

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 1 of 65

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- Groton Jr. Legion advances to state](#)
- [3- Amateur Region Games](#)
- [4- Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller](#)
- [8- COVID Heat Map](#)
- [9- Weather Pages](#)
- [13- Daily Devotional](#)
- [14- 2022 Community Events](#)
- [15- Subscription Form](#)
- [16- News from the Associated Press](#)



August 5-7: State Jr. Legion at Clark

Thursday, Aug. 4

First allowable day of football practice

Monday, Aug. 8

First allowable day of boys golf practice

Thursday, Aug. 11

First allowable day of volleyball and cross country practice



Help Wanted

Want a fun job with flexible hours? We're looking for 16 year olds and older with smiling faces! Free meals and we'll work around your schedule. Are you a mom wanting some hours while your kids are in school or a teenager wanting to earn some money or an adult looking for work? Daytime – evening – week-end hours are available and we'll make the hours work for you! Stop in for an application. Dairy Queen, 11 East Hwy 12 in Groton.

CLEANER WANTED

SATURDAY CLEANER NEEDED IN FERENY, SD, 830 am to 130 pm. \$15 an hour. Must be dependable and be willing to work around customers coming into the family owned business. Please call Stephanie at 605-381-1758.

**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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Groton Jr. Legion advances to state Groton Post 39 Jr Legion Claims Blow-Out Victory Over Hamlin Jr, 12-1

Groton Post 39 Jr Legion had all cylinders firing on offense on Tuesday, winning big over Hamlin Jr Post 37 / 217 12-1, in the championship game.

Groton Post 39 Jr Legion got things moving in the first inning, when Ryan Groeblichhoff singled on a 1-2 count, scoring one run.

Groton Post 39 Jr Legion tallied six runs in the third inning. Groton Post 39 Jr Legion put the pressure on, lead by singles by Groeblichhoff, Braxton Imrie, Dillon Abeln, and Korbin Kucker and a groundout by Colby Dunker.

Groeblichhoff pitched Groton Post 39 Jr Legion to victory. The righty went four innings, allowing one run on one hit, striking out one and walking one. Kucker threw one inning in relief out of the bullpen.

Watson Grantham took the loss for Hamlin Jr Post 37 / 217. Grantham went four and two-thirds innings, allowing 12 runs on 14 hits, striking out one and walking one.

Groton Post 39 Jr Legion smacked one home run on the day. Kaleb Antonsen had a four bagger in the fifth inning.

Groton Post 39 Jr Legion totaled 14 hits. Kaleb Hoover, Teylor Diegel, Dunker, and Groeblichhoff each had multiple hits for Groton Post 39 Jr Legion. Hoover went 3-for-3 at the plate to lead Groton Post 39 Jr Legion in hits.

Sam Gigov led Hamlin Jr Post 37 / 217 with one hit in two at bats.

Amateur Region Games

Locke Electric Takes Victory Over Northville Merchants in a High-Scoring Affair

Bats were blistered as Locke Electric defeated Northville Merchants 13-7 on Monday.

Locke Electric got things started in the second inning when Jonny Israel singled on a 2-2 count, scoring one run.

In the bottom of the fourth inning, Northville Merchants tied things up at four. Schipke drove in two when Schipke singled.

After Locke Electric scored one run in the top of the third, Northville Merchants answered with one of their own. Locke Electric scored when Cody Jensen singled on the first pitch of the at bat, scoring one run. Northville Merchants then answered when Lefforge singled on a 0-1 count, scoring one run.

Locke Electric pulled away for good with two runs in the fifth inning. In the fifth Wilson Bonet hit a solo homer and Jensen's sac fly scored one run for Locke Electric.

Locke Electric notched four runs in the seventh inning. Locke Electric put the pressure on, lead by singles by Austin Jones and Carlos Camacho and a double by Jackson Cogley.

Northville Merchants scored three runs in the fourth inning. Northville Merchants batters contributing to the big inning included Jaragoski and Schipke, who each had RBIs in the inning.

Israel took the win for Locke Electric. Israel allowed nine hits and five runs over five and a third innings, striking out three and walking zero. Cogley threw three and two-thirds innings in relief out of the bullpen.

Waltman took the loss for Northville Merchants. The hurler lasted six and two-thirds innings, allowing ten hits and ten runs while striking out four.

Locke Electric socked one home run on the day. Bonet had a four bagger in the fifth inning.

Locke Electric had 16 hits in the game. Dylan Frey, Bonet, Heath Giedt, Cogley, Jones, and Jensen each collected multiple hits for Locke Electric. Frey led Locke Electric with three hits in five at bats.

Northville Merchants collected 11 hits on the day. Lefforge and Simes each managed multiple hits for Northville Merchants. Lefforge went 3-for-5 at the plate to lead Northville Merchants in hits.

Redfield Pheasants Runs Away With Early Lead in Victory

Locke Electric watched the game slip away early and couldn't recover in a 6-0 loss to Redfield Pheasants on Tuesday. Redfield Pheasants took the lead on a fielder's choice in the second inning.

The Locke Electric struggled to put runs on the board and had a tough time defensively containing Redfield Pheasants, giving up six runs.

Redfield Pheasants got on the board in the second inning when Aaron Severson induced Drew Masat to hit into a fielder's choice, but one run scored.

One bright spot for Locke Electric was a single by Heath Giedt in the second inning.

Gregg earned the win for Redfield Pheasants. The fireballer went nine innings, allowing zero runs on five hits and striking out six.

Severson took the loss for Locke Electric. The pitcher went five and a third innings, allowing six runs on seven hits, striking out three and walking one.

Giedt led Locke Electric with two hits in four at bats.

Redfield Pheasants tallied eight hits in the game. Kuehn and Barrett Wren all managed multiple hits for Redfield Pheasants. Kuehn went 3-for-4 at the plate to lead Redfield Pheasants in hits. Redfield Pheasants didn't commit a single error in the field. Wren had ten chances in the field, the most on the team.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 4 of 65

#545 in a series Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I'm guessing you've heard by now that 100 percent of US presidents in office during this pandemic have managed to contract this infection. As I noted when the former president was sick, the country doesn't really need the uncertainty that accompanies illness in the executive, so we will hope the situation resolves quickly. I'll note that Mr. Biden's vaccination status along with the state-of-the-art antiviral, Paxlovid, he's taking puts him in a much better spot than Mr. Trump was in a couple of years ago before we even had vaccines. I will note that the President's physician, Dr. Kevin O'Connor, in his daily written report to the press this morning, said Mr. Biden's symptoms have "almost completely resolved."

We can't act too surprised when any particular person shows up with Covid-19 these days; it's tearing across the country. Cases are on the rise with a seven-day new-case average up to 127,756 at midday today and BA.5 by itself accounting for 65 percent of US cases. We've hit another milestone with a pandemic total up to 90,248,093. Here's the recent history:

March 3 – 79 million – 15 days
March 31 – 80 million – 28 days
April 27 – 81 million – 27 days
May 11 – 82 million – 14 days
May 20 – 83 million – 9 days
May 31 – 84 million – 11 days

June 8 – 85 million – 8 days
June 17 – 86 million – 9 days
June 27 – 87 million – 10 days
July 7 – 88 million – 10 days
July 14 – 89 million – 7 days
July 21 – 90 million – 7 days

The number of hospitalizations is rising, and the number of Covid-positive ICU patients is rising proportionately as well. The seven-day average is now up to 43,277. The CDC has projected that Covid-19 hospital admissions will increase four-fold by August 5. Deaths have increased as well; we're back over an average of 400 deaths daily with 444; last month, that number was only 264. The total number of deaths in the pandemic thus far is 1,023,341. No one thinks we're going back to the 2000-3000 daily deaths of the bad old days; but considering these are now largely preventable, it's a lot. Something I want to add is that even among the deaths we call "non-preventable"—those in elderly or compromised people with a lot of other health problems—a large share wouldn't be occurring if transmission wasn't running wild. If we were controlling transmission—at all, really—most of these folks wouldn't be getting sick in the first place, so they wouldn't be dying of Covid-19 either. I'd consider those deaths largely preventable too.

Last week, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington published its latest briefing which covers the first half of July. I've had a look and picked up some interesting tidbits. One that shouldn't surprise any of us is that IHME analysis says this: "Despite 2 ½ years of the pandemic, our current ability to make sense of the pandemic has declined as data systems have become less, not more, comparable during the Omicron period." We've talked about how much less we know these days due to home testing, a lack of any effort to gather the data from them, and overall slow-downs in reporting. This hampers our ability to respond.

The report also says the researchers expect the BA.5 surge to be "relatively short-lived in the order of 4-6 weeks" and a major increase in deaths is not expected. It is noted that only two percent of the US population is currently unvaccinated, but indicates a desire to be vaccinated, which means we've pretty much exhausted that as an avenue for bringing the virus under control. (I'll add that I am frustrated every time some expert says something like, "Don't worry about the boosters; we need to get more people vaccinated in the first place," without ever explaining how the hell we're supposed to do that. I'm fresh out of ideas.) The population stands at 69 percent fully vaccinated (not to say boosted), and something like 80

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 5 of 65

percent who have received at least one dose. Those numbers will likely continue to creep upward slowly. The authors suggest the primary strategies still available to us in the US are going to be (1) encouraging second boosters, (2) use of Paxlovid in those at risk, and (3) use of social distancing and masking in people at risk. They would also like to see improved reporting and the better surveillance that would enable. At the moment, around 16 percent of the population self-report that they wear masks outside the home, and that number is expected to continue to decline, which offers not a great deal of hope on that front.

The IHME assessment of our current situation includes an estimate that we're averaging 851,000 new cases per day, just over seven-and-one-half times the reported number. There's also a shortfall in deaths reporting; the report places the actual daily average about 100 above the reported average, listing Covid-19 as the number five cause of death in the US this week. Here's the eye-popping number: an estimate that 82 percent of the US population has been infected at least once. That means if you've never been infected, you are one of a vanishing breed.

As for projections, IHME has daily infections declining to just over 250,000 by September 19, high or extreme stress on hospitals unlikely (with a very few potential exceptions), and additional deaths from July 11 to November 1 likely to be around 30,000. I'll add my own note that almost all of those deaths are preventable.

We'll note the Biden administration has extended the public health emergency through at least mid-October; I don't really see how they could have done anything else given the current situation. We have a super-transmissible new subvariant which is at evading our immunity, whether from vaccination or from infection, than any prior variants; we have a population which is undervaccinated; immunity is likely waning for some folks; and we have long abandoned the most rudimentary of precautions. Not surprisingly, we're in a surge—or whatever you call a situation where the last surge never really died down followed by resumed increases in cases. Some people have been infected three or more times; lots and lots of them at least twice, sometimes just weeks apart. An article in New York Magazine's *The Intelligencer* says, "More variants means more infections; more infections mean more variants. It's true that, compared with earlier in the pandemic, hospitalization and death rates remain relatively low. But a high rate of infections is keeping us in the vicious viral-evolution cycle."

The CDC's current estimate is that 93 percent of counties have high community transmission. Most of that isn't simply high; it is utterly unchecked, just running where it will. While we're woefully short of good data, we do have a test-positivity rate over 17 percent nationwide with some places running well above that. You may recall that test positivity is the percentage of tests that come back positive and is a good indicator of whether we have a lot of undetected transmission. Back in our more innocent days when we thought we might control this virus, three percent positivity was the goal. We haven't seen a number like that in a very long time. The CDC's estimate is that 93 percent of counties have high community transmission. Most of that isn't just high; it is utterly unchecked, just running where it will. Fifty-five percent of us live in high-risk communities where we should be masking according to CDC guidelines. If you don't like to wear a mask, don't worry; no one's doing it.

The other day, I received a question about the accuracy of the antigen (home) Covid-19 tests. I figured there may be others wondering about that too, so I'm adding my answer for that to this post.

We'll start here: There are basically two kinds of diagnostic tests, the ones you get at a clinic which are processed in a lab and the ones you buy over the counter and do at home. The laboratory tests, reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) are called molecular tests because they detect molecules of the viral RNA. They're relatively expensive, and it takes time to get results back. The other kind, the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 6 of 65

home tests, are called antigen tests because they use an antibody to the virus to identify viral proteins. They're relatively cheap and very fast, not to mention anyone can run one at home; they do not require special expertise.

When we evaluate a diagnostic test, we're basically interested in two things: We want to know how often it's right when it says you have the infection, and we want to know how often it's right when it says you don't have the infection. In other words, can you believe the result? The sad fact is that tests are not perfect, so there's always some chance the result is not right. Let's think about the two ways this can go wrong: (1) You can have a false positive, that is, the test is positive (says you're infected) when you're actually not; and (2) you can have a false negative, that is, the test is negative (says you're fine) when you're actually not.

What we find is that these two kinds of tests have different strengths. The PCR is very solid when it returns a negative result; it picks up even small traces of viral RNA, so we really don't see many false negatives once the virus is established in the patient, only when it's too early in the course of infection to have enough virus to detect. You can also trust it when it's positive, that is, we don't really see many false positives—until you're recovering. At that point, because it's so good at picking up minute traces of RNA, fragments of virus you haven't yet cleared away could cause you to continue to test positive well after you no longer harbor any active virus or pose an exposure risk to others. That's why we don't recommend PCR testing to "prove" your Covid-19 is really gone; it's not very good at that.

When it comes to antigen tests, a positive result is very trustworthy. If the antigen test says you're infected, you very likely are—just believe it. It also generally shows negative after you recover; that's because it's not good at picking up minute traces. Where these can give us trouble is on the false negative front; they're just not as good as the PCR at detecting infections, especially early on. I can't tell you how many cases I've heard of where the person developed symptoms, did an antigen test which was negative, and then later discovered they really were infected.

According to a group at the University of Massachusetts Chan School of Medicine which has been studying Covid-19 tests for a couple of years, PCR tests will become positive one to two days before an antigen test will. They concluded that "serial testing—two tests taken 24 to 36 hours apart—is critical with rapid tests. This is because they observed that if a person had an infection that was detected by a PCR test for at least two days in a row, one or both of two over-the-counter tests taken over the same time also detected the infection 92 percent of the time. That's a pretty strong result.

What this tells me is consistent with the advice you've read in my past couple of Updates for testing when you've been exposed: If the rapid test is negative, test again a couple of days later. Even so, that's likely to miss close to 10 percent of infections, so if you're going to do something where a mistake could be disastrous—like visiting your frail grandmother—maybe do a third one. We will note also that these tests are more effective in people with symptoms, so if you are not having symptoms, it is more important to test serially.

There have been reports surfacing for a while about temporary menstrual changes related to Covid-19 vaccination. These are unusual data for reports on vaccines except when relevant to pregnancy, but we should note that this is probably because surveys for vaccine side-effects and tracking for clinical trials don't ever really track menstrual changes. It is quite possible these sorts of effects are more common in vaccination scenarios than we know, most likely an effect of the fact that very few senior research positions have been held by women; men don't typically think much about menstruation at all because it's not part of their lived experience.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 7 of 65

Now there's been a paper published last week in Science Advances (which I was able to read in preprint before peer-review was complete) from a group at Washington University in St. Louis and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign which reports that 42 percent of people with regular menstrual cycles report heavier bleeding after vaccination. We'll note here that this was a self-selected group, a sampling technique which drives up numbers because people experiencing an effect are more likely to report; that makes it probable the real proportion of the population who suffers such effects is considerably smaller than the proportion reported here. Even so, and even though 44 percent reported no change and 14 percent reported lighter bleeding, this is likely a fairly common effect.

The study of more than 3900 people vaccinated with vaccines from Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, Astra-Zeneca, Janssen/Johnson & Johnson, and Novavax excluded people between the ages of 45 and 55 because this age group is frequently in perimenopause when irregularities in the menstrual cycle and flow are common. The survey also excluded as far as possible those who had been infected with SARS-CoV-2. Additionally, individuals who do not usually menstruate, including the post-menopausal, those using long-acting contraceptives or hormonal contraceptives, and those receiving gender-affirming therapies that stop menstruation experienced breakthrough bleeding after vaccination. There is reason to believe these changes are more likely an inflammatory event than a hormonal one, but it is not understood at this time why these effects occur.

We know that Covid-19 disrupts menstruation more than the vaccines appear to do; the effect is particularly strong with long-Covid. This post-vaccine disruption has no apparent effects on either the efficacy or the safety of vaccination, but there is a risk it could increase people's resistance to being vaccinated. That may be its greatest long-term effect.

I've been thinking we were going to hear soon that second boosters have been authorized for folks under 50, but the latest scuttlebutt from the regulators seems to indicate that they may wait on those until the updated vaccines become available in the fall. There is some hope that Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech can speed up production on these new vaccines to make them available as soon as early to mid-September instead of late in October or after as had been previously expected. If that earlier availability looks like it's going to happen, then it might not be a great idea for this younger group to get a booster now, which would delay their ability to receive the new and likely more effective vaccine until very late into the fall. We'll want to remember that the current between-booster interval is four months; getting a booster now would push back the fall booster until nearly December. I would think the sooner folks can get the reformulated fall booster, the better. It is generally expected we'll soon have an answer on the likelihood of the accelerated vaccine production schedule; and I'd guess we'll have a decision on these second boosters soon after that. The federal government has agreements in place for the purchase of 105 million doses of the reformulated Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and expects to finalize a contract with Moderna soon. Sadly, that's likely to be enough doses for those who want them. I'll update as more information becomes available.

As predicted last week in my last Update, the CDC has approved a dosage schedule for the new Novavax vaccine to which the FDA has already given emergency use authorization (EUA). This occurred after Tuesday's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices meeting at which agreement was unanimous, and now the CDC director has signed off on these. This expands the array of vaccines available to those who need them yet in the US. Mix-and-match protocols have not yet been approved for this vaccine but a request for EUA for the vaccine as booster has been filed. We'll see how these fit into the vaccination program in this country soon enough.

And that's all I have for today. Take care. We'll talk again.

Groton Daily Independent

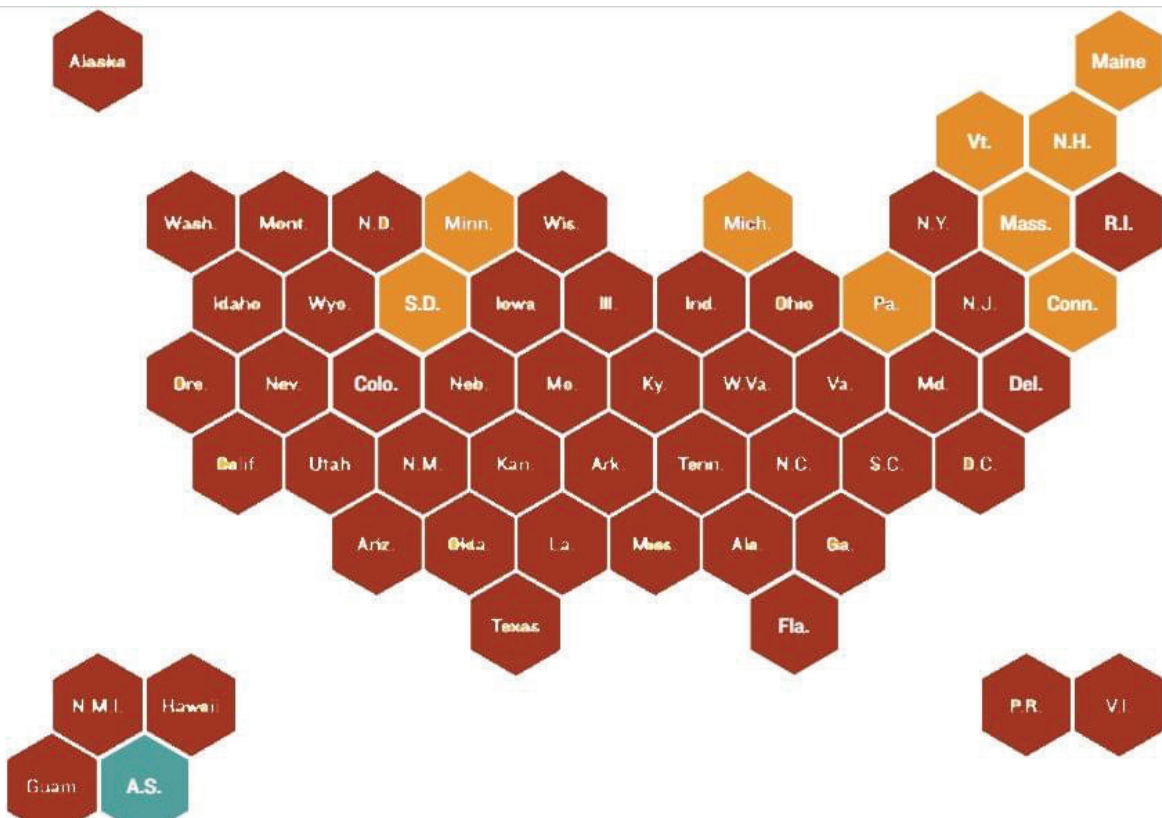
Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 8 of 65

COVID Heat Map Reported by Marie Miller

Well folks, this isn't getting better. We're up to 46 of the 56 states and US territories we're tracking with unchecked transmission. There are 9 in orange and just 1 in green.

Plenty of movement, almost all of it in the wrong direction. The bright spots are American Samoa which is firmly in green with no new cases over the past week and Minnesota which has dropped from red to orange. Moving up from orange to red are Idaho, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Rhode Island, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Georgia, and the US Virgin Islands.

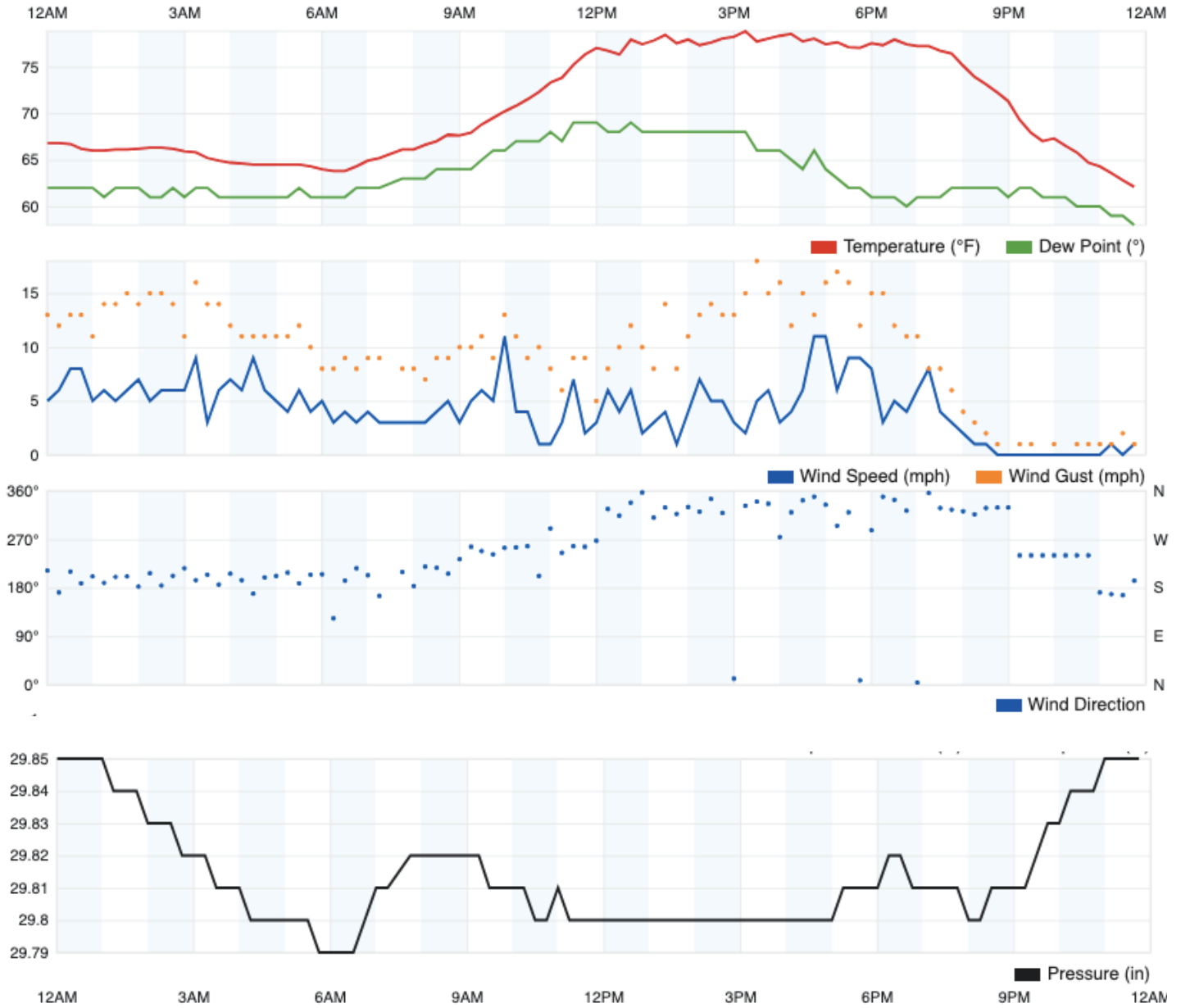
No one appears to be making a serious bid to drop a level; New Hampshire is dropping, but they have a long way to go to get to yellow. I see the following states looking to move up to red: South Dakota, Minnesota, the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, and Michigan.



