will have a seismic impact on our society and economy."

Many others have remained quiet. They include Netflix, PayPal, Microsoft, Patagonia, Target, Walmart and Apple, which is reportedly covering travel costs for its Texas workers through its medical insurance. Microsoft and the Chamber of Commerce, the world's largest business federation, said it had no comment; the rest did not respond to requests for comment. The Business Roundtable, which represents some of the country's most powerful companies, said it "does not have a position on this issue."

Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, also did not respond to an Associated Press request for comment, though its chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, posted on her personal social media accounts on Tuesday that the document represents a "scary day for women all across the country."

Adamson believes that many companies have held off weighing in on the Supreme Court's draft because they want to wait to see the court's final ruling.

"This gives companies a chance to think this through," he said, noting that companies need to make a decision based on what the majority of their employees want.

Over the past few years, companies have added their voices to the Black Lives Matter movement and issues like same-sex marriage. After the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, dozens pledged to halt donations to lawmakers who objected to Congress' certification of President Joe Biden's victory, promises that turned out to be largely empty.

But taking a stance on controversial issues is seemingly becoming more challenging, oftentimes pitting companies against Republican lawmakers who seem increasingly eager to push back.

Delta, which declined to comment on the abortion issue, was the subject of attacks by the Georgia GOP last year for its opposition to the state's restrictive voting rights bill. In response, Georgia's Republican-controlled House voted to revoke a jet fuel tax break that benefits the Atlanta-based company, an effort that ultimately fizzled.

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Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill last month to dissolve the private government Walt Disney World controls on its property in the state as retribution for the company's opposition to a new law critics have dubbed "Don't Say Gay." On Wednesday, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio introduced a bill that would prohibit companies from claiming tax deductions for their employees' abortion travel costs or "gender transition" expenses for employees' children.

State lawmakers are similarly taking aim at companies that offer help to women seeking abortions in states with less restrictive laws around abortions. Should Roe v. Wade get overturned, roughly half of states are likely to quickly ban abortion.

In March, Texas State Representative Briscoe Cain, a Republican, sent a cease-and-desist letter to Citigroup, saying he would propose legislation barring local governments in the state from doing business with any company that provides travel benefits for employees seeking abortions. If enacted, Cain said the bill would prevent the New York-based bank from underwriting municipal bonds in Texas unless the bank rescinds its policy.

In South Dakota, GOP Rep. Scott Odenbach suggested lawmakers might look at legislation to discourage companies from covering the costs of employees who travel to another state for an abortion, noting that the state's proximity to Minnesota, where abortion will remain legal even if Roe is undone, raises "cross-border issues."

David Levine, a professor at UC Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco, said the legality of what states can or can't do to regulate companies who cover such costs can get murky. He said the easiest thing lawmakers can do is to remove tax breaks offered to companies who cover them.

Businesses face tough choices if they continue to operate in states that legislatively ban abortion, agreed John E. Katsos, a research affiliate at Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland, who consults with multinational companies. Katsos predicted insurance companies would raise the premium rates of companies that operate in such states, because it costs more to insure a pregnant woman and children than to cover an abortion procedure.

Some corporations have long paid for their employees' travel-related expenses for surgeries out of state under their medical benefits, noted Katy Johnson, senior counsel of health policy at The American Benefits Council, a lobbying group in Washington, D.C. She said she has fielded more interest from companies since the abortion ban in Texas to cover travel expenses for abortion procedures.

State abortion bans might make it harder for companies located in such states to recruit college-educated workers at a time of severe labor shortages, some experts said. That might outweigh any special tax privileges that helped to entice companies to locate there.

"You would rather pay higher tax and have great people than struggle to recruit people to your headquarters in Texas," said Maurice Schweitzer, a professor at University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.

"College graduates will have a lot of choices. And I think there's going to be a stigma and an aversion to moving to states that have these draconian laws."

Eggers offers replacements for South Dakota banned books

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Best-selling author Dave Eggers is offering high school seniors in South Dakota's second-largest city free copies of his book "The Circle" and copies of four books by other authors that were removed from the district's schools.

School administrators in Rapid City deemed the books inappropriate for high school students and marked the district's copies as surplus to be destroyed.

"The mass destruction of books by school boards is an unconscionable horror, and the freethinking young people of South Dakota shouldn't be subjected to it," Eggers said. "Every high school student should have unfettered access to literature, so if you're a Rapid City high school senior, email our office and ask for any of these titles. For every copy the school board destroys, let's add a new one to the local circulation."

Valerie Brablec Seales, Rapid City Area Schools' director of Teaching, Learning and Innovation, told the Board of Education that teachers requested the books and were considering using them in a new 12th-grade

English course.

Seales didn't say why administrators objected to "The Circle," which satirizes cultures and values that have emerged in the internet age. But she said the first concerns about one of the five books were raised in August, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"The first question arose when one of the three high school principals sent me an image of a page in one of the books, an excerpt, and expressed concerns about not wanting it in their classrooms," she said Tuesday.

She said the books were ordered and sent to a warehouse before being distributed to the district's three high schools. Copies of the five books in question were then listed as surplus and marked "to be destroyed." The Board of Education on Tuesday voted to delay a decision to destroy the books in order to seek legal advice.

Eggers said Rapid City seniors can receive any of the books that were pulled from the high school at no cost to them by emailing Amanda Uhle at amanda@daveeggers.net. He said the books will be shipped to students by independent bookstores.

The other books that the district pulled are "How Beautiful We Were: A Novel" by Imbolo Mbue, which follows a young woman from a small African village who starts a revolution against an American oil company.

Also removed was "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic," a graphic memoir about author Alison Bechdel's fraught relationship with her late father, and "The Perks of Being a Wallflower" by Stephen Chbosky, which some schools elsewhere have banned because of its references to drug and alcohol use and sexual content.

The other book removed is the Booker prize-winning "Girl, Woman, Other: A Novel" by Bernardine Evaristo, which follows the lives and struggles of twelve characters, many of whom are Black British women.

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.

Two drugs are required. The first, mifepristone, blocks a hormone needed to maintain a pregnancy. A second drug, misoprostol, taken one to two days later, empties the uterus. Both drugs are available as generics and are also used to treat other conditions.

The FDA last year lifted a long-standing requirement that women pick up abortion pills in person. Federal regulations now also allow mail delivery nationwide. Even so, 19 states have passed laws requiring a medical clinician to be physically present when abortion pills are administered to a patient.

South Dakota is among them, joining several states, including Texas, Kentucky, Arkansas, Ohio, Tennessee and Oklahoma, where Republicans have moved to further restrict access to abortion pills in recent months.

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

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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."

Besides crossing state lines, women can also turn to international 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?"

Abortion law experts say it's an unsettled question whether states can restrict access to abortion pills in the wake of the FDA's decision.

"The general rule is that federal law preempts conflicting state law," said Laura Hermer, a professor at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota. "There is no question that the FDA has proper authority to regulate the drugs used in medication abortions. The question is whether a state can make a viable, winning argument that, for public health purposes, it needs to further regulate access to the relevant medications."

Hermer said she doesn't think there is a valid public health reason because the published evidence is that the drugs are "exceptionally safe." But if the Supreme Court overrules *Roe v. Wade* and a state gives embryos and fetuses full rights as people "then all bets would be off."

The Planned Parenthood regional organization that includes South Dakota doesn't believe it can legally mail abortion pills to patients there.

Telemedicine providers have to abide by the laws of the state where the patient is, said Dr. Sarah Traxler, chief medical officer for Planned Parenthood North Central States in St. Paul. She acknowledged that some organizations disagree. "But," she added, "we don't feel like we have liberty to mail pills from Minnesota to other places in the country where it's illegal to provide medication abortion."

Sue Leibel, the state policy director for Susan B. Anthony List, a prominent organization opposed to abortion, acknowledged that medication abortions have "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."

Leibel maintained women should not be prosecuted for seeking abortions, keeping with a long-standing principle of many abortion opponents. She 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 will turn their attention toward the women who get the pills.

Indeed, a Louisiana House committee advanced a bill Wednesday that would make abortion a crime of homicide for which a woman ending her pregnancy could be charged, along with anyone helping her.

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

A song with power: Ukraine's Eurovision entry unites nation

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

TURIN, Italy (AP) — Ukrainian band Kalush Orchestra's upbeat, melodic entry for this month's Eurovision Song Contest was written as a tribute to the frontman's mother.

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Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has become an anthem to the war-ravaged motherland.

"Stefania" is the most-watched song on YouTube among the 35 national entries that will compete in the Eurovision Song Contest next week in Italy's northern industrial city of Turin. While some oddsmakers and data analysts have pegged others to win, the song by Kalush Orchestra is quickly becoming a sentimental favorite.

"I'll always find my way home, even if all roads are destroyed," Kalush Orchestra frontman Oleh Psiuk wrote in "Stefania."

The lyrics have become more poignant as Russian missiles pound Ukrainian cities and villages, forcing over 11 million to flee the country already.

"Indeed, some stuff in here was written long before the war, and it was dedicated to my mother," Psiuk told The Associated Press at his hotel in Turin, wearing a bright bucket hat that makes him instantly recognizable to anyone who has streamed "Stefania."

"After it all started with the war and the hostilities, it took on additional meaning, and many people started seeing it as their mother, Ukraine, in the meaning of the country. It has become really close to the hearts of so many people in Ukraine," he said.

Mixing traditional Ukrainian folk music with hip hop, Kalush Orchestra's Eurovision performance will have an added political message, representing the uniqueness of Ukrainian culture against Russian President Vladimir Putin's bellicose claim that the former Soviet republic was always part of Russia.

"We ourselves show that Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian ethnic code exists," Psiuk said. "Our purpose is to make Ukrainian music popular, not only in Ukraine but all over Europe. And Eurovision is the best platform for that."

"Stefania" incorporates old Ukrainian melodies and unique musical pitches from a primitive, difficult-to-play woodwind called a telenka, played by lead singer Tymofii Muzychuk.

The band members mix break dancing with Hopak, a Ukrainian folk dance, in an energetic performance punctuated by Psiuk's rap interludes. Costumes feature embroidered Cossack shirts and vests mixed with contemporary streetwear.

Psiuk and five bandmates, all men between the ages of 21 to 35, received special permission from Ukrainian authorities to travel to Turin to participate in Eurovision, traveling by land to Poland and then flying to Italy. One original band member stayed behind to fight.

Psiuk, 27, left behind a network of volunteers he organized two days into the war to help mete out logistical help to people across Ukraine seeking shelter or transport.

All will return to Ukraine when the song contest finishes.

"We feel a big responsibility," Psiuk said. "It's very important for us to be as useful to the country as possible. We want to represent our country decently."

Kalush Orchestra is more than just a musical group. It is a cultural project that includes folklore scholars and purposefully combines hip hop with traditional Ukrainian music, dance and costumes, some long-forgotten, according to Psiuk.

The 6-month-old project takes its name from Psiuk's hometown of Kalush, which is tucked in the Carpathian Mountains, south of the western city of Lviv. It's an evolution from the original Kalush hip hop group that Psiuk also fronted.

After Russia's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's entry to the Eurovision was kicked out of the contest in a move organizers said aimed to keep politics out of the hugely popular event, which was viewed last year by 183 million people.

Psiuk said Russia's exclusion from Eurovision, along with other cultural and sporting events, could send a message to Russians "who may say they do not understand the situation in full ... that there is a reason that the whole world, Europe, is banning them."

Ukraine first joined the Eurovision Song Contest 19 years ago. It has won twice since, both times with songs performed primarily in Ukrainian: by Ruslana in 2004 and Jamala in 2016.

Psiuk attributes Ukraine's success to "the peculiar character that our music has."

"I really hope that after we perform it at the Eurovision Song Contest, Ukrainian music will be even more

popular and heard," Psiuk said.

SpaceX brings 4 astronauts home, then launches 53 satellites

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — SpaceX brought four astronauts home with a midnight splashdown in the Gulf of Mexico on Friday, capping the busiest month yet for Elon Musk's taxi service.

The three U.S. astronauts and one German in the capsule were bobbing off the Florida coast, near Tampa, less than 24 hours after leaving the International Space Station. NASA expected to have them back in Houston later in the morning.

"That was a great ride," said Raja Chari, the capsule commander. As for the reintroduction to gravity, he noted: "Only one complaint. These water bottles are super heavy."

NASA's Chari, Tom Marshburn and Kayla Barron, and the European Space Agency's Matthias Maurer, were out of the capsule within an hour of splashdown, waving and giving thumbs-up as they were hustled away on rolling chaises for medical checks.

Their departure from the space station Thursday was bittersweet, as they embraced the seven astronauts remaining there.

"It's the end of a six-month mission, but I think the space dream lives on," Maurer said.

SpaceX brought up their U.S. and Italian replacements last week, after completing a charter trip to the station for a trio of businessmen.

That amounts to two crew launches and two splashdowns in barely a month. Musk's company has now launched 26 people into orbit in less than two years, since it started ferrying astronauts for NASA. Eight of those 26 were space tourists.

SpaceX's William Gerstenmaier, a vice president, acknowledges it's "a pretty exciting time."

Barely five hours after splashdown, the company founded by Musk in 2002 launched a fresh batch of its own internet satellites known as Starlinks from Cape Canaveral. There were 53 of the mini flat-panel satellites in this predawn load.

"Satellites are nice, but flying people are a little special and a little bit different, and the team here sure understands that," he told reporters. "There's a sense of relief and a sense of accomplishment that you know you've done something good."

NASA is more impressed than ever, given SpaceX's unprecedented pace. The only problem of note in the latest flight was a mechanical nut that wiggled loose and floated away from the SpaceX capsule following Thursday's undocking. Officials assured everyone it would not pose a danger to the space station.

"Look at all this work in the last month," said Kathy Lueders, NASA's space operations mission chief. "I really want to personally thank SpaceX for just, wow, just performing such seamless operations on all those missions."

The astronauts said their mission was highlighted by the three visitors and their ex-astronaut escort who dropped by in April, opening up NASA's side of the station to paying guests after decades of resistance.

On the down side, they had to contend with a dangerous spike in space junk after Russia blew up a satellite in a missile test in mid-November. More than 1,500 pieces of shrapnel spread across Earth's orbit for years to come.

While the war in Ukraine has caused tensions between the U.S. and Russia, the astronauts have stood by their Russian crewmates, and vice versa. Flight controllers in Houston and Moscow also continued to cooperate as always, according to NASA officials.

As he relinquished command of the space station earlier this week, Marshburn called it "a place of peace" and said international cooperation would likely be its lasting legacy. Russian Oleg Artemyev, the new commander, also emphasized the "peace between our countries, our friendship" in orbit and described his crewmates as brothers and sisters.

Up there now are three Russians, three Americans and one Italian.

It was Marshburn's third spaceflight, and the first for the three returning with him. Chari and Barron's next

stop could be the moon; they are among 18 U.S. astronauts picked for NASA's Artemis moon-landing program. Two others in that elite group are now at the space station.

Israel searches for attackers who killed 3 in mass stabbing

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli security forces took part in a massive manhunt Friday for two Palestinians suspected of carrying out a stabbing rampage near Tel Aviv that left three Israelis dead.

The stabbing on Thursday, Israel's Independence Day, was the latest in a series of deadly assaults deep inside the country in recent weeks. It came as Israeli-Palestinian tensions were already heightened by violence at a major holy site in Jerusalem sacred to Jews and Muslims.

Police said they were searching for two suspects, 19 and 20 years old, from the town of Jenin in the occupied West Bank, which has re-emerged as a militant bastion in the latest wave of violence — the worst Israel has seen in years. Several attackers have come from in or around Jenin, and Israeli forces have launched arrest raids that have ignited gunbattles there.

"We will get our hands on the terrorists and their supportive environment, and they will pay the price," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said after huddling with senior security officials late Thursday. Authorities said the attackers fled in a vehicle.

Medics described a horrific scene in Elad, an ultra-Orthodox town near Tel Aviv. In addition to the three killed, four others were wounded, one of them critically.

Israeli media identified those killed as Yonatan Havakuk, Boaz Gol and Oren Ben Yiftah, three fathers in their 30s and 40s who together are survived by 16 children. Funerals will be held on Friday.

Ben Yiftah, 35 years old and the father of six, was from the central city of Lod. The city's mayor, Yair Revivo, said "our heart breaks into tiny pieces" in a Facebook post, calling it a "great tragedy."

Israel marked its Independence Day on Thursday, a festive national holiday in which people typically hold barbecues and attend air shows.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz extended a closure on the West Bank, imposed ahead of the holiday to prevent Palestinians from entering Israel, to remain in effect until Sunday.

In Washington, Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned the "horrific attack targeting innocent men and women."

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose government administers autonomous zones in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and cooperates with Israel on security, also condemned the attack.

"The killing of Palestinian and Israeli civilians leads only to more deterioration at a time when all of us try to achieve stability and prevent escalation," the official Wafa news agency quoted him as saying.

The Palestinian militant group Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, praised the attack and linked it to violence at the Jerusalem holy site.

"The storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque can't go unpunished," Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said. "The heroic operation in Tel Aviv is a practical translation of what the resistance had warned against."

The Al-Aqsa Mosque compound is the third holiest site in Islam and is built on a hilltop that is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount. It lies at the emotional heart of the conflict, and Palestinians and Israeli police have clashed there repeatedly in recent weeks.

Under informal arrangements known as the status quo, Jews are allowed to visit the site but not pray there. In recent years, they have visited in ever-increasing numbers with police escorts and many have discreetly prayed, angering the Palestinians as well as neighboring Jordan, which is the custodian of the site. The Palestinians have long feared that Israel plans to eventually take over the site or partition it.

Israel says it is committed to maintaining the status quo, and accuses Hamas of inciting the recent violence.

At least 18 Israelis have been killed in five attacks since March, including another stabbing rampage in southern Israel, two shootings in the Tel Aviv area, and a shooting last weekend in a West Bank settlement.

Nearly 30 Palestinians have died in violence — most of whom had carried out attacks or were involved in confrontations with Israeli forces in the West Bank. But an unarmed woman and two apparent bystanders

were also among those killed, and rights groups say Israel often uses excessive force.

Israel and Hamas fought an 11-day war a year ago, fueled in large part by similar unrest in Jerusalem.

Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem — which includes Al-Aqsa and other major religious sites sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims — in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories to form their future state. The last serious peace talks collapsed more than a decade ago.

Police boss journal cites early angst in Ronald Greene death

By JAKE BLEIBERG and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

Within days of the deadly 2019 arrest of Ronald Greene, when body-camera video captured white troopers stunning, beating and dragging the Black motorist, the head of the Louisiana State Police wrote a stark note about the case in his journal: "Realize there is a problem — must address immediately."

But well over a year went by — 462 days to be exact — before Col. Kevin Reeves opened an internal investigation into the actions of the troopers involved, including one who was recorded boasting he "beat the ever-living f--- out of" Greene.

Eleven pages from Reeves' three journals were released Thursday in response to a subpoena from a legislative committee looking into a possible cover-up of the case. And the panel's chairman says the troubling questions raised by those few pages were enough to demand that Reeves comply by turning over all his journals, with a threat of contempt charges if he doesn't.

"The documents themselves show that Colonel Reeves knew early on that there was an issue and considered possible measures to address it but ultimately didn't," Republican state Rep. Tanner Magee said. "This committee has sought to figure out why."

While the handwritten pages are in places difficult to decipher, a page of notes dated just 12 days after Greene's death are clear, a to-do list of possible actions in response to the case: suspending officers or putting them on administrative leave, opening up an internal probe and conducting a video audit of Master Trooper Chris Hollingsworth, who boasted of beating Greene and had a history of turning off his body-camera video.

Reeves, who described Greene's death as "awful but lawful" and stepped down in late 2020 amid criticism, has sought to downplay his own involvement in the case.

His attorney, Lewis Unglesby, said the delays in the Greene case "are not at the foot at all of Kevin Reeves," saying it fell to his subordinates to get to the bottom of what happened. "There's a difference between 'This is what I want y'all to do' and 'I'm going to do it.'"

Greene's May 10, 2019, death has been shrouded in secrecy and accusations of cover-up from the beginning, when authorities told grieving relatives and put in initial reports that the 49-year-old died in a car crash at the end of a high-speed chase near Monroe.

The Associated Press last year obtained long withheld body-camera video that showed what really happened: Troopers swarming Greene's car, stunning him repeatedly, punching him in the head, dragging him by his ankle shackles and leaving him prone on the ground for more than nine minutes. At times, Greene could be heard pleading for mercy and wailing, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared."

Coming up on the three-year anniversary of Greene's death, still no charges have been filed in the case despite a federal civil rights investigation, a separate state criminal probe and the legislative investigation.

The bipartisan legislative committee formed in February in response to an AP report that Reeves informed Gov. John Bel Edwards within hours that troopers arresting Greene had engaged in a "violent, lengthy struggle." Yet the Democrat stayed mostly silent on the case for two years as state troopers continued to raise the car crash theory, which was later debunked by a new autopsy commissioned by the FBI.

The governor has said that he held off on speaking out about the troopers' actions — even after privately watching graphic body camera footage of the arrest — because of the ongoing federal investigation. He's since called the actions of the troopers involved criminal and racist.

For weeks, the eight-member legislative panel has been interviewing state police and other officials in a bid to reconstruct the agency's handling of the case. Last week, one senior state police official told lawmakers he was "mystified" that no troopers have yet faced criminal charges. Another ranking official described

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Greene's fatal arrest as "a complete disregard for the sanctity of human life."

Lawmakers have said they intend to investigate what Edwards knew and when he knew it, but no one on his staff has yet been called to testify.

UK Conservatives lose London strongholds, in blow to Johnson

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's governing Conservatives suffered local election losses in their few London strongholds, according to results announced Friday that will pile more pressure on Prime Minister Boris Johnson amid ethics scandals and a worsening economic picture.

Voting held Thursday for thousands of seats on more than 200 local councils decided who will oversee garbage collection and the filling of potholes, but were also seen as an important barometer of public opinion ahead of the next national election, which must be held by 2024.

The main opposition Labour Party, which has been out of power nationally since 2010, won control of Wandsworth, Barnet and Westminster, three London boroughs long held by the Conservatives.

Johnson's party also lost ground to the centrist Liberal Democrats in the Conservatives' southern England heartlands, where many middle-class voters are opposed to Brexit and dismayed by rule-breaking and sexual misconduct allegations swirling around Johnson and other senior Tories.

