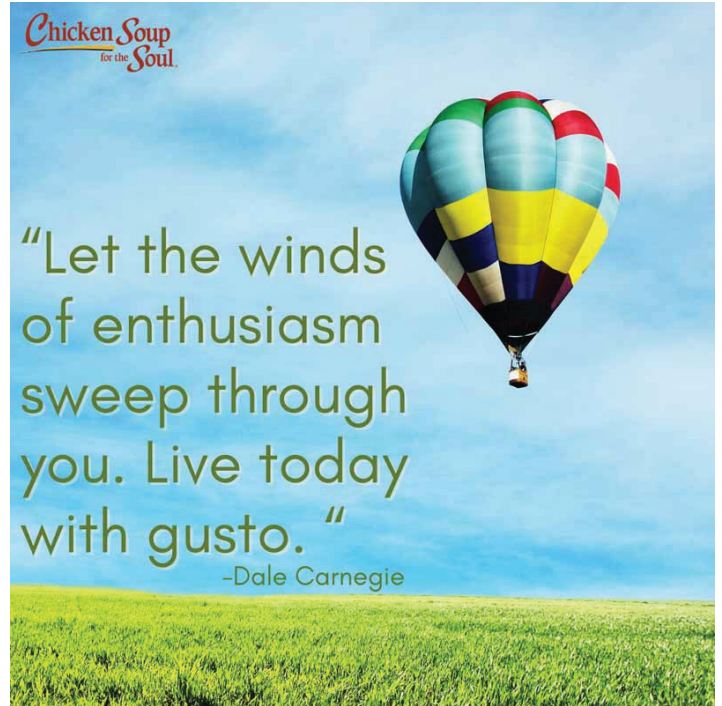


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“Let the winds of enthusiasm sweep through you. Live today with gusto.”

-Dale Carnegie



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 FERNEY, 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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Lady A Cancels Tour...

New Announcement Coming Soon for South Dakota State Fair

HURON, S.D. – Lady A has cancelled the remainder of their 2022 tour, including their show at the South Dakota State Fair scheduled for Sunday, September 4. In light of this recent announcement, South Dakota State Fair officials are working diligently with their talent agency to find a new headliner.

Lady A released:

We have decided to postpone our Request Line Tour until next year. Being on the road with our fans is our greatest joy, so it was a hard but important decision to make.

We are a band, but more importantly...we're family. We're proud to say that Charles has embarked on a journey to sobriety. So, right now in order to be the healthiest, strongest and most creative band we can be, Lady A will take the time with the support of our families and team of professionals to walk through this together. It's early on this road, but we are determined to do what will best set us up for many more years together. We're grateful for your patience.

This update is coming in real time, but in the coming days, your point of purchase will be in touch with new ticket information. We're looking forward to making 2023 our best year yet!

With love, Lady A

"Our goal is for everyone to have an amazing State Fair experience," says Fair Manager Peggy Besch. "We know concerts are a big part of fair week, but we have no control over a situation such as this. While disappointed, we are working with industry leaders and look forward to replacing Lady A with another great concert. We ask that everyone bear with us as we work through our options and hope to make an announcement very soon."

For now, all ticket holders should keep their tickets and wait for new announcements coming soon.

The most recent, up-to-the-minute information will be made available on the South Dakota State Fair social channels and website.

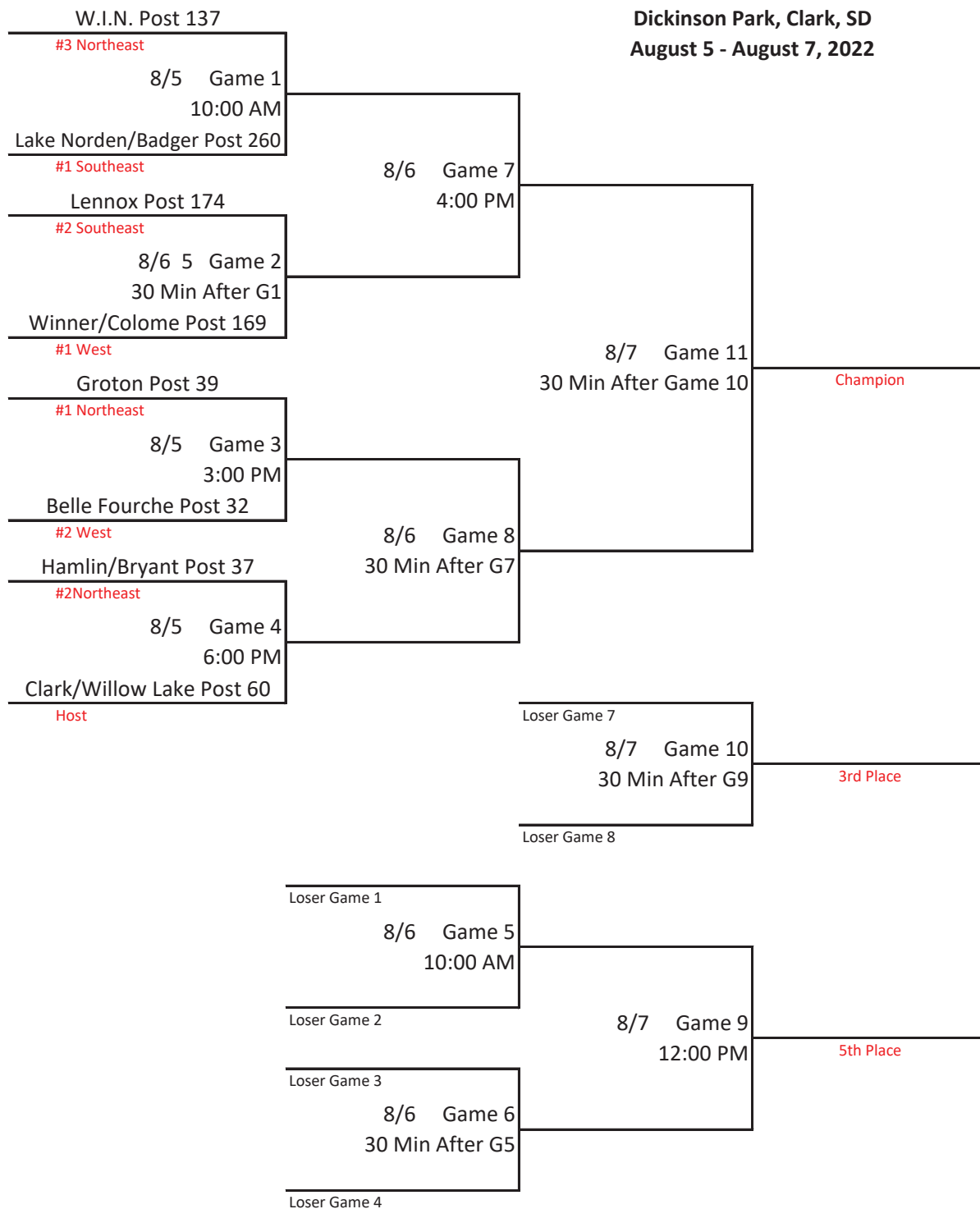
The 2022 South Dakota State Fair runs Thursday, September 1, through Monday, September 5. Channel Seeds preview night will be Wednesday, August 31. For information about the South Dakota State Fair, contact the Fair office at 800-529-0900, visit www.sdstatefair.com or find them on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

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2022 South Dakota American Legion State Class "B" Jr. Baseball Tournament

South Dakota American Legion
State Class "B" Jr. Baseball Tournament
Dickinson Park, Clark, SD
August 5 - August 7, 2022



Tournament MVP:

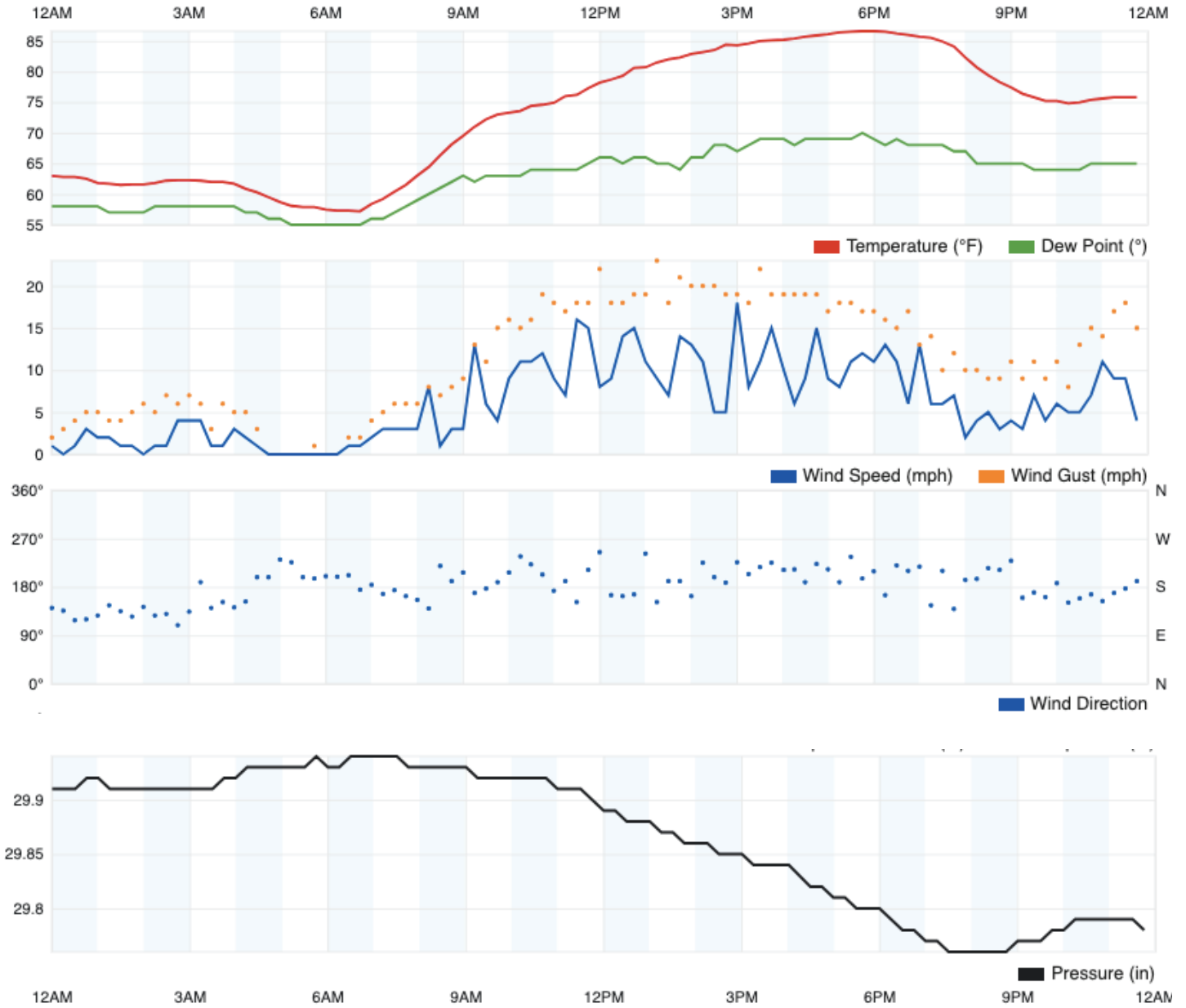
Big Stick Award:

Porter T. Talcott Sportsmanship Award:

Groton Daily Independent

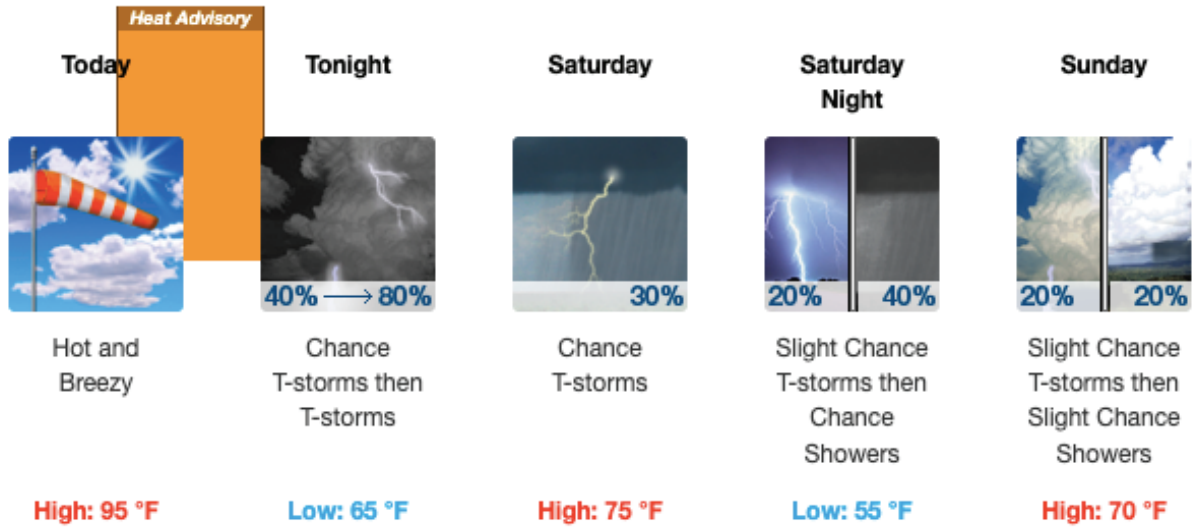
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

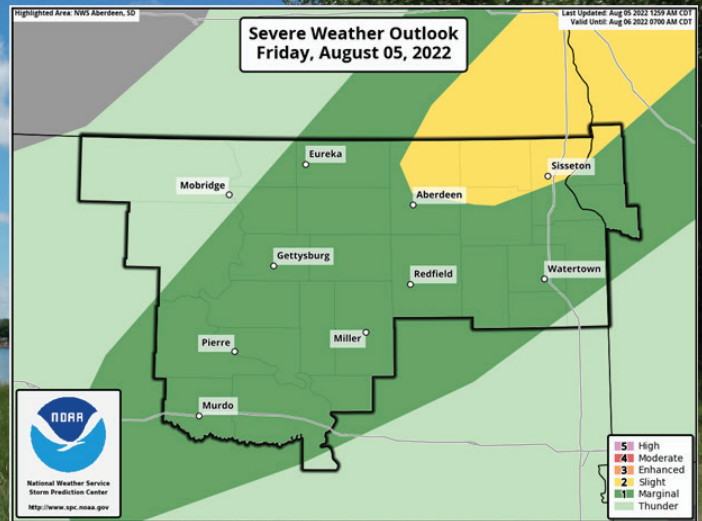
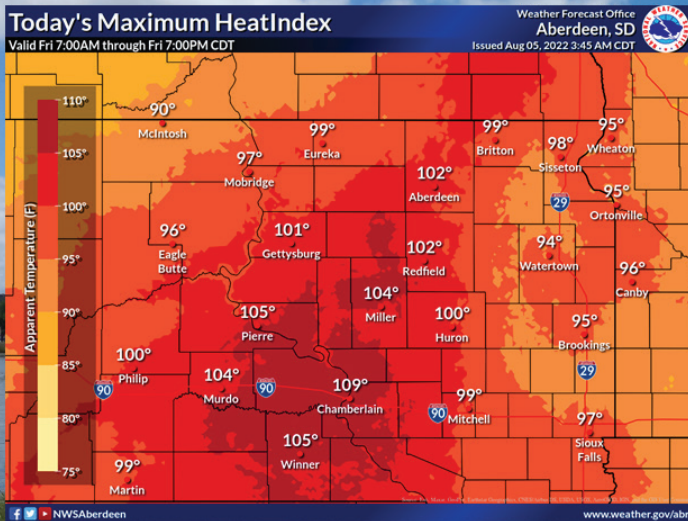


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Hot Temperatures Persist Today Severe Thunderstorm chances increase by Late Afternoon-Evening



National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota

Updated: 8/5/2022 3:59 AM Central

The area will see one more day of temperatures in the 90s to low 100s for highs today. Combined with high humidity values, maximum heat indices will top out in the upper 90s east to the lower 100s across the James Valley and points west. A heat advisory remains in place for those areas during the afternoon hours. A strong cold front will sweep southward into the area this afternoon into tonight. Scattered thunderstorms are expected to form by late this afternoon and continue into the evening. Some of these storms will be severe and capable of producing strong winds, hail and locally heavy rainfall.

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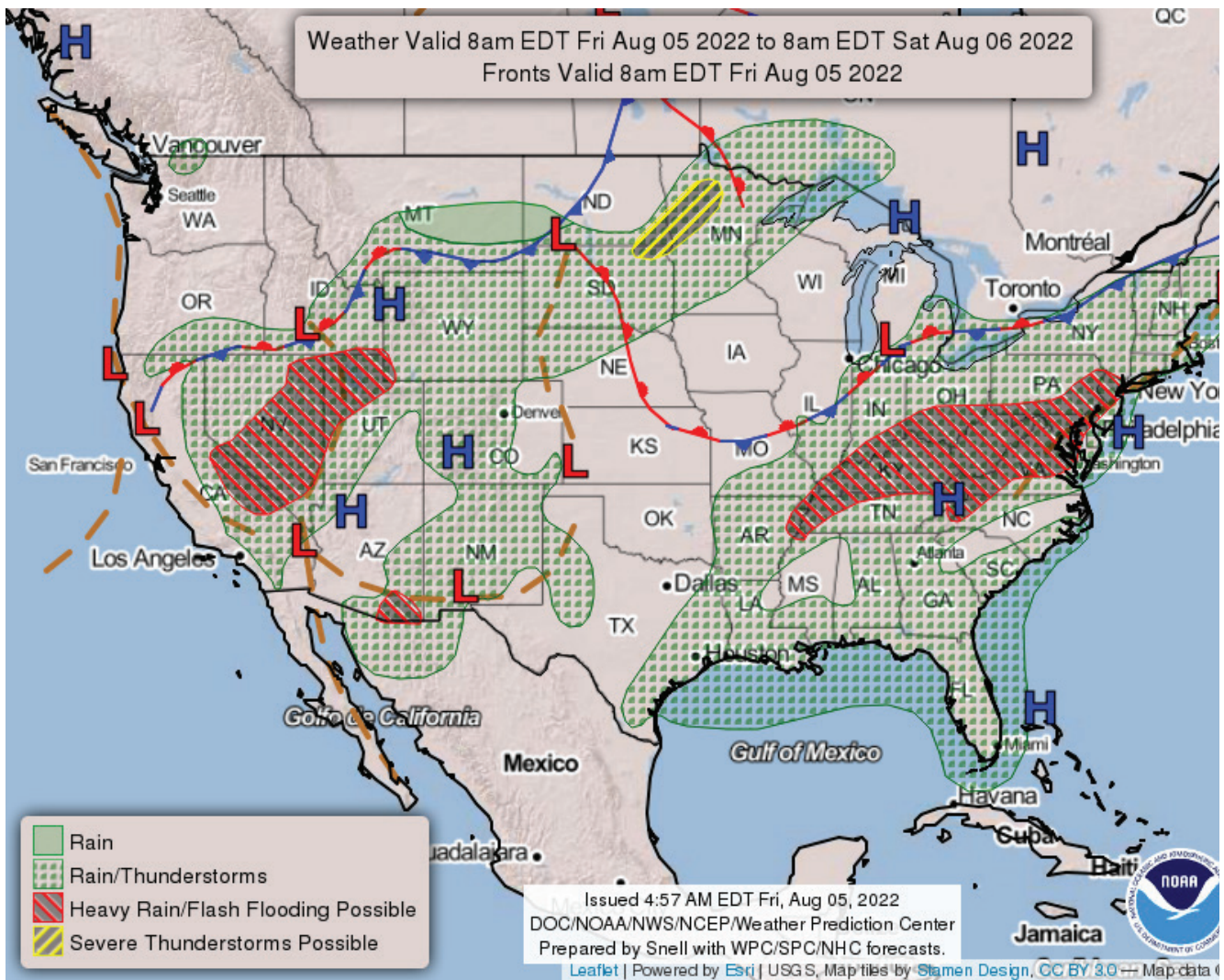
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 87 °F at 6:08 PM
Low Temp: 57 °F at 6:38 AM
Wind: 23 mph at 1:07 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 14 hours, 36 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 107 in 1941
Record Low: 41 in 1994
Average High: 85°F
Average Low: 59°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 0.37
Precip to date in Aug.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 14.47
Precip Year to Date: 14.54
Sunset Tonight: 8:56:47 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:21:10 AM



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Today in Weather History

August 5, 1987: Six tornadoes touched down in central South Dakota. Five of these tornadoes touched down in Lyman County, including three which did damage near Kennebec within 25 minutes of each other. One of the tornadoes destroyed three farms, downing outbuildings, power lines, granaries, and killing cattle.

August 5, 2000: A wet microburst with winds estimated at 120 mph caused substantial damage in and around Mitchell. Apartments and several mobile homes were destroyed, vehicles were overturned, and other damage occurred to buildings and vehicles. Widespread tree and power line damage also occurred. Ten people were injured, although the majority of the injuries were minor. The damage path was approximately a mile and a half long and a mile wide, extending over the southwest part of Mitchell.

1843 - A spectacular cloudburst near Philadelphia turned the small creeks and streams entering the Delaware River into raging torrents. As much as sixteen inches of rain fell in just three hours. Flooding destroyed thirty-two county bridges, and caused nineteen deaths. It is believed that several small tornadoes accompanied the torrential rains, one of which upset and sank more than thirty barges on the Schuylkill River. (David Ludlum)

1875: Several tornadoes moved across northern and central Illinois. One of the stronger tornadoes touched down in Warren and Knox County where it destroyed 25 homes and killed two people. Another in a series of tornadoes touched down near Knoxville and moved east into northern Peoria County. This estimated F4 tornado injured 40 people and was described by eyewitnesses as looking like a "monstrous haystack."

1961 - The temperature at Ice Harbor Dam, WA, soared to 118 degrees to equal the state record established at Wahluke on the 24th of July in 1928. The afternoon high of 111 degrees at Havre, MT, was an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Severe thunderstorms raked eastern South Dakota. The thunderstorms spawned half a dozen tornadoes, produced softball size hail at Bowdle, and produced wind gusts to 90 mph south of Watertown. Hot weather continued in eastern Texas. Afternoon highs of 100 degrees at Houston and 106 degrees at Waco equalled records for the date. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather from Indiana and Lower Michigan to Pennsylvania and New York State during the day. Thunderstorms in Michigan produced wind gusts to 80 mph at Ashley, Hastings and Lennon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in Oklahoma, and from Iowa to the Upper Ohio Valley, with 216 reports of large hail or damaging winds between early Saturday morning and early Sunday morning. Thunderstorms moving across Iowa around sunrise produced extremely high winds which caused ten million dollars damage to crops in Carroll and Greene Counties. Thunderstorm winds at Jefferson IA reached 102 mph. Afternoon thunderstorms produced tennis ball size hail at Bay Mills, WI. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)



Our Daily Bread.

Love God. Love Others.

We Need Jesus' Help

Scripture: John 15:1-8 (English Standard Version)

I Am the True Vine

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Insight By: Arthur Jackson

One of the distinctly beautiful features of the gospel of John is its seven "I am" sayings. These statements serve to identify Jesus with Yahweh—the eternal, ever-present, covenant-keeping God who revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14: "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" " Jesus' declaration in John 15:1, 5—"I am the [true] vine"—is the seventh "I am" statement (see also 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6) . On the eve of His death, Jesus reminded His disciples of how essential it was to remain connected to Him. Through Christ's words we understand that "loving obedience" is required to abide in Him: "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love" (15:10).

Comment By: John Blase

The day finally came—the day I realized my father wasn't indestructible. As a boy, I knew his strength and determination. But in my early adult years, he injured his back, and I realized that my father was mortal after all. I stayed with my parents to help my dad to the bathroom, assisting him in dressing, even guiding a glass of water to his mouth—it was humbling to him. He made some initial attempts to accomplish small tasks, but admitted, "I can't do anything without your help." He eventually recovered to his strong self, but that experience taught both of us an important lesson. We need each other.

And while we need each other, we need Jesus even more. In John 15, the imagery of the vine and the branches continues to be one we cling to. Yet one of the other phrases, while comforting, can also strike at our self-reliance. The thought that can easily creep into our minds is, I don't need help. Jesus is clear—"apart from me you can do nothing" (v. 5). Christ is talking about bearing fruit, like "love, joy, peace" (Galatians 5:22), those core features of a disciple. To bear fruit is the life Jesus calls us to, and our total reliance on Him yields a fruitful life, a life lived to the Father's glory (John 15:8).

Reflect and Prayer: The prayer "I can do nothing apart from You" is simple and powerful. What situations are you facing today that need prayer? How can you rest assured that God is with you and loves you?

Father, I can do nothing apart from You.

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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)

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News from the Associated Press

Will abortion be on more state ballots after Kansas vote?

By JOHN HANNA and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Abortion opponents were shocked and abortion rights advocates energized by a decisive statewide vote in heavily Republican Kansas this week in favor of protecting abortion access, yet it's not likely to translate into new abortion votes across the U.S. in the November election.

Four other states — California, Kentucky, Michigan and Vermont — could have votes in November on abortion access, and a fifth, Montana, is voting on a measure that would require abortion providers to give lifesaving treatment to a fetus that is born alive after a botched abortion. Opponents argue federal law already offers those protections. No other abortion initiatives are likely to make a state's November ballot.

The Kansas vote was the first test of public feeling about abortion rights since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in late June, and it upended political assumptions.

Voters rejected a proposed amendment to the Kansas Constitution declaring that it grants no right to abortion. That would have opened the door for the GOP-controlled Legislature to further restrict or ban abortion and nullify a 2019 decision by the Kansas Supreme Court that access is a "fundamental" right under the state's Bill of Rights.

HOW WAS THE OUTCOME OF THE KANSAS VOTE A SURPRISE?

Abortion rights supporters prevailed by nearly 18 percentage points in the Republican state with deep ties to the anti-abortion movement. They took the outcome as confirmation that preserving access to abortion is popular.

Officials with several national abortion rights groups argued that the vote shows it's a mistake for Democrats in red states like Kansas to avoid talking about abortion and that support for abortion rights can drive voters to the polls. In Kentucky, donations to the abortion rights cause poured in immediately, said Tamarra Wieder, state director for Planned Parenthood Alliance Advocates.

The election in Kansas coincided with the state's primary. Over the previous 10 years, turnout for a mid-term primary has averaged less than 26%, with Republicans casting twice as many ballots as Democrats.

But turnout for this election topped 45% — almost 915,000 voters — approaching levels normally seen during a fall election for governor. More than half of registered Democrats and Republicans cast ballots. At least 28% of registered unaffiliated voters, who couldn't vote on anything else on ballots on Tuesday, voted on the proposed amendment.

The outcome also suggested that a sizeable number of Republicans voted against the proposed amendment.

"Three things in Kansas are really important to note: One, the depth of the victory; two, the amount of increased voter turnout, and three, that it happened in an off-year midterm election," said Kristen Rowe-Finkbeiner, CEO of MomsRising, an advocacy group that supports abortion rights.

Abortion opponents argued that the vote was a temporary setback and vowed to keep electing anti-abortion candidates.

CAN EITHER SIDE RUSH TO PUT A QUESTION TO VOTERS IN MY STATE IN NOVEMBER?

Likely not. For one thing, deadlines to do it have passed in the half of U.S. states that allow voters to put questions on the ballot without going through the Legislature.

In Ohio, the Democratic nominee for governor, Nan Whaley, has called for putting an abortion rights measure on the ballot as early as next year, and efforts have started in Colorado and South Dakota for 2024. In Iowa, GOP lawmakers have taken the first step toward putting an anti-abortion measure on the ballot in 2024.

In Kansas, anti-abortion lawmakers anticipated voters approving their measure.

BUT THERE ARE VOTES IN SOME STATES IN NOVEMBER?

Yes, but those efforts were all underway before the Kansas vote.

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Legislators in California and Vermont put measures to protect abortion rights on the ballot, and Kentucky lawmakers have a measure on the ballot similar to the one that failed in Kansas.

In Michigan, abortion rights advocates believe they have turned in enough signatures to put an abortion rights amendment to the state constitution on the November ballot, but the signatures must still be counted.