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 9 of 65

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 10 of 65

Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 79 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 53 °F

Thursday



Sunny

High: 75 °F

Thursday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 52 °F

Friday



Sunny

High: 81 °F

Today



Partly Cloudy

Isolated Thunderstorms (15-20%) south of I-90
Northwest Winds gusting to 20-30 mph

HIGHS: 76-85°

Thursday



Mostly Sunny

Northwest Winds gusting to 20-25 mph

HIGHS: 73-81°

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



weather.gov/abr

7/27/2022 6:13 AM

Surface high pressure will begin building into the region on Wednesday and remain in place through Friday. Generally comfortable temperatures can be expected through the end of the week, along with dry conditions. Breezy northwest winds will develop on Wednesday, but will lessen a bit each day through Friday. Morning lows Thursday and Friday morning will be around 50 degrees for some areas, and may even sneak into the upper 40s in favored cool spots!

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 11 of 65

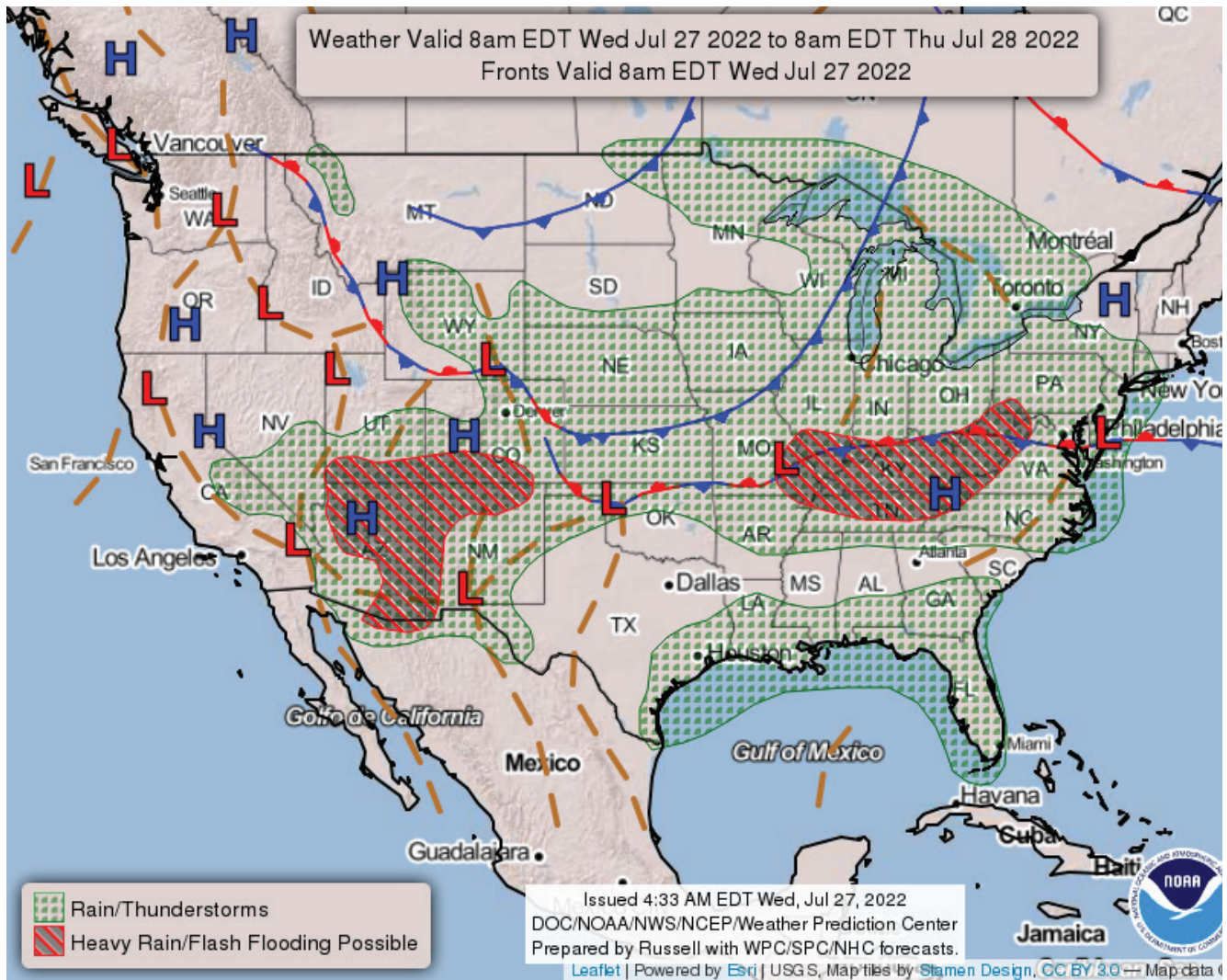
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 79 °F at 1:23 PM
Low Temp: 62 °F at 11:57 PM
Wind: 18 mph at 3:29 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 14 hours, 58 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 110 in 1931
Record Low: 41 in 2013
Average High: 85°F
Average Low: 60°F
Average Precip in July.: 2.76
Precip to date in July.: 2.80
Average Precip to date: 13.77
Precip Year to Date: 14.38
Sunset Tonight: 9:08:19 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:10:40 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 12 of 65

Today in Weather History

July 27, 1999: Golf ball size hail and high winds destroyed hundreds of acres of crops on a farm southeast of Ipswich. Golf ball size hail and high winds caused extensive damage to the Richland Wesleyan Church and the pastor and associate pastor home. The hail poked numerous holes in the siding and shingles of the buildings and broke many windows. Several cars were damaged, and a large tree was also downed. An F1 tornado snapped large branches of an oak and drove them into the ground. The tornado knocked down approximately five headstones in a small cemetery and took a roof off a small outbuilding. It destroyed an empty grain bin, moved a grain auger 50 feet, and took off several large doors on a machine shed. The tornado also knocked down or snapped off numerous large trees in shelter belts and destroyed a barn and several outbuildings just north of Chelsea.

July 27, 2001: An F1 tornado damaged homes, public buildings, trees, and power lines in the town of Lennox, Lincoln County. The American Legion building had its entire front facade ripped off, and its windows shattered. Several vehicles near the building sustained significant damage from flying debris, and one was lifted and dropped partly onto another vehicle. Damage to homes included holes in permanent siding, several roofs heavily damaged, windows were broken, fences blew down, garages damaged including at least one destroyed. Damage to public buildings included the pump house at the water tower being destroyed, the roof at the water plant was damaged, flag poles next to the ambulance building were broken, and an overhead door at the fire station was torn off. A fire truck at the fire station was damaged, and the window air conditioner was blown out along with some ceiling tiles inside. Power was lost to much of the city for at least an hour and a half because of the downed power lines.

1819: A hurricane affected the coast from Louisiana to Alabama. New Orleans was on the fringe of the storm and suffered no severe damage. Ships at the Balize experienced a strong gale for 24 hours that only grounded three ships. Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne rose five to six feet during the storm, with farms along the lakes flooded by the storm tide. Forty-one lives were lost on the U.S. Man of War schooner Firebrand, a 150-ton gunship, while it lay off the west end of Cat Island. At 15 least 43 people died in all.

1926: A destructive Category 4 hurricane struck Nassau during the evening hours on the 25th. The hurricane passed just east of Cape Canaveral early on the 28th and made landfall near present-day Edgewater, Florida.

1939 - The temperature at Lewiston, ID, hit 117 degrees to establish an all-time record high for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1943 - On a whim, and flying a single engine AT-6, Lieutenant Ralph O'Hair and Colonel Duckworth were the first to fly into a hurricane. It started regular Air Force flights into hurricanes. (The Weather Channel)

1943: A "surprise," Category 2 Hurricane moved ashore near Galveston, Texas. Due to World War II, all news underwent censorship, including any weather reports making this the surprise storm. The hurricane killed 19 people and caused millions of dollars in damages. Of particular note, Lieutenant Colonel Joe Duckworth and Lieutenant Ralph O'Hair flew an AT-6 Texan into the eye of the hurricane, becoming the first flight into the eye of the storm. Click [HERE](#) for more information.

1987 - Thunderstorms in Minnesota spawned a tornado which moved in a southwesterly direction for a distance of thirty miles across Rice County and Goodhue County. Trees were uprooted and tossed about like toys, and a horse lifted by the tornado was observed sailing horizontally through the air. Thunderstorms drenched La Crosse, WI, with 5.26 inches of rain, their second highest 24 hour total of record. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989: Thunderstorms produced locally heavy rains in the southwestern U.S. Yuma, Arizona experienced their most severe thunderstorm of record. Strong winds, with unofficial gusts as high as 95 mph, reduced visibilities to near zero in blowing dust and sand. Yuma got nearly as much rain in one hour as is typically received in an entire year. The storm total of 2.55 inches of rain was a record 24-hour total for July. Property damage due to flash flooding and high winds was in the millions.



SAY IT ISN'T SO

A deacon phoned his pastor who was on vacation in a distant city. When he answered the call, the deacon blurted out, "Pastor, a cyclone just came through our county and destroyed my house and barn."

"I'm not surprised," replied his pastor. Then he continued, "The punishment for unconfessed sin is inevitable! Sooner or later, God will judge all sin and sinners!"

"But Pastor," continued the deacon, "it destroyed your house as well."

"It did?" exclaimed the pastor. "The ways of the Lord are past human understanding."

There are times when it is difficult to offer love and kindness to those whom we feel do not deserve it. Our responses to another person's trials and tragedies, unfortunately and often, come from a distorted view of God's love. We are inclined to look at what happens to others from a normal, distorted, human response and believe that "they got what they deserved."

When we realize the loving kindness of God to us and His blessings on us, and then realize how undeserving we are of anything and everything, perhaps we may begin to see things differently. If God does not withhold anything good from us, we should treat others the same!

Prayer: Lord, may we look at others the way You look at us – with love, care and compassion. May we realize that we are all equal when we stand before You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: 1 Corinthians 16:14 And do everything with love.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 14 of 65

2022-23 Community Events

- 07/21/2022: Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/22/2022: Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/24/2022: Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
07/27/2022: 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
No Date Set: 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)
No Date Set: 6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022: Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10 a.m.
09/02-04: Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/01/2022: Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/07/2022: Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
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
12/10/2022: Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
07/04/2023 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start (4th of July)
07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 15 of 65

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

07-29-60-63-66, Mega Ball: 15, Megaplier: 3

(seven, twenty-nine, sixty, sixty-three, sixty-six; Mega Ball: fifteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$1,025,000,000

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: 145,000,000

Pope in headdress stirs deep emotions in Indian Country

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

It was a stunning image: Pope Francis briefly wearing a full Indigenous headdress, its rows of soft white feathers fastened in place by a colorful, beaded headband after he apologized for the Catholic Church's role in Canada's "disastrous" residential school system for Indigenous children.

Chief Wilton Littlechild, a residential school survivor himself, gave Francis the headdress Monday, placing it on his head amid cheering by an audience in Maskwacis, Alberta, that included many school survivors.

The Vatican and the pope clearly appreciated the gesture: Francis kissed Littlechild's hands after receiving the headdress, something he has done in the past as a sign of respect for Holocaust survivors, and has done on this trip for residential school survivors.

The Vatican obviously understood the symbolic significance of the moment, putting the photo on the front page of the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano under the headline "I humbly beg forgiveness."

Headdresses historically are a symbol of respect, worn by Native American war chiefs and warriors. For many Plains tribes, for example, each feather placed on a headdress has significance and had to be earned through an act of compassion or bravery. Some modern-day Native American leaders have been given war bonnets in ceremonies accompanied by prayers and songs.

Yet this revered regalia also represents an image that has been co-opted from tribes in popular culture for decades, feeding stereotypes in everything from Hollywood films, to fashion runways to Halloween costumes.

Some members of Indigenous tribes said they found the gesture incongruous with the past transgressions at church-run schools that Francis apologized for.

Russ Diabo, a member of the Kahnawake Mohawk tribe in Canada and an Indigenous advocate and policy analyst, described the scene as "pageantry" and the pope's statements as "facile."

Diabo said on Twitter it was "the Catholic Church and Canada collaborating in creating a mythology for a shared 'Reconciliation' agenda narrated by prominent federal collaborators/residential school survivors!"

"I have so much to say about this, and all of it negative," tweeted Joe Horse Capture, vice president of native collections and curator of Native American History and Culture at the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles.

"I am practicing 'If you can't say anything positive, don't say anything at all' mantra. But I'll be honest, it's difficult!," added Horse Capture, a member of the A'aniih Nation.

More than 150,000 Native children in Canada were forced to attend government-funded Christian schools from the 19th century until the 1970s in an effort to isolate them from the influence of their homes and culture. The aim was to Christianize and assimilate them into mainstream society, which previous Canadian governments considered superior.

The discoveries of hundreds of potential burial sites at former schools in the past year have drawn international attention to the schools in Canada and their counterparts in the United States.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 17 of 65

Leading U.S.-based Indigenous news outlet ICT made a deliberate decision to not make the war bonnet a focus of their papal visit coverage.

"When I saw the headdress being placed on the Pope, I immediately thought 'absolutely not.' We are not running that photo," said Jourdan Bennett-Begaye, editor of ICT, formerly Indian Country Today. "It distracts readers from the Pope's apology and survivors' stories who sat in those chairs listening to his every word. Something they've been waiting for, for decades.

"It creates unnecessary noise regarding Indigenous peoples' choices where the real scrutiny should be placed on the Pope and that entire institution."

Maka Black Elk, executive director of Truth and Healing at Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, described the scene on Twitter as a "#toosoon moment."

"The discourse around the #PopeFrancis headdress is unfortunate," wrote Black Elk. "He did not request that. It wasn't his fault. But it's also clear the givers did not consider how it would make other Indigenous people feel."

Black Elk said later in a telephone interview that the mixed reaction to the headdress being placed on the pope's head "reflects the reality of native people and our need for more dialogue" about the past.

"I do think that Chief Littlechild felt it was important to honor this moment, and this was a significant moment," he added.

A spokeswoman for Littlechild didn't immediately respond Tuesday to a message seeking comment.

But Keeshon Littlechild used a Facebook post to defend his grandfather for giving Francis one of his own many headdresses.

"Bugs me to see people bashing my grandfather and I understand how much respect is needed to be gifted one but at the end of the day that was him showing the pope respect for coming all the way to maskwacis to apologize," he wrote.

Among those coming to Littlechild's defense was Phil Fontaine, a former Assembly of First Nations chief and a residential school survivor.

"Chief Littlechild followed his protocols," Fontaine said. "There is a protocol for that kind of gift. He went to the elders, he went to the leadership and requested permission to present that gift. It is entirely consistent with the way they follow their customs and protocol here."

Jon Crier, a First Nations elder and school survivor, said during a news conference after the apology that the gesture meant tribal leaders "adopted him as one of our leaders in the community.

"It's an honoring of the man, it's an honoring of the work he has done and it's also recognizing ... here's a man that belongs in our tribe," Crier said.

Marie-Anne Day Walker Pelletier, former chief of Okanese First Nation, told CTV, "I thought it was pretty cool. The chief of all chiefs now I guess."

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 18 of 65

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Pope in Canada prays for healing for ‘terrible’ colonization

By NICOLE WINFIELD, PETER SMITH and ROB GILLIES Associated Press

LAC SAINTE ANNE, Alberta (AP) — Pope Francis prayed for healing Tuesday from the “terrible effects of colonization” as he led a pilgrimage to a Canadian lake that has been known to Native peoples for centuries as a sacred place of healing.

The prayer service at Lac Sainte Anne in Alberta was one of the spiritual highlights of the pontiff’s six-day visit to Canada to atone for the Catholic Church’s role in running residential schools that forcibly assimilated the country’s Indigenous children into Christian society. On Monday he apologized for the “catastrophic” ways families were torn apart; the following day he transitioned to praying to help them heal from the “wounds of violence.”

“In this blessed place, where harmony and peace reign, we present to you the disharmony of our experiences, the terrible effects of colonization, the indelible pain of so many families, grandparents and children,” Francis said on the shore of the lake. “Help us to be healed of our wounds.”

The ceremony fell on the Feast of St. Anne, the grandmother of Jesus and a figure of particular devotion for Indigenous Catholics, who every year make pilgrimages to Lac Sainte Anne to wade into its waters. Francis highlighted the importance grandmothers have in Indigenous families, and recalled the critical role his own grandmother Rosa had in transmitting the faith to him as a youngster in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

“Part of the painful legacy we are now confronting stems from the fact that Indigenous grandmothers were prevented from passing on the faith in their own language and culture,” he said.

More than 150,000 Native children in Canada were taken from their homes and made to attend government-funded Christian schools from the 19th century until the 1970s in an effort to isolate them from the influence of their families and culture. The aim was to Christianize and assimilate them into mainstream society, which previous Canadian governments considered superior.

In his first event in Canada, Francis blasted the residential schools Monday as a “disastrous error” and apologized at the site of a former school in Maskwacis for the “evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples.”

Emotions were still raw a day later as those words were digested and dissected.

Murray Sinclair, the First Nations chairman of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, welcomed the apology but said Tuesday that it didn’t go far enough in acknowledging institutional blame for the papacy’s own role in justifying European colonial expansion and the hierarchy’s endorsement of Canada’s assimilation policy.

“It is important to underscore that the church was not just an agent of the state, nor simply a participant in government policy, but was a lead co-author of the darkest chapters in the history of this land,” Sinclair said in a statement.

Sinclair said church decrees led directly to the “cultural genocide” of Indigenous peoples by underpinning colonial policy and the Doctrine of Discovery, a 19th-century international legal concept has been understood to justify colonial seizure of land and resources by European powers.

Trip organizers pushed back on his criticism, insisting that Francis had indeed “accepted full responsibility for the Catholic Church’s role in the residential school system.”

“His decision to apologize on Canadian soil, in a year where he faces significant health challenges and has had to cancel other international travel, demonstrates his understanding of the Catholic Church’s in-

stitutional responsibility to contribute to the reconciliation journey," Neil MacCarthy, communications chief for the papal visit, told The Associated Press via email.

He added that Canada's Catholic bishops were working with the Vatican on issuing a new statement on the papal bulls associated with the Doctrine of Discovery, even though the Holy See has already said the decrees have no legal or moral authority in the church today.

"We understand the desire to name these texts, acknowledge their impact and renounce the concepts associated with them," MacCarthy said.

Gerald Antoine, Dene national and Assembly of First Nations regional chief, said he had hoped the pope might renounce the decrees while in Canada but he was grateful for the attention the visit and apology have brought to a history that his own family experienced.

"The world is seeing we are telling the truth," Antoine said. "Our family got uprooted, displaced and relocated. This is what our people have been saying. Nobody ever cared to listen."

Francis didn't dwell on the apology or the church's fraught history during a morning Mass in Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium dedicated to St. Anne and grandparents, which drew some 50,000 people. Due to knee problems, the 85-year-old pontiff celebrated the Mass from a seated position behind the altar.

"Thanks to our grandparents, we received a caress from the history that preceded us: We learned that goodness, tender love and wisdom are the solid roots of humanity," Francis said. "We are children because we are grandchildren."

He later carried the grandparental theme to Lac Sainte Anne, where an estimated 10,000 pilgrims gathered at and around the shores of the lake amid vast acres of bright yellow canola flowers that bloom at the peak of summer. Some traveled from faraway parts of Canada to participate in the pilgrimage, which was restarting after two years of COVID-19 closures.

"I am happy he apologized," said Myles Wood, who came from Saint Theresa Point in remote northern Manitoba with his wife, mother and members of their parish. "I've got a lump in my throat," he said after Francis passed by and blessed the crowd with holy water from the lake.

Francis arrived to the sound of drums and ululating and paused for a minute of prayer at the water's edge. Ahead of the visit, Alberta health authorities issued a blue-green algae bloom advisory for the lake, warning visitors to avoid contact with the blooms and refrain from wading where they are visible.

The lake is known as Wakamne, or "God's Lake," by the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation who live nearby, and Manito Sahkahiga, or "Spirit Lake," by the Cree. The name "Lac Sainte Anne" was given to it by the Rev. Jean-Baptiste Thibault, the first Catholic priest to establish a mission on the site.

For Lorna Lindley, a survivor of the Kamloops residential school in British Columbia, where the first presumed unmarked graves were discovered last year, the day was difficult. She attended the morning Mass to honor her late parents, who were taken to a residential school at age 5 in a cattle truck.

"For myself it's really heavy," Lindley said. "It's hard. No matter how many times you apologize, it doesn't take away the hurt and pain."

North Dakota abortion clinic prepares for likely final day

By DAVE KOLPACK Associated Press

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — North Dakota's only abortion clinic is preparing for what could be its final day of performing procedures, with a trigger ban due to take effect Thursday that will likely force patients to travel hundreds of miles to receive care pending the clinic's relocation across the border to Minnesota.

Barring a judge's intervention, the Red River Women's Clinic will provide abortion services Wednesday then shut down. Owner Tammi Kromenaker is building a new clinic in Moorhead, Minnesota, with the aid of nearly \$1 million raised through GoFundMe.

Kromenaker has not said when the new clinic will open and she did not respond to messages Tuesday. Planned Parenthood has said it can perform abortions at its own Moorhead facility to fill the gap if needed, but it is not clear if that will happen.

Once North Dakota's ban takes effect, the nearest abortion clinics will be in Minneapolis and Duluth,

Minnesota, a drive of about four hours from Fargo, and in Billings, Montana, which is nearly four hours from North Dakota's western border.

Destini Spaeth, the volunteer leader of an independent group that helps fund abortions in North Dakota, is investigating temporary solutions until the Moorhead clinic opens. That could include helping to pay for trips to Minnesota and Montana.

