

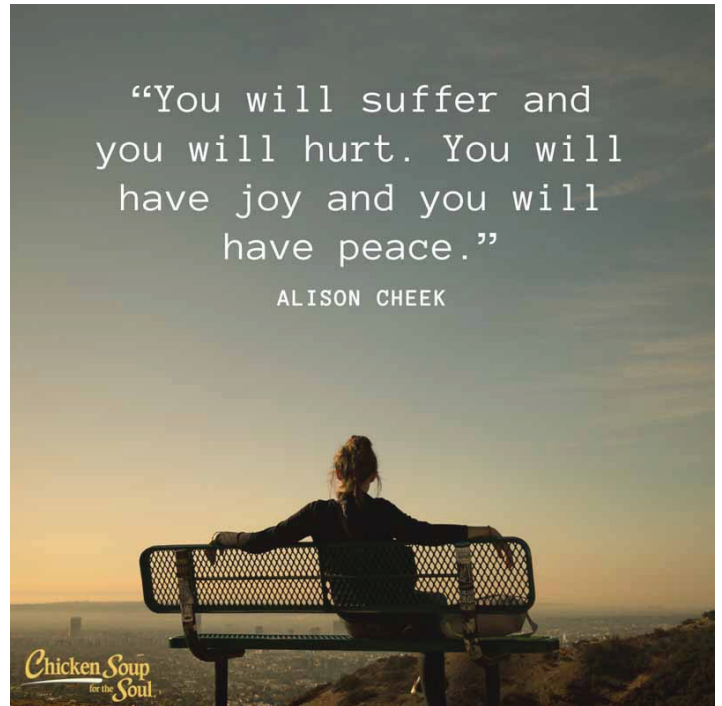
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Now hiring full or part-time positions. Tire handler, responsible for assisting in unloading tires from semi trailers, feeding the tire shredder and general cleanup tasks. Must be able to lift 50 lbs. Starting pay \$16/hr. Contact Robert Wegner at 605-397-7579. Saber Shred Solutions (formerly New Deal Tire Groton, SD)



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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Football

**Groton Area vs. Roncalli at
Dacotah Bank Stadium, Aberdeen
7 p.m. , Friday, Aug. 19, 2022**



Check out the pregame interview with Coach Wannier. The link is on the black bar on the left hand side of our home page.
Either 397news.com or GDILIVE.COM

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Karma Salon

Department of Health Reminds Families about the Importance of Childhood Immunizations

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Health wants to remind families that August is National Immunization Awareness Month, and with the back-to-school season in full swing, childhood immunizations can help protect the health of children and youth now and in the future. “Making sure that your child sees their doctor for well-child visits and recommended immunizations is one of the best things you can do to protect your child and community from serious diseases that are easily spread,” said Joan Adam, Department Secretary. “If you think you might be behind on your child’s immunization schedule, talk with your medical provider to determine what is best for you and your family to get back on track.” It’s easy to catch up by scheduling [a well-child visit](#) with your medical provider. During the visit, your child can get their recommended immunizations, you can track their growth and development, and you can discuss any other questions or concerns about their health.

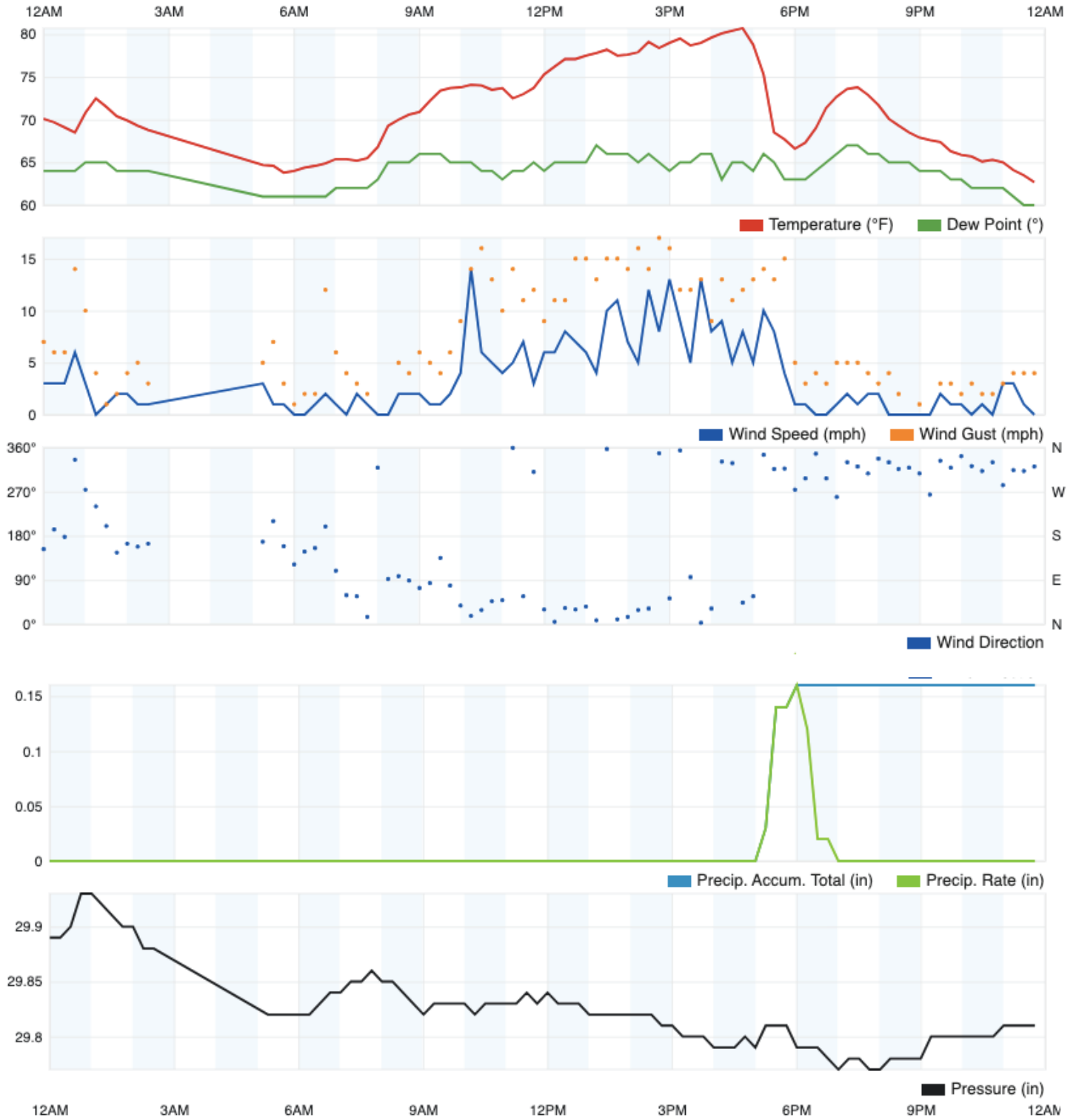
Keeping children and adolescents up to date with recommended immunizations is the best way to protect them from [vaccine-preventable diseases](#). Among children born from 1994-2018, immunizations prevented an estimated 936,000 early deaths, 8 million hospitalizations, and 419 million illnesses.

Learn more by viewing the recommended immunizations and ages to receive them on the [immunization schedule](#) for children ages 18 years or younger.