The Montana referendum also was initiated by legislators.

IN STATES ALLOWING IT, WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR VOTERS TO GET A QUESTION ON THE BALLOT?

They have to circulate petitions and collect tens of thousands of signatures from registered voters; the number is often a percentage of the vote in a previous election. Some states set requirements to get signatures from across the state, not just in one or two metropolitan areas.

In Nebraska, abortion opponents are focused on gaining one more seat in its one-house Legislature for the two-thirds majority necessary to overcome filibusters and pass an abortion ban. A voter initiative there must gather nearly 88,000 signatures from at least 5% of the registered voters in 38 of its 93 counties, something known as the "two-fifths rule."

In Missouri, initiatives can take a year to get to the ballot, and in Oklahoma, the average length has been more than a year — 64 weeks — over the past 10 years, according to the secretary of state's office.

"From start to finish, if you could get it done in nine months, you'd really be moving fast," said Amber England, a political strategist in Oklahoma who has worked to get questions on the ballot in recent years.

The Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, which advises progressive groups on campaigning for ballot questions, advises that the work should take three years, including building community relationships before even circulating signatures.

SO IT'S A MATTER OF GETTING ENOUGH VALID SIGNATURES IN THE RIGHT PLACES?

Not necessarily. There can be other hurdles, particularly if public officials who are players in the process oppose an initiative.

In Missouri in 2019, opponents of a law banning most abortions after eight weeks of pregnancy sought to get a proposed repeal on the ballot, but Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft, a Republican who opposes abortion, took enough time in vetting the language that supporters had only two weeks to gather signatures. While the initiative's backers sued — and won — the final ruling from the state Supreme Court didn't come until early this year.

"It was a significant victory," said Mallory Schwarz, executive director of Pro-Choice Missouri. "But we didn't get a do-over."

With recession anxiety growing, hiring may be cooling off

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The American job market has defied raging inflation, rising interest rates, growing recession fears. Month after month, U.S. employers just kept adding hundreds of thousands of workers, at a pace that regularly outpaced the expectations of most economists.

Yet cracks have begun to appear in one of the nation's pillars of economic strength. Job openings are down, and the number of Americans signing up for unemployment benefits is up.

"When we look across the labor market, we are seeing broad indications of cracks beginning to show," said Sarah House, senior economist at Wells Fargo. "Overall conditions aren't nearly as strong as what we were seeing three to six months ago."

The Labor Department on Friday will report how many jobs were created in July and whether the super-low U.S. unemployment rate has begun to tick higher.

Forecasters, on average, expect the economy to have picked up another 250,000 jobs last month, according to a survey by the data firm FactSet. That would be a solid number in normal times but would mark a big deceleration for 2022: Employers have been hiring an average 457,000 workers a month so far this year.

The unemployment rate is expected to remain at 3.6% — just off a 50-year low — for the fifth con-

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secutive month.

There are, of course, political implications in the numbers being released Friday: Rising prices and the risk of recession are likely to weigh on voters in November's midterm elections, potentially making it tougher for President Joe Biden's Democrats to maintain control of Congress.

The economic backdrop is troubling: Gross domestic product — the broadest measure of economic output — fell in both the first and second quarters; consecutive GDP drops is one definition of a recession. And inflation is roaring at a 40-year high.

The resiliency of the current labor market, especially the low jobless rate — is the biggest reason most economists don't believe a downturn has started yet, though they increasingly fear that one is on the way. History isn't entirely reassuring: The unemployment rate was even lower — 3.5% — when an 11-month recession began in December 1969.

Recession is not an American problem alone.

In the United Kingdom, the Bank of England on Thursday projected that the world's fifth-largest economy would slide into recession by the end of the year.

Russia's war in Ukraine has darkened the outlook across Europe. The conflict has made energy supplies scarce and driven prices higher. European countries are bracing for the possibility that Moscow will keep reducing — and perhaps completely cut off — flows of natural gas, used to power factories, generate electricity and keep homes warm in winter.

If Europeans can't store enough gas for the cold months, rationing may be required by industry.

Economies have been on a wild ride since COVID-19 hit in early 2020.

The pandemic brought economic life to a near standstill as companies shut down and consumers stayed home. In March and April 2020, American employers slashed a staggering 22 million jobs and the economy plunged into a deep, two-month recession.

But massive government aid — and the Federal Reserve's decision to slash interest rates and pour money into financial markets — fueled a surprisingly quick recovery. Caught off guard by the strength of the rebound, factories, shops, ports and freight yards were overwhelmed with orders and scrambled to bring back the workers they furloughed when COVID hit.

The result has been shortages of workers and supplies, delayed shipments -- and rising prices. In the United States, inflation has been rising steadily for more than a year. In June, consumer prices jumped 9.1% from a year earlier — the biggest increase since 1981.

The Fed underestimated inflation's resurgence, thinking prices were rising because of temporary supply chain bottlenecks. It has since acknowledged that the current spate of inflation is not, as it was once referred to, "transitory."

Now the central bank is responding aggressively. It has raised its benchmark short-term interest rate four times this year, and more rate hikes are ahead.

Higher borrowing costs are taking a toll. Rising mortgage rates, for instance, have cooled a red-hot housing market. Sales of previously occupied homes dropped in June for the fifth straight month.

Real estate companies — including lending firm loanDepot and online housing broker Redfin — have begun laying off workers.

The labor market is showing other signs of wobbliness.

The Labor Department reported Tuesday that employers posted 10.7 million job openings in June — a healthy number but the lowest since September.

And the four-week average number of Americans signing up for unemployment benefits — a proxy for layoffs that smooths out week-to-week swings — rose last week to the highest level since November, though the numbers may have been exaggerated by seasonal factors.

Friday's jobs report comes at a critical moment for President Biden, who has maintained that the economy is merely slowing down rather than heading into a recession. Inflation has dogged public support for Biden, yet the administration has stressed that the 3.6% unemployment rate and solid job gains are signs of a healthy economy.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the administration expects the pace of hiring to fall further in the coming months because the unemployment rate is already near historic lows and fewer potential workers are available.

A slower pace of hiring and reduced levels of wage growth could also suggest that inflationary pressures are easing, but it has the White House attempting to convince the American public that less growth is a positive at a moment when Republican lawmakers are saying a recession has already started; they cite the drop in GDP over the first half of the year.

"We're expecting it to be closer to 150,000 jobs per month," Jean-Pierre said at Thursday's briefing. "This kind of job growth is consistent with the lower level of unemployment numbers that we've been seeing."

Economist House at Wells Fargo expects employers to keep adding jobs for a few months. But rising interest rates, she said, will gradually choke off economic growth.

"We are actually looking for outright declines in hiring come the first quarter, maybe second quarter of next year," she said. "As monetary policy continues to tighten, that's going to have an effect on overall business conditions and therefore demand for workers."

"Our expectation is that the U.S. economy will slip into recession, probably at the start of the year."

In Baghdad's Sadr City, cleric's support underpins protests

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Khalil Ibrahim's four sons are among thousands of followers of an influential Shiite cleric staging a sit-in outside Iraq's parliament after storming the building last week in a stunning move that threw the country into a new era of political instability.

Ibrahim is behind them all the way, he says — as are practically all his neighbors in Sadr City, the huge Baghdad district of millions of largely impoverished Shiites that is the heart of support for the cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr.

Every house within the district's concrete jungle has members participating in the sit-in, the 70-year-old Ibrahim told The Associated Press on Thursday. "This time we know there will be change, we are sure of it," he said.

Al-Sadr derives his political weight largely from their seemingly unending support. His word has spurred meticulously organized mass protests at various times in the past, bringing Baghdad to a halt and disrupting the political process. Many in Sadr City proclaim their devotion to al-Sadr, dismissing allegations of corruption against his movement.

They are drawn by his religious rhetoric and the promise of long-sought change and recognition for a community that is among Iraq's most destitute.

Most in Sadr City complain of inadequate basic services, including electricity in the scorching summer heat — temperatures soared above 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit) Thursday. The majority who spoke to the AP did not finish school, and those who did say they can't find work.

Prompted by protest calls by al-Sadr's party, they overran parliament on Saturday, before pulling back to the sit-in outside the building. Their gathering is preventing al-Sadr's Iranian-backed political rivals from forging ahead with government formation. Al-Sadr, whose party won the largest number of seats in the last election, had been demanding a majority government that would have squeezed out his rivals.

The standoff extends an unprecedented political impasse, 10 months since the elections. On Friday, hundreds of thousands heeded al-Sadr's call yet again, gathering for a mass prayer in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone.

The cleric elicits a powerful combination of religion, in particular by evoking the sacrifices of Imam Hussein, a revered figure in Shiite Islam. He also taps into Sadr City's long history as an epicenter of mass social demonstration where sentiments of oppression and revolution run deep.

This history dates back to the district's founding soon after the 1958 overthrow of the monarchy by Abdel Karim Qassim.

Called Revolution City back then, Qassim built settlements for migrants from southern Iraq, many of

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whom were violently dispossessed of land and suffered immense poverty. The area's five original sectors would grow over the following decades to 100 sectors, with 2.5 million residents.

However, promises to develop the neighborhood never came to fruition throughout Iraq's turbulent modern history and it fell into neglect, creating an urban underclass segregated from the rest of Baghdad society.

Under Saddam Hussein, it became a center for Shiite resistance. After the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, it was renamed Sadr City after al-Sadr's father.

In a speech Wednesday, al-Sadr instructed his followers to carry on with the sit-in and called for early elections, the dissolution of parliament and amendments to the constitution.

In the Ibrahim household, the demands are simpler. They want to own a house and find work. Ibrahim's sons only have irregular day laborer jobs. His eldest is 23, and none went past primary school.

The entire family — 12 persons in all — live in a house where the rent takes up most their incomes, even though Ibrahim worked his entire life as a guard outside the Education Ministry.

Hamida, Ibrahim's wife, desperately wants to own a house of their own. "We filled out applications for government housing, we filled out applications for jobs, but nothing worked," she said.

As she spoke, the electricity cut out. "There it goes again," she sighed.

More recently, al-Sadr's support, which extends to parts of southern Iraq, has shown signs of eroding. Though the party was the biggest vote-getter in October's elections, its total votes were under a million, less than in previous elections.

The party has been part of multiple governments over the years, yet Sadr City has seen little improvement. Despite his portrayal as a hero the dispossessed, his party has a vast network of civil servant appointees across Iraq's state institutions, ready to do its bidding. Contractors doing business with the ministries under his control have complained of harassment and threats from his party members.

Critics accuse the cleric of using his followers as pawns by evoking the legacy of his father, Mohamed Sadeq al-Sadr a highly respected Shiite religious figure killed by Saddam's regime in the 1990s.

In Sadr City, his supporters are quick to defend him, saying his political opponents have obstructed his agenda.

Many said his calls to protest gave them purpose beyond the monotony of their poverty-stricken lives. The protest call is disseminated from Sadr's party offices down to tribal leaders, who pass it on to their members.

Many protesters who stormed the parliament last Saturday said it was their first glimpse of the halls of power, where they are seldom welcome.

"I saw the big buildings, the beautiful rooms, and I thought 'How can this exist in the same city where I am struggling?'" said Mohammed Alaa, a grocer in Sadr City. "Aren't we human also?"

Portraits of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, hang outside almost every door in Sadr City. Ashura, next Monday, commemorates his killing, and Iraqis typically march in the thousands to mark the day in the holy city of Karbala, south of Baghdad.

Al-Sadr's messaging is suffused with references to Hussein's sacrifice and calls to rise up against oppression. In Saturday's speech, al-Sadr said he was against bloodshed, but added that "reform comes only through sacrifice," pointing to the example of the imam.

The comparison resonates among his followers. A portrait of Imam Hussein glitters in Ibrahim's modest living room.

"Imam Hussein called for reform and revolution, and now our leaders are also," Ibrahim said. "Of course, some can ignore that, but we can't."

The AP Interview: US aid chief counters food crisis, Russia

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Samantha Power won fame as a human rights advocate and was picked by President Joe Biden to lead the agency that distributes billions of dollars in U.S. aid abroad, including providing

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more food assistance than anyone else in the world. But since Russia invaded Ukraine, that job includes a new task with a Cold War feel — countering Russia's messaging abroad.

As administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Power is dealing now with a global food crisis, brought on by local conflicts, the pandemic's economic upheaval, and drought and the other extremes typical of climate change. As the Biden administration spells out often, the problems have all been compounded by Russia invading Ukraine, deepening food shortages and raising prices everywhere.

That set up an hearts-and-minds competition reminiscent of the days of the Soviet Union last month, when Power visited desperate families and struggling farmers in Horn of Africa nations. She watched relief workers give emergency food to children, always among the first to die in food crises, and announced new food aid.

But unexpectedly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov trailed her to Africa days later, visiting other capitals with a different message meant to shore up his country's partnerships in Africa.

It was U.S. and international sanctions on Russia over its six-month invasion of Ukraine that were to blame for cutting off vital grain supplies from the world market, Lavrov claimed. He dismissed "the so-called food crisis" on the continent being hit hardest.

In fact, a Russian blockade has kept Ukraine's grain from reaching the world. The international sanctions on Russia exempt agricultural products and fertilizer.

"What we're not going to do, any of us in the administration, is just allow the Russian Federation, which is still saying it's not at war in Ukraine, to blame the latest spike in food and fertilizer prices on sanctions and on the United States," Power, back in her office in Washington, told The Associated Press.

"People, especially when they're facing a crisis of this enormity, they really do know the difference about ... whether you're providing emergency humanitarian assistance ... or whether you're at a podium trying to make it a new Cold War," Power said.

"For Mr. Lavrov to have traveled to Africa just after I did, there's almost nothing tangible in the wake of that visit that the countries he visited have obtained from him, other than the misinformation and lies," Power said.

Even African officials whose governments refused to join in formal U.N. condemnation earlier this year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine tell of calling Russian leaders privately to urge Russia to let Ukraine's grain out of the ports, she said.

A former journalist, Power won the Pulitzer in 2003 for "A Problem from Hell," a book on genocide that has fueled debates in government and among academics on the wisdom and morality of intervening in atrocities abroad ever since. She served as U.S. ambassador to the U.N. under President Barack Obama, before joining the Biden administration.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, creating new food and energy shortfalls at a time when record numbers of people around the world were already hungry, much of Power's focus has been on the food crisis. After an earlier decade of success slicing away at the numbers of people going without food, the estimated number of people around the world going hungry rose to 828 million this year, 150 million just since the pandemic, Power said, with many in acute need.

Even in countries outside areas where aid organizations warn of famine, high food prices are adding to political unrest, as in the overthrow of Sri Lanka's government this summer. "Most analysts would be very surprised if the Sri Lankan government were the last to fall," Power noted.

"The cascading political effects and the instability that stems from economic pain and people's need, the human need, to hold authorities accountable for what is a terrifying inability to look out for the needs of your loved ones — that is a motivator if there ever is one" to protest, Power said.

"This, I can't say it more starkly, is the worst food crisis of our lifetimes," Power said.

There have been some hopeful signs in recent weeks, she pointed out — Russia allowing Ukraine to send its first ship of grain in months out of a Russian-blockaded port, and an easing of food and fuel prices.

But in the East Africa states hardest hit — Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia — four rainy seasons in a row failed, withering grain in the field and killing hundreds of million of livestock that were the only support for the region's herders. "They don't have a Plan B," she said.

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A woman farmer in Kenya told her of recoiling at the high price of fertilizer, and realizing she could only plant half as much food for the next season, a warning of even deeper hunger coming.

But donor assistance for Africa's current hunger crisis is running at less than half of that for the last major one, in 2016, Power said. With no sign of an end to the war in Ukraine or to the food crisis, wealthier countries tell Power they gave much of their relief money to Ukraine and are otherwise tapped out.

Tellingly, a GoFundMe-run account that Power announced in mid-July for ordinary people to help out in the global food crisis showed just \$2,367 in donations on Friday.

Power and other U.S. officials increasingly urge China, in particular, to give more relief. The Chinese Embassy in Washington, asked for comment, said China had given \$130 million to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

"That's not a talking point," Power said of the request to China. "That's a sincere hope."

Blinken: China military drills are 'significant escalation'

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Friday that China's military exercises aimed at Taiwan, including missiles fired into Japan's exclusive economic zone, represent a "significant escalation" and that he has urged Beijing to back down.

China launched the drills following a visit by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan that infuriated Beijing, which claims the self-governed island as its own territory.

Blinken told reporters on the sidelines of a meeting with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Cambodia, however, that Pelosi's visit was peaceful and did not represent a change in American policy toward Taiwan, accusing China of using it as a "pretext to increase provocative military activity in and around the Taiwan Strait."

He said the situation had led to a "vigorous communication" during East Asia Summit meetings in Phnom Penh in which both he and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi took part along with the ASEAN nations, Russia and others.

"I reiterated the points that we made publicly as well as directly to Chinese counterparts in recent days, again, about the fact that they should not use the visit as a pretext for war, escalation, for provocative actions, that there is no possible justification for what they've done and urge them to cease these actions," he said.

Blinken did not sit down one-on-one with Wang but said he had spoken with the Chinese foreign minister already about the possibility of a Pelosi visit to Taiwan before it had taken place during meetings in Bali, and had made the U.S. position clear.

China on Friday announced unspecified sanctions on Pelosi for her visit. A Chinese Foreign Ministry statement said she had disregarded China's concerns and resolute opposition to her trip.

Pelosi received a euphoric welcome as the first U.S. House speaker, and highest ranking U.S. official, to visit Taiwan in more than 25 years.

China opposes any engagement by Taiwanese officials with foreign governments, and has accused the U.S. of breaking the status quo with the Pelosi visit. The U.S. insists there has been no change to its "one-China" position of recognizing the government in Beijing, while allowing for informal relations and defense ties with Taipei.

Despite the aggressive Chinese reaction to the visit, Blinken said the U.S. would also not change its "commitment to the security of our allies in the region," and that the Defense Department had ordered the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier group "to remain on station in the general area to monitor the situation."

"We will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows," he said. "We'll continue to conduct standard air and maritime transits through the Taiwan Strait, consistent with our long-standing approach to working with allies and partners to uphold freedom of navigation and overflight."

As the East Asia Summit opened, Wang patted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the shoulder

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as he entered the room and gave the already-seated Lavrov a quick wave before taking his own seat. Lavrov waved back in response.

Blinken, who entered the room last, did not even glance at Lavrov as he took his own seat about a half dozen chairs away, or at Wang who was seated farther down the same table as Lavrov.

Ahead of the Phnom Penh talks, the U.S. State Department indicated Blinken had no plans to meet one-on-one with either man during the course of the meetings.

Following the meetings, Lavrov told reporters there had been a lot of "fiery statements" about the aftermath of the Pelosi visit.

"There have been rather sharp statements from our Chinese partners, who we support," he told reporters. "And there have been responses from the U.S. and Japan that it's not China's business and that the declared policy of supporting the one-China principle doesn't mean one has to ask Beijing for permission to visit Taiwan. Surely, it's a weird logic."

The talks came a day after WNBA star Brittney Griner was convicted of drug possession and sentenced to nine years in prison by Russia in a politically charged case amid antagonisms over the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Blinken said the conviction and sentence "compounds the injustice that has been done to her."

"It puts a spotlight on our very significant concern with Russia's legal system and the Russian government's use of wrongful detentions to advance its own agenda using individuals as political pawns," he said.

Blinken has suggested the possibility of a prisoner swap for Griner and another American jailed in Russia, Paul Whelan, but Lavrov told reporters that such a deal could only be decided upon by Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden.

"We're ready to discuss this topic, but to discuss it within the channel that was agreed on by presidents Putin and Biden," Lavrov said on the sidelines of the ASEAN meeting.

On Thursday, China canceled a foreign ministers' meeting with Japan to protest a statement from the Group of Seven industrialized nations that said there was no justification for Beijing's military exercises, which virtually encircle Taiwan.

"Japan, together with other member of the G-7 and the EU, made an irresponsible statement accusing China and confounding right and wrong," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said in Beijing.

When Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa began to speak Friday at the East Asia Summit, both Lavrov and Wang walked out of the room, according to a diplomat in the room who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss the private session.

In the wake of the Chinese missile launches into Japan's economic zone, Blinken said the U.S. stands in "strong solidarity" with Japan following the "dangerous actions China has taken."

Meta trims election misinformation efforts as midterms loom

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facebook owner Meta is quietly curtailing some of the safeguards designed to thwart voting misinformation or foreign interference in U.S. elections as the November midterm vote approaches.

It's a sharp departure from the social media giant's multibillion-dollar efforts to enhance the accuracy of posts about U.S. elections and regain trust from lawmakers and the public after their outrage over learning the company had exploited people's data and allowed falsehoods to overrun its site during the 2016 campaign.

The pivot is raising alarm about Meta's priorities and about how some might exploit the world's most popular social media platforms to spread misleading claims, launch fake accounts and rile up partisan extremists.

"They're not talking about it," said former Facebook policy director Katie Harbath, now the CEO of the tech and policy firm Anchor Change. "Best case scenario: They're still doing a lot behind the scenes. Worst

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case scenario: They pull back, and we don't know how that's going to manifest itself for the midterms on the platforms."

Since last year, Meta has shut down an examination into how falsehoods are amplified in political ads on Facebook by indefinitely banishing the researchers from the site.

CrowdTangle, the online tool that the company offered to hundreds of newsrooms and researchers so they could identify trending posts and misinformation across Facebook or Instagram, is now inoperable on some days.

Public communication about the company's response to election misinformation has gone decidedly quiet. Between 2018 and 2020, the company released more than 30 statements that laid out specifics about how it would stifle U.S. election misinformation, prevent foreign adversaries from running ads or posts around the vote and subdue divisive hate speech.

Top executives hosted question and answer sessions with reporters about new policies. CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote Facebook posts promising to take down false voting information and authored opinion articles calling for more regulations to tackle foreign interference in U.S. elections via social media.

But this year Meta has only released a one-page document outlining plans for the fall elections, even as potential threats to the vote remain clear. Several Republican candidates are pushing false claims about the U.S. election across social media. In addition, Russia and China continue to wage aggressive social media propaganda campaigns aimed at further political divides among American audiences.

Meta says that elections remain a priority and that policies developed in recent years around election misinformation or foreign interference are now hard-wired into company operations.

"With every election, we incorporate what we've learned into new processes and have established channels to share information with the government and our industry partners," Meta spokesman Tom Reynolds said.

He declined to say how many employees would be on the project to protect U.S. elections full time this year.

During the 2018 election cycle, the company offered tours and photos and produced head counts for its election response war room. But The New York Times reported the number of Meta employees working on this year's election had been cut from 300 to 60, a figure Meta disputes.

Reynolds said Meta will pull hundreds of employees who work across 40 of the company's other teams to monitor the upcoming vote alongside the election team, with its unspecified number of workers.

The company is continuing many initiatives it developed to limit election misinformation, such as a fact-checking program started in 2016 that enlists the help of news outlets to investigate the veracity of popular falsehoods spreading on Facebook or Instagram. The Associated Press is part of Meta's fact-checking program.

This month, Meta also rolled out a new feature for political ads that allows the public to search for details about how advertisers target people based on their interests across Facebook and Instagram.

Yet, Meta has stifled other efforts to identify election misinformation on its sites.

It has stopped making improvements to CrowdTangle, a website it offered to newsrooms around the world that provides insights about trending social media posts. Journalists, fact-checkers and researchers used the website to analyze Facebook content, including tracing popular misinformation and who is responsible for it.

That tool is now "dying," former CrowdTangle CEO Brandon Silverman, who left Meta last year, told the Senate Judiciary Committee this spring.

Silverman told the AP that CrowdTangle had been working on upgrades that would make it easier to search the text of internet memes, which can often be used to spread half-truths and escape the oversight of fact-checkers, for example.

"There's no real shortage of ways you can organize this data to make it useful for a lot of different parts of the fact-checking community, newsrooms and broader civil society," Silverman said.

Not everyone at Meta agreed with that transparent approach, Silverman said. The company has not

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rolled out any new updates or features to CrowdTangle in more than a year, and it has experienced hourslong outages in recent months.

Meta also shut down efforts to investigate how misinformation travels through political ads.

The company indefinitely revoked access to Facebook for a pair of New York University researchers who they said collected unauthorized data from the platform. The move came hours after NYU professor Laura Edelson said she shared plans with the company to investigate the spread of disinformation on the platform around the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, which is now the subject of a House investigation.

"What we found, when we looked closely, is that their systems were probably dangerous for a lot of their users," Edelson said.

Privately, former and current Meta employees say exposing those dangers around the American elections have created public and political backlash for the company.

Republicans routinely accuse Facebook of unfairly censoring conservatives, some of whom have been kicked off for breaking the company's rules. Democrats, meanwhile, regularly complain the tech company hasn't gone far enough to curb disinformation.

"It's something that's so politically fraught, they're more trying to shy away from it than jump in head first," said Harbath, the former Facebook policy director. "They just see it as a big old pile of headaches."

Meanwhile, the possibility of regulation in the U.S. no longer looms over the company, with lawmakers failing to reach any consensus over what oversight the multibillion-dollar company should be subjected to.

Free from that threat, Meta's leaders have devoted the company's time, money and resources to a new project in recent months.

Zuckerberg dived into this massive rebranding and reorganization of Facebook last October, when he changed the company's name to Meta Platforms Inc. He plans to spend years and billions of dollars evolving his social media platforms into a nascent virtual reality construct called the "metaverse" — sort of like the internet brought to life, rendered in 3D.

His public Facebook page posts now focus on product announcements, hailing artificial intelligence, and photos of him enjoying life. News about election preparedness is announced in company blog posts not written by him.

In one of Zuckerberg's posts last October, after an ex-Facebook employee leaked internal documents showing how the platform magnifies hate and misinformation, he defended the company. He also reminded his followers that he had pushed Congress to modernize regulations around elections for the digital age.

"I know it's frustrating to see the good work we do get mischaracterized, especially for those of you who are making important contributions across safety, integrity, research and product," he wrote on Oct. 5. "But I believe that over the long term if we keep trying to do what's right and delivering experiences that improve people's lives, it will be better for our community and our business."

It was the last time he discussed the Menlo Park, California-based company's election work in a public Facebook post.

3 more ships with grain depart Ukraine ports under UN deal

By ZEYNEP BILGINSOY Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — Three more ships with grain have left Ukrainian ports and are headed to Turkey for inspection, Turkey's defense ministry said Friday, evidence that a U.N.-backed deal is working to export Ukrainian grain that has been trapped by Russia's invasion.

The three ships are loaded with over 58,000 tons of corn. Much of the grain that Ukraine exports is used as animal feed, experts say.

Ukraine is one of the world's main breadbaskets and the stocks of grain trapped were exacerbating a sharp rise of food prices and raising fears of a global hunger crisis.

The departure of the ships comes after the first grain shipment since the start of the war left Ukraine earlier this week. It crossed the Black Sea under the breakthrough wartime deal and passed inspection Wednesday in Istanbul and then headed on to Lebanon.

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The ships that departed Friday from Ukraine are from among over a dozen bulk carriers and cargo ships that had been loaded with grain and stuck at the ports there since the start of Russia's invasion in late February.

While tens of thousands of tons of grains are now making their way out with these latest shipments, it's still a fraction of the 20 million tons of grains which Ukraine says are trapped in the country's silos and ports, and which must be shipped out in order to make space for this year's harvest.

Around 6 million tons of that trapped grain is wheat, and just half of that is for human consumption, said David Laborde, an expert on agriculture and trade at the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington D.C.

Prices of grains peaked in the first weeks after Russia's invasion, but some have since come down to their pre-war levels. Corn prices are running around 70% above the levels seen at the end of February 2020, before the pandemic, according to Jonathan Haines, senior analyst and data and analytics firm, Gro Intelligence. He said wheat prices are currently 63% above the levels seen at the end of February this year, when the invasion was launched.

The three ships that left Ukrainian ports are the Turkish-flagged Polarnet, carrying 12,000 tons of corn, which left the Chornomorsk port bound for Karasu, Turkey. The Panama-flagged Navi Star left Odesa's port for Ireland with 33,000 tons of corn. The Maltese-flagged Rojen left Chornomorsk for the United Kingdom carrying over 13,000 tons of corn, according to the United Nations.