With results from about half of England announced Friday morning, Labour had not made big gains outside of the capital, especially in working-class northern England — areas that Johnson successfully wooed in the 2019 general election with promises to improve local economies and opportunities after Britain's exit from the European Union.

Conservative Party chairman Oliver Dowden acknowledged the results in London were "difficult" but said the "more mixed picture" elsewhere showed Labour did not have the momentum to win the next general election.

Labour's national campaign coordinator, Shabana Mahmood, argued that the results showed Labour was building a solid foundation to regain power after four successive national election defeats.

"Labour is making headway ... taking over key Conservative councils and winning in vital Parliamentary battlegrounds across the country," she said.

"This is a big turning point for us," Labour leader Keir Starmer said. "We've changed Labour, and now we're seeing the results of that."

Under Starmer's hard-left predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, fighting between Labour's left-wing and more centrist wings roiled the party, which suffered its worst election defeat in more than 80 years to Johnson's Conservatives in 2019.

Voting results were still to come Friday from the rest of England, and all of Scotland and Wales. 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.

Across the U.K., election campaigns were 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

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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 could lead Conservatives to try to replace Johnson with a less tarnished leader.

Dowden, the party chairman, acknowledged there had been “challenging headlines for the past few months.”

“But I do think that set against all of that, those sort of challenges that you would expect after 12 years in office, these are challenging results, but we have made progress in lots of places,” he told Sky News.

“Labour are certainly not on the path to power and I believe that Boris Johnson does have the leadership skills, in particular the energy and the dynamism that we need during this difficult period of time.”

Europe’s farmers stir up biogas to offset Russian energy

By JOHN LEICESTER and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

SONCHAMP, France (AP) — In lush fields southwest of Paris, farmers are joining Europe’s fight to free itself from Russian gas.

They’ll soon turn on the tap of a new facility where crops and agricultural waste are mashed up and fermented to produce “biogas.” It’s among energy solutions being promoted on the continent that wants to choke off funding for Russia’s war in Ukraine by no longer paying billions for Russian fossil fuels.

Small rural gas plants that provide energy for hundreds or thousands of nearby homes aren’t — at least anytime soon — going to supplant the huge flows to Europe of Russian gas that powers economies, factories, business and homes. And critics of using crops to make gas argue that farmers should be concentrating on growing food — especially when prices are soaring amid the fallout of the war in Ukraine, one of the world’s breadbaskets.

Still, biogas is part of the puzzle of how to reduce Europe’s energy dependence.

The European Biogas Association says the European Union could quickly scale up the production of bio-methane, which is pumped into natural gas networks. An investment of 83 billion euros (\$87.5 billion) — which, at current market prices, is less than the EU’s 27 nations pay per year to Russia for piped natural gas — would produce a tenfold increase in bio-methane production by 2030 and could replace about a fifth of what the bloc imported from Russia last year, the group says.

The farmers around the Paris-region village of Sonchamp feel their new gas plant will do its bit to untie Europe from the Kremlin.

“It’s not coherent to go and buy gas from those people who are waging war on our friends,” said Christophe Robin, one of the plant’s six investors, who farms wheat, rapeseed, sugar beets and chickens.

“If we want to consume green (energy) and to avoid the flows and contribution of Russian gas, we don’t really have a choice. We have to find alternative solutions,” he said.

Biogas is made by fermenting organic materials — generally crops and waste. Robin likened the process to food left too long in a container.

“When you open it, it goes ‘Poof.’ Only here, we don’t open it. We collect the gas that comes from the fermentation,” he said.

The gas from their plant could meet the needs of 2,000 homes. It will be purified into bio-methane and injected into a pipeline to the nearby town of Rambouillet, heating its hospital, swimming pool and homes.

“It’s cool,” said Robin. “The kids will benefit from local gas.”

Like in the rest of Europe, the production of bio-methane in France is still small. But it is booming. Almost three bio-methane production sites are going online every week in France on average and their numbers have surged from just 44 at the end of 2017 to 365 last year. The volume of gas they produced for the national network almost doubled in 2021 compared to the previous year and was enough for 362,000 homes.

France’s government has taken several steps to quicken bio-methane development since Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. The industry says bio-methane met almost 1% of France’s needs in 2021 but that will increase to at least 2% this year and it could make up 20% of French gas consumption by 2030, which would

be more gas than France imported last year from Russia.

The Sonchamp farmers took out 5 million euros (\$5.3 million) in loans and received a 1-million-euro state subsidy to build their plant, Robin said. They signed a 15-year contract with utility firm Engie, with a fixed price for their gas. That will limit their ability to profit from high gas prices now but ensures them a stable income.

"We're not going to be billionaires," said Robin.

Workers are finishing the construction and the plant is almost ready to be connected to the network. Piles of agricultural waste — wheat husks, pulped sugar beets, onion peelings, even chicken droppings — have been prepared to be fed into the giant bubble-like fermentation tanks.

Winter barley specially grown to make gas will make up about 80% of the 30 tons of organic material that will be fed each day into the plant.

Robin insists that the barley won't interfere with the growing of other crops for food, which critics worry about. Instead of one food crop per year, they'll now have three harvests every two years — with the barley as extra, sandwiched in between, Robin said.

In Germany, the biggest biogas producer in Europe, the government is cutting down on crop cultivation for fuels. The share of corn permitted in biogas facilities will be lowered from 40% to 30% by 2026. Financial incentives will be provided so operators use waste products such as manure and straw instead.

Germany is estimated to have over 9,500 plants, many of them small-scale units supplying rural villages with heat and electricity.

Andrea Horbelt, a spokeswoman for the German biogas association, said the production of bio-methane could be doubled in a matter of years but also wouldn't be cheap.

"Using biogas for electricity is more expensive than solar and wind, and will always remain so," she said.

At the end of their gas-making process, the Sonchamp farmers will also get nitrogen- and potassium-rich wastes from the fermenters that they'll use to fertilize their fields, reducing their consumption of industrial fertilizer.

"It's a circular economy and it's green. That pleases me," Robin said. "It's a superb adventure."

Defenders inside Ukrainian steel mill refuse to surrender

By JON GAMBRELL and CARA ANNA Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian fighters battling Russian forces in the tunnels beneath Mariupol's immense steel plant refused to surrender in the face of relentless attacks, with the wife of one commander saying they had vowed to "stand till the end."

The fight in the last Ukrainian stronghold of the strategic port city reduced to ruins by the Russian onslaught appeared increasingly desperate amid growing speculation that President Vladimir Putin wants to present the Russian people with a battlefield triumph — or announce an escalation of the war — in time for Victory Day on Monday.

"They won't surrender," Kateryna Prokopenko said Thursday after speaking by phone to her husband, a leader of the steel plant defenders. "They only hope for a miracle."

She said her husband, Azov Regiment commander Denys Prokopenko, told her he would love her forever. "I am going mad from this. It seemed like words of goodbye," she said.

The Ukrainian military's General Staff said Friday that "the blockade of units of the defense forces in the Azovstal area continues" and that the Russians, with aviation support, had resumed assault operations to take control of the sprawling plant.

Monday's Victory Day is the biggest patriotic holiday on the Russian calendar, marking the Soviet Union's triumph over Nazi Germany. But as long as Ukrainians resist the takeover of the plant, "Russian losses will continue to build and frustrate their operational plans in southern Donbas," the British Defense Ministry said in an assessment.

Some 2,000 Ukrainian fighters, by Russia's most recent estimate, were holed up in a maze of tunnels and bunkers beneath Azovstal steelworks. A few hundred civilians were also believed trapped there.

"There are many wounded (fighters), but they are not surrendering," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zel-

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enskyy said in his nightly video address. "They are holding their positions."

"Just imagine this hell! And there are children there," he said. "More than two months of constant shelling, bombing, constant death."

The Russians managed to get inside the plant Wednesday with the help of an electrician who knew the layout, said Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's Internal Affairs Ministry.

"He showed them the underground tunnels which are leading to the factory," Gerashchenko said in a video.

Zelenskyy said the attack was preventing evacuation of the remaining civilians, even as U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said another attempt was underway. "We must continue to do all we can to get people out of these hellscapes," Guterres said.

The Kremlin denied its troops were storming the plant and has demanded the Ukrainians surrender. They have refused. Russia has also accused the fighters of preventing the civilians from leaving.

The fall of Mariupol 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 eastern industrial region that the Kremlin says is now its chief objective.

Capt. Sviatoslav Palamar, deputy commander of the Azov Regiment, pleaded on Ukrainian TV for the evacuation of civilians and wounded fighters from the steelworks, saying soldiers were "dying in agony due to the lack of proper treatment."

More than 100 civilians were rescued from the steelworks over the weekend. But many previous attempts to open safe corridors from Mariupol have fallen through, with Ukraine blaming shelling and firing by the Russians.

Meanwhile, 10 weeks into the devastating war, Ukraine's military claimed it recaptured some areas in the south and repelled other attacks in the east, further frustrating Putin's ambitions after his abortive attempt to seize Kyiv. Ukrainian and Russian forces are fighting village by village.

The General Staff in Kyiv said Russian forces were conducting surveillance flights, and in the hard-hit areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukrainian forces repulsed 11 attacks and destroyed tanks and armored vehicles. Russia gave no immediate acknowledgement of those losses.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Russian forces are making only "plodding" progress in the Donbas.

There are growing suggestions that Ukraine might try to widen its push to seize more territory from Russia outside of Kharkiv, its second-largest city.

Ukrainian chief of defense, Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, said Thursday that a counteroffensive could begin to push Russian forces away from Kharkiv and Izyum, which has been a key node in Russia's control of the eastern cauldron. Ukraine in recent days has driven Russian troops some 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of Kharkiv, which has been repeatedly struck by Russian shelling.

Additional Ukrainian advances may spare the city from artillery strikes, as well as force Moscow to divert troops from other areas of the front line.

On Thursday, an American official said the U.S. shared intelligence with Ukraine about the location of a Russian flagship before the mid-April strike that sank it, one of Moscow's highest-profile failures in the war.

The U.S. has provided "a range of intelligence" that includes locations of warships, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. The official said the decision to target the missile cruiser Moskva was purely a Ukrainian decision.

Fearful of new attacks surrounding Victory Day, the mayor of the western Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk urged residents to leave for the countryside over the long weekend and warned them not to gather in public places.

And the southeastern city of Zaporizhzhia, a key transit point for evacuees from Mariupol, announced a curfew from Sunday evening through Tuesday morning.

Mariupol, which had a prewar population of over 400,000, has come to symbolize the misery inflicted by the war. The siege of the city has trapped perhaps 100,000 civilians with little food, water, medicine or heat.

As the battle raged there, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Russian bombardment Thursday hit dozens of Ukrainian military targets, including troop concentrations in the east,

an artillery battery near the eastern settlement of Zarozhne and rocket launchers near the southern city of Mykolaiv.

The war has devastated Ukraine's medical infrastructure, Zelenskyy said in a video link to a charity event in the U.K. Nearly 400 health care facilities have been damaged or destroyed, he said.

"There is simply a catastrophic situation regarding access to medical services and medicines," in areas occupied by Russian forces, he said. "Even the simplest drugs are lacking."

With the challenge of mine-clearing and rebuilding after the war in mind, Zelenskyy announced the launch of a global fundraising platform called United24.

At the same time, Poland hosted an international donor conference that raised \$6.5 billion in humanitarian aid. The gathering was attended by prime ministers and ambassadors from many European countries, as well as representatives of other nations and some businesses.

In addition, a Ukrainian cabinet body began to develop proposals for a comprehensive postwar reconstruction plan, while Zelenskyy also urged Western allies to put forward a program similar to the post-World War II Marshall Plan plan to help Ukraine rebuild.

Growing African mangrove forests aim to combat climate woes

By WANJOHI KABUKURU Associated Press

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) — In a bid to protect coastal communities from climate change and encourage investment, African nations are increasingly turning to mangrove restoration projects, with Mozambique becoming the latest addition to the growing list of countries with large scale mangrove initiatives.

Mozambique follows efforts across the continent — including in Kenya, Madagascar, Gambia and Senegal — and is touted as the world's largest coastal or marine ecosystem carbon storage project. Known as blue carbon, carbon captured by these ecosystems can sequester, or remove, carbon dioxide from the atmosphere at a faster rate than forests, despite being smaller in size.

Mozambique's mangrove restoration project — announced in February alongside its UAE-based partner Blue Forest Solutions — hopes to turn 185,000 hectares (457,100 acres) in the central Zambezia and southern Sofala provinces into a forest which could capture up to 500,000 tons of carbon dioxide, according to project leaders.

"Blue carbon can be utilized not only to sequester tons of carbon dioxide but to also improve the lives of coastal communities," Vahid Fotuhi, the Chief Executive officer of Blue Forest, told the Associated Press. "There are around one million hectares of mangroves forests in Africa. Collectively they're able to sequester more carbon dioxide than the total annual emissions of a country like Croatia or Bolivia." He added these projects would create green jobs and promote biodiversity.

Africa's major mangrove forests have been decimated in recent decades due to logging, fish farming, coastal development, and pollution, leading to increased blue carbon emissions and greater exposure of vulnerable coastal communities to flooding and other threats to livelihood.

But the continent's growing attention on mangrove restoration can be attributed in part to the successful Mikoko Pamoja project, initiated in 2013 in Kenya's Gazi Bay, which protected 117 hectares (289 acres) of mangrove forest and replanted 4,000 trees annually, spurring other countries to also address their damaged coastal land and recreate its success.

Mikoko Pamoja, Swahili for 'mangroves together', centered its efforts around protecting the small communities in Gazi and Makongeni villages from coastal erosion, loss of fish and climate change. It was dubbed the "world's first blue carbon project" and earned the community of just 6,000 global fame, accolades, carbon cash and greater living standards.

"Mikoko Pamoja has led to development of projects in the community, including installation of water," Iddi Bomani, the village chairperson of the Gazi community, said. "Everyone has water available in their houses."

"It especially leads to improved livelihoods through job creation when done by communities," Laitani Suleiman, a committee member of the Mikoko Pamoja, added.

Several other projects have come to fruition since. In Senegal, 79 million replanted mangrove trees are

projected to store 500,000 tons of carbon over the next 20 years. Neighboring Gambia launched its own reforestation effort in 2017, with Madagascar following suit with its own preservation project two years later. Egypt is planning its mangrove restoration project ahead of hosting the United Nations climate conference in November this year.

The projects have sparked a clamor for the sale of carbon credits, a type of permit that allows for a certain amount of emissions as remuneration for forest restoration or other carbon offset projects. Gabon was offered a recent pay package of \$17 million through the Central African Forest Initiative due to its protection efforts, but complaints persist on the low prices offered to African governments.

"Africa remains excluded from a lot of financing available under climate change," Jean Paul Adam, head of the climate division at the Economic Commission for Africa, said, adding that a lack of financing means nations on the continent are unable to build up their resilience to climate change.

He added that "nature-based solutions and advocating for a fair development price of carbon" would propel the African economy.

And the benefits of reforestation can be significant, according to Coral Reef Alliance's Marissa Stein.

"Restoring and protecting our marine habitats plays a key role in maintaining the health of our planet," she said, adding that mangroves alone store up to four times more carbon per hectare than tropical rainforests. The Global Mangroves Alliance also estimates that mangroves reduce damages and flood risk for 15 million people and can prevent over \$65 billion of property damage each year.

Flowers in the rubble: Ukrainian woman sees a sliver of hope

By ELENA BECATOROS and EMILIO MORENATTI Associated Press

IRPIN, Ukraine (AP) — There are no walls any longer. The broad wooden roof beams lie splintered and scattered, and random pieces of clothing dangle from damaged water pipes. But among the rubble of what used to be her home, the house that her grandparents built, Anna Shevchenko sees a glimmer of hope.

There, among the twisted metal and broken bricks of her former life in Irpin, stood the slender stalk of one of her beloved lilies. A bit further, some roses had survived. A small bunch of daffodils and a tiny peony poked through the destruction, battered but not broken. And her tulips are starting to bloom.

"I saw a photo of the house," said Shevchenko, who had fled the town on the outskirts of Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, nearly two weeks before the bombs rained down. "I tried to prepare myself to see it with my own eyes. And then the next moment — I looked and I saw the flowers."

"It was new life," she said. "So I tried to save my flowers."

A piece of concrete piping now serves as protection for the peony, which has sprouted new leaves. She pushed a giant piece of hard plastic off her gently blossoming peach tree and tenderly watered a single lily shoot peeping from beneath a slab of concrete. The orchids inside her home were long dead, but outside, her bright red tulips had escaped unscathed.

By the time the harsh Ukrainian winter began turning into spring, Shevchenko's family had already paid a heavy price in Russia's war against Ukraine. On the same day they lost their home, Shevchenko's father lost his leg to an explosion as he tried to flee Irpin. An active man in his early 60s who loved to cycle, he now barely leaves the apartment that Shevchenko's friends are letting the family stay in since he was released from the hospital.

When the family fled Irpin around March 10, Shevchenko said her father stayed behind, hoping to save his house.

"My grandparents built this house, brick by brick," the 35-year-old literature teacher explained.

As the shelling intensified and Russian troops, who once occupied parts of Irpin in a failed attempt to advance on Kyiv, came ever closer to their neighborhood, Shevchenko's father realized he had to leave.

He hasn't described how he was wounded to his daughter yet, she said, but she knows he was hit by an explosion as he sat in a car trying to evacuate. He lost his right leg above the knee. The part the doctors did save was badly broken and is still held together by an external metal rod screwed into his thigh.

He hasn't yet seen what became of his home — or his bike, which lies smashed under piles of bricks in what

used to be his front garden.

Her grandparents built one part of the house for her mother, then added on another for her uncle, which Shevchenko had been living in. While that part is damaged, the main house has been totally destroyed. As she surveyed the site on a sunny May afternoon, she wondered whether it was possible to save anything or if the entire house should be razed and rebuilt.

Still, despite her father's horrific injury, at least they were all still alive, she said.

Gardening was Shevchenko's favorite hobby, her way of relaxing. Now as she watches new life emerge from the earth amid so much destruction, it gives her hope for the future.

"We have another chance," she said. "To live."

New reparations focus: Black enclaves lost to development

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Terrell Osborne knows well what happens when urban renewal comes to communities of color.

As a child growing up in Providence, Rhode Island, in the 1950s and 1960s, huge swaths of his neighborhood of Lippitt Hill, a center of Black life at the foot of the stately homes of the city's elite East Side, were taken by eminent domain for redevelopment projects.

Hundreds of Black families and dozens of minority small businesses across some 30 acres were bulldozed. In their place rose an apartment complex catering to downtown workers and students and faculty at nearby Brown University, as well as a shopping plaza now anchored by a Whole Foods and a Starbucks.

Meanwhile, Black families like the Osbornes were scattered across the city and never compensated.

"We had stores. People owned things. Money was circulating around," said Osborne, who now lives on Providence's South Side. "There was a whole community there, and they just took that neighborhood and we never got anything for it. Not even as much as a thank you."

As Providence gears up to provide reparations to Black residents for centuries of injustices, city officials are looking beyond the city's leading role in the Colonial transatlantic slave trade.

They're looking to atone, at least initially, for what happened during urban renewal efforts of the late 20th century, a period that saw Black and Native American communities such as Lippitt Hill razed to make way for new residential and business developments that paved the way for the city's modern economy, anchored around its universities and hospitals.

The approach builds off the blueprint in Evanston, a Chicago suburb that became the first in the nation to begin paying reparations last year with a program providing Black residents grants for mortgage payments and home repairs, in acknowledgement of the historic discrimination Black people endured when trying to buy homes.

By making progress on such modern day wrongs, communities can hopefully start to overcome longstanding resistance to reparations, says Justin Hansford, a professor at Howard University's law school who spearheads the African American Redress Network, which tracks reparations efforts nationwide.

Local cities and towns, college and even states are increasingly taking up reparations as efforts at the federal level have gone nowhere. Harvard University announced last week it'll spend \$100 million to atone for its slave ties while California is pioneering a statewide task force on reparations.

"We know its a losing conversation to talk about slavery in the 1600s," said Raymond "Two Hawks" Watson, a member of Providence's recently formed reparations commission whose family has long lived in the Lippitt Hill area. "But we also know we don't have to go that far back. We know what happened with urban renewal and we can see what's happening with gentrification. We're able to show this is just a continuation of what's been going on for centuries."

Providence's efforts also notably look to use some \$15 million in federal COVID-19 funds to jump-start reparations work, something other city leaders have pursued recently.

In Athens, Georgia, Mayor Kelly Girtz says his proposed budget calls for using pandemic relief money to establish a housing fund for Black residents akin to Evanston's. Athens, like Providence, seeks to atone for

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the razing of the Black neighborhood of Linnentown to make way for University of Georgia dormitories and parking lots in the 1960s.

In Providence, centuries of discrimination have left communities of color far poorer than white enclaves: Median household income on the affluent, largely white East Side is nearly \$180,000 a year, compared to nearly \$19,000 in the city's predominantly Black and Latino South Side.

On Lippitt Hill, families weren't compensated but instead offered priority in claiming a unit in the new residential development, which became known as University Heights, says Osborne. But the modern apartments were financially out of reach for most.

Cheryl Taylor, whose family was forced to move and shutter their repair business on Lippitt Hill to make way for another development, hopes the reparations process can help Black residents purchase their own homes. The few like her who remain living nearby are renters in an increasingly unaffordable part of town.

"They're all white. I don't know these people," Taylor says of the neighborhood's newer residents.

Looking back, Osborne wonders if the destruction of his old neighborhood was an effort to dilute the growing power of the city's Black community.

Osborne's family was among a number of working class but upwardly mobile Black households on the hillside that separates the East Side from downtown.

His grandfather, Clarence "Legs" Osborne, was a trumpeter who played with Count Basie, Duke Ellington and other famous Black musical acts. His uncle, Jeffrey Osborne, went on to become a Grammy-nominated R&B singer with a string of hits in the 1980s, including "On the Wings of Love."

Osborne, who heads a Providence organization that provides musical opportunities to youths, says he'd like to see the city establish a college scholarship fund or programs to help Black residents build equity, rather than making direct payouts to impacted families like his.

"The question with reparations is always where do you start. Why not start with something that's tangible?" he said. "We're here. We're not buried in the past, and we know something should have happened then. Maybe now is the time."

Official: US gave intel before Ukraine sank Russian warship

By AAMER MADHANI, NOMAAN MERCHANT and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. says it shared intelligence with Ukraine about the location of the Russian missile cruiser Moskva prior to the strike that sank the warship, an incident that was a high-profile failure for Russia's military.