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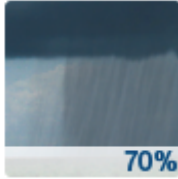
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



70%

Showers
Likely and
Breezy

High: 72 °F

Tonight



30%

Chance
T-storms then
Partly Cloudy

Low: 60 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 77 °F

Saturday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 56 °F

Sunday



Sunny

High: 82 °F

Weekend Outlook

August 19, 2022
2:06 AM



Today:

Scattered Showers/Storms, Highs 68-83°



Saturday:

Isolated Showers, Highs 72-85°



Sunday:

Mostly Sunny, Warmer ...Highs 77-94°

NWS - Aberdeen SD

Scattered showers and storms are expected through the day. Severe weather is NOT anticipated. Isolated showers are still possible on Saturday, but Sunday should be dry. #sdwx #mnwx

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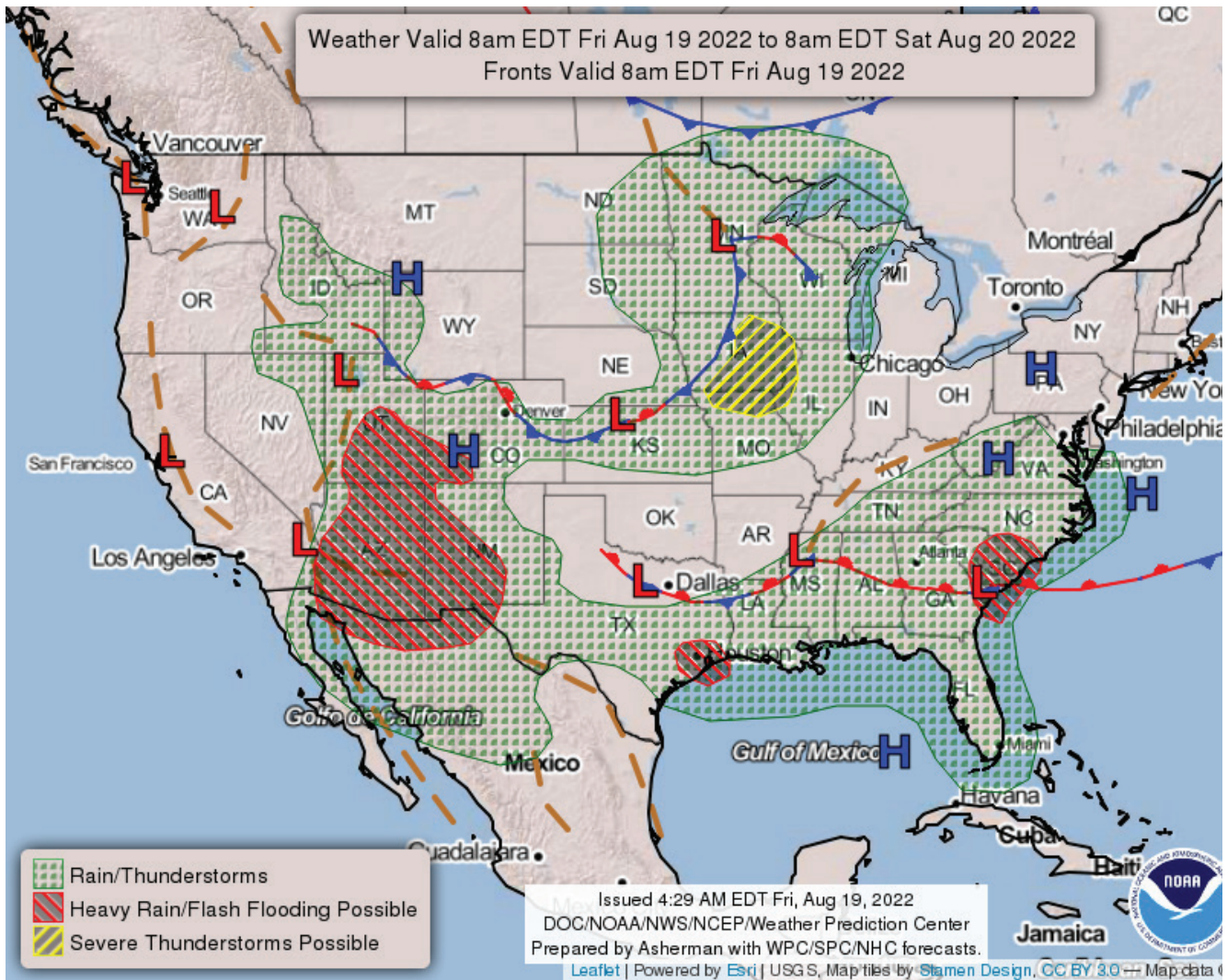
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 81 °F at 4:38 PM
Low Temp: 62 °F at 11:53 PM
Wind: 18 mph at 12:48 AM
Precip: : 0.15

Day length: 13 hours, 58 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 103 in 1976
Record Low: 34 in 2004
Average High: 83°F
Average Low: 56°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 1.37
Precip to date in Aug.: 0.80
Average Precip to date: 15.47
Precip Year to Date: 15.34
Sunset Tonight: 8:35:00 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:38:08 AM



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Today in Weather History

August 19, 1899: An estimated F3 tornado passed 3 miles north of Clear Lake. The tornado killed a man by flying debris as five homes, and many barns were destroyed.

August 19, 1983: Between 0155 and 0330 CST, thunderstorm winds blow through Brown County. At 0155, an estimated 64 mph wind gust was observed on the southeast corner of Warner. A 60 mph wind gust was measured at the Aberdeen Airport at 0218. By 0330 an estimated wind gust of 75 mph was observed in Ordway.

August 19, 1991: A thunderstorm produced about five inches of rain, strong winds, and hail in Ridgeview, Dewey County. Three-grain bins were blown over. One of the bins hit a house causing considerable damage. Wind gusts were estimated to be 60 mph. High winds continued into Sully and Hughes Counties.

1890: An estimated F3 tornado hit South Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. About 400 buildings were destroyed in the industrial and more impoverished residential section of town. The death toll was 16 and damage was estimated at \$400,000.

1896: The famous Cottage City (Oak Bluffs) waterspout occurred off Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The vortex was 3,600 feet high, formed three times, and was well photographed.

1788 - A small but powerful hurricane inflicted great havoc upon forests along a narrow track from New Jersey to Maine. A similar storm track today would cause extreme disaster in the now populated area. (David Ludlum)

1969 - 'Never say die' Camille let loose a cloudburst in Virginia resulting in flash floods and landslides which killed 151 persons and cause 140 million dollars damage. Massies Hill VA received 27 inches of rain. (David Ludlum)

1986 - The temperature at San Antonio, TX, soared to an all-time record high of 108 degrees. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - Thunderstorms moving out of southeastern Nebraska spread severe weather into eastern Kansas and western Missouri during the day. Thunderstorms in Nebraska produced hail three inches in diameter at Albion, and high winds which downed a large tent at Waterloo injuring a dozen persons. Thunderstorms in Kansas produced baseball size hail northwest of Topeka, and wind gusts to 80 mph at Fulton. Ten persons were injured in a thunderstorm at Princeton KS, and damage to crops in southern Franklin County KS was estimated at 3.5 million dollars. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Raleigh, NC, reported a record hot temperature reading of 103 degrees. Afternoon thunderstorms in Oklahoma produced wind gusts to 75 mph in southern Pittsburgh County. Thunderstorms in Indiana produced 4.50 inches of rain at Morgantown. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Early morning thunderstorms deluged southeastern Delaware with six to ten inches of rain in four to six hours, with local reports of 13 to 20 inches of rain. Twenty-six major roads were closed or damaged, and fourteen bridges were washed out. Flooding caused nearly four million dollars damage to local businesses. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)



As Strong as Iron

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:14–19 (NIV)

14 The Lord said to me, "From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. 15 I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms," declares the Lord.

"Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem; they will come against all her surrounding walls and against all the towns of Judah.

16 I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made.

17 "Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. 18 Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. 19 They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord..

Insight By: Arthur Jackson

The words terrified/terrify in Jeremiah 1:17 translate the Hebrew word *hatat*, meaning to be shattered, dismayed, broken, abolished, afraid, discouraged, terrified. The word is used in contexts where God's people are encouraged to take a stand in the face of odds (see 1 Chronicles 22:13; 2 Chronicles 20:15, 17; Ezekiel 3:9). It's often preceded by the word not and the exhortation to "not fear" as in Joshua 1:9, where the Hebrew word is translated "discouraged": "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." In the Gospels, Jesus' words to His disciples echo what we hear in the Old Testament: "Do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say" (Luke 12:11–12)..