The U.N. said the joint coordination center overseeing the deal had authorized the three ships as the operation expands, and also inspected a ship headed for Ukraine.

The Barbados-flagged Fulmar S was inspected in Istanbul and is destined for Ukraine's Chornomorsk port. Officials from Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the U.N. make up the Joint Coordination Center that oversees the deal signed in Istanbul last month.

The deal's aim is to create safe Black Sea shipping corridors to export Ukraine's desperately needed agricultural products. Checks on ships by inspectors seek to ensure that outbound cargo ships carry only grain, fertilizer or food and not any other commodities, and that inbound ships are not carrying weapons.

The U.N. said that the humanitarian corridor had to be revised after this week's first shipment "to allow for more efficient passage of ships while maintaining safety."

In a first, Somalia-based al-Shabab is attacking in Ethiopia

By OMAR FARUK Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — The al-Shabab extremist group has exploited Ethiopia's internal turmoil to cross the border from neighboring Somalia in unprecedented attacks in recent weeks that a top U.S. military commander has warned could continue.

The deadly incursions into Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country and long seen as an anchor of security in the Horn of Africa, are the latest sign of how deeply the recent war in the northern Tigray region and other ethnic fighting have made the country more vulnerable.

Ethiopia has long resisted such cross-border attacks by the al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab, in part by deploying troops inside Somalia, where the extremist group controls large rural parts of the country's southern and central regions. But the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and its security forces have struggled with unrest at home especially since the Tigray conflict began in late 2020.

Experts say al-Shabab, also emboldened by instability under Somalia's previous administration, is seizing the chance to expand its footprint and claim the killing of scores of Ethiopian security forces. But the group is also feeling the pressure of a renewed push by Somalia's new government and the return of U.S. forces to the country after their withdrawal by former President Donald Trump.

The turn to Ethiopia is a significant strategic shift by al-Shabab, Matt Bryden, a security analyst with the Sahan Foundation think tank, told The Associated Press. The extremist group had never been able to conduct major operations inside Ethiopia.

"The reports of clashes along the Ethiopia-Somalia border are just a fraction of the overall picture,"

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Bryden said. "We understand that planning for this offensive began more than one year ago, when the Ethiopian government appeared to be on the verge of collapse" as rival Tigray forces pushed toward the capital, Addis Ababa. Those forces later retreated, and both sides are edging toward peace talks.

Al-Shabab has trained several thousand fighters for its Ethiopian "command," mainly ethnic Somalis and Oromos inside Ethiopia, Bryden asserted. Ethiopia's federal government has said it fears al-Shabab will link up with the Oromo Liberation Army, which it has designated a terror organization, though other security experts have called that unlikely.

Hundreds of al-Shabab fighters were able to slip into Ethiopia last week alone and their presence has been detected near multiple communities such as El Kari, Jaraati, and Imey, Bryden said. The incursions began in late July.

"There are also credible reports of al-Shabab units deploying in the direction of Moyale," the main border post between Ethiopia and Kenya, he said.

Somalia's previous president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, avoided any major confrontation with al-Shabab. But new President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has said his government will take the offensive against the group's thousands of fighters, with the backing of returning U.S. forces.

"Al-Shabab therefore faces a much greater military challenge in Somalia than before and has therefore embarked on this Ethiopian campaign in order to preserve some of its forces and establish strategic depth," Bryden said.

He warned that if al-Shabab establishes a stronghold in southeastern Ethiopia, "the consequences for peace and security in the region could be very serious indeed." The fighters would be well-positioned to strike deeper into Ethiopia, into Kenya and even as far as Uganda to the west. Al-Shabab has carried out several high-profile deadly attacks inside Kenya over the years.

The outgoing head of the U.S. Africa Command, Gen. Stephen Townsend, last month warned that al-Shabab's activities inside Ethiopia were not a "one-off" and said the fighters made it as far as 150 kilometers into the country.

Al-Shabab has long regarded Ethiopia an enemy for its long military presence inside Somalia countering the fighters. Via its Radio Andalus media arm, the extremist group has claimed killing at least 187 Ethiopian regional forces and seizing military equipment in its attacks.

Ethiopian officials have expressed alarm. On Tuesday, the country's Somali regional president, Mustefa Omer, told a regional assembly that more than 600 al-Shabab fighters have been killed.

The region is in a lengthy war with the extremists, not just a one-time clash, he said, and "the Ethiopian federal army is currently involved in the fight against the terrorists ... and we will also work with Somalia."

He said the goal is to create a security buffer inside Somalia to guard against further incursions. "We should not wait for the enemy to invade," he said.

Also on Tuesday, the Somali region announced that Ethiopian military officials had arrived in Somalia's town of Beledweyne to discuss strategies to counter al-Shabab's incursion. The statement said Ethiopia's soldiers in the African Union peacekeeping force in Somalia will be deployed against the extremists.

Residents of the Somali town of Yeed near the Ethiopian border told the AP they witnessed losses suffered by al-Shabab fighters in an Ethiopian attack last week. They spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retribution.

And a resident of Somalia's Bakool region, Isak Yarow, said Ethiopian military planes have carried out airstrikes in Garasweyne village in an area where Ethiopian and al-Shabab fighters have clashed.

Ethiopia's military has claimed the killing of three prominent al-Shabab figures including its propaganda chief, but the extremist group has denied it.

While Al-Shabab's ultimate aims inside Ethiopia are yet to be determined, its new actions signal its "growing ambition, regional capabilities, and opportunism to exploit regional geopolitics, especially as the Abiy Ahmed government struggles to contain the various insurgencies inside Ethiopia," security analysts Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell wrote late last month.

Security analyst Ismail Osman, a former deputy of Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency,

told the AP that "President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's immediate priority is to eradicate al-Shabab" and warned that regional tensions could worsen amid this new instability.

Spain leads Europe in monkeypox, struggles to check spread

By JOSEPH WILSON and RENATA BRITO Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — As a sex worker and adult film actor, Roc was relieved when he was among the first Spaniards to get a monkeypox vaccine. He knew of several cases among men who have sex with men, which is the leading demographic for the disease, and feared he could be next.

"I went home and thought, 'Phew, my God, I'm saved,'" the 29-year-old told The Associated Press.

But it was already too late. Roc, the name he uses for work, had been infected by a client a few days before. He joined Spain's steadily increasing count of monkeypox infections that has become the highest in Europe since the disease spread beyond Africa where it has been endemic for years.

He began showing symptoms: pustules, fever, conjunctivitis and tiredness. Roc was hospitalized for treatment before getting well enough to be released.

Spanish health authorities and community groups are struggling to check an outbreak that has already claimed the lives of two young men. They reportedly died of encephalitis, or swelling of the brain, that can be caused by some viruses. Most monkeypox cases cause only mild symptoms.

Spain has had 4,577 confirmed cases in the three months since the start of the outbreak, which has been linked to two raves in Europe, where experts say the virus was likely spread through sex.

The only country with more infections than Spain is the much larger United States, which has reported 7,100 cases.

In all, the global monkeypox outbreak has seen more than 26,000 cases in nearly 90 countries since May. There have been 103 suspected deaths in Africa, mostly in Nigeria and Congo, where a more lethal form of monkeypox is spreading than in the West.

Health experts stress that this is not technically a sexually transmitted disease, even though it has been mainly spreading via sex among gay and bisexual men, who account for 98% of cases beyond Africa. The virus can be spread to anyone who has close, physical contact with an infected person, their clothing or bedsheets.

So part of the complexity of fighting monkeypox is striking a balance between not stigmatizing men who have sex with men while also ensuring that both vaccines and pleas for greater caution reach those currently in the greatest danger.

Spain has distributed 5,000 shots of the two-shot vaccine to health clinics and expects to receive 7,000 more from the EU in the coming days, its health ministry said.

To ensure that those shots get administered wisely, community groups and sexual health associations targeting gay men, bisexuals and transgender women are taking the lead.

In Barcelona, BCN Checkpoint, which focuses on AIDS/HIV prevention in gay and trans communities, is now contacting at-risk people to offer them one of the precious vaccines.

Pep Coll, medical director of BCN Checkpoint, said the vaccine rollout is focused on people who are already at risk of contracting HIV and are on preemptive treatment, men with a high number of sexual partners and those who participate in "chemsex" (sex with the use of drugs), as well as people with suppressed immune responses.

But there are many more people who fit those categories than doses.

"If we just consider the number of people (on prophylactic HIV treatment) plus the number of people with HIV, we are talking about some 15,000 people (just in Barcelona)," Coll said.

The lack of vaccines, which is far more severe in Africa than in Europe and the U.S., makes social public health policies key, experts say.

As with the coronavirus pandemic, contact tracing to identify people who could have been infected is critical. But, while COVID-19 could spread to anyone simply through the air, the close bodily contact that serves as the leading vehicle for monkeypox makes some people hesitant to share information.

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"We are having a steady stream of new cases, and it is possible that we will have more deaths. Why? Because contact tracing is very complicated because it can be a very sensitive issue for someone to identify their sexual partners," said Amós García, epidemiologist and president of the Spanish Association of Vaccinology.

Spain says that most of its cases are among men who have sex with men and only 5% are women. But García insisted that will even out unless the entire public, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, grasps that having various sexual partners creates greater risk.

"The same thing happened with AIDS/HIV, when at one moment the group of men who had sex with men was the most affected (before spreading to other groups), and that can become the path that this takes if we are not able to send a strong message to society," García said.

Given the dearth of vaccines and the trouble with contact tracing, more pressure is being put on encouraging prevention.

From the start, government officials ceded the leading role in the get-out-the-word campaign to community groups.

Sebastian Meyer, president of the STOP SIDA association dedicated to AIDS/HIV care in Barcelona's LGBTQ community, said the logic was that his group and others like it would be trusted message-bearers with person-by-person knowledge of how to drive the health warning home.

While community associations that represent gay and bisexual men have bombarded social media, websites and blogs with information on monkeypox safety, Meyer says there is still a lot to be done.

Meyer, who is on the monkeypox advisory boards for both Spain's national government and for regional authorities covering Barcelona, believes fatigue from the COVID-19 pandemic has played a part. Doctors advise people with monkeypox lesions to isolate until they have fully healed, which can take up to three weeks.

"When people read that they must self-isolate, they close the webpage and forget what they have read," Meyer said. "We are just coming out of COVID, when you couldn't do this or that, and now, here we go again ... People just hate it and put their heads in the sand."

Meyer said that his group is currently brainstorming ways to revamp and relaunch their message.

"If you haven't been selected for a vaccine, the answer is not to desperately hope that you'll get one," he said. "The answer is to be more careful. That is much better than any vaccine."

Pelosi: China cannot stop US officials from visiting Taiwan

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — China will not isolate Taiwan by preventing U.S. officials from traveling there, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Friday in Tokyo, wrapping up her Asia tour highlighted by a visit to Taipei that infuriated China.

The Chinese have tried to isolate Taiwan, Pelosi said, including most recently by preventing the self-governing island from joining the World Health Organization.

"They may try to keep Taiwan from visiting or participating in other places, but they will not isolate Taiwan by preventing us to travel there," she said, defending her trip that some say has escalated tension in the region.

Pelosi called the contention "ridiculous" and said that her trip to Taiwan was not intended to change the status quo for the island but to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait. She praised Taiwan's hard-fought democracy, including its progress in diversity including LGBTQ rights, and success in technology and business, while criticizing China's violations of trade agreements, proliferation of weapons and human rights problems.

"If we do not speak out for human rights in China because of commercial interests, we lose all moral authority to speak out about human rights any place in the world," Pelosi said. "China has some contradictions — some progress in terms of lifting people up, some horrible things happening in terms of the Uyghurs. In fact, it's been labeled a genocide."

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Pelosi said "the two big countries" — the United States and China — must communicate in areas such as climate and other global issues. "It isn't about our visit determining what the U.S.-China relationship is. It's a much bigger and longer-term challenge and once again, we have to recognize that we have to work together on certain areas."

"Our friendship with Taiwan is a strong one. It is bipartisan in the House and in the Senate, overwhelming support for peace and the status quo in Taiwan," she said.

Pelosi, the first House speaker to visit Taiwan in 25 years, said Wednesday in Taipei that American commitment to democracy on the island and elsewhere "remains ironclad."

Pelosi and five other members of Congress arrived in Tokyo late Thursday after visiting Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and South Korea.

China, which claims Taiwan and has threatened to annex it by force if necessary, called her visit to the island a provocation and on Thursday began military drills, including missile strike training, in six zones surrounding Taiwan, in what could be its biggest since the mid-1990s.

Pelosi said that China had launched the "strikes probably using our visit as an excuse."

Earlier Friday, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said that China's military exercises aimed at Taiwan represent a "grave problem" that threatens regional peace and security after five ballistic missiles launched as part of the drills landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone near a southwestern remote island.

Kishida, speaking after breakfast with Pelosi and her congressional delegation, said the missile launches need to be "stopped immediately."

Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi said five missiles landed on Thursday in Japan's exclusive economic zone off Hateruma, an island far south of Japan's main islands. He said Japan protested to China, saying the missiles "threatened Japan's national security and the lives of the Japanese people, which we strongly condemn."

The Defense Ministry later said it believed the other four missiles, fired from China's southeastern coast of Fujian, flew over Taiwan.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, attending a regional meeting in Cambodia, said China's actions are "severely impacting peace and stability in the region and the international community, and we demand the immediate suspension of the military exercises."

Japan has in recent years bolstered its defense capability and troop presence in southwestern Japan and remote islands, including Okinawa, which is about 700 kilometers (420 miles) northeast of Taiwan. Many residents say they worry their island will be quickly embroiled in any Taiwan conflict. Okinawa is home to the majority of about 50,000 American troops based in Japan under a bilateral security pact.

At the breakfast Friday, Pelosi and her congressional delegation also discussed their shared security concern over China, North Korea and Russia, and pledged their commitment to working toward peace and stability in Taiwan, Kishida said. Pelosi and the delegation also held talks with her Japanese counterpart, lower house Speaker Hiroyuki Hosoda, after briefly observing a plenary session where they were welcomed by standing ovation.

Japan and its key ally, the U.S., have been pushing for new security and economic frameworks with other democracies in the Indo-Pacific region and Europe as a counter to China's growing influence amid rising tensions between Beijing and Taipei.

Days before Pelosi's Taiwan visit, a group of senior Japanese lawmakers, including former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba, visited the island and discussed regional security with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. Ishiba said Japan, while working with the United States to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific, wants a defense agreement with Taiwan.

On Thursday, the foreign ministers of the Group of Seven industrialized nations issued a statement saying "there is no justification to use a visit as pretext for aggressive military activity in the Taiwan Strait." It said China's "escalatory response risks increasing tensions and destabilizing the region."

China cited its displeasure over the statement for the last-minute cancellation of talks between the Chinese and Japanese foreign ministers on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

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meeting in Cambodia on Thursday.

Pelosi held talks Thursday in South Korea, also a key U.S. ally, which stayed away from the Taiwan issue, apparently to avoid upsetting China, focusing instead on North Korea's increasing nuclear threat.

In recent years, South Korea has been struggling to strike a balance between the United States and China as their rivalry has deepened.

The Chinese military exercises launched Thursday involve its navy, air force and other departments and are to last until Sunday. They include missile strikes on targets in the seas north and south of the island in an echo of the last major Chinese military drills in 1995 and 1996 aimed at intimidating Taiwan's leaders and voters.

Taiwan has put its military on alert and staged civil defense drills, while the U.S. has numerous naval assets in the area.

China also flew war planes toward Taiwan and blocked imports of its citrus and fish.

China sees the island as a breakaway province and considers visits to Taiwan by foreign officials as recognizing its sovereignty.

The Biden administration and Pelosi have said the United States remains committed to the "one China" policy, which recognizes Beijing as the government of China but allows informal relations and defense ties with Taipei. The administration discouraged but did not prevent Pelosi from visiting.

Pelosi has been a long-time advocate of human rights in China. She, along with other lawmakers, visited Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1991 to support democracy two years after a bloody military crackdown on protesters at the square.

As leader of the House of Representatives, Pelosi's trip has heightened U.S.-China tensions more than visits by other members of Congress. The last House speaker to visit Taiwan was Newt Gingrich in 1997.

China and Taiwan, which split in 1949 after a civil war, have no official relations but multibillion-dollar business ties.

More NCAA leagues to pay women's basketball referees equally

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

The NCAA earned praise last year when it agreed to pay referees at its men's and women's basketball tournaments equally. The gesture only cost about \$100,000, a tiny fraction of the roughly \$900 million networks pay annually to broadcast March Madness.

Now, as the NCAA examines various disparities across men's and women's sports, pressure is rising to also pay referees equally during the regular season. Two Division 1 conferences told The Associated Press they plan to equalize pay, and another is considering it. Others are resisting change, even though the impact on their budgets would be negligible.

"The ones that are (equalizing pay) are reading the writing on the wall," said Michael Lewis, a marketing professor at Emory University's Goizueta Business School.

The details of NCAA referee pay are closely guarded, but The Associated Press obtained data for the 2021-22 season that show 15 of the NCAA's largest — and most profitable -- conferences paid veteran referees for men's basketball an average of 22% more per game.

That level of disparity is wider than the gender pay gap across the U.S. economy, where women earn 82 cents for every dollar a man earns, according to the 2020 census. And it is an overwhelming disadvantage for women, who make up less than 1% of the referees officiating men's games.

Dawn Staley, the head coach for the University of South Carolina Gamecocks — the women's national champions — said referees on the men's side should be "stepping up" and advocating for equal pay for women's referees. "They don't do anything different," she said. "Why should our officials get paid less for taking the (expletive) we give them?"

The people who provided AP with data for nearly half of the NCAA's 32 Division I conferences have direct knowledge of pay scales, and they did so on condition of anonymity because the information is considered private.

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The Northeast Conference had the widest per-game pay disparity among the NCAA leagues AP analyzed, with the most experienced referees for men's games earning 48% more. The Atlantic-10 paid veteran men's refs 44% more, while the Colonial Athletic Association paid them 38% more. (Only the Ivy League paid veteran officials equally in the data AP reviewed.)

Of the conferences with unequal pay contacted by AP, two -- the Pac-12 and the Northeast Conference — said they plan to level the playing field starting next season. A third, the Patriot League, which had a 33% pay gap last year, said it is reviewing equity for officials in all sports. "Pay is part of that," commissioner Jennifer Heppel said.

The Pac-12 paid referees equally a decade ago, but allowed a disparity to build over time, according to associate commissioner Teresa Gould. She said returning to equal pay is "the right thing to do."

NEC commissioner Noreen Morris said the decision to equalize pay was an easy one to make once it realized that basketball was the only sport where it was not compensating referees equally.

Relative to the amounts of money these leagues generate, the cost of bridging the pay gap can seem small.

For example, the SEC paid referees for men's games 10%, or \$350, more than those officiating women's games. Over the course of a season, it would cost the SEC a couple hundred thousand dollars to pay them equally -- a sliver of the \$3 billion deal it signed with ESPN to broadcast all of its sports starting in 2024.

The most experienced Division 1 referees — for men's or women's games — are well paid. Some earn more than \$150,000 in a season, officiating dozens of games across multiple conferences. Newer referees earn far less, supplementing income from another job.

All NCAA referees are independent contractors, with no union representing their interests, and all have to cover their own travel expenses.

The busiest referees can work five or six games a week in different cities, running up and down the court for 40 minutes one night, getting a few hours of sleep, and then waking up at 4 a.m. to catch a flight to their next destination.

Dee Kantner, a veteran referee of women's games who works for multiple conferences, finds it frustrating to have to justify equal pay.

"If I buy an airline ticket and tell them I'm doing a women's basketball game they aren't going to charge me less," she said.

"Do you value women's basketball that much less?" Kantner said. "How are we rationalizing this still?"

Several conference commissioners said the men's and women's games do not generate equal amounts of revenue, and that the level of play is not equal, and so referee salaries are set accordingly.

"Historically we have treated each referee pool as a separate market," said Big East Commissioner Val Ackerman. "We paid rates that allow us to be competitive for services at our level. I think the leagues are entitled to look at different factors here. I don't see it as an equity issue — I see it as a market issue."

The Big East pays referee's working its men's games 22% more, and Ackerman said there is no imminent plan to make a change.

Atlantic-10 Commissioner Bernadette McGlade said the market-based approach is what enables her to offer some of the highest per-game rates across the NCAA. "We get the most experienced, most qualified officials in the country," she said.

Veteran referees officiating in the Atlantic-10 are paid \$3,300 for men's games, compared with \$2,300 for women's games, according to data reviewed by AP. Seven other conferences had higher per-game rates — and narrower gender gaps — last year, the data show.

Of the roughly 800 referees officiating women's basketball this past season, 43% were female, a proportion that's been relatively consistent over the past decade. But just six women officiated men's games last year — a number that has slowly grown over the last few years.

Penny Davis, the NCAA's supervisor of officials, said conferences are trying to recruit more women to officiate men's games, which is another way to help bridge the gender pay gap.

But Davis says she would hate to see even fewer women refereeing women's basketball. "We don't want to lose our best and brightest," she said.

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A decade ago, referees working the men's and women's NCAA Tournament were paid equally. But as the profitability of the men's tournament skyrocketed, its budget grew too -- and so did pay for referees.

Both McGlade and Ackerman praised the NCAA for restoring equal pay at the March tournaments. "We're mindful of the what the NCAA did for the tournament," Ackerman said. "NCAA Tournament games are closer but not entirely a common officiating experience."

Ivy League executive director Robin Harris disagrees. "We decided a while ago that it was the right thing to do to pay them the same amount. They are doing the same job."

Far-right mayor wins GOP primary for Nashville US House seat

By JONATHAN MATTISE and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Andy Ogles, a far-right county mayor, won Tennessee's crowded Republican primary on Thursday in a reconfigured congressional district in left-leaning Nashville that the party is hoping to flip in November. In a warning ahead of the general election, he said, "Liberals, we're coming for you."

Ogles, the Maury County mayor and onetime leader of the Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity's state chapter, emerged among nine candidates after a hard-fought primary for the state's 5th Congressional District. The seat drew heavy interest from Republicans after GOP state lawmakers carved Nashville into three districts, leading incumbent Democratic Rep. Jim Cooper to announce his retirement.

"We're at war. This is a political war, a cultural war, and it's a spiritual war," Ogles said in his victory speech. "And as we go forward, we've got to get back to honoring God and country."

Ogles will face Democratic state Sen. Heidi Campbell in November. The new district favored Donald Trump over Joe Biden by 12 percentage points in 2020.

Voters in Tennessee's primary elections also cast ballots for a Democratic gubernatorial nominee to take on Republican Gov. Bill Lee in November. The Democratic primary remained too early to call Friday morning between Nashville physician Jason Martin and Memphis City Councilman JB Smiley Jr.

Smiley would be the state's first Black nominee for governor. Martin, a political newcomer, said he was spurred to run by Lee's hands-off response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lee will have a strong advantage in November in a state that has not elected a Democrat to statewide office since 2006. He defeated a Democratic opponent by 21 percentage points in 2018.

In the congressional race, Ogles scored Republican Sen. Ted Cruz's endorsement and overcame a fundraising advantage from his top opponents, former Tennessee House Speaker Beth Harwell and retired Tennessee National Guard Brig. Gen. Kurt Winstead. He also benefited the most from third-party groups, which ran TV ads touting his opposition to COVID-19 mandates and dragging down his opponents as insufficiently conservative.

Ogles described the GOP primary as "establishment versus the conservative wing of the party," saying voters were getting a "true conservative" in his nomination. He didn't shy from inflammatory comments during his victory speech, calling for the impeachment of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, as well as treason charges against the Department of Homeland Security secretary over the administration's handling of immigration issues.

Campbell, who was unopposed in her Democratic primary, said the race was "symbolic of the crossroads" the country finds itself at.

"One where we move forward together, protecting working families, our freedoms, and future — or one where extreme politicians turn us backward, controlling our lives and ruling for the wealthy few," she said before the GOP primary was called for Ogles.

Redrawn congressional districts helped put Tennessee among the states where Republicans hope to flip a seat in a push to reclaim control of the U.S. House. Tennessee held the only statewide elections in the nation Thursday.

In the other two Nashville-area districts, the Republican incumbents didn't have primary opponents. The new maps weight their districts in their favor.

In the new 6th District, which includes more of the city, Republican U.S. Rep. John Rose brings a huge

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fundraising edge into a general election against Democrat Randal Cooper, who defeated a primary opponent. Over in the new 7th District, Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Green ran unopposed and will face Democrat Odessa Kelly, who also didn't face an opponent.

But at least in Nashville, anyone who turned on a TV was more likely to see ads for a Republican running for the 5th Congressional District than a candidate for anything else.

The election marked the first time voters get a say over a seat that had been subject to months of Republican political brokering.

Political infighting over the carefully crafted district — it meanders through six counties — led the state Republican Party to boot three candidates off the ballot, including Trump's pick, former State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus. One of the booted candidates, video producer Robby Starbuck, was attempting a write-in campaign.

One local contest stood out Thursday.

In the Shelby County district attorney's race, Democratic challenger Steve Mulroy was leading incumbent Republican Amy Weirich, who drew national attention when she prosecuted Pamela Moses, a Black woman, for registering to vote erroneously, resulting in a six-year prison sentence that was later discarded. Weirich has been criticized for failing to say outright whether she will or won't prosecute doctors who perform abortions. Mulroy said he would make abortion prosecutions "extremely low priority."

Gov. Lee, meanwhile, is the first to avoid a primary challenge since Democratic Gov. Ned McWherter in 1990, said Tennessee legislative historian Eddie Weeks.

Weeks said he could not find an African American nominee for governor, Democrat or Republican, in state history. Yet, he noted that in 1876, William Yardley, an African American Knoxville official later elected to the county court, ran as an independent when the Republican Party declined to nominate a candidate for governor. Democratic Gov. James Davis Porter won reelection that year.

Tennessee had a Black Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate as recently as 2020.

Banksy painting sprayed in West Bank resurfaces in Tel Aviv

By ILAN BEN ZION and ISAAC SCHARF Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — A long-lost painting by the British graffiti artist Banksy has resurfaced in a swank art gallery in downtown Tel Aviv, an hour's drive and a world away from the concrete wall in the occupied West Bank where it was initially sprayed.

The relocation of the painting — which depicts a slingshot-toting rat and was likely intended to protest the Israel occupation — raises ethical questions about the removal of artwork from occupied territory and the display of such politically-charged pieces in radically different settings from where they were created.

The painting initially appeared near Israel's separation barrier in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem and was one of several works created in secret around 2007. They employed Banksy's trademark absurdist and dystopian imagery to protest Israel's decades-long occupation of territories the Palestinians want for a future state.

Now it resides at the Urban Gallery in the heart of Tel Aviv's financial district, surrounded by glass and steel skyscrapers.

"This is the story of David and Goliath," said Koby Abergel, an Israeli art dealer who purchased the painting, without elaborating on the analogy. He said the gallery was simply displaying the work, leaving its interpretation to others.

The Associated Press could not independently confirm the authenticity of the piece, but Abergel said the cracks and scrapes in the concrete serve as "a fingerprint" that proves it is the same piece that appears on the artist's website.

The 70-kilometer (43-mile) journey it made from the West Bank to Tel Aviv is shrouded in secrecy. The 900-pound concrete slab would have had to pass through Israel's serpentine barrier and at least one military checkpoint — daily features of Palestinian life and targets of Banksy's biting satire.

Abergel, who is a partner with the Tel Aviv gallery, said he bought the concrete slab from a Palestinian

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associate in Bethlehem. He declined to disclose the sum he paid or identify the seller, but insisted on the deal's legality.

The graffiti artwork was spray-painted on a concrete block that was part of an abandoned Israeli army position in Bethlehem, next to a soaring concrete section of the separation barrier.

Some time later, the painting was itself subjected to graffiti by someone who obscured the painting and scrawled "RIP Banksy Rat" on the block. Palestinian residents cut out the painting and kept it in private residences until earlier this year, Abergel said.

He said the relocation involved delicate negotiations with his Palestinian associate and careful restoration to remove the acrylic paint sprayed over Banksy's work. The massive block was then enclosed in a steel frame so it could be lifted onto a flatbed truck and rolled through a checkpoint, until it arrived in Tel Aviv in the middle of the night.