An American official said Thursday that Ukraine alone decided to target and sink the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet using its own anti-ship missiles. But given Russia's attacks on the Ukrainian coastline from the sea, the U.S. has provided "a range of intelligence" that includes locations of those ships, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Biden administration has ramped up intelligence sharing with Ukraine alongside the shipment of arms and missiles to help it repel Russia's invasion. The disclosure of U.S. support in the Moskva strike comes as the White House is under pressure from Republicans to do more to support Ukraine's resistance and as polls suggest Americans question whether President Joe Biden is being tough enough on Russia.

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion in February, the White House has tried to balance supporting Ukraine, a democratic ally, against not doing anything that would seem to provoke a direct war between Putin and the U.S. and NATO allies. As the war has gone on, the White House has ramped up its military and intelligence support, removing some time and geographic limits on what it will tell Ukraine about potential Russian targets.

The official who spoke Thursday said the U.S. was not aware that Ukraine planned to strike the Moskva until after they conducted the operation. NBC News first reported on the American role in the sinking of the ship.

Speaking earlier Thursday after a New York Times report about the U.S. role in supporting Ukraine's killing of Russian generals, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said American agencies "do not provide intelligence on the location of senior military leaders on the battlefield or participate in the targeting decisions of the

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Ukrainian military.”

“Ukraine combines information that we and other partners provide with the intel that they themselves are gathering and then they make their own decisions and they take their own actions,” Kirby said.

GOP works to get out the vote after calling elections rigged

By DAVID KLEPPER and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Republican David Perdue has made election fraud the centerpiece of his run for Georgia governor. But if he hopes to win in this year’s midterm elections, his supporters will have to use the same democratic system he says they shouldn’t trust.

The only way to win a rigged election, he says, is to turn out in such high numbers that the Democrats can’t get away with cheating.

“If we get out the vote, if everybody votes, we will win,” Perdue told his audience at a campaign speech last month.

Across the nation, Republicans who have embraced discredited conspiracy theories about the 2020 election are attempting a similar high-wire act: campaigning for votes by preaching skepticism about elections.

For GOP contenders, it’s a tricky calculus. If they continue spreading former President Donald Trump’s lies that the election was stolen, they risk undermining faith in democracy and having their supporters stay at home. But those who reject Trump’s false claims face the wrath of the former president and his supporters, who wield sizable influence in many GOP primaries.

The tactic of campaigning on a distrust of democracy can confuse voters on whether their vote matters or not. Joe Kent, a Republican running for Congress in Washington, said voters sometimes ask him why they should bother voting at all, if elections are rigged. Kent said he believes Trump won and has said he would work to overturn President Joe Biden’s win if elected, even though there is no legal mechanism for doing so.

“I don’t have a perfect answer for you,” is what Kent said he tells voters who say they no longer trust voting. “I wish there was a remedy. If you buy into ‘It’s all rigged’ and ‘I’m not going to vote,’ we are 100% going to lose.”

In the 18 months since Biden defeated Trump, other issues have bubbled up to compete for the attention of candidates and voters: inflation, the bloody exit from Afghanistan, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and debates over vaccines and masks in schools.

Trump’s false statements about the election, meanwhile, have been roundly disproved — by courts, law enforcement, elected election officials from both parties, and independent investigations.

“We need to move on to solving problems for citizens,” said Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, the Republican from southwest Washington state facing a primary challenge this year from Kent. Beutler has said she supported Trump’s right to bring legal challenges, but there’s no evidence of widespread voter fraud.

Beutler is one of 10 House Republicans who supported Trump’s second impeachment. She also voted to certify Biden’s election victory, making her a major target for Trump and his supporters.

The former president began spreading doubts about the 2020 election years before the first votes were even cast, saying he would only accept the results if he was the victor. He’s spent the last year and a half repeating those same claims, despite an absence of evidence. Now, he’s using his power within the GOP to punish candidates for being insufficiently loyal.

When Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama, a stalwart Trump backer, told a crowd of Trump supporters that it was time to move on from 2020, he was jeered. Trump ended up pulling his endorsement of Brooks in Alabama’s Senate race.

“He wanted the election rescinded and a do-over,” Brooks later said. “But there’s no legal way to do it.”

Many Republicans have leaned into Trump’s conspiracy theories. In Missouri, Rep. Billy Long, who is running for the U.S. Senate, released a 30-second ad claiming the “Democrats rigged the election.” YouTube later removed the ad from its platform for violating its rules on misinformation.

In Texas, one survey of 143 Republican candidates for Congress this year found that only 13 stated that Biden was the election’s rightful winner.

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Georgia is perhaps the best example of how Trump's self-serving conspiracy theories continue to resonate with Republican voters, and the candidates hoping for their support.

Republican turnout in Georgia dropped in the January 2021 runoffs amid Trump's barrage of voter fraud claims in his own election defeat, leading many Republicans to conclude that Trump's messaging cost their party control of the Senate when Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock beat Perdue and fellow Republican Kelly Loeffler.

Perdue, now running for governor at Trump's behest, has made election fraud the centerpiece of his challenge to incumbent Gov. Brian Kemp. Perdue and Trump blame Kemp's refusal to attempt to overturn Trump's defeat in Georgia during the 2020 campaign for their losses.

In his campaign speech, Perdue pledged to eliminate Georgia's Dominion voting machines, which Trump has falsely accused of flipping votes against him. But Perdue also said concerns about the machines shouldn't discourage Republicans from voting, noting that Democratic-leaning Virginia elected Republican Glenn Youngkin with votes recorded on Dominion machines.

"Let's give you some hope. In Virginia, we just elected a Republican governor using these same machines," Perdue said. "How did we do it? Well, Trump told people, he said: 'Look, they fixed some rules. We still use the machines. It's not perfect yet, but we can overwhelm it if we all get out and vote.'"

Perdue has also touted Republican efforts to recruit more poll watchers, saying they will help prevent fraud, although Perdue's accusations have focused on the disproven claim that fraud in Georgia centered on absentee ballots that were returned in drop boxes.

Running for the U.S. Senate in Georgia, Herschel Walker has taken a different tack, saying he doesn't want to look backward at the 2020 election. During an April 20 interview with radio station WDUN-AM in Gainesville, Georgia, Walker acknowledged concerns about election fraud among Republican voters. He sought to reassure voters that Georgia's restrictive 2021 election law will put to rest worries about absentee ballots by requiring driver license numbers on ballot applications and by limiting ballot drop boxes.

"I don't know if there are problems with the 2020 elections," Walker said. "One thing I have to worry about right now is that I'm going to have a fair election, and that people can believe in our election when I run."

Surveys indicate that many Republicans have harbored doubts about Biden's win, skepticism that has been encouraged by Trump and his allies on cable TV and talk radio, along with conspiracy theories and misinformation spreading online.

Distrust of American institutions was already increasing when Trump began telling his supporters that the election was rigged if he lost. The COVID-19 pandemic then prompted many states to rush out new vote-by-mail rules that alarmed some conservatives and prompted even more falsehoods from Trump.

When the votes were counted, large numbers of those mail-in ballots helped tilt the outcome in states like Pennsylvania and Georgia toward Biden.

"They view what happened in Pennsylvania and Georgia with suspicion," said Daron Shaw, a former campaign strategist and polling expert who now teaches at the University of Texas. "But it was their guy who said don't vote by mail. Voters take their cues from partisan elites, but instead of pushing back on this (voter fraud claim), the party elites have acted as an accelerant."

3 Israelis killed in stabbing attack near Tel Aviv

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A pair of Palestinian attackers went on a stabbing rampage in a town near Tel Aviv on Thursday night, killing at least three people and wounding four others before fleeing in a vehicle, Israeli authorities said.

Police launched a massive search for the assailants, setting up roadblocks and dispatching a helicopter. The stabbing, coming on Israel's Independence Day, was the latest in a string of deadly attacks in Israeli cities in recent weeks.

Early Friday, Israeli police said a search was underway for two Palestinian suspects from the occupied West Bank. The suspects, aged 19 and 20 years old, came from Jenin, the hometown of other assailants involved

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in recent attacks in Israel. The town and its surroundings have seen frequent Israeli military raids and clashes with Palestinian militants in recent weeks.

"We will get our hands on the terrorists and their supportive environment, and they will pay the price," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said after huddling with senior security officials late Thursday.

Israeli-Palestinian tensions have soared recently, with the attacks in Israel, military operations in the occupied West Bank and violence at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site. The site, home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, was the scene of new unrest earlier Thursday.

Alon Rizkan, a medic with Israel's Magen David Adom rescue service, described a "very difficult call" when he arrived at the scene in Elad, an ultra-Orthodox town near Tel Aviv. He said he identified three dead people at various locations. At least four others were wounded, one critically, officials said.

Israeli media quoted police as saying there were two assailants, and just before midnight, police said they were still searching for the attackers. They called on the public to avoid the area, and urged people to report suspicious vehicles or people to them.

Israel marked its Independence Day on Thursday, a festive national holiday in which people typically hold barbecues and attend air shows.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz ordered a closure on the West Bank, imposed ahead of the holiday and preventing Palestinians from entering Israel, to remain in effect until Sunday.

In Washington, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said U.S. officials "vehemently condemn" the attack in Elad. "This was a horrific attack targeting innocent men and women, and was particularly heinous coming as Israel celebrated its Independence Day," Blinken said in a statement. "We remain in close contact with our Israeli friends and partners and stand firmly with them in the face of this attack."

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose government administers autonomous zones in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, condemned the attack.

"The killing of Palestinian and Israeli civilians leads only to more deterioration at a time when all of us try to achieve stability and prevent escalation," the official Wafa news agency quoted him as saying.

The Palestinian militant group Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, praised the attack and linked it to violence at the Jerusalem holy site.

"The storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque can't go unpunished," Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said. "The heroic operation in Tel Aviv is a practical translation of what the resistance had warned against."

The Al-Aqsa Mosque compound is the third holiest site in Islam and is built on a hilltop that is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount. It lies at the emotional heart of the conflict, and Palestinians and Israeli police have clashed there repeatedly in recent weeks.

Early Thursday, Israeli police entered the site to clear away Palestinian protesters, after Jewish visits that had been paused for the Muslim holidays resumed.

As the visits resumed, dozens of Palestinians gathered, chanting "God is greatest." Scuffles broke out when the police went to arrest one of them. Police fired rubber-coated bullets on the sprawling esplanade as some Palestinians sheltered inside the mosque itself. The police could later be seen just inside an entrance to the barricaded mosque.

The police said they responded to dozens of people who were shouting incitement and throwing stones, and that one police officer was lightly injured. The Palestinian Red Crescent emergency service said two Palestinians were taken to a hospital after being struck with batons.

Unlike in previous confrontations, Palestinian witnesses said there was no rock-throwing initially. Some of those who sheltered inside the mosque began throwing stones and other objects when police entered the building. The witnesses spoke on condition of anonymity because of security concerns.

Under informal arrangements known as the status quo, Jews are allowed to visit the site but not pray there. In recent years, they have visited in ever-increasing numbers with police escorts and many have discreetly prayed, angering the Palestinians as well as neighboring Jordan, which is the custodian of the site. The Palestinians have long feared that Israel plans to eventually take over the site or partition it.

Israel says it is committed to maintaining the status quo, and accuses Hamas of inciting the recent violence.

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It has been some of the worst bloodshed in years. At least 18 Israelis have died in five attacks — including a stabbing rampage in southern Israel, two other shootings in the Tel Aviv area and a shooting last weekend in a West Bank settlement. Nearly 30 Palestinians have died in violence — most of whom had carried out attacks or were involved in confrontations with Israeli forces in the West Bank. But an unarmed woman and a lawyer who appears to have been inadvertently shot were also killed.

Israel and Hamas fought an 11-day war a year ago, fueled in large part by similar unrest in Jerusalem.

Jill Biden to meet Ukrainian refugees during border visit

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For weeks, first lady Jill Biden has been transfixed by the news coming out of Ukraine, by the bombings and scenes of “parents weeping over their children’s broken bodies in the streets,” as she said in a recent speech.

Now Biden is using her second solo overseas trip to get an up-close look at the Ukrainian refugee crisis by visiting Romania and Slovakia, where she will spend Mother’s Day meeting with displaced families in a small Slovakian village on the border with Ukraine.

Biden, who opens the visit Friday in Romania, told reporters traveling with her Thursday night, “It’s so important to the president and to me that the Ukrainian people know that we stand with them.” She said earlier in the week she wants the refugees to know “their resilience inspires me.”

NATO allies Romania and Slovakia border Ukraine and have taken in some of the millions of mostly women and children who fled after Russia invaded Ukraine in late February, triggering Europe’s largest refugee crisis since World War II.

Biden also will use her four days in Europe to highlight issues she promotes at home, such as support for U.S. service members, education and the welfare of children.

After flying overnight from Washington, Biden was to arrive at Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base in Romania, near the Black Sea, in time to help serve Friday dinner to U.S. service members stationed there. Some of the several thousand U.S. troops that President Joe Biden deployed to eastern Europe in the leadup to the war were sent to the base, which is about 60 miles (100 kilometers) from Romania’s border with Ukraine.

The centerpiece of the first lady’s trip comes Sunday — Mother’s Day — when Biden, a mother of three, meets with displaced Ukrainians who sought refuge across the border in Slovakia.

Biden’s daughter, Ashley Biden, had planned to accompany her mother to Europe, but backed out after learning Thursday that she was a close contact of someone who tested positive for COVID-19, said Michael LaRosa, the first lady’s spokesperson. Ashley Biden tested negative, LaRosa said.

“I can only imagine the grief families are feeling,” Jill Biden said this week. “I know that we might not share a language, but I hope that I can convey, in ways so much greater than words, that their resilience inspires me, that they are not forgotten, and that all Americans stand with them still.”

The first lady also will meet during the trip with humanitarian aid workers, educators, government officials and U.S. embassy personnel, the White House said.

Nearly 6 million Ukrainians, mostly women and children, have fled their country since Russia’s invasion, according to the U.N. refugee agency. Many have resettled in next-door countries, like Romania and Slovakia, or have gone elsewhere in Europe to try to rebuild their lives.

More than 850,000 Ukrainians have entered Romania since the invasion, while nearly 400,000 have crossed into Slovakia, according to government figures from those countries.

Biden has long displayed an interest in the plight of refugees around the world.

In 2011, when her husband was vice president, she traveled to drought-stricken east Africa to visit with Somali famine refugees at the Dadaab camp in Kenya. In 2017, she visited refugees in Chios, Greece, as part of work by the aid organization Save The Children, on whose board she served.

Some refugee advocates said Biden’s trip will send the message that the United States takes seriously its humanitarian commitment to the Ukrainian people.

“Every first lady has a far-reaching platform to raise awareness and this trip will be an important tool for

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mobilizing additional support for those forced to flee their homeland," said Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and formerly a policy director to first lady Michelle Obama.

Jill Biden's trip will be the latest to the region by a U.S. government representative following recent visits to Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

President Biden visited Ukrainian refugees during a stop in Poland in March. That's the closest he's been to Ukraine. The White House has said there are no current plans for him to visit Kyiv.

After her time with the U.S. service members, the first lady was set to spend Saturday in Bucharest, Romania's capital, being briefed on humanitarian efforts, meeting with Romanian first lady Carmen Iohannis and touring a school where Ukrainian refugee students are enrolled before she departs for Slovakia. Biden is a community college English professor.

On Sunday, she heads to Kosice, Slovakia, to visit a city-operated refugee center and a public school that also hosts Ukrainian refugee students, where she will spend time with Ukrainian and Slovakian mothers and children as they participate in Mother's Day activities. Afterward, she will travel to the Slovakia-Ukraine border crossing in Vysne Nemecke, Slovakia.

The White House declined to comment on whether she will cross the border and enter Ukraine.

She'll also visit a small Greek Catholic chapel in Vysne Nemecke that serves refugees.

Monday brings a meeting with Slovakian President Zuzana Caputova, the country's first female president, before Biden heads back to Washington.

The first lady has shown her support the Ukrainian people in several ways. She wore a sunflower — Ukraine's national flower — on her mask and a dress sleeve, and traveled to a Tennessee hospital to visit with Ukrainian children flown there for cancer treatment.

She had Ukraine's ambassador to the U.S., Oksana Markarova, sit with her during President Biden's State of the Union address in March, and went to the Army's Fort Campbell in Kentucky to visit with the families of U.S. soldiers who were deployed to Europe to assist with the Ukraine crisis.

The trip is the first lady's second overseas by herself. She flew to Tokyo last year to represent the United States at the opening of the Olympic Games.

How does it f-e-e-e-l? Bob Dylan museum opening in Tulsa

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Elvis Costello, Patti Smith and Mavis Staples will be among the dignitaries expected in Tulsa, Oklahoma, this weekend for the opening of the Bob Dylan Center, the museum and archive celebrating the Nobel laureate's work.

Dylan himself won't be among them, unless he surprises everyone.

The center's subject and namesake has an open invitation to come anytime, although his absence seems perfectly in character, said Steven Jenkins, the center's director. Oddly, Dylan was just in Tulsa three weeks ago for a date on his concert tour, sandwiched in between Oklahoma City and Little Rock. He didn't ask for a look around.

"I don't want to put words in his mouth," Jenkins said. "I can only guess at his reasoning. Maybe he would find it embarrassing."

It's certainly unusual for a living figure — Dylan is due to turn 81 on May 24 — to have a museum devoted to him, but such is the shadow he has cast over popular music since his emergence in the early 1960s. He's still working, performing onstage in a show devoted primarily to his most recent material.

And he's still pushing the envelope. "Murder Most Foul," Dylan's nearly 17-minute rumination on the Kennedy assassination and celebrity, is as quietly stunning as "Like a Rolling Stone" was nearly a half-century ago, even if he's no longer at the center of popular culture.

The center offers an immersive film experience, performance space, a studio where visitors can play producer and "mix" different elements of instrumentation in Dylan's songs and a curated tour where people

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can take a musical journey through the stages of his career. The archive has more than 100,000 items, many accessed only by scholars through appointment.

Museum creators said they wanted to build an experience both for casual visitors who might not know much of Dylan's work and for the truly fanatical — the skimmers, the swimmers and the divers, said designer Alan Maskin of the firm Olson Kundig.

The museum hopes to celebrate the creative process in general, and at opening will have an exhibit of the work of photographer Jerry Schatzberg, whose 1965 image of Dylan is emblazoned on the building's three-story facade.

Since Dylan's still creating, "we're going to continue to play catch-up" with him, Jenkins said.

So for a figure who was born and raised in Minnesota, came of musical age in New York and now lives in California, how does a museum devoted to his life's work end up in Oklahoma?

He's never seemed the nostalgic type, but Dylan recognized early that his work could have historical interest and value, Jenkins said. Together with his team, he put aside boxes full of artifacts, including photos, rare recordings and handwritten lyrics that show how his songs went through revisions and rewrites.

With use of those lyrics, two of the early displays will focus on how the songs "Jokerman" and "Tangled Up in Blue" took shape — the latter with lyrics so elastic that Dylan was still changing verses after the song had been released.

Dylan sold his archive in 2016 to the Tulsa-based George Kaiser Family Foundation, which also operates the Woody Guthrie Center — a museum that celebrates one of Dylan's musical heroes and is only steps away from the new Dylan center.

Dylan likes the Guthrie museum, and also appreciates Tulsa's rich holdings of Native American art, Jenkins said. Much of that is on display at another new facility, the Gilcrease Museum, which is also the world's largest holding of art of the American West.

"I think it's going to be a true tourist draw to Tulsa for all the right reasons," said Tulsa Mayor G. T. Bynum. "This is one of the great musicians in the history of humankind and everyone who wants to study his career and see the evolution of his talent will be drawn to it."

Bynum hopes that it also encourages others who may someday want to put their archives on display, and make Tulsa a center for the study of modern American music.

Dylan designed and built a 16-foot high metal sculpture that will be displayed at the entrance to the museum. Otherwise, he had nothing to do with the museum's design and declined, through a spokesman, to offer a comment about the opening.

"If Bob were telling us what we could or couldn't do, it would have felt like a vanity project, in a way," Maskin said. "It was a tremendous relief not to have to satisfy Bob Dylan."

Still, it's safe to assume the lines of communication are open if necessary: Jenkins, the center's director, is the brother of Larry Jenkins, Dylan's long-time media representative.

In addition to a dinner to celebrate the opening this weekend, Costello, Smith and Staples will all perform separate concerts at Cain's Ballroom. Costello was asked to program a jukebox that will be on display at the museum and, within a day, submitted his suggestions for 160 Dylan songs and covers, Steven Jenkins said.

The Bob Dylan Center is open to the public on May 10.

Maskin has no expectation that Dylan will ever see the designer's work. Still, he indulges himself in a fantasy of a slow summer day, a security guard dozing in the corner, and someone slipping in wearing black jeans, sunglasses and a familiar mop of hair to wander among the displays.

"To be honest, I don't think that's going to happen," he said. "I think he's interested in the work he's doing, and not the work he's done."

Asian stocks follow Wall St down as rate hike worries grow

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Asian stocks followed Wall Street lower Friday as fears spread that U.S. interest rate hikes to fight inflation might stall economic growth.

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Shanghai, Hong Kong, Seoul and Sydney declined. Tokyo edged higher as trading resumed after a holiday. Wall Street's benchmark S&P 500 index plunged 3.6% on Thursday for its biggest one-day loss in two years as optimism that drove the previous day's rally evaporated.

Investors worry about whether the Federal Reserve, which raised its key interest rate by a half percentage point on Wednesday, can cool inflation without tipping the slowing U.S. economy into recession. Traders were temporarily encouraged by chairman Jerome Powell's comment that the Fed wasn't considering even bigger increases.

"Clearly, investors had second thoughts about the so-called 'dovish hike' from the Fed," Rob Carnell of ING said in a report. The likelihood is "rate hikes coming thick and fast, but little if any prospect of a turn in inflation any time soon."

The Shanghai Composite Index fell 1.6% to 3,019.11 and Hong Kong's Hang Seng plunged 3.6% to 20,051.61. The Nikkei 225 in Tokyo added 0.9% to 27,053.81.

The Kospi in Seoul tumbled 1.3% to 2,642.26 and Sydney's S&P-ASX 200 lurched down 2.3% to 7,197.40. New Zealand and Singapore also declined.

Russia's war on Ukraine, high oil prices and global supply chain disruptions are adding to investor unease.

Also Thursday, the Bank of England raised its benchmark rate to the highest level in 13 years, its fourth hike since December to cool British inflation that is running at 30-year highs.