"To have to cross state lines and to be treated like and spoken about like a criminal in your home state and forced to travel elsewhere, pleading for care, desperate for care," said Spaeth, spokeswoman for the North Dakota Women In Need fund. "It's got to be just so traumatic."

Kristi Wolff, executive director of the North Dakota Women's Network, said the women's advocacy group still refers people to the Red River Women's Clinic or to a physician "if that's what's needed." Wolff said she has fielded numerous calls from women showing "a lot of uncertainty and despair and anger" about what's in store.

"If there is no clinic operating within North Dakota, women will have to travel farther," Wolff said. "In order to do that, they have to have the resources for adequate transportation, you know, gas money, child care, time off work, they need all those things. To have to do that just get to health care, that's unacceptable."

The clinic is suing in state court to block the trigger law, which was passed years ago to take effect if the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the Roe v. Wade precedent establishing a right to abortion. The lawsuit argues that a ban would be contrary to the state constitution. It also argues that Attorney General Drew Wrigley prematurely started the 30-day countdown for the law to take effect.

"I'm not holding my breath for an injunction," Spaeth said. "I think we're preparing for tomorrow to be the last clinic day in North Dakota for a while."

The first abortion clinic in Fargo opened in 1981, in a two-story house that was more than 70 years old. It was the site of intense protests in the early 1990s sparked by a national group that locked themselves to cars, trees, street signs and other objects. The clinic moved to its current location in downtown Fargo in 1998.

While the move to Moorhead will add a couple of miles for patients from the Dakotas, it will also mean that the weekly group of anti-abortion protesters won't be traveling much further. Some of them have called Wednesday's planned Fargo finale bittersweet and said they will resume their posts when the new clinic opens.

McKenzie McCoy, executive director of North Dakota Right To Life, said she's "overjoyed the clinic is closing" but isn't blind to the fact that the clinic is reopening a few miles away.

"So we will continue to go across to Minnesota to love these women and show that, you know, we're here for you, regardless of the decision, but that there really are other solutions," she said.

Republican AGs sue US agency over LGBTQ school guidance

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — More than 20 Republican attorneys general filed a lawsuit Tuesday against President Joe Biden's administration over a Department of Agriculture school meal program that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The challenge, led by Tennessee Attorney General Herbert Slatery, claims that the federal government is attempting to force states and schools to follow antidiscrimination requirements that "misconstrue the law."

The coalition of attorneys general are hoping for a similar result to a separate challenge from earlier this month when a Tennessee judge temporarily barred two federal agencies from enforcing directives issued by Biden's administration that extended protections for LGBTQ people in schools and workplaces.

The judge sided with the attorneys general, ruling that the directives infringed on states' right to enact laws, such as banning students from participating in sports based on their gender identity or requiring schools and businesses to provide bathrooms and showers to accommodate transgender people.

"This case is, yet again, about a federal agency trying to change law, which is Congress' exclusive prerogative," Slatery said in a statement. "The USDA simply does not have that authority. We have successfully

challenged the Biden Administration's other attempts to rewrite law and we will challenge this as well."

In May, the USDA announced that it would include discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity as a violation of Title IX, the sweeping 1972 law that guarantees equity between the sexes in "any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." The directive requires states to review allegations of discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as update their policies and signage.

The agency warned that states and schools that receive federal funds, which include the national school lunch program overseen by the USDA, have agreed to follow civil rights laws. Although the agency says it wants voluntary compliance, it also has promised to refer violations to the Department of Justice. It is not clear whether the federal government would hold back funding for school meal programs as part of its enforcement.

The directive followed a landmark civil rights decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2020 that, under a provision called Title VII, protects gay, lesbian and transgender people from discrimination in the workplace.

According to the lawsuit, the attorneys general allege that the USDA's new directive is based on a "misreading" of the Supreme Court's ruling and did not provide states and other groups the opportunity to provide public comment.

The attorneys general involved in the lawsuit filed Tuesday are from Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and West Virginia.

A spokesperson for the USDA did not immediately return a request for comment.

Two fatal fires in Sioux Falls under investigation

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Two fatal fires in Sioux Falls are under investigation.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens says a 30-year-old man died in one of the weekend fires while three others in the mobile home made it out safely. Firefighters brought the man out of the burning home, but he was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Early indications are that the fire accidentally started, Clemens said. But, the cause remains under investigation.

The other fire broke out in an apartment in northeastern Sioux Falls. A 53-year-old woman was found in the apartment and flown to Minneapolis, where she was pronounced dead.

Police are waiting for an autopsy report on what caused her death while they investigate what started the fire.

Sioux Falls Fire Rescue Division Chief Steve Fessler is reminding residents to call 211 if they need a free smoke detector.

Fessler says someone will come and install the alarms at no cost.

US military making plans in case Pelosi travels to Taiwan

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

SYDNEY (AP) — U.S. officials say they have little fear that China would attack Nancy Pelosi's plane if she flies to Taiwan. But the U.S. House speaker would be entering one of the world's hottest spots, where a mishap, misstep or misunderstanding could endanger her safety. So the Pentagon is developing plans for any contingency.

Officials told The Associated Press that if Pelosi goes to Taiwan — still an uncertainty — the military would increase its movement of forces and assets in the Indo-Pacific region. They declined to provide details, but said that fighter jets, ships, surveillance assets and other military systems would likely be used to provide overlapping rings of protection for her flight to Taiwan and any time on the ground there.

Any foreign travel by a senior U.S. leader requires additional security. But officials said this week that a visit to Taiwan by Pelosi — she would be the highest-ranking U.S. elected official to visit Taiwan since 1997 — would go beyond the usual safety precautions for trips to less risky destinations.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 23 of 65

Asked about planned military steps to protect Pelosi in the event of a visit, U.S. Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Wednesday that discussion of any specific travel is premature. But, he added, "if there's a decision made that Speaker Pelosi or anyone else is going to travel and they asked for military support, we will do what is necessary to ensure a safe conduct of their visit. And I'll just leave it at that."

China considers self-ruling Taiwan its own territory and has raised the prospect of annexing it by force. The U.S. maintains informal relations and defense ties with Taiwan even as it recognizes Beijing as the government of China.

The trip is being considered at a time when China has escalated what the U.S. and its allies in the Pacific describe as risky one-on-one confrontations with other militaries to assert its sweeping territorial claims. The incidents have included dangerously close fly-bys that force other pilots to swerve to avoid collisions, or harassment or obstruction of air and ship crews, including with blinding lasers or water cannon.

Dozens of such maneuvers have occurred this year alone, Ely Ratner, U.S. assistant defense secretary, said Tuesday at a South China Sea forum by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. China denies the incidents.

The U.S. officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive security issues, described the need to create buffer zones around the speaker and her plane. The U.S. already has substantial forces spread across the region, so any increased security could largely be handled by assets already in place.

The military would also have to be prepared for any incident — even an accident either in the air or on the ground. They said the U.S. would need to have rescue capabilities nearby and suggested that could include helicopters on ships already in the area.

Pelosi, D-Calif., has not publicly confirmed any new plans for a trip to Taiwan. She was going to go in April, but she postponed the trip after testing positive for COVID-19.

The White House on Monday declined to weigh in directly on the matter, noting she had not confirmed the trip. But President Joe Biden last week raised concerns about it, telling reporters that the military thinks her trip is "not a good idea right now."

A Pelosi trip may well loom over a call planned for Thursday between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, their first conversation in four months. A U.S. official confirmed plans for the call to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity ahead of the formal announcement.

U.S. officials have said the administration doubts that China would take direct action against Pelosi herself or try to sabotage the visit. But they don't rule out the possibility that China could escalate provocative overflights of military aircraft in or near Taiwanese airspace and naval patrols in the Taiwan Strait should the trip take place. And they don't preclude Chinese actions elsewhere in the region as a show of strength.

Security analysts were divided Tuesday about the extent of any threat during a trip and the need for any additional military protection.

The biggest risk during Pelosi's trip is of some Chinese show of force "gone awry, or some type of accident that comes out of a demonstration of provocative action," said Mark Cozad, acting associate director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the Rand Corp. "So it could be an air collision. It could be some sort of missile test, and, again, when you're doing those types of things, you know, there is always the possibility that something could go wrong."

Barry Pavel, director of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council, scoffed at U.S. officials' reported consideration of aircraft carriers and warplanes to secure the speaker's safety. "Obviously, the White House does not want the speaker to go and I think that's why you're getting some of these suggestions."

"She's not going to go with an armada," Pavel said.

They also said that a stepped-up U.S. military presence to safeguard Pelosi risked raising tensions.

"It is very possible that ... our attempts to deter actually send a much different signal than the one we intend to send," Cozad said. "And so you get into ... some sort of an escalatory spiral, where our attempts to deter are actually seen as increasingly provocative and vice versa. And that can be a very dangerous dynamic."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 24 of 65

On Wednesday, China's Foreign Ministry declined to comment on the presidential phone call. However, spokesperson Zhao Lijian reiterated China's warnings over a Pelosi visit. "If the U.S. insists on going its own way and challenging China's bottom line, it will surely be met with forceful responses," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing. "All ensuing consequences shall be borne by the U.S."

Milley said this week that the number of intercepts by Chinese aircraft and ships in the Pacific region with U.S. and other partner forces has increased significantly over the past five years. He said Beijing's military has become far more aggressive and dangerous, and that the number of unsafe interactions has risen by similar proportions.

Those include reports of Chinese fighter jets flying so close to a Canadian air security patrol last month that the Canadian pilot had to swerve to avoid collision, and another close call with an Australian surveillance flight in late May in which the Chinese crew released a flurry of metal scraps that were sucked into the other plane's engine.

U.S. officials say that the prospects of an intercept or show of force by Chinese aircraft near Pelosi's flight raises concerns, prompting the need for American aircraft and other assets to be nearby.

The U.S. aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan and its strike group is currently operating in the western Pacific, and made a port call in Singapore over the weekend. The strike group involves at least two other Navy ships and Carrier Air Wing 5, which includes F/A-18 fighter jets, helicopters and surveillance aircraft.

Prior to pulling into port in Singapore, the strike group was operating in the South China Sea. In addition, another Navy ship, the USS Benfold, a destroyer, has been conducting freedom of navigation operations in the region, including a passage through the Taiwan Strait last week.

Strong quake kills 5, injures dozens in northern Philippines

By JIM GOMEZ and AARON FAVILA Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — A strong earthquake set off landslides and damaged buildings in the northern Philippines on Wednesday, killing at least five people and injuring dozens. In the capital, hospital patients were evacuated and terrified people rushed outdoors.

The 7-magnitude quake was centered in a mountainous area of Abra province, said Renato Solidum, the head of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology, who described the midmorning shaking as a major earthquake.

"The ground shook like I was on a swing and the lights suddenly went out. We rushed out of the office, and I heard screams and some of my companions were in tears," said Michael Brillantes, a safety officer of the Abra town of Lagangilang, near the epicenter.

"It was the most powerful quake I've felt and I thought the ground would open up," Brillantes told The Associated Press by cellphone.

At least five people died — mostly in collapsed structures. One villager died when hit by falling cement slabs in his house in Abra, where dozens of others were injured. In Benguet province, a worker was pinned to death after a small building that was under construction collapsed in the strawberry-growing mountain town of La Trinidad.

Hundreds of houses and buildings had cracked walls, including some that collapsed in Abra, where President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office less than a month ago, planned to travel Thursday to meet victims and local officials.

Marcos Jr. told a news conference he was in his office at the riverside Malacanang presidential palace complex when the chandeliers began swaying and making clanking sounds. "It was very strong," he said of the ground shaking.

In a chilling near-death experience, Filipino photojournalist Harley Palangchao and companions were traveling downhill in two vans in Mountain Province when they suddenly heard thunder-like thuds and saw an avalanche of boulders as big as cars raining down just ahead of them from a towering mountain.

Amid screams of his companions in their van to "back up, back up!" the 44-year-old father of three raised

his camera in the front seat and snapped what he feared could be the final pictures of his life. The van in front of them was grazed by a boulder, injuring one, but he and others in the second van drove backward fast enough and escaped unscathed.

"I was thinking there should be at least a record if something happened to us," Palangchao told the AP. "It was a horrific experience."

The Red Cross issued a picture of a three-story building precariously leaning toward a debris-covered road in Abra. A video taken by a panicking witness showed parts of an old stone church tower peeling off and falling in a cloud of dust on a hilltop.

Patients, some in wheelchairs, and medical personnel were evacuated from at least two hospitals in Manila, about 300 kilometers (200 miles) south of Lagangilang, but were later told to return after engineers found only a few minor cracks on walls.

The quake's strength was lowered from the initial 7.3 magnitude after further analysis. The quake was set off by movement in a local fault at a depth of 17 kilometers (10 miles), the institute said, adding it expected damage and more aftershocks.

The Philippines lies along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," an arc of faults around the Pacific Ocean where most of the world's earthquakes occur. It is also lashed by about 20 typhoons and tropical storms each year, making it one of the world's most disaster-prone countries.

A magnitude 7.7 quake killed nearly 2,000 people in the northern Philippines in 1990.

Risks, mined waters slow rush to extract grains from Ukraine

By AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

Shipping companies are not rushing to export millions of tons of trapped grain out of Ukraine, despite a breakthrough deal to provide safe corridors through the Black Sea. That is because explosive mines are drifting in the waters, ship owners are assessing the risks and many still have questions over how the deal will unfold.

The complexities of the agreement have set off a slow, cautious start, but it's only good for 120 days — and the clock began ticking last week.

The goal over the next four months is to get some 20 million tons of grain out of three Ukrainian sea ports blocked since Russia's Feb. 24 invasion. That provides time for about four to five large bulk carriers per day to transport grain from the ports to millions of impoverished people worldwide who are facing hunger.

It also provides ample time for things to go awry. Only hours after the signing Friday, Russian missiles struck Ukraine's port of Odesa — one of those included in the agreement.

Another key element of the deal offers assurances that shipping and insurers carrying Russian grain and fertilizer will not get caught in the wider net of Western sanctions. But the agreement brokered by Turkey and the U.N. is running up against the reality of how difficult and risky the pact will be to carry out.

"We have to work very hard to now understand the detail of how this is going to work practically," said Guy Platten, secretary-general of the International Chamber of Shipping, which says it represents national shipowners associations, accounting for about 80% of the world's merchant fleet.

"Can we make sure and guarantee the safety of the crews? What's going to happen with the mines and the minefields, as well? So lots of uncertainty and unknowns at the moment," he said.

Getting wheat and other food out is critical to farmers in Ukraine, who are running out of storage capacity as they harvest their fields. Those grains are vital to millions of people in Africa, parts of the Middle East and South Asia, who are already facing food shortages and, in some cases, famine.

Ukraine and Russia are key global suppliers of wheat, barley, corn and sunflower oil, with fighting in the Black Sea region, known as the "breadbasket of the world," pushing up food prices, threatening political stability in developing nations and leading countries to ban some food exports, worsening the crisis.

The deal stipulates that Russia and Ukraine will provide "maximum assurances" for ships that brave the journey through the Black Sea to the Ukrainian ports of Odesa, Chernomorsk and Yuzhny.

"The primary risk that's faced is obviously going to be mines," said Munro Anderson, head of intelligence

and a founding partner at Dryad. The maritime security advisory company is working with insurers and brokers to assess the risks that ships could face along the route as sea mines laid by Ukraine to deter Russia are drifting.

Shipowners, charterers and insurance firms are seeking to understand how the deal will play out in real time.

"I think it's going to come (down) to the position of the marine insurers that provide war risk and how much they are going to be adding in additional charges for vessels to go into that area," said Michelle Wiese Bockmann, shipping and commodities analyst at Lloyd's List, a global shipping news publication.

Bockmann said vessels carrying this kind of load typically have between 20 to 25 seafarers on board.

"You can't risk those lives without something concrete and acceptable to the shipowners and to their charterers to move grain," she said.

Marine insurers reached by The Associated Press declined to comment on whether they would provide coverage for these ships.

Ukrainian officials have expressed hope that exports could resume from one of the ports within days, but they have also said it could take two weeks for all three ports to become operational again.

The war has wreaked havoc on global trade, stranding over 100 ships in Ukraine's many ports.

Since the war began in late February, 22 bulk carriers and cargo ships have been stuck at the three ports included in the export agreement, data from Lloyd's List Intelligence shows. Around 13 are docked at Chornomorsk, six in Odesa and three at Yuzhny.

Some of those ships might still have crews aboard that could be mobilized to start exporting grains.

Ukrainian traders have been able to send some grain through the Danube River, which helped buoy exports to about 1.5 million tons in May and up to around 2 million tons in June, though that is still less than half the monthly grain shipments of 4 to 5 million tons prior to the war, according to Svetlana Malysh, a Black Sea agriculture markets analyst with Refinitiv.

Over the 2021-2022 marketing year, Russia exported about 30 million tons of wheat, according to Refinitiv trade flows. That is the lowest level since 2017, in part because of the chilling effect of sanctions. Russian fertilizer exports also saw a drop of 25% in the first quarter of the year compared with the same period last year, in part due to Western sanctions, Malysh said.

For ships heading to Ukraine's three ports, smaller Ukrainian pilot boats will guide the vessels through approved corridors. The entire operation, including the scheduling of ships along the route, will be overseen by a Joint Coordination Center in Istanbul staffed by officials from Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the United Nations.

Once ships reach port, they will be loaded with tens of thousands of tons of grains before departing back to the Bosphorus Strait, where representatives from Ukraine, Russia, the U.N. and Turkey will board the ships to inspect them for weapons. There will likely be inspections for ships embarking to Ukraine as well.

"The balance of power on this agreement still sits with Russia," said Anderson, Dryad's head of intelligence. Any Ukrainian ports outside the agreement face increased risk of attack, he said.

"I think what Russia wants ... is to be seen as the state that controls the narrative within the Black Sea," Anderson said.

Ukraine uses new artillery to hit key bridge for Russians

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian artillery hit a strategic bridge essential for Moscow to supply its forces occupying Ukraine's southern region, using a U.S.-supplied precision rocket system to deliver a morale-lifting punch.

The Ukrainian military struck the Antonivskiy Bridge across the Dnieper River in southern Ukraine late Tuesday, the deputy head of the Moscow-appointed administration for the Kherson region, Kirill Stremousov, said.

He said Wednesday the bridge was still standing but its deck was pierced with holes, preventing vehicles

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 27 of 65

from crossing.

The 1.4-kilometer (0.9-mile) bridge sustained serious damage in Ukrainian shelling last week, when it took multiple hits. It was closed for trucks but had remained open for passenger vehicles until the latest strike.

Ukrainian forces used U.S.-supplied HIMARS multiple rocket launchers to hit the bridge, Stremousov said.

The HIMARS system has precision strike capability and has added a more modern technological edge to Ukraine's dated military assets.

The HIMARS have a longer range, a much better precision and a faster rate of fire compared with Soviet-designed Smerch, Uragan and Tornado multiple rocket launchers used by both Russia and Ukraine.

The billions of dollars in Western military assistance have been crucial for Ukraine's efforts to fend off Russian attacks, but officials in Kyiv say the numbers are still too small to turn the tide of the war.

While halting traffic across the bridge, at least temporarily, makes only a slight dent in the overall Russian military operation, the strike showed Russian forces are vulnerable and was a minor triumph for Ukrainians.

The bridge is the main crossing across the Dnieper River in the Kherson region. The only other option is a dam at the hydroelectric plant in Kakhovka, which also came under Ukrainian fire last week but has remained open for traffic.

Knocking the crossings out would make it hard for the Russian military to keep supplying its forces in the region amid repeated Ukrainian attacks.

Early in the war, Russian troops quickly overran the Kherson region just north of the Crimean Peninsula that Russia annexed in 2014. They have faced Ukrainian counterattacks, but have largely held their ground.

The accurate targeting of the bridge contrasted with Russia's indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas since the invasion five months ago.

The governor of Dnipropetrovsk, in the central eastern area of Ukraine, said Wednesday that Russian forces struck two regions with artillery. Gov. Valentyn Reznichenko said that in the town of Marhanets, a woman was wounded and several apartment buildings, a hospital and a school were damaged by the shelling.

"Chaotic shelling has no other goal but to sow panic and fear among the civilian population," he said.

The Ukrainian attacks on the bridge in Kherson come as the bulk of the Russian forces are stuck in the fighting in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland of Donbas where they have made slow gains in the face of ferocious Ukrainian resistance.

Russian forces kept up their artillery barrage in the eastern Donetsk region, targeting towns and villages, according to regional governor Pavlo Kyrylenko.

"The Russian army is using scorched earth tactics in attacking the Ukrainian cities," Kyrylenko said in televised remarks.

He said the region is without gas and power, while water supplies to some areas also have been cut.

In Bakhmut, a key city on the front line of the Russian offensive, the shelling damaged a hotel and caused casualties, Kyrylenko said. A rescue operation was under way.

Amid Moscow's push to take full control of the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Russians have gained marginal ground northeast of Bakhmut, according to a Washington D.C.-based think tank.

Russian forces, however, are unlikely to occupy significant additional territory in Ukraine "before the early autumn," the Institute for the Study of War said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy claimed that Russian military losses have climbed to nearly 40,000, adding that tens of thousands more were wounded and maimed. His claim couldn't be independently verified.

The Russian military last reported its losses in March, when it said that 1,351 troops were killed in action and 3,825 were wounded.

In other developments:

— Six people were wounded when the city of Kharkiv, in the northeast, came under shelling overnight, according to the city mayor, Ihor Terekhov.

Xi, Biden to speak as possible Pelosi Taiwan visit looms

BEIJING (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden is planning to speak with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping for the first time in four months, with a wide range of bilateral and international issues on the table.

But a potential visit to Taiwan by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is looming over the conversation set for Thursday, with China warning of a severe response if she travels to the self-governing island democracy Beijing claims as its own territory.

On Wednesday, China's Foreign Ministry declined to comment on the presidential phone call. However, spokesperson Zhao Lijian reiterated China's warnings over a Pelosi visit.

"If the U.S. insists on going its own way and challenging China's bottom line, it will surely be met with forceful responses," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing. "All ensuing consequences shall be borne by the U.S."

Pelosi's office has yet to say when, or even if, she will proceed with the visit, but the timing is especially sensitive amid heightened tensions between Beijing and Washington over trade, human rights and Taiwan.

While the U.S. has in recent years sent a Cabinet secretary and high-ranking former officials to Taiwan, Pelosi's status as the top congressional Democrat and second in line of succession to the presidency puts her in a separate category. The speaker has made standing up to China a key feature of her more than three decades in Congress.

While Biden has no authority to prevent Pelosi visiting, China's authoritarian Communist government chooses to ignore the separation of powers in the U.S., saying Congress is beholden to the administration. In Beijing's perception, the fact both belong to the Democratic Party reinforces the notion that Pelosi is somehow working with Biden's assent.

Despite that, Biden last week told reporters that U.S. military officials believed it was "not a good idea" for the speaker to visit the island at the moment. The Financial Times reported last week that Pelosi planned to visit Taiwan in August, a trip that had originally been planned for April but was postponed after she tested positive for COVID-19.

Pelosi would be the highest-ranking U.S. elected official to travel to Taiwan since Republican Newt Gingrich visited the island in 1997 when he served as House speaker. Gingrich and other prominent Republicans who are normally highly critical of Pelosi have offered their encouragement, saying China has no right to dictate where Americans can travel to.

China has given no details on what specific actions it would take in response, but experts say it could launch additional incursions into waters and airspace near Taiwan, or even cross the center line of the Taiwan Strait dividing the two. Some have speculated China might even attempt to prevent her plane from landing, something that would spark a major crisis and is generally considered unlikely.