It was not possible to independently confirm his account of its journey.

The piece now stands on an ornately patterned tile floor, surrounded by other contemporary art. Baruch Kashkash, the gallery's owner, said the roughly 2-square-meter (-yard) block was so heavy it had to be brought inside by a crane, and could barely be moved from the doorway.

Israel controls all access to the West Bank, and Palestinians require Israeli permits to travel in or out and to import and export goods. Even when traveling within the West Bank, they can be stopped and searched by Israeli soldiers at any time.

Israeli citizens, including Jewish settlers, can travel freely in and out of the 60% of the West Bank that is under full Israeli control. Israel prohibits its citizens from entering areas administered by the Palestinian Authority for security reasons, but there's little enforcement of that ban.

The Palestinians have spent decades seeking an independent state in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem, territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war. The peace process ground to a halt more than 10 years ago.

Abergel said the artwork's move was not coordinated with the Israeli military, and that his Palestinian associates, whom he declined to name, were responsible for moving it into Israel and crossing through military checkpoints. He said he has no plans to sell the piece.

According to the international treaty governing cultural property to which Israel is a signatory, occupying powers must prevent the removal of cultural property from occupied territories. It remains unclear exactly how the 1954 Hague Convention would apply in this instance.

"This is theft of the property of the Palestinian people," said Jeries Qumsieh, a spokesperson for the Palestinian Tourism Ministry. "These were paintings by an international artist for Bethlehem, for Palestine, and for visitors to Bethlehem and Palestine. So transferring them, manipulating them and stealing them is definitely an illegal act."

The Israeli military and COGAT, the Israeli Defense Ministry body responsible for coordinating civilian affairs with the Palestinians, said they had no knowledge of the artwork or its relocation.

Banksy has created numerous artworks in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in recent years, including one depicting a girl conducting a body search on an Israeli soldier, another showing a dove wearing a flak jacket, and a masked protester hurling a bouquet of flowers. He also designed the "Walled Off Hotel" guesthouse in Bethlehem, which is filled with his artwork.

A spokesperson for Banksy did not respond to requests for comment.

This is not the first time the street artist's work has been lifted from the West Bank. In 2008, two other paintings — "Wet Dog" and "Stop and Search" — were removed from the walls of a bus shelter and butcher shop in Bethlehem. They were eventually bought by galleries in the United States and Britain where they were exhibited in 2011.

Abergel says it's up to viewers to draw their own conclusions about the artwork and its implications.

"We brought it to the main street of Tel Aviv to be shown to the audience and to show his messages," said Abergel. "He should be happy with it."

Fire at music pub in eastern Thailand kills at least 13

By TASSANEE VEJPONGSA Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — At least 13 people were killed and dozens injured when a fire broke out early Friday morning at a crowded music pub in eastern Thailand, police and rescue workers said.

Video circulating on social media showed people fleeing the pub while thick black smoke billowed from the door and then the entrance through which people were escaping was suddenly engulfed in flames. Several people's clothing was on fire as they emerged from the pub. Rescue workers said more than three dozen people were injured.

The cause of the fire at the Mountain B pub in Sattahip district of Chonburi province, about 160 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of Bangkok, is under investigation, provincial police chief Maj. Gen. Atthasit Kijjahan told PPTV television news. He said the pub's owner and staff were giving statements at the police station and the police forensic team would be collecting evidence at the scene. Police said the fire was reported around 12:45 a.m.

Several witnesses described seeing smoke and fire on the ceiling near the venue's stage followed by the sound of explosions.

"The fire started at the top right corner of the stage," a witness identified only as Nana told PPTV. "The singer must have seen it too, so he shouted 'fire' and threw away the microphone."

"I am quite shocked. But I am lucky that when I saw the fire, I could get myself together and get out of there," she said, adding that she saw several pub security guards with their clothing on fire.

A waitress at the venue, Thanyapat Sornsuanhwan, also told Thai television reporters that she saw smoke near the stage.

"I shouted 'fire' to customers, and I was near the doors, so I directed them out. I kept shouting 'fire, fire' and the security guards were also helping lead people out," she said.

Police chief Atthasit said the club had three entrances: at the front, on the side near the cashier for unloading goods and at the back. Thai public television station TPBS reported that the back door is often locked.

A DJ at the pub who did not identify himself told PPTV that the fire had spread quickly, in about a minute, when he heard the sound of an explosion, shattering windows.

The pub was lined with flammable soundproofing, and it took two hours for firefighters to put out the blaze, Manop Theprith of a private emergency services group told the television station. His group said 40 people were injured.

One of Thailand's deadliest fires in recent decades was at a nightclub in the capital, Bangkok, during a 2008-2009 New Year's Eve celebration, when 66 people were killed and more 200 injured. That blaze at the Santika nightclub also began on the ceiling above a stage, apparently sparked by an indoors fireworks display. Toxic smoke flooded the venue as the entire club caught fire.

Trump ally Kari Lake wins GOP primary for Arizona governor

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Kari Lake, a former news anchor who walked away from her journalism career and was embraced by Donald Trump and his staunch supporters, won the Republican primary for Arizona governor on Thursday.

Lake's victory was a blow to the GOP establishment that lined up behind lawyer and businesswoman Karrin Taylor Robson in an attempt to push their party past the chaotic Trump era. Lake said she would not have certified President Joe Biden's 2020 victory and put false claims of election fraud at the center of her campaign.

"Arizonans who have been forgotten by the establishment just delivered a political earthquake," Lake said in a statement after the race was called.

Republicans now enter the general election sprint with a slate of nominees closely allied with Trump who deny that Biden was legitimately elected president. Lake will face Democratic Secretary of State

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Katie Hobbs in the November election.

"This race for governor isn't about Democrats or Republicans. It's a choice between sanity and chaos," Hobbs said Thursday night in a statement on Lake's victory.

Early election results showing only mail ballots received before Election Day gave Robson a solid lead, but that was whittled down as votes from polling places were added to the tally. Lake's victory became clear Thursday when Maricopa County released results from thousands of mail ballots dropped off at the polls on Tuesday.

"The voters of Arizona have spoken," Robson said in a statement conceding to Lake late Thursday. "I accept the results, I trust the process and the people who administer it."

In a midterm primary season with mixed results for Trump's favored candidates, the former president came out on top in Arizona, a state that has been central to his efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election and cast doubt on Biden's victory. In addition to Lake, Trump's picks for U.S. Senate, secretary of state, attorney general, U.S. House and the state Legislature all won their GOP primaries.

If they win in November, Trump allies will hold sway over the administration of elections in a crucial battleground state as he considers another bid for the White House in 2024. The results also show that Trump remains a powerful figure in the GOP as longtime party stalwarts get increasingly bold in their efforts to reassert control ahead of the next presidential campaign.

Former Vice President Mike Pence, Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey and former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie all campaigned for Robson in the days before the election.

Robson, who is married to one of Arizona's richest men, largely self-funded her campaign. She called the 2020 election "unfair" but stopped short of calling it fraudulent and pushed for the GOP to look toward the future.

Lake now faces the daunting task of uniting the Republican Party after a bruising primary. On Wednesday, as Lake declared victory prematurely, she attempted to reach out to Robson and others she fiercely criticized as RINOs, or Republicans in Name Only, who don't align with Trump on key issues.

"Frankly, this party needs her to come together, and I welcome her," Lake said of Robson. "And I hope that she will come over for this."

Robson said she's spent her life supporting Republicans, "and it is my hope that our Republican nominees are successful in November."

Like Trump, Lake courts controversy and confrontation. She berates journalists and dodges questions. She burned masks during the COVID-19 surge in the summer of 2021 and attacked Republicans like Ducey who allowed restrictions on businesses, though as a news anchor she encouraged people to follow public health guidance.

Lake spent the days leading up to her own election claiming there were signs of fraud, but she refused to provide any evidence. Once her victory was assured, she said voters should trust her win is legitimate.

"We outvoted the fraud," Lake said. She pointed to problems in Pinal County, which ran out of ballots in some precincts and had to print more, but she and her attorney, Tim La Sota, refused to provide evidence backing up her claims of fraud.

She said she has no plans to stop talking about election fraud even as she needs to broaden her appeal beyond the loyalists her powered her primary victory.

Federal and state election officials and Trump's own attorney general have said there is no credible evidence the 2020 election was tainted. Trump's allegations of fraud were also roundly rejected by courts, including by judges he appointed. A hand recount led by Trump supporters in Maricopa County, Arizona's largest, found no proof of a stolen election and concluded Biden's margin of victory was larger than the official count.

Hobbs, Lake's opponent in November, went after the candidate over her opposition to abortion rights and gun control and a proposal she floated to put cameras in every classroom to keep an eye on teachers.

Republicans, moving toward November as a divided party in Arizona, need to make an appeal to the independent voters who decide close races, said Chuck Coughlin, a longtime Republican strategist who left the party during the Trump era.

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"I see it as a challenge the Republicans are going to have: How do they narrate to unaffiliated voters?" Coughlin said.

Democrats could strip Iowa of opening spot in 2024 campaign

By WILL WEISSERT and THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Democrats are poised to strip Iowa from leading off their presidential nominating process starting in 2024, part of a broader effort allowing less overwhelmingly white states to go early and better reflect the party's deeply diverse electorate.

The Democratic National Committee's rule-making arm had planned to recommend on Friday which states should be the first four to vote, while considering adding a fifth prior to Super Tuesday, when a large number of states hold primary elections. But it delayed the decision until after November's election, lest it become a distraction affecting Democrats in key congressional races.

Still, the position of Iowa's caucus remains precarious after technical glitches sparked a 2020 meltdown. More than a decade of complaints that caucus rules requiring in-person attendance serve to limit participation are reaching crescendo. That's ignited a furious push for the No. 1 position between New Hampshire, which now goes second but traditionally kicks off primary voting, and Nevada, a heavily Hispanic state looking to jump from third to first.

"I fully expect that Iowa will be replaced," said Julián Castro, a former San Antonio mayor and federal housing chief. "And that the primary calendar will be reordered to better reflect the diversity of the Democratic Party and of the country."

Castro isn't on the rules committee but has criticized Iowa being first since his 2019 presidential run. A Democratic National Committee spokesperson said the rules committee "is conducting a thorough process" and will continue to "let it play out."

Iowa has survived previous challenges and may do so again, especially given that the final decision won't come for months. It argues that, aside from 2020, voters here have a strong track record launching the nomination process — and that its caucuses keep Democrats relevant amid the state's recent shift to the right.

Iowa Democratic Party Chairman Ross Wilburn said he'd fight to ensure that nearly 50 years of tradition hold.

"When I became chair and we started this process, the word was 'Iowa's done,'" Wilburn told reporters Thursday. "But no decision has been made. No calendar has been presented to the committee. We are still in this fight."

But many rules committee members privately said that the party is leaning toward either New Hampshire or Nevada going first, or perhaps on the same day. They all requested anonymity to more freely detail discussions that remain ongoing.

South Carolina, with its large bloc of Black Democrats, may move from fourth to third, freeing up a large Midwestern state to go next. Michigan and Minnesota are making strong cases, but both can't move their primary dates without legislative approval, requiring support from Republicans.

If the committee adds a fifth early slot, that could go to Iowa to soften the blow.

Iowa has kicked off voting since 1976, when Jimmy Carter scored a caucus upset and grabbed enough momentum to eventually win the presidency. Since then, it's been followed by New Hampshire, which has held the nation's first primary since 1920. Nevada and South Carolina have gone next since the 2008 presidential election, when Democrats last did a major primary calendar overhaul.

Nevada has now scrapped its caucus in favor of a primary. During a recent presentation before rules committee members, its delegation showed a video arguing that "tradition is not a good enough reason to preserve the status quo."

"If a diverse and inclusive state isn't at the front of the primary calendar, I'm really concerned that what we're gonna keep seeing is the same criticisms that we've been seeing about the Democratic Party primary process," said Nevada Democratic Sen. Jacky Rosen.

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Representatives from Iowa and New Hampshire argue that small states let all candidates — not just well-funded ones — connect personally with voters, and that losing their slots could advantage Republicans in congressional races. The GOP has already decided to keep Iowa starting its 2024 presidential nominating cycle.

“Just like when two more states were added to the early window, Nevada and South Carolina,” there is a sense that, just like America isn’t stagnant, “that the Democratic Party changes and grows with the times as well,” said rules committee member Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

New Hampshire Democratic National Committeeman Bill Shaheen said he didn’t know what would’ve happened if the rules committee vote wasn’t postponed, but cheered it as “one more chance to show what kind of state we are.”

When the DNC approved shaking up the primary calendar ahead of 2008, it called for Nevada’s caucus after Iowa and before New Hampshire, only to see New Hampshire move up its primary. Shaheen said his state might do similar this time, regardless of the party’s decision.

“We’re going to do the first primary whether the DNC recognizes it or not,” said Shaheen whose wife, Jeanne, is a senator. “There’s a great likelihood of that.”

Those pushing for more diverse states to leadoff say Democrats can impose sanctions to prevent such jockeying this time.

Non-white voters made up 26% of all voters and supported Joe Biden over Donald Trump by a nearly 3-to-1 margin in the 2020 presidential election, according to AP VoteCast, a nationwide survey of the electorate. Nonwhite voters accounted for 38% of Democratic voters then.

By contrast, 91% of 2020 Iowa Democratic caucus goers were white and 94% of New Hampshire primary voters were, according to VoteCast surveys.

Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., who is helping lead her state’s push to go early, said Michigan reflects diversity “and that’s what we are missing in these early primaries.”

“We are not testing candidates in what their general election’s gonna look like,” said Dingell, who added that Michigan’s “got more county fairs than anyone could want.” That recalls Iowa’s state fair, where generations of presidential candidates have worked the porkchop grill and wolfed down deep-fried versions of all imaginable foodstuffs.

“We’re very good at junk food,” Dingell said, laughing.

If the rules committee approves a reshuffled framework, it would still have to be sanctioned by the full Democratic National Committee, though it usually endorses such decisions.

This may be moot if Biden opts to seek a second term. In that case, the party likely will have little appetite to build out a robust primary schedule potentially allowing another Democrat to challenge him for the nomination.

Some rules committee members suggested that the White House has taken a keener interest in the primary calendar process recently, but others expressed frustration that the Biden administration hasn’t given them clearer guidance on where its preferences lie.

In addition to diversity, Democrats are considering electoral competitiveness and states’ efforts to relax voting restrictions. They’re scrutinizing states’ racial makeup, union membership and size in terms of population and geography — which can affect possibilities for direct voter engagement and travel and advertising costs.

After results malfunctions that kept The Associated Press from declaring a winner, Iowa Democrats have proposed changing the caucus’ presidential preference portion to require that all participants mail in their selections. But there also had been calls for a decade-plus from top Democrats to move the starting line elsewhere, thus highlighting the party’s growth and potential among younger voters and those of color.

Advocacy groups have cheered Nevada’s bid for first, with Latino Victory, the board of the Asian American Action Fund, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus’ Bold PAC, Somos Votantes and ASPIRE PAC, which represents Asian American and Pacific Islander members of Congress, endorsing it.

Castro said that his position was once an outlier that irked party bosses but increasingly become ac-

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cepted among top Democrats.

"This time feels different," he said. "After the experience of Iowa in 2020 — and after the push for equity and racial justice the last two years, the recognition that the Democratic Party is the only big tent party, the only inclusive party — it's fitting that our primary calendar would reflect that."

Tougher IRS enforcement central to Dem economic package

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After more than a decade of mostly losing out, the Internal Revenue Service may finally get the cash infusion it's long wanted in the economic package that Democrats are working furiously to push through Congress before their August break.

Under a deal worked out by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, the bill would spend an extra \$79.6 billion on the beleaguered agency over the next 10 years. The plan would generate an additional \$203.7 billion in revenue for the federal government over that time frame, for a net gain of more than \$124 billion, the Congressional Budget Office projects.

As the Senate prepares to begin voting on the bill in the coming days, the IRS proposal has become a magnet for GOP attacks, testing Democratic unity as they try to deliver on key climate and health care priorities ahead of the fall midterm elections.

Democrats say the IRS investment is needed to ensure that corporations and wealthier Americans pay what they owe in taxes. But Republicans are warning it will lead to increased scrutiny of small business owners and others who are burdened enough.

The IRS has been mostly on the losing end of congressional funding fights over the past dozen years. In April, IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig told members of the Senate Finance Committee the agency's budget has decreased by more than 15% over the past decade when accounting for inflation and that the number of full-time employees at 79,000 in the last fiscal year was close to 1974 levels.

Enforcement staffing has been hit even harder, falling by some 30% since 2010, even though the filing population increased.

"Every measure that is important to effective tax administration has suffered tremendously in recent years, with profound deficiencies resulting from underinvestment in human capital and information technology," Rettig said.

Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., a longtime member of the Senate Finance Committee, said he hears the same thing from IRS commissioners every few years, regardless of whether they're serving a Republican or Democratic administration.

"They beg us to provide some resources to the IRS so they can do their job," Carper said.

Democrats see an opportunity to change that. More than half of their proposed spending increase would go to enforcement. The next biggest chunk, \$25.3 billion, would go to operations support, such as rent, security and postage. Another \$4.75 billion would go to improve call-back services and other technology designed to improve customer service. And \$3.2 billion would go to pre-filing and educational assistance.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden, D-Ore., called the investment "essential as a tool to making sure we have a rational tax policy."

"This will give us the chance to raise the revenue from wealthy tax cheats who are getting out of paying what they owe," Wyden said.

GOP lawmakers decry the plan and depict a larger IRS as a means to harass constituents.

"In a time of inflation, Democrats also want to spend \$80 billion to roughly double the size of the IRS so they can take more money out of the American people through harassment and audits, using taxpayer money to make taxpayers' lives worse," Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor Thursday.

"I think it's terrible for them to want to weaponize the Internal Revenue Service, to supersize it in an effort to go after, you know, families and farmers and small businesses and try to raise more money," said Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo. "It's basically a shakedown operation."

One particular complaint is that the Democratic proposal should have put more resources for customer

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service rather than focusing on enforcement. The pandemic forced the IRS to temporarily shut down its processing facilities for health and safety reasons. That has led to unprecedented delays and challenges with the IRS still struggling to catch up.

"First, take care of good, honest taxpayers just trying to get basic assistance out of the IRS," said Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont.

In a letter to lawmakers on Thursday, Rettig emphasized that the resources in the package would get the IRS back to historical norms in areas that are challenging the agency. Those include large corporations and high net-worth taxpayers, as well as multinational taxpayers, where sophisticated, specialized teams are needed to unpack complex structures. He also said that audit rates would not rise relative to recent years for those with less than \$400,000 in annual income.

"These resources are absolutely not about increasing audit scrutiny on small businesses or middle-income Americans," Rettig wrote.

The CBO projections indicate that the IRS measures represent about a sixth of the revenue raised by the bill, with that revenue going toward helping people buy private health coverage, boosting federal investments in renewable energy like wind and solar power, and paying down debt, among other things.

It's unclear which aspects of the Democratic tax proposals could change before the Senate completes work on the bill, but Wyden said he is confident that the boost in spending for the IRS will remain in the final package.

"I can tell you, thus far, I have not had an objection in the Democratic caucus on this provision of beefing up IRS resources so they can go after wealthy tax cheats," Wyden said.

Republicans to announce site of 2024 national convention

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Republicans are to announce Friday whether the 2024 national convention, where the party's presidential nominee will be officially named, will be held in Milwaukee or Nashville.

Milwaukee, in swing state Wisconsin, is the odds-on favorite to get the event given Nashville's refusal to adopt an agreement for hosting the convention. There has been broad bipartisan support for holding the event in Milwaukee, which was selected to host the 2020 Democratic convention that had to be moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Milwaukee used its preparations for that convention to argue to Republicans that it had a "turnkey" operation ready to host for real in 2024. Milwaukee was the pick of the RNC's site selection committee in July.

The Republican National Committee is to announce its decision on the final day of its summer meeting in Chicago.

Nashville's bid hit a roadblock after Mayor John Cooper and others expressed concerns about security, the economic trade-off of having to mostly shut down the bustling downtown except for convention activity as well as the implications of tying up city resources for the event.

The Nashville common council on Tuesday rejected a draft agreement for hosting the convention, seemingly ending that city's chances.

It was a different story in Milwaukee, where leaders in the Democratic stronghold joined together with Republican power brokers, including former RNC Chairman Reince Priebus, to make the pitch for hosting the convention. Priebus, a former White House chief of staff under former President Donald Trump and Wisconsin state GOP chairman, leads the local committee for the convention.

Trump narrowly won Wisconsin in 2016, but lost to President Joe Biden by a nearly identical margin in 2020.

Wisconsin could determine who wins in 2024, while Tennessee has not backed a Democrat for president since 1996. But choosing Milwaukee is in line with recent Republican choices for the convention. For two decades, Republicans have placed their nominating convention in swing states — North Carolina, Ohio and Florida.

US to issue ID to migrants awaiting deportation proceedings

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

U.S. immigration authorities are planning to issue photo ID cards to immigrants in deportation proceedings in a bid to slash paper use and help people stay up-to-date on required meetings and court hearings, officials said.

The proposal from Immigration and Customs Enforcement is still being developed as a pilot program, and it was not immediately clear how many the agency would issue. The cards would not be an official form of federal identification, and would state they are to be used by the Department of Homeland Security.

The idea is for immigrants to be able to access information about their cases online by using a card rather than paper documents that are cumbersome and can fade over time, officials said. They said ICE officers could also run checks on the cards in the field.

"Moving to a secure card will save the agency millions, free up resources, and ensure information is quickly accessible to DHS officials while reducing the agency's FOIA backlog," an ICE spokesperson said in a statement, referring to unfulfilled public requests for agency documents. Homeland Security gets more Freedom of Information Act requests than any other federal agency, according to government data, and many of those involve immigration records.

The proposal has sparked a flurry of questions about what the card might be used for and how secure it would be. Some fear the program could lead to tracking of immigrants awaiting their day in immigration court, while others suggest the cards could be advertised by migrant smugglers to try to induce others to make the dangerous trip north.

The Biden administration is seeking \$10 million for the so-called ICE Secure Docket Card in a budget proposal for the next fiscal year. It was not immediately clear if the money would cover the pilot or a broader program or when it would begin.

The administration has faced pressure as the number of migrants seeking to enter the country on the southwest border has increased. Border Patrol agents stopped migrants more than 1.1 million times from January to June, up nearly one-third from the same period of an already-high 2021.

Many migrants are turned away under COVID-19-related restrictions. But many are allowed in and either are detained while their cases churn through the immigration courts or are released and required to check in periodically with ICE officers until a judge rules on their cases.

Those most likely to be released in the United States are from countries where expulsion under the public health order is complicated due to costs, logistics or strained diplomatic relations, including Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

At shelters, bus stations and airports along the U.S.-Mexico border, migrants carefully guard their papers in plastic folders. These are often the only documents they have to get past airport checkpoints to their final destinations in the United States. The often dog-eared papers can be critical to getting around.

An immigration case can take years and the system can be confusing, especially for immigrants who know little English and may need to work with an array of government agencies, including ICE and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which issues work permits and green cards. U.S. immigration courts are overseen by the Justice Department.

Gregory Z. Chen, senior director of government relations at the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said migrants have mistakenly gone to ICE offices instead of court for scheduled hearings that they then missed as a result. He said so long as immigrants' privacy is protected, the card could be helpful.

"If ICE is going to be using this new technology to enable non citizens to check in with ICE, or to report information about their location and address, and then to receive information about their case — where their court hearings might be, what the requirements might be for them to comply with the law — that would be a welcome approach," Chen said.

It was not clear whether Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration would accept the cards for airport travel or whether private businesses would consider it valid.

The United States doesn't have a national photo identification card. Residents instead use a range of

cards to prove identification, including driver's licenses, state ID cards and consular ID cards. What constitutes a valid ID is often determined by the entity seeking to verify a person's identity.

Talia Inlender, deputy director of the Center for Immigration Law and Policy at University of California, Los Angeles' law school, said she was skeptical that using a card to access electronic documents would simplify the process for immigrants, especially those navigating the system without a lawyer, and questioned whether the card has technology that could be used to increase government surveillance of migrants.

But having an ID could be useful, especially for migrants who need to travel within the U.S., Inlender said. "Many people are fleeing persecution and torture in their countries. They're not showing up with government paperwork," Inlender said. "Having a form of identification to be able to move throughout daily life has the potential to be a helpful thing."

That has some Republican lawmakers concerned that the cards could induce more migrants to come to the U.S. or seek to access benefits they're not eligible for. A group of 16 lawmakers sent a letter last week to ICE raising questions about the plan.

"The Administration is now reportedly planning yet another reckless policy that will further exacerbate this ongoing crisis," the letter said.

Typically bombastic Alex Jones makes for complicated court

By JIM VERTUNO and MICHAEL TARM Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones bulled through the first of several trials against him that could decimate his personal fortune and media empire in his usual way: Loud, aggressive and talking about conspiracies both in and out the courtroom.

It's business as usual for the gravelly voiced, barrel-chested Jones. But by courtroom standards, his erratic and, at times, disrespectful behavior is unusual — and potentially complicated for the legal process.

Jones and his media company, Free Speech Systems, were ordered Thursday to pay \$4.11 million in compensatory damages to the parents of 6-year-old Jesse Lewis, who was killed with 19 other first graders and six educators in the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Newtown, Connecticut. And significantly more could be on the way.

Although the more-than \$4 million was significantly less than the \$150 million in damages Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis are seeking, the jury meets again Friday to hear about Jones' finances before deciding on punitive damages.

Jones faces two more Sandy Hook trials to determine damages later this year: One for parents of a 6-year-old boy in an Austin court, and another for eight families in Connecticut.

Heslin and Lewis have testified that Jones' constant push of false claims that the shooting was a hoax or staged made the last decade a "living hell" of death threats, online abuse and unrelenting trauma inflicted by Jones and his followers.

After years of false hoax claims, Jones admitted under oath that the shooting was "100% real" and even shook hands with the parents.

But the bombastic version of Jones was always lurking under the surface, or even on full display away from the courthouse.

During a break on the first day, he held an impromptu news conference just a few feet from the courtroom doors, declaring the proceedings a "kangaroo court" and "show trial" railroading his fight for free speech under the First Amendment. On the first day, he arrived at the courthouse with "Save the 1st" written on silver tape over his mouth.

When he came to the courthouse, it was always with a security detail of three or four guards. Jones, who wasn't in court for the verdict, often skipped testimony to appear on his daily Infowars program, where the attacks on the judge and jury continued. During one show, Jones said the jury was pulled from a group of people who "don't know what planet they live on."

That clip was shown to the jury. So was a snapshot from his Infowars website showing Judge Maya Guerra Gamble engulfed in flames. She laughed at that.

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Jones was only slightly less combative in court. He was the only witness to testify in his defense and Gamble knew it had the potential to go off the rails. She warned Jones' lawyers before it even started that if he tried to turn it into a performance, she would clear the courtroom and shut down the livestream broadcasting the trial to the world.

When Jones arrived for Lewis' testimony, Gamble asked if he was chewing gum, a violation of a strict rule in her courtroom. She'd scolded his attorney Andino Reynal several times already.

That led to a testy exchange. Jones said he wasn't chewing gum. Gamble said she could see his mouth moving. Jones opened wide and leaned over the defense table to show her a gap in his mouth where he'd had a tooth extracted. Jones insisted he was only massaging the hole with his tongue.

"Don't show me," the judge said.

Some legal experts said they were surprised by Jones' behavior and questioned whether it was a calculated risk to boost his appeal to fans.

"It's the most bizarre behavior I have ever seen at a trial," said Barry Covert, a Buffalo, New York, First Amendment lawyer. "In my opinion, Jones is a money making juggernaut — crazy like a fox," Covert said. "The bigger the spectacle, the better."

Kevin Goldberg, a First Amendment specialist at the Maryland-based Freedom Forum, said he found it hard to imagine what Jones might be thinking and what benefit he could derive from his behavior.

"I don't know what it is designed to accomplish other than being on brand for Alex Jones," said Goldberg. "This seem to be a man who has built his brand ... on disrespecting the institutions of government ... and this court."