The S&P 500 fell 3.6% to 4,146.87, giving back Wednesday's 3% increase.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 3.1% to 32,997.97. The Nasdaq, dominated by tech stocks, slumped 5% to 12,317.69.

The U.S. government was due to report employment numbers on Thursday, a closely watched data point.

Economists at BNP Paribas still expect the Fed to keep hiking the federal funds rate until it reaches a range of 3% to 3.25%, up from zero to 0.25% earlier this year.

Energy markets remain volatile as the conflict in Ukraine continues and demand remains high amid tight supplies of oil. European governments are trying to replace energy supplies from Russia and are considering an embargo. OPEC and allied oil-producing countries decided Thursday to gradually increase the flows of crude they send to the world.

Benchmark U.S. crude gained 77 cents to \$109.03 in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. The contract rose 45 cents to \$108.26 on Thursday. Brent crude, the price basis for international oil trading, advanced 75 cents to \$111.65 per barrel in London.

The dollar rose to 130.47 yen from Thursday's 130.40 yen. The euro gained to \$1.0539 from \$1.0519.

'Roe' under threat, California leans in as abortion refuge

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Democrats have accelerated their plan to make the nation's most populous state a sanctuary for women seeking abortions, propelled by the release this week of an early draft of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that has ignited a surge of activism among the state's vast network of providers and advocacy groups.

The draft — which could change when a final ruling is issued, likely next month — would end nearly 50 years of federal abortion protections. Just hours after a leaked copy was published, Gov. Gavin Newsom and the state's top legislative leaders said they would seek voter approval to make abortions a constitutional right in California, a move designed to shield the state from future court rulings and a potential federal abortion ban should Republicans win control of Congress.

On Thursday, Democrats in the state Legislature fast-tracked a bill that would block other states' laws from imposing civil or criminal penalties on people who provide or aid abortions in California, setting up another likely prolonged legal fight over state sovereignty.

The California Legislative Women's Caucus has asked Newsom for \$20 million to help pay for women from other states where abortion would be outlawed to come to California for the procedure — a sum the governor could announce in his revised budget proposal next week.

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In just 48 hours after the draft ruling became public, California's only statewide nonprofit that helps women travel to and within the state to get abortions raised \$25,000 — a quarter of its normal annual spending — while fielding a flood of calls from people volunteering to give free rides or a place to stay to women looking to end their pregnancies.

For Madilynne Hoffman, California's preparations are comforting. The 22-year-old mother of two ended her pregnancy in December at an abortion clinic in the state's Central Valley.

When she returned to a different clinic later for birth control, she said a protester followed her to her car. That experience, coupled with the draft court ruling, prompted her to look for volunteer opportunities at clinics.

"That's really saddening to think that women have to fight for their bodies," she said. "It should just be an automatic right."

California's legislative efforts represent the opening salvos in the next phase of the abortion rights battle, which will play out among state governments that are left to make and enforce their own rules if the federal protections are abolished. Already, Republican-led states like Oklahoma and Idaho have passed more restrictive abortion laws in anticipation of the court's ruling.

Democratic-led states like California, meanwhile, are passing laws to expand abortion access.

The Democrats who control all levers of power in state government have written 13 bills that would authorize more medical providers to perform abortions, create scholarships for reproductive care doctors, block other states from accessing some California medical records, and create a fund for taxpayer money to help pay for women in states where abortion is illegal to come to California to get the procedure. A measure that makes abortions cheaper by banning co-pays and deductibles has already been signed into law.

Meanwhile, abortion providers are busy hiring more doctors and adding space to receive a predicted surge in patients. Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, the nation's largest Planned Parenthood affiliate, is renovating and building new facilities in Oakland, San Jose, Fresno, Visalia and Reno, Nevada. When they're finished, it will boost their capacity from 200 to 500 patients per week.

"We've been preparing for it for over a year — and honestly since November 2016," when Republican Donald Trump was elected president, said Andrew Adams, Planned Parenthood Mar Monte's chief of staff and head of strategic communications.

Anti-abortion advocates are getting ready, too, by bolstering staffing and support at crisis pregnancy centers. These centers, which often locate near abortion clinics and are religiously affiliated, seek to convince women to forego abortion for adoption or other options.

Some of these centers in conservative states receive tens of millions of dollars in public money. California has been hostile to these centers, passing a law requiring them to tell clients about abortion services. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down that law in 2018.

"We believe that is the way people of faith and the pro-life community can really help to put our money where our mouth is," said Jonathan Keller, president and CEO of the California Family Council, which opposes abortion. "No woman should ever feel like abortion is the best option for them."

While abortion has been legal in every state, it's not easily accessible everywhere, especially for people who live in poor or rural areas. Across the country, nearly 100 "abortion funds" exist to help these women pay for things like travel, lodging and child care they need to make their appointments.

Since Monday, a national digital fundraising platform for these groups has raised about \$1 million, according to Sierra Harris, deputy director of network strategy for the National Network of Abortion Funds.

California has one statewide abortion fund, known as Access Reproductive Justice. The group helps roughly 500 women each year, about a third whom come from other states, according to Executive Director Jessica Pinckney. Each woman gets an average of \$300 to \$400 in assistance.

That doesn't pay for everything. To fill the gaps, the group relies on a set of 50 core volunteers who stand ready to give rides, places to stay and extra cash. Those volunteers include Harris, who lives in Oakland.

Since the pandemic, most of the assistance Harris gives is cash. The mother of two small children, Harris recalled a time when she pitched in to buy another woman a plane ticket so she could travel to get an abortion. The woman was also a mother, and later sent Harris a card calling her an "angel."

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The woman said her help made it possible for her "to parent the child I have," Harris said. "I think about that all the time."

US hiring was likely strong again in April despite inflation

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the past year, America's job market has run like a well-engineered machine, adding an impressive average of 540,000 workers a month despite a punishing inflation rate, Russia's ruinous war against Ukraine, a still-risky pandemic, jittery financial markets and the prospect of much higher borrowing costs.

Hiring gains have topped 400,000 every month since May 2021.

And most economists think the winning streak has continued: According to a survey by the data firm FactSet, they expect Friday's jobs report for April to show that employers added 400,000 more jobs last month. They have also forecast that the unemployment rate remained at 3.6%, a notch above a half-century low that was reached shortly before the pandemic struck two years ago.

The resilience of the job market is particularly striking when set against the backdrop of galloping price increases, rising borrowing costs and widespread fear that the Federal Reserve's sharp interest rate hikes will eventually trigger a recession.

"The labor market remains in solid shape as the spring quarter begins," said Stuart Hoffman, senior economic adviser at PNC Financial. "Demand for labor is very strong ... Firms are competing for workers and bidding up wages."

This week, the Labor Department provided further evidence that the job market is still booming. It reported that only 1.38 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment benefits, the fewest since 1970. And it said that employers posted a record-high 11.5 million job openings in March and that layoffs remained well below pre-pandemic levels.

What's more, the economy now has, on average, two available jobs for every unemployed person. That's the highest such proportion on record.

And in yet another sign that workers are enjoying unusual leverage in the job market, a record 4.5 million people quit their jobs in March, evidently confident that they could find a better opportunity elsewhere. In addition, over the past year, 3.8 million people have rejoined the labor force, meaning they now either have a job or are looking for one. Some of them had been on the sidelines for many months after the pandemic struck.

For all the sparkling signs of a healthy labor market, it's unclear how much longer the hiring surge will last. On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve raised its benchmark rate by a half-percentage point — its most aggressive move since 2000 — and signaled further large rate hikes to come. As the Fed's series of rate hikes take effect, they will make it increasingly expensive for consumers to borrow, spend and hire.

Economists warn that those sharply higher borrowing costs could derail what has been a remarkably vigorous recovery from the COVID-19 recession, which wiped out 22 million jobs in March and April of 2020. The economic rebound that quickly followed was fueled by vast federal spending and ultra-low rates engineered by the Fed. Generous relief checks gave households the financial wherewithal to keep spending. And the rollout of vaccines emboldened them to return to shops, restaurants and bars.

But chronic shortages of goods, supplies and workers have contributed to skyrocketing price increases — the highest inflation rate in 40 years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February dramatically worsened the financial landscape, sending global oil and gas prices skyward and severely clouding the national and global economic picture.

In the meantime, with many industries slowed by worker shortages, companies have been jacking up pay to try to attract job applicants and retain their existing employees: Hourly wages rose 5.6% in March from a year earlier — the third-largest monthly jump in Labor Department records dating to 2007.

Even so, pay raises haven't kept pace with the spike in consumer prices: Adjusted for inflation, hourly wages have actually fallen for 12 straight months.

That's why the Fed, which most economists say was much too slow to recognize the inflation threat, is

now raising rates aggressively. Its goal is a notoriously difficult one: a so-called soft landing.

"Trying to slow the economy just enough, without causing a recession," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "Their track record on that is not particularly good."

'Seemed like goodbye': Mariupol defenders make their stand

By JON GAMBRELL and CARA ANNA Associated Press

LIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian fighters in the tunnels underneath Mariupol's pulverized steel plant held out against Russian troops Thursday in an increasingly desperate and perhaps doomed effort to deny Moscow what would be its biggest success of the war yet: the complete capture of the strategic port city.

The bloody battle came amid growing speculation that President Vladimir Putin wants to present the Russian people with a battlefield triumph — or announce an escalation of the war — in time for Victory Day on Monday. Victory Day is the biggest patriotic holiday on the Russian calendar, marking the Soviet Union's triumph over Nazi Germany.

Some 2,000 Ukrainian fighters, by Russia's most recent estimate, were holed up at Mariupol's sprawling Azovstal steelworks, the last pocket of resistance in a city largely reduced to rubble over the past two months. A few hundred civilians were also believed trapped there.

The defenders will "stand till the end. They only hope for a miracle," Kateryna Prokopenko said after speaking by phone to her husband, a leader of the steel plant defenders. "They won't surrender."

She said her husband, Azov Regiment commander Denys Prokopenko, told her he would love her forever. "I am going mad from this. It seemed like words of goodbye," she said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the attack was preventing the evacuation of civilians remaining in the plant's underground bunkers.

"Just imagine this hell! And there are children there," he said late Thursday in his nightly video address. "More than two months of constant shelling, bombing, constant death."

The Russians managed to get inside with the help of an electrician who knew the layout, said Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's Internal Affairs Ministry.

"He showed them the underground tunnels which are leading to the factory," Gerashchenko said in a video posted late Wednesday. "Yesterday, the Russians started storming these tunnels, using the information they received from the betrayer."

The Kremlin denied its troops were storming the plant.

The fall of Mariupol 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 eastern industrial region that the Kremlin says is now its chief objective.

Capt. Sviatoslav Palamar, deputy commander of the Azov Regiment, pleaded on Ukrainian TV for the evacuation of civilians and wounded fighters from the steelworks, saying soldiers were "dying in agony due to the lack of proper treatment."

The Kremlin has demanded the troops surrender. They have refused. Russia has also accused them of preventing the civilians from leaving.

The head of the United Nations said another attempt to evacuate civilians from Mariupol and the plant was underway. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said: "We must continue to do all we can to get people out of these hellscape."

More than 100 civilians were rescued from the steelworks over the weekend. But many previous attempts to open safe corridors from Mariupol have fallen through, with Ukraine blaming shelling and firing by the Russians.

Meanwhile, 10 weeks into the devastating war, Ukraine's military claimed it recaptured some areas in the south and repelled other attacks in the east, further frustrating Putin's ambitions after his abortive attempt to seize Kyiv. Ukrainian and Russian forces are fighting village by village.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Russian forces are making only "plodding" progress in the Donbas.

The head of Britain's armed forces, Chief of the Defense Staff Adm. Tony Radakin, said Putin is "trying to

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rush to a tactical victory" before Victory Day. But he said Russian forces are struggling to gain momentum. Radakin told British broadcaster Talk TV that Russia is using missiles and weapons at such a rate that it is in a "logistics war" to keep supplied. "This is going to be a hard slog," he said.

On Thursday, an American official said the U.S. shared intelligence with Ukraine about the location of a Russian flagship before the mid-April strike that sank it, one of Moscow's highest-profile failures in the war. The U.S. has provided "a range of intelligence" that includes locations of warships, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. The official said the decision to target the missile cruiser Moskva was purely a Ukrainian decision.

Fearful of new attacks surrounding Victory Day, the mayor of the western Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk urged residents to leave for the countryside over the long weekend and warned them not to gather in public places.

And the southeastern city of Zaporizhzhia, a key transit point for evacuees from Mariupol, announced a curfew from Sunday evening through Tuesday morning.

In other developments, Belarus' authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, defended Russia's invasion of Ukraine in an interview with The Associated Press but said he didn't expect the conflict to "drag on this way."

Lukashenko, whose country was used by the Russians as a launch pad for the invasion, said Moscow had to act because Kyiv was "provoking" Russia.

But he also created some distance between himself and the Kremlin, repeatedly calling for an end to the conflict and referring to it as a "war" — a term Moscow refuses to use. It insists on calling the fighting a "special military operation."

Mariupol, which had a prewar population of over 400,000, has come to symbolize the misery inflicted by the war. The siege of the city has trapped perhaps 100,000 civilians with little food, water, medicine or heat.

As the battle raged there, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Russian bombardment Thursday hit dozens of Ukrainian military targets, including troop concentrations in the east, an artillery battery near the eastern settlement of Zarozhne, and rocket launchers near the southern city of Mykolaiv.

Five people were killed and dozens injured in shelling of cities in the Donbas over the past 24 hours, Ukrainian officials said, with shells hitting schools, apartments and a medical facility.

Ukrainian forces said 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.

The Washington-based Institute for the Study of War said that Ukrainian forces "have largely stalled Russian advances in eastern Ukraine," and intensified Russian airstrikes on transportation infrastructure in the western part of the country have failed to stop Western aid shipments to Ukraine.

But the war has devastated the country's medical infrastructure, Zelenskyy said in a video link to a charity event in the U.K., with nearly 400 healthcare facilities damaged or destroyed.

"There is simply a catastrophic situation regarding access to medical services and medicines," in areas occupied by Russian forces, he said. "Even the simplest drugs are lacking."

With the challenge of mine-clearing and rebuilding after the war in mind, Zelenskyy announced the launch of a global fundraising platform called United24.

At the same time, Poland hosted an international donor conference that raised \$6.5 billion in humanitarian aid. The gathering was attended by prime ministers and ambassadors from many European countries, as well as representatives of nations farther afield and some businesses.

In addition, a Ukrainian cabinet body began to develop proposals for a comprehensive postwar reconstruction plan, while Zelenskyy also urged Western allies to put forward a program similar to the post-World War II Marshall Plan plan to help Ukraine rebuild.

Biden taps 1st Black woman, LGBT White House press secretary

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday named Karine Jean-Pierre to be the next White House press secretary, the first Black woman and openly LGBTQ person to serve in the role. Incumbent Jen Psaki is set to leave the post next week.

Jean-Pierre takes on the role as the White House faces an uphill battle to help Democrats hold onto the House and Senate in this fall's midterm elections, and as the administration struggles to address Americans' concerns about soaring inflation and the state of the economy. She also comes into the job as Biden faces a daunting array of foreign policy challenges, including the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and North Korea's escalating nuclear testing program. Biden is set to visit South Korea and Japan later this month and Europe in June.

Biden is also bringing back longtime Democratic strategist Anita Dunn as his senior adviser. She had served in the Biden White House last year for several months after Biden was sworn into office.

"Karine not only brings the experience, talent and integrity needed for this difficult job, but she will continue to lead the way in communicating about the work of the Biden-Harris administration on behalf of the American people," Biden said in a statement praising Jean-Pierre, who has served as his principal deputy press secretary since Inauguration Day.

Psaki, who leaves the White House on May 13, praised her successor as a "partner in truth," noting the significance of the history-making appointment.

"Representation matters and she is going to give a voice to so many and show so many what is truly possible when you work hard and dream big," Psaki said.

Taking the lectern briefly while Psaki briefed the press Thursday, Jean-Pierre said she was "still processing" the significance of her hire, calling it "an honor and privilege to be behind this podium."

"This is a historic moment, and it's not lost on me," she said. "It's a very emotional day."

Psaki said Biden offered the job to Jean-Pierre Thursday in the Oval Office. White House staffers were gathered after the offer and greeted Jean-Pierre with applause, an official said. Two "warm bottles" of champagne were procured for a toast in White House paper cups, the official added, speaking on the condition of anonymity to describe the internal gathering.

Jean-Pierre had occasionally taken the lectern in the press briefing room instead of Psaki and more frequently held off-camera "gaggles" with reporters when Biden was traveling on Air Force One. She traveled with Biden to Europe last fall and in March instead of Psaki, who had tested positive for COVID-19 before both trips.

Before joining the Biden presidential campaign, Jean-Pierre was the chief public affairs officer of the progressive group MoveOn.org and a former political analyst for NBC and MSNBC. She also worked in political affairs in the Obama White House and on his reelection campaign.

The press secretary is responsible for holding daily briefings with the news media and leading a department of more than a dozen staffers who help address queries from the press.

When she took the job, Psaki, who has two young children, said publicly she aimed to remain in the job for about a year. She is expected to join MSNBC later this year. She was expected to remain as the public face of the administration until her departure next Friday.

Biden said Psaki "has set the standard for returning decency, respect and decorum to the White House briefing room."

"I want to say thank you to Jen for raising the bar, communicating directly and truthfully to the American people, and keeping her sense of humor while doing so," Biden said. "I thank Jen for her service to the country, and wish her the very best as she moves forward."

Dunn is a partner at the Democratic consulting firm SKDK, and was a senior adviser on Biden's 2020 campaign and previously chief strategist and communications director for President Barack Obama. The White House said she is returning to "assist in advancing the President's policy and communications objectives."

It's Chief Justice Roberts' Court, but does he still lead?

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — John Roberts is heading a Supreme Court in crisis.

The chief justice has already ordered an investigation of the leak this week of a draft opinion suggesting the court could be poised to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 case legalizing abortion nationwide. What comes next could further test Roberts' leadership of a court where his vote already appears less crucial in determining the outcome in contentious cases.

"This is a time when the court is under siege, both externally and internally now," said Roanoke College professor Todd Peppers, who writes about the court. "I just don't think the spotlight has ever been brighter on the court in recent history."

Speaking Thursday at a judicial conference in Atlanta, Roberts called the leak "appalling," according to CNN.

Roberts' court was facing challenges even before the leak, which the chief called a "betrayal of the confidences of the Court." Polling has shown a notable decline in the public's approval of the court. And there have been recent calls for term limits for the justices and for increasing the number of justices as well as for a code of ethics, particularly following reports that Justice Clarence Thomas' wife, Virginia, implored Donald Trump's White House chief of staff to act to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Confirmation hearings for the court's newest justices have been contentious.

The addition of three conservative justices during Trump's presidency also means there are now five conservative justices to Roberts' right who no longer need his vote, and perhaps his moderating influence, to prevail in a case. The abortion decision could be another example of that, with the court's other conservatives prepared to go further than Roberts.

Roberts, 67, has noted the limits of his position in the past. Asked during a 2018 appearance how it's different to be chief, Roberts responded: "In many ways it's different. In the most important it's not. I have one vote. I participate in the decision-making of the court like any of the associate justices."

Still, there's a reason that the chief is called the "first among equals" and that historians refer to time periods at the court using the chief justice's name: the Marshall Court, the Rehnquist Court, the Roberts Court. The chief is the first to speak when the justices discuss cases at their private conference and guides that discussion. The chief decides who writes the opinion of the court when the chief is in the majority.

Roberts, an appointee of President George W. Bush, has faced other challenging times in his 16 years as chief. He's led the court through contentious cases on gay marriage, on President Barack Obama's health law and on Trump-era policies including building a U.S.-Mexico border wall and the travel ban.

In 2020, Roberts was in the spotlight presiding over Trump's first impeachment trial, though his role was modest. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, he led the court through a period where it decided to postpone arguments for the first time in more than 100 years and then to conduct them by telephone for more than a year and a half.

Early in his tenure, in a speech at Georgetown's law school graduation and elsewhere, Roberts explained his philosophy in guiding the court and his preference for decisions where there could be broad agreement on narrow grounds.

"There are clear benefits to a greater degree of consensus on the court. Unanimity or near unanimity promote clarity and guidance for the lawyers and for the lower courts trying to figure out what the Supreme Court meant," he said in 2006. He added: "The rule of law is strengthened when there's greater coherence and agreement about what the law is."

Artemus Ward, a professor at Northern Illinois University who is one of the editors of a book of scholarly research on chief justices, said Roberts has been "trying to achieve consensus, trying to rule narrowly." But following the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a liberal, and her replacement by conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett, "Roberts' vote is less powerful" because there are five conservative votes even without him, Ward said.

There's been some evidence of the impact of that already.

Before Ginsburg's death, Roberts joined with the court's four liberals to reject a challenge to attendance limits California imposed on religious services because of the coronavirus pandemic. But about a month after Barrett joined the court, the justices ruled 5-4 the other way in a case about similar limits in New York, with

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Roberts and the liberals in dissent.

In September of last year, the court decided 5-4 not to block a new Texas law banning most abortions in the state. The dissenters were once again Roberts and the three liberal justices.

It was the same lineup in February when the Supreme Court put on hold a lower court ruling that Alabama must draw new congressional districts before the 2022 elections to increase Black voting power. And in April when the court reinstated a Trump-era water rule.

"Roberts Has Lost Control of the Supreme Court," was the title of an article written that month by professor Stephen I. Vladeck of the University of Texas School of Law.

It remains to be seen how divided and how sweeping the court will be in other decisions, including a major gun ruling, that are still to be released before the court breaks for summer.

Unknown too is how closely the final opinion in the abortion case will mirror the leaked draft, which was written by Justice Samuel Alito and distributed to other members of the court in February. Politico reported that Alito had the votes of four other conservatives to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and a later decision that reaffirmed a constitutional right to abortion services, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. The three liberals planned to dissent, Politico said, while Roberts' ultimate vote was unclear.

Official: US gave intel before Ukraine sank Russian warship

By AAMER MADHANI, NOMAAN MERCHANT and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. says it shared intelligence with Ukraine about the location of the Russian missile cruiser Moskva prior to the strike that sank the warship, an incident that was a high-profile failure for Russia's military.