U.S. officials told The Associated Press that if Pelosi goes to Taiwan, the military will increase movement of forces and assets in the Indo-Pacific region.

They declined to provide details, but said that fighter jets, ships, surveillance assets and other military systems would likely be used to provide overlapping rings of protection for her flight to Taiwan and any time on the ground there.

A possible Pelosi visit makes it even more important that Xi and Biden hold a meaningful discussion, said Yu Wanli, a professor of international relations at Beijing Language and Culture University.

Although both their administrations are opposed to it, Pelosi's visit "has been hijacked by U.S. domestic politics, with Republicans and other forces exerting pressure not to show weakness to China," Yu said.

"The issue of how China and the U.S. manage and control the Taiwan issue has become an urgent matter, and therefore the talk between the two leaders is very timely and necessary," he said.

The U.S. has only informal relations and defense ties with Taipei in deference to China, but remains the island's most important source of military and political support. Legally, the U.S. is obligated to ensure Taiwan can defend itself and regard threats to it as matters of "grave concern."

China, which in recent years has boosted its threat to use force to annex Taiwan if necessary, objects to all U.S. arms sales and contacts with the island's government.

It regularly stages military exercises and flies warplanes into Taiwan's air defense identification zone, in what it calls warnings to supporters of the island's formal independence and their foreign allies.

The sides split amid civil war in 1949 and Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has refused Beijing's demand that she recognize the island as a part of China. Public sentiment in Taiwan strongly favors maintaining the status quo of de-facto independence without further antagonizing Beijing.

Along with Taiwan, North Korea's nuclear program, Beijing's close ties to Russia, efforts by Biden to revive the Iran nuclear deal and the status of the U.S. administration's review of tough tariffs imposed on China by the Trump administration are likely to feature in discussions between the leaders.

Taiwan was a central topic during Biden and Xi's last call in March, about three weeks after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. China has refused to criticize Russia's move, blames the U.S. and NATO for provoking Moscow and has blasted punishing sanctions imposed on Vladimir Putin's government and political cronies.

Cameroon becomes a go-to country for foreign fishing vessels

By RICHA SYAL and GRACE EKPU Associated Press

DOUALA, Cameroon (AP) — Off the coast of West Africa, the Trondheim is a familiar sight: a soccer field-sized ship, plying the waters from Nigeria to Mauritania as it pulls in tons of mackerel and sardines — and flying the red, yellow and green flag of Cameroon.

But aside from the flag, there is almost nothing about the Trondheim that is Cameroonian.

Once, it operated under the name of the King Fisher and sailed under the flag of the Caribbean nation St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Then it switched to Georgia, the former Soviet republic. It was only in 2019 that it began flying the banner of Cameroon.

The Trondheim is one of several vessels reflagged under Cameroon's growing fishing fleet that have changed names and been accused of illicit activities at sea. Currently, an investigation by The Associated Press found, 14 of these vessels are owned or managed by companies based in European Union member states: Belgium, Malta, Latvia and Cyprus.

This story was supported by funding from the Walton Family Foundation and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

The AP examined over 80 ship profiles on MarineTraffic, a maritime analytics provider, and matched them with company records through IHS Maritime & Trade and the International Maritime Organization or IMO.

"They're interested in the flag. They're not interested in Cameroon," said Beatrice Gorez, coordinator for the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, a group of organizations highlighting the impacts of EU-African fisheries arrangements that identified the recent connection between companies in EU member states and the Cameroon fleet.

Each of the vessels changed flags to Cameroon between 2019 and 2021, though they had no obvious link to the country and did not fish in its waters. The Trondheim and at least five others have a history of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, according to a report by the environmental group Greenpeace. Both the vessels and their owners conceal what they catch, where it goes and who is financially benefiting from it, maritime and company records show.

In recent years, Cameroon has emerged as one of several go-to countries for the widely criticized "flags of convenience" system, under which companies can — for a fee — register their ships in a foreign country even though there is no link between the vessel and the nation whose flag it flies.

The ships are supposed to abide by that nation's fishing agreements with other countries. But experts say weak oversight and enforcement of fishing fleets by countries with open registries like Cameroon offer shipping companies a veil of secrecy that allows them to mask their operations.

That secrecy, the experts say, also undermines global attempts to sustainably manage fisheries and threatens the livelihoods of millions of people in regions like West Africa. Cameroonian officials say all the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 30 of 65

ships that fly its flag are legally registered and abide by all of its laws. But regulators in Europe recently warned the country that its inability to provide oversight of its fishing fleet could lead to a ban on fish from the country.

Cameroon's flagged fishing fleet is minuscule compared to countries such as Liberia, Panama or the Marshall Islands. But the rapid adoption of the country's flag by some shipping companies accused of illegal fishing is raising alarm.

"This is a big issue," said Aristide Takoukam, a biologist and founder of the African Marine Mammal Conservation Organization, a non-profit based in Cameroon that monitors illegal fishing. "I don't think Cameroon is able to monitor these vessels that are flying Cameroon flags outside its waters."

A HISTORY OF LAX OVERSIGHT

Cameroon has long been criticized for lax oversight of its fishing fleet. A study published last year in the journal *African Security* documented deep-rooted corruption in the ministries that oversee the fishing industry. In that same year, the European Commission issued a "yellow card" to the country, warning it to step up its actions against illegal fishing.

The commission identified a series of shortcomings, including that the country had registered several fishing vessels — some of them accused of illegal fishing — under its flag in the past few years, raising concerns about the nation's ability to control and monitor the activities of its fleet.

If Cameroon does not comply after its initial warning, the commission can issue a "red card," effectively listing them as a non-cooperating country. And it can ban their fish products from entering EU markets.

The commission's report named a dozen fishing vessels registered between 2019 and 2020 whose names were not provided to them by Cameroonian authorities. At least eight of the 12 identified vessels are managed or owned by European companies. The AP found six more vessels not included in the EU report.

The European Commission did not respond to the AP's requests for comment.

Data from two maritime intelligence companies, Windward and Lloyd's List Intelligence, reveals an accelerated growth in the number of vessels that sail under the Cameroonian flag in the past four years, from 14 vessels in 2018 to more than 129 in 2022. According to the Environmental Justice Foundation, Cameroon's fishing capacity is now nine times larger than it was before 2018.

While the number of flagged ships has grown, the resources to monitor them have not kept pace, a review of budget documents show. The documents show that the budget for the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries' control and supervision of fisheries declined 32 percent from 2019 to last year.

While countries have a right to allow vessels to adopt their nationality and fly their flag, Article 91 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea requires a "genuine link" to be established between a vessel and its flag state.

Despite this, foreign vessels in countries with open registries often have little to no relationship with their flag states. The responsibility falls on the flagged country to control operations of the vessels in their fleet, including any illegal activity caused in other nations' waters or on the high seas.

"The very point of flags of convenience is that it's easy, it's cheap, you can do it quickly, and they are not necessarily looking at your history of compliance," said Julien Daudu, senior campaigner at the Environmental Justice Foundation, a British NGO focusing on environmental and human rights issues.

Paul Nkesi, a representative of the agency that oversees fisheries, the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries, says that although the government recognizes the need to step up its surveillance of industrial trawlers, all vessels are registered lawfully in Cameroon.

All of the 14 EU-linked vessels registered to Cameroon are massive trawler ships at least 100 meters long; none operate in Cameroonian waters. Tracking data show the ships journeying between ports in Mauritania, Angola, South Africa, and Namibia.

Still, for the local fishermen who already compete with the Chinese-owned vessels in their waters, the pressure of a growing fleet is creating concerns that Cameroon will be completely overpowered by foreign-owned vessels.

"Their business is only fishing; they can fish more than 1,000 local boats. If those bigger (international)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 31 of 65

vessels enter here, we'll be really affected," said Simeon Oviri, a local fisherman in Youpwe, a coastal area near Douala, Cameroon's largest city.

Maurice Beseng, a research associate at the University of Sheffield's Institute for Sustainable Development and visiting fellow in maritime security at Coventry University, said ships operating the flags of convenience appear to be using the system to circumvent the limits on fishing imposed by the European Union.

DIFFERING SETS OF RULES

The EU has fishing agreements with numerous countries, and EU-flagged vessels are subject to stricter fishing restrictions around the world, including in West Africa. But ships flagged to other countries outside the union are not subject to the same fishing limits.

For example, data from Global Fishing Watch, which uses satellite data and machine learning to monitor activity at sea, shows most of the EU-affiliated, Cameroonian-flagged trawlers appear to be fishing in Mauritania, a country that has one of the most robust fishing agreements with the EU.

Under this agreement, trawlers fishing with an EU flag have a total fishing capacity of 225,000 tons for a maximum of 19 vessels. Once that quota is met, all fishing activity has to stop.

But foreign vessels not under any agreement can fish in Mauritania under a free license. For the Cameroon-flagged trawlers, this means they can go above the EU limit without having to land their catches in Mauritania.

The same goes for Gambia, where industrial fishing vessels flagged to Cameroon may fish for any species outside the 7-mile nautical limit. However, if the vessel is flagged to an EU member state, the vessel can only fish for tuna and hake, according to current sustainable fisheries partnership agreements between the small West African country and the EU.

"They are able to use that as a loophole to go beyond the agreements," said Charles Kilgour, director of fisheries analysis for Global Fishing Watch.

The trawler vessels catch small fish species, including horse mackerel, sardinella and anchovy, which recent stock assessments have shown are overfished along the Atlantic coast of West Africa.

These species are a lucrative and vital food source across the region, with an estimated 6.7 million people dependent directly on them. Sardinella in particular are locally consumed in the region as an affordable source of protein and nutrients. Currently, the Food and Agriculture Organization lists most of the targeted species as either fully exploited or overexploited.

Although it's unclear where the fish goes after being unloaded in ports, Beseng notes that the fish targeted by these vessels commonly enter EU markets to be used as fish meal and fish oil.

"Their impact is huge. These are species that the local population depend on," Beseng said. "The increase in catch has increased food security challenges for coastal communities."

While environmental and maritime security experts applauded the EU for issuing the yellow card to Cameroon for the lax oversight of its fishing fleet, they say not enough is being done to target the EU-based companies that are the culprits.

"If you have European companies that are working under this flag," Daudu said, "you should also demonstrate exemplary behavior by going after your own nationals."

But just finding the trail can be a daunting — and sometimes insurmountable — challenge. "It's really like an ink bottle. You can get so far, and then at some point it becomes completely opaque," Gorez said. "It makes it really difficult to find information on who owns these vessels."

THE COMPANIES

The AP tracked the 14 vessels ultimately to four active companies: Ocean Whale Co. Ltd in Malta, INOK NV in Belgium, Sundborn Management Ltd in Cyprus and Baltreids SIA in Latvia.

— Ocean Whale operates several former Soviet trawlers, including a ship formerly known as the Coral that has changed the flag under which it operates seven times since 2005. Recently, it switched to the Cameroon flag after two months under the Russian flag.

Other ships in the company's fleet were involved in a 2010-12 fishing license scandal in Senegal. Under an agreement that was neither allowed by law nor publicly disclosed, the fisheries ministry granted several

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 32 of 65

of its vessels licenses to catch small fish that were in danger of being overfished. The company and the minister denied wrongdoing.

The company did not respond to the AP's requests for comment.

On its website, the Ocean Whale Co. said it catches fish in Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Namibia, and that "the company is only engaged in legal fishing activities under the licenses issued by the coastal States and strictly adheres to all applicable environmental regulations."

— Another group of ships registered to EU companies and recently flagged to Cameroon were also named in the Senegalese fishing scandal. Data from the IMO, the Maritime & Trade database and the Russian maritime register of shipping identifies the fleet's owners as various companies in Cyprus and Belgium, with each ultimately managed by Sundborn Management Ltd, a company registered in Cyprus and INOK NV, a company registered in Belgium.

Both INOK and Sundborn Management offer vessel registration services. Among them: choosing a "flag of convenience and a ship register for a vessel," in Malta, Cyprus, Panama, Belize and other countries.

Neither company responded to requests for comments from the AP.

Belgium's Department of Agriculture and Fisheries said it has been contacted by the European Commission about vessels managed by INOK that have reflagged to Cameroon between 2019 and 2020 but said it couldn't comment on ongoing investigations.

— Baltreids Ltd, a Latvian fishing company established in 1998, manages five Cameroon-flagged vessels. The company structure includes two other holdings listed as official owners of the vessels in 2021, Limmat Inter SA, based in the Seychelles, and Oceanic Fisheries NB Ltd, based in Canada.

Baltreids has been accused of a number of suspicious activities, including insurance fraud and illegal fishing in the Atlantic Ocean. A 2020 Canadian Broadcasting Corp. investigation found that Oceanic Fisheries N.B., was flagged by global banks for more than \$31 million in suspicious money transfers, according to documents shared with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and other news organizations as part of the FinCEN Files.

When trying to track down a physical presence of the company in Canada, the CBC hit a dead end.

The Latvian IUU Single Liaison Office, the team that works with the EU Commission to regulate IUU fishing in Latvia, told the AP that the Marshal Vasilevskiy was excluded from the Latvian Ship Register in November 2019, when the ship reflagged to Cameroon, and the Kaptian Rusak was never registered under the Latvian flag. Instead, the vessel is listed as owned by Fishing Company SA, a company based in the British Virgin Islands.

IMO data lists ownership of the five Cameroon-flagged vessels owned by either Baltreids Ltd, Limmat Inter SA or Oceanic Fisheries NB Ltd, effective between 2019 and 2021. The New Brunswick corporate register indicates that Oceanic Fisheries N.B. has been inactive since October 2021.

Baltreids denied ever having links to Oceanic Fisheries N.B. or to engaging in any illegal fishing or money laundering to the CBC. In response to the AP, the company said it presently owns two vessels registered in Latvia.

UPPING THE ACCOUNTABILITY

According to Gorez, the timing of the ships' reflagging to Cameroon in recent years seem to correspond with the 2017 adoption of the Sustainable Management of External Fishing Fleets, a regulation adopted by the European Parliament aimed to monitor EU vessels that operate outside EU waters.

The regulation requires fishing vessels to provide information regarding their operations' sustainability and legality before their EU member state can issue them an authorization to fish in the waters of third countries.

"This regulation is really trying to catch these guys, but as soon as it becomes too complicated, then the easy way out is to change the flag," Gorez said. "It's like when you try to catch soap with your hands. It slips and goes somewhere else."

Since 2010, the EU has incorporated other provisions to make its nationals more accountable for fisheries operations, regardless of country or vessel flags — most notably by penalizing EU nationals who engage in or support illegal or unregulated fishing anywhere in the world, under any flag.

But it's up to the member states to address the issue. Gorez says the states involved in this matter — Latvia, Malta, Belgium and Cyprus — have so far shown little interest.

"We can see the duplicity of the EU in terms of their effort to fight IUU fishing. They've come up with good regulations, but when you go deep into how this is implemented in practice, you see that there are a lot of loopholes," Beseng said.

Part of the SMEFF regulation is to maintain a database including information on the beneficial owners of operations by vessels flagged in an EU member state. As of now, the information remains confidential.

"How can you expect an official in a remote country that sees a vessel coming to be able to easily retrace the whole history of the vessel by himself if the former flag state does not put that information online?" said Daudu. "It would cost a lot of time. It would take a lot of verification. Sometimes it's so well concealed that you can't even find information."

AP Exclusive: Philippines scraps Russian chopper deal

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — The Philippine government has scrapped a deal to purchase 16 Russian military transport helicopters due to fears of possible U.S. sanctions, Philippine officials said.

Former Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said Tuesday night he canceled the 12.7-billion-peso (\$227 million) deal to acquire the Mi-17 helicopters in a decision last month that was approved by then-President Rodrigo Duterte before their terms in office ended on June 30.

"We could face sanctions," Lorenzana told The Associated Press, describing ways Washington could express its displeasure if the Philippines proceeded with the deal due to America's worsening conflict with Russia.

American security officials were aware of Manila's decision and could offer similar heavy-lift helicopters for Philippine military use, he said.

After serving as defense chief under Duterte, Lorenzana has been appointed by new President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to head a government agency in charge of transforming former military bases into business hubs.

Philippine Ambassador to Washington Jose Manuel Romualdez told The AP that the deal was canceled because Manila could face possible sanctions under a U.S. federal law called the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act if the helicopter deal went through.

A Philippine military official said the helicopter deal would undergo a "termination process" after the decision to cancel it was made since a contract has already been signed. The Russians can appeal but there is little room for the Philippine government to reconsider, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of a lack of authority to publicly discuss the issue.

Under the helicopter purchase agreement, which was signed in November, the first batch of the multi-purpose helicopters would have been scheduled for delivery by Russia's Sovtechnoexport in about two years.

Asked in March if Russia's invasion of Ukraine would affect the purchase, Lorenzana told reporters: "We do not see any likelihood of it being scrapped as of this moment" and added that "only time can tell."

Lorenzana at the time said an initial payment had been made by the Philippines in January. It was not immediately clear what would happen to the payment after the Philippines' decision to back out of the deal.

The Russian-made helicopters could have been used for combat, search and rescue operations, and medical evacuations in the Southeast Asian archipelago, which is often lashed by typhoons and other natural disasters, Philippine officials said.

In March, the Philippines voted "yes" on a U.N. General Assembly resolution that demanded an immediate halt to Moscow's attack on Ukraine and the withdrawal of all Russian troops. It condemned the invasion and echoed U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's appeal for respect of humanitarian principles to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine.

Duterte has expressed concern over the global impact of the Russian invasion but has not personally condemned it. When he was in office, he nurtured close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom he once called his "idol," and Chinese leader Xi Jinping while frequently criticizing U.S. security policies.

The Philippines is a treaty ally of Washington, which has imposed heavy sanctions aimed at pressuring Moscow to pull back from Ukraine.

The deal to acquire the Russian helicopters was among several weapons purchase agreements signed during Duterte's final months in office.

Last February, Lorenzana signed a 32-billion-peso (\$571 million) deal to acquire 32 S-70i Black Hawk helicopters from Poland-based aerospace manufacturer PZL Mielec. It was the largest military aircraft acquisition contract signed under Duterte, Philippine defense officials said.

Due to financial constraints, the Philippines has struggled for years to modernize its military, one of the most underfunded in Asia, to deal with decades-long Muslim and communist insurgencies and to defend its territories in the disputed South China Sea.

The AP Interview: Japan minister says women 'underestimated'

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's minister for gender equality and children's issues called the country's record low births and plunging population a national crisis and blamed "indifference and ignorance" in the male-dominated Japanese parliament.

In a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press, Seiko Noda said the steadily dwindling number of children born in Japan was an existential threat, saying the nation won't have enough troops, police or firefighters in coming decades if it continues. The number of newborns last year was a record low 810,000, down from 2.7 million just after the end of World War II, she said.

"People say that children are a national treasure. ... They say that women are important for gender equality. But they are just talking," Noda, 61, told the AP in a Cabinet office in downtown Tokyo's government complex. "The politics of Japan will not move unless (the problems of children and women) are made visible."

She said there are a variety of reasons for the low birthrate, persistent gender bias and population decline in Japan, "but being in the parliament, I especially feel that there is indifference and ignorance."

Japan is the world's third biggest economy, a powerful democracy and a major U.S. ally, but the government has struggled to make society more inclusive for children, women and minorities. There are deep concerns, both within Japan and abroad, about how the country will reverse what critics call a deep-seated history of male chauvinism that has contributed to the low birthrate.

The gap between men and women in Japan is one of the world's worst. It ranked 116th in a 146-nation survey by the World Economic Forum for 2022, which measured progress toward equality based on economic and political participation, as well as education, health and other opportunities for women.

"Japan has fallen behind because other countries have been changing faster," said Chizuko Ueno, a University of Tokyo professor of feminist studies, referring to Japan's gender gap. "Past governments have neglected the problem."

Because of outdated social and legal systems surrounding family issues, younger Japanese are increasingly reluctant to get married and have children, contributing to the low birthrate and shrinking population, said Noda. She has served in parliament since 1993 and expressed her ambition to be Japan's first female prime minister.

Noda criticized a law requiring married couples to choose one family name — 90% of the time it is the women who change their surnames — saying it's the only such legislation in the world.

"In Japan, women are underestimated in many ways," said Noda, who is one of only two women in the 20-member Cabinet. "I just want women to be on equal footing with men. But we are not there yet, and the further advancement of women still has to wait."

The more powerful lower house of Japan's two-chamber parliament is more than 90% "people who do not menstruate, do not get pregnant and cannot breastfeed," Noda said.

The lack of female representation is often referred to as "democracy without women."

A quota system could help increase the number of female candidates for political office, Noda said. Male

lawmakers have criticized her proposal, saying women should be judged by their abilities.

"That made me think that there are men who lack the ability" to be candidates, she said. But during the candidate selection process, "men can just be men, and I guess, for them, just being male can be considered their ability."

Noda graduated from Sophia University in Tokyo and worked at the prestigious Imperial Hotel in Tokyo before she entered politics, succeeding her grandfather, who was a parliamentarian in central Japan's Gifu prefecture.

Noda had her first and only child, who is disabled, at age 50 after fertility treatments. She supports same-sex marriage and acceptance of sexual diversity.

She has many liberal supporters, calling herself "an endangered species" in her conservative Liberal Democratic Party, which has governed Japan with little interruption since the end of the war.

Noda said she is frequently "bashed" by conservatives in the party, but also by women's rights activists, who don't see her as an authentic feminist.

Without the help of powerful male lawmakers in the party, Noda might not have come this far, Chiyako Sato, a Mainichi newspaper editorial writer, said in a recent article.

Comparing Noda and her ultra-conservative, hawkish female rival lawmaker, Sanae Takaichi, Sato said that despite their different political views, the women share some similarities. "Perhaps they had no other way but to win powerful male lawmakers' backing to advance in the Liberal Democratic Party at a time when women are not considered full-fledged humans."

One big problem, Noda said, is that Japan's Self Defense Force has had trouble getting enough troops because of the shrinking younger population. She said there's also not enough attention paid to what the dwindling numbers will mean for police and firefighters, who rely on young recruits.

To try to address the problems, she has created a new government agency dedicated to children, set to be launched next year.

Younger male politicians in recent years have become more open to gender equality, partly a reflection of the growing number of children who are being raised by working couples, Noda said.

But many male lawmakers, she said, think that issues related to families, gender and population don't concern them, and are reluctant to get involved.

"The policies have been made as if there were no women or children," she said.

Amnesty: Taliban crackdown on rights is 'suffocating' women

By RAHIM FAIEZ Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — The lives of Afghan women and girls are being destroyed by a "suffocating" crackdown by the Taliban since they took power nearly a year ago, Amnesty International said in a report released Wednesday.

After they captured the capital, Kabul, in August 2021 and ousted the internationally backed government, the Taliban presented themselves as having moderated since their first time in power, in the 1990s. Initially, Taliban officials spoke of allowing women to continue to work and girls to continue their education.

Instead, they formed an all-male government stacked with veterans of their hard-line rule that has banned girls from attending school from seventh grade, imposed all-covering dress that leaves only the eyes visible and restricted women's access to work.

Amnesty said the Taliban have also decimated protections for those facing domestic violence, detained women and girls for minor violations and contributed to a surge in child marriages. The report also documented the torture and abuse of women arrested by the Taliban for protesting against restrictions.

"Taken together, these policies form a system of repression that discriminates against women and girls in almost every aspect of their lives," the report said. "This suffocating crackdown against Afghanistan's female population is increasing day by day."