Defendants at trial are often given some leeway because they have so much at stake — prison in criminal cases and, in Jones' civil trial, potential financial ruin. Monetary sanctions or even post-trial contempt charges are also a possibility.

Gamble had to be careful how she handled it all, Covert said.

"Jones' bizarre behavior is putting the judge in a very difficult box," said Covert. "She doesn't want to appear to put her finger on the scales of justice."

Jones skipped Heslin's testimony when he described for the jury holding his dead son in his arms with a "bullet hole through his head."

Heslin said he wanted to confront Jones face-to-face and called his absence that day "cowardly." Jones was instead appearing on his daily broadcast.

Jones was in the room when Lewis took the stand, sitting barely 10 feet away as she looked directly at him.

"My son existed. I am not 'deep state,' she said of the conspiracy theory of a shadowy network of federal workers running the government.

"I know you know that," Lewis said.

When Lewis asked Jones if he thought she was an actor, Jones answered "No," but was cut off by Gamble who scolded him for speaking out of turn.

At the end of that day, Jones and the parents shook hands. Lewis even handed him a sip of water to help calm a persistent cough Jones said was caused by a torn larynx. Her attorney Wesley Ball quickly stepped in to break it up.

"No," Ball snapped at Jones, "You are NOT doing this."

Jones was the only witness in his defense. His testimony pushed the rules of the court so often that the plaintiffs openly questioned whether Jones and his attorneys were trying to sabotage the court and force a mistrial. They filed a motion for sanctions against them after Jones claimed he was bankrupt, which attorneys dispute and was off limits in testimony.

At one point, Jones appeared flabbergasted when the family's attorneys announced that Jones' legal team had mistakenly sent them two years' worth of data from his cell phone — a massive data dump they said should have been produced in discovery but wasn't. They said it proved he'd been receiving texts and emails about Sandy Hook and his media company's finances that he hadn't turned over under

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court orders.

"This is your Perry Mason moment," Jones snapped.

Plaintiff's attorney Mark Bankston said Thursday that the House committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol had requested those materials and that he intended to give it to them.

The Jan. 6 committee first subpoenaed Jones in November, demanding a deposition and documents related to his efforts to spread misinformation about the 2020 election and a rally on the day of the attack.

During the trial, Jones often spoke out of turn, and was cut off when he veered into conspiracies, ranging from the Sept. 11 terror attacks being staged to a fake effort of the United Nations on world depopulation. He continued to call into question some of the biggest events and significant government institutions in American life.

"This," the judge told him, "is not your show."

Democrats say they've reached agreement on economic package

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Democrats have agreed to eleventh-hour changes to their marquee economic legislation, they announced late Thursday, clearing the major impediment to pushing one of President Joe Biden's paramount election-year priorities through the chamber in coming days.

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., a centrist seen as the pivotal vote in the 50-50 chamber, said in a statement that she had agreed to revamping some of the measure's tax and energy provisions and was ready to "move forward" on the bill.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he believed his party's energy, environment, health and tax compromise "will receive the support of the entire" Democratic membership of the chamber. His party needs unanimity and Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote to move the measure through the Senate over certain solid opposition from Republicans, who say the plan's tax boosts and spending would worsen inflation and damage the economy.

The announcement came as a surprise, with some expecting talks between Schumer and the mercurial Sinema to drag on for days longer without guarantee of success. Schumer has said he wants the Senate to begin voting on the legislation Saturday, after which it would begin its summer recess. Passage by the House, which Democrats control narrowly, could come when that chamber returns briefly to Washington next week.

Democrats revealed few details of their compromise, and other hurdles remained. Still, final congressional approval would complete an astounding resurrection of Biden's wide-ranging domestic goals, though in more modest form.

Democratic infighting had embarrassed Biden and forced him to pare down a far larger and more ambitious \$3.5 trillion, 10-year version, and then a \$2 trillion alternative, leaving the effort all but dead. Instead, Schumer and Sen. Joe Manchin, the conservative maverick Democrat from West Virginia who derailed Biden's earlier efforts, unexpectedly negotiated the slimmer package two weeks ago.

Its approval would let Democrats appeal to voters by boasting they are moving to reduce inflation — though analysts say that impact would be minor — address climate change and increase U.S. energy security.

"Tonight, we've taken another critical step toward reducing inflation and the cost of living for America's families," Biden said in a statement.

Sinema said Democrats had agreed to remove a provision raising taxes on "carried interest," or profits that go to executives of private equity firms. That's been a proposal she has long opposed, though it is a favorite of Manchin and many progressives.

The carried interest provision was estimated to produce \$13 billion for the government over the coming decade, a small portion of the measure's \$739 billion in total revenue.

It will be replaced by a new excise tax on stock buybacks which will bring in more revenue than that, said one Democrat familiar with the agreement. The official, who was not authorized to discuss the deal

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publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, provided no other detail.

Sinema said she had also agreed to unspecified provisions to “protect advanced manufacturing and boost our clean energy economy.”

She noted that Senate parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough is still reviewing the measure to make sure no provisions must be removed for violating the chamber’s procedures. “Subject to the parliamentarian’s review, I’ll move forward,” Sinema said.

The measure must adhere to those rules for Democrats to use procedures that will prevent Republicans from mounting filibusters, delays that require 60 votes to halt.

Schumer said the measure retained the bill’s language on prescription drug pricing, climate change, “closing tax loopholes exploited by big corporations and the wealthy” and reducing federal deficits.

He said the bill “addressed a number of important issues” that Democratic senators raised during talks. He said the final measure “will reflect this work and put us one step closer to enacting this historic legislation into law.”

Left unclear was whether changes had been made to the bill’s 15% minimum corporate tax, a provision Sinema has been interested in revising. It would raise an estimated \$313 billion, making it the legislation’s largest revenue raiser.

That levy, which would apply to around 150 corporations with income exceeding \$1 billion, has been strongly opposed by business, including by groups from Sinema’s Arizona.

The final measure was expected to include assistance that Sinema and other Western senators have been trying to add to help their states cope with epic drought and wildfires that have become commonplace. Those lawmakers have been seeking around \$5 billion but it was unclear what the final language would do, said a Democrat following the bargaining who would describe the effort only on condition of anonymity.

The measure will also have to withstand a “vote-a-rama,” a torrent of nonstop amendments expected to last well into the weekend, if not beyond. Republicans want to kill as much of the bill as possible, either with the parliamentarian’s rulings or amendments.

Even if their amendments lose — as is certain for most — Republicans will consider it mission accomplished if they force Democrats to take risky campaign-season votes on touchy issues like taxes, inflation and immigration.

Democratic amendments are expected as well. Progressive Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., has said he wants to make its health care provisions stronger.

The overall bill would raise \$739 billion in revenue. That would come from tax boosts on high earners and some huge corporations, beefed-up IRS tax collections and curbs on drug prices, which would save money for the government and patients.

It would spend much of that on initiatives helping clean energy, fossil fuels and health care, including helping some people buy private health insurance. That would still leave over \$300 billion in the measure for deficit reduction.

Alex Jones ordered to pay Sandy Hook parents more than \$4M

By JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A Texas jury Thursday ordered conspiracy theorist Alex Jones to pay more than \$4 million — significantly less than the \$150 million being sought — in compensatory damages to the parents of a 6-year-old boy killed in the Sandy Hook massacre, marking the first time the Infowars host has been held financially liable for repeatedly claiming the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history was a hoax.

The Austin jury must still decide how much the Infowars host should pay in punitive damages to Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis, whose son Jesse Lewis was among the 20 children and six educators who were killed in the 2012 attack in Newtown, Connecticut.

The parents had sought at least \$150 million in compensation for defamation and intentional infliction

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of emotional distress. Jones' attorney asked the jury to limit damages to \$8 — one dollar for each of the compensation charges they considered — and Jones himself said any award over \$2 million "would sink us."

It likely won't be the last judgment against Jones — who was not in the courtroom — over his claims that the attack was staged in the interests of increasing gun controls. A Connecticut judge has ruled against him in a similar lawsuit brought by other victims' families and an FBI agent who worked on the case. He also faces another trial in Austin.

Jones' lead attorney, Andino Reynal, winked at his co-counsel before leaving the courtroom. He declined to comment on the verdict.

Outside the courthouse, the plaintiffs' attorney Mark Bankston insisted that the \$4.11 million amount wasn't a disappointment, noting it was only part of the damages Jones will have to pay.

The jury returns Friday to hear more evidence about Jones and his company's finances.

In a video posted on his website Thursday night, Jones called the reduced award a major victory.

"I admitted I was wrong. I admitted it was a mistake. I admitted that I followed disinformation but not on purpose. I apologized to the families. And the jury understood that. What I did to those families was wrong. But I didn't do it on purpose," he said.

The award was "more money than my company and I personally have, but we are going to work on trying to make restitution on that," Jones said.

Bankston suggested any victory declarations might be premature.

"We aren't done folks," Bankston said. "We knew coming into this case it was necessary to shoot for the moon to get the jury to understand we were serious and passionate. After tomorrow, he's going to owe a lot more."

The total amount awarded in this case could set a marker for the other lawsuits against Jones and underlines the financial threat he's facing. It also raises new questions about the ability of Infowars — which has been banned from YouTube, Spotify and Twitter for hate speech — to continue operating, although the company's finances remain unclear.

Jones, who has portrayed the lawsuit as an attack on his First Amendment rights, conceded during the trial that the attack was "100% real" and that he was wrong to have lied about it. But Heslin and Lewis told jurors that an apology wouldn't suffice and called on them to make Jones pay for the years of suffering he has put them and other Sandy Hook families through.

The parents testified Tuesday about how they've endured a decade of trauma, inflicted first by the murder of their son and what followed: gun shots fired at a home, online and phone threats, and harassment on the street by strangers. They said the threats and harassment were all fueled by Jones and his conspiracy theory spread to his followers via his website Infowars.

A forensic psychiatrist testified that the parents suffer from "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" inflicted by ongoing trauma, similar to what might be experienced by a soldier at war or a child abuse victim.

At one point in her testimony, Lewis looked directly at Jones, who was sitting barely 10 feet away.

"It seems so incredible to me that we have to do this — that we have to implore you, to punish you — to get you to stop lying," Lewis told Jones.

Barry Covert, a Buffalo, New York, First Amendment lawyer who is not involved in the Jones case, said the \$4 million in compensatory damages was lower than he would have expected given the evidence and testimony.

"But I don't think Jones can take this as a victory," he added. "The fact is, \$4 million is significant even if we might have thought it would be a little higher."

Jurors often decline to award any punitive damages after deciding on a compensation figure. But when they choose to, the punitive amount is often higher, Covert said. He said he expects the parents' attorneys to argue that jurors should send the message that no one should profit off defamation.

"They will want jurors to send the message that you can't make a quarter of a billion in profit off harming someone and say you'll just take the damages loss in court," Covert said.

Jones was the only witness to testify in his defense, and he only attended the trial sporadically while

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still appearing on his show. And he came under withering attack from the plaintiffs attorneys under cross-examination, as they reviewed Jones' own video claims about Sandy Hook over the years, and accused him of lying and trying to hide evidence, including text messages and emails about the attack. It also included internal emails sent by an Infowars employee that said "this Sandy Hook stuff is killing us."

At one point, Jones was told that his attorneys had mistakenly sent Bankston the last two years' worth of texts from Jones' cellphone. Bankston said in court Thursday that the U.S. House Jan. 6 committee investigating the 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol has requested the records and that he intends to comply.

And shortly after Jones declared "I don't use email," Jones was shown one that came from his address, and another one from an Infowars business officer telling Jones that the company had earned \$800,000 gross in selling its products in a single day, which would amount to nearly \$300 million in a year.

Jones' media company Free Speech Systems, which is Infowars' parent company, filed for bankruptcy during the two-week trial.

EXPLAINER: What will it take to get Brittney Griner home?

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Now that WNBA star Brittney Griner has been convicted of drug possession and sentenced to nine years in prison, attention turns to the prospect of a prisoner swap between the United States and Russia that could get her home.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken went public with that possibility last week, revealing in an unusual announcement that the U.S. had made a "substantial proposal" aimed at securing the release of Griner and another jailed American, Paul Whelan.

With her court case concluded and her sentence pronounced, such a deal — assuming one can be reached with the Russians — is Griner's best chance of being freed early.

Though the guilty verdict was seen as a foregone conclusion, the imposition of a sentence her lawyers decried as far longer than average could give the U.S. extra impetus to strike a deal palatable to Russia as soon as possible. And the formal end of the court case could be the opening both sides need to forge a diplomatic resolution, too.

A look at what's at stake:

WHAT DID THE U.S. OFFER?

Blinken did not specify the terms other than to describe the offer as substantial and something that he intended to discuss with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

A person familiar with the situation said that the U.S. offered to release Viktor Bout, a convicted Russian arms dealer serving a 25-year prison sentence on charges that he conspired to sell tens of millions of dollars in weapons to Colombia's former FARC guerrilla army. At the time of his conviction, the group was classified by the U.S. as a foreign terrorist organization, though that designation was lifted last year.

The officials did wind up speaking by phone last Friday, the highest-level known contact between the two sides since Russia invaded Ukraine. They are also in Cambodia for meetings involving foreign ministers of Southeast Asian countries.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE RUSSIAN RESPONSE?

Minimal, at least in public. Blinken did not provide details after his call with Lavrov about his response. The Russians gave no hint about their interest in the offer, other than a statement chiding the U.S. to pursue the Americans' freedom through "quiet diplomacy, without releases of speculative information."

On Monday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the Russian government had responded in a "bad faith" manner with an offer that U.S. officials did not regard as serious. She did not elaborate, though CNN reported last week that Moscow also wanted the release of a former colonel from one of its spy agencies who was convicted of murder in Germany last year.

WOULD THERE BE A PRECEDENT FOR A PRISONER SWAP?

In many ways, yes — and a recent one too. In April, Russia traded Marine veteran Trevor Reed, convicted of a physical altercation with police in Moscow, for Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot imprisoned for

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a cocaine trafficking conspiracy.

Yet that involved a Russian with far less notoriety than Bout, a former Soviet air force officer who once inspired a Hollywood movie and who earned the nickname the "Merchant of Death" over allegations that he supplied weapons used for civil wars in countries around the globe. He has adamantly maintained his innocence.

But there's not much recent precedent for public discussions of prisoner swaps, at least by the U.S. government, before the deal is done and planes are in the air. That's what made Blinken's announcement from the State Department briefing room all the more striking.

On one hand, it seemed intended to communicate to the public that the administration will do whatever it needs to do to bring home wrongfully detained Americans.

But such a public overture also risks weakening the administration's negotiating hand to the extent it makes the U.S. look overly desperate for a deal, or signals to other countries that it is willing to meet potentially unreasonable demands.

SO WILL THE DEAL TAKE PLACE?

It's hard to say, but the contact between Blinken and Lavrov does suggest more progress than has been made before. It also reinforces the idea that the two countries are willing to maintain communication despite extraordinary tensions related to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Griner is the most prominent American detained by a foreign country. She is a two-time Olympic gold medalist detained since February when police said they found vape cartridges containing cannabis oil in her luggage at an airport in Moscow. And though some Republicans including former President Donald Trump have expressed opposition to a deal, the conviction and sentence will only ramp up pressure on the administration to reach an agreement that can get her out soon.

"Today's sentencing of Brittney Griner was severe by Russian legal standards and goes to prove what we have known all along, that Brittney is being used as a political pawn," Lindsay Kagawa Colas, Griner's agent, tweeted Thursday.

She said getting a deal done for Griner and Whelan, a Michigan corporate security executive imprisoned on an espionage conviction he and his family says is baseless, may be difficult but it is "urgent" and the "right thing to do." The U.S. government also regards Whelan as wrongfully convicted.

For their part, Russian authorities have suggested that they regard a conviction as basically a prerequisite for a prisoner swap.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden again urged Russia to release Griner immediately.

"My administration will continue to work tirelessly and pursue every possible avenue to bring Brittney and Paul Whelan home safely as soon as possible," he said in a statement.

Dried blood and roses: Jury gets rare look at Parkland scene

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Roses brought to honor love on that Valentine's Day in 2018 lay withered, their dried and cracked petals scattered across classroom floors still smeared with the blood of victims gunned down by a former student more than four years ago.

Bullet holes pocked walls, and shards of glass from windows shattered by gunfire crunched underfoot at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, where shooter Nikolas Cruz killed 14 students and three staff members. Nothing had been changed, except for the removal of the victims' bodies and some personal items.

Twelve jurors and 10 alternates who will decide whether Cruz gets the death penalty or life in prison made a rare visit to the massacre scene Thursday, retracing Cruz's steps through the three-story freshman building, known as "Building 12." After they left, a group of journalists was allowed in for a much quicker first public view.

The sight was deeply unsettling: Large pools of dried blood still stained classroom floors. A lock of dark hair rested on the floor where one of the victims' bodies once lay. A single black rubber shoe was in a

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hallway. Brownd rose petals were strewn across a hallway where six people died.

In classroom after classroom, open notebooks displayed uncompleted lessons. A blood-coated book called, "Tell Them We Remember" sat atop a bullet-riddled desk in the classroom where teacher Ivy Schamis taught students about the Holocaust. A sign attached to a bulletin board read: "We will never forget." Two students died there.

In the classroom of English teacher Dara Hass, where the most students were gunned down, there were essays about Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager shot by the Taliban for going to school, and who has since become a global advocate for educational access for women and girls.

"A bullet went straight to her head but not her brain," one student wrote. "We go to school every day of the week and we take it all for granted," wrote another. "We cry and complain without knowing how lucky we are to be able to learn."

The door of Room 1255, teacher Stacey Lippel's classroom, was pushed open — like others to signify that Cruz shot into it. Hanging on a wall inside was a sign reading, "No Bully Zone." The creative writing assignment for the day was on the whiteboard: "How to write the perfect love letter."

And still hanging on the wall of a second-floor hallway was a quote from James Dean: "Dream as if you'll live forever, live as if you'll die today."

In slain teacher Scott Beigel's geography classroom, a laptop was still open on his desk. Student assignments comparing the tenets of Christianity and Islam remained, some graded, some not. On his whiteboard, Beigel, the school's cross-country coach, had been writing the gold, silver and bronze medalists in each event at the Winter Olympics, which had begun five days earlier.

Prosecutors, who rested their case following the jury's tour, hope the visit will help prove that Cruz's actions were cold, calculated, heinous and cruel; created a great risk of death to many people and "interfered with a government function" — all aggravating factors under Florida's capital punishment law.

Under Florida court rules, neither the judge nor the attorneys were allowed to speak to the jurors — and the jurors weren't allowed to converse with each other — when they retraced the path Cruz took on Feb. 14, 2018, as he moved from floor to floor, firing down hallways and into classrooms. Prior to the tour, the jurors had already seen surveillance video of the shooting and photographs of its aftermath.

The building has been sealed and was surrounded by a 15-foot (4.6-meter) chain-link fence wrapped in a privacy mesh screen fastened with zip ties. It looms ominously over the school and its teachers, staff and 3,300 students, and can be seen easily by anyone nearby. The Broward County school district plans to demolish it whenever prosecutors approve. For now, it is a court exhibit.

"When you are driving past, it's there. When you are going to class, it's there. It is just a colossal structure that you can't miss," said Kai Koerber, who was a Stoneman Douglas junior at the time of the shooting. He is now at the University of California, Berkeley, and the developer of a mental health phone app. "It is just a constant reminder ... that is tremendously trying and horrible."

Cruz, 23, pleaded guilty in October to 17 counts of first-degree murder; the trial is only to determine if he is sentenced to death or life without parole.

Miami defense attorney David S. Weinstein said prosecutors hope the visit will be "the final piece in erasing any doubt that any juror might have had that the death penalty is the only recommendation that can be made."

Such crime site visits are rare. Weinstein, a former prosecutor, said in more than 150 jury trials dating back to the late 1980s, he has only had one.

In most trials, a crime scene visit wouldn't even be considered because years later it's not the same place as when the crime occurred and can give a false sense of what happened. But in this case, the building was sealed off so it could be done.

Cruz's attorneys have argued that prosecutors have used what they assert is provocative evidence, including Thursday's visit, not just to prove their case, but to inflame jurors' passions.

After jurors returned to the courtroom Thursday, the mothers of two victims testified that the massacre permanently cast a pall over not only every Valentine's Day but other important family celebrations.

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Helena Ramsay, 17, died on her father's birthday. "That day will never be a celebration and can never be the same for him," her mother, Anne Ramsay, said.

Hui Wang, whose 15-year-old son Peter was killed, said the shooting occurred the day before Chinese New Year. A planned celebration was canceled that year and every year since then.

"This day of unity became a day that hurts the most," she said.

The wife of athletic director, Chris Hixon, and their 26-year-old son, who has special needs, also spoke on the fourth and final day jurors heard from victims' families. Hixon, a 49-year-old Navy veteran, died charging into the building trying to stop Cruz and protect the students.

Corey Hixon described a weekly ritual of getting donuts with his dad.

"I miss him," he said, simply.

Twitter responds to Musk's claims, calls them 'excuses'

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Reporter

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Twitter denied in a court filing that it had deprived its would-be acquirer, billionaire and Tesla CEO Elon Musk, of necessary information or misrepresented details about its business. Musk originally made those charges to justify his attempt to back out of a \$44 billion deal to buy the social platform, which he later claimed was infested with much larger numbers of "spam bots" and fake accounts than Twitter had disclosed.

That fate of that acquisition, which Musk agreed to without taking the time to examine the details of Twitter's business, now rests with a Delaware court where Twitter sued to force Musk to complete the deal. The case is scheduled to go to trial on October 17.

The court's decision could ultimately determine the future of a social platform used daily by 238 million people around the globe — a small audience by the standards of Facebook and other major platforms, but one that include political leaders, major entertainers and experts on a variety of subjects. Until January 2021, it was also home to the then-U.S. president, Donald Trump.

In an unexpected twist, Twitter was able to file its response to Musk before Musk's own counterclaims have surfaced in public. A judge ruled on Wednesday that Musk's counterclaim will be made public by Friday.

Parts of Musk's counterclaim, however, was included in Twitter's response. These include accusing the company of fraud and "delay tactics" and only providing Musk "sanitized, incomplete information" in answer to his questions about spam accounts and other company metrics. While Twitter has claimed that Musk is inventing reasons to get out of buying the company, Musk's lawyers say that Twitter is the one holding back the deal by "dragging its feet" and providing insufficient data to the billionaire's requests.

In a reply filed Thursday in Delaware Chancery Court, Twitter calls Musk's reasoning "a story, imagined in an effort to escape a merger agreement that Musk no longer found attractive."

"The Counterclaims are a made-for-litigation tale that is contradicted by the evidence and common sense," Twitter's response says. "Musk invents representations Twitter never made and then tries to wield, selectively, the extensive confidential data Twitter provided him to conjure a breach of those purported representations."

At the same time, the response says, Musk also accused Twitter of breaching their agreement by "stonewalling" his information requests.

Representatives for Musk did not immediately return a message for comment Thursday, although Musk briefly talked about Twitter at Tesla's annual shareholders meeting Thursday.

He told an audience at Tesla's factory near Austin, Texas, that Twitter fit into the grand vision for his holding company. He said that since he uses Twitter a lot, with more than 100 million followers, he knows what to do with it.

"I do understand the product quite well," he said. "So I think I've got a good sense of where to point the engineering team at Twitter to make it radically better," he said.

Attorneys for Musk had wanted to file a public version of their answer and counterclaims in Delaware court Wednesday. But Twitter attorneys complained that they needed more time to review and potentially

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redact Musk's sealed filing, saying it refers "extensively" to internal Twitter information and data given to Musk.

Musk, the world's richest man, agreed in April to buy Twitter and take it private, offering \$54.20 a share and vowing to loosen the company's policing of content and to root out fake accounts. Among other things, Musk said he would restore Trump — who was banned from Twitter following the January 6, 2021, riots at the U.S. Capitol — to the platform.

But Musk said in July that he wanted to back out of the deal, prompting Twitter to file a lawsuit to hold him to the "seller-friendly" agreement.

Musk says Twitter has failed to provide him enough information about the number of fake accounts on its service. Twitter argues that Musk, CEO of electric car maker and solar energy company Tesla Inc., is deliberately trying to tank the deal because market conditions have deteriorated and the acquisition no longer serves his interests.

Either Musk or Twitter would be entitled to a \$1 billion breakup fee if the other party is found responsible for the agreement failing. Twitter wants more, however, and is seeking a court order of "specific performance" directing Musk to follow through with the deal.

US declares public health emergency over monkeypox outbreak

By ZEKE MILLER, MIKE STOBBE and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal government declared a public health emergency Thursday to bolster the response to the monkeypox outbreak that has infected more than 7,100 Americans.

The announcement will free up money and other resources to fight the virus, which may cause fever, body aches, chills, fatigue and pimple-like bumps on many parts of the body.

"We are prepared to take our response to the next level in addressing this virus, and we urge every American to take monkeypox seriously," said Xavier Becerra, head of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The declaration by HHS comes as the Biden administration has faced criticism over monkeypox vaccine availability. Clinics in major cities such as New York and San Francisco say they haven't received enough of the two-shot vaccine to meet demand, and some have had to stop offering the second dose to ensure supply of first doses.

The White House said it has made more than 1.1 million doses available and has helped to boost domestic diagnostic capacity to 80,000 tests per week.

The monkeypox virus spreads through prolonged skin-to-skin contact, including hugging, cuddling and kissing, as well as sharing bedding, towels and clothing. The people who have gotten sick so far have been primarily men who have sex with men. But health officials emphasize that the virus can infect anyone.

No one in the United States has died. A few deaths have been reported in other countries.

Earlier this week, the Biden administration named top officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to serve as the White House coordinators to combat monkeypox.

Thursday's declaration is an important — and overdue — step, said Lawrence Gostin, a public health law expert at Georgetown University.

"It signals the U.S. government's seriousness and purpose, and sounds a global alarm," he said.

Under the declaration, HHS can draw from emergency funds, hire or reassign staff to deal with the outbreak and take other steps to control the virus.

For example, the announcement should help the federal government to seek more information from state and local health officials about who is becoming infected and who is being vaccinated. That information can be used to better understand how the outbreak is unfolding and how well the vaccine works.

Gostin said the U.S. government has been too cautious and should have declared a nationwide emergency earlier. Public health measures to control outbreaks have increasingly faced legal challenges in recent years, but Gostin didn't expect that to happen with monkeypox.

"It is a textbook case of a public health emergency," Gostin said. "It's not a red or a blue state issue."

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There is no political opposition to fighting monkeypox.”

A public health emergency can be extended, similar to what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, he noted.

The urgency in the current response stems from the rapid spread of the virus coupled with the limited availability of the two-dose vaccine called Jynneos, which is considered the main medical weapon against the disease.

The doses, given 28 days apart, are currently being given to people soon after they think they were exposed, as a measure to prevent symptoms.

Becerra announced the emergency declaration during a call with reporters. During the call, Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Robert Califf said regulators are reviewing an approach that would stretch supplies by allowing health professionals to vaccinate up to five people — instead of one — with each vial of Jynneos.

Under this so-called “dose-sparing” approach, physicians and others would use a shallower injection under the skin, instead of the subcutaneous injection currently recommended in the vaccine’s labeling.

Califf said a decision authorizing that approach could come “within days.”

That would require another declaration, to allow the government to alter its guidelines on how to administer the vaccine, officials said.

Health officials pointed to a study published in 2015 that found that Jynneos vaccine administered that way was as effective at stimulating the immune system as when the needle plunger deeper into other tissue.

But experts also have acknowledged they are still gathering information on how well the conventional administration of one or two full doses works against the outbreak.

Others health organizations have made declarations similar to the one issued by HHS.

Last week, the World Health Organization called monkeypox a public health emergency, with cases in more than 70 countries. A global emergency is WHO’s highest level of alert, but the designation does not necessarily mean a disease is particularly transmissible or lethal.

California, Illinois and New York have all made declarations in the last week, as have New York City, San Francisco and San Diego County.

The declaration of a national public health emergency and the naming of a monkeypox czar are “symbolic actions,” said Gregg Gonsalves, a Yale University infectious diseases expert.