An American official said Thursday that Ukraine alone decided to target and sink the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet using its own anti-ship missiles. But given Russia's attacks on the Ukrainian coastline from the sea, the U.S. has provided "a range of intelligence" that includes locations of those ships, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Biden administration has ramped up intelligence sharing with Ukraine alongside the shipment of arms and missiles to help it repel Russia's invasion. The disclosure of U.S. support in the Moskva strike comes as the White House is under pressure from Republicans to do more to support Ukraine's resistance and as polls suggest Americans question whether President Joe Biden is being tough enough on Russia.

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion in February, the White House has tried to balance supporting Ukraine, a democratic ally, against not doing anything that would seem to provoke a direct war between Putin and the U.S. and NATO allies. As the war has gone on, the White House has ramped up its military and intelligence support, removing some time and geographic limits on what it will tell Ukraine about potential Russian targets.

The official who spoke Thursday said the U.S. was not aware that Ukraine planned to strike the Moskva until after they conducted the operation. NBC News first reported on the American role in the sinking of the ship.

Speaking earlier Thursday after a New York Times report about the U.S. role in supporting Ukraine's killing of Russian generals, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said American agencies "do not provide intelligence on the location of senior military leaders on the battlefield or participate in the targeting decisions of the Ukrainian military."

"Ukraine combines information that we and other partners provide with the intel that they themselves are gathering and then they make their own decisions and they take their own actions," Kirby said.

Miami's Wong shows college sports hurtles toward free market

By JIM VERTUNO AP Sports Writer

An agent for a prominent college athlete finally said out loud what schools likely hear in private: Pay the player more, or he will transfer to a school that will.

The brazen demand made on behalf of University of Miami basketball star Isaiah Wong last week provided a rare, unvarnished glimpse into the way elite college sports have been transformed by athletes' rights to

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earn money through endorsements.

Teammates are comparing contracts. Players' financial backers are swapping barbs. And coaches and administrators are struggling to keep their rosters full — and players happy -- without running afoul of the rules.

If Wong's agent didn't technically cross the bounds of what's permissible -- players can't seek payment simply in return for a promise to play at a specific school — then he firmly planted his foot on the line, according to labor experts.

"We are rapidly moving toward professionalization at full market rate for these NCAA players," said Michael LeRoy, labor law professor at the University of Illinois. "It's very clear it's really not about endorsements, it's about paying guys for their performance."

Until recently, endorsement deals — or any compensation other than scholarships -- were strictly off limits for college athletes. Paying students was seen as a threat to the ideal of amateur sports. But legal challenges by athletes seeking to reap some of the billions of dollars schools were earning off of sports forced change. In 2019, California became the first state to pass a law allowing athletes to earn money on endorsements, autograph signings and other activities, and by July 2021, the NCAA lifted its decades-old ban.

The NCAA left in place only loosely defined guidelines: the deals could not be used to entice recruits or as a form of pay-for-play contracts.

Wong, who has apparently opted to stay at Miami, surely wasn't the first player to have a representative make a demand based on a player's perceived market value, and he won't be the last, experts said.

"He was just the first to be so public about it," said Todd Berry, executive director of the American Football Coaches Association.

Tens of thousands of athletes across many sports have cashed in, according to Opendorse, a firm that works with schools on player-compensation matters ranging from brand-building to compliance.

Deals can be worth as little as a few hundred dollars; some reportedly top \$1 million. Football players earn the most, followed by women's and men's basketball players, according to Opendorse. Endorsements can be found far and wide, even in seemingly low-profile sports such as golf, rowing and hockey.

So far, it's only been individual players like landing big deals, but that could change. LeRoy, the labor law professor, wondered what would happen if players from the same basketball team made a joint demand for more generous endorsement pay, putting a program in a bind.

It's easier for a football team to bounce back if players seeking better endorsements transfer to other schools because the rosters are larger than in basketball. But keeping everyone happy is a challenge for coaches.

"All 85 players are your roster and free agents every year," Berry said. "This is a professional model. It's not a collegiate model anymore."

TCU football coach Sonny Dykes said recruits routinely ask about endorsement deals.

"Basically, all we can do is pass on a number and say, 'Hey, you can talk to this guy, and he'll tell you what we can or can't do.' It's really that simple," Dykes said. "The concern for me is that somebody makes a promise to a kid and doesn't follow through. We have no control over that."

In many cases, the people to call are the ones running so-called collectives, sports marketing agencies that have sprung up to support specific schools and facilitate deals between their athletes and businesses such as apparel companies, energy drink companies, car dealerships and restaurants.

At Texas, one group is dangling \$50,000 a year to individual offensive linemen for work supporting community charities, such as in-person appearances, promotions or representation. At the University of Oregon, billionaire Nike founder Phil Knight is part of group helping Ducks athletes line up deals.

Nigel Pack, a men's basketball player who transferred to Miami from Kansas State, signed with the software company LifeWallet for \$800,000, plus the use of a car for two years. UConn basketball player Paige Bueckers last year was the first college athlete to sign a deal to represent Gatorade.

A large majority of athletic directors worry that collectives are improperly using endorsement contracts to recruit players from high schools or other colleges, according to a survey released Wednesday by LEAD1, an association of athletic directors at the 130 schools in the Football Bowl Subdivision.

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"This is a transformational period in college sports and the results of our survey illustrate that (athletic directors) are extremely concerned with a number of key issues," LEAD1 President Tom McMillen said.

The NCAA, the governing body of college sports, has taken a mostly hands-off approach since allowing endorsement deals, and more than two dozen states have laws allowing endorsement deals. Most of the state laws include the ban on pay-for-play.

But as cases like Wong's illustrate how quickly college sports is changing, there is new pressure to study the issue. On Thursday, the commissioners of the Southeastern Conference and Pac-12, two of the wealthiest leagues in college sports, were scheduled to meet with lawmakers in Washington to lobby for some federal regulations, which could include possible bans on using endorsement contracts as recruiting inducements and pay-for-play deals.

Leagues, schools and some coaches worry the new free-for-all upends competitive balance, disrupts rosters and pushes more control over athletic programs to outside forces.

What caught many by surprise is how quickly deep-pocketed collectives and wealthy individuals aligned with major colleges poured in to raise and dangle millions of dollars in front of athletes.

"Nobody anticipated these collectives forming a year ago," LeRoy said. "It shows us how out of control the whole system is. It has become a way for schools to find a third-party payer for their athletic talent."

Even financial backers can get caught off guard when an athlete decides the money isn't big enough, or when a teammate perhaps becomes a financial rival.

Mit Winter, a sports law and business attorney in Kansas City, Missouri, said some deals are pushing the boundaries, and making it seem as if players are simply getting paid to play, as opposed to being compensated at market rates for endorsements.

"Arguably these deals are violating NCAA rules and sometimes even state laws," Winter said. "That's kind of the big question: Is the NCAA ever going to start investigating some of these deals?"

Some point to a future of collective bargaining between athletes and schools. That would mean schools treating athletes more like employees, which they have resisted.

Last September, the top lawyer for National Labor Relations Board said in a memo that college athletes should be treated as employees of their schools. That established a potential path for athletes to unionize or bargain over working conditions.

Collective bargaining would require some flexibility and creative thinking by schools and conferences. It could also let them bring their institutional power into negotiations with athletes, who may have competing interests, such as gender equity and different health and safety needs across multiple sports.

"It would be a nervous moment for teams and leagues. They don't have experience with it and their TV contracts would be unsettled," LeRoy said. "But at the end of the day, they would be able to get a stable kind of resolution to their labor problems."

Virus found in pig heart used in human transplant

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Researchers trying to learn what killed the first person to receive a heart transplant from a pig have discovered the organ harbored an animal virus but cannot yet say if it played any role in the man's death.

A Maryland man, 57-year-old David Bennett Sr., died in March, two months after the groundbreaking experimental transplant. University of Maryland doctors said Thursday they found an unwelcome surprise — viral DNA inside the pig heart. They did not find signs that this bug, called porcine cytomegalovirus, was causing an active infection.

But a major worry about animal-to-human transplants is the risk that it could introduce new kinds of infections to people.

Because some viruses are "latent," meaning they lurk without causing disease, "it could be a hitchhiker," Dr. Bartley Griffith, the surgeon who performed Bennett's transplant, told The Associated Press.

Still, development is under way of more sophisticated tests to "make sure that we don't miss these kinds of viruses," added Dr. Muhammad Mohiuddin, scientific director of the university's xenotransplant program.

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The animal virus was first reported by MIT Technology Review, citing a scientific presentation Griffith gave to the American Society of Transplantation last month.

For decades, doctors have tried using animal organs to save human lives without success. Bennett, who was dying and ineligible for a human heart transplant, underwent the last-ditch operation using a heart from a pig genetically modified to lower the risk that his immune system would rapidly reject such a foreign organ.

The Maryland team said the donor pig was healthy, had passed testing required by the Food and Drug Administration to check for infections, and was raised in a facility designed to prevent animals from spreading infections. Revivacor, the company that provided the animal, declined to comment.

Griffith said his patient, while very ill, had been recovering fairly well from the transplant when one morning he woke up worse, with symptoms similar to an infection. Doctors ran numerous tests to try to understand the cause, and gave Bennett a variety of antibiotics, antiviral medication and an immune-boosting treatment. But the pig heart became swollen, filled with fluid and eventually quit functioning.

"What was the virus doing, if anything, that might have caused the swelling in his heart?" Griffith asked. "Honestly we don't know."

The reaction also didn't appear to be a typical organ rejection, he said, noting the investigation still is underway.

Meanwhile doctors at other medical centers around the country have been experimenting with animal organs in donated human bodies and are anxious to attempt formal studies in living patients soon. It's not clear how the pig virus will affect those plans.

Major companies stay mum on thorny abortion issue - for now

By HALELUYA HADERO and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A leaked draft of a Supreme Court opinion that would abolish a nationwide right to abortion has thrust major companies into what's arguably the most divisive issue in American politics.

But while some are signaling support for abortion rights, many want to stay out of it — at least for now.

Experts say it's tough to navigate these waters. Companies are facing increasing pressure from social media and their own employees to speak out. And while some of them have weighed in on issues like LGBTQ rights, voting rights and gun control, the thorny issue of abortion could prove to be more challenging.

"This is the hottest of the hot potatoes," said Allen Adamson, co-founder of marketing consultancy Metaforce. "While lots of issues are polarizing, this is ground zero for polarization. People are fanatically passionate one way or another."

Despite the risks, major companies have waded into the abortion issue in the past. In 2019, more than 180 of them — including H&M, Slack and Glossier — signed an open letter that said restrictive abortion laws were against their values and "bad for business."

A similar letter was signed by more than 60 companies last year in response to a Texas law banning abortions after roughly six weeks of pregnancy, forcing some women to travel out-of-state to access the procedure. Among others, jeans maker Levi Strauss & Co., the online reviews site Yelp, banking giant Citigroup and ride-hailing company Lyft pledged to cover travel costs for employees who have to travel long distances to access an abortion.

When the report of the draft court opinion set off a political firestorm this week, a few companies issued statements supporting abortion rights but stopped short of taking further action themselves.

"Overturning Roe v. Wade will jeopardize the human rights of millions of women who stand to lose the liberty to make decisions over their own bodies," Yelp said in a statement. "Turning back the clock on the progress women have made over the past 50 years will have a seismic impact on our society and economy."

Many others have remained quiet. They include Netflix, PayPal, Microsoft, Patagonia, Target, Walmart and Apple, which is reportedly covering travel costs for its Texas workers through its medical insurance. Microsoft and the Chamber of Commerce, the world's largest business federation, said it had no comment; the rest did not respond to requests for comment. The Business Roundtable, which represents some of the country's most powerful companies, said it "does not have a position on this issue."

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Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, also did not respond to an Associated Press request for comment, though its chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, posted on her personal social media accounts on Tuesday that the document represents a "scary day for women all across the country."

Adamson believes that many companies have held off weighing in on the Supreme Court's draft because they want to wait to see the court's final ruling.

"This gives companies a chance to think this through," he said, noting that companies need to make a decision based on what the majority of their employees want.

Over the past few years, companies have added their voices to the Black Lives Matter movement and issues like same-sex marriage. After the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, dozens pledged to halt donations to lawmakers who objected to Congress' certification of President Joe Biden's victory, promises that turned out to be largely empty.

But taking a stance on controversial issues is seemingly becoming more challenging, oftentimes pitting companies against Republican lawmakers who seem increasingly eager to push back.

Delta, which declined to comment on the abortion issue, was the subject of attacks by the Georgia GOP last year for its opposition to the state's restrictive voting rights bill. In response, Georgia's Republican-controlled House voted to revoke a jet fuel tax break that benefits the Atlanta-based company, an effort that ultimately fizzled.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill last month to dissolve the private government Walt Disney World controls on its property in the state as retribution for the company's opposition to a new law critics have dubbed "Don't Say Gay." On Wednesday, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio introduced a bill that would prohibit companies from claiming tax deductions for their employees' abortion travel costs or "gender transition" expenses for employees' children.

State lawmakers are similarly taking aim at companies that offer help to women seeking abortions in states with less restrictive laws around abortions. Should Roe v. Wade get overturned, roughly half of states are likely to quickly ban abortion.

In March, Texas State Representative Briscoe Cain, a Republican, sent a cease-and-desist letter to Citigroup, saying he would propose legislation barring local governments in the state from doing business with any company that provides travel benefits for employees seeking abortions. If enacted, Cain said the bill would prevent the New York-based bank from underwriting municipal bonds in Texas unless the bank rescinds its policy.

In South Dakota, GOP Rep. Scott Odenbach suggested lawmakers might look at legislation to discourage companies from covering the costs of employees who travel to another state for an abortion, noting that the state's proximity to Minnesota, where abortion will remain legal even if Roe is undone, raises "cross-border issues."

David Levine, a professor at UC Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco, said the legality of what states can or can't do to regulate companies who cover such costs can get murky. He said the easiest thing lawmakers can do is to remove tax breaks offered to companies who cover them.

Businesses face tough choices if they continue to operate in states that legislatively ban abortion, agreed John E. Katsos, a research affiliate at Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland, who consults with multinational companies. Katsos predicted insurance companies would raise the premium rates of companies that operate in such states, because it costs more to insure a pregnant woman and children than to cover an abortion procedure.

Some corporations have long paid for their employees' travel-related expenses for surgeries out of state under their medical benefits, noted Katy Johnson, senior counsel of health policy at The American Benefits Council, a lobbying group in Washington, D.C. She said she has fielded more interest from companies since the abortion ban in Texas to cover travel expenses for abortion procedures.

State abortion bans might make it harder for companies located in such states to recruit college-educated workers at a time of severe labor shortages, some experts said. That might outweigh any special tax privileges that helped to entice companies to locate there.

"You would rather pay higher tax and have great people than struggle to recruit people to your headquarters

in Texas," said Maurice Schweitzer, a professor at University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. "College graduates will have a lot of choices. And I think there's going to be a stigma and an aversion to moving to states that have these draconian laws."

Heard takes stand, accuses Depp of violent sexual assault

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (AP) — Actor Amber Heard tearfully told jurors Thursday that Johnny Depp sexually assaulted her with a liquor bottle in an alcohol-fueled rage.

The March 2015 incident in Australia, where Depp was filming the fifth "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie, is sharply disputed and has been a focal point of the four-week civil trial in Fairfax, Virginia.

The night ended with the tip of Depp's middle finger cut off, and him writing vulgar messages in blood on the walls of the house. Depp denies assaulting her in any way and says his finger was severed when Heard threw a vodka bottle at him; Heard said she'd taken sleeping pills after she was attacked and was not awake when the finger was severed.

The graphic description of the sexual assault left Heard fighting for her composure as she described it to jurors. She said Depp had been angry as soon as she arrived in Australia, roughly a month after the couple had married in February 2015.

He was accusing her of sleeping with co-stars in her movies, including Billy Bob Thornton and Eddie Redmayne, with whom she'd just shot the film "The Danish Girl" — accusations she denied.

The fight escalated to the point where he threw her into a ping-pong table, breaking it, Heard testified. He ripped off her nightgown, and Heard said she was naked and exposed as she was assaulted.

"I couldn't get up. I thought he was punching me," she said. "I could just feel this pressure on my pubic bone."

She thought he was assaulting her with her fist, but later figured out that she was being assaulted with a bottle, and realized that there had been numerous bottles broken in the fight.

"I looked around and saw so much broken glass. I just remember thinking, 'Please God, please don't be broken,'" she said.

Heard described bizarre details in the aftermath of the attack, including seeing her shredded burgundy nightgown used to wrap a raw steak that had been left out. She said that when Depp's security team finally arrived to tend to his severed finger, Depp was still trying to leave vulgar messages for her, but was trying to write them by urinating on the wall.

Much of the trial testimony has been repetitive of a civil suit Depp filed against a British newspaper. A judge there ruled against Depp in 2020, finding that Heard had in fact been assaulted multiple times by Depp. But the sexual assault allegations described by Heard on Thursday were not publicly aired in the U.K. trial.

Depp is suing Heard in Virginia for libel over an op-ed she wrote in The Washington Post describing herself as "a public figure representing domestic abuse." His lawyers say he was defamed by the 2018 article even though it never mentioned his name.

Earlier in her testimony Thursday, Heard testified that Depp surrounded himself with an entourage of enablers to shield him from the consequences of his drug and alcohol use.

She described an incident that has already come up at trial, a May 2014 plane ride from Boston to Los Angeles. According to Heard, Depp was jealous and irate that she was making a movie with actor James Franco that included a kissing scene.

"He hated, hated James Franco," she said.

As soon as Depp stepped into the private plane, he began berating her, she said. She got up and walked away, but Depp followed her. At one point, he slapped her, Heard testified. Later, she said, he kicked her, and not one person on board intervened on her behalf.

"I felt this boot in my back," she said. "I fell to the floor. And no one said anything. No one did anything. You could have heard a pin drop. I just remember feeling so embarrassed."

Depp, who testified earlier in the trial, described the incident differently. He denied that he'd drank excessively before getting on the plane, and said Heard initiated an argument and pursued him until he felt

compelled to hide in a bathroom.

But jurors heard a recording Heard made toward the end of the incident, in which it sounds like Depp is howling and babbling incoherently. And the jury has seen a text message Depp sent his friend Paul Bettany shortly after the flight, in which he says he's going to "properly stop the booze thing" because the flight got "ugly." He also texted Bettany saying, "I'm admittedly too f—— in the head to spray my rage at the one I love for little reason as well."

Heard has testified that she was physically and sexually assaulted on multiple occasions by Depp, typically when he was drunk or high on drugs. Depp has denied ever hitting her, but Heard's lawyers have said his denials lack credibility in part because he can't remember what he's done when he blacks out.

Depp has said Heard greatly exaggerates his drinking, and that he tolerates his liquor well. Friends, family and employees of Depp have taken the stand and backed up his contention.

But Heard said that's part of the problem: She said Depp has a team around him that cleans him up when he gets sick, and enables him to go about his business without acknowledging the consequences of his drinking.

AP analysis finds growing number of poor, high-hazard dams

By DAVID A. LIEB, MICHAEL CASEY and MICHELLE MINKOFF Associated Press

Constructed four generations ago, the massive rock and clay dam at El Capitan Reservoir is capable of storing over 36 billion gallons of water, enough to supply every resident in San Diego for most of a year.

Today, it's three-quarters empty, intentionally kept low because of concerns it could fail under the strain of too much water.

During "a big earthquake, you never know what's going to happen, if this is going to hold," said Samuel Santos, a longtime resident who frequently fishes near the dam.

Seismic instability and a spillway in need of "significant repair" led El Capitan to be added to a growing list of dams rated in poor condition or worse that would likely cause deaths downstream if they failed.

An Associated Press analysis tallied more than 2,200 high-hazard dams in poor or unsatisfactory condition across the U.S. — up substantially from a similar AP review conducted three years ago. The actual number is likely even higher, although it's unclear because some states don't track such data and many federal agencies refuse to release details about their dams' conditions.

The nation's dams are on average over a half-century old and often present more of a hazard than envisioned when designed because homes, businesses or highways have cropped up below them. Meanwhile, a warming atmosphere can bring stronger storms with heavier rainfall that could overwhelm aging dams.

"All of a sudden, you've got older dams with a lower design criteria that now can potentially cause loss of life if they fail," said Del Shannon, an engineer who is president of the U.S. Society on Dams.

"The number of deficient, high-hazard dams is increasing," he said, adding that without investment in upgrades, that number will continue to rise.

Decades of deferred maintenance has worsened the problem. But a changing climate and extreme floods — such as the one that caused the failure of two Michigan dams and the evacuation of 10,000 people in 2020 — have brought a renewed focus to an often overlooked aspect of America's critical infrastructure.

The \$1 trillion infrastructure bill signed last year by President Joe Biden will pump about \$3 billion into dam-related projects, including hundreds of millions for state dam safety programs and repairs.

It marks "a tremendous leap and jump of funding," said Kayed Lakhia, director of the National Dam Safety Program at the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Yet it's still just a fraction of the nearly \$76 billion needed to fix the almost 89,000 dams owned by individuals, companies, community associations, state and local governments, and other entities besides the federal government, according to a report by the Association of State Dam Safety Officials.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lists about 92,000 dams in its nationwide database, most of which are privately owned and regulated by states. Dams are classified according to the risk posed by failure, ranging from low to significant to high. A high hazard means lives could be lost if the dam fails.

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Dams also are assessed by their condition. Those in the worst shape — categorized as poor or unsatisfactory — can have a variety of problems including cracks and erosion that could undermine a dam, or spillway outlets unable to release all the water after extraordinary rainfall.

The number of high-hazard dams in poor or unsatisfactory condition has risen partly because of stricter regulation. Some state programs, infused with millions of additional dollars, have stepped up inspections, reassessed whether old dams endanger new downstream developments and worked to identify dams long ago abandoned by their owners. Some also are updating the precipitation tools used to evaluate the risks.

New York has about twice the number of high-hazard dams in poor condition as it did in 2018, when the AP collected data for its earlier analysis. The increase came as officials pushed to assess all high-hazard dams that were previously unrated.

The number of high-hazard dams in deficient condition in South Carolina rose by a third from 2018 to 2021, after lawmakers more than doubled annual funding for the state's dam safety program. More than 70 dams failed in the state amid heavy rains in 2015 and 2016. Since then, South Carolina has ramped up staffing, undertaken more regular inspections and begun mapping potential flood zones for low-hazard dams to determine if they should be reclassified as high hazard.

"When you had a storm of that magnitude and you have it happen again the next year, and dams continue to fail, we've got to be able to provide a response," said Jill Stewart, the state's director of dam safety and stormwater permitting.