The group's researchers visited Afghanistan in March as part of a nine-month-long investigation conducted from September 2021 to June 2022. They interviewed 90 women and 11 girls, between 14 and 74

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 36 of 65

years-old, across Afghanistan.

Among them were women detained for protesting who described torture at the hands of Taliban guards, including beatings and threats of death.

One woman told Amnesty that guards beat her and other women on the breasts and between the legs, "so that we couldn't show the world." She said one told her, "I can kill you right now, and no one would say anything."

A university student who was detained said she was electrically shocked on her shoulder, face, neck and elsewhere, while the Taliban shouted insults at her. One held a gun at her and told her, "I will kill you, and no one will be able to find your body."

The report said rates of child, early and forced marriage in Afghanistan are surging under Taliban rule. The increase, Amnesty said, is fueled by Afghanistan's economic and humanitarian crisis and the lack of education and job prospects for women and girls. The report documented cases of forced marriages of women and girls to Taliban members — under pressure by the Taliban member or by the women's families.

One woman from a central province of Afghanistan told Amnesty that she was compelled her to marry off her 13-year-old daughter to a 30-year-old neighbor in exchange for 60,000 Afghanis (around US\$670). She said she felt relieved because her daughter "won't be hungry anymore."

She said she was also considering the same for her 10-year-old daughter but was holding off in hopes the girl could get an education and eventually secure a job to support the family. "Of course, if they don't open the school, I will have to marry her off," she added.

"You have a patriarchal government, war, poverty, drought, girls out of school. With all of these factors combined ... we knew child marriage was going to go through the roof," said Stephanie Sinclair, director of Too Young to Wed, who was quoted in the report.

The Taliban seized Kabul as U.S. and NATO forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan, ending a nearly 20-year war against the Taliban's insurgency. The world has refused to recognize the Taliban's rule, demanding it respect human rights and show tolerance for other groups. The U.S. and its allies have cut off billions in development funds that kept the government afloat, as well as froze billions in Afghan national assets.

This sent the already shattered economy into freefall, increasing poverty dramatically and creating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Millions, struggling to feed their families, are kept alive by a massive U.N.-led relief effort.

Amnesty called on the international community to take action to protect Afghan women and girls.

"Less than one year after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, their draconian policies are depriving millions of women and girls of their right to lead safe, free and fulfilling lives," said Agnès Callamard, Amnesty secretary general.

"If the international community fails to act, it will be abandoning women and girls in Afghanistan, and undermining human rights everywhere," she said.

No one wins U.S. Mega Millions, jackpot now over \$1B

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A giant Mega Millions lottery jackpot ballooned to \$1.02 billion after no one matched all six numbers Tuesday night and won the top prize.

The new estimated jackpot will be the nation's fourth-largest lottery prize.

The jackpot has grown so large because no one has matched the game's six selected numbers since April 15. That's 29 consecutive drawings without a big winner.

Tuesday's numbers were: 07-29-60-63-66, Mega Ball: 15.

The \$1.02 billion prize is for winners who choose the annuity option, paid annually over 30 years. Most winners opt for the cash option, which for the next drawing Friday night is an estimated \$602.5 million.

The odds of winning the jackpot are 1 in 302.5 million.

Mega Millions is played in 45 states as well as Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The game is coordinated by state lotteries.

GOP's links to extremism surface in congressional primary

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A congressional candidate whose compelling personal story of military valor and unfathomable loss helped him win former President Donald Trump's support has connections to right-wing extremists, including a campaign consultant who was a member of the Proud Boys.

Republican Joe Kent, who is challenging U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler of Washington state in the Aug. 2 primary, has also courted prominent white nationalists and posed recently for a photograph with a media personality who has previously described Adolf Hitler as a "complicated historical figure" who "many people misunderstand."

An Associated Press review of internet postings, court records and campaign finance disclosures depict a candidate with a more complicated biography than the compelling personal story that turned the 42-year-old Kent into a favorite of conservative media.

Square-jawed with wavy black hair and sleeve tattoos, the former Green Beret served 11 combat deployments before retiring from Special Forces to join the CIA. He also endured unspeakable tragedy: His wife, Shannon, a Navy cryptologist, was killed by a suicide bomber in 2019 while fighting the Islamic State group in Syria, leaving him to raise their two young sons alone.

But taken broadly, Kent's recent relationships and activities reinforce concerns about the GOP's ties to extremist groups. The House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol has drawn attention to the role such organizations, particularly the Proud Boys, played in the effort to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power after Trump's reelection loss in 2020.

"There's a through line," said Dave Neiwert, an author and journalist who has covered right-wing extremism in the Pacific Northwest for decades. "Many (Republican) politicians play footsie with it. Kent is just unabashed."

Kent's campaign declined to make him available for an interview.

"Joe Kent's platform of inclusive populism rejects racism and bigotry and invites all Americans to support his aggressive America First agenda of rebuilding our industries, ending illegal immigration, and stopping stupid military interventions that don't directly support our national interest," Matt Braynard, a Kent strategist, said in a statement.

Ahead of the final slate of primaries that unfold in August, Kent is not the only House candidate worrying some Republicans who fear an otherwise favorable political climate to regain control of the House could be threatened by candidates seen as too extreme.

In Michigan, John Gibbs, a former Trump administration official challenging Republican Rep. Peter Meijer, once spread false claims that Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign chairman participated in a satanic ritual that involved bodily fluids.

In New York, Carl Paladino, a former GOP candidate for governor now running for the House, praised Hitler last year as "the kind of leader we need today" and once emailed racist comments about Michelle Obama to a Buffalo newspaper for publication. And former Trump administration official Max Miller, the Republican nominee for an Ohio congressional seat, was accused of physical abuse by his ex-girlfriend, Trump White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham. Miller denies the allegations and has sued Grisham for defamation.

A representative for the National Republican Congressional Committee, the organization responsible for helping the GOP regain control of the House, declined to comment, citing a policy of not interfering in primaries. A Trump spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

Of those soon facing elections, Kent stands out for the breadth of his ties to a deep-seated extremist fringe that has long existed in the Pacific Northwest but is often obscured by the region's overwhelming liberal politics.

Campaign finance disclosures reveal Kent recently paid \$11,375 for "consulting" over the past four months to Graham Jorgensen, who was identified as a Proud Boy in a law enforcement report and was charged with cyber stalking his ex-girlfriend in 2018. The charges were dismissed in late 2019. But a judge in Vancouver, Washington, issued an order of protection requiring Jorgensen to stay away from her, records show.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 38 of 65

Kent's campaign said Jorgensen was a low-level worker who hands out literature and puts up signs and denied he has any current affiliation with "outside organizations." They declined to make Jorgensen available for an interview.

Kent is also a close political ally of Joey Gibson, the founder of the Christian nationalist group Patriot Prayer. Since establishing the group in 2016, Gibson has organized demonstrations in Portland, as well as the city's Washington state suburbs, where he and his followers have clashed with left-wing groups. Many of the demonstrations were coordinated with the Proud Boys.

The often violent rallies organized by Gibson drew anti-government activists, extremists as well as white supremacists to unite in common cause — namely fighting left-wing activists.

Photos from the events archived online by the group Rose City Antifa demonstrate how in some cases Kent's allies have associated with people who have expressed white supremacist views. In numerous instances, Gibson as well as Jorgensen, the Proud Boy on Kent's payroll, were recorded standing next to Jacob Von Ott, who has posted racist and antisemitic views online and expressed admiration for the founder of the American Nazi Party.

Von Ott did not respond to a request for comment sent to an email address listed to him, but he has previously denied that he's a white supremacist.

"The danger with these groups is it can be an initial foray into this extremist space. And once you're in this extremist space, you can become further radicalized," said Emily Kaufman, an Anti-Defamation League researcher who tracks extremist activity in the Pacific Northwest.

Gibson regularly promotes Kent's campaign on social media and spoke at a Kent fundraiser last year. When it was Kent's turn to speak at the event, he lavished Gibson with praise, explaining that Gibson "defended this community when our community was under assault from antifa."

Gibson was acquitted last week on felony riot charges after an altercation with left-wing activists at a Portland bar

Kent's ties to extremism aren't limited to the Pacific Northwest.

Braynard, one of Kent's top advisers, was the architect of a Washington, D.C., rally last year that sought to build sympathy for those arrested during the insurrection by rebranding them as "political prisoners." Kent spoke at the rally, which was poorly attended.

And his candidacy is endorsed by far-right Arizona state lawmaker Wendy Rogers, who has identified herself as a member of the Oath Keepers, a far-right militia group that played an outsize role in the storming of the U.S. Capitol. Kent publicly thanked Rogers for her endorsement and has raised doubts about the circumstances that led to the arrest of Oath Keepers over their role in the attack.

Kent has also sought support from figures associated with the white nationalist "Groyper Army" movement led by Nick Fuentes, an internet personality who has promoted white supremacist beliefs and attended the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, as well as the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

Kent has acknowledged that a political consultant set up a call early in his campaign that Fuentes was part of, where expanding his campaign's reach on social media was discussed. But he denied that there was any sort of formal arrangement and distanced himself from Fuentes in March after their affiliation became broadly known. Kent tweeted at the time that he did not want "want Fuentes's endorsement due his focus on race/religion."

After the rebuke, however, Kent appeared on a far-right YouTube channel where he echoed sentiments similar to those held by many white nationalists.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with there being a white people special interest group," Kent said during the YouTube interview with a group called the American Populist Union. He also said the immigration situation between the U.S. and Mexico wasn't as bad as in Europe because "their version of Mexico is Africa and the Middle East."

In April, Kent was photographed at a fundraiser giving a thumbs-up with Greyson Arnold, a Groyper-aligned commentator who identifies as a "Christian American Nationalist." Like Fuentes, Arnold was also at the U.S. Capitol during the insurrection.

Arnold has shared memes online that refer to Nazis as a "pure race" and has called Hitler a "complicated" and "misunderstood" historical figure. He also hosted a "White Boy Summer" celebration in Lake Havasu, Arizona, in June 2021, drawing the event's title from a popular meme that was circulating among white nationalists and racist groups.

Arnold did not respond to an email seeking comment.

Braynard, the Kent strategist, said the candidate does not know Arnold and the campaign "does not do background checks on the thousands of people who've asked to take selfies with Joe."

Tom Davis, a former Virginia congressman who led House Republicans' campaign arm during George W. Bush's first term, said GOP leadership in Washington, D.C., faces a difficult set of choices when deciding what to do about candidates like Kent.

"You don't want to go too heavy on this guy because if he's nominated you want to hold the seat," said Davis. "The problem for Republicans is you can probably get away with this in 50 districts in the country. But this does not strike me as the kind of district where you don't pay a price."

Records fall as Northwest swelters under multiday heat wave

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Free transportation to cooling centers and garbage pickup well before sunrise were among the steps being taken in the Pacific Northwest as the region hit the peak of a multiday heat-wave.

Temperatures soared to 102 degrees Fahrenheit (38.9 Celsius) in Oregon's largest city on Tuesday, which is expected to be the hottest day of a scorching spell that will be unusually long for this part of the United States. It was also a new daily record for the city for July 26, besting the previous mark set in 2020.

Seattle also reported a new all-time daily high of 94 F (34.4 C), breaking the previous record of 92 F (33.3 C) from 2018, according to the National Weather Service.

Elsewhere in Washington state, record daily temperatures were also registered in Bellingham and the capital, Olympia, which experienced 90 F (32.2 C) and 97 F (36.1 C) respectively.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown declared a state of emergency across much of the state, warning the extreme temperatures may cause utility outages and transportation disruptions. Temperatures aren't expected to cool in western Oregon and Washington until the weekend.

Under the sweltering heat, Matthew Carr spent his lunch break in a fountain in downtown Portland, Oregon. The 57-year-old works outside picking up trash for the city and had to find a way to cool off.

"This is pretty hot," Carr said. "I can just take my uniform off, jump in there with my shorts for my break, and hang out for a good 10 or 15 minutes."

Oregon health officials say there has been an uptick in the number of people reporting heat-related illness in emergency departments, and the number of those calling emergency services numbers for similar symptoms.

"Heat-related illness daily visits are above expected levels statewide," said Jonathan Modie, lead communications officer at the Oregon Health Authority's Public Health Division. He said there were 32 such visits to emergency rooms on Monday compared to three to five per day before the heat wave began.

Portland officials have opened cooling centers in public buildings and installed misting stations in parks. TriMet, which operates public transportation in the Portland metropolitan area, will allow passengers who cannot afford fares to ride for free when heading to cooling centers.

Most of Portland's garbage companies began earlier pick-ups on Tuesday morning, starting as early as 4 a.m. to reduce drivers' exposure to heat and health risks. The early rounds will likely continue through Friday morning.

Multnomah County, which includes Portland, planned to open four overnight emergency cooling shelters starting Tuesday night so people who can't get cool on their own could spend the night. The locations can accommodate a total of 245 guests, said Multnomah County spokesperson Kate Yeiser.

"We're going to find space for anybody who needs it," Yeiser said, adding that the sites have a "no-turn-away policy." She said the county may open an additional overnight center on Wednesday if there's high

demand.

Many libraries are extending their hours, staying open until 8 or 9 p.m. to allow people more time to cool off.

Residents and officials in the Northwest have been trying to adjust to the likely reality of longer, hotter heat waves following last summer's deadly "heat dome" weather phenomenon that prompted record temperatures and deaths.

In response, Oregon passed a law requiring all new housing built after April 2024 to have air conditioning installed in at least one room. The law already prohibits landlords in most cases from restricting tenants from installing cooling devices in their rental units.

About 800 people died in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia during a 2021 heat wave that hit in late June and early July. The temperature at the time soared to an all-time high of 116 F (46.7 C) in Portland and smashed heat records in cities and towns across the region. Many of those who died were elderly and lived alone.

While temperatures this week are not expected to get that high, the anticipated number of consecutive hot days has raised concerns among officials.

The National Weather Service has issued an extreme heat warning for large swaths of Oregon and Washington state.

Officials in Seattle and Portland have issued air quality advisories from Tuesday through Saturday, warning that smog may reach levels that could be unhealthy for sensitive groups.

Cooling sites are open throughout Seattle, greater King County and throughout western Washington

Hawley, Cruz escape Jan. 6 probe, have no regrets over role

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The week before the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, Missouri's Josh Hawley became the first Republican senator to announce he would object to the certification of the 2020 election.

Texas' Ted Cruz came next, dashing off his own plan on a flight from Houston to Washington days before the joint session of Congress to certify the election results.

In all, a dozen GOP senators initially planned to challenge Joe Biden's victory. But unlike their House GOP counterparts who have been subpoenaed for testimony before the Jan. 6 committee, the Republican senators have largely escaped the reach of the investigation.

While the committee did share highlights about the senators, including Hawley's raised-fist salute to the rioters that day — an image seared in history, and now on coffee mugs the senator sells — it has made the surprising, if pragmatic, decision not to call the senators for testimony. One dramatic video showed Hawley sprinting from the Senate chamber later that day as rioters swarmed.

Amid wider public scrutiny of Jan. 6, the senators have been left to explain their actions on their own terms, and have often done so defiantly.

"I do not regret it," Hawley said to applause at Turning Point USA's Student Action Summit in Tampa, Florida, after he strode to the stage Friday to a standing ovation.

As the summer hearings of the Jan. 6 committee come to a close, Chairman Bennie Thompson has indicated that the panel is looking elsewhere. As work continues, the investigation is moving closer to the top ranks of the White House and the defeated president's inner circle.

"We continue to receive new information every day," Thompson, D-Miss., said last week, announcing the next round of hearings in September. "We are pursuing many additional witnesses for testimony."

The House committee is investigating not only the grisly attack on the Capitol, but Trump's extraordinary effort to overturn the presidential election by submitting "fake" slates of electors from the battleground states to vote for him, not Biden, when Congress convened Jan. 6 to tally the 2020 presidential election results.

The senators could provide information about the run-up to Jan. 6, including any conversations they may have had with Trump and his lawyers who were putting together the plan for the fake electors, said Norm Eisen, a senior fellow at Brookings and former top adviser to Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 41 of 65

In one dramatic screenshot of a text exchange, the committee told the story of how a top aide for GOP Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin attempted to hand off a slate of false, pro-Trump electors to then-Vice President Mike Pence as he was presiding in his ceremonial role of certifying the election. Johnson has said he was not involved in that effort.

But having interviewed more than 1,000 witnesses and having issued rare subpoenas to fellow House lawmakers, Eisen said the panel is trying to preserve its political capital by declining to compel senators to testify in what would be seen as an unusual House challenge to the upper chamber.

The Jan. 6 committee's decision to issue subpoenas to House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California and Reps. Jim Jordan of Ohio, Scott Perry of Pennsylvania, Andy Biggs of Arizona and Mo Brooks of Alabama was a show of force by the nine-member panel. And it came after much deliberation among the lawmakers, who for weeks considered whether taking the unprecedented step of subpoenaing members of their own chamber would be worth further inflaming partisan tensions over the 2021 attack.

"They only have so much committee time," said Eisen.

Cruz declined to say Tuesday if he would have appeared had the Jan. 6 panel asked for his testimony. Hawley's office has similarly said he wouldn't want to address a hypothetical situation.

But in recent conversations, the Republicans have stood by their efforts to challenge Biden's victory.

"This country would have been much better off" if Congress had taken up his plan, Cruz recently told The Associated Press.

Cruz had proposed forming a commission to audit voter fraud in the disputed states, even though Trump's own Justice Department said there was no voter fraud on a scale that could have tipped the 2020 election. Dozens of court cases claiming fraud had been rejected or gone unheard.

Cruz said he did not recall conversations with Trump ally John Eastman, the conservative lawyer who was the architect of the alternative electors plan. Last month, federal authorities seized Eastman's phone and issued subpoenas to electors in states nationwide allegedly involved in the scheme.

"I wrestled for a long time with what was the best approach to take with regard to the certification on Jan. 6," Cruz said. He said he alone drafted the statement he put out with 11 senators, which he said he dashed off on the flight back to Washington.

Hawley has brushed off questions about the committee's work, and declined last month to comment about Eastman's plans for the alternative electors.

One police officer testified to the committee that Hawley's raised fist on Jan. 6 "riled up the crowd" that day, said Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Va. During last week's hearing, she played the video showing how Hawley "fled after those protesters he helped to rile up stormed the Capitol."

Johnson has downplayed his aide's attempt to pass a fake slate of electors to Pence. The handoff never took place, but the moment showed how close the plan came to fruition. If it had been successful, the electoral votes for Michigan and Wisconsin could have gone to Trump, not Biden, the rightful winner in those states.

After police cleared the Capitol of rioters that night, seven Republican senators led by Cruz and Hawley stuck with the plan to challenge the election results. Several of the other GOP senators who had initially signed on backed out.

At least one Republican who voted to challenge the election results after the rioting, Sen. Tommy Tuberville of Alabama, said Tuesday he would talk to the committee if they asked for his testimony,

"I'd go," said Tuberville, who took a phone call from Trump as senators were being swept to safety. Tuberville was also among senators who had received a voicemail from Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani that night, the committee has said.

Tuberville said he hasn't been watching the hearings. "There's nothing, anything, that I've seen that would change my mind on anything that I've voted on," he said.

Argentines yearn for Evita, 70 years after her death

By DANIEL POLITI Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 42 of 65

BUENOS AIRES (AP) — María Eva Noble says she is carrying out the legacy of her namesake as she labors in a soup kitchen in a working class neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

She was named after iconic Argentine former first lady María Eva Duarte de Perón, better known as Eva Perón, or Evita, who died 70 years ago Tuesday. The soup kitchen where Noble does volunteer duty in the Flores district gives daily lunches to about 200 people and is run by an organization that also carries the name of the late leader.

Though not related to Eva Perón, Noble says, "I carry Evita in my DNA." And she is hardly the only one who feels this way.

Seven decades after her death, Evita continues to awaken passions in Argentina as her followers believe her image as a champion of the poor is more relevant than ever at a time when inequality and poverty are rising as the economy remains stagnated amid galloping inflation.

Evita has been the subject of countless books, movies, TV shows and even a Broadway musical but for some of her oldest, most ardent followers the connection with the actress turned political leader is much more personal.

Juana Marta Barro was one of dozens of people who lined up Tuesday morning to leave flowers and pay her respects at Evita's tomb, located in the Recoleta neighborhood in Argentina's capital.

With tears in her eyes, the 84-year-old Barro, daughter of a housekeeper, recalled how her life in northern Tucumán province improved after Evita came on the political scene, and she suddenly received better shoes and school uniform.

"It was thanks to her that I had my first backpack," said Barro, who still recalls the excitement of seeing Evita pass by her town on a train. "She is a torch that shines in my heart."

Evita was born in a modest home in Los Toldos, a small rural town some 300 kilometers (186 miles) from the capital, where she moved to when she was 15 to pursue her dream of becoming an actress. A decade later, she met Juan Domingo Perón, a military officer who was a government official.

Evita was by his side when Perón won the 1946 presidential election and went on to take an unprecedented role as a powerful first lady, putting herself at the forefront of women's rights causes, including suffrage that was approved a year later and setting up a foundation to help workers and the poor.

As much as Evita was loved, she was equally hated by many of the country's wealthy and powerful who were wary of her growing popularity and influence.

Her time in the spotlight was intense but brief as she died of cervical cancer at age 33, which led to an outpouring of grief in the streets as the South American country went into mourning.

Perón ended up being elected president two more times and was the founder of a political movement — Peronism — that dominates Argentine political life to this day, with many leaders of disparate ideological views claiming loyalty to the former general.

"Perón was respected, he was obeyed — you either agreed with what he said or not. But Evita was loved or hated and ended up contributing a strong dose of emotion to Peronism," said Felipe Pigna, a historian who has written extensively about the former first lady.

For some, that emotion has lived on.

María Eva Sapire joined with almost 100 others a day before the anniversary of Evita's death to dress up like her as part of a performance that paid homage to the former first lady.

Sapire was named after Evita and now she talks about her with her own daughter.

"When you listen to her speeches it's amazing how so many things still fit so many years later," Sapire said.

Others who came to admire Evita later in life, often say that it was precisely the feeling that she was advanced for her time in many issues, particularly women's rights, that led them to join her legions of fans.

"Young people in particular see a rebel in Evita, a figure who didn't bow her head or give up" and ended up dying "young and beautiful," which contributed to the construction of a "pop icon," Pigna said.

"Eva is a character who bewitches," said Alejandro Maci, director of new series "Santa Evita" that premieres Tuesday on Disney's streaming services based on a 1995 novel by Argentine writer Tomás Eloy Martínez.

Perón and Evita continue to be the subject of criticism both within Argentina and abroad. Some, for

example, say Evita used money from the state to carry out what she described as charitable works to build up her own image as a saintly figure and help her husband grow in popularity. Others also point to claims that the couple received money from the Nazis to help perpetrators of war crimes hide out in Argentina after World War II.

Cristina Alvarez Rodríguez, a great-niece of Evita who is now a minister in the Buenos Aires provincial government, said she is particularly moved by the number of “very young girls who have tattooed Evita on their skin” and now “have her as a guiding light.”

Many now are also yearning for a figure like Evita.

For some, the current government of President Alberto Fernández, who describes himself as a Peronist, has strayed from those principles.

“The Argentine people feel betrayed. Peronism never came to starve the people, and that’s what is happening now,” said Mateo Nieto, who has photos of Perón and Evita in his pizza restaurant in the northern city of Posadas, near the border with Paraguay.

Nieto said that “the government that is in power calls itself Peronist, but it really isn’t Peronism.”

“We really miss someone like Evita, it would be great to have a leader like her in this time,” he said.