Comment By: Jennifer Benson Schuldt

Ironclad beetles are known for their tough exterior which protects them from predators. One special variety, however, has extraordinary strength under pressure. The insect's hard, outer shell stretches, rather than cracks, where it joins together. Its flat back and low profile also help it to resist fractures. Scientific tests show that it can survive a compression force of nearly forty thousand times its body weight.

Just as God made this bug extra tough, He gave resilience to Jeremiah as well. The prophet would face intense pressure when he delivered unwelcome messages to Israel, so God promised to make him "an iron pillar and a bronze wall" (Jeremiah 1:18). The prophet wouldn't be flattened, dismantled, or overwhelmed. His words would stand strong because of God's presence and rescuing power.

Throughout his life, Jeremiah was falsely accused, arrested, tried, beaten, imprisoned, and tossed into a well—yet he survived. Jeremiah also persisted despite the weight of inner struggles. Doubt and grief plagued him. Constant rejection and the dread of a Babylonian invasion added to his mental stress.

God continually helped Jeremiah so that his spirit and testimony weren't shattered. When we feel like giving up on the mission He's given us, or backing away from living faith-filled lives, we can remember that Jeremiah's God is our God. He can make us as strong as iron because His power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9)..

Reflect and Prayer: Which circumstances are threatening to crush you? How do the examples of Bible characters inspire you to exhibit faith in God?

Dear God, please strengthen me to meet the challenges I face today.

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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)
09/11/2022: 6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3-5pm
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
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News from the Associated Press

Prince William charity invests with bank tied to dirty fuels

By ED DAVEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The conservation charity founded by Prince William, second in line to the British throne and who launched the Earthshot Prize, keeps its investments in a bank that is one of the world's biggest backers of fossil fuels, The Associated Press has learned.

The Royal Foundation also places more than half of its investments in a fund advertised as green that owns shares in large food companies that buy palm oil from companies linked to deforestation.

"The earth is at a tipping point and we face a stark choice," the prince, a well-known environmentalist, is quoted saying on the websites of the Earthshot Prize and Royal Foundation.

Yet in 2021, the charity kept more than 1.1 million pounds (\$1.3 million) with JPMorgan Chase, according to the most recent filings, and still invests with the corporation today. The foundation also held 1.7 million pounds (\$2 million) in a fund run by British firm Cazenove Capital Management, according to the 2021 filing. As with JPMorgan, it still keeps funds with Cazenove, which in May had securities linked to deforestation through their use of palm oil. The foundation invested similar amounts in both funds in 2020, its older filings show. As of December 2021, the charity also held more than 10 million pounds (\$12.1 million) in cash.

The investments, which the Royal Foundation didn't dispute when contacted by the AP, come as top scientists repeatedly warn that the world must shift away from fossil fuels to sharply reduce emissions and avoid more and increasingly intense extreme weather events.

Financial experts say investments like those of the foundation can be blind spots for charities and philanthropies. As climate change is an increasing area of attention for foundations and others, organizations have sometimes struggled to recognize where their own investments lie and align them with more environmentally friendly choices, despite growing numbers of ways to steer clear of funds linked to fossil fuels.

Like the Royal Foundation, in recent years other foundations, including high profile British charities like the National Trust and Wellcome Trust, also have faced criticism for investments with strong connections to fossil fuels or environmentally harmful practices. Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist Bill Gates announced that he divested his foundation's direct oil and gas holdings in 2019.

Charities that are talking the talk "also need to walk the walk," said Andreas Hoepner, professor of Operational Risk, Banking and Finance at University College Dublin, who helped design several European Union climate benchmarks and has sat on its sustainable finance group.

"There are funds that are more sustainably oriented," Hoepner added, pointing to a dozen alternatives to the JPMorgan product that are marketed as sustainable.

There are also alternatives to Cazenove's sustainability fund. For example, funds manager CCLA caters to churches and charities and does not invest in businesses that get more than 10% of their revenue from oil and gas. Another option is Generation Investment Management, founded in part by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore.

The Royal Foundation said by email that it had followed Church of England guidelines on ethical investment since 2015, and goes beyond them.

"We take our investment policies extremely seriously and review them regularly," the statement said.

The foundation said management fees paid to JPMorgan were small, but declined to provide a figure.

It's not clear what role, if any, Prince William had in investment decisions, as he did not respond to AP requests for comment. JPMorgan Asset Management in an email declined to comment on questions about charities investing in their products despite its record of financing fossil fuels.

Bloomberg data show JPMorgan has underwritten more bonds and loans for the fossil fuel industry and earned greater fees than its competitors in the five years up to 2021.

Environmental NGO Rainforest Action Network looked at direct loans and stock ownership along with bonds and estimated that between 2016 and 2021, JPMorgan's banking arm financed fossil fuel companies

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with some \$382 billion. This was more than any other bank.

"Major investors have their pick of companies to manage their assets, and mission-driven institutions have options well beyond the world's worst fossil fuel bank," said Jason Disterhoft, senior energy campaigner with Rainforest Action Network.

As one of the world's biggest banks, JPMorgan is also a leading financier of green projects, and has set a target of investing \$1 trillion in these over the next decade. However, it made about \$985 million in revenue from fossil fuels compared to \$310 million from green projects since the Paris Agreement in 2015, about three times more, according to Bloomberg Data.

Compared to some other charities, the Royal Foundation's investments are small, with little impact on climate change. But they are not in line with the ethos of the foundation, which lists conservation and mental health as main points of emphasis, or Prince William's public statements. His Earthshot Prize, a "global search for solutions to save our planet," awards grants of up to 1 million pounds (\$1.2 million) each year to projects confronting environmental challenges, according to the charity's website, which suggests banks as among potential recipients. In July, the Royal Foundation announced that the Earthshot Prize had become an independent charity and Prince William would be its president.

Through launching and awarding the prize and in other public appearances, Prince William has been outspoken on the environment for years. He has argued that entrepreneurs should focus their energies on saving the Earth before investing in space tourism, encouraged parents to consider how their children don't have the same outdoor opportunities they had and urged conservation.

"Today, in 2022, as the queen celebrates her Platinum Jubilee, the pressing need to protect and restore our planet has never been more urgent," the prince said in June during Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee.

The policies of the Royal Foundation do not allow ownership of stock in oil companies, tobacco or alcohol. But profits from the Royal Foundation's account could enable JPMorgan to loan more money to the many oil companies it backs, allowing their expansion. In the same way, investing in companies tied to problems with palm oil supply could help fund unsustainable practices.

While the Cazenove fund is marketed as "sustainable," as of May 31 the fund held almost \$6 million of shares in Nestlé, and shares worth \$8.1 million in Reckitt Benckiser, according to Morningstar Direct data. Both Nestlé and Reckitt Benckiser have faced controversy over their palm oil supply. Clearing rainforests to make way for palm oil plantations is one of Southeast Asia's biggest drivers of deforestation.

Nestlé is the world's largest food and beverage manufacturer, while Reckitt manufactures popular U.S. brands including Lysol and Woolite, and Vanish and Dettol, familiar in the U.K.

A 2021 investigation by the environmental NGO Global Witness said both companies were sourcing palm oil via intermediaries from illegally deforested areas in Papua New Guinea. The plantations responsible were also accused of corruption, use of child labor and paying police to attack protesters.

Another 2021 report, by sustainability analysts Chain Reaction Research, said both companies purchased palm oil from an Indonesian firm that has an affiliated mining project accused of deforestation in an orangutan habitat.

An investigation in 2020 by Chain Reaction Research found that more than 500 hectares (1,235 acres) — over 1,000 American football fields — of rainforest in Indonesia's Papua province were felled by a supplier to Wilmar, a giant food and oils producer, from which both source their palm oil.