What’s important is that the government is taking the necessary steps to control the outbreak and — if it comes to that — to have a plan for how to deal with monkeypox if it becomes endemic, he said.

Monkeypox is endemic in parts of Africa, where people have been infected through bites from rodents or small animals. It does not usually spread easily among people.

But in May, a wave of unexpected cases began emerging in Europe and the United States. Now more than 26,000 cases have been reported in countries that traditionally have not seen monkeypox.

Polio fears rise in New York amid possible community spread

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York state health officials issued a more urgent call Thursday for unvaccinated children and adults to get inoculated against polio, citing new evidence of possible “community spread” of the dangerous virus.

The polio virus has now been found in seven different wastewater samples in two adjacent counties north of New York City, health officials said.

So far, only one person has tested positive for polio — an unvaccinated adult in Rockland County who suffered paralysis.

But based on earlier polio outbreaks, “New Yorkers should know that for every one case of paralytic polio observed, there may be hundreds of other people infected,” the state’s health commissioner, Dr. Mary T. Bassett, said in a statement.

“Coupled with the latest wastewater findings, the Department is treating the single case of polio as just

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the tip of the iceberg of much greater potential spread," she said. "As we learn more, what we do know is clear: the danger of polio is present in New York today. We must meet this moment by ensuring that adults, including pregnant people, and young children by 2 months of age are up to date with their immunization — the safe protection against this debilitating virus that every New Yorker needs."

The polio patient in Rockland County is the first person known to be infected with the virus in the U.S. in nearly a decade. Wastewater samples collected in June and July in adjacent Orange County also contained the virus.

Polio, once one of the nation's most feared diseases, was declared eliminated in the United States in 1979, more than two decades after vaccines became available.

A majority of people infected with polio have no symptoms, but can still shed the virus and give it to others for days or weeks. A small percentage of people who get the disease suffer paralysis. The disease is fatal for between 5-10% of those paralyzed.

All school children in New York are required to have a polio vaccine, but enforcement of vaccination rules in some areas can be lax. Rockland and Orange counties are both known as centers of vaccine resistance. Statewide, about 79% of have completed their polio vaccination series by age two. In Orange County, that rate is 59%. In Rockland it is 60%.

The Orange County wastewater samples were initially collected from municipal wastewater treatment plants for COVID-19 testing.

"It is concerning that polio, a disease that has been largely eradicated through vaccination, is now circulating in our community, especially given the low rates of vaccination for this debilitating disease in certain areas of our County," said Orange County Health Commissioner Irina Gelman said. "I urge all unvaccinated Orange County residents to get vaccinated as soon as medically feasible."

Autocratic Hungarian leader Orban hailed by US conservatives

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Hungary's autocratic Prime Minister Viktor Orban urged cheering American conservatives on Thursday to "take back the institutions," stick to hardline stances on gay rights and immigration and fight for the next U.S. presidential election as a pivotal moment for their beliefs.

The exuberant cheers and standing ovations at the Conservative Political Action Conference for the far-right prime minister, who has been criticized for undermining his own country's democratic institutions, demonstrated the growing embrace between Orban and Republicans in the U.S.

He mocked the media in this country and in Europe. And in a speech he titled "How We Fight," Orban told the crowd gathered in a Dallas convention ballroom to focus now on the 2024 election, saying they had "two years to get ready," though he endorsed no candidate or party.

"Victory will never be found by taking the path of least resistance," he said during one of the keynote slots of the three-day CPAC event. "We must take back the institutions in Washington and Brussels. We must find friends and allies in one another."

Referring to liberals, he said: "They hate me and slander me and my country, as they hate you and slander you for the America you stand for."

His entrance drew a bigger welcome than the governor of Texas, Republican Greg Abbott, received moments earlier on the same stage. From there, the cheers continued as Orban weaved through attacks on LGBTQ rights, boasted about reducing abortions in Hungary and celebrated hardline immigration measures back home.

Other speakers will include former President Donald Trump — who met with Orban earlier this week and will address the gathering on Saturday — Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Republican candidates fresh off GOP primary election victories Tuesday.

Orban's visit to the U.S. came amid backlash back home and in Europe over anti-migrant remarks in which he railed against Europe becoming a "mixed race" society. One of his closest associates compared his comments to Nazi rhetoric and resigned in protest. Orban told the crowd in Texas the media would

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portray him as a racist strongman and dismissed those who would call his government racist as "idiots."

His invitation to CPAC reflects conservatives' growing embrace of the Hungarian leader whose country has a single-party government. Orban also is considered the closest ally in the European Union to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Thursday that President Joe Biden had no plans to speak with Orban while he's in the U.S. Asked if the administration had any concerns about CPAC inviting such a leader to speak at the high-profile conference, Kirby demurred.

"He's coming at a private invitation," Kirby said. "Mr. Orban and the CPAC, they can talk about his visit."

Trump praised Orban, who has been prime minister for 12 years, after their meeting this week in Florida.

"Few people know as much about what is going on in the world today," the former president said in a statement after the meeting.

To some attending the three-day conference, Orban is a model leader who makes an impression beyond Hungary because of his policies and personality.

They praised him for his border security measures and for providing financial subsidies to Hungarian women, which Orban has called an effort to counter Hungary's population decline. Lilla Vessey, who moved to Dallas from Hungary with her husband, Ede, in the 1980s, said what she hears back in Hungary is that Orban is not anti-democratic.

"I don't know how it happened that the conservatives kind of discovered him," said Ede Vessey, 73. "He supports the traditional values. He supports the family."

Scott Huber, who met Orban along with other CPAC attendees at a private event hours before the speech, said the prime minister expressed hope the U.S. would "moderate a little bit from the far-left influences" in November's midterm elections. The 67-year-old Pennsylvanian said he would not disagree with descriptions of Orban as autocratic and that he has upset democratic norms, but said he thought it would change in time.

As to why Orban is winning over so many conservatives, Huber noted Orban's attacks on George Soros, the American-Hungarian billionaire and philanthropist who is a staunch critic of Hungary's government and a supporter of liberal causes.

"That's why I was so interested in seeing him," Huber said.

Through his communications office, Orban declined an interview request by The Associated Press prior to his speech in Dallas.

The AP and other international news organizations also were prohibited from covering a CPAC conference held in Budapest in May, the group's first conference in Europe. During that gathering, Orban called Hungary "the bastion of conservative Christian values in Europe" and urged conservatives in the U.S. to defeat "the dominance of progressive liberals in public life."

He has styled himself as a champion of what he calls "illiberal democracy."

Orban served as prime minister of Hungary between 1998 and 2002, but it's his record since taking office again in 2010 that has drawn controversy and raised concerns about Hungary sliding into authoritarian rule. He has depicted himself as a defender of European Christendom against Muslim migrants, progressives and the "LGBTQ lobby."

Last year, his right-wing Fidesz party banned the depiction of homosexuality or sex reassignment in media targeting people under 18. Information on homosexuality also was forbidden in school sex education programs, or in films and advertisements accessible to minors.

Some of the biggest applauses during Orban's speech came when he described Hungary's family framework.

"To sum up, the mother is a woman, the father is a man, and leave our kids alone, full stop," he said.

Orban has consolidated power over the the country's judiciary and media, and his party has drawn legislative districts in a way that makes it very difficult for opposition parties to win seats — somewhat similar to partisan gerrymandering efforts for state legislative and congressional seats in the U.S. That process currently favors Republicans because they control more of the state legislatures that create those boundaries.

Orban's moves have led international political observers to label him as the face of a new wave of authoritarianism. The European Union has launched numerous legal proceedings against Hungary for breaking EU rules and is withholding billions in recovery funds and credit over violations of rule-of-law standards and insufficient anti-corruption safeguards.

Feds charge 4 police officers in fatal Breonna Taylor raid

By DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — The federal government filed civil rights charges Thursday against four Louisville police officers over the drug raid that led to the death of Breonna Taylor, a Black woman whose fatal shooting helped fuel the racial justice protests that rocked the nation in 2020.

The charges — most of which stem from the faulty drug warrant used to search Taylor's home — are an effort to hold law enforcement accountable for the killing of the 26-year-old medical worker. One of the officers was acquitted of state charges earlier this year.

"Breonna Taylor should be alive today," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in announcing the charges, which include unlawful conspiracy, use of force and obstruction of justice.

The charges named former officers Joshua Jaynes and Brett Hankison, along with current officers Kelly Goodlett and Sgt. Kyle Meany. Louisville police said they are seeking to fire Goodlett and Meany.

Hankison was the only officer charged Thursday who was on the scene the night of the killing.

Taylor was shot to death by officers who knocked down her door while executing a search warrant. Taylor's boyfriend fired a shot that hit one of the officers as they came through the door, and they returned fire, striking Taylor multiple times.

Hankison, Jaynes and Meany had initial appearances Thursday in federal court before Magistrate Judge Regina Edwards, who set their bonds at \$50,000 each, according to a court clerk official. The three men face a maximum sentence of life in prison for the civil rights charges. Calls to attorneys for Jaynes and Meany were not returned Thursday. It wasn't immediately known if Hankison had an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

Goodlett has pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiracy, Taylor family attorney Ben Crump said Thursday, though records on her court proceedings were sealed. Goodlett faces up to five years in prison.

Local activists and members of Taylor's family celebrated the charges and thanked federal officials. Supporters gathered in a downtown park and chanted: "Say her name, Breonna Taylor!"

"This is a day when Black women saw equal justice in America," Crump said.

Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, said she has waited nearly 2 1/2 years for police to be held accountable. "Today's overdue, but it still hurts," she said.

The Justice Department is also conducting a non-criminal investigation of the Louisville Police Department, announced last year, that is probing whether the department has a pattern of using excessive force and conducting unreasonable search and seizures.

In the protests of 2020, Taylor's name was often shouted along with George Floyd, who was killed less than three months after Taylor by a Minneapolis police officer in a videotaped encounter that shocked the nation.

Protesters who took to the streets over months in Louisville were especially critical of Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron, who presented only wanton endangerment charges against Hankison for a grand jury to consider in 2020. Members of the grand jury later came forward to complain that Cameron's office had steered them away from charges for the other officers involved in the raid.

"Thank God that Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron did not get the last word in regard to justice for Breonna Taylor," Crump said Thursday. "We have always said this was a conspiracy to cover up the death of Breonna Taylor. Today the Justice Department put forth the charging documents to show we weren't crazy."

Cameron, a Republican running for governor next year, said in announcing the indictment against Hankison in September 2020 that he would leave "issues regarding potential civil rights violations" to federal

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officials to investigate.

Cameron said in a release Thursday evening that his office's primary task was to "investigate whether the officers who executed the search warrant were criminally responsible for Ms. Taylor's death under state law."

"It is important that people not conflate what happened today with the state law investigation undertaken by our office," Cameron said. "I'm proud of the work of our investigators and prosecutors."

Garland said the officers who were at Taylor's home just after midnight on March 13, 2020, "were not involved in the drafting of the warrant, and were unaware of the false and misleading statements."

Hankison was indicted on two deprivation-of-rights charges alleging he used excessive force when he retreated from Taylor's door, turned a corner and fired 10 shots into the side of her two-bedroom apartment. Bullets flew into a neighbor's apartment, nearly striking one man.

He was acquitted by a jury of state charges earlier this year.

A separate indictment said Jaynes and Meany both knew the warrant used to search Taylor's home had information that was "false, misleading and out of date." Both are charged with conspiracy and deprivation of rights.

Meany ran a police unit that focused on aggressive drug investigations. Police served five warrants simultaneously the night of the Taylor raid, four of them in a concentrated area where drug activity was suspected, and the fifth at Taylor's apartment nearly 10 miles (16 kilometers) away.

The warrant for Taylor's house alleged that she was receiving packages for a suspected drug dealer who was a former boyfriend. The warrant, signed by Jaynes and approved by Meany, said Jaynes had confirmed with the postal service that packages for the ex-boyfriend, Jamarcus Glover, were going to Taylor's apartment. Investigators later learned that Jaynes had not confirmed that with the postal inspector.

Jaynes was fired in January 2021 for violating department standards in the preparation of a search warrant execution and for being "untruthful" in the Taylor warrant.

Jaynes and Goodlett allegedly conspired to falsify an investigative document that was written after Taylor's death, Garland said. Federal investigators also allege that Meany, who testified at Hankison's trial, lied to the FBI during its investigation.

Federal officials filed a separate charge against Goodlett, alleging she conspired with Jaynes to falsify Taylor's warrant affidavit.

Garland alleged that Jaynes and Goodlett met in a garage in May 2020 "where they agreed to tell investigators a false story."

Former Louisville Police Sgt. John Mattingly, who was shot at Taylor's door, retired last year. Another officer, Myles Cosgrove, who investigators said fired the shot that killed Taylor, was dismissed from the department in January 2021.

Taylor's boyfriend, Kenny Walker, who was in her apartment that night and fired the shot at Mattingly, was initially charged with attempted murder of a police officer but that charge was dropped after Walker told investigators he thought an intruder was breaking into the apartment.

The Taylor case also prompted a review of the city's "no-knock" warrant policy. Officers at Taylor's door said they knocked and announced they were police even though the warrant didn't require that. Those types of warrants, used in drug investigations to attempt to prevent the destruction of evidence, were later banned in the city of Louisville.

'Stray': How a virtual orange tabby is helping real cats

By THALIA BEATY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The virtual cat hero from the new video game sensation "Stray" doesn't just wind along rusted pipes, leap over unidentified sludge and decode clues in a seemingly abandoned city. The daring orange tabby is helping real world cats as well.

Thanks to online fundraising platforms, gamers are playing "Stray" while streaming live for audiences to raise money for animal shelters and other cat-related charities. Annapurna Interactive, the game's

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publisher, also promoted "Stray" by offering two cat rescue and adoption agencies copies of the game to raffle off and renting out a New York cat cafe.

Livestreaming game play for charity isn't new, but the resonance "Stray" quickly found from cat lovers is unusual. It was the fourth most watched and broadcast game on the day it launched on Twitch, the streaming platform said.

Viewers watch as players navigate the adventurous feline through an aging industrial landscape doing normal cat stuff — balancing on railings, walking on keyboards and knocking things off shelves — to solve puzzles and evade enemies.

About 80% of the game's development team are "cat owners and cat lovers" and a real-life orange stray as well as their own cats helped inspire the game, one creator said.

"I certainly hope that maybe some people will be inspired to help actual strays in real life — knowing that having an animal and a companion is a responsibility," said producer Swann Martin-Raget, of the BlueTwelve gaming studio in Montpellier, in southern France.

When Annapurna Interactive reached out to the Nebraska Humane Society to partner before the game's launch on July 19, they jumped at the chance, marketing specialist Brendan Gepson said.

"The whole game and the whole culture around the game, it's all about a love of cats," Gepson said. "It meshed really well with the shelter and our mission."

The shelter got four copies of the game to give away and solicited donations for \$5 to be entered into a raffle to win one. In a week, they raised \$7,000, Gepson said, with the vast majority of the 550 donors being new to them, including people donating from Germany and Malta. The company also donated \$1,035 to the shelter.

"It was really mutually beneficial," Gepson said. "They got some really good PR out of it and we got a whole new donor base out of it."

Annapurna also bought out Meow Parlour, the New York cat cafe and adoption agency, for a weekend, as well as donating \$1,000. Visitors who made reservations could buy "Stray" themed merchandise and play the game for 20 minutes while surrounded by cats. (The game also captivates cats, videos on social media show.)

Jeff Legaspi, Annapurna Interactive's marketing director, said it made sense for the game's launch to do something "positively impactful and hopefully bring more awareness to adopting and not shopping for a new pet."

Annapurna declined to disclose sales or download figures for the game, which is available on PlayStation and the Steam platform. However, according to Steam monitor SteamDB, "Stray" has been the No. 1 purchased game for the past two weeks.

North Shore Animal League America, which rescues tens of thousands of animals each year, said it hadn't seen any increase in traffic from the game but they did receive more than \$800 thanks to a gamer.

In a happy coincidence, the shelter had just set up a profile on the platform Tiltify, which allows non-profits to receive donations from video streams, the week the game launched. The player channeled donations to the shelter, smashing her initial goal of \$200.

"We are seeing Tiltify and livestreaming as this whole new way for us to engage a whole different audience," said Carol Marchesano, the rescue's senior digital marketing director. Usually, though, organizations need to reach out to online personalities to coordinate livestreams, which can take a lot of work, she said.

About nine campaigns on Tiltify mention the game "Stray," the company's CEO Michael Wasserman said. JustGiving, which also facilitates charity livestreams, said it identified two campaigns with the game.

For his part, Gepson from Nebraska reached out to an Omaha resident who goes by the name Trey-Day1014 online to run a charity livestream. Trey, who asked that his last name not be used, has two cats, one of which he adopted from the shelter.

Last week, he narrated to viewers watching live on the platform Twitch as his cat character batted another cat's tail and danced along railings.

"If I found out my cat was outside doing this, I'd be upset," Trey said, as his character jumped across a perilous distance. Moments later, a rusty pipe broke, sending the tabby down a gut-wrenching plunge

into the darkness.

"That is a poor baby," Trey said somberly, "but we are okay."

A \$25 donation followed the fall, pushing the amount raised by Trey for the Nebraska shelter to over \$100 in about 30 minutes. By the end of four and a half hours of play, donations totaled \$1,500. His goal had been to raise \$200.

"This has opened my eyes to being able to use this platform for a lot more good than just playing video games," Trey said.

Autopsy: Family killed at Iowa park shot, stabbed, strangled

By MARGERY A. BECK Associated Press

Three family members killed during a shooting last month at an eastern Iowa state park were shot, stabbed and/or strangled, according to autopsy results released Thursday.

Tyler Schmidt, 42, died from a gunshot wound and "multiple sharp force injuries," while his wife, 42-year-old Sarah Schmidt, died from multiple sharp force injuries, the Iowa Department of Public Safety said in a news release. Their 6-year-old daughter, Lula Schmidt, died from a gunshot wound and strangulation, officials said.

All three family members' deaths have been ruled homicides. The Schmidts' 9-year-old son, who was with his family on the camping trip, survived the attack without physical injuries, but investigators have not said whether he was in the tent when the attack happened.

The department confirmed Thursday that the killer was Anthony Sherwin, 23, of LaVista, Nebraska, who died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound after the family was attacked early on the morning of July 22 in their tent at the Maquoketa Caves State Park campground. Sherwin was at the park camping with his parents at the time of the attack, according to police and Sherwin's mother.

Investigators said all evidence collected substantiates that Sherwin acted alone, but police have not revealed a motive for the killings. Mitch Mortvedt, assistant director of the Department of Public Safety's division of criminal investigation, said Thursday that investigators "have indications as to what the motive was," but don't plan to release that information.

Police who swarmed the park about 180 miles (290 kilometers) east of Des Moines in the wake of the shooting found Sherwin's body outside the campground but within a wooded area of the park.

A memorial to celebrate the lives of the Schmidts was held Tuesday in their hometown of Cedar Falls, Iowa, drawing about 200 people.

Sandy Hook lawyer: Jan. 6 panel asked for Alex Jones' texts

By JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — An attorney for the parents of a child killed in the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre who are suing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones over his false claims about the attack said Thursday that the U.S. House Jan. 6 committee has requested two years' worth of records from Jones' phone.

Attorney Mark Bankston told the Texas court where Jones is on trial to determine how much he owes for defaming the parents that the committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol has requested the digital records. He later said outside of court that he plans to comply with the request.

A spokesperson for the committee declined to comment Thursday.

As Jones testified at the trial on Wednesday, Bankston revealed that the Infowars host's lead attorney, Andino Reynal, had mistakenly sent him the last two years' worth of texts from Jones' cellphone.

Reynal asked Judge Maya Guerra Gamble to declare a mistrial over the mistaken transfer of records and said they should have been returned and any copies destroyed. Gamble rejected the request.

Reynal also accused Bankston of trying to perform "for a national audience." He said the material included a review copy of text messages over six months from late 2019 into the first quarter of 2020.

Bankston said his team followed Texas' civil rules of evidence and that Jones' attorneys missed their chance to properly request the return of the records.

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"Mr. Reynal is using a fig leaf (to cover) for his own malpractice," Bankston said.

He said the records mistakenly sent to him included some medical records of plaintiffs in other lawsuits against Jones.

"Mr. Jones and his intimate messages with Roger Stone are not protected," Bankston said, referring to former President Donald Trump's longtime ally.

Rolling Stone, quoting unnamed sources, reported Wednesday evening that the Jan. 6 committee was preparing to subpoena the data from the parents' attorneys to assist in the investigation of the deadly riot.

Bankston said outside of court Thursday that the committee had requested the phone records, but hadn't subpoenaed them. He also said he wasn't familiar with everything that was in the records yet, including whether they include any information that the committee is seeking, because there was so much information in them.

"We don't know (yet) the full scope and breadth," of the material, Bankston said. "We certainly saw text messages from as far back as 2019. ... In terms of what all is on that phone, it's going to take a little while to figure that out."

"The Jan. 6 committee doesn't have any more information about what's on that phone than I do. I don't know if it even covers the time period they are interested in," he said

Jones didn't attend Thursday's court proceedings. But on his Infowars show Thursday, he said the records were from a year before Jan. 6 and had "nothing to do with it."

"And if anything, I say more radical things on air than I do on text messages. And the idea that there's some type of criminal activity on there is preposterous," he said.

The jury in Austin is deciding how much Jones should pay to the parents of a child killed in the 2012 school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, because of his and Infowars' repeated false claims that the shooting was a hoax created by advocates for gun control. Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis, the parents suing Jones, are seeking at least \$150 million in damages.

Last month, the Jan. 6 committee showed graphic and violent text messages and played videos of right-wing figures, including Jones, and others vowing that Jan. 6 would be the day they would fight for Trump.

The committee first subpoenaed Jones in November, demanding a deposition and documents related to his efforts to spread misinformation about the 2020 election and a rally on the day of the attack.

In the subpoena letter, Rep. Bennie Thompson, the Democratic chairman, said Jones helped organize the Jan. 6 rally at the Ellipse that preceded the insurrection. He also wrote that Jones repeatedly promoted Trump's false claims of election fraud, urged his listeners to go to Washington for the rally, and march from the Ellipse to the Capitol. Thompson also wrote that Jones "made statements implying that you had knowledge about the plans of President Trump with respect to the rally."

The nine-member panel was especially interested in what Jones said shortly after Trump's now-infamous Dec. 19, 2020, tweet in which he told his supporters to "be there, will be wild!" on Jan. 6.

"You went on InfoWars that same day and called the tweet 'One of the most historic events in American history,'" the letter continued.

In January, Jones was deposed by the committee during an hourslong, virtual meeting in which he said he exercised his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination "almost 100 times."

Judge shortens road to decide NFL racial discrimination suit

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge on Thursday made it likely she'll rule in weeks rather than months whether NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell gets to decide the merits of racial discrimination claims made by Black coaches against the league and its teams, saying an effort to gather more evidence seems like "an impermissible fishing expedition."

U.S. District Judge Valerie Caproni said in a written ruling that lawyers for coaches Brian Flores, Steve Wilks and Ray Horton cannot gather additional evidence from defendants to support their arguments that the lawsuit in Manhattan federal court should remain in court rather than be sent to arbitration.

Her ruling makes it likely that a decision on whether to move the case to arbitration or let it remain in

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Manhattan federal court will be decided in weeks rather than months.

"Because Plaintiffs should know whether they entered into any other contracts or agreements that would affect their agreement to arbitrate, the Court can only assume that they are attempting to embark on an impermissible fishing expedition," Caproni wrote.

Still, the judge said lawyers for the coaches may well be able to argue that the proposed arbitrator is so biased against them that the motion to compel arbitration should not be granted, but they do not need discovery to do so. In legal cases, "discovery" references evidence such as emails and text messages that lawyers try to get from their opponents to strengthen their arguments.

Flores, who was fired in January as head coach of the Miami Dolphins and is now an assistant coach with the Pittsburgh Steelers, filed the lawsuit in February, saying the league was "rife with racism" even as it publicly condemns it. The other coaches later joined the lawsuit, which sought unspecified damages and class-action status.

The NFL and six of its teams say the lawsuit they maintain is "without merit" is required to go to arbitration, where Goodell would be the arbitrator, according to the terms laid out in employment contracts and the NFL's constitution.

Caproni wrote that courts have not historically allowed lawyers to gather evidence prior to deciding whether a case is required to go to arbitration.

"An agreement to arbitrate is binding on the parties unless the agreement is invalid under state contract law," she wrote. "Thus, on a motion to compel arbitration, the Court's analysis is generally limited to determining whether there is a valid agreement to arbitrate, whether one party has failed to perform its duties under that agreement, and whether the agreement, properly interpreted, encompasses the dispute at hand."

Attorneys Douglas H. Wigdor and John Elefterakis, representing Flores, said in a statement that they are "confident that we will defeat the efforts of the NFL to move this matter into a private and confidential arbitration behind closed doors."

"It is obvious that the NFL is trying to hide behind this process and avoid public scrutiny of the racial discrimination and retaliation claims we have brought. If they are confident in their defenses, they should let the process play out in court so the general public can see," the lawyers said.

In Thursday's ruling, Caproni instructed lawyers for the coaches to submit written arguments against arbitration by Aug. 19 and told the NFL and its teams to respond by Aug. 26.

Her decision came just days after the NFL released the results of its investigation into allegations by Flores that Dolphins owner Stephen Ross offered \$100,000 a game to purposely lose games.

Investigators said the team didn't intentionally lose and neither Ross nor anyone from the team told Flores to purposely lose. And investigators added that any \$100,000-a-game offer "was not intended or taken to be a serious offer." Investigators also found Ross several times during the season expressed his belief that draft position should take priority over won-loss record.

The NFL suspended Ross and fined him \$1.5 million for having impermissible communications with Tom Brady when he was under contract with the New England Patriots and with Sean Payton before he announced his decision to retire as coach of the New Orleans Saints.

In a statement, Ross had called Flores' allegations "false, malicious and defamatory."

Lawyers for the NFL and its teams did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment.

Russians shell city near Europe's largest nuclear plant

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces shelled a Ukrainian city close to Europe's biggest nuclear power plant Thursday, reinforcing warnings from the U.N. nuclear chief that the fighting around the site could lead to a disastrous accident.

Dnipropetrovsk's regional governor said Russia fired 60 rockets at Nikopol, across the Dnieper River from the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, which has been under Russian supervision since Moscow's troops

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seized it early in the war.

Some 50 residential buildings were damaged in the city of 107,000, and residents were left without electricity, Valentyn Reznichenko wrote on Telegram.

Rafael Grossi, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, had warned on Tuesday that the situation was becoming more perilous daily at the Zaporizhzhia plant in the city of Enerhodar.

"Every principle of nuclear safety has been violated" at the plant, he said. "What is at stake is extremely serious and extremely grave and dangerous."

He expressed concern about the way the plant is being operated and the danger posed by the fighting going on around it. He cited shelling at the beginning of the war when it was taken over and continuing instances of Ukraine and Russia accusing each other of attacks there.

Experts at the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War said they believe Russia is shelling the area intentionally, "putting Ukraine in a difficult position."

"Either Ukraine returns fire, risking international condemnation and a nuclear incident — which Ukrainian forces are unlikely to do — or Ukrainian forces allow Russian forces to continue firing on Ukrainian positions from an effective 'safe zone,'" the think tank said.

The Russian capture of Zaporizhzhia renewed fears that the largest of Ukraine's four nuclear power plants could be damaged, setting off an emergency like the 1986 Chernobyl accident, the world's worst nuclear disaster, which happened about 110 kilometers (65 miles) north of the capital, Kyiv.

Also in the Zaporizhzhia region, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Lt. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said the Russian military struck two Ukrainian munitions depots near the village of Novoivanivka and a fuel depot near the Zaporizhzhia railway station.

In northern Ukraine, the country's second-largest city, Kharkiv, was shelled by the Russians, Ukraine's presidential office said. Several industrial sites were hit in the city, which has been a frequent target. In the nearby city of Chuhuiv, a rocket hit a five-story residential building.

Fighting continued in the fiercely contested Donetsk region in the east, with Ukrainian authorities saying a school was destroyed in the village of Ocheretyne. The attacks have disrupted supplies of gas, water and power, and the region's residents are being evacuated.