Maci, the director, sees Evita as “interesting metaphor” to think about what kind of country Argentines want at a time of growing poverty and inequality.

“This woman proposed a society with greater mobility, which is exactly what Argentina does not have right now. It lacks any kind of social mobility, and if it has any, it’s downward,” he said.

2 cops face sentencing for violating George Floyd’s rights

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — The last two former Minneapolis police officers to be sentenced for violating George Floyd’s civil rights are scheduled to learn their penalties Wednesday, which could set in motion another round of plea deal discussions in state court over a killing that sparked a reckoning on racial injustice.

J. Alexander Kueng and Tou Thao were convicted in February of two counts of violating Floyd’s civil rights in the 2020 slaying. The jury found they deprived the 46-year-old Black man of medical care and failed to stop Derek Chauvin as he knelt on Floyd’s neck for 9 1/2 minutes while Floyd gasped for air.

Kueng held Floyd’s back, former Officer Thomas Lane held his feet and Thao kept back bystanders, some of whom recorded video that led to worldwide protests.

Chauvin, who pleaded guilty last year to violating Floyd’s civil rights and the civil rights of a teenager in an unrelated case, was sentenced to 21 years in federal prison. Lane, who twice asked if Floyd should be rolled onto his side so he could breathe, was convicted of one count and was sentenced to 2 1/2.

Prosecutors have not made specific recommendations for Kueng and Thao’s sentence, but have requested less time than Chauvin and “substantially” more than Lane. Thao’s attorney is asking for two years; Kueng’s request is sealed.

Kueng and Thao got a victory last week when U.S. District Judge Paul Magnuson issued rulings that affect how their federal sentences will be calculated and could mean far less prison time. The rulings — particularly one that cross-references their crimes with involuntary manslaughter instead of murder — mean the men head into Wednesday’s hearing with a recommended range of 4 1/4 years to 5 1/4 years. They might have faced a life sentence.

“It made a huge difference,” Mark Osler, a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law and former federal prosecutor, said. “The impact of it is already baked in now.”

Osler said one key is if Magnuson determines that Kueng and Thao were “minor” or “minimal” participants in the crime. Magnuson found Lane was a minimal participant, resulting in a lower sentence. Osler said a minor participant would be more culpable.

“You have one officer who at least made some effort to change the trajectory, and that’s Lane. You have one most directly involved in the killing of George Floyd, and that’s Derek Chauvin — and then you have these two in the middle,” Osler said.

The potential for lower sentences for Kueng and Thao raises questions about whether they will consider a plea deal or risk trial Oct. 24 in state court, where they face counts of aiding and abetting second-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

Osler said once the men know what their federal sentence is, they will likely seek a plea deal on the state charges that won't exceed the federal sentence and will let them serve the sentences concurrently.

Kueng and Thao can still appeal their federal convictions. If they plead guilty in state court, any federal appeal would be moot, said Mike Brandt, a criminal defense attorney who has been following the case. But it's also hard to win a federal appeal, he said.

"Those are some of the calculus they are going to have to make in terms of, 'Do I go to trial and risk something worse? Do I think I have a good shot at appeal on the federal case?'" Brandt said.

Kueng, who is Black, and Thao, who is Hmong American, likely will remain free on bond after Wednesday sentencing and be allowed to self-report to prison, especially since they have a pending trial and will need to be in contact with their attorneys and be present for court proceedings.

Lane, who is white, pleaded guilty to a state charge of aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter and is awaiting sentencing in that case. He was allowed to remain free on bond after his federal sentencing.

Chauvin, who is white, was convicted of second-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in state court and is serving a 22 1/2-year state sentence. His federal and state sentences are being served simultaneously.

Northwest swelters under 'uncomfortable' multiday heat wave

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Under the sweltering heat, Matthew Carr spent his lunch break in a fountain in downtown Portland, Oregon. The 57-year-old works outside picking up trash for the city and had to find a way to cool off.

"This is pretty hot," Carr said. "I can just take my uniform off, jump in there with my shorts for my break, and hang out for a good 10 or 15 minutes."

Temperatures soared to 102 degrees Fahrenheit (38.9 Celsius) in Oregon's largest city on Tuesday, which is expected to be the hottest day of a scorching spell that will be unusually long for this part of the United States. It was also a new daily record for the city for July 26, besting the previous mark set in 2020.

Seattle also reported a new record daily high of 94 F (34.4 C), breaking the previous record of 92 F (33.3 C) from 2018, according to the National Weather Service.

Elsewhere in Washington state, record daily temperatures were also registered in Bellingham and the capital Olympia, which experienced 90 F (32.2 C) and 97 F (36.1 C) respectively.

Oregon health officials said there has been an uptick in the number of people reporting heat-related illness in emergency departments, and the number of those calling emergency services numbers for similar symptoms.

"Heat-related illness daily visits are above expected levels statewide," said Jonathan Modie, lead communications officer at the Oregon Health Authority's Public Health Division. He said there were 32 such visits to emergency departments on Monday compared to three to five per day before the heat wave began.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown declared a state of emergency across much of the state, warning the extreme temperatures may cause utility outages and transportation disruptions.

"With many parts of Oregon facing a high heat wave, it is critical that every level of government has the resources they need to help keep Oregonians safe and healthy," Brown said in a statement.

Portland officials have opened cooling centers in public buildings and installed misting stations in parks. TriMet, which operates public transportation in the Portland metropolitan area, will allow passengers who cannot afford fares to ride for free when heading to cooling centers.

Most of Portland's garbage companies began earlier pick-ups on Tuesday morning, starting as early as 4 a.m. to reduce drivers' exposure to heat and health risks. The early rounds will likely continue through Friday morning.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 45 of 65

Multnomah County, which includes Portland, plans to open four overnight emergency cooling shelters starting Tuesday night so people who can't get cool on their own can spend the night. The locations can accommodate a total of 245 guests, said Multnomah County spokesperson Kate Yeiser.

"We're going to find space for anybody who needs it," Yeiser said, adding that the sites have a "no-turn-away policy." She said the county may open an additional overnight center on Wednesday if there is high demand.

Many libraries are extending their hours, staying open until 8 or 9 p.m. to allow people more time to cool off.

As the northwestern U.S. heated up, the hot spell on the East Coast appeared to have broken, with few areas east of the Mississippi River under heat advisories on Tuesday.

Philadelphia hit 99 degrees (37 Celsius) Sunday before factoring in humidity. Newark, New Jersey, marked five consecutive days of 100 degrees or higher, the longest such streak since records began in 1931. Boston also hit 100 degrees, surpassing the previous daily record high of 98 degrees (36.6 Celsius) set in 1933.

On Tuesday, highs peaked in the 80s in New York and Boston.

Residents and officials in the Northwest have been trying to adjust to the likely reality of longer, hotter heat waves following last summer's deadly "heat dome" weather phenomenon that prompted record temperatures and deaths.

In response, Oregon passed a law requiring all new housing built after April 2024 to have air conditioning installed in at least one room. The law already prohibits landlords in most cases from restricting tenants from installing cooling devices in their rental units.

About 800 people died in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia during the 2021 heat wave in late June and early July. The temperature at the time soared to an all-time high of 116 degrees F (46.7 C) in Portland and smashed heat records in cities and towns across the region. Many of those who died were elderly and lived alone.

While temperatures this week are not expected to get that high, the anticipated number of consecutive hot days has raised concerns among officials.

The National Weather Service has issued an extreme heat warning for large swaths of Oregon and Washington state, including Portland and Seattle, out of concern that nighttime temperatures won't help residents to sufficiently cool off.

"The main reason for that warning is because of those low temperatures only getting into the 65 to 70 degree range, and the fact that this is such a long duration event," said Colby Neuman, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Portland.

Portland seems to be on track to "either tying or exceeding" previous heat wave duration records, Neuman said. The record stands at six consecutive days of 95 degrees (35C) or higher, which has only been reached twice before.

Officials in Seattle and Portland have issued air quality advisories from Tuesday through Saturday, warning that smog may reach levels that could be unhealthy for sensitive groups.

Cooling sites are open throughout Seattle, greater King County and throughout western Washington.

In Portland, an emergency cooling shelter provided relief on Tuesday for Rory Lidster, a veteran without housing who described the heat as "uncomfortable."

"I think these cooling shelters are a real good thing, that the elderly really need them and that all people really need them in this kind of heat," Lidster said.

The 55-year-old said he has been living in a tent on the street for the past two weeks. He described calling shelters every morning only to find no open spots. Now, he will be able to spend the night at the emergency cooling site, where he hopes to stay "for a little while."

"As long as we can be, I will be here," Lidster said.

Biden, Xi to hold talks amid new tensions over Taiwan

By AAMER MADHANI and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 46 of 65

WASHINGTON (AP) — Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping will speak Thursday, according to a U.S. official, their first conversation in four months coming amid new tension between Washington and Beijing over China's claims on Taiwan.

The planned talks between the two leaders — the fifth in a series of regular check-ins — have been in the works for weeks. But the possibility of a visit to Taiwan by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the top congressional Democrat and second in line of succession to the presidency, has added fresh strain to the complicated relationship.

Beijing is warning that it will take "forceful measures" should Pelosi visit the self-ruled island of Taiwan that China claims as part of its territory.

The U.S. official declined to be identified ahead of the public announcement. The schedule was first reported by Bloomberg.

Pelosi hasn't confirmed plans to visit Taiwan, but Biden last week told reporters that U.S. military officials believed it was "not a good idea" for the speaker to visit the island at the moment. Biden's comments came after the Financial Times reported last week that Pelosi planned to visit Taiwan in August, a trip she had originally planned to make in April but postponed after she tested positive for COVID-19.

The speaker has declined to comment on whether she plans to visit Taiwan, citing security protocol on her travel. But she said Biden's comment stemmed from military brass being "afraid our plane would get shot down, or something like that, by the Chinese." She would be the highest-ranking U.S. elected official to visit Taiwan since Republican Newt Gingrich visited the island in 1997 when he served as House speaker.

"It's important for us to show support for Taiwan," Pelosi said. "None of us have ever said we're for independence when it comes to Taiwan. That's up to Taiwan to decide."

Administration officials have privately stressed to Pelosi that traveling to Taiwan could further complicate a delicate status quo.

Chinese officials aren't mincing words, sending a message that a visit by Pelosi would be viewed as a change in U.S. policy and treated as a provocation.

"If the U.S. insists on going its own way, China will take forceful measures to resolutely respond and counter it, and we will do what we say," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin.

The U.S. has a longstanding commitment to the "One China" policy that recognizes Beijing as the government of China but allows informal relations and defense ties with Taipei. China has stepped up its military provocations against Taiwan in recent years, and there are fears that it's trying to intimidate the island into accepting Beijing's demands to unify with the communist mainland.

The talks between Biden and Xi could also include discussion of North Korea's nuclear program, differences between Beijing and Washington over Russia's war in Ukraine, efforts by the Biden administration to revive the Iran nuclear deal and the status of the U.S. administration's review of tough tariffs imposed on China by the Trump administration.

"There are issues of tension in this relationship," John Kirby, a national security spokesperson for the White House, said Tuesday. "But there's also issues where we believe cooperation is not only possible, but mandatory, for instance on climate change, which affects us greatly."

Long-simmering differences over Taiwan have come into intense focus in the aftermath of Russia's invasion and ongoing efforts to annex swaths of eastern Ukraine.

As the U.S. scrambled to assemble a global coalition to hit the Russian economy with heavy sanctions following Vladimir Putin's ordered invasion of Ukraine, Biden warned allies — particularly those in the Indo-Pacific — that Beijing would be watching closely how democracies responded as it considers its next steps on Taiwan.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Friday he fears that Beijing might be gleaning some "concerning" takeaways from the five-month-old war in eastern Europe. But he suggested the moment has also led to careful reflection in Taipei.

"Not as many people ask 'Is Taiwan learning lessons from Ukraine?' and you can bet they are," Sullivan said during an appearance at the Aspen Security Forum. "They're learning lessons about citizen mobilization

and territorial defense. They're learning lessons about information warfare, and how to set the information space. And they're learning lessons about how to prepare for a potential contingency involving China and they're working rapidly at that."

Taiwan was a central topic during Biden and Xi's last call in March, about three weeks after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine.

China has repeatedly threatened to assert its claim to Taiwan by force, and has dispatched hundreds of sorties in Taiwanese airspace since Biden took office 18 months ago. The U.S. is legally obligated to ensure the self-governing island democracy can defend itself and treats threats to it with grave concern.

The conversation also comes as Biden's national security and economic aides near the completion of a review of U.S. tariff policy and prepare to make recommendations to the president.

The tariffs imposed under President Donald Trump applied a 25% duty on billions of dollars of Chinese products. The penalties were intended to reduce the U.S. trade deficit and force China to adopt fairer practices.

Trump, Pence speeches put stark GOP divide on display

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The intensifying rivalry between former President Donald Trump and his once fiercely loyal vice president, Mike Pence, was put on stark display Tuesday as the two gave dueling speeches in Washington on the future of the Republican Party.

Trump, in his first return to Washington since Democrat Joe Biden ousted him from the White House, repeated the false election fraud claims that sparked the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, while Pence, in a separate address, implored the party to move on from Trump's defeat.

Federal and state election officials and Trump's own attorney general have said there is no credible evidence the 2020 election was tainted. The former president's allegations of fraud were also roundly rejected by courts, including by judges he appointed.

"It was a catastrophe, that election," Trump nonetheless declared to an audience of cheering supporters at the America First Agenda Summit, about a mile from the White House he once called home.

Hours earlier, addressing a student conservative group, Pence said, "Some people may choose to focus on the past, but elections are about the future."

The speeches highlighted the divisions within the party between Trump loyalists who still refuse to accept the results of the 2020 election and other Republicans who believe the party should instead focus on the future heading into this fall's midterm elections and beyond.

And they come as both men have been laying the groundwork for expected presidential runs. Trump, in particular, has been teasing his intentions and said Tuesday that he "may just have to do it again" as he addressed a group of former White House officials and Cabinet members who have been crafting an agenda for a possible second Trump administration.

Pence, once Trump's loyal vice president, spoke about his own "Freedom Agenda" as he presented a different vision for the party at a conference nearby.

"I believe conservatives must focus on the future to win back America. We can't afford to take our eyes off the road in front of us because what's at stake is the very survival of our way of life," he said in an address to Young America's Foundation, a student conservative group.

Trump, too, said America's survival was at stake. In a speech billed as focused on public safety, he painted a dark picture of a nation in decline and one in imminent danger from rising crime. Among his proposals, he called for executing drug dealers, sending the homeless to tent cities on the outskirts of cities, and expanding his Southern border wall.

Biden joined in — on Twitter — dismissing Trump's claim to have been a law-and-order president.

Referring to the Capitol riot, he tweeted: "I don't think inciting a mob that attacks a police officer is 'respect for the law.' You can't be pro-insurrection and pro-cop — or pro-democracy, or pro-American."

Trump, in his remarks, also spent plenty of time airing his usual grievances even as some advisers have

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 48 of 65

urged him to move on.

"If I renounced my beliefs, if I agreed to stay silent, if I stayed home and just took it easy, the persecution of Donald Trump would stop immediately," he said. "But that's not what I will do."

Despite Trump's reputation for harshly criticizing rivals, Pence and other potential GOP contenders have been increasingly brazen in their willingness to take on the man who remains a dominating force in the Republican Party, despite his actions on Jan. 6, when he stood by as a mob of his supporters ransacked the Capitol and tried to halt certification of Biden's win.

The former White House partners also campaigned for rival candidates in Arizona Friday, while Pence's former chief of staff, Marc Short, recently testified before a federal grand jury investigating the assault on the U.S. Capitol.

Short was at the building that day as Pence fled an angry mob of rioters who called for his hanging after Trump wrongly insisted Pence had the power to overturn the election results.

Pence has repeatedly defended his actions that day, even as his decision to stand up to his boss turned large swaths of Trump's loyal base against him. Polls show that Trump remains, by far, the top choice of GOP primary voters, with Pence far behind.

That contrast was on display Tuesday as Trump spoke before an audience of hundreds of cheering supporters gathered for the America First Policy Institute's two-day America First Agenda Summit. The group is widely seen as an "administration in waiting" that could quickly move to the West Wing if Trump should run again and win.

The event had the feel of a Trump White House reunion — but one without Pence.

Pence, meanwhile, received a friendly — but less exuberant — welcome from the students, who struggled to break into a "USA!" chant.

In his remarks, Pence repeatedly touted the "Trump-Pence administration." But the first question he received during a brief question-and-answer session that followed his speech was about his growing split with Trump, which is particularly stark given the years he spent as the former president's most loyal sidekick.

Pence denied the two "differ on issues," but acknowledged, "we may differ on focus."

"I truly do believe that elections are about the future and that it's absolutely essential, at a time when so many Americans are hurting and so many families are struggling, that we don't give way to the temptation to look back," he said.

Pence has spent recent months delivering policy speeches, traveling to early voting states and penning a book that Simon & Schuster announced Tuesday would be titled "So Help Me God" and published in November. The publisher said the book would, in part, chronicle "President Trump's severing of their relationship on January 6, 2021, when Pence kept his oath to the Constitution."

Trump, meanwhile, has spent much of his time since leaving office spreading lies about his loss to sow doubt about Biden's victory. Indeed, even as the House Jan. 6 committee has been laying bare his attempts to remain in power and his refusal to call off a violent mob of his supporters as they tried to halt the peaceful transition of power, Trump has continued to try to pressure officials to overturn Biden's win, despite there being no legal means to decertify it.

The America First Policy Institute is one of several Trump-allied organizations that have continued to advocate for his priorities in his absence. In addition to the summit, the group has been making preparations for another possible Trump administration, hoping to avoid the early chaos of Trump's first term by "making sure we have the policies, personnel and process nailed down for every key agency when we do take the White House back," said AFPI president Brooke Rollins, who previously served as head of Trump's Domestic Policy Council.

While the organization was once dismissed as a landing zone for ex-Trump administration officials shut out of more lucrative jobs, it has grown into a behemoth, with an operating budget of around \$25 million and 150 staff, including 17 former senior White House officials and nine former Cabinet members overseeing nearly two dozen policy centers.

Climate disinformation leaves lasting mark as world heats

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

In 1998, as nations around the world agreed to cut carbon emissions through the Kyoto Protocol, America's fossil fuel companies plotted their response, including an aggressive strategy to inject doubt into the public debate.

"Victory," according to the American Petroleum Institute's memo, "will be achieved when average citizens 'understand' (recognize) uncertainties in climate science... Unless 'climate change' becomes a non-issue... there may be no moment when we can declare victory."

The memo, later leaked to The New York Times that year, went on to outline how fossil fuel companies could manipulate journalists and the broader public by muddying the evidence, by playing up "both sides" of the debate and by portraying those seeking to reduce emissions as "out of touch with reality."

Nearly 25 years later, the reality of a changing climate is now clear to most Americans, as heatwaves and wildfires, rising sea levels and extreme storms become more common.

Last week, President Joe Biden announced moves intended to expand offshore wind, though he stopped short of declaring a national climate emergency. A Supreme Court ruling last month limited the federal government's ability to regulate carbon emissions from power plants, meaning it will be up to a divided Congress to pass any meaningful limits on emissions.

Even as surveys show the public generally has become more concerned about climate change, a sizeable number of Americans have become even more distrustful of the scientific consensus.

"The tragedy of this is that all over social media, you can see tens of millions of Americans who think scientists are lying, even about things that have been proven for decades," said Naomi Oreskes, a historian of science at Harvard University who has written about the history of climate change disinformation. "They've been persuaded by decades of disinformation. The denial is really, really deep."

And persistent. Just last month, even with record heat in London, raging wildfires in Alaska and historic flooding in Australia, the Science and Environmental Policy Project, a pro-fossil fuel think tank, said all the scientists had it wrong.

"There is no climate crisis," the group wrote in its newsletter.

Years before COVID-19 set off a wave of misinformation, or former President Donald Trump's lies about the 2020 election helped spur an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, fossil fuel companies spent big in an effort to undermine support for emissions reductions.

Now, even as those same companies promote investments in renewable energy, the legacy of all that climate disinformation remains.

It's also contributed to a broader skepticism of scientists, scientific institutions and the media that report on them, a distrust reflected by doubts about vaccines or pandemic-era public health measures like masks and quarantines.

"It was the opening of a Pandora's Box of disinformation that has proven hard to control," said Dave Anderson of the Energy and Policy Institute, an organization that has criticized oil and coal companies for withholding what they knew about the risks of climate change.

Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, as public awareness of climate change grew, fossil fuel companies poured millions of dollars into public relations campaigns denouncing the accumulating evidence supporting the idea of climate change. They funded supposedly independent think tanks that cherry-picked the science and promoted fringe views designed to make it look like there were two legitimate sides to the dispute.

Since then, the approach has softened as the impact of climate change has become more apparent. Now, fossil fuel companies are more likely to play up their supposedly pro-environmental record, touting renewables like solar and wind or initiatives designed to improve energy efficiency or offset carbon emissions.

Aggressive approaches to address climate change are now dismissed not on scientific grounds but on economic ones. Fossil fuel companies talk about lost jobs or higher energy prices — without mentioning the cost of doing nothing, said Ben Franta, an attorney, author and Stanford University researcher who tracks fossil fuel disinformation.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 50 of 65

"We are living within an extended multi-decade campaign executed by the fossil fuel industry," Franta said. "The debate (over climate change) was manufactured by the fossil fuel industry in the 1990s, and we are living with that history right now."

The impact of that history is reflected in public opinion surveys that show a growing gap between Republicans and other Americans when it comes to views on climate change.

While the percentage of overall Americans who say they're concerned about climate change has risen, Republicans are increasingly skeptical. Last year, Gallup found that 32% of self-identified Republicans said they accepted the scientific consensus that pollution from humans is driving climate change, down from 52% in 2003.

By comparison, the percentage of self-identified Democrats that say they accept that human activities are leading to climate change increased from 68 to 88 over the same time period.

Fossil fuel companies deny any intent to mislead the American public and point to investments in renewable energy as evidence that they take climate change seriously.

ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods told members of Congress last fall that his company "has long acknowledged the reality and risks of climate change, and it has devoted significant resources to addressing those risks." ExxonMobil's public claims about climate change, he said, "are and have always been truthful, fact-based ... and consistent" with mainstream science.

Asked about its role in spreading climate misinformation, a spokesman for the Southern Company pointed to recent expansions in renewable energy and initiatives meant to offset carbon emissions.

The 1998 "victory memo" laying out the industry's strategy was created by the American Petroleum Institute. In a statement emailed to The Associated Press, API spokesperson Christina Noel said the oil industry is working to reduce emissions while also ensuring access to reliable, affordable energy.

"That's exactly what our industry has been focused on for decades," Noel said. "Any suggestion to the contrary is false."

The 1998 memo is one of several documents cited by climate activists and some Democratic lawmakers who say they could be used to hold them legally responsible for misleading ratepayers, investors or the general public.

"It's time for these companies to answer for the harm they have caused," said Rep. Ro Khanna, D-California.

Republicans, however, have said Democrats want to focus on climate misinformation to distract from failed environmental policies that are driving up gas and energy costs.

Is this the night you win \$830 million Mega Millions prize?

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — The chances are steadily rising that someone will win the massive \$830 million Mega Millions jackpot on Tuesday night, but will it be you?

Almost certainly not.

That's because while the nation's fourth-largest lottery prize has sparked a surge in sales that will mean more possible number combinations are covered, your odds of winning remain the same. At 1 in 302.5 million, they're pretty miserable.