David Croft, head of sustainability at Reckitt, said no tainted palm oil entered its products from the Papua New Guinea properties, while conceding their mills were previously in its supplier list. An intermediary company linked Reckitt to the Indonesian mining conglomerate in its supply chain, he said, and it was investigating. Croft said they have had "active discussions" with Wilmar, which stopped sourcing from the Papua plantation in January 2022. In a public statement published in response to Chain Reaction's investigation, Wilmar disputed the cleared area was high conservation value forest.

Despite being a "relatively small user of palm oil," Reckitt knows there is more to do, said Croft, and is accelerating its progress. Croft said Reckitt could not get all the product it needs from certified producers before 2026.

Emma Keller, head of sustainability at Nestlé U.K. and Ireland, said the Wilmar case was to be investigated.

Nestlé engages with suppliers that fall short to help them change and monitors performance, she said.

Sixty percent of Nestlé's palm oil supply was certified as sustainable by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, an industry-organized effort, in 2021, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature. For Reckitt, that figure was 15.3%.

Keller said that by winter 2021, more than 90% of Nestlé palm oil was deforestation-free and it will achieve zero-deforestation status by the end of 2022. It uses supply chain maps, on-the-ground verification and satellite monitoring for verification. Nestlé was moving towards "a model for conserving and restoring the world's forests," Keller said.

Lily Tomson, of the responsible investment charity ShareAction, said Cazenove had shown some leadership on sustainable investing, but there "remain areas charities such as the Royal Foundation can push them on."

Investors can vote on key environmental issues in companies where they hold shares, for example setting targets to align with the Paris Agreement, or on climate lobbying. Yet Cazenove's parent company, Schroders, voted against 22% of environmental resolutions last year, ShareAction research has found.

Kate Rogers, head of sustainability at Cazenove Capital, said the company engaged with Nestlé and Reckitt, and has seen progress on deforestation.

Environmental factors are ingrained in the company's decision-making, she said, every investment assessed for sustainability. Cazenove has committed to eliminating commodity-driven deforestation from its investments by 2025 and said a new voting policy meant that as of June 2022, the firm had voted against 60 directors of companies it invests in over a lack of climate action.

Dr. Raj Thamotheram, former head of responsible investing at both a \$109 billion British university pension fund and AXA Investment Managers, said foundations should be better regulated, with annual reports made to detail how well their investment strategy aligns with their mission.

Thamotheram, now an independent adviser, called unsustainable investments a "cultural and governance blind spot of huge proportions," and said they were endemic in the charity sector.

"It's the status quo approach and it needs shaking up," he said.

Anti-vax group in Europe thrives online, thwarts tech effort

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

Troubled by the number of unvaccinated COVID-19 patients showing up at his hospital, the French doctor logged on to Facebook and uploaded a video urging people to get vaccinated.

He was soon swarmed by dozens, then hundreds, then more than 1,000 hateful messages from an anti-vaccine extremist group known as V_V. The group, active in France and Italy, has harassed doctors and public health officials, vandalized government offices and tried to disrupt vaccine clinics.

Alarmed by the abuse of its platform, Facebook kicked off several accounts tied to the group last December. But it didn't stop V_V, which continues to use Facebook and other platforms and, like many anti-vaccine groups around the world, has expanded its portfolio to include climate change denialism and anti-democratic messaging.

"Let's go and get them at home, they don't have to sleep anymore," reads one post from the group. "Fight with us!" reads another.

The largely unchecked nature of the attacks on the indisputable health benefits of the vaccine highlight the clear limits of a social media company to thwart even the most destructive kind of disinformation, particularly without a sustained aggressive effort.

Researchers at Reset, a U.K.-based nonprofit, identified more than 15,000 abusive or misinformation-laden Facebook posts from V_V — activity that peaked in spring 2022, months after the platform announced its actions against the organization. In a report on V_V's activities, Reset's researchers concluded that its continued presence on Facebook raises "questions about the effectiveness and consistency of Meta's self-reported intervention."

Meta, Facebook's parent company, noted in response that its 2021 actions were never meant to eliminate

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all V_V content but to take down accounts found to be participating in coordinated harassment. After The Associated Press notified Facebook of the group's continued activities on its platform, it said it removed an additional 100 accounts this week.

Meta said it's trying to strike a balance between removing content from groups like V_V that clearly violate rules against harassment or dangerous misinformation, while not silencing innocent users. That can be particularly difficult when it comes to the contentious issue of vaccines.

"This is a highly adversarial space and our efforts are ongoing: since our initial takedown, we've taken numerous actions against this network's attempts to come back," a Meta spokesman told the AP.

V_V is also active on Twitter, where Reset researchers found hundreds of accounts and thousands of posts from the group. Many of the accounts were created shortly after Facebook took action on the program last winter, Reset found.

In response to Reset's report, Twitter said it took enforcement actions against several accounts linked to V_V but did not detail those actions.

V_V has proved especially resilient to efforts to stop it. Named for the movie "V for Vendetta," in which a lone, masked man seeks revenge on an authoritarian government, the group uses fake accounts to evade detection, and often coordinates its messaging and activities on platforms such as Telegram that lack Facebook's more aggressive moderation policies.

That adaptability is one reason why it's been hard to stop the group, according to Jack Stubbs, a researcher at Graphika, a data analysis firm that has tracked V_V's activities.

"They understand how the internet works," Stubbs said.

Graphika estimated the group's membership to be 20,000 in late 2021, with a smaller core of members involved in its online harassment efforts. In addition to Italy and France, Graphika's team found evidence that V_V is trying to create chapters in Spain, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Brazil and Germany, where a similar anti-government movement known as Querdenken is active.

Groups and movements such as V_V and Querdenken have increasingly alarmed law enforcement and extremism researchers who say there's evidence that far-right groups are using skepticism about COVID-19 and vaccines to expand their reach.

Increasingly, such groups are moving from online harassment to real world action.

For instance, in April, V_V used Telegram to announce plans to pay a 10,000 Euro bounty to vandals who spray painted the group's symbol (two red Vs in a circle) on public buildings or vaccine clinics. The group then used Telegram to disseminate photos of the vandalism.

A month before Facebook took action on V_V, Italian police raided the homes of 17 anti-vaccine activists who had used Telegram to make threats against government, medical and media figures for their perceived support of COVID-19 restrictions.

Social media companies have struggled with responding to a wave of misinformation about vaccines since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier this week, Facebook and Instagram suspended Children's Health Defense, an influential anti-vaccine organization led by Robert Kennedy Jr.

One reason is the tricky balancing act between moderating harmful content and protecting free expression, according to Joshua Tucker of New York University, who co-directs NYU's Center for Social Media and Politics and is a senior advisor at Kroll, a tech, government and economic consulting firm.

Striking the right balance is especially important because social media has emerged as a key source of news and information around the world. Leave up too much bad content and users may be misinformed. Take down too much and users will begin to distrust the platform.

"It is dangerous for society for us to be moving in a direction in which nobody feels they can trust information," Tucker said.

Iran deal tantalizingly close, but US faces new hurdles

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Last week's attack on author Salman Rushdie and the indictment of an Iranian

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national in a plot to kill former national security adviser John Bolton have given the Biden administration new headaches as it attempts to negotiate a return to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

A resolution may be tantalizingly close. But as the U.S. and Europe weigh Iran's latest response to an EU proposal described as the West's final offer, the administration faces new and potentially insurmountable domestic political hurdles to forging a lasting agreement.

Deal critics in Congress who have long vowed to blow up any pact have ratcheted up their opposition to negotiations with a country whose leadership has refused to rescind the death threats against Rushdie or Bolton. Iran also vows to avenge the Trump administration's 2020 assassination of a top Iranian general by killing former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Iran envoy Brian Hook, both of whom remain under 24/7 taxpayer-paid security protection.