Rhode Island examined the capacity of all its dam spillways after five dams failed during a storm in 2010. A 2019 study found that a quarter of its high-hazard dams couldn't hold up to a 100-year storm — an event with a 1% chance of happening any year — and 17% couldn't pass a 500-year storm, which has a 0.2% chance of occurring in a year.

The state was sharing the findings with dam owners and could require some to upgrade their spillways to meet state regulations.

Many old dams "are undersized for the kind of storms that we're getting today and will be getting in the future," said David Chopy, administrator of the Office of Compliance and Inspection at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

Since 2019, California regulators have downgraded four of San Diego's water supply dams from fair to poor condition because of deterioration and concerns they could fail because of an earthquake or extraordinary rainfall. As a result, the high-hazard dams at El Capitan, Hodges and Morena reservoirs all are restricted to holding less than half their capacities. The dam at Lower Otay Reservoir, also high hazard and in poor condition, is not restricted.

The lower water means Santos, who has been coming to El Capitan Reservoir since childhood, can't find relief from shade trees when he fishes from the receding banks. His children don't want to join him because it's so hot.

"It's sad to see it, because it's just like a duck pond compared to what it used to be," said another longtime resident, Bob Neal, who said his father-in-law helped build the dam in the 1930s.

The dam's poor condition also means less water is stored to prepare for drought, which has become particularly severe in the West. San Diego gets an average of just 10 inches of rain annually.

"These reservoirs are very important," said Republican state Sen. Brian Jones, whose district includes the El Capitan and Lake Hodges dams. "We need to start spending the money on them to retrofit them, to get them up again back to full capacity."

Jones is among several lawmakers pushing the state to carry out a 2014 ballot proposition that authorized billions of dollars for reservoir projects. San Diego's mayor also has urged the state to allot at least \$3 billion for dam repairs statewide.

For many dams, problems develop gradually and risks can be reduced by temporary measures, such as lowering water levels, until repairs can be made, said Ryan Stack, chief engineer at Missouri's dam safety program.

"Unsatisfactory doesn't necessarily mean helicopters and bells-and-whistles and everything going off for an immediate crisis," Stack said.

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But the risk from old, inadequate dams has become painfully evident in recent years.

In 2019, a rural Nebraska dam failed under extreme pressure from a raging flood of ice chunks, killing a man whose home was beneath the dam. An independent investigation determined that state regulators should have classified the dam as "high hazard," which could have led to a plan to increase its flood capacity and better warn residents downstream. The public utility that owned the dam agreed this year to a \$2.5 million settlement for the man's family while a lawsuit continues against the state.

In 2020, central Michigan's Edenville Dam failed following heavy rainfall. The rupture unleashed a torrent on the Tittabawassee River, leading to the failure of Sanford Dam downstream and the evacuation of about 10,000 people.

The high-hazard Edenville Dam, built in 1924, had been rated in unsatisfactory condition in 2018 and lost its federal hydropower license due to a variety of issues, including a spillway incapable of standing up to a severe flood.

An investigatory report released Wednesday found that Edenville dam had deficiencies with its earthen embankment that could have been caught and corrected if engineers had gone beyond visual inspections and conducted a more comprehensive review of the dam's design and construction. Regulators across the country should learn from the Michigan failures, said John France, an engineer who led the investigation.

"No one has X-ray eyes," France said Thursday. "You would have to look at the records, you would have to look at the test borings that were done and assimilate that all together."

After the dam failures, Michigan beefed up its 2022 budget with \$19 million for dam safety, plus money to hire more regulatory staff. Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer recently signed legislation providing an additional \$250 million for dams, including about \$200 million to repair those damaged by the 2020 floods.

The plan prioritizes high-risk dams "that can be ticking time bombs if they are not addressed," said state Rep. Roger Hauck, a Republican whose district experienced flooding from the dam failures. "Dragging our feet or failing to get it done will only open the door to other catastrophes down the line."

Other states also are pumping more money into dam safety. After Kansas exempted thousands of dams from state regulation in 2013, its allotment of annual federal dam safety funds plunged, leading to a decline in staffing and delays in handling permits and inspections. A budget passed by the Legislature this year will double state funding and staff for the dam safety office.

Facing a projected 20-year backlog of work, Missouri lawmakers last year added \$75,000 to hire an additional dam safety engineer. But it's taken 10 months to find someone qualified to fill the position.

Addressing the problems posed by old, unsafe dams can be challenging. Repairs can be costly and take years to complete. Attempts to remove dams — and empty the lakes they hold back — can spawn legal battles and a public outcry from those who rely on them for recreation or to sustain nearby property values.

A pair of high-hazard dams built in the mid-1800s near Cleveland are among those in need of major repair. Upper Shaker Lake, commonly known as Horseshoe Lake, was drained as a precaution after it developed sinkholes and cracks. The cities of Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights, which jointly manage the dams, last year approved a \$28.3 million plan to remove Horseshoe Lake Dam, return the area to a free-flowing stream and rebuild Lower Shaker Lake Dam.

But the plan faces backlash from community members who formed a nonprofit to try to save Horseshoe Lake. They hired a law firm and engineering company, launched a fundraising drive and gathered about 2,000 online petition signatures.

"The lake is a beautiful, calming feature that is the central park of the Heights neighborhood," said musician Bert Stratton, a resident helping to lead the efforts. "It's where people come to congregate, and they have for over 100 years."

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, which manages stormwater projects, said Horseshoe Lake provides little flood-control benefit and that the district won't pay to rebuild it.

"People need to understand there is a major risk at this facility," including the "probable loss of life if the dam blew out," said Frank Greenland, the district's director of watershed programs.

Decades of procrastination on repairs has led to the deterioration of other dams across the country. Some

owners find it difficult to justify the costs of improving structures without facing an emergency.

There's an attitude among some dam owners of "oh, we'll take care of it next year; oh, we'll take care of it in three years; oh, let's put together a plan," said Bob Travis, managing partner of Risk Management Matters LLC, a consultant for community associations. "Meanwhile, that dam is getting older and older and older."

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.

Two drugs are required. The first, mifepristone, blocks a hormone needed to maintain a pregnancy. A second drug, misoprostol, taken one to two days later, empties the uterus. Both drugs are available as generics and are also used to treat other conditions.

The FDA last year lifted a long-standing requirement that women pick up abortion pills in person. Federal regulations now also allow mail delivery nationwide. Even so, 19 states have passed laws requiring a medical clinician to be physically present when abortion pills are administered to a patient.

South Dakota is among them, joining several states, including Texas, Kentucky, Arkansas, Ohio, Tennessee and Oklahoma, where Republicans have moved to further restrict access to abortion pills in recent months.

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."

Besides crossing state lines, women can also turn to international 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?"

Abortion law experts say it's an unsettled question whether states can restrict access to abortion pills in the wake of the FDA's decision.

"The general rule is that federal law preempts conflicting state law," said Laura Hermer, a professor at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota. "There is no question that the FDA has proper authority to regulate the drugs used in medication abortions. The question is whether a state can make a

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viable, winning argument that, for public health purposes, it needs to further regulate access to the relevant medications."

Hermer said she doesn't think there is a valid public health reason because the published evidence is that the drugs are "exceptionally safe." But if the Supreme Court overrules Roe v. Wade and a state gives embryos and fetuses full rights as people "then all bets would be off."

The Planned Parenthood regional organization that includes South Dakota doesn't believe it can legally mail abortion pills to patients there.

Telemedicine providers have to abide by the laws of the state where the patient is, said Dr. Sarah Traxler, chief medical officer for Planned Parenthood North Central States in St. Paul. She acknowledged that some organizations disagree. "But," she added, "we don't feel like we have liberty to mail pills from Minnesota to other places in the country where it's illegal to provide medication abortion."

Sue Leibel, the state policy director for Susan B. Anthony List, a prominent organization opposed to abortion, acknowledged that medication abortions have "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."

Leibel maintained women should not be prosecuted for seeking abortions, keeping with a long-standing principle of many abortion opponents. She 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 will turn their attention toward the women who get the pills.

Indeed, a Louisiana House committee advanced a bill Wednesday that would make abortion a crime of homicide for which a woman ending her pregnancy could be charged, along with anyone helping her.

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

Cardinal: Pope OK'd spending 1M euros to free kidnapped nun

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis authorized spending up to 1 million euros to free a Colombian nun kidnapped by al-Qaida-linked militants in Mali, a cardinal testified Thursday, revealing previously secret papal approval to hire a British security firm to find the nun and secure her freedom.

Cardinal Angelo Becciu's bombshell testimony could pose serious security implications for the Vatican and Catholic Church, since he provided evidence that the pope was apparently willing to pay ransom to Islamic militants to free a nun, who was eventually let go last year.

Ransom payment are rarely if ever confirmed, precisely to dissuade future kidnappings, and it's not known how much — if any Vatican money — actually ended up in the hands of the militants. Prosecutors have accused a Becciu co-defendant of embezzling around half the amount on high-end luxury items for herself.

Becciu, who was once one of Francis' top advisers as the No. 2 in the Vatican secretariat of state, had withheld his testimony from the Vatican tribunal for nearly two years as a matter of state and pontifical secret. But he spoke freely Thursday in his own defense after Francis released him from the confidentiality requirement, providing the most anticipated testimony of the yearlong trial to date.

Becciu is one of 10 people accused in the Vatican's sprawling financial fraud trial, which originated in the Holy See's 350 million euro investment in a London property and expanded to cover other alleged crimes. Prosecutors have accused the defendants of a host of crimes for allegedly fleecing the Holy See of millions of euros in fees, commissions and bad investments.

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Becciu, the lone cardinal on trial, is accused of embezzlement, abuse of office and witness tampering, all of which he denies. On Thursday, his testimony covered the charges concerning his relationship with an Italian self-styled intelligence specialist, Cecilia Marogna.

Marogna has told Italian media that she helped negotiate the release of Catholic hostages in Africa on behalf of the Holy See. Vatican prosecutors accuse her of embezzling 575 million euros, citing bank records from her Slovenian holding company that show nine wire transfers from the Vatican in 2018-2019 for unspecified humanitarian ends, and expenditures out of the account at Prada, Luis Vuitton and fancy hotels. Marogna has said the transfers were reimbursements for expenditures and compensation for her services.

Becciu testified Thursday that he hired Marogna as an external security consultant, impressed by her grasp of geopolitical affairs and the trust she enjoyed of two of Italy's top secret service officials, Generals Luciano Carta and Gianni Caravelli, who accompanied her to a meeting with Becciu in the Vatican in October 2017.

Becciu said he turned to Marogna for help following the February 2017 kidnapping of a Colombian nun, Sister Gloria Cecilia Narvaez, in Mali. She had been kidnapped by al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, which has bank-rolled its insurgency by kidnapping Westerners. During her captivity, the group periodically showed Narvaez on video asking for the Vatican's help.

Becciu said he had heard from the Vatican's nuncio in Colombia as well as other sisters from the nun's religious order asking for help. He said he brought the matter to Francis as well as Marogna, who he said advised him that she could work with a British intelligence firm, The Inkerman Group, to secure the nun's release.

Becciu testified that Francis authorized him to proceed with the Inkerman operation, and forbade him from telling anyone else about it, including the Vatican's own police chief. Francis was concerned about the security and reputational implications if the news leaked, Becciu said.

Becciu said he and Marogna met with Inkerman officials at their London office in mid-January 2018.

Inkerman officials said there were no assurances of success and that the total expenditure could reach 1 million euros, Becciu said. Because the Vatican wanted to remain external to any operation, Marogna became the key intermediary and the one to receive periodic payments from the Vatican secretariat of state for the operation, Becciu testified.

Becciu said he provided Francis a preliminary oral readout of the London meeting on Jan. 15, 2018, while the pope was en route to Peru.

"He listened to me and confirmed my intention to proceed," Becciu testified. "In a subsequent meeting with the Holy Father, once in Rome, I spoke to him in more detail about the conversation we had with the Inkermans and the sum that we should have estimated in broad terms: about 1 million euros, part to pay for the creation of a network of contacts, and part for the effective liberation of the nun."

"I pointed out that we shouldn't have gone beyond that figure. He approved. I must say that every step of this operation was agreed with the Holy Father," Becciu testified.

Narvaez was released in October, 2021, after more than four years in captivity. Soon after, she met with Francis at the Vatican.

Vatican prosecutors say they have evidence that the secretariat of state, in addition to the transfer of 575,000 euros sent to Marogna's Slovenian accounts, sent an equivalent amount directly to a British bank account held by Inkerman.

Becciu also responded to claims against him concerning Cardinal George Pell, who left his job as the Vatican's financial czar in 2017 to face historic sex abuse charges in his native Australia, for which he was ultimately acquitted. Pell clashed repeatedly with Becciu during his time at the Vatican and has repeated Italian media claims that Becciu approved money transfers from the Vatican to Australia that in some way aided in the sex abuse prosecution against him.

Becciu on Thursday produced two letters to refute the claims: One from the current secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, explaining that the 1.46 million euros that was wired to Australia was to pay for a domain name ".catholic." And the other, a Sept. 11, 2015 letter authorizing that expenditure, signed by none other than Pell.

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US mortgage rates rise; 30-year at 5.27%, highest since 2009

WASHINGTON (AP) — Average long-term U.S. mortgage rates resumed their ascent this week, as the key 30-year loan reached its highest point since 2009.

The increases came in the week preceding the widely anticipated action by the Federal Reserve, announced Wednesday, to intensify its fight against the worst inflation in 40 years by raising its benchmark interest rate by a half-percentage point and signaling further large rate hikes to come. The Fed's move, its most aggressive since 2000, will bring higher costs for mortgages as well as credit cards, auto loans and other borrowing for individuals and businesses.

Mortgage buyer Freddie Mac reported Thursday that the 30-year rate rose to 5.27% from 5.1% last week, when it edged down after seven weeks of increases. By contrast, the average rate stood at 2.96% a year ago.

The average rate on 15-year, fixed-rate mortgages, popular among those refinancing their homes, jumped to 4.52% from 4.4% last week.

With inflation at a four-decade high, rising mortgage rates, elevated home prices and tight supply of homes for sale, homeownership has become less attainable, especially for first-time buyers.

Some economists suggest that home sales this year could decline as much as 10% from 2021 levels.

In a statement Wednesday following their two-day meeting, Fed policymakers noted that Russia's invasion and war on Ukraine is worsening inflation pressures by raising oil and food 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.

Summer Preview: Banana! The Minions expand their empire

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Some of the movies' biggest stars barely speak a word of English, or any other language for that matter. Sure, you can occasionally hear them say "Banana!" or possibly "Smoochy smoochy!" but most of what they say is gibberish. The Minions may be the world's most popular, and lucrative, foreign language movie stars — even if "Minionese" isn't an officially recognized language.

This summer, the goggle-wearing yellow ones will return yet again to further expand their sizable empire in "Minions: Rise of Gru" (in theaters July 1). The "Despicable Me" franchise (a fourth is due in 2024) and its "Minions" spinoffs already rank as the highest-grossing animated film franchise ever with more than \$3.7 billion in tickets sold worldwide.

That's a big reason why "Rise of Gru" was held back by Universal Pictures for the last two years during the pandemic. The Minions — a second-banana scene-stealing horde of mostly incompetent but fiercely loyal henchmen — have in 12 years become a formidable force and a ubiquitous culture presence.

"There's a lot of them so they have a kind of power in that they can overwhelm," says Chris Renaud, producer of "Rise of Gru" and director of the first two "Despicable Me" movies. "It's like power by wearing you out."

"There's a paradox about them," says Kyle Balda, director of "Rise of Gru," "Minions" and "Despicable Me 3." "They want to serve an evil boss of some sort yet there's nothing evil about them, really. They're quite good-natured except they like to see others fail a little bit. They laugh at each other's misfortune. They're very flawed, but their flaws end up working out for them. One of the things we often say is: They fail upward."

Failing upward has gotten the Minions very far, indeed, especially considering how close they came to never quite clicking in the first place. When the filmmakers and artists of the Paris-based animation studio Illumination were developing "Despicable Me," the original script had them as "henchmen and technicians" and the early mock-ups drew them as hulking tough guys, almost Orc-like monsters.

Then they were cylindrically shaped robots. But the filmmakers — including Renaud, co-director Pierre Coffin and art director Eric Guillon — kept playing with the concept, trying to channel the spirit of the Jawas in "Star Wars" or the Oompa Loompas in "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory." Since "Despicable Me" was based on Gru, the evildoing protagonist, the Minions needed to help balance him. If the Minions loved him, he could love the Minions.

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"Pierre was the one who said 'Maybe they shouldn't be robots,'" recalls Renaud. "I said, 'Well, what about mole people?' And he goes, 'I don't know what that is.' So I sent a couple ugly sketches to Pierre and Eric, and then Eric did a sketch that's basically what you see you today. We were like, 'OK, that looks like a pill with a goggle on it. That could work.'"

But what, exactly, were the Minions? Even their creators weren't immediately sure. They pondered a wide range of ideas. Were they created in a lab by the movie's gadget-maker, Dr. Nefario? The Minions were effectively blank slates, and the filmmakers could funnel just about any slapstick influence through them, from Charlie Chaplin to James Bond. A breakthrough, Renaud says, came while they were scripting a scene where the Minions craft Gru's internet dating profile and "go full incompetent."

That was when the "Despicable Me" filmmakers started to sense that they had hit on something potentially big — a truly cartoon creation with limitless possibilities. The Minions, wide-eyed and (mostly) innocent, were like kids.

"When we do design work, it's like baby animals," says Renaud. "Even if they're behaving poorly, you forgive them and laugh at it, the way you would with your own kids."

Just as key, too, was Coffin's voicing of the Minions. Coffin has voiced (with the aid of pitch modulation) nearly all the minions in each film, spitting out half-words, onomatopoeias and a grab bag of expressions from a wide spectrum of languages. If Coffin and the team had Indian food for lunch, the Minions would be shouting "Tikka Masala!" by dinner.

Because the Minions started out loosely defined, and their very nature a little mysterious, the franchise has offered them a chance to continually evolve. In 2015's "Minions," their backstory got filled in a little; a montage followed them through history and a long line of bosses, from a Tyrannosaurus rex to Napoleon — all of whom the Minions unwittingly sabotage. Some Minions — Kevin, Stewart and Bob — have been isolated like a trio of siblings. "The Rise of Gru" picks up after they meet young Gru, who they call "mini-boss" even though he wants to be taken seriously as a villain.

"It's sort of like a romantic comedy where it doesn't all work out nicely in the beginning," says Balda. "Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back. But in this case, Gru is the girl because it's the Minions who are really courting him."

Family moviegoing fell considerably during the pandemic, during which several prominent films for kids went straight to streaming. But the recent box-office successes of films like "Sonic the Hedgehog 2" and "The Bad Guys" have suggested families are eager to return to theaters. There are other family-friendly movies heading to theaters this summer (most notably "Lightyear," the first Pixar film to open theatrically in two years), but the Minions and "Rise of Gru" hope to help lead the way. A trailer for the film ends with the Minions, like children at the movies, filing into a theater and hopping into their seats.

Meanwhile, the work continues for the filmmakers to find out a little more about the juggernaut they created, and to keep coming up with new gags for the Minions. In "Rise of Gru," they learn kung fu, a complication considering the size of their legs. Luckily, it's not really even up to the filmmakers. The Minions are in charge.

Says Balda: "It's almost like the Minions tell you what they want to do as you're drawing them."

Israel says Putin apologized over his FM's Holocaust remarks

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said he accepted an apology from Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday for controversial remarks about the Holocaust made by Moscow's top diplomat.

The two leaders talked over the phone, after which an Israeli statement said Putin had apologized. However, the Russian statement about the call made no mention of an apology. Instead, it said they emphasized the importance of marking the Nazi defeat in World War II, which Russia celebrates on Monday.

Bennett emerged as a potential mediator between Russia and Ukraine shortly after Moscow's invasion. But that role was thrown into doubt this week when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made comments about the Holocaust that were deeply offensive to Jews.

Asked in an interview with an Italian news channel about Russian claims that it invaded Ukraine to "denazify"

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the country, Lavrov said that Ukraine could still have Nazi elements even though its president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is Jewish.

"In my opinion, Hitler also had Jewish origins, so it doesn't mean absolutely anything. For some time we have heard from the Jewish people that the biggest antisemites were Jewish," he said, speaking to the station in Russian, dubbed over by an Italian translation.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who has harshly criticized Russia over the invasion, called Lavrov's statement "unforgivable and scandalous and a horrible historical error."

"The Jews did not murder themselves in the Holocaust," said Lapid, the son of a Holocaust survivor. "The lowest level of racism against Jews is to blame Jews themselves for antisemitism."

He demanded that Russia apologize, and Israel summoned the Russian ambassador in protest.

Bennett, who has been more measured in his criticism of Russia's invasion, also condemned Lavrov's comments. On Thursday, he said Putin had apologized.

"The Prime Minister accepted President Putin's apology for Lavrov's remarks and thanked him for clarifying the President's attitude towards the Jewish people and the memory of the Holocaust," Bennett's office said in a statement.

Evoking Russia's deeply-rooted narrative of suffering and heroism in World War II, Putin has portrayed the war in Ukraine as a struggle against Nazis, even though it has a democratically elected government and a Jewish president whose relatives were killed in the Holocaust.

Israel gained independence in the wake of the Holocaust and has served as a refuge for the world's Jews. The Holocaust and its remembrance remain central to Israel's national identity, and the country marked its annual Holocaust memorial day last week. The Nazis and their collaborators killed 6 million Jews during World War II.

Israel has tried to maintain ties with Russia despite the war, in part because Russia has a large military presence in neighboring Syria, where Israel routinely strikes suspected Iranian military targets. Israel and Moscow coordinate their actions in Syria to avoid coming into conflict.

That paved the way for Bennett to be able to try to mediate between the sides in Ukraine, a role he seems to have resumed this week.

Bennett's office said he and Putin discussed plans to evacuate civilians from a besieged steel plant in the port city of Mariupol in southern Ukraine. That came after a call between Bennett and Zelenskyy on Wednesday.

The statement from Bennett said Putin "promised to allow the evacuation of civilians, including wounded civilians, through a U.N. and Red Cross humanitarian corridor."

WHO: Nearly 15 million deaths associated with COVID-19

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — The World Health Organization estimates that nearly 15 million people were killed either by coronavirus or by its impact on overwhelmed health systems during the first two years of the pandemic, more than double the current official death toll of over 6 million.

Most of the deaths occurred in Southeast Asia, Europe and the Americas, according to a WHO report issued Thursday.