National Mega Millions sales rose from \$116 million for the July 19 drawing to \$172.1 million for the July 22 drawing, according to Marie Kilbane, a spokeswoman for the Ohio Lottery Commission. And with all the attention on Tuesday's giant prize, lottery officials expect sales to climb to \$262.1 million for the drawing.

The additional ticket purchases mean that while 23% of all number combinations were covered for the July 22 drawing, about 33% will be covered for Tuesday's.

Sales likely will grow even larger if there again isn't a winner. Kilbane says the jackpot likely would top \$1 billion for Friday's drawing.

The last time someone beat the staggering odds and won the Mega Millions jackpot was April 15, when a Tennessee player matched all six numbers and snagged a \$20 million prize.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 51 of 65

Since then there have been 28 consecutive draws without a jackpot winner, allowing the prize to grow week after week.

Although someone theoretically could buy all the 302.5 million possible number combinations, in practice it would be nearly impossible and would likely be a financial flop.

That's because even after coming up with more than \$600 million to buy all those \$2 tickets, a team of people would need to somehow coordinate their request of each number combination and payment. Considering the hundreds of millions of options, it would be a staggering chore.

Even if someone accomplished that task, keep in mind that the advertised \$830 million prize is for the annuity option, paid annually over 30 years. Nearly everyone opts for cash, which for Tuesday's drawing would be \$487.9 million, of which about one-third would go toward federal taxes with possibly more for state taxes, depending on where the buyer lived.

After all that, there is a chance that some of the countless people who also plunk down a few bucks for a ticket could hit the winning numbers, meaning the potential jackpot would be divided in half or in thirds.

Winless streaks have gone longer in the past, with the record being a 36-roll run that ended Jan. 22, 2021, with a \$1.05 billion Mega Millions payout in Michigan. That was the third-largest prize ever won.

The biggest was a gargantuan \$1.586 Powerball jackpot won in 2016 by three players in California, Florida and Tennessee.

Mega Millions is played in 45 states as well as Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The game is overseen by state lottery officials.

Buzz Aldrin flight-to-moon jacket sells at auction for \$2.8M

NEW YORK (AP) — Buzz Aldrin's jacket worn on his historic first mission to the moon's surface in 1969 has been auctioned off to a bidder for nearly \$2.8 million.

The \$2,772,500 paid for the Apollo 11 Inflight Coverall Jacket is the highest for any American space-flown artifact sold at auction, according to Sotheby's, which handled the sale. The unidentified winning bidder, who participated by phone, outlasted several others in a bidding that spanned almost 10 minutes.

The jacket displays Aldrin's name tag on the left breast above the Apollo 11 mission emblem, and the American flag on the left shoulder. It is made of a fire-resistant material known as Beta cloth that was incorporated in spacesuits in response to the fire that killed three astronauts aboard Apollo 1 in 1967, according to Sotheby's.

Aldrin and Neil Armstrong became the first astronauts to walk on the moon on July 20, 1969.

New studies bolster theory coronavirus emerged from the wild

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Two new studies provide more evidence that the coronavirus pandemic originated in a Wuhan, China market where live animals were sold – further bolstering the theory that the virus emerged in the wild rather than escaping from a Chinese lab.

The research, published online Tuesday by the journal Science, shows that the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was likely the early epicenter of the scourge that has now killed nearly 6.4 million people around the world. Scientists conclude that the virus that causes COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, likely spilled from animals into people two separate times.

"All this evidence tells us the same thing: It points right to this particular market in the middle of Wuhan," said Kristian Andersen a professor in the Department of Immunology and Microbiology at Scripps Research and coauthor of one of the studies. "I was quite convinced of the lab leak myself until we dove into this very carefully and looked at it much closer."

In one study, which incorporated data collected by Chinese scientists, University of Arizona evolutionary biologist Michael Worobey and his colleagues used mapping tools to estimate the locations of more than 150 of the earliest reported COVID-19 cases from December 2019. They also mapped cases from January and February 2020 using data from a social media app that had created a channel for people with

COVID-19 to get help.

They asked, "Of all the locations that the early cases could have lived, where did they live? And it turned out when we were able to look at this, there was this extraordinary pattern where the highest density of cases was both extremely near to and very centered on this market," Worobey said at a press briefing. "Crucially, this applies both to all cases in December and also to cases with no known link to the market ... And this is an indication that the virus started spreading in people who worked at the market but then started to spread into the local community."

Andersen said they found case clusters inside the market, too, "and that clustering is very, very specifically in the parts of the market" where they now know people were selling wildlife, such as raccoon dogs, that are susceptible to infection with the coronavirus.

In the other study, scientists analyzed the genomic diversity of the virus inside and outside of China starting with the earliest sample genomes in December 2019 and extending through mid-February 2020. They found that two lineages – A and B – marked the pandemic's beginning in Wuhan. Study coauthor Joel Wertheim, a viral evolution expert at the University of California, San Diego, pointed out that lineage A is more genetically similar to bat coronaviruses, but lineage B appears to have begun spreading earlier in humans, particularly at the market.

"Now I realize it sounds like I just said that a once-in-a-generation event happened twice in short succession," Wertheim said. But certain conditions were in place — such as people and animals in close proximity and a virus that can spread from animals to people and from person to person. So "barriers to spillover have been lowered such that multiple introductions, we believe, should actually be expected," he said.

Many scientists believe the virus jumped from bats to humans, either directly or through another animal. But in June, the World Health Organization recommended a deeper probe into whether a lab accident may be to blame. Critics had said the WHO was too quick to dismiss the lab leak theory.

"Have we disproven the lab leak theory? No, we have not," Andersen said. "But I think what's really important here is there are possible scenarios and there are plausible scenarios and it's really important to understand that possible does not mean equally likely."

The pandemic's origins remain controversial. Some scientists believe a lab leak is more likely and others remain open to both possibilities. But Matthew Aliota, a researcher in the college of veterinary medicine at the University of Minnesota, said in his mind the pair of studies "kind of puts to rest, hopefully, the lab leak hypothesis."

"Both of these two studies really provide compelling evidence for the natural origin hypothesis," said Aliota, who wasn't involved in either study. Since sampling an animal that was at the market is impossible, "this is maybe as close to a smoking gun as you could get."

Body near Lake Mead swimming site 3rd to surface since May

By KEN RITTER Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Another body has surfaced at Lake Mead — this time in a swimming area where water levels have dropped as the Colorado River reservoir behind Hoover Dam recedes because of drought and climate change.

The National Park Service did not say in a statement how long officials think the corpse was submerged in the Boulder Beach area before it was found Monday by people who summoned park rangers.

Clark County Coroner Melanie Rouse said Tuesday it was partially encased in mud at the water line of the swimming area along the shore north of Hemenway Harbor marina.

The gender of the dead person was not immediately apparent, Rouse said, and it was too early to tell a time, cause and manner of death. Investigators will review missing persons records as part of the effort, Rouse said.

The corpse was the third found since May as the shoreline retreats at the shrinking reservoir between Nevada and Arizona east of Las Vegas. The lake surface has dropped more than 170 feet (52 meters) since the reservoir was full in 1983. It is now about 30% full.

The coroner said her office was continuing work to identify a man whose body was found May 1 in a

rusted barrel in the Hemenway Harbor area and a man whose bones were found May 7 in a newly surfaced sand bar near Callville Bay, more than 9 miles (14.5 kilometers) from the marina.

On July 6, the body of a 22-year-old Boulder City woman was found in the water near where she disappeared while riding a personal watercraft. Rouse said it may take several weeks to determine her cause of death.

The case of the body in the barrel was being investigated as a homicide after police said the man had been shot and his clothing dated to the mid-1970s to early 1980s.

The discoveries have prompted speculation about long-unsolved missing person and murder cases dating back decades — to organized crime and the early days of Las Vegas, which is just a 30-minute drive from the lake.

The drop in the lake level comes while a vast majority of peer-reviewed science says the world is warming, mainly because of rising levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Scientists say the U.S. West, including the Colorado River basin, has become warmer and drier in the past 30 years.

Man's 63-month prison term matches longest for Capitol riot

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

A man who attacked police officers with poles during the riot at the U.S. Capitol was sentenced on Tuesday to more than five years in prison, matching the longest term of imprisonment so far among hundreds of Capitol riot prosecutions.

Mark Ponder, a 56-year-old resident of Washington, D.C., said he "got caught up" in the chaos that erupted on Jan. 6, 2021, and "didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"I wasn't thinking that day," Ponder told U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan, asking her for mercy before she sentenced him to five years and three months in prison.

That was three months longer than the prison sentence requested by prosecutors. And it's the same sentence that Chutkan gave Robert Palmer, a Florida man who also pleaded guilty to assaulting police at the Capitol.

More than 200 other Capitol riot defendants have been sentenced so far. None received a longer prison sentence than Ponder or Palmer.

Chutkan said Ponder was "leading the charge" against police officers trying to hold off the mob that disrupted Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's electoral victory.

"This is not 'caught up,' Mr. Ponder," she said. "He was intent on attacking and injuring police officers. This was not a protest."

Chutkan has consistently taken a hard line in punishing Capitol rioters. She has handed down terms of imprisonment to all 13 riot defendants who have come before her, matching or exceeding the Justice Department's sentencing recommendation in every case, according to an Associated Press review of court records.

Prosecutors had recommended a five-year prison sentence for Ponder, who has been jailed since his arrest in March 2021.

In April, Ponder pleaded guilty to an assault charge punishable by a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. Federal sentencing guidelines called for a prison term ranging from nearly five years to just under six years, but Chutkan wasn't bound by those recommendations.

More than 100 police officers were injured during the riot.

Defense attorney Joseph Conte said Ponder was "caught up in the madness that was January 6." Conte asked for a sentence below the guidelines range.

Ponder swung a pole at a Capitol police officer on the Capitol's West Plaza, breaking it against the officer's shield. After retreating into the crowd, Ponder grabbed a sturdier pole colored in red, white, and blue stripes. He used it to assault two other officers, hitting one of them in the left shoulder, before police detained and handcuffed him.

Outnumbered officers released Ponder because they couldn't get a police vehicle to transport him. They

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 54 of 65

told him to leave the Capitol, but Ponder stayed and joined a mob of rioters clashing with police at a tunnel. Capitol Police Sgt. Aquilino Gonell, one of the officers assaulted by Ponder, said the force of Ponder's blow shattered his shield.

"It was horrific," Gonell said during Ponder's sentencing hearing. "That particular day will impact me for the rest of my life."

After his arrest, Ponder told FBI agents that he typically supports police but viewed the officers as "part of the problem" that day.

"At some point in time, the way this country is going, you gonna have to pick a side," he said, according to prosecutors.

Ponder attended the "Stop the Steal" rally on Jan. 6 to hear then-President Donald Trump's speech and to "peacefully protest the results of the election and the lack of attention to alleged voting irregularities," Conte wrote in a court filing.

"He did so with no intent to do anything but add his voice to the vocal protests over the injustice he perceived had happened in the election," the attorney added. "Unfortunately, he got caught up in the riotous atmosphere of the crowd and erroneously perceived the police as standing in the way of the crowd's desire to protest the election results."

Ponder has a substantial criminal record spanning three decades, including a 2008 conviction for bank robbery, according to prosecutors.

More than 840 people have been charged with federal crimes for their conduct at the Capitol on Jan. 6. Over 350 riot defendants have pleaded guilty or been convicted by a jury or a judge after trials.

More than 220 of them have been sentenced, including approximately 100 who received a term of imprisonment. Ponder is the 15th to be sentenced to a prison term exceeding one year.

The prison sentences for Ponder and Palmer may not be the lengthiest for much longer. Prosecutors are seeking a 15-year prison sentence for Guy Reffitt, a Texas man who was convicted of storming the Capitol with a holstered handgun. U.S. District Judge Dabney Friedrich is scheduled to sentence Reffitt on Monday.

EXPLAINER: How do we know when a recession has begun?

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — By one common definition, the U.S. economy is on the cusp of a recession. Yet that definition isn't the one that counts.

On Thursday, when the government estimates the gross domestic product for the April-June period, some economists think it may show that the economy shrank for a second straight quarter. That would meet a longstanding assumption for when a recession has begun.

But economists say that wouldn't mean that a recession had started. During those same six months when the economy might have contracted, businesses and other employers added a prodigious 2.7 million jobs — more than were gained in most entire years before the pandemic. Wages are also rising at a healthy pace, with many employers still struggling to attract and retain enough workers.

The job market's strength is a key reason why the Federal Reserve is expected to announce another hefty hike in its short-term interest rate on Wednesday, one day before the GDP report. Several Fed officials have cited the healthy job growth as evidence that the economy should be able to withstand higher rates and avoid a downturn. Many economists, though, are dubious of that assertion.

The Fed is also trying to combat raging inflation, which reached a 9.1% annual rate in June, the worst mark in nearly 41 years. Rapid price increases, particularly for such essentials as food, gas and rent, have eroded Americans' incomes and led to much gloomier views of the economy among consumers.

The definition of recession that is most widely accepted is the one determined by the blandly named National Bureau of Economic Research, a nonprofit group of economists whose Business Cycle Dating Committee defines a recession as "a significant decline in economic activity that is spread across the economy and lasts more than a few months." The committee assesses a wide range of factors before publicly declaring the death of an economic expansion and the birth of a recession — and it often does

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 55 of 65

so well after the fact.

So if we're not in a recession, what's going on with the economy, which is sending frustratingly mixed signals? Here are some answers to those and other questions:

IS THE ECONOMY SHRINKING — OR NOT?

It did in the first three months of the year, when GDP contracted 1.6% at an annual rate. Economists have forecast that on Thursday, the government will estimate that the economy managed to grow at an annual rate of just below 1% in the April-June quarter, according to data provider FactSet. If accurate, that forecast would indicate that the economy isn't technically in recession by any definition.

Even if growth does go negative for a second straight quarter, Fed officials and Biden administration economists point to a lesser-known measure called "gross domestic income."

GDP calculates the value of the nation's output of goods and services by adding up spending by consumers, businesses and governments. By contrast, GDI, as the name implies, seeks to measure the same thing by assessing incomes.

Over time, the two measures should track each other. But they often diverge in the short run. In the first quarter, GDI grew 1.8% — much better than the 1.6% decline in GDP.

As part of its judgment of whether an economy is in recession, the NBER considers an average of the two measures. In the first quarter, the average was 0.2%, suggesting that the economy expanded slightly.

WHAT ELSE DOES THE NBER MONITOR?

The NBER studies many other data points in determining recessions, including measures of income, employment, inflation-adjusted spending, retail sales and factory output. It puts greater weight on jobs and a gauge of inflation-adjusted income that excludes government support payments such as Social Security.

That gauge covers combined income from all workers, so it rises when the unemployed find a job or when existing workers receive a pay raise. The measure increased slightly in April and May after a flat reading in the first quarter of this year.

BUT DON'T A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK A RECESSION IS COMING?

Yes, because many people now feel more financially burdened.

With wage gains trailing inflation for most people, higher prices for such essentials as gas, food, and rent have eroded Americans' spending power,

On Monday, Walmart reported that higher gas and food costs have forced its shoppers to reduce their purchases of discretionary spending such as new clothing, a clear sign that consumer spending, a key driver of the economy, is weakening. The nation's largest retailer, Walmart reduced its profit outlook and said it will have to discount more items like furniture and electronics.

And the Fed's rate hikes have caused average mortgage rates to double from a year ago, to 5.5%, causing a sharp fall in home sales and construction.

Higher rates will also likely weigh on businesses' willingness to invest in new buildings, machinery and other equipment. If companies reduce spending and investment, they'll also start to slow hiring. Rising caution among companies about spending freely could lead eventually to layoffs. If the economy were to lose jobs and the public were to grow more fearful, consumers would further reduce spending.

The Fed's rapid rate hikes have raised the likelihood of recession in the next two years to nearly 50%, Goldman Sachs economists have said. And Bank of America economists now forecast a "mild" recession later this year.

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS OF AN IMPENDING RECESSION?

The clearest signal that a recession is under way, economists say, would be a steady rise in job losses and a surge in unemployment. In the past, an increase in the unemployment rate of three-tenths of a percentage point, on average over the previous three months, has meant that a recession will soon follow.

Many economists monitor the number of people who seek unemployment benefits each week, which

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 56 of 65

indicates whether layoffs are worsening. Last week, applications for jobless aid rose to 251,000, the highest level in eight months. While that is a potentially concerning sign, that is still a low level historically.

ANY OTHER SIGNALS TO WATCH FOR?

Many economists also monitor changes in the interest payments, or yields, on different bonds for a recession signal known as an "inverted yield curve." This occurs when the yield on the 10-year Treasury falls below the yield on a short-term Treasury, such as the 3-month T-bill. That is unusual. Normally, longer-term bonds pay investors a richer yield in exchange for tying up their money for a longer period.

Inverted yield curves generally mean that investors foresee a recession that will compel the Fed to slash rates. Inverted curves often predate recessions. Still, it can take 18 to 24 months for a downturn to arrive after the yield curve inverts.

For the past two weeks, the yield on the two-year Treasury has exceeded the 10-year yield, suggesting that markets expect a recession soon. Many analysts say, though, that comparing the 3-month yield to the 10-year has a better recession-forecasting track record. Those rates are not inverted now.

WILL THE FED KEEP RAISING RATES EVEN AS THE ECONOMY SLOWS?

The economy's flashing signals — slowing growth with strong hiring — have put the Fed in a tough spot. Jerome Powell is aiming for a "soft landing," in which the economy weakens enough to slow hiring and wage growth without causing a recession and brings inflation back to the Fed's 2% target.

But Powell has acknowledged that such an outcome has grown more difficult to achieve. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's COVID-19 lockdowns have driven up prices for energy food, and many manufactured parts in the U.S.

Powell has also indicated that if necessary, the Fed will keep raising rates even amid a weak economy if that's what's needed to tame inflation.

"Is there a risk that we would go too far?" Powell asked last month. "Certainly there's a risk, but I wouldn't agree that's the biggest risk to the economy. The biggest mistake to make...would be to fail to restore price stability."

US economy sending mixed signals: Here's what it all means

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. economy is caught in an awkward, painful place. A confusing one, too. Growth appears to be sputtering, home sales are tumbling and economists warn of a potential recession ahead. But consumers are still spending, businesses keep posting profits and the economy keeps adding hundreds of thousands of jobs each month.

In the midst of it all, prices have accelerated to four-decade highs, and the Federal Reserve is desperately trying to douse the inflationary flames with higher interest rates. That's making borrowing more expensive for households and businesses.

The Fed hopes to pull off the triple axel of central banking: Slow the economy just enough to curb inflation without causing a recession. Many economists doubt the Fed can manage that feat, a so-called soft landing.

Surging inflation is most often a side effect of a red-hot economy, not the current tepid pace of growth. Today's economic moment conjures dark memories of the 1970s, when scorching inflation co-existed, in a kind of toxic brew, with slow growth. It hatched an ugly new term: stagflation.

The United States isn't there yet. Though growth appears to be faltering, the job market still looks quite strong. And consumers, whose spending accounts for nearly 70% of economic output, are still spending, though at a slower pace.

So the Fed and economic forecasters are stuck in uncharted territory. They have no experience analyzing the economic damage from a global pandemic. The results so far have been humbling. They failed to anticipate the economy's blazing recovery from the 2020 recession — or the raging inflation it unleashed.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 57 of 65

Even after inflation accelerated in spring of last year, Fed Chair Jerome Powell and many other forecasters downplayed the price surge as merely a “transitory” consequence of supply bottlenecks that would fade soon.

It didn’t.

Now the central bank is playing catch-up. It’s raised its benchmark short-term interest rate three times since March. Last month, the Fed increased its rate by three-quarters of a percentage point, its biggest hike since 1994. The Fed’s policymaking committee is expected to announce another three-quarter-point hike Wednesday.

Economists now worry that the Fed, having underestimated inflation, will overreact and drive rates ever higher, imperiling the economy. They caution the Fed against tightening credit too aggressively.

“We don’t think a sledgehammer is necessary,” Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, said this week.

Here’s a look at the economic vital signs that are sending frustratingly mixed signals to policymakers, businesses and forecasters:

THE OVERALL ECONOMY

As measured by the nation’s gross domestic product — the broadest gauge of output — the economy has looked positively sickly so far this year. And steadily higher borrowing rates, engineered by the Fed, threaten to make things worse.

“Recession is likely,” said Vincent Reinhart, a former Fed economist who is now chief economist at Dreyfus and Mellon.

After growing at a 37-year high 5.7% last year, the economy shrank at a 1.6% annual pace from January through March. For the April-June quarter, forecasters surveyed by the data firm FactSet estimate that growth equaled a scant 0.95% annual rate from April through June. (The government will issue its first estimate of April-June growth on Thursday.)

Some economists foresee another economic contraction for the second quarter. If that happened, it would further escalate recession fears. One informal definition of recession is two straight quarters of declining GDP. Yet that definition isn’t the one that counts.

The most widely accepted authority is the National Bureau of Economic Research, whose Business Cycle Dating Committee assesses a wide range of factors before declaring the death of an economic expansion and the birth of a recession. It defines a recession as “a significant decline in economic activity that is spread across the economy and that lasts more than a few months.”

In any case, the economic drop in the January-March quarter looked worse than it actually was. It was caused by factors that don’t mirror the economy’s underlying health: A widening trade deficit, reflecting consumers’ robust appetite for imports, shaved 3.2 percentage points off first-quarter growth. A post-holiday-season drop in company inventories subtracted an additional 0.4 percentage point.

Consumer spending, measured at a modest 1.8% annual rate from January through March, is still growing. Americans are losing confidence, though: Their assessment of economic conditions six months from now has reached its lowest point since 2013 in June, according to the Conference Board, a research group.

INFLATION

What’s agitating consumers is no secret: They’re reeling from painful prices at gasoline stations, grocery stores and auto dealerships.

The Labor Department’s consumer price index skyrocketed 9.1% in June from a year earlier, a pace not seen since 1981. The price of gasoline has jumped 61% over the past year, fares 34%, eggs 33%.

And despite widespread pay raises, prices are surging faster than wages. In June, average hourly earnings slid 3.6% from a year earlier adjusting for inflation, the 15th straight monthly drop from a year earlier.

And on Monday, Walmart, the nation’s largest retailer, lowered its profit outlook, saying that higher gas and food prices were forcing shoppers to spend less on many discretionary items, like new clothing.

The price spikes have been ignited by a combination of brisk consumer demand and global shortages of

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 58 of 65

factory parts, food, energy and labor. And so the Fed is now aggressively raising rates.

"There is a risk of overdoing it," warned Ellen Gaske, an economist at PGIM Fixed Income. "Because inflation is so bad right now, they are focused on the here and now of each monthly CPI report. The latest one showed no letup."

JOBS

Despite inflation, rate hikes and declining consumer confidence, one thing has remained solid: The job market, the most crucial pillar of the economy. Employers added a record 6.7 million jobs last year. And so far this year, they're adding an average of 457,000 more each month.

The unemployment rate, at 3.6% for four straight months, is near a half-century low. Employers have posted at least 11 million job openings for six consecutive months. The government says there are two job openings, on average, for every unemployed American, the highest such ratio on record.

Job security and the opportunity to advance to better positions are providing the confidence and financial wherewithal for Americans to spend and keep the job machine churning.

Still, it's unclear how long a hiring boom will last. In keeping up their spending in the face of high inflation, Americans have been drawing down the heavy savings they built up during the pandemic. That won't last indefinitely. And the Fed's rate hikes mean it's increasingly expensive to buy a house, a car or a major appliance on credit.