Although such threats are not covered by the deal, which relates solely to Iran's nuclear program, they underscore deal opponents' arguments that Iran cannot be trusted with the billions of dollars in sanctions relief it will receive if and when it and the U.S. return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, a signature foreign policy accomplishment of the Obama administration that President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018.

"This is a tougher deal to sell than the 2015 deal in that this time around there are no illusions that it will serve to moderate Iranian behavior or lead to greater U.S.-Iran cooperation," said Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"The Iranian government stands to get tens of billions in sanctions relief, and the organizing principle of the regime will continue to be opposition to the United States and violence against its critics, both at home and abroad," he said.

Iran has denied any link with Rushdie's alleged attacker, an American citizen who was indicted for attempted murder and has pleaded not guilty in the Aug. 12 stabbing at a literary event in Western New York. But Iranian state media have celebrated Iran's long-standing antipathy toward Rushdie since the 1988 publication of his book "The Satanic Verses," which some believe is insulting to Islam.

Media linked to Iran's leadership have lauded the attacker for following through on a 1989 decree, or fatwa, calling for Rushdie to be killed that was signed by Iran's then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

And the man who was charged with plotting to murder Bolton is a member of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Justice Department alleges the IRGC tried to pay \$300,000 to people in the United States to avenge the death of Qassam Suleimani, the head of its elite Quds Force who was killed by a U.S. airstrike in Iraq in 2020.

"I think it's delusional to believe that a regime that you're about to enter into a significant arms control agreement with can be depended on to comply with its obligations or is even serious about the negotiation when it's plotting the assassination of high-level former government officials and current government officials," Bolton told reporters Wednesday.

"It certainly looks like the attack on Salman Rushdie had a Revolutionary Guard component," Bolton said. "We've got to stop this artificial division when dealing with the government of Iran between its nuclear activities on the one hand and its terrorist activities on the other."

Others agree.

"Granting terrorism sanctions relief amid ongoing terror plots on U.S. soil is somewhere between outrageous and lunacy," said Rich Goldberg, a former Trump administration national security council staffer and longtime deal critic who is now a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has also lobbied against a return to the JCPOA.

While acknowledging the seriousness of the plots, administration officials contend that they are unrelated to the nuclear issue and do nothing to change their long-held belief that an Iran with a nuclear weapon would be more dangerous and less constrained than an Iran without one.

"The JCPOA is about the single, central challenge we face with Iran, the core challenge, what would be the most threatening challenge we could possibly face from Iran, and that is a nuclear weapon," State

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Department spokesman Ned Price said this week. "There is no doubt that a nuclear-armed Iran would feel an even greater degree of impunity, and would pose an even greater threat, a far greater threat, to countries in the region and potentially well beyond."

"Every challenge we face with Iran, whether it is its support for proxies, its support for terrorist groups, its ballistic missiles program, its malign cyber activities — every single one of those — would be more difficult to confront were Iran to have a nuclear weapons program," he said.

That argument, however, will be challenged in Congress by lawmakers who opposed the 2015 deal, saying it gave Iran a path to develop nuclear weapons by time-limiting the most onerous restrictions on its nuclear activities. They say there's now even more tangible evidence that Iran's malign behavior make it impossible to deal with.

Two of the most outspoken critics of the deal, Republican senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Tom Cotton of Arkansas, have weighed in on what the Rushdie attack should mean for the administration.

"The ayatollahs have been trying to murder Salman Rushdie for decades," Cruz said. "Their incitement and their contacts with this terrorist resulted in an attack. This vicious terrorist attack needs to be completely condemned. The Biden administration must finally cease appeasing the Iranian regime."

"Iran's leaders have been calling for the murder of Salman Rushdie for decades," said Cotton. "We know they're trying to assassinate American officials today. Biden needs to immediately end negotiations with this terrorist regime."

Under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, or INARA, the administration must submit any agreement with Iran for congressional review within five days of it being sealed. That begins a 30-day review period during which lawmakers may weigh in and no sanctions relief can be offered.

That timeline means that even if a deal is reached within the next week, the administration will not be able to start moving on sanctions relief until the end of September, just a month from crucial congressional midterm elections. And, it will take additional time for Iran to begin seeing the benefits of such relief because of logistical constraints.

While deal critics in the current Congress are unlikely to be able to kill a deal, if Republicans win back control of Congress in the midterms, they may be able to nullify any sanctions relief.

"Even if Iran accepts President Biden's full capitulation and agrees to reenter the Iran nuclear deal, Congress will never vote to remove sanctions," the GOP minority on the House Armed Services Committee said in a tweet on Wednesday. "In fact, Republicans in Congress will work to strengthen sanctions against Iran."

Doctors stay in Ukraine's war-hit towns: 'People need us'

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV and DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

ZOLOCHIV, Ukraine (AP) — Dr. Ilona Butova almost looks out of place in her neatly pressed lavender scrubs as she walks through a door frame that hangs from a crumbled wall into what used to be an administrative office of her hospital in Zolochiv.

Not one building in the facility in the northeastern Ukrainian town near the Russian border has escaped getting hit by artillery shells.

Since Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, space to treat patients at the hospital has shrunk constantly because of damage. Her staff has dwindled to 47 from 120. And the number of people seeking treatment in the small town 18 kilometers (11 miles) from the border is often higher now than before the fighting began.

Ukraine's health care system struggled for years because of corruption, mismanagement and the COVID-19 pandemic. But the war has only made things worse, with facilities damaged or destroyed, medical staff relocating to safer places and many drugs unavailable or in short supply. Care is being provided in the hardest-hit areas by doctors who have refused to evacuate or have rushed in as volunteers, putting themselves at great risk.

"It's very hard, but people need us. We have to stay and help," said Butova, a neurologist who also is the administrator of the hospital in the town near Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city. She added that she has had to do more with fewer resources.

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The World Health Organization declared its highest level of emergency in Ukraine the day after the invasion, coordinating a major relief effort there and in neighboring countries whose medical systems also are under strain.

About 6.4 million people have fled to other European countries, and a slightly higher number are internally displaced, according to U.N. estimates. That presents a major challenge to a health care system built on family doctor referrals and regionally separate administrations.

Across Ukraine, 900 hospitals have been damaged and another 123 have been destroyed, said Health Minister Viktor Liashko, noting: "Those 123 are gone, and we're having to find new sites to build replacements."

In addition, scores of pharmacies and ambulances have been destroyed or are seriously damaged, and at least 18 civilian medical staff have been killed and 59 others seriously wounded, he said.

"In occupied areas, the referral system has totally broken down," Liashko told The Associated Press. "People's health and their lives are in danger."

Kyiv's economy was drained by the conflict with Moscow-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine that began in 2014. When he came to power five years later, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy inherited a health care system that was undermined by reforms launched under his predecessor that had slashed government subsidies and closed many small-town hospitals. During the pandemic, people in those communities had to seek care in large cities — sometimes waiting as long as eight hours for an ambulance in severe cases of COVID-19.

As Russia has expanded the territory it controls in eastern and southern Ukraine, the supply of drugs in those areas has dwindled, along with medical staff to administer them. In the southern front-line town of Mykolaiv, "things have been very difficult," volunteer Andrii Skorokhod said.

"Pharmacies have not been working, and shortages have become increasingly acute: Hospital staff were among those evacuated, including specialists. We just need more staff," said Skorokhod, who heads a Red Cross initiative to provide residents with free medications.

Volunteers like Skorokhod saved the life of 79-year-old Vanda Banderovska, whose home near Mykolaiv was destroyed by Russian artillery. Her 53-year-old son, Roman, was killed, and she was brought to the hospital badly bruised and barely conscious.

"My son went out to the car to get his mobile phone when the Russians started shelling. He was hit in the head," she said at a recovery ward, her voice trembling with emotion. "They've destroyed everything and I have nothing left."

Banderovska said she was deeply grateful to the people who saved her life but also overcome by grief and anger.

"The pain I feel is so great. When doctors took me to the hospital I was bruised black and blue but I slowly recovered," she said.