In the town of Toretsk, artillery shells hit a bus stop, a church and apartment buildings, killing at least eight people, regional Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko said.

In the city of Donetsk, Russian-backed separatist authorities accused Ukrainian forces of shelling the central part of the city Thursday. The area hit was near a theater where a farewell ceremony for a prominent separatist officer killed a few days ago was being held. Donetsk Mayor Alexei Kulemzin said six people were killed.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, denied Ukrainian involvement. He alleged, without offering evidence, that Russian or separatist forces were responsible for the shelling.

Russia and Ukraine have repeatedly accused each other of firing on territories under their own control.

Russian forces have already seized the Luhansk region that neighbors Donetsk. Its Ukrainian governor, Serhiy Haidai, said on social media that local residents are being mobilized by the Russian side to fight against Kyiv's forces and that "even indispensable mine workers are being taken."

Ukrainian authorities reported another abduction of a mayor who reportedly refused to collaborate with the Russians in the southern Kherson region, which is also almost entirely occupied.

The reported kidnapping of Serhiy Lyakhno, mayor of the village of Hornostaivka, comes as Russia amasses more troops in the area in anticipation of a counteroffensive by Kyiv and ahead of a planned referendum on the region becoming part of Russia.

Jo Koy's 'Easter Sunday' puts Filipinos front and center

By TERRY TANG The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — For a comedy, Jo Koy's new movie "Easter Sunday" had a lot of waterworks.

The film was no ordinary job for the comedian and the rest of the cast. The magnitude of being on a mostly Filipino set led to happy cry-fests, Koy said. Emotions really hit when co-star Tia Carrere pointed

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out this was her first time playing a Filipino character in her 40-year career.

"To be able to be right there in a scene with five other Filipino actors and just doing a scene about a family... She never saw that before," Koy, 51, told The Associated Press. "We all just kind of like teared up and just celebrated together because it's like 'OK, this is going to be one of many moments up here.'"

Koy, who is half Filipino and half white, is making his feature film debut in a movie largely inspired by the material from his Netflix stand-up specials. DreamWorks/Universal is touting "Easter Sunday," which opens in theaters Friday, as the first big studio movie with an all-Filipino ensemble. Koy plays Joe Valencia, a comic and aspiring actor who goes home to the San Francisco Bay Area for the titular holiday. He attempts to bond with his teenage son while dealing with well-meaning but overbearing relatives. The production comes at a time when Filipino American food, history and advocacy are increasingly emerging into the zeitgeist.

"Finally our stories, our faces are front and center on the big screen," said Carrere, 55, and known for movies like "Wayne's World," "True Lies" and "Lilo & Stitch." "I have to pinch myself that I'm still here, still in the business and invited to the party."

Jimmy O. Yang ("Crazy Rich Asians," "Love Hard"), who has a cameo in "Easter Sunday," also served as a producer. That meant watching many, many audition tapes of actors of Filipino or Asian descent. Yang was blown away by the talent. It made casting 10 roles that much tougher. He thinks Hollywood claims that capable Asian actors are hard to find are just lazy excuses.

"As an actor, I'm like all of these guys are so good. How did I ever get a job?" Yang said. "Some of them I wanted to call them and be like 'Hey, man! Please keep going OK? We just couldn't hire you for this job but please keep going.'"

"Easter Sunday," directed by Jay Chandrasekhar, is set in the heavily Filipino suburb of Daly City where screenwriter Ken Cheng immigrated to as a kid. He envisioned a mix of Ice Cube's "Friday" and the holiday flick "It's a Wonderful Life." A producer, too, Cheng wrote it in 2020 during lockdown. He then turned to Steven Spielberg, whose Amblin Partners is co-producing. Within a few hours the legendary director read it and gave his approval, according to Cheng.

"From that day to the first day we started shooting was something like five and a half months. And that's like insanely fast," Cheng said. "A lot of that is how enthusiastic everyone was about building a movie around Jo."

Hollywood is populated with notable half-Filipino actors like Vanessa Hudgens and Darren Criss. But Koy is the one leaning into his heritage in his work. For example, he wanted a scene in "Easter Sunday" showing the family packing customary balikbayan boxes. Filipinos, usually first-generation immigrants, typically send boxes with American goods to relatives in the Philippines. Mailing balikbayan boxes is practically its own industry.

"There's this responsibility that they put on their shoulders when they make it to this country," Koy said. "I see that with a lot of Filipino families and I wanted to show the world that's how important this is to us."

Today, Filipinos make up over 4 million of the country's 23 million-plus Asian population, according to the U.S. Census. Only Chinese and Indians number more. Filipino culture and history have been gaining more mainstream visibility in recent years — mostly because of decades-long activism by Filipinos.

This year, a 30-foot (9-meter) tall gateway arch was unveiled in Los Angeles' Historic Filipinotown and a street in New York City's Queens was co-named Little Manila Avenue. A newly built Bay Area park was named for striking Filipino American farmworkers. For years, Filipino food has been hailed off and on as the next culinary trend. It seems to be having a moment again in the fine dining world. Chicago's Kasama became the only Michelin-starred Filipino restaurant in the country.

"Easter Sunday" is coming during "this really amazing moment in Asian American history and Filipino American history, where political, social, and economic capital has all come together," said Eric Pido, an Asian American Studies professor at San Francisco State University with a background in Filipina/o American Studies. He predicts younger generations will raise Filipinos' profiles in the next few years.

"I think Filipino Americans are no longer shying away from sort of taking a representational role in American politics, which will bring up all sorts of interesting things about Filipino American culture that

lots of folks just don't think about," Pido said.

Last month, Koy and Cheng attended a screening of "Easter Sunday" in Daly City. Among the people there was the director of Pixar's "Turning Red," Domee Shi. "Turning Red," about a Chinese-Canadian teenage girl and her family, was a hit after its March release on Disney+. But a white film reviewer called the animated feature exhausting and only relatable for Shi's Chinese family and friends. The review was later pulled over accusations of racism.

The idea that stories that focus on Asian ethnicities and cultures are too specific to be appealing is just outdated, Koy said.

"The relationship between a mother and son is the same no matter what ethnicity," Koy said. "I hate ignorant people that don't move forward... There's a lot of people that live in this country that need to be heard and it's time to hear it."

Amazon workers at UK warehouse stop work to protest pay

LONDON (AP) — More than 700 Amazon warehouse workers in England staged a protest Thursday in a dispute over pay, in the latest sign of workplace friction stoked by Britain's cost of living crisis and a growing discontent among employees over wage and working conditions.

The GMB union said employees at the facility in Tilbury, Essex, east of London, stopped work after the ecommerce giant offered to raise salaries by 35 pence (42 cents) an hour.

The union said workers want a raise of 2 pounds to better match the demands of their job and cope with soaring inflation. Amazon doesn't recognize the union, which likely has one of the highest number of members at the Tilbury location out of its 28 U.K. facilities.

"Amazon is one of the most profitable companies on the planet," said Steve Garelick, the GMB union's regional organizer for logistics and gig economy. "With household costs spiraling, the least they can do is offer decent pay."

Garelick shared videos on Twitter of workers sitting down at tables, which he said showed a "withdrawal of labour" at the Tilbury warehouse.

He said Amazon's "repeated use of short-term contracts is designed to undermine workers' rights."

Amazon said U.K. warehouse employee salaries will rise to between 10.50 and 11.45 pounds an hour, which it called "competitive pay." But its dependent on location.

As well, the company said employees get a comprehensive benefits package that includes private medical insurance, life insurance, subsidized meals, and employee discounts that are "worth thousands annually," as well as a company pension plan.

Similar protests have been staged in the U.S., including in March, when more than 60 workers in New York and Maryland walked out on the job to call for a \$3 raise and a return to 20-minute breaks the company put in place during the pandemic.

Amazon boosted its average hourly wage to \$18 an hour last year.

The Amazon Labor Union, a nascent group composed of former and current Amazon workers, won its union election on Staten Island, New York partly on a platform of raising wages to \$30 an hour. But getting anywhere close to that is bound to be a tough fight. Amazon has been seeking to scrap the union's April victory and is petitioning the National Labor Relations Board for a new election.

Seven years of sex abuse: How Mormon officials let it happen

By MICHAEL REZENDES Associated Press

BISBEE, Ariz. (AP) — MJ was a tiny, black-haired girl, just 5 years old, when her father admitted to his bishop that he was sexually abusing her.

The father, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and an admitted pornography addict, was in counseling with his bishop when he revealed the abuse. The bishop, who was also a family physician, followed church policy and called what church officials have dubbed the "help line" for guidance.

But the call offered little help for MJ. Lawyers for the church, widely known as the Mormon church, who

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staff the help line around the clock told Bishop John Herrod not to call police or child welfare officials. Instead he kept the abuse secret.

"They said, 'You absolutely can do nothing,'" Herrod said in a recorded interview with law enforcement.

Herrod continued to counsel MJ's father, Paul Douglas Adams, for another year, and brought in Adams' wife, Leizza Adams, in hopes she would do something to protect the children. She didn't. Herrod later told a second bishop, who also kept the matter secret after consulting with church officials who maintain that the bishops were excused from reporting the abuse to police under the state's so-called clergy-penitent privilege.

Adams continued raping MJ for as many as seven more years, into her adolescence, and also abused her infant sister, who was born during that time. He frequently recorded the abuse on video and posted the video on the internet.

Adams was finally arrested by Homeland Security agents in 2017 with no help from the church, after law enforcement officials in New Zealand discovered one of the videos. He died by suicide in custody before he could stand trial.

The Associated Press has obtained nearly 12,000 pages of sealed records from an unrelated child sex abuse lawsuit against the Mormon church in West Virginia. The documents offer the most detailed and comprehensive look yet at the so-called help line Herrod called. Families of survivors who filed the lawsuit said they show it's part of a system that can easily be misused by church leaders to divert abuse accusations away from law enforcement and instead to church attorneys who may bury the problem, leaving victims in harm's way.

The help line has been criticized by abuse victims and their attorneys for being inadequate to quickly stop abuse and protect victims. Yet the Utah-based faith has stuck by the system despite the criticism and increasing scrutiny from attorneys and prosecutors, including those in the Adams case.

"I just think that the Mormon church really sucks. Seriously sucks," said MJ, who is now 16, during an interview with the AP. "They are just the worst type of people, from what I've experienced and what other people have also experienced."

MJ and her adoptive mother asked the AP to use only her initials in part because videos of her abuse posted by her father are still circulating on the internet. The AP does not publish the names of sexual abuse survivors without their consent.

William Maledon, an Arizona attorney representing the bishops and the church in a lawsuit filed by three of the Adams' six children, told the AP last month that the bishops were not required to report the abuse.

"These bishops did nothing wrong. They didn't violate the law, and therefore they can't be held liable," he said. Maledon referred to the suit as "a money grab."

In his AP interview, Maledon also insisted Herrod did not know that Adams was continuing to sexually assault his daughter after learning of the abuse in a single counseling session.

But in the recorded interview with the agent obtained by the AP, Herrod said he asked Leizza Adams in multiple sessions if the abuse was ongoing and asked her, "What are we going to do to stop it?"

"At least for a period of time I assumed they had stopped things, but — and then I never asked if they picked up again."

'THE PERFECT LIFESTYLE'

The Adams family lived on a lonely dirt road about 8 miles from the center of Bisbee, an old copper-mining town in southeastern Arizona known today for its antique shops and laid-back attitude. Far from prying eyes, the Adams home — a three-bedroom, open concept affair surrounded by desert — was often littered with piles of clothing and containers of lubricant Adams used to sexually abuse his children, according to legal documents reviewed by the AP.

Paul's wife, Leizza, assumed most of the child-rearing responsibilities, including getting their six children off to school and chauffeuring them to church and religious instruction on Sundays. Paul, who worked for the U.S. Border Patrol, spent much of his time online looking at porn, often with his children watching, or wandering the house naked or in nothing but his underwear.

He had a short fuse and would frequently throw things, yell at his wife and beat his kids. "He just had

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this explosive personality," said Shaunice Warr, a Border Patrol agent and a Mormon who worked with Paul and described herself as Leizza's best friend. "He had a horrible temper."

Paul was more relaxed while coaxing his older daughter to hold a smartphone camera and record him while he sexually abused her. He also seemed to revel in the abuse in online chat rooms, where he once bragged that he had "the perfect lifestyle" because he could have sex with his daughters whenever he pleased, while his wife knew and "doesn't care."

He would later tell investigators the abuse was a compulsion he couldn't stop. "I got into something too deep that I just couldn't pull myself out of," he said. "I'm not trying to say the devil made me do it."

The Adams family was deeply involved in the Mormon community, and on Sundays they attended services in Bisbee. So Adams turned to his church, and to Bishop Herrod, when he sought help and revealed his abuse of MJ.

Herrod later told Homeland Security agent Robert Edwards he knew from the start that Leizza Adams was unlikely to stop her husband, after he called her into the counseling sessions. The bishop, who was also Leizza's personal physician, said she seemed "pretty emotionally dead" when her husband recounted his abuse of their daughter. The bishop also recognized the harm being done to MJ. "I doubt (she) will ever do well," he said in his recorded interview with Homeland Security agents.

Herrod also told Edwards that when he called the help line, church officials told him the state's clergy-penitent privilege required him to keep Adams's abuse confidential.

But the law required no such thing.

Arizona's child sex abuse reporting law, and similar laws in more than 20 states that require clergy to report child sex abuse and neglect, says that clergy, physicians, nurses, or anyone caring for a child who "reasonably believes" a child has been abused or neglected has a legal obligation to report the information to police or the state Department of Child Safety. But it also says that clergy who receive information about child neglect or sexual abuse during spiritual confessions "may withhold" that information from authorities if the clergy determine it is "reasonable and necessary" under church doctrine.

In 2012, when Herrod rotated out of his position as bishop of the Bisbee ward — a Mormon jurisdiction similar to a Catholic parish — he told incoming Bishop Robert "Kim" Mauzy about the abuse in the Adams household. Instead of rescuing MJ by reporting the abuse to authorities, Mauzy also kept the information within the church.

In a separate recorded interview with federal agents obtained by the AP, Mauzy said church officials told him he should convene a confidential disciplinary hearing for Adams, after which Adams was excommunicated in 2013. Mauzy and other church leaders still didn't report Adams to the police.

Two years later, in 2015, Leizza Adams gave birth to a second daughter. It took her husband just six weeks to start sexually assaulting her, recording the abuse, and uploading the videos to the internet.

The revelation that Mormon officials may have directed an effort to conceal years of abuse in the Adams household sparked a criminal investigation of the church by Cochise County Attorney Brian McIntyre, and the civil lawsuit by three of the Adams children.

"Who's really responsible for Herrod not disclosing?" McIntyre asked in an AP interview. "Is it Herrod," who says he followed the church lawyers' instruction not to report the abuse to authorities? "Or is it the people who gave him that advice?"

'THE CALL COMES TO MY CELL PHONE'

When it comes to child sexual abuse, the Mormon church says "the first responsibility of the church in abuse cases is to help those who have been abused and protect those who may be vulnerable to future abuse," according to its 2010 handbook for church leaders. The handbook also says, "Abuse cannot be tolerated in any form."

But church officials, from the bishops in the Bisbee ward to officials in Salt Lake City, tolerated abuse in the Adams family for years.

"They just let it keep happening," said MJ, in her AP interview. "They just said, 'Hey, let's excommunicate her father.' It didn't stop. 'Let's have them do therapy.' It didn't stop. 'Hey, let's forgive and forget and all

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this will go away.' It didn't go away."

A similar dynamic played out in West Virginia, where church leaders were accused of covering up the crimes committed by a young abuser from a prominent Mormon family even after he'd been convicted on child sex abuse charges in Utah. The abuser, Michael Jensen, today is serving a 35- to 75-year prison sentence for abusing two children in West Virginia. Their family, along with others, sued the church and settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.

"Child abuse festers and grows in secrecy," said Lynne Cadigan, a lawyer for the Adams children who filed suit. "That is why the mandatory reporting came into effect. It's the most important thing in the world to immediately report to the police."

The lawsuit filed by the three Adams children accuses The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and several members, including Bishops Herrod and Mauzy, of negligence and conspiring to cover up child sex abuse to avoid "costly lawsuits" and protect the reputation of the church, which relies on proselytizing and tithing to attract new members and raise money. In 2020, the church claimed approximately 16 million members worldwide, most of them living outside the United States.

"The failure to prevent or report abuse was part of the policy of the defendants, which was to block public disclosure to avoid scandals, to avoid the disclosure of their tolerance of child sexual molestation and assault, to preserve a false appearance of propriety, and to avoid investigation and action by public authority, including law enforcement," the suit alleges. "Plaintiffs are informed and believe that such actions were motivated by a desire to protect the reputation of the defendants."

Very few of the scores of lawsuits against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints mention the help line, in part because details of its operations have been a closely guarded secret. The documents in the sealed court records show how it works.

"The help line is certainly there to help — to help the church keep its secrets and to cover up abuse," said Craig Vernon, an Idaho attorney who has filed several sex abuse lawsuits against the church.

Vernon, a former member, routinely demands that the church require bishops to report sex abuse to police or state authorities rather than the help line.

The sealed records say calls to the help line are answered by social workers or professional counselors who determine whether the information they receive is serious enough to be referred to an attorney with Kirton McConkie, a Salt Lake City firm that represents the church.

A document with the heading "Protocol for abuse help line calls," which was among the sealed records obtained by the AP, laid out the questions social workers were to ask before determining whether the calls should be referred to the lawyers.

Mormon officials in the West Virginia case said they did not recognize the Protocol and could not authenticate it. But a ranking church official in a separate sex abuse lawsuit in Oregon confirmed that those answering the help line used a "written protocol" to guide them.

"There would be a page containing various topics to discuss and handle," said Harold C. Brown, then director of the church's Welfare Services Department.

The Protocol instructs those staffing the help line to tell callers they are to use first names only. "No identifying information should be given." Under the heading "High Risk Cases," it also instructs staffers to ask a series of questions, including whether calls concerned possible abuse by a church leader, an employee, or abuse at "a church-sponsored activity."

The protocol advises those taking the calls to instruct a "priesthood leader," which includes bishops and stake presidents, to encourage the perpetrator, the victim, or others who know of the abuse to report it. But it also says, in capital letters, that those taking the calls "should never advise a priesthood leader to report abuse. Counsel of this nature should come only from legal counsel."

That counsel comes from attorneys from Kirton McConkie, which represents the church.

Joseph Osmond, one of the Kirton McConkie lawyers assigned to take help line calls, said in a sealed deposition that he's always ready to deal with sex abuse complaints.

"Wherever I am. The call comes to my cell phone," he said. He then acknowledged that he did not refer

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calls to a social worker and wouldn't know how to do so.

Osmond declined to comment through church officials. Peter Schofield, a Kirton McConkie lawyer long associated with the help line, also declined to answer questions from the AP.

Maledon, the attorney for the church in the Adams lawsuit, said church clergy or church attorneys have made "hundreds of reports" of child abuse to civil authorities in Arizona over an unspecified number of years. But he could not say how many calls to the help line were not referred to police or child welfare officials and could not provide a referral rate.

Two church practices, identified in the sealed records, work together to ensure that the contents of all help lines calls remain confidential. First, all records of calls to the help line are routinely destroyed. "Those notes are destroyed by the end of every day," said Roger Van Komen, the church's director of Family Services, in an affidavit included in the sealed records.

Second, church officials say that all calls referred to Kirton McConkie lawyers are covered by attorney-client privilege and remain out of the reach of prosecutors and victims' attorneys. "The church has always regarded those communications between its lawyers and local leaders as attorney-client privileged," said Paul Rytting, the director of Risk Management, in a sealed affidavit.

AN OMINOUS TIME

Mormon leaders established the help line in 1995 and it operated not within its Department of Family Services, but instead in its Office of Risk Management, whose role is to protect the church and members from injury and liability in an array of circumstances, including fires, explosions, hazardous chemical spills and severe weather. The department ultimately reports to the First Presidency, the three officials at the very top of the church hierarchy, according to records in the sealed documents.

Risk management also tracks all sex abuse lawsuits against the church, according to a sealed affidavit by Dwayne Liddell, a past director of the department who helped establish the help line. He said members of the church's First Presidency knew the details of the help line.

"I have been in those type of meetings where ... the training of ecclesiastical leaders (and) the establishment of a help line have been discussed," Liddell said. When asked who attended the meetings, he answered, "Members of the First Presidency and the presiding bishopric," or the top leaders of the church.

Before establishing the help line in 1995, the Mormon church simply instructed bishops to comply with local child sex abuse reporting laws.

At the time, child sex abuse lawsuits were on the rise and juries were awarding victims millions of dollars. The Mormon church is largely self-insured, leaving it especially vulnerable to costly lawsuits.

"There is nothing inconsistent between identifying cases that may pose litigation risks to the church and complying with reporting obligations," church lawyers said in a sealed legal filing.

But one affidavit in the sealed records which repeatedly says the church condemns child sexual abuse, also suggests the church is more concerned about the spiritual well-being of perpetrators than the physical and emotional well-being of young victims, who also may be members of the faith.

"Disciplinary proceedings are subject to the highest confidentiality possible," said Rytting. "If members had any concerns that their disciplinary files could be read by a secular judge or attorneys or be presented to a jury as evidence in a public trial, their willingness to confess and repent and for their souls to be saved would be seriously compromised."

A GLOBAL INVESTIGATION

In 2016 police in New Zealand arrested a 47-year-old farm worker on child pornography charges and found a nine-minute video on his cell phone, downloaded from the internet, showing a man in his 30s raping a 10-year-old girl.

A global search for the rapist and his victim was on. It started with Interpol and led to the U.S. State Department, where investigators using facial recognition technology matched the rapist with a passport card photo of a U.S. Border Patrol employee living in Bisbee, Arizona, according to a Homeland Security synopsis obtained by the AP.

Agents rushed to the Naco, Arizona, Border Station and arrested Adams, then a lanky, bearded mis-

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sion support specialist with the Border Patrol. After some coaxing, Adams admitted to raping MJ and to sexually assaulting her younger sister, and to posting video of the assaults on the internet. When agents raided his home, they seized phones and computers holding more than 4,000 photos and nearly 1,000 videos depicting child sex abuse, many featuring the Adams daughters.

But the nine-minute video stood out. "This video is one of the worst I've ever seen," Homeland Security agent Edwards later testified, adding that haunting dialogue between Adams and his older daughter helped make the video "stand out in my mind and continue to stand out in my mind."

That video represented nine minutes and 14 seconds in seven years of continual and unnecessary trauma for MJ — and a lifetime of abuse for her tiny sister — while Bishops Herrod and Mauzy and church representatives in Salt Lake City stood by.

After Paul Adams died by suicide, Leizza Adams pleaded no contest to child sex abuse charges and served two-and-a-half years in state prison. Three of the Adams children went to live with members of Leizza's extended family in California. The other three were taken in by local families.

THE SURVIVORS

MJ's little sister was only 2 when she met her adoptive mother for the first time. The toddler wrapped her arms and legs around Miranda Whitworth's head, buried her face in her neck, and refused to look up to say good-bye to members of Leizza's family. "It was the craziest thing," said Whitworth who, with her husband, Matthew, welcomed the toddler into their family. "It was like when you see a baby monkey or baby gorilla cling to their mother, and they just won't let go."

Over the next few days and weeks, the Whitworths would see additional markers of the unfathomable abuse the toddler endured at the hands of her father — much of it recorded on video. She would howl in terror when any man attempted to touch her, whether it was Matthew or the family physician. "The nurse was fine but the minute the doctor walked in she climbed onto me and started screaming bloody murder," Miranda said.

The 2-year-old was also terrified of the water, which made bathing an ear-splitting ordeal. She wouldn't tolerate anything wrapped around her wrists. And at church, she would run and hide behind Miranda whenever anyone greeted her by an old family nickname.

When they took in the toddler, neither Miranda nor Matthew knew very much about what had happened to her. But while sitting in on Leizza Adams's sentencing hearing, they learned about the repeated rapes, the videos, and the fact that church bishops knew about the abuse of the older daughter and did nothing to stop it.

The Whitworths were converts to the Mormon faith and, like many new followers of a religion, they were especially enthusiastic about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In particular, they appreciated the efforts Mormons make to help fellow church members in times of need through church organizations established to give special attention to women, teens and children.

"It's all about family," Miranda said. "That's one of the things we absolutely loved."

But after learning about what Adams did to their new daughter, and the failure of the church to stop him, the scales fell from their eyes. "We decided to remove our records from the church," said Matthew Whitworth. "I personally couldn't continue to provide tithing money to a church that would allow young children to be abused and not do anything to prevent it."

Unlike the Whitworths, Nancy Salminen has never been a member of the Mormon church. But as a special needs teacher and a rape victim herself, she has a special affinity for MJ and others like her. Over the last five years, she has opened her home to 17 girls and boys who needed a safe place to stay. Her house is a modest, ranch-style structure she bought out of foreclosure.

"Everything's a little broken here and that's perfect because so are we," she said.

Salminen said she met MJ after receiving an urgent call on a Friday evening to rescue a 12-year-old from another family. "She was pretty scared and pretty confused when I picked her up," Salminen recalled. "She spent a lot of time in her closet in her room when we got home, but we got to know each other and got to like each other."

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Like the Whitworths, Salminen knew very little about what MJ had endured until Leizza Adams's sentencing hearing.

"What I heard made me want to throw up," she said. "And the more I learned the more I wanted to help her fight this fight that she didn't even know about."

Safely settled in Salminen's household — which today includes a foster girl Salminen also plans to adopt — MJ has been transformed from a victim of unimaginable abuse to a bubbly 16-year-old who plays in the high school band and proudly dons a crisp, new uniform for her job at a fast-food restaurant.

"She had every excuse to fail and to just fold into herself and run away," Salminen said. "But instead, she came back stronger than anyone I've ever known."

So strong that she appears eager to play an active role in the battle she and her two siblings are waging against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "I just want them to do what they're supposed to do and report to the police," MJ said.

The adoptive parents of the third Adams child who has filed suit declined to speak to the AP about the case. Like MJ, Miranda and Matthew Whitworth said they joined the lawsuit against the church on behalf of their young daughter not in hopes of a payday, but to change church policy so that any instance of child sexual abuse is immediately reported to civil authorities. "We just don't understand why they're paying all these lawyers to fight this," Matthew Whitworth said. "Just change the policy."

THE PRIVILEGE

That policy is the key to the church's defense. In a recent filing asking a Superior Court judge to dismiss the case, Maledon and other lawyers for the church said the case "hinges entirely on whether Arizona's child abuse reporting statute required two church bishops ... to report to authorities confidential confessions made to them by plaintiffs' father."

Whatever moral or public policy arguments one could make that the church should have told authorities that Paul Adams was raping his daughters are irrelevant, the lawyers argued. "Arizona's reporting statute broadly exempts confidential communications with clergy, as determined by the clergyman himself," according to the church motion to dismiss the case. "Reasonable people can debate whether this is the best public policy choice. But that is not an issue for a jury or this court."

Bishop Herrod, in his recorded interview, said church officials told him he had to keep what Adams told him confidential or he could be sued if he went to authorities.

But McIntyre, the Cochise County attorney, said that's false, noting the Arizona reporting law says that anyone reporting a belief that child sex abuse occurred "is immune from any civil or criminal liability."

Aside from the legal arguments over whether Bishops Herrod and Mauzy were excused from their reporting obligations under the clergy-penitent privilege, critics of the inaction by the two bishops and the broader church have raised ethical issues.

Gerard Moretz, a seasoned child sex abuse investigator for the Pima County, Arizona, Sheriff's Department and an expert witness for the Adams children, is one of them.

"What aspect of your religious practice are you advancing if you don't report something like this?" he asked.

Trump-aligned challengers ousting GOP legislative incumbents

By TODD RICHMOND and DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — As Wisconsin's longest-serving Assembly speaker, Republican Robin Vos has presided over efforts to restrict abortions, weaken unions, expand gun rights and push back against COVID-19 mandates. Despite that, he's facing a primary challenger who claims he's not conservative enough.

The challenger's argument: Vos should do more to respond to former President Donald Trump's unfounded allegations of fraud in the 2020 election.