The U.N. health agency's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, described the newly calculated figure as "sobering," saying it should prompt countries to invest more in their capacities to quell future health emergencies.

WHO tasked scientists with determining the actual number of COVID-19 deaths between January 2020 and the end of last year. They estimated that between 13.3 million and 16.6 million people died either due to the coronavirus directly or because of factors somehow attributed to the pandemic's impact on health systems, such as cancer patients who were unable to seek treatment when hospitals were full of COVID patients.

Based on that range, the scientists came up with an approximated total of 14.9 million.

The estimate was based on country-reported data and statistical modeling, but only about half of countries provided information. WHO said it wasn't yet able to break down the data to distinguish between direct

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deaths from COVID-19 and those related to effects of the pandemic, but the agency plans a future project examining death certificates.

"This may seem like just a bean-counting exercise, but having these WHO numbers is so critical to understanding how we should combat future pandemics and continue to respond to this one," said Dr. Albert Ko, an infectious diseases specialist at the Yale School of Public Health who was not linked to the WHO research.

For example, Ko said, South Korea's decision to invest heavily in public health after it suffered a severe outbreak of MERS allowed it to escape COVID-19 with a per-capita death rate around a 20th of the one in the United States.

Accurately counting COVID-19 deaths has been problematic throughout the pandemic, as reports of confirmed cases represent only a fraction of the devastation wrought by the virus, largely because of limited testing. Government figures reported to WHO and a separate tally kept by Johns Hopkins University show more than 6.2 million reported virus deaths to date.

Scientists at the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington calculated for a recent study published in the journal *Lancet* that there were more than 18 million COVID deaths from January 2020 to December 2021.

A team led by Canadian researchers estimated there were more than 3 million uncounted coronavirus deaths in India alone. WHO's new analysis estimated that missed deaths in India alone ranged between 3.3 million to 6.5 million.

In a statement following the release of WHO's data, India disputed the U.N. agency's methodology. India's Health and Family Welfare Ministry called the analysis and data collection methods "questionable" and complained that the new death estimates were released "without adequately addressing India's concerns."

Samira Asma, a senior WHO director, acknowledged that "numbers are sometimes controversial" and that all estimates are only an approximation of the virus' catastrophic effects.

"It has become very obvious during the entire course of the pandemic, there have been data that is missing," Asma told reporters during a press briefing on Thursday. "Basically, all of us were caught unprepared."

Ko said the new figures from WHO might also explain some lingering mysteries about the pandemic, like why Africa appears to have been one of the least affected by the virus, despite its fragile health systems and low vaccination rates.

"Were the mortality rates so low because we couldn't count the deaths, or was there some other factor to explain that?" he asked, citing the far higher mortality rates in the U.S. and Europe.

Dr. Bharat Pankhania, a public health specialist at Britain's University of Exeter, said the world may never get close to measuring the true toll of COVID-19, particularly in poor countries.

"When you have a massive outbreak where people are dying in the streets because of a lack of oxygen, bodies were abandoned or people had to be cremated quickly because of cultural beliefs, we end up never knowing just how many people died," he explained.

Pankhania said that while the estimated COVID-19 death toll still pales in comparison to the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, which experts estimate caused up to 100 million deaths, the fact that so many people died despite the advances of modern medicine, including vaccines, is shameful.

He also warned that the cost of COVID-19 could be far more damaging in the long term, given the increasing burden of caring for people with long COVID.

"With the Spanish flu, there was the flu and then there were some (lung) illnesses people suffered, but that was it," he said. "There was not an enduring immunological condition that we're seeing right now with COVID."

"We do not know the extent to which people with long COVID will have their lives cut short and if they will have repeated infections that will cause them even more problems," Pankhania said.

Small businesses still struggle to find enough workers

By MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Some small businesses are still struggling to hire qualified workers, even as Americans return to the U.S. job market in droves.

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Hiring and retaining employees remains the top challenge for small businesses, according to a survey of 1,100 businesses by Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Business Voices out last week. Ninety percent of businesses that are hiring are finding it difficult to recruit qualified candidates for open positions.

In general, the U.S. job market is sizzling. An unexpectedly strong recovery from the brief but devastating coronavirus recession left companies scrambling to recall workers they had laid off in the spring of 2020 and to find new ones. Over the past year, U.S. employers have added an average of more than 540,000 jobs a month. The Labor Department is expected to report Friday that employers hired another 396,000 last month, according to FactSet.

But small business owners believe the job market is a tale of two recoveries. Eighty-eight percent of respondents in the Goldman Sachs survey say small businesses are struggling relative to larger companies in their local communities. Forty-two percent say they have lost employees to larger businesses that are paying more.

"Small businesses are struggling to compete with larger employers on pay and benefits and cite a lack of qualified workers," said Joe Wall, National Director of Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Voices.

Data from payroll processing firm ADP show a widening gap in hiring between businesses with 500 or more employees and businesses with less than 50 staffers. Those smaller businesses have lost jobs in three of the past four months.

In March, employers advertised a record 11.5 million job openings. The United States now has two job openings for every unemployed person. But a large number of smaller businesses say they're having trouble getting candidates to even apply for openings, particularly in the hard-hit leisure and hospitality industry. Owners are taking on more work themselves and improvising other ways to get by.

"I'm worried about burnout. ... It's frustrating, very frustrating," said Shirley Hughes, owner of Sweet Cheats bakery in Atlanta.

Sweet Cheats had nine staffers at the pre-pandemic peak. Now Hughes has two plus herself. She's curtailed business hours — closing time has gone from 8:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. and now 4 p.m. — giving her and her two bakers more time in the kitchen. Still, Hughes says she now works 80 to 90 hours a week.

Inflation is another challenge. Higher expenses not only hurt businesses' bottom lines, but also affect how well they can retain and attract workers. Before the pandemic, Hughes would get hundreds of applicants for openings. Now, she says she's lucky to get one or two, and they tend to want \$18 or \$20 an hour, when she offers \$14 or \$15 for experienced bakers.

Hughes has had to add benefits for her two long-time staffers to hang onto them.

Teresa Depola is also taking on more work herself because of a lack of available help. She opened Betty Boops Diner in Albany, New York, 10 years ago, with her husband and son, and kept running it after she and her husband divorced.

While she ideally would have three staffers to run the place, lately she's been a one-person workforce: cooking, waitressing, and even running deliveries.

"It's small enough so I can do it myself, it's not bad," she said. Still, she would like to add some staff so she could serve dinner again. She's been serving breakfast and lunch only and closing at 3 p.m. since the pandemic started. And she doesn't see the job picture improving anytime soon.

"I don't think it's going to change for a while," she said. "I'm going to keep it the way it is right now, people are not willing to work just yet. I'm still having a lot of trouble finding staff."

While most major U.S. industries have regained the jobs lost to the pandemic, employment in leisure and hospitality is down by 1.5 million, or 8.7%, since February 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Many in the industry faced burnout after being on the front lines during two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, said Rob Wilson, president of human resources provider Employco. Some who stayed in the industry switched to larger restaurants where wages might be higher. Others left and looked into new opportunities.

"There's nobody to hire, there's nobody out there looking for jobs," said Anesh Bodasing, who opened Tiffin Box, a fast-casual Indian restaurant in West Palm Beach, Florida, in 2019 with 20 staffers.

Last year in April 2021, Bodasing temporarily opened a second location in a food hall. But then the staffing shortage began to hit home.

"Your standard of employee went down and pay you're paying people went up. From an employers' stand-

point, that's the wrong equation," he said.

Bodasing shuttered the food hall stall and is down to three staffers at the West Palm Beach location. He is considering changing the business to use less staffers.

"Let's assume the employment shortage is not going to change," Bodasing said. "You can sit around and struggle or pivot and change the business in a way that will get us ahead even during the shortage."

One option is to replace the cashier position with an automated kiosk, which lets customers order and pay. Another possibility: introducing meal plans, where customers order a minimum of five meals in advance that they can eat or freeze.

"You just have to think outside the box; literally nothing is off the table," he said.

Matt Ensero, founder of Wing it On! chicken restaurants, faced the challenge of keeping a full staff of 35 employees at the company's two corporate restaurants in Waterbury, Connecticut, and Raleigh, North Carolina. (The chain also has nine franchise locations with more in development.)

"We thought, this is pervasive across our industry, we have to change our strategy," he said. Ensero realized he was competing with other restaurants just to get applicants in the door — people would schedule an interview and then not show up 90% of the time. So, the chain started offering people a free lunch or dinner if they showed up. The ratio "flip-flopped" he said, and most applicants came for the interview.

Meanwhile, at the Raleigh location, which is near North Carolina State University, the company started offering scholarships to workers: \$1,000 if they worked for a full year, or \$500 if they worked one semester. The program was a success, and the company plans to increase the amount for full-year workers to \$2,000 next year.

"It's not something that's a foregone conclusion anymore that you can put up an ad and people will walk through the door, and you hire them," Ensero said.

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

By IAN PHILLIPS Associated Press

MINSK, Belarus (AP) — Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko defended Russia's invasion of Ukraine in an interview Thursday with The Associated Press, but he said he didn't expect the 10-week-old conflict to "drag on this way."

He also spoke out against the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine but wouldn't say if Russian President Vladimir Putin had plans to launch such a strike.

Lukashenko said Moscow, which launched the invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24 — partly from his territory — had to act because Kyiv was "provoking Russia."

"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," he said, speaking at Independence Palace in Minsk. "I want to stress one more time: I feel like this operation has dragged on."

Lukashenko's support of the war has prompted international criticism and sanctions against Minsk. Some Russian troops were sent from Belarusian territory into Ukraine, and Lukashenko has publicly stood by his longtime ally, who has pumped billions of dollars into shoring up his Soviet-style, state-controlled economy with cheap energy and loans.

But in his comments to the AP, Lukashenko said he and his country stand for peace and repeatedly called for the end of the "war" — a term the Kremlin refuses to use, calling the invasion a "special military operation" instead.

The 67-year-old president struck a calm and more measured tone in the nearly 90-minute interview than in previous media appearances in which he hectored the West over sanctions and lashed out at journalists.

"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.

Lukashenko said using nuclear weapons in Ukraine was "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," he said. "Whether or not Russia is capable of that — is a question you need to ask the Russian leadership."

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Russia "can't by definition lose this war," Lukashenko said, noting that Belarus is the only country standing by Moscow, while "as many as 50 states have joined forces" on Ukraine's side.

He added that Putin isn't seeking a direct conflict with NATO, and the West should 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 warned.

Lukashenko called Putin his "big brother" and said the Russian leader doesn't have "closer, more open or friendlier relations with any of the world leaders other than the president of Belarus."

Their relationship has been particularly close recently but was rocky in earlier years. Before a disputed 2020 election sparked mass protests and a domestic crackdown by Lukashenko, he often accused the Kremlin of trying to force him to relinquish control of prized economic assets and abandon his country's independence.

Faced with tough economic sanctions after he brutally suppressed the protests, the Belarusian leader started emphasizing a need to jointly counter Western pressure and met with Putin regularly, stressing their close ties.

Lukashenko's support of the invasion has stopped short of deploying his own troops there, but it still has drawn criticism from the Belarusian opposition and calls for more sanctions on him and the country. Opposition figures say ordinary Belarusians don't support the invasion. Hundreds of them who live in Ukraine have been affected by the war, and some have become volunteers, fighting alongside Ukrainian forces.

Top Belarus opposition activist Pavel Latushka dismissed Lukashenko's calls for peace on Thursday, saying they "look absurd after more than 600 missiles were fired from the territory of Belarus, and the country became a platform for aggression."

He added: "Minsk deserves the harshest Western sanctions."

Opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya echoed Latushka's sentiment, calling Lukashenko a "co-aggressor" and saying he is "trying to change his image of an arsonist into that of a firefighter and peacekeeper."

Lukashenko told AP that his country poses no danger to others, even as its military conducted drills this week.

"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 ... is absolutely not in the interests of the Belarusian state. So the West can sleep peacefully," he said.

He blamed the West — especially Washington — for fueling the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

"The U.S. wants to seize the moment, tying its allies to itself, and drown Russia in the war with Ukraine. It's their goal — to sort out Russia, and then China," he said.

Lukashenko said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was taking orders from the United States.

"Today it's not Zelenskyy who's running Ukraine — no offense, that's my point of view, maybe I'm wrong," Lukashenko said, adding that if U.S. President Joe Biden said so, "everything will stop within a week."

Ruling threatens US power as world's high-seas drug police

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Jeffri Dávila-Reyes says he's still mystified how he ended up serving hard time in a U.S. federal prison.

His cocaine bust at sea was closer to his homeland of Costa Rica than the United States, and the few kilos of drugs he was carrying were bound for Jamaica rather than American shores.

His plight is similar to hundreds of foreigners swept up by the U.S. Coast Guard in international waters every year, most of them poor, semiliterate fishermen from Central and South America driven to smuggling with offers of more money than they've ever seen — in Dávila-Reyes' case \$6,000.

"Nobody can be blamed for being born poor," he wrote in a recent letter to The Associated Press.

But now, seven years into his 10-year sentence, Dávila-Reyes' conviction has been thrown out in a little-noticed ruling that threatens a key weapon in the United States' war on drugs: A decades-old law that gives the U.S. broad authority to make arrests on the high seas anywhere in the world, even if the drugs aren't

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bound for the U.S.

It's a law that helps the U.S. bolster its drug-interdiction numbers and flex its maritime muscle in a region where drugs are trafficked most. But since it often targets smugglers at the lowest rungs of the drug trade, it has yet to make a dent in the huge volumes of narcotics flowing into the U.S.

"It is a waste of U.S. taxpayer dollars to have these costly misadventures as we play drug police to the world," said Eric Vos, head of the public defender's office in Puerto Rico where Dávila-Reyes' case began. "Our enforcement efforts and multibillion-dollar expenditures should concentrate exclusively on drugs actually entering America."

At issue is the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act, passed by Congress in 1986 at the height of the crack epidemic. It defines drug smuggling in international waters as a crime against the United States and gives the U.S. unique law enforcement powers anywhere on the seas — whenever it determines a vessel is "without nationality."

But how a vessel is deemed stateless sometimes gets messy.

When the Coast Guard chased down Dávila-Reyes' speedboat in the western Caribbean in 2015, he and two cousins who were seen frantically trying to dump packages of cocaine overboard identified their vessel as hailing from Costa Rica, according to the FBI's summary of the investigation.

But other than the markings on the boat's side resembling Costa Rica's flag, the men lacked any documentation proving its nationality. When the U.S. asked the Costa Rican government to confirm the vessel's registry, it responded 12 weeks after the bust that it could neither confirm nor refute the claim.

A few weeks later the men were charged and eventually pleaded guilty to possessing narcotics "on board a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States."

The conviction would have gone unnoticed if not for a challenge brought by a group of dedicated public defenders in Puerto Rico, where many of the drug cases are tried.

A three-judge panel of the First Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston ruled in January that the law's provisions — equating a nation's equivocal response to an outright denial of a captain's claim of nationality — were an unconstitutional extension of U.S. policing powers beyond America's borders.

Tellingly, almost none of those prosecuted under the law had ever set foot in the U.S. nor were they charged with trying to import cocaine. In Dávila-Reyes' case, the five to 15 kilograms of cocaine he was convicted of transporting were purportedly bound for dealers in Jamaica.

Despite the ruling, Dávila-Reyes remains behind bars as the Justice Department seeks reconsideration by all of the First Circuit's nine judges. His two co-defendants were released in 2018 and 2020 after completing sentences of around five years each.

ENDLESS WAR

From the moment President Richard Nixon declared "war on drugs" in 1971, the U.S. Coast Guard has been at the forefront of the campaign to stop illegal narcotics from entering the U.S. Today, it spends more than \$2 billion annually as part of that effort. Other federal agencies — the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs and Border Patrol, the Departments of State and Justice — kick in billions more.

The aim of the high-seas busts is to seize cocaine at a vulnerable choke point and inflict heavy losses on traffickers, limiting the amount of drugs that make it onto U.S. streets.

But, almost from the start, that goal has proven elusive.

Cocaine prices, a gauge of supply, have been hovering at historical lows for more than a decade as cocaine production from Colombia has soared to record highs. In a good year, barely 10% of cocaine shipments in the waters off Central and South America — where the bulk of the world's cocaine is trafficked — are actually seized or destroyed, according to the U.S. government's own estimates.

Despite that poor record, U.S. officials continue to tout their success at sea.

A 2020 Coast Guard report said at-sea interdictions are the most effective way to combat cartels and criminal networks. Since 2017, the amount of cocaine it has seized or destroyed exceeds 959 metric tons.

"We are hitting the drug traffickers where it hits them most -- in their pocketbooks," Rahul Gupta, the White House drug czar, said at news conference earlier this year in Fort Lauderdale to welcome a U.S. Coast Guard cutter home from a three-month deployment that yielded seizures of 30 metric tons of cocaine and

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marijuana worth \$1 billion.

But nowhere to be seen among the drugs piled neatly on deck were the 86 foreign drug runners responsible for the contraband, some of whom had been offloaded and jailed the day before.

Prosecutions under the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act exploded last fiscal year to 296 — nearly five times the number a decade ago, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, which collects Justice Department data. But since each case involves multiple defendants, the actual number of foreigners detained at sea last year was 635 — the highest tally since 2017.

Each offense carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years because of the large amounts of cocaine involved.

Critics of U.S. drug policy say most such smugglers fell into the job because of poverty and are hardly worth locking up for so long when legions of their poor compatriots stand ready to take their place. Davila-Reyes, for example, had to quit school in the third grade to help support his family, eventually finding hand-blistering construction work for \$10 a day.

"These are not masterminds like Pablo Escobar or Chapo Guzman," said Kendra McSweeney, an Ohio State University geographer who has spent years researching U.S. drug policies.

"But if you're trying to hit numbers, and nobody is measuring the importance of those numbers, then all the incentives are there to keep going," she said. "It makes people feel good about themselves but it's egregiously ineffective."

FLOATING PRISONS

After Dávila-Reyes' bust, he said he was mistreated while adrift at sea, allowed to bathe just once a week, and served spoiled, foul-smelling plates of beans.

"I couldn't eat this food," he wrote in a series of letters in Spanish to the AP from his West Virginia prison.

AP was unable to verify Dávila-Reyes' account but attorneys appointed by the courts to represent foreign drug runners say such tales are commonplace.

Miami defense attorney Bert Dominguez pointed to courtroom testimony last year in which a Coast Guard officer described how detainees are shackled by their leg to the deck of a cutter. The restraints are removed only to allow the detainees to use the bathroom, take a shower or for a short amount of daily exercise.

"They're treated like warehoused fruit," Dominguez said.

The U.S. Coast Guard rejects that characterization and says all suspects have regular access to medical treatment, personal hygiene products, shelter from the elements and regular meals after being detained.

"The Coast Guard treats each person entrusted to our care with dignity and respect," said Cmdr. Matt Kroll, a spokesman.

What's undisputed is that 19 days passed from the time of Dávila-Reyes' detention until he made his initial appearance before a federal magistrate in Puerto Rico. By the standards of justice in drug boat cases, that's actually fast: nationwide, the average delay is more than 23 days, according to an AP analysis of 28 cases this year involving 89 foreign nationals. In one case, the wait lasted 46 days.

U.S. criminal proceedings mandate that suspects, even those apprehended outside the country, be brought before a judge "without unnecessary delay." Typically, that means no more than 48 hours after arrest.

Kroll said the Coast Guard seeks to ensure a "timely" transfer of suspects but justified the prolonged detentions because of the need to maintain ongoing law enforcement operations across vast geographical distances.

"The government is operating under this fiction that they're not really arrested when they're taken into custody and chained to a deck of a Coast Guard cutter," Miami public defender Tracy Dreispul said during the hearing last year where the Coast Guard witness testified. "But we all know what arrest means."

LEGAL FALLOUT

Neither the Coast Guard nor Justice Department would comment on Dávila-Reyes' appeal but experts say it's too early to judge the fallout from the landmark ruling.

Currently Vos' office in Puerto Rico is preparing 14 motions for dismissal in other boat cases on behalf of jailed defendants from Colombia, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. The ruling has also been cited in at least five proceedings outside the First Circuit.

Of the 28 interdictions on the high seas this year, 10 involve a claim of nationality for the vessel that a foreign

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government was unable to confirm or deny, according to an AP analysis of court records. In only five cases there was no nationality claimed and in the remaining 13 the court records did not say.

"It's definitely a chink in the armor," said Roger Cabrera, a court-appointed attorney in Miami seeking to leverage Dávila-Reyes to appeal his own client's conviction. "But like most chinks, I'm sure the federal government is already looking for a workaround."

For now, U.S. law enforcement continues to conduct regular search and seizures on the high seas with little indication of concern.

In court filings, attorneys for the U.S. government have argued that the procedures for boarding a vessel and determining whether a claim of nationality is legitimate are governed by bilateral treaties, including one with Costa Rica, which has never complained that its sovereignty was being violated.

Further, they said holding up interdictions to wait for an unequivocal denial of registry from a foreign nation before declaring a vessel stateless would be impractical and quickly encourage traffickers to claim their vessels are from small Micronesian states, or North Korea, where diplomatic contacts are limited.

"Anyone involved with bringing dangerous drugs into the United States will be held accountable, no matter their position in the drug distribution network," said Justice Department spokeswoman Nicole Navas Oxman. "These offenders are an intricate part of drug-trafficking networks, which pose a direct threat to the health and safety of American communities."

Ms. Pac-Man clears path to World Video Game Hall of Fame

ROCHESTER, N.Y. (AP) — More than 40 years after blazing a trail for female video game characters, Ms. Pac-Man was inducted Thursday into the World Video Game Hall of Fame, along with Dance Dance Revolution, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time and Sid Meier's Civilization.

The Hall of Fame considers electronic games of all types each year — arcade, console, computer, handheld and mobile. Inductees are recognized for their popularity and influence on the video game industry or pop culture over time.

The Ms. Pac-Man arcade game was released in 1981 as Midway's follow-up to Pac-Man, which entered the hall as part of the inaugural class in 2015. The Pac-Man sequel reimaged the main character to acknowledge the original game's female fans, according to the hall. After selling 125,000 cabinets within the first five years, it became one of the best-selling arcade games of all time.

There was nothing inherently gendered about early video games, said Julia Novakovic, senior archivist at the hall. But "by offering the first widely recognized female video game character," she said, "Ms. Pac-Man represented a turn in the cultural conversation about women's place in the arcade, as well as in society at large."