R. Kelly's lawyer gets chance to question government witness

By MICHAEL TARM Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — R. Kelly's legal team will get its chance to question the government's star witness on Friday after she gave what jurors could see as damning testimony against Kelly at his federal trial in Chicago on charges that include the production of child pornography.

Jane, the pseudonym used for her during the trial, has been central to Kelly's legal troubles for more than two decades. She testified for over four hours for the government Thursday, telling jurors it was her and Kelly in a videotape that was at the heart of his 2008 child pornography trial, at which he was acquitted.

Jane, now 37, paused, tugged at a necklace and dabbed her eyes with a tissue as she said publicly for the first time that the girl in the video was her and that the man was Kelly.

When a prosecutor asked Jane how old she was at the time the video was shot, she said quietly: "14." Kelly, 55, would have been around 30 years old at the time.

In addition to charges of child pornography and enticement of minors, Kelly, who has denied any wrong-

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doing, faces charges of conspiring to rig that 2008 trial by intimidating and paying off the girl to ensure she didn't testify then.

Some jurors for the 2008 trial, which was on state charges, said that they had no choice but to acquit the R&B star because the girl — by then an adult — didn't testify. On the stand Thursday, Jane conceded that she lied to a state grand jury in 2002 when she said that it was not her in the video.

"I was afraid something bad would happen to Robert," she told jurors about why she didn't tell the truth then, referring to Kelly by his full first name. "I was protecting him."

She added there was another reason she lied about the identity of the person in the video. "I also did not want that person to be me," she told jurors. "I was ashamed."

Kelly's attorney was scheduled to get her chance to cross-examine Jane starting Friday morning.

A prosecutor asked Jane toward the end of the day Thursday why she decided in recent years to begin speaking honestly about what happened with Kelly, who Jane said she continued to care for and sometimes live with into her 20s.

"I became exhausted living with his lies," she answered. She added that federal prosecutors assured her she would not be charged with lying to authorities if she testified truthfully at this trial.

Earlier, Jane also became emotional when she was asked to explain why Kelly can be seen handing money to her in the video. She said it was a precaution against anyone accusing him of abusing a child if the video ever fell into the hands of authorities.

"If anyone saw the tape ... he wanted it to appear as if I was a prostitute," Jane said.

She described her parents confronting Kelly in the early 2000s about whether he was having sex with their daughter. Kelly dropped to his knees and begged her parents to forgive him, Jane testified. She said she later implored her parents not to do anything to get Kelly in trouble, telling them she loved him.

As Jane spoke, Kelly mostly stared down at the defense table and rarely looked up at her. She, too, rarely looked in his direction.

Earlier, she testified that Kelly sexually abused her "hundreds" of times before she turned 18 years old, starting when she was 15. She said they were having oral sex in the video and that she was 14 at the time.

Jane told jurors that in the late 1990s when she was 13, she asked the Grammy award-winning singer to be her godfather because she saw him as an inspiration and mentor.

She said within weeks, Kelly would call her and say sexual things. She told jurors she was 15 when they first had intercourse.

Asked by a prosecutor how she would know what to do sexually, Jane answered, "He would tell me what to do." Asked how many times they had sex before she turned 18, she answered quietly: "Uncountable times. ... Hundreds."

A federal judge in New York sentenced Kelly to a 30-year prison sentence this year for his 2021 conviction for using his fame to sexually abuse fans.

Speaking softly and tentatively when she first took the stand Thursday, Jane described her upbringing in a musical family in a Chicago suburb, including that she was home-schooled because she was in a touring musical group that she joined when she was about 12.

Jane first met Kelly in the late 1990s when she was in junior high school. She had tagged along to Kelly's Chicago recording studio with her aunt, a professional singer who worked with Kelly. Soon after that meeting, Jane told her parents that Kelly was going to be her godfather.

Kelly, who rose from poverty on Chicago's South Side to become a star singer, songwriter and producer, knew a conviction in 2008 would effectively end his life as he knew it, and so prosecutors say he conspired to fix that trial.

Kelly has been trailed for decades by complaints and allegations about his sexual behavior. The scrutiny intensified after the #MeToo era and the 2019 six-part documentary "Surviving R. Kelly."

Kelly also faces four counts of enticement of minors for sex at the Chicago trial — one each for four other accusers. They, too, are expected to testify.

Yangtze shrinks as China's drought disrupts industry

By MARK SCHIEFELBEIN Associated Press

CHONGQING, China (AP) — Ships crept down the middle of the Yangtze on Friday after China's driest summer in six decades left one of the mightiest rivers barely half its normal width and set off a scramble to contain the damage to a weak economy in a politically sensitive year.

Factories in Sichuan province and the adjacent metropolis of Chongqing in the southwest were ordered to shut down after reservoirs that supply hydropower fell to half their normal levels and demand for air conditioning surged in scorching temperatures.

River ferries in Chongqing that usually are packed with sightseers were empty and tied to piers beside mudflats that stretched as much as 50 meters (50 yards) from the normal shoreline to the depleted river's edge. Smaller ships sailed down the middle of the Yangtze, one of China's biggest trade channels, but no large cargo ships could be seen.

Normally bustling streets were empty after temperatures hit 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit) in Chongqing on Thursday. State media said that was the hottest in China outside the desert region of Xinjiang in the northwest since official records began in 1961.

"We cannot live through this summer without air conditioning," said Chen Haofeng, 22, who was taking pictures of the exposed riverbed. "Nothing can cool us down."

The disruption adds to challenges for the ruling Communist Party, which is trying to shore up sagging economic growth before a meeting in October or November when President Xi Jinping is expected to try to award himself a third five-year term as leader.

The world's second-largest economy grew by just 2.5% over a year earlier in the first half of 2022, less than half the official target of 5.5%.

The drought's impact in Sichuan is unusually severe because the province gets 80% of its power from hydroelectric dams.

Thousands of factories that make processor chips, solar panels and auto components in Sichuan and Chongqing shut down this week for at least six days.

Some announced there was no disruption in supplies to customers, but the Shanghai city government said in a letter released Thursday that Tesla Ltd. and a major Chinese automaker were forced to suspend production.

The city government of Chengdu, the Sichuan provincial capital, told households to conserve power by setting air conditioning no lower than 27 C (80 F). Another city, Dazhou, earlier announced rolling three-hour daily power outages for neighborhoods.

The Yangtze basin, covering parts of 19 provinces, produces 45% of China's economic output, according to the World Bank.

Low water levels in rivers also forced halts to cargo shipments.

A canal that connects Wuhan on the Yangtze with the city of Anqing to the northeast in Anhui was closed because it was too shallow for vessels to move safely, the Shanghai news outlet The Paper reported.

The national impact of shutdowns is limited because Sichuan accounts for only 4% of industrial production, while other provinces use more coal-fired power, which hasn't been disrupted.

The government says China's two main state-owned power companies, State Grid Ltd. and Southern Grid Ltd., are moving power from 15 other provinces to Sichuan.

A member of the Communist Party's seven-member ruling Standing Committee, Han Zheng, promised official support to ensure power supplies during a visit Wednesday to State Grid, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

China suffered similar disruptions last year when a dry summer caused hydropower shortages and shut down factories in Guangdong province in the southeast, a global manufacturing center. Other regions suffered blackouts due to coal shortages and mandatory power cuts to meet official energy efficiency targets.

This year is unlikely to be so severe, according to Larry Hu of Macquarie Group.

"If the power rationing in Sichuan only lasts a few weeks, the impact on the industrial production at the

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national level should be very limited," Hu said in a report.

Xuguang Electronics Co. in Chengdu said the six-day shutdown would reduce its output by 48,000 electronic circuits. The company said it expected to take a 5 million yuan (\$600,000) hit to its annual profit.

BOE Technology Group Co., which makes electronic displays, said a Sichuan subsidiary would suspend production. BOE promised in a statement issued through the Shenzhen Stock Exchange to "fully guarantee delivery of customers' products."