Primary challengers like the one facing Vos next Tuesday have been successfully targeting incumbent state lawmakers across the country, and Republicans are taking the brunt of it.

With more than half the state legislative primaries concluded, Republican incumbents this year have

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been losing at nearly twice the average rate of the past decade, according to data compiled for The Associated Press by the election tracking organization Ballotpedia. The primary loss rate for Democratic state lawmakers is similar to previous elections.

The Republican losses continued to mount Tuesday, as Trump-endorsed candidates ousted incumbent state senators in Arizona and Michigan and a conservative challenger beat the assistant majority leader of the Missouri Senate. Though not technically an incumbent, Arizona House Speaker Rusty Bowers also lost a bid for state Senate after being criticized for refusing to help Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

In many cases, Republican lawmakers are being defeated by challengers portraying themselves as more conservative on election integrity, transgender policies, school instruction and other hot-button issues.

"We have a far-right faction that is very dissatisfied with what's happening on the left. So if you are not rabidly a fanatic that just punches every button, then you're going to have an issue," said Arkansas state Rep. Craig Christiansen, who lost in a Republican primary earlier this year.

Though Christiansen considers himself "very conservative," he drew multiple challengers and failed to advance to a runoff. That came after he voted against overriding Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson's veto of legislation making Arkansas the first state banning gender-confirming treatments for those younger than 18. Christiansen said he considered the legislation unconstitutional, because it lacked an exception for youths already undergoing such treatments.

Vos, who has served as Wisconsin Assembly speaker since 2013, has taken sharp criticism for not pursuing a resolution decertifying Democrat Joe Biden's victory in the state. Trump endorsed his Republican challenger, Adam Steen, saying that "Vos refused to do anything to right the wrongs that were done" in the 2020 election.

Under pressure from Trump, Vos hired former state Supreme Court Justice Michael Gableman last year to investigate the election. Gableman said decertifying the election was "a practical impossibility."

Steen said he decided to challenge Vos because he failed to pass legislation outlawing absentee ballot drop boxes ahead of the 2020 election and hasn't pushed for tougher consequences for voter fraud, among other things.

"Conservatism as a whole has been lethargic," Steen said. "We lack vision, and I think that vision is coming back."

Vos said Steen is running on hyperbole. He said Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, poses the real obstacle to conservatives. Evers, for example, vetoed Republican bills that would have made it harder to vote absentee.

"If we don't get a Republican governor, (Steen) would have less success than I had," Vos said.

Vos is one of nine GOP Wisconsin lawmakers facing primaries. Though the challengers face an uphill fight, they could push the already conservative Legislature even further right if they notch a few victories. That would mark a significant shift in a state that plays a crucial role in national elections.

Twenty-seven states had held legislative primaries or conventions before Tuesday. In those, at least 110 Republican incumbents and 33 Democrats had been defeated. The Republican loss rate of 7.1% far exceeds the Democratic rate of 2.8%. It also significantly exceeds the 3.6% average Republican incumbent loss rate over the previous decade in those states, as well as the 4.4% Republican loss rate in those states during the last redistricting election cycle in 2012.

Idaho voters have led the way in ousting Republican incumbents, defeating 18 GOP lawmakers — or 30% of those who sought reelection — even while choosing GOP Gov. Brad Little over a Trump-backed challenger who claimed he wasn't conservative enough. The losers included three lawmakers representing Kootenai County in northern Idaho, where a local Republican committee recommended conservative challengers against some incumbents after a lengthy vetting process.

"People have kind of had it, and they're willing to get up and vote," said Brent Regan, chair of the Kootenai County Republican Central Committee.

In Iowa, Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds endorsed primary opponents to four GOP state House members

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who hadn't supported her plan to provide taxpayer-funded scholarships for students to attend private schools. All four incumbents lost, including House Education Committee Chairman Dustin Hite.

Even in some Democratic-dominated states, Republican primary voters have ousted incumbents deemed not conservative enough.

Illinois state Rep. David Welter, one of nine Republican lawmakers booted from the chamber in February for ignoring COVID-19 protocols to wear masks, lost his primary in June to a challenger who claimed Welter wasn't Republican enough. Challenger Jed Davis criticized Welter's votes for the Equal Rights Amendment and a construction bill containing a gas tax hike, among other things.

Davis also derided Welter's connections to U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, who became a GOP outcast after voting to impeach Trump and participating in the Democratic-led House panel investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Welter once worked for Kinzinger's campaign and received \$32,500 in contributions since 2021 from committees associated with Kinzinger.

"People pegged me as more of a moderate," Welter said. "I'm now going to be replaced by somebody who is really, really far to the extreme on the right."

Welter believes redistricting after the 2020 census also played a role in his defeat by shifting the voters he represented.

In states where partisan officials controlled redistricting, such as Illinois, the maps enacted for the 2022 elections often contained "more and more extreme partisan gerrymanders," according to a recent analysis by political scientists and data experts.

When legislative districts tilt further right or left, incumbents are more likely to face challengers, and candidates who take more extreme positions are more likely to win, according to an analysis in a forthcoming book by Saint Louis University political scientist Steven Rogers.

Wisconsin's state legislative districts had some of the largest pro-Republican tilts among all states during the past decade and underwent only minor changes before this year's election.

Most of the challengers there are likely to lose, said University of Wisconsin-La Crosse political scientist Anthony Chergosky. But they still could leave their mark by forcing incumbents further right to please the GOP base that votes in primaries.

"We are just experiencing a real scramble for power within the Republican Party right now," he said. "President Trump is really flexing his muscles in directing activists in the party against people like Robin Vos. Anyone in a position of authority in the Republican Party is a target."

Update to electors law desperately needed, senators declare

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Sen. Susan Collins and Democrat Joe Manchin made the case on Wednesday for overhauling the 1800s-era Electoral Count Act, pushing for quick passage of a bipartisan compromise that would make it harder for a losing candidate to overturn legitimate results of a presidential election.

Proposals from their group of 16 senators — nine Republicans and seven Democrats — are a response to former President Donald Trump and his allies pushing courts, state legislatures and Congress to somehow overturn his 2020 loss to President Joe Biden. Trump's efforts culminated in the violence of Jan. 6, 2021, when hundreds of his supporters pushed past police and broke into the Capitol as Congress was certifying the results.

An update to the electoral law is "something our country desperately needs," Manchin said Wednesday, testifying at a Senate hearing on the bill. "The time for Congress to act is now."

Manchin and Collins, who introduced a series of proposals to reform the law last month along with 14 other senators, are pushing for passage of the legislation before the end of the congressional session in January. The bills could face a harder path after November's midterm elections if Republicans take over the House, where Democrats are leading a separate effort to revise the law.

"This is something we shouldn't carry over into another election cycle," said Missouri Sen. Roy Blunt,

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the top Republican on the Senate Rules Committee who has been supportive of the effort.

The Electoral Count Act of 1887 governs the counting and certification of electoral votes in presidential elections and has long been criticized as arcane, vaguely written and vulnerable to abuse. Those fears were realized after the 2020 contest when Trump's allies worked to exploit those weaknesses, pushing states to put forward alternate slates of electors and pressuring Vice President Mike Pence to use his ceremonial role in the congressional joint session on Jan. 6 to object to the results or delay certification.

The bipartisan group of senators has worked for months to find agreement on a way to revamp the process, eventually settling on the series of proposals introduced last month.

The legislation would add a series of safeguards to the electoral count, increasing the thresholds for challenging results so state or federal officials can't exploit loopholes to advocate for a preferred candidate.

It would reinforce that the vice president's role over the electoral count is "solely ministerial," with no power to change the results. It would make clear that Congress can only accept the one legitimate slate of electors from each state and make it harder for members of either party to object to the results. And it would strike an outdated law that could allow some state legislatures to override the popular vote.

"Nothing is more essential to the survival of a democracy than the orderly transfer of power," said Sen. Collins,, of Maine, who testified alongside Manchin, of West Virginia. "And there is nothing more essential to the orderly transfer of power than clear rules for effecting it."

It is unclear how quickly the Senate might act when it returns from its August break in the fall. Both Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell have signaled support, and the legislation is expected to have enough backing to overcome any objections and pass in the 50-50 Senate.

Roadblocks await in the House, however, where some Democrats would like the bill to do much more. The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection and the House Administration Committee, have been working on similar proposals to each other and promise to release them soon.

While overwhelmingly supportive of the current Senate proposal, legal experts who testified at the hearing identified some potential sticking points. They recommended some tweaks, including better defining the specific grounds that members of Congress can use when objecting to a state's electors during congressional certification and making it even harder for state legislators to delay or override a vote by declaring a "failed election."

The Senate compromise would already amend an 1845 law allowing states to declare a "failed election," only permitting a state to modify election timing in "extraordinary and catastrophic" circumstances, but the experts said that might not be enough. They said such circumstances should be spelled out — a natural disaster that prevents many people from reaching the polls, for example, — and not simply what state lawmakers may consider a "catastrophic" election result.

While recommending changes, the panel of experts — including Bob Bauer, who was White House counsel in the Obama administration, and Brookings Institution Fellow Norm Eisen — said the need for action is urgent.

"Jan. 6 has passed, but the danger has not," said Eisen, who served as a lawyer for the House Judiciary Committee during Trump's first impeachment.

The proposals introduced by the bipartisan group last month also include bolstered security for state and local election officials, who have faced violence and harassment, including doubled penalties for people who threaten or intimidate election officials.

Some of those election officials testified at a separate Senate Judiciary hearing on Wednesday, asking for Congress to amend federal law to include strong penalties on those who threaten or harm anyone involved in election administration — and to limit access to individuals seeking personal information of election officials.

New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver said threats to election integrity are growing by the day, noting the recent case in her state of a county commissioner who refused to certify the results of a primary.

"For the election officials and volunteer poll workers that our elections depend on, I fear that threats

and harassment will cause them so much stress and uncertainty that they will simply give up the work for voters," she said.

Dirty tricks in Kansas via text: Does yes actually mean no?

By DAVID KLEPPER and SOPHIA TULP Associated Press

In the thick of Kansas' contentious debate over abortion rights, the anonymous text messages arriving on the eve of the big referendum this week seemed clear enough. "Voting YES on the Amendment will give women a choice."

The only problem: It was a lie, transmitted by text message Monday, a day before voters were to decide a ballot amendment seen as the first test of voter sentiment after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*. Voters in the conservative state with deep ties to the anti-abortion movement ended up rejecting the measure.

"We've certainly seen dirty tricks, but never this level of deception aimed to make people vote the opposite way than they intend to," said Davis Hammet, president of Loud Light, a youth voter registration and engagement organization in Kansas.

The misleading texts sent to Kansas Democrats highlights the growing problem of political disinformation sent by automated text message, a ubiquitous communication system that presents new opportunities for those who would attempt to deceive voters.

To be sure, ballot initiatives are often confounding — sometimes by design, so voters will support a measure they actually oppose.

But text messages are emerging as an increasingly popular means of spreading disinformation about voting and elections. That reflects a broader embrace of texting by political campaigns and organizations, a trend that accelerated when the pandemic forced campaigns to find new ways to engage with voters.

People in the United States received nearly 6 billion political texts in 2021, according to an analysis by RoboKiller, a mobile phone app that lets users block text and voice spam. That's after a steady rise throughout the 2020 election that saw political spam texts increase by 20% a month.

"There's been an explosion of political text messages since 2020 and since then the political messages have stuck around," said RoboKiller's vice president, Giulia Porter.

Two days after the 2020 election, thousands of anonymous texts were sent to supporters of then-President Donald Trump, stating that election officials in Philadelphia were rigging the vote. The text urged the recipients to show up where ballots were being counted to "show their support" for Trump.

The anonymous texts were later linked to a texting company run by one of Trump's top campaign officials.

The same year, someone used text messages to spread false rumors of a national COVID-19 lockdown. Federal officials later blamed a foreign government for trying to stoke fear and division.

Text messages can offer specific advantages over social media when it comes to disseminating misinformation without leaving tracks, according to Darren Linvill, a Clemson University professor who researches disinformation techniques.

People also view text messages in a different way than social media, Linvill said. Social media is designed to reach the widest audience possible, but text messages are sent to particular phone numbers. That suggests the sender knows the recipient in some way and is specifically targeting that person.

"People aren't as used to distrusting information on a text message," Linvill said. "It's more personal. Someone out there has your phone number and they're reaching out to touch you with this information."

While large social media companies have had varying success in curbing misinformation on their platforms, text messages are unmoderated. Because they aim for maximum exposure, disinformation campaigns using social media are easier to spot, study and expose, while text messages are private, one-to-one communications.

Software allowing groups to send hundreds or thousands of texts using fake numbers makes it even more difficult to find out the identity of the sender.

The texts sent in Kansas used a messaging platform made by Twilio, a San Francisco-based communi-

cations company. Twilio would not identify the customer who sent the texts, but a spokesman said the sender had been suspended from its service for violating its rules on disinformation.

The ballot amendment asked Kansans to decide on a proposed change to the state constitution that would clear the way for its Republican-controlled Legislature to more strictly regulate or ban abortion. A "yes" vote would have supported amending the constitution to remove the right to abortion. A "no" vote opposed amending the state constitution, maintaining a right to abortion.

Lindsay Ford, the associate director of a Kansas nonprofit voter engagement group called The Voter Network, noted that the texts came at a critical time, when someone looking to manipulate voters might have the best chance of succeeding.

"This is when voters who aren't super engaged start to pay attention, in the last couple of days before the election," Ford said. "So if they're looking for something and haven't seen information anywhere else and that was the first or only text they received, I can see how that could lead people down the wrong path."

Iran nuclear talks in Vienna as Tehran expands enrichment

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

Negotiators from Iran, the U.S. and the European Union resumed monthslong, indirect talks over Tehran's tattered nuclear deal Thursday, as international inspectors reported that the Islamic Republic is expanding its uranium enrichment.

The resumption of the Vienna talks, suddenly called Wednesday, appeared not to include high-level representation from all the countries that were part of Iran's 2015 deal with world powers.

The negotiations come as Western officials express growing skepticism over the prospects for a deal to restore the accord. The EU's top diplomat has warned that "the space for additional significant compromises has been exhausted."

Iran's top negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, met with EU mediator Enrique Mora, Iranian media reported. As in other talks, the U.S. won't directly negotiate with Iran. Instead, the two sides will speak through Mora.

U.S. Special Representative for Iran Rob Malley also was on hand, tweeting Wednesday that "our expectations are in check."

Mora also met Thursday with Russian Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, who has represented Moscow's interests in the talks. Ulyanov also separately met with Bagheri Kani.

"As always we had a frank, pragmatic and constructive exchange of views on ways and means of overcoming the last outstanding issues," Ulyanov wrote on Twitter.

But going into the negotiations, Iran laid out a maximalist stance. Through its state-run IRNA news agency, Tehran denied that it had abandoned its effort to get America to delist its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization as a precondition to a deal. That has been a main sticking point.

IRNA also quoted Iran's civilian nuclear chief as saying turned-off surveillance cameras of the International Atomic Energy Agency would be switched back on only if the West abandons an effort to investigate manmade traces of uranium found at previously undisclosed sites in the country.

Those positions could doom the talks.

Iranian officials have been trying to offer optimistic assessments of the negotiations while blaming the U.S. for the deadlock. They may be worried that a collapse of the talks could send the country's rial currency plunging to new lows.

Iran struck the nuclear deal in 2015 with the U.S., France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China. The deal saw Iran agree to limit its enrichment of uranium under the watch of U.N. inspectors in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Then-President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled the U.S. out of the accord in 2018, saying he would negotiate a stronger deal, but that didn't happen. Iran began breaking the deal's terms a year later.

As of the last public IAEA count, Iran has a stockpile of some 3,800 kilograms (8,370 pounds) of enriched uranium. More worrying for nonproliferation experts, Iran now enriches uranium up to 60% purity — a

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level it had never reached before. That is a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

Those experts warn Iran has enough 60% enriched uranium to reprocess into fuel for at least one bomb. However, Iran still would need to design a bomb and a delivery system for it, likely a monthlong project.

Iran maintains its program is for peaceful purposes, though its officials increasingly are discussing the country's ability to build a nuclear bomb if it chose — previously a taboo topic there.

Meanwhile Thursday, U.N. inspectors at the IAEA said that they had verified that Iran had begun feeding uranium gas into two IR-1 cascades previously unused at its underground Natanz facility. Those cascades will enrich uranium up to 5%.

The IAEA inspectors also verified that Iran had completed installation of three advanced IR-6 cascades at the plant, each comprising up to 176 centrifuges. The IAEA said those cascades had yet to be fed uranium. Iran also told the IAEA it planned to installed six more IR-2M cascades in a new operating unit at Natanz, inspectors said.

Applications for US jobless claims up again last week

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — More Americans applied for jobless benefits last week as the number of unemployed continues to rise modestly, though the labor market remains one of the strongest parts of the U.S. economy.

Applications for jobless aid for the week ending July 30 rose by 6,000 to 260,000 from the previous week's 254,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. First-time applications generally reflect layoffs.

The four-week average for claims, which evens out the weekly ups and downs, also rose from the previous week, to 254,750.

The total number of Americans collecting jobless benefits for the week ending July 23 rose by 48,000 from the previous week, to 1,416,000. That figure has been near 50-year lows for months.

On Tuesday, the Labor Department reported that American employers posted fewer job openings in June as the economy contends with persistently high inflation and rising interest rates.

Job openings fell to a still-high 10.7 million in June from 11.3 million in May. Job openings, which never exceeded 8 million in a month before last year, had topped 11 million every month from December through May before dipping in June.

The Labor Department's jobs report for July, due out Friday, is expected to show that employers tacked on another 250,000 jobs last month, which would be a healthy number in normal times but would be the lowest since December 2020, when the global economy was being ravaged by the pandemic.

Economists expect the unemployment rate to hold at 3.6% for the fifth straight month.

Though the labor market is still considered strong, there have been some high-profile layoffs announced recently by Tesla, Netflix, Carvana, Redfin and Coinbase. A host of other companies, particularly in the tech sector, have announced hiring freezes.

Other indicators point to some weakness in the U.S. economy. The government said last week that the U.S. economy shrank 0.9% in the second quarter, the second straight quarterly contraction.

Consumer prices are still soaring, up 9.1% in June compared with a year earlier, the biggest yearly increase in four decades. In response, the Federal Reserve raised its main borrowing rate by another three-quarters of a point last week. That follows June's three-quarter point hike and another half-point increase in May.

Higher rates have already sent home sales tumbling, made the prospect of buying a new car more burdensome and pushed credit card rates up.

All of those factors paint a divergent and confusing picture of the post-pandemic economy: Inflation is hammering household budgets, forcing consumers to pull back on spending, and growth is weakening, heightening fears the economy could fall into recession.

4 takeaways from AP's Mormon church sex abuse investigation

By MICHAEL REZENDES Associated Press

When an Arizona bishop in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, widely known as the Mormon church, learned that a member of his ward was sexually assaulting his 5-year-old daughter, he followed church policy and called the Mormon Abuse Help Line.

The bishop later told law enforcement that church attorneys in Salt Lake City who staff the help line around the clock said that because he learned of the abuse during a counseling session the church considers a spiritual confession, he was legally bound to keep the abuse secret.

Paul Douglas Adams, a U.S. Border Patrol employee living with his wife and six children in Bisbee, Arizona, continued abusing his daughter for as many as seven more years, and went on to abuse a second daughter. He finally stopped in 2017 with no help from the church only because he was arrested.

The Associated Press obtained thousands of pages of sealed court documents that show in detail exactly how the church's "help line" can divert abuse complaints away from law enforcement, leaving children in danger.

Takeaways from the AP's investigation:

THE CLERGY-PENITENT PRIVILEGE

The seven years of secrecy in the Adams case began when church attorneys in Salt Lake City advised Bishop John Herrod and later Bishop Robert "Kim" Mauzy they were exempt from reporting requirements under the state's child abuse reporting law because of the law's so-called clergy-penitent privilege.

"You absolutely can do nothing," Herrod said he was told during an interview with federal investigators.

Arizona's child sex abuse reporting law, and similar laws in more than 20 states, says clergy, physicians, nurses, or anyone caring for a child who "reasonably believes" the child has been abused or neglected has a legal obligation to report the information to police or the state Department of Child Safety. But it also says that clergy who receive information about child neglect or sexual abuse during spiritual confessions "may withhold" that information from authorities if the clergy determine it is "reasonable and necessary" under church doctrine.

An Arizona attorney who is defending the bishops and the church in a lawsuit filed by three of the Adams children, told the AP that Herrod and Mauzy — and by extension the church — were acting within the law and in accordance with their "religious principles."

"These bishops did nothing wrong. They didn't violate the law, and therefore they can't be held liable," said William Maledon. He also called the Adams children's lawsuit "a money grab."

THE HELP LINE

The Associated Press obtained nearly 12,000 pages of sealed records from an unrelated child sex abuse lawsuit against the Mormon church in West Virginia, which show that the help line is part of a system that can easily be misused by church leaders to divert abuse accusations against church members away from law enforcement and instead to church attorneys, who may bury the problem, leaving victims in harm's way.

It was established in 1995 when legal claims of sex abuse against churches were on the rise.

Officials of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints said in sworn statements included in the sealed records that the help line is staffed by social workers who destroy records of all calls at the close of each day.

When the social workers receive calls about abuse that may present a risk to the church — such as abuse committed by prominent church members, abuse perpetrated during church activities, or especially egregious instances of abuse — the calls are referred to attorneys with the Salt Lake City law firm Kirton McConkie. The church maintains that all calls referred to the attorneys are protected by attorney-client privilege, leaving no record of the accusations accessible to prosecutors or victims' attorneys.

The lawsuit filed by the Adams children alleges: "The Mormon Church implements the Helpline not for the protection and spiritual counseling of sexual abuse victims...but for (church) attorneys to snuff out complaints and protect the Mormon Church from potentially costly lawsuits."

THE SURVIVORS

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Miranda and Matthew Whitworth adopted the Adams' younger daughter when she was just 2 years old. Miranda said when they met, the toddler wrapped her arms and legs around her head, buried her face in her neck, and refused to look up to say good-bye to her mother's family.

"It was the craziest thing," Miranda Whitworth said. "It was like when you see a baby monkey or baby gorilla cling to their mother, and they just won't let go."

The couple said they joined the lawsuit to push the church to change its policy so that any instance of child sexual abuse is immediately reported to civil authorities. "We just don't understand why they're paying all these lawyers to fight this," Matthew Whitworth said. "Just change the policy."

Nancy Salminen, a special needs teacher in public schools, adopted the older Adams daughter, MJ, after providing her with foster care when she was 12 years old. Today, MJ is a bubbly 16-year-old who plays in her high school band and proudly dons a crisp new uniform for her job as a fast-food restaurant.

"She had every excuse to fail and to just fold into herself and run away," Salminen said. "But instead, she came back stronger than anyone I've ever known."

THE UPSHOT

Paul Adams died by suicide in jail before he could stand trial on federal child pornography charges and state child sex abuse charges.

Leizza Adams pleaded no contest to two counts of child abuse and served two-and-a-half years in state prison.

Judge Wallace Hoggatt called the abuse endured by MJ and her younger sister "one of the most horrendous cases of child molestation" he had ever encountered.

Today, the lawsuit filed by the Adams children in Cochise County Superior Court, as well as a criminal investigation by the Cochise County attorney, continue to unfold.

"I just think that the Mormon church really sucks. Seriously sucks," MJ told the AP. "They are just the worst type of people, from what I've experienced and what other people have experienced."

Today in History: Aug. 5, Nelson Mandela arrested

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Aug. 5, the 217th day of 2022. There are 148 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Aug. 5, 1981, the federal government began firing air traffic controllers who had gone out on strike.

On this date:

In 1864, during the Civil War, Union Adm. David G. Farragut led his fleet to victory in the Battle of Mobile Bay, Alabama.

In 1884, the cornerstone for the Statue of Liberty's pedestal was laid on Bedloe's Island in New York Harbor.

In 1914, what's believed to be the first electric traffic light system was installed in Cleveland, Ohio, at the intersection of East 105th Street and Euclid Avenue.

In 1936, Jesse Owens of the United States won the 200-meter dash at the Berlin Olympics, collecting the third of his four gold medals.

In 1953, Operation Big Switch began as remaining prisoners taken during the Korean War were exchanged at Panmunjom.

In 1957, the teenage dance show "American Bandstand," hosted by Dick Clark, made its network debut on ABC-TV.

In 1962, South African anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela was arrested on charges of leaving the country without a passport and inciting workers to strike; it was the beginning of 27 years of imprisonment. Movie star Marilyn Monroe, 36, was found dead in her Los Angeles home; her death was ruled a probable suicide from "acute barbiturate poisoning."

In 1964, U.S. Navy pilot Everett Alvarez Jr. became the first American flier to be shot down and captured

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by North Vietnam; he was held prisoner until February 1973.

In 1974, the White House released transcripts of subpoenaed tape recordings showing that President Richard Nixon and his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, had discussed a plan in June 1972 to use the CIA to thwart the FBI's Watergate investigation; revelation of the tape sparked Nixon's resignation.

In 2010, the Senate confirmed Elena Kagan, 63-37, as the Supreme Court's 112th justice and the fourth woman in its history. Thirty-three workers were trapped in a copper mine in northern Chile after a tunnel caved in (all were rescued after being entombed for 69 days).

In 2011, the sun-powered robotic explorer Juno rocketed toward Jupiter on a five-year quest to discover the secret recipe for making planets. (Juno reached Jupiter on July 4, 2016.)

In 2020, authorities said protesters in Portland, Oregon, barricaded about 20 police officers inside a precinct and tried to set it on fire; police used tear gas on the crowd for the first time since U.S. agents sent by President Donald Trump left the city the previous week. A city commission in Minneapolis blocked a November vote on a proposal to dismantle the city's police department in the wake of George Floyd's death.

Ten years ago: A gunman opened fire, killing six people at a Sikh temple near Milwaukee before shooting himself dead during an exchange of fire with one of the first officers to respond. The robotic explorer Curiosity blazed through the pink skies of Mars, steering itself to a gentle landing inside a giant crater. Jamaica's Usain Bolt pulled away from the pack and crossed the finish line to claim consecutive gold medals in the marquee track and field event at the Summer Games in London. Britain's Andy Murray cruised past Roger Federer 6-2, 6-1, 6-4 in the men's tennis singles final. Serena and Venus Williams won the women's doubles title.

Five years ago: The U.N. Security Council unanimously approved tough new sanctions against North Korea for its escalating nuclear and missile programs. Eight-time Olympic gold medalist Usain Bolt finished third in the 100-meter dash at the world track championships in London, which marked his farewell from the sport; the winner was American Justin Gatlin.

One year ago: Richard Trumka, who rose from the coal mines of Pennsylvania to preside over one of the world's largest labor organizations, the AFL-CIO, died at 72. A Texas appeals court upheld the murder conviction of Amber Guyger, a former Dallas police officer who was sentenced to prison for fatally shooting her neighbor in his home.

Today's Birthdays: College Football Hall of Famer and former NFL player Roman Gabriel is 82. Country songwriter Bobby Braddock is 82. Actor Loni Anderson is 77. Actor Erika Slezak is 76. Rock singer Rick Derringer is 75. Actor Holly Palance is 72. Pop singer Samantha Sang is 71. Rock musician Eddie Ojeda (Twisted Sister) is 67. Actor-singer Maureen McCormick is 66. Rock musician Pat Smear is 63. Author David Baldacci is 62. Actor Janet McTeer is 61. Country musician Mark O'Connor is 61. Basketball Hall of Famer Patrick Ewing is 60. Actor Mark Strong is 59. Director-screenwriter James Gunn is 56. Actor Jonathan Silverman is 56. Country singer Terri Clark is 54. Actor Stephanie Szostak is 51. Retired MLB All-Star John Olerud is 54. Rock musician Eicca Toppinen (EYE'-kah TAH'-pihn-nehn) (Apocalyptica) is 47. Actor Jesse Williams is 42. Actor Brendon Ryan Barrett is 36. Actor Meegan Warner (TV: "TURN: Washington's Spies") is 31. Actor/singer Olivia Holt is 25. Actor Albert Tsai is 18. Actor Devin Trey Campbell is 14.