The Class of 2022 was chosen from a field of finalists that also included Assassin's Creed, Candy Crush Saga, Minesweeper, NBA Jam, PaRappa the Rapper, Resident Evil, Rogue, and Words with Friends. It is the eighth class to be inducted since the World Video Game Hall of Fame was established at The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York.

Konami's Dance Dance Revolution, first seen in arcades in Japan in 1998, was recognized for helping to pave the way for other music-centered games like Guitar Hero and Rock Band. The fast-paced game put players on a dance floor with a screen in front to direct their moves.

"Music has been an integral part of human life since prehistoric times, so it comes as no surprise that DDR enjoyed a unique popularity that spanned ages, genders, and regions," said video game curator Lindsey Kurano.

A home version of the game followed on the Sony PlayStation in 1999.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, also first released in 1998, came out for the Nintendo 64 gaming console and defined what a 3D action video game could be, Hall of Fame officials said. The award-winning game sold more than 7.6 million copies worldwide and continues to be recognized by some players and critics as one of the best video games ever made.

"Even today, developers throughout the world credit The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time as influencing the way they create games," digital games curator Andrew Borman said. "The game's sprawling 3D world,

fluid combat, complex puzzles and time-shifting story combined to inspire a wonder in players that they have never forgotten.”

Sid Meier’s Civilization, released in 1991, was recognized as an influential simulation and strategy game. The game, which invited players to develop their own empires, launched a series of successor games, including the most recent Civilization: Beyond Earth and Civilization VI.

“The addictive nature of the game, which creator Sid Meier himself called the ‘one more turn’ quality, and its nearly unlimited choices that prevented repetitive gameplay, earned Civilization recognition from Computer Gaming World as the best video game of all time in 1996,” said Jon-Paul Dyson, director of The Strong’s International Center for the History of Electronic games. “Altogether — and given the extraordinarily long periods of play the game afforded — players have engaged with the Civilization series for more than a billion hours.”

Anyone can nominate a game for the World Video Game Hall of Fame. Final selections are made on the advice of journalists, scholars and others with knowledge of the history of video games and their role in society.

Once conflicted, Biden embraces role as abortion defender

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Soon after being elected to the U.S. Senate, Joe Biden was pulled aside by a Democratic colleague who wanted to know how he was going to vote on abortion.

Biden explained that while he was personally opposed to abortion and would resist federal funding for the procedure, he didn’t want to impose his view on others by overturning Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion nationwide.

“That’s a tough position, kid,” said Sen. Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut. Then Ribicoff offered him some advice, Biden recalled years later in a memoir: “Pick a side. You’ll be much better off politically. Just pick a side.”

During five decades in elected office, Biden has tried to avoid picking a side on abortion whenever he could. Now that’s impossible as the Supreme Court seems poised to strike down the constitutional right to abortion. A draft copy of the court’s majority opinion was published by Politico earlier this week, and a final decision is expected this summer.

As the Democratic president who happens to be serving when the Republicans’ anti-abortion agenda reaches its crescendo, Biden is being drafted into the kind of fight that he’s sidestepped for much of his career.

It’s not a natural role for him, despite his longtime defense of a woman’s right to choose whether to end her pregnancy. Like many Catholic Democrats, he’s expressed conflicting opinions on abortion, which his church regards as a sin but his political party views as a legal right.

Mini Timmaraju, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America, said Biden “understands there’s a difference between his personal view and what he would do in his personal life, and what he and his party stands for in terms of protecting freedoms for the American people.”

Although Biden called for protecting Roe v. Wade in his State of the Union speech in March, since becoming president he had never publicly uttered the word “abortion” until this week, when the draft court decision leaked. And he still prefers to frame the issue around privacy and people’s ability to make their own decisions free from government interference.

“This is about a lot more than abortion,” he said Wednesday at the White House. He often references other court decisions on same sex marriage or birth control. “What are the next things that are going to be attacked?”

It’s the kind of rhetoric that he deployed successfully during the 1987 confirmation hearings for Robert Bork, President Ronald Reagan’s nominee to the Supreme Court.

Biden was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and he focused his questioning on Griswold v. Connecticut, a 1965 decision that allowed married couples to buy birth control.

“If we tried to make this a referendum on abortion rights, for example, we’d lose,” he wrote in his 2007 memoir, “Promises to Keep.”

Biden’s handling of the issue was a sharp contrast with colleagues like Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., who said in a speech that “Robert Bork’s America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley

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abortions.”

“No one could have ever confused then-Sen. Biden with being a culture warrior,” said Jim Manley, a long-time Senate staff member who worked for Kennedy and Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev.

Bork’s nomination was defeated, preventing a rightward shift on the Supreme Court that could have jeopardized *Roe v. Wade*.

But there was still lingering suspicion about Biden’s support for abortion rights. Victoria Nourse, a lawyer who worked for Biden in the Senate, said the distrust became an obstacle when he was working on the Violence Against Women Act, which passed in 1994 and increased protections against sexual assault and domestic abuse.

“The women’s groups wouldn’t come on board, because they thought he was weak on abortion,” she said.

The issue returned in 2019, when Biden was running for the Democratic presidential nomination. Biden faced criticism for his support of the Hyde Amendment, which banned federal funding for abortions, and he swiftly reversed course on his longtime position.

Biden explained his shift by saying “circumstances have changed” because Republican-led states were enacting new abortion restrictions.

“I make no apologies for my last position,” he said. “I make no apologies for what I’m about to say.”

It was a change that mirrored a broader shift in American politics. Michele Swers, a professor of government at Georgetown, said it used to be more common to find anti-abortion Democrats and Republicans who support abortion rights.

Biden became a U.S. senator in January 1973, the same month the *Roe v. Wade* decision was issued, and he criticized the Supreme Court for going “too far.” When it comes to abortion, he told an interviewer, he was “about as liberal as your grandmother.”

However, activist groups at each end of the political spectrum have gained influence within the parties, Swers said, creating a clearer partisan split on the issue.

There’s little room for politicians who hold what Biden once described as “middle-of-the-road” views.

“If you want to move up in national politics, it is definitely harder,” Swers said. “I don’t think that someone who took the positions that he used to take could run for president now.”

During the presidential campaign, Biden also promised to support legislation that would codify *Roe v. Wade* in law. However, there’s little chance of that passing the Senate, despite the slim Democratic majority, leaving the White House with limited options to protect abortion rights.

Advocates and White House officials have spent months engaged in conversations about steps that could be taken if the Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*.

Some ideas under consideration include highlighting the ability to obtain abortion pills through the mail, something that the Food and Drug Administration recently approved, or finding ways to help women travel to get abortions in states with more permissive laws.

“We want to see more, of course,” said Alexis McGill Johnson, president of Planned Parenthood. “We want to see all of the creative solutions in their arsenal right now, particularly at a moment where we’re in the greatest crisis.”

Death toll rises to 26 in central China building collapse

BEIJING (AP) — The death toll jumped Thursday to 26 from the collapse last week of a residential and commercial building in central China, state media reported.

Ten other people have been rescued from the wreckage in the city of Changsha, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

The 10th survivor, an unidentified woman, was pulled out shortly after midnight on Thursday, nearly six days after the building suddenly caved in on April 29, Xinhua said. Rescue teams with search dogs have been searching through the rubble since then.

The woman was conscious and advised rescuers on how to pull her out without causing further injury, Xinhua said. Teams also used hand tools as well as drones and electronic life detectors in the search.

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At least nine people have been arrested in connection with the collapse of what Xinhua has described as a “self-built building” on suspicion of ignoring building codes or committing other violations. Varying reports have said the building was either six or eight stories tall.

All of the survivors were reportedly in good condition after being treated in a hospital. Intermittent rain showers in recent days may have increased their chances of survival without food or water.

In an account of Monday’s rescue of the eighth survivor pulled out, state media said rescuers faced an unstable pile of rubble that they had to work around rather than demolish. Prior to the rescue, they were able to feed in video equipment to communicate with the girl and establish that one of her legs was trapped.

Before retreating to draw up a strategy, they fed in saline solution for her to drink, to which she responded, “Don’t worry big brother, I know you’ll be back for me right away,” the reports said.

No other details about the girl or her condition were given.

The arrested include the building owner, three people in charge of design and construction and five others who allegedly gave a false safety assessment for a guest house on the building’s fourth to sixth floors.

The building also housed residences, a café and a restaurant.

An increase in the number of collapses of self-built buildings in recent years prompted Chinese President Xi Jinping to call last month for additional checks to uncover structural weaknesses.

Poor adherence to safety standards, including the illegal addition of extra floors and failure to use reinforcing iron bars, is often blamed for such disasters. China also suffers from decaying infrastructure such as gas pipes that has led to explosions and collapses.

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-racking 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.

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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.

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 glass-makers 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.

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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."

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," Belev said. 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."

Hong Kong reopens beaches, Beijing relaxes quarantine rules

BEIJING (AP) — Hong Kong reopened beaches and pools and relaxed other pandemic restrictions Thursday, a day after China's capital, Beijing, announced it would ease its tough quarantine rules for arrivals from overseas.

The two Chinese cities are at opposite ends of COVID-19 outbreaks. Hong Kong is emerging from by far its deadliest wave, which killed 9,000 people. In Beijing, a new wave is just beginning and authorities have imposed a series of restrictions on residents to try to snuff it out.

The easing of quarantine requirements was a reminder that China does want eventually to back off from its strict "zero-COVID" approach that is imposing growing economic and human costs, though officials have shown no inclination to do so in a meaningful way anytime soon.

In Hong Kong, the rising costs have sparked a backlash against "zero COVID." The city closed water sports venues during its outbreak of the highly transmissible omicron variant, but has been reducing restrictions as cases decline. 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 per table — up from four previously — and masks will no longer be required during outdoor exercise, a change that's important to organizers 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 Wil-

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liam 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 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 hard-line "zero-COVID" approach but has imposed less onerous restrictions in Beijing 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 immediate impact on arrivals. 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 reduce 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 during 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.

As diversity rises, US boards still disproportionately white

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Amid the push to get U.S. boardrooms to look more like companies' customers and employees, advocates are finally seeing just how steep the task will be.

Boards of directors at publicly traded U.S. companies are much more white and much less diverse than the overall population, often starkly so. Just 2.7% of directors at the start of the year were Hispanic, for example. That would need to soar to 18.5% to mirror the U.S. population.

Outside of looking at a photograph of each director, it hasn't always been easy to measure racial diversity on corporate boards. On Thursday, executive data firm Equilar released its first racial breakdown of boards for companies in the Russell 3000 index, which covers about 97% of all investable U.S. stocks.

The survey found only 6.2% of directors are Black, versus 13.4% of the country. And the 5% of directors who are of Asian or Pacific islander descent also fell short of the 6.1% for the entire U.S. population.

Equilar pulled the numbers from a range of sources, including disclosures from companies, data from affiliate networks and lists of influential executives from racial and ethnic minorities. Its results are similar to the disproportionate representation found in other surveys of more limited groups.

Executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles earlier this week released its roundup of boards at a smaller group of companies, those in the Fortune 500. It found that Black directors hold 26% of board seats, while

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Asian or Asian American directors had 9% and Hispanic directors held 6%.

Bigger companies tend to have more diverse boards than smaller companies. But more across the board are being transparent about the racial breakdown for their board of directors. A big reason for that is because they're being forced to, with pressure coming from stock exchanges, regulators and investors.

At the Nasdaq, for example, U.S. securities regulators approved a rule last summer requiring companies listed on its U.S. exchange to file an annual document detailing racial and ethnic backgrounds of its directors, among other demographic data. Nasdaq even has a fillable PDF form available to make it easier for companies, which have to submit the data by Aug. 8 or whenever they file their 2022 proxy statement, whichever comes later.

By Aug. 7, 2023, Nasdaq will require a listed company to either have at least one director considered "diverse" or explain why it doesn't.

Investors are making similar pushes, arguing that more diverse boards lead to more points of view and better decision-making. They want boards to look more like their employees and customers, which are increasingly diversifying along the country's trends, to better understand them.

"If you're an investor, you're looking for ways that companies can outperform," said Ann Milette, who is both chief diversity officer and head of active equity at Allspring Global Investments. "We generally agree that the more diversity you have on your board, the better performance that you're going to get in the long run."

The push for more racial and ethnic diversity on boards follows years where the focus was mostly on gender. Thursday's numbers from Equilar show how women from racial and ethnic minorities are among the least represented on boards. Just 0.9% of U.S. directors are Hispanic women, for example, half of the already low 1.8% for Hispanic men.

Some of the requirements to increase diversity have met stiff resistance. California, for example, passed a law in 2020 requiring companies with principal offices in the state to have a minimum number of directors from an underrepresented community. That includes people who self-identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

A California state court earlier this year ruled the requirement unconstitutional following a complaint that it violated California's equal protection clause. The judge wrote in his decision that the state should have considered other options for achieving greater diversity on boards before mandating it.

Such requirements did end up increasing racial diversity on boards, but in an uneven manner, said Vicki Bogan, professor at Cornell University's SC Johnson College of Business.

Her research found that board appointments went up substantially for directors of Asian, Middle Eastern and North African descent after the signing of the California law. But the number of appointments for Black directors did not. That's likely because California companies were substituting nominees from the first group for the second to comply with the rule, she said.

Bogan said the 2020 murder of George Floyd had a bigger effect, specifically for the appointment of Black directors.

All U.S. companies showed an increased probability of appointing a Black person to its board following the forced recognition of racism across America, she said. But companies that had zero Black directors had an even bigger jump in probability.

"I think it's too soon to tell whether this is temporary or not," she said. "What I can share is I hope it's not. I hope we're on the path to having more boards that are more representative of the population."

OPEC+ opens oil taps gradually as Russian war roils markets

LONDON (AP) — OPEC and allied oil-producing countries decided Thursday to gradually increase the flows they send to the world, even as Europe's plan to sanction Russian oil threatens to yank millions of barrels off a global market already thirsty for crude.

The cautious approach from the OPEC+ alliance — which includes non-member Russia — will exacerbate a global energy crunch, with prices expected to rise further for oil and the gasoline, diesel and aviation fuel made from it. Those higher prices will worsen global inflation, eating away at people's ability to spend money that would otherwise support the economic recovery.

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At an online meeting, OPEC+ stuck with its road map to gradually open the oil taps, agreeing to add 432,000 barrels per day in June. The plan is to make those regular increases to restore cuts made in 2020 during the worst of the pandemic recession.

Oil prices have risen — more than 40% this year — as the boost in production remains smaller than what the U.S. and other oil-consuming countries are pressing for to ease high prices at the pump.

Bigger surges in oil prices have been held back by COVID-19 lockdowns in China cutting demand and the U.S. and other member countries of the International Energy Agency releasing oil from strategic reserves.

Still, analysts from Rystad Energy foresee the global market potentially losing up to 2 million barrels within six months if the 27 European Union countries approve a proposal to sanction Russian oil. Moscow is expected to see production fall after losing its biggest oil customer — Europe.

OPEC has made it clear to European officials that the oil cartel is not going to increase production to compensate for lost Russian oil. Some OPEC members already can't meet their oil production quotas.

Russia is the world's largest oil exporter with some 12% of global supply, and fears its oil and natural gas could be cut off have kept energy prices high. Before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia sent around 3.8 million barrels of oil per day to the European Union, where refineries turn it into gasoline and diesel fuel.

If the EU carries through on its plans to phase out crude imports in six months, Russia could try to sell those barrels to countries in Asia that are not participating in the boycott. But it might not be able to find customers for all of the oil displaced from Europe, even at tempting knockdown prices.

For one reason, there is limited pipeline and rail capacity to Asia. While some oil could be redirected by sea, that will depend on the availability of oil tankers willing to deal with Russian crude, given the risk of sanctions. Banks and companies that insure tanker fleets may be reluctant to facilitate the sale of Russian oil.

"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 rose Thursday, up 1.2% after the meeting to \$109.01 per barrel, or 43% higher since the start of the year. International benchmark Brent crude rose 1.7%, to \$111.81 per barrel.

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

Diesel for trucks and farm equipment has risen even more over a year ago, 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.

More Americans apply for jobless aid last week

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — More Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week but the total number of people collecting jobless aid is at its lowest level in more than 50 years.

Jobless claims in the U.S. rose by 19,000 to 200,000 for the week ending April 30, the Labor Department reported Thursday. First-time applications generally reflect the number of layoffs.

The four-week average for claims, which softens some of the weekly volatility, rose 8,000 from the previous week to 188,000.

The total number of Americans collecting jobless benefits for the week ending April 23 fell by 19,000 from the previous week, to 1,384,000. That's the fewest since January 17, 1970.

American workers are experiencing historically strong job security two years after the coronavirus pandemic plunged the economy into a brief but devastating recession. Weekly applications for unemployment aid have been consistently below the pre-pandemic level of 225,000 for most of this year, even as the overall economy contracted.

On Tuesday, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that U.S. employers posted a record 11.5 million job openings in March — an unprecedented two job openings for every person who is unemployed. A record

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4.5 million Americans quit their jobs in March — a sign that they are confident they can find better pay or improved working conditions elsewhere.

Employers have added an average of more than 540,000 jobs a month for the past year, pushing the unemployment rate down to 3.6%. The Labor Department is expected to report Friday that the economy generated another 400,000 new jobs in April, according to a survey by the data firm FactSet. That would mark an unprecedented 12th straight month that hiring has come in at 400,000 or more.

The only thing hotter than the job market is inflation. On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve intensified its fight against the worst inflation in 40 years by raising its benchmark short-term interest rate by a half-percentage point — its most aggressive move since 2000 — and signaling further large rate hikes to come.

The increase in the Fed's key rate raised it to a range of 0.75% to 1%, the highest point since the pandemic struck two years ago.

The Commerce Department reported last month that the U.S. economy shrank last quarter for the first time since the pandemic recession struck two years ago, contracting at a 1.4% annual rate, even as consumers and businesses kept spending in a sign of underlying resilience.

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 infrastructure 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

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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 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."

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 United States, 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.

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

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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."

Today in History: May 6, Hindenburg crash

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, May 6, the 126th day of 2022. There are 239 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 6, 1937, the hydrogen-filled German airship Hindenburg caught fire and crashed while attempting to dock at Lakehurst, New Jersey; 35 of the 97 people on board were killed along with a crewman on the ground.

On this date:

In 1882, President Chester Alan Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese immigrants from the U.S. for 10 years (Arthur had opposed an earlier version with a 20-year ban).

In 1910, Britain's Edwardian era ended with the death of King Edward VII; he was succeeded by George V.

In 1935, the Works Progress Administration began operating under an executive order signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In 1941, Josef Stalin assumed the Soviet premiership, replacing Vyacheslav (VEE'-chek-slav) M. Molotov. Comedian Bob Hope did his first USO show before an audience of servicemen as he broadcast his radio program from March Field in Riverside, California.

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In 1942, during World War II, some 15,000 American and Filipino troops on Corregidor island surrendered to Japanese forces.

In 1954, medical student Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile during a track meet in Oxford, England, in 3:59.4.

In 1994, former Arkansas state worker Paula Jones filed suit against President Bill Clinton, alleging he'd sexually harassed her in 1991. (Jones reached a settlement with Clinton in November 1998.)

In 2004, President George W. Bush apologized for the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers, calling it "a stain on our country's honor"; he rejected calls for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's resignation.

In 2006, Lillian Gertrud Asplund, the last American survivor of the sinking of the Titanic, died in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, at age 99.

In 2010, a computerized sell order triggered a "flash crash" on Wall Street, sending the Dow Jones industrials to a loss of nearly 1,000 points in less than half an hour.

In 2013, kidnap-rape victims Amanda Berry, Gina DeJesus and Michelle Knight, who went missing separately about a decade earlier while in their teens or early 20s, were rescued from a house just south of downtown Cleveland. (Their captor, Ariel Castro, hanged himself in prison in September 2013 at the beginning of a life sentence plus 1,000 years.)

In 2020, New York City began shutting down its subway system overnight to allow for additional cleaning and disinfecting of cars and stations amid the pandemic. President Donald Trump reversed course on plans to wind down his COVID-19 task force; he said the force would shift its focus toward rebooting the economy and developing a vaccine.

Ten years ago: Vice President Joe Biden told NBC's "Meet the Press" he was "absolutely comfortable" with gay couples who marry getting the same civil rights and liberties as heterosexual couples. Socialist Francois Hollande (frahn-SWAH' oh-LAWN'D') defeated conservative incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy (sahr-koh-ZEE') to become France's next president. Actor George Lindsey, "Goober" on "The Andy Griffith Show," died in Nashville at age 83.

Five years ago: A Nigerian military official said 83 Chibok (chih-BAWK') schoolgirls had been released more than three years after they were abducted from their boarding school by Boko Haram (BOH'-koh hah-RAHM') extremists.

One year ago: Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a 48-page elections bill that Republicans said would guard against fraud and vote harvesting; Democrats and voting rights advocates said it was an attempt to make it harder for some people to vote. In an election-year surprise, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms announced that she would not seek a second term. The Los Angeles Angels cut 41-year-old superstar Albert Pujols. (Pujols would finish the season with the Los Angeles Dodgers, before returning to the St. Louis Cardinals in 2022.)

Today's Birthdays: Baseball Hall of Famer Willie Mays is 91. Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala., is 88. Rock singer Bob Seger is 77. Singer Jimmie Dale Gilmore is 77. Gospel singer-comedian Lulu Roman is 76. Actor Alan Dale is 75. Actor Ben Masters is 75. Actor Richard Cox is 74. Actor Gregg Henry is 70. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair is 69. TV personality Tom Bergeron is 67. Actor Roma Downey is 62. Rock singer John Flansburgh (They Might Be Giants) is 62. Actor Julianne Phillips is 62. Actor-director George Clooney is 61. Actor Clay O'Brien is 61. Rock singer-musician Tony Scalzo (Fastball) is 58. Actor Leslie Hope is 57. Actor Geneva Carr (TV: "Bull") is 56. Rock musician Mark Bryan (Hootie and the Blowfish) is 55. Rock musician Chris Shiflett (Foo Fighters) is 51. Actor Stacey Oristano is 43. Model/TV personality Tiffany Coyne is 40. Actor Adrienne Palicki is 39. Actor Gabourey Sidibe (GA'-bah-ray SIH'-duh-bay) is 39. Actor-comedian Sasheer Zamata is 36. Rapper Meek Mill is 35. Houston Astros infielder Jose Altuve is 32. Actor-singer Naomi Scott is 29. Actor Noah Galvin is 28.