News reports said producers in Sichuan of solar panels and lithium for electric cars also shut down, but no companies announced disruptions in supplies.

Zimbabweans hit by 257% inflation: Will gold coins help?

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — After working as an overnight security guard at a church in Harare's impoverished Mabvuku township, Jeffrey Carlos rushes home to help his wife fetch water to sell.

Prolonged water shortages mean most residents of the capital city of more than 2.4 million must source their own water. Carlos is lucky because the property he rents has a well and his family can haul up buckets of water to sell to neighbors.

"This is our gold," he says of the well water.

"If we are lucky, we can sell up to 12 buckets of water (per day) for \$2," said the 50-year-old father of three. That's about enough money to buy the family's food for the day, he said.

Rising prices and a fast depreciating currency have pushed many Zimbabweans to the brink, reminding people of when the southern African country faced world-record inflation of 5 billion% in 2008. With inflation jumping from 191% in June to 257% in July, many Zimbabweans fear the country is heading back to such hyperinflation.

To prevent a return of such economic disaster, President Emmerson Mnangagwa's government last month took the unprecedented step of introducing gold coins as legal tender. The country's central bank, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, said that because the value of the one-ounce, 22-carat coins would be determined by the international price of gold they will help tame the runaway inflation and stabilize the nation's currency.

The glitter of the gold coins is hard to see for Zimbabweans struggling each day to eke out a living. The government sees things differently and is pleading for time.

Although expensive at an average price of just below \$2,000 per coin, central bank governor John Mangudya said the coin will have a trickle-down effect that will eventually help average folk.

"The ordinary man will benefit more from the stability (provided by) these gold coins. Where there is stability, money will have value and stability in prices," said Mangudya ahead of the launch. He said the central bank plans to introduce smaller denominated gold coins in November to allow ordinary people to also use them as a saving mechanism. The smaller coins will be half an ounce, a quarter of an ounce and 10% of an ounce, he said.

But many such as Carlos say they can hardly afford a meal, let alone earn enough to save.

"Where will I get the money to buy the gold coins? It is for them, the rich. Poor people like me do not see any difference. Things continue to be hard in this country," he told The Associated Press between trips to the well to pull up buckets of water.

"Gold coins are a scheme for the elite. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer," said Gift Mugano, an economics professor during an online roundtable debate titled: "Is there gold in the coins?"

With so many Zimbabweans scrambling to get food to eat each day, there are questions if the gold coins will help them.

"People are struggling. They are living from hand to mouth so most people may not actually have the money to save in the first place. Most people are in survivalist mode because of inflation," said Prosper Chitambara, a Harare-based economist.

To get by, many are forced to take up multiple jobs.

Carlos, in Mabvuku, says he gets about \$100 dollars a month from his job as an overnight security guard for a church and the bar next door. That's hardly enough to pay rent, school fees and other basic needs. Sometimes, he exchanges water for food items.

"If we fetch water for someone but they don't have money, so we get tomatoes, vegetables, beans or maize. That's how we get food," he said.

His wife, Christwish, 43, prepares the day's evening meal — the staple maize (corn) meal and vegetables plucked from a small home garden — over a wood fire. Because of Zimbabwe's lengthy power cuts, the children do their homework by a candle, although their parents press them to use it sparingly.

"The firewood costs a dollar for a small bundle enough (to cook) for a single meal. The candles are also expensive," lamented Christwish, who supplements the family income by doing household chores for better-off families in exchange for money or food items.

Items previously regarded as basics are now out of reach, she said.

"We last ate bread with margarine on Christmas Day," she said. "Now we just see these things in the shops and leave them there."

Bomb threats put tiny Moldova, Ukraine's neighbor, on edge

By CRISTIAN JARDAN and STEPHEN McGRATH Associated Press

CHISINAU, Moldova (AP) — For tiny Moldova, an impoverished, landlocked nation that borders war-torn Ukraine but isn't in the European Union or NATO, it's been another week plagued by bomb threats.

On an overcast day outside the international airport serving Moldova's capital of Chisinau, hundreds of people lined up this week as bomb-sniffing dogs examined the vicinity. That's now a common scene in Europe's poorest nation as it battles what observers believe are attempts to destabilize the former Soviet republic amid Russia's war in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of July, Moldova has received nearly 60 bomb threats — with more than 15 reported so far this week — at locations ranging from the capital's city hall, to the airport, the supreme court, shopping malls and hospitals.

While no one has yet been charged for the bomb threats, most of which have arrived via email and all of which have turned out to be false, officials say they have traced computer addresses to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

"It is part of the disinformation war against Moldova, which is ongoing," said Valeriu Pasa, an analyst at the Chisinau think tank Watchdog.md. "It could be part of the Russian effort to destabilize Moldova, as they use many different methods to do so."

Since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, Moldova, which has a population of 2.6 million people, has faced a multitude of crises. It has received more Ukrainian refugees per capita than any other country; tensions have soared in the country's Russia-backed breakaway region; it is dealing with an acute energy crisis; and like much of Europe it is battling skyrocketing inflation.

The frequent bomb threats are only adding pressure to the country's already overstretched authorities.

"It blocks a lot of the resources — police, investigators, technical services — it's a type of bullying I would say, or harassment, of Moldovan state systems and public services," Pasa said.

Maxim Motinga, a prosecutor from Moldova's Office for Combating Organized Crime, told The Associated Press that since the bomb threats started "practically every day we open criminal cases."

"At the moment, all criminal investigations are ongoing," he said, adding that requests have been made for official assistance from Russia and Ukraine if "certain tracks leading to the respective countries were established."

"I hope we get some answers from those countries," he said.

For Veaceslav Belbas, a 43-year-old Moldovan businessman returning from Turkey to Chisinau on Monday, a bomb threat left him frightened as his plane circled the capital's airport for 30 minutes. After that, the plane did a U-turn and went back to Turkey.

"We prayed a lot and finally landed," he said. "For me, it was such a big shock that I told my wife that

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this is my last flight.”

Tensions in Moldova soared in April after a series of actual explosions occurred in the Russia-backed breakaway region of Transnistria, where Russia bases about 1,500 troops in a so-called frozen conflict zone. It raised fears that non-NATO, militarily neutral Moldova could get dragged into Russia's war orbit. At least one Russian official has spoken openly of snatching enough land in southern Ukraine to link up Russian-controlled areas from the mainland to Transnistria.

Observers pointed out that the blasts came as Moldova — which has historically close ties with Moscow — showed a growing Western orientation and after it had applied to join the EU, which it did shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine. It was granted EU candidate status in late June, shortly before the bomb threats started.

Since Moldova gained independence in 1991, it has been plagued by organized crime and official corruption. After an election in 2019, a local oligarch attempted to seize power, which triggered mass protests before he fled the country. In 2014, several politicians and oligarchs had alleged ties to a scam in which \$1 billion vanished from local banks. No one has yet been convicted in that case.

Galina Gheorghes was returning to England from Moldova last month after attending a family get-together when a bomb threat canceled her flight. She says she is angry that no one has yet been caught.

“It is very bad what’s happening ... unfortunately, the ordinary people suffer,” the 35-year-old Gheorghes said.

Amid a seemingly endless pattern of disruptive and costly threats, Moldova’s Internal Ministry said it wants to toughen punishments for anyone convicted of false bomb alerts by ramping up fines and handing out lengthier prison sentences.

Chisinau Airport has been hit by dozens of bomb threats since July and has bolstered security in response. Radu Zanoaga, head of border police at the airport, says a specialist unit has been established to save security officials the trouble of traveling in from the city center each time a bomb threat is made.

“At the moment, we are dealing with the situation in cooperation with other (state) bodies and institutions that operate within the airport,” he said. “There have been bomb alerts before — but not as many and not as frequent as now.”

Backyard mosquito spraying booms, but may be too deadly

By JOHN FLESHER AP Environmental Writer

CASCADE TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — It’s an increasingly familiar sight in U.S. cities and suburbs: A van pulls up to the curb. Workers wearing gloves, masks and other protective gear strap on backpack-type mechanisms with plastic hoses, similar to leaf blowers.

Revvng up the motors, they drench trees, bushes and even house walls with pesticides targeting an age-old menace: mosquitoes.

The winged, spindly-legged bloodsuckers have long been the bane of backyard barbecues and, in tropical nations, carriers of serious disease. Now, with climate change widening the insect’s range and lengthening its prime season, more Americans are resorting to the booming industry of professional yard spraying.

“If you like to be outside, it certainly makes it more pleasant not to be swatting mosquitos and worrying about all the issues,” said Marty Marino, a recent customer in Michigan’s Cascade Township, a bedroom community near Grand Rapids.

But the chemical bombardment is beginning to worry scientists who fear over-use of pesticides is harming pollinators and worsening a growing threat to birds that eat insects.

“The materials these companies spray kill all bugs,” said Lynn Goldman, an environmental health professor at George Washington University and former assistant administrator for toxic substances at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

“That includes bees, butterflies and all kinds of beneficial bugs that maybe people don’t love but should,” Goldman said. “It’s not good to have this kind of indiscriminate killing, messing up the whole ecosystem.”

More than 40% of insect species worldwide are threatened with extinction, including some pollinator

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bees and butterflies, according to the journal Biological Conservation.

Spraying companies, which have been multiplying with the surging demand, say they try to minimize pollinator losses but acknowledge there's collateral damage.

Mosquito Joe, which treated Marino's yard and those of several neighbors on a humid July morning, avoids spraying on windy days when poisons would blow onto flowering plants that attract bees, said Lou Schager, president of the company based in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

"We need our pollinators," said David Price, the company's director of technical services. "They're incredibly important. But at the same time, we need to eliminate mosquitoes that (carry) diseases."

In 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported "dramatic" increases in illnesses spread by mosquitoes and other blood feeders. Zika, Chikungunya and West Nile viruses have turned up in the U.S. And Asian tiger and yellow fever types of mosquitoes that originated in the tropics are now common in Southern states and have begun afflicting Southern California.

With climate change, Michigan's mosquito season is about a month longer at the beginning and the end than a few decades ago, as warm-weather varieties increasingly turn up, entomology professor Edward Walker of Michigan State University said.

Meanwhile, the revenue from mosquito spraying has soared, according to Pest Control Technology, a trade publication. Exterminators are adding mosquitoes to their traditional services and new companies are making mosquitoes their primary focus.

Overall industry totals weren't available. But more than 70% of pest control companies surveyed last year offered the service, up from 38% in 2014. It generated nearly one-fifth of company revenue in 2021.

A Zika outbreak that began in 2015 and spread to more than 80 countries helped fuel the surge in the business, said Daniel Markowski, technical adviser to the American Mosquito Control Association, a 1,200-member nonprofit group.

"It was all over the media," said Markowski, and "made a lot of pest control companies say, 'Holy cow, I could make a lot of money with residential services.'"

Established in 2010, Mosquito Joe now has 173 franchises in 39 states, Schager said.

Many companies use a "residual barrier" strategy, spraying pesticide around the perimeter of a property that typically lasts several weeks. When mosquitoes settle on the bushes or trees, they get a lethal dose.

For yard treatments, companies typically use pyrethrins — bug-killing substances produced by chrysanthemum flowers — or synthetic imitators called pyrethroids.

The federal government says the chemicals are safe for humans when used as directed and mostly nontoxic to birds. But they're deadly to fish and bees, and harm birds indirectly by killing insects they feed on, Goldman said.

A drop-off of 3 billion North American birds in recent decades has consisted largely of insect eaters, from the whip-poor-will to redwing blackbirds and barn swallows.

EPA says it is seeking more information about pollinator harm as part of a periodic review of pyrethrins and pyrethroids and could order labeling changes if needed.

Critics also contend homeowners are falling for company sales pitches when simpler methods, such as emptying stagnant water sources and running electric fans, would keep mosquitoes away.

The mosquito control association says companies should first clear out mosquito breeding areas and spray only when an inspection shows it's needed, instead of on a set schedule.

"If I'm doing my job, you won't need my mosquito service over time," said Dan Killingsworth, operations director for Environmental Security Pest Control, based in Panama City Beach, Florida. "If I can reduce mosquitoes on your property to where they're no longer a problem, we can potentially eliminate that service."

Many companies don't go to such lengths, Markowski said. "They'll just come out and spray your property and leave."

Schager said his company limits its insecticide use and usually sprays every three to four weeks, arguing that regular treatments are needed to disrupt breeding cycles.

Marino, the Michigan homeowner, says he's trying an optional spray of water mixed with "essential oils"

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from plants such as garlic, lemongrass, peppermint and rosemary, which are less harmful to other insects. About 10% of Mosquito Joe's clientele use this option, although most prefer the longer-lasting pyrethroids, Price said.

The company charges around \$90 per treatment with pyrethroids, while oils cost about 20% more, he said.

"One of our dogs likes to eat wood chips from the landscaping," Marino said. "If there's the synthetic insecticide on it, that's a great concern."

Crisis looms without big cuts to over-tapped Colorado River

By SAM METZ and KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Hydroelectric turbines may stop turning. Las Vegas and Phoenix may be forced to restrict water usage or growth. Farmers might cease growing some crops, leaving fields of lettuce and melons to turn to dust.

Those are a few of the dire consequences that could result if states, cities and farms across the American West cannot agree on how to cut the amount of water they draw from the Colorado River.

Yet for years, seven states that depend on the river have allowed more water to be taken from it than nature can replenish. Despite widespread recognition of the crisis, the states missed a deadline this week to propose major cuts that the federal government has said are necessary.

And again, the government failed to force harsh decisions and stopped short of imposing the cuts on its own, despite previous threats to do so.

Any unilateral action from federal officials would likely move conversations from negotiating tables to courtrooms and delay action even longer.

The river, which cascades from the Rockies down to the deserts of the Southwest, quenches the thirst of 40 million people in the U.S. and Mexico and sustains a \$15 billion-a-year agricultural industry.

But for a century, agreements governing how it's shared have been based on faulty assumptions about how much water is available. With climate change making the region hotter and drier, that discrepancy is becoming impossible to ignore.

Lake Powell and Lake Mead, the two largest reservoirs that hold Colorado River water, have fallen to dangerously low levels faster than anyone expected. The decline threatens to disrupt hydroelectric power production and water sent to cities and farms.

Though everyone agrees the stakes are high, states and the U.S. government have struggled to reach a consensus on what to do.

People have "been hoping to stave off this day," said Felicia Marcus, a former top water official in California, which holds the largest right to the river's water. "But now I think we can't expect Mother Nature to bail us out next year. The time for some of these really hard decisions is now."

The river is also tapped by Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Mexico and some tribes.

For years, officials have issued warnings about the state of the river, but also reassured people that the system won't crash. That two-part message was front and center this week, when the states failed to meet a deadline set by the Bureau of Reclamation for them to propose 15% to 30% cuts to their water use.

As the deadline passed Tuesday, the potentially dramatic moment amounted to a shrug. Officials said they still have faith the states will reach a deal if given more time.

Visiting California the next day, Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton repeatedly dodged questions about what might happen next. She's given no specifics about what the bureau's more aggressive actions might look like, or when they might happen.

The federal government, she said, "is ready to move forward on our own." But officials "will continue to talk to everybody about what the process is."

Not everyone is satisfied with that approach.

"I'm asking them to at least lay out very clearly how that threat will be imposed," Southern Nevada Water

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Authority General Manager John Entsminger said.

Entsminger and his counterparts in Arizona, Utah and California, as well as local officials in and around Phoenix, also repeated what has become a common refrain: They said they were gravely concerned about river's future, yet wanted to reassure their water users that the river won't stop flowing imminently.