The weekly number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits, a proxy for layoffs and a bellwether for where the job market may be headed, reached 251,000 in the most recent reading. That's still quite low by historic standards, but it's the most since November.

MANUFACTURING

COVID-19 kept millions of Americans cooped up at home. But it didn't stop them from spending. Unable to go out to restaurants, bars and movie theaters, people instead loaded up on factory-made goods — appliances, furniture, exercise equipment.

Factories have enjoyed 25 consecutive months of expansion, according to the Institute for Supply Management's manufacturing index. Customer demand has been strong, though supply chain bottlenecks have made it hard for factories to fill orders.

Now, the factory boom is showing signs of strain. The ISM's index dropped last month to its lowest level in two years. New orders declined. Factory hiring dropped for a second straight month.

A key factor is that the Fed's rate hikes are heightening borrowing costs and the value of the U.S. dollar against other currencies, a move that makes American goods more expensive overseas.

"We doubt the outlook for manufacturing will improve any time soon," Andrew Hunter, senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics, wrote this month. "Weakening global growth and the drag from the stronger dollar look set to keep U.S. manufacturers under pressure over the coming months."

HOUSING

No sector of the U.S. economy is more sensitive to interest rate increases than housing. And the Fed's hikes and the prospect of steadily tighter credit are taking a toll.

Mortgage rates have risen along with the Fed's benchmark rate. The average rate on a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage hit 5.54% last week, nearly double its level a year earlier.

The government reported Tuesday that sales of new single-family homes fell 8% last month from May and 17% from June 2021. And sales of previously occupied homes dropped in June for a fifth straight month. They're down more than 14% from June 2021.

In response to the rapidly slowing home market, builders are cutting back. Construction of single-family homes dropped last month to its lowest level since March 2020, at the height of pandemic lockdowns.

Judge upholds Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene's eligibility

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 59 of 65

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A judge in Atlanta has rejected an appeal by a group of voters and affirmed the Georgia secretary of state's decision that U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene is eligible to run for reelection.

The five voters from Greene's district sought to have her removed from the ballot, saying that she played a significant role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol that disrupted Congress' certification of Biden's presidential victory. That was a violation of a rarely invoked provision in the 14th Amendment against insurrection or rebellion, they argued.

Represented by Free Speech for People, a national election and campaign finance reform group, the voters filed a complaint with Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger in March.

Greene was questioned extensively during a daylong hearing in April before Georgia Administrative Law Judge Charles Beaudrot, who ruled on May 6 that Greene should not be disqualified. Raffensperger immediately affirmed the decision.

The voters appealed in Fulton County Superior Court, where Chief Judge Christopher Brasher affirmed Raffensperger's adoption on Monday.

The voters said Beaudrot made four legal errors, but Brasher found that Beaudrot acted properly.

Free Speech for People said in a statement that Brasher ruled "with minimal legal analysis," and that it has not decided whether to appeal to the Georgia Supreme Court.

The challenge to Greene's eligibility was based on a section of the 14th Amendment that says no one can serve in Congress "who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress ... to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same."

Ratified shortly after the Civil War, it was meant in part to keep representatives who had fought for the Confederacy from returning to Congress.

Beaudrot found that the voters hadn't produced sufficient evidence that Greene's actions before, during and after the Capitol siege encouraged and helped facilitate a violent attack on the U.S. government and democracy in violation of the U.S. Constitution.

Greene won about 70% of the vote in the May Republican primary, easily defeating five challengers who tried to unseat her. She faces Democrat Marcus Flowers in November's general election.

Civilian medic commands respect on Ukraine war's front lines

By INNA VARENYTSIA and NARIMAN EL-MOFTY Associated Press

DONETSK REGION, Ukraine (AP) — All over the Donetsk region, close to the front lines of Russia's war in Ukraine, Nataliia Voronkova turns up at Ukrainian field positions and hospitals wearing high heels. A colleague bought her running shoes, but Voronkova gave them away.

A helmet and a protective vest aren't part of her uniform, either, as she distributes first-aid kits and other equipment to Ukrainian soldiers and paramedics. She is a civilian, the founder of a medical non-profit, and looking like one is something no one can take from her, even in a combat zone.

"I am myself, and I will never give up my heels for anything," Voronkova said of the red strappy sandals, beige pumps and other elegant footwear she typically pairs with full skirts and midi dresses as she makes her dangerous rounds to secret military bases and mobile medical units.

The former adviser to the Ukrainian Defense Ministry with graduate degrees in banking and finance is a familiar sight to officers and troops in eastern Ukraine. For eight years after Moscow seized Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Voronkova dedicated her life to providing tactical medical training and equipment for Ukrainian forces fighting pro-Russia separatists.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February has created exponentially more need for her organization, Volunteers Hundred Dobrovolia, and new challenges.

Working on their own, Voronkova and her assistant, Yevhen Veselov, drive a van filled with donated supplies - everything from night vision goggles and battlefield basics like tourniquets and medical staplers to the advanced equipment needed for brain surgery — swiftly through checkpoints, irrespective of curfews. Servicemen recognize Voronkova and with one look, let them through.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 60 of 65

The smell of her sweet cherry cigarillos fills the air when she gets out of her van to smoke one with her manicured red nails. Although she manages 20 people and lives in Kyiv, Voronkova has been in eastern Ukraine since the Russians focused their attention there in April, and she insists on delivering first-aid kits to the front line herself.

"A woman is like the neck of the head. She moves everything," she said.

Voronkova grew up loving medicine, but her family did not want her to pursue it. They were bankers and thought she should take the same career path. The separatist conflict that started in 2014 persuaded her to study combat medicine, and she eventually received certification as an instructor.

From 2015 until Russia invaded Ukraine, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry tasked her with finding solutions to problems encountered by army units in the Donbas. Now, she uses her own teaching techniques to help the units protect themselves and their comrades in battle.

"I still remind my mother that when I was in 10th grade, I had a box filled with (over-the-counter) pills, and all my friends at school knew I had medicine for everything," she said. "Unfortunately, I could not pursue my dream. But today I am implementing it by giving aid."

Martial law has swelled the ranks of Ukraine's defenders, but many of the people who have joined the military during the war entering its sixth month do not have combat experience or the supplies they need.

"It feels like 2014. We need first-aid kits and uniforms for the territorial defense. I think it was created with hardly any time to allocate a budget for them. Therefore, they need support from volunteers," Voronkova says.

As she brought boxes of scalpels, electrocoagulation devices, emergency catheters and other supplies to a hospital in the city of Kurakhove, the roar of outgoing rockets and incoming shelling did not make her flinch.

In her tactical medical class, Voronkova commands a room filled with soldiers, paramedics, and technicians spanning a range of ages. She grabs their attention with her loud voice, humor and experience. Air raid sirens blasted as she taught a class in Dobropillia, but she went on with her lesson in an underground bomb shelter.

The training she provides has become more crucial during the long battle for Ukraine's Donbas region, where Russian forces have both carried out relentless air strikes and shelling but also engaged in street-by-street fighting as they try to seize control of villages, cities and towns.

Voronkova thinks the opportunity for Ukraine's government to work out a peaceful solution with Moscow has long passed and "at the moment, the price of victory is our lives."

During her travels around Donetsk, in Bakhmut, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Toretsk and other places Russia hopes to capture, she meets and gives advice to everyone from high-ranking officers to paramedics. The male officers listen, and the young medics open up to her about their experiences.

Voronkova stands for hours, patiently listening and giving guidance.

"Every evening when I go to sleep, I ask myself, 'What good thing have I done today?' she said. "I want people to understand that they come into this world not only to eat, drink, and have fun every day, but to do something good. No day should be wasted."

Pressure on Senate GOP after same-sex marriage passes House

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate unexpectedly launched a new push Wednesday to protect same-sex marriage in federal law after a surprising number of Republicans helped pass landmark legislation in the House. Some GOP senators are already signaling support.

The legislation started as an election-season political effort to confront the new Supreme Court majority after the court overturned abortion access in *Roe v. Wade*, raising concerns that other rights were at risk. But suddenly it has a shot at becoming law. Pressure is mounting on Republicans to drop their longstanding opposition and join in a bipartisan moment for gay rights.

"This legislation was so important," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said as he opened the chamber Wednesday.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 61 of 65

The Democratic leader marveled over the House's 267-157 tally, with 47 Republicans — almost one-fifth of the GOP lawmakers — voting for the bill late Tuesday.

"I want to bring this bill to the floor," Schumer said, "and we're working to get the necessary Senate Republican support to ensure it would pass."

Political odds are still long for the legislation, the Respect for Marriage Act, which would enshrine same-sex and interracial marriages as protected under federal law. Conservatives, including House GOP leaders, largely opposed the bill, and the vast majority of Republicans voted against it.

But in a sign of shifting political attitudes and a need for an election-year win, some Republicans are signaling there may be an opening. Few Republicans spoke directly against gay marriage during Tuesday's floor debate in the House. And Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell was notably silent when asked about the bill, saying he would take a look if it comes to the Senate.

"I'm going to delay announcing anything on that issue," McConnell said, adding he would wait to see if Schumer brings it forward.

President Joe Biden wants Congress to send him the bill to sign as soon as possible.

"This is something that's personal to the president," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters traveling with the president.

Biden is "a proud champion of the right for people to marry whom they love and is grateful to see bipartisan support for that right," she said. "He believes it is non-negotiable and that the Senate should act swiftly to get this to the president's desk. He wants to sign it, so we need this legislation and we urge Congress to move as quickly as possible."

So far, the legislation has just two Senate Republican co-sponsors, Susan Collins of Maine and Rob Portman of Ohio. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Thom Tillis of North Carolina are among others closely watched for possible support.

In all 10 Republican senators would need to join with all Democrats to reach the 60 vote threshold to overcome a GOP filibuster.

"We're seeing progress on this, and I'll take progress," Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., the bill's chief sponsor, told reporters at the Capitol.

The No. 2 Republican, Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, was doubtful Tuesday, calling the proposed legislation little more than a political message.

Social issues including same-sex marriage and abortion have sprinted to the top of the congressional agenda this summer in reaction to the Supreme Court's action overturning *Roe v. Wade*, a stunning ruling that ended the nearly 50-year-old constitutional right to abortion access. It set off alarms that other rights conservatives have targeted could be next.

While Justice Samuel Alito, writing for the majority, insisted the *Roe v. Wade* ruling pertained only to abortion access, it demonstrated the new conservative muscle with three Trump-era justices tipping the court's balance. A concurring opinion by Justice Clarence Thomas, who has gained stature in the new majority, raised questions about gay marriage and other rights.

"We take Justice Thomas — and the extremist movement behind him — at their word," said Speaker Nancy Pelosi during the House debate. "This is what they intend to do."

Both Pelosi and Schumer criticized Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who said over the weekend that the Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell vs. Hodges* decision upholding gay marriage was "clearly wrong."

The Respect for Marriage Act was rushed to the House floor in an election year with polling showing a majority of Americans favor preserving rights to marry, regardless of sex, gender, race or ethnicity, a long-building shift in modern mores toward inclusion.

A Gallup poll released in June of 2021 showed broad and increasing support for same-sex marriage, with 70% of U.S. adults saying they think such unions should be recognized by law. The poll showed majority support among both Democrats (83%) and Republicans (55%).

Approval of interracial marriage in the U.S. hit a six-decade high at 94% in September, according to Gallup.

McConnell, the Republican leader, is eager to regain control of the Senate, now evenly split 50-50, and his views on whether his party should support or oppose the same-sex marriage protections will almost

certainly be viewed through that political lens.

Unlike the abortion issue, where views are deeply held with little room for Congress to find common ground, attitudes toward same-sex continue to evolve and shift among lawmakers.

Incumbent Republican senators seeking to win reelection and GOP candidates running for office may want a chance to support the gay marriage issue that is popular with many voters. Strong Republican-led opposition could be seen as detrimental to the party's candidates in swing states that McConnell needs to win to regain control.

One Republican hopeful, Joe O'Dea, who is challenging incumbent Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet in Colorado, said he was glad to see the same-sex marriage bill pass in the House.

"You've got a lot of politicians in both political parties who spend way too much time trying to tell people how to live their lives. That's just not me. I live my life. You live yours," O'Dea said. "Let's get on with solving the huge challenges facing the American people."

Still, some vocal leaders in the Republican Party, including Cruz and Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, both potential presidential candidates, have indicated likely opposition to the legislation.

The Respect for Marriage Act would repeal the Clinton-era Defense of Marriage Act, which put into federal law the definition of marriage as a heterosexual union between a man and woman. That 1996 law was largely overshadowed by subsequent court rulings, including Obergefell vs. Hodges in 2015, legalizing gay marriage nationwide.

Russian expert at Griner's trial discusses medical cannabis

By JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

KHIMKI, Russia (AP) — The drug trial of American basketball star Brittney Griner in a Russian court focused Tuesday on testimony that cannabis, while illegal in Russia, is regarded in other countries as having legitimate medicinal use.

Griner acknowledged in court earlier this month that she was carrying vape canisters containing cannabis oil when she was arrested in February at a Moscow airport. But she contends she had no criminal intent and that the canisters ended up in her luggage inadvertently because of hasty packing.

"We are not arguing that Brittney took it here as a medicine. We are still saying that she involuntarily brought it here because she was in a rush," defense attorney Alexander Boykov said after the hearing.

Another member of Griner's defense team previously submitted a U.S. doctor's letter recommending the basketball player use medical cannabis to treat pain. During Tuesday's court session, a Russian neuropsychologist testified about worldwide use of medicinal cannabis.

"The Russian public has to know, and the Russian court in the first place has to know, that it was not used for recreational purposes in the United States. It was prescribed by a doctor," lawyer Boykov said.

A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson said last week that the legalization of cannabis for medical and recreational use in parts of the U.S. had no bearing on what happens in Russia.

Griner, a two-time Olympic gold medalist, pleaded guilty to drug possession charges at the second hearing of her trial, which started July 1. She faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted of transporting drugs. The medical testimony and Griner's admission that she had the canisters were aimed at earning her a mild sentence.

"We have a lot of mitigating factors. So we do hope that the court will take it into consideration. And the courts in Russia, in fact, have very broad discretion with regard to the sentence," said Maria Blagovolina, another of Griner's lawyers.

Five court sessions have taken place so far, some lasting only about an hour. After Tuesday's session of about 90 minutes, the case was adjourned until Wednesday afternoon.

It is unclear how long the trial will last, but a court has authorized Griner's detention until Dec. 20.

The slow-moving trial and Griner's five months of detention have raised strong criticism among teammates and supporters in the United States, which has formally declared her to be "wrongfully detained," a designation sharply rejected by Russian officials.

Elizabeth Rood, the U.S. Embassy's charge d'affaires, attended Tuesday's court session. Griner "confirms

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 63 of 65

that she is doing OK and as well as can be expected under these circumstances," Rood told reporters.

ABC's "Good Morning America" aired a producer's brief interview with Griner in which she wished her wife, Cherelle, "good luck on the bar exam."

When asked whether she had any complaints, Griner replied: "No, no complaints. Just waiting patiently." She displayed photos of her wife, friends and teammates.

Griner was arrested in February amid high U.S.-Moscow tensions ahead of Russia sending troops into Ukraine later that month. Some supporters contend she is being held in Russia as a pawn, possibly for a prisoner swap. American soccer notable Megan Rapinoe last week said "she's being held as a political prisoner, obviously."

The Russian Foreign Ministry last week lashed out at the U.S. contention that Griner was being wrongfully detained and said Russian laws should be respected.

"If a U.S. citizen was taken in connection with the fact that she was smuggling drugs, and she does not deny this, then this should be commensurate with our Russian local laws, and not with those adopted in San Francisco, New York and Washington," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

"If drugs are legalized in the United States, in a number of states, and this is done for a long time and now the whole country will become drug-addicted, this does not mean that all other countries are following the same path," she added.

Russian media have speculated that Griner could be exchanged for prominent Russian arms trader Viktor Bout, who is imprisoned in the United States, and that Paul Whelan, an American imprisoned in Russia for espionage, may also figure in an exchange.

U.S. officials have not commented on the prospects for such a trade. Russian officials have said no exchange could be discussed until the conclusion of the legal proceedings against Griner.

Previous trial sessions have included character-witness testimony from the director and captain of the Russian team that Griner played for in the off-season, and written testimony such as the American doctor's letter saying he had authorized her to use cannabis for pain treatment.

Joni Mitchell, 78, graces stage after nearly 2 decades away

NEWPORT, RI (AP) — Surprise! Joni Mitchell is back onstage.

The folk legend performed her first full-length concert on Sunday at the Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island, The Boston Globe reported. Mitchell has contended with health complications since suffering an aneurysm in 2015, and her last full show was in late 2002, according to reports.

Seated in a wingback chair and wearing a blue beret and sunglasses, Mitchell joined festival headliner Brandi Carlile and a bevy of other artists, including Wynonna Judd, Allison Russell and Marcus Mumford. It was Mitchell's first Newport festival performance since 1969.

This was, Carlile explained, a recreation of the "Joni Jam" musical gatherings that have brought famous friends like Elton John to Mitchell's Los Angeles home in recent years.

And Mitchell wasn't there to just to sing. Halfway through the 13-song set, she played an electric guitar solo, which was her first time playing guitar in public since her aneurysm, Carlile said.

The ensemble played Mitchell's most familiar songs ("Circle Game," "Big Yellow Taxi") and a few of her favorites ("Love Potion No. 9," "Why Do Fools Fall in Love").

After their rendition of "Both Sides Now," Carlile was fighting back tears. Addressing the audience, she asked: "Did the world just stop?"

Jack Harlow, Lil Nas X, Kendrick Lamar top MTV VMA nominees

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Jack Harlow, Lil Nas X and Kendrick Lamar are top contenders with seven nominations at the 2022 MTV Video Music Awards.

MTV announced Tuesday that Lil Nas X and Harlow earned multiple nominations for their collaborative hit "Industry Baby," which is nominated for video of the year. Both performers along with Drake, Bad Bunny,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 64 of 65

Ed Sheeran, Harry Styles and Lizzo will compete for artist of the year.

Lamar, who is nominated for the first time since 2018, has two songs "family ties" and "N95" that will vie for best cinematography. The rapper was also nominated for best hip-hop, direction, visual effects, editing and video for good.

Styles and Doja Cat received the second-most nominations with six. Sheeran, Billie Eilish, Drake, Dua Lipa, Taylor Swift and The Weeknd each pulled in five.

Madonna, who is the most awarded artist in MTV history with 20 wins, becomes the only artist to receive a nomination in each of the VMAs five decades. She earned her 69th nomination for her 14th studio album "Madame X."

The awards will have 26 first-time nominees including Baby Keem with four along with Kacey Musgraves, GAYLE and Måneskin – who each have two nominations.

The VMAs will take place Aug. 28 at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey. Fan-voting begins Tuesday across 22 categories at vote.mtv.com.

Today in History: July 27, Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, July 27, the 208th day of 2022. There are 157 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On July 27, 1953, the Korean War armistice was signed at Panmunjom, ending three years of fighting.

On this date:

In 1789, President George Washington signed a measure establishing the Department of Foreign Affairs, forerunner of the Department of State.

In 1866, Cyrus W. Field finished laying out the first successful underwater telegraph cable between North America and Europe (a previous cable in 1858 burned out after only a few weeks' use).

In 1909, during the first official test of the U.S. Army's first airplane, Orville Wright flew himself and a passenger, Lt. Frank Lahm, above Fort Myer, Virginia, for one hour and 12 minutes.

In 1940, Billboard magazine published its first "music popularity chart" listing best-selling retail records (in first place was "I'll Never Smile Again" recorded by Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra, with featured vocalist Frank Sinatra).

In 1960, Vice President Richard M. Nixon was nominated for president on the first ballot at the Republican National Convention in Chicago.

In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to assess the causes of urban rioting, the same day Black militant H. Rap Brown told a press conference in Washington that violence was "as American as cherry pie."

In 1974, the House Judiciary Committee voted 27-11 to adopt the first of three articles of impeachment against President Richard Nixon, charging he had personally engaged in a course of conduct designed to obstruct justice in the Watergate case.

In 1980, on day 267 of the Iranian hostage crisis, the deposed Shah of Iran died at a military hospital outside Cairo, Egypt, at age 60.

In 1981, 6-year-old Adam Walsh was abducted from a department store in Hollywood, Fla., and was later murdered. (His father, John Walsh, became a well-known crime victims' advocate.)

In 1996, terror struck the Atlanta Olympics as a pipe bomb exploded at Centennial Olympic Park, directly killing one person and injuring 111. (Anti-government extremist Eric Rudolph later pleaded guilty to the bombing, exonerating security guard Richard Jewell, who had been wrongly suspected.)

In 2015, the Boy Scouts of America ended its blanket ban on gay adult leaders while allowing church-sponsored Scout units to maintain the exclusion for religious reasons.

In 2020, the world's biggest COVID-19 vaccine study began with the first of 30,000 planned volunteers helping to test shots created by the National Institutes of Health and Moderna Inc.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, July 27, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 020 ~ 65 of 65

Ten years ago: Britain opened its Olympic Games in a celebration of Old England and new, even cheekily featuring a stunt double for Queen Elizabeth II parachuting with James Bond into Olympic Stadium.

Five years ago: New White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci, in an interview published by *The New Yorker*, attacked chief of staff Reince Priebus and other White House officials in sometimes profane terms. (A day later, President Donald Trump announced that Priebus was being replaced by John Kelly. Scaramucci himself was ousted on July 31.)

One year ago: American gymnast Simone Biles pulled out of the gymnastics team competition at the Tokyo Olympics to focus on her mental well-being, saying she realized following a shaky vault that she wasn't in the right headspace to compete; she was the latest high-profile athlete to discuss mental health struggles. Seventeen-year-old Lydia Jacoby of Alaska won the women's 100-meter breaststroke, upsetting American teammate and defending champion Lilly King. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that even vaccinated people return to wearing masks indoors in parts of the U.S. where the delta variant of the coronavirus was fueling infection surges. Robert Aaron Long, accused in eight killings at Atlanta-area massage businesses, pleaded guilty to murder in four of the deaths and was sentenced to life in prison. Actor Bob Odenkirk collapsed on the set of the TV drama "Better Call Saul" in New Mexico; he later announced that he'd had a small heart attack.

Today's Birthdays: TV producer Norman Lear is 100. Actor John Pleshette is 80. Actor-director Betty Thomas is 75. Olympic gold medal figure skater Peggy Fleming is 74. Singer Maureen McGovern is 73. Rock musician Tris Imboden (formerly with Chicago) is 71. Actor Roxanne Hart is 68. Comedian-actor-writer Carol Leifer is 66. Comedian Bill Engvall is 65. Jazz singer Karrin Allyson is 60. Country singer Stacy Dean Campbell is 55. Rock singer Juliana Hatfield is 55. Actor Julian McMahon is 54. Actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau (NIH'-koh-lye KAH'-stur WAHL'-dah) is 52. Comedian Maya Rudolph is 50. Rock musician Abe Cunningham is 49. Singer-songwriter Pete Yorn is 48. Former MLB All-Star Alex Rodriguez is 47. Actor Seamus Dever is 46. Actor Martha Madison is 45. Actor Jonathan Rhys (rees) Meyers is 45. Actor/comedian Heidi Gardner is 39. Actor Blair Redford is 39. Actor Taylor Schilling is 38. MLB All-Star pitcher Max Scherzer is 38. Singer Cheyenne Kimball is 32. Golfer Jordan Spieth (speeth) is 29. Actor Alyvia Alyn Lind is 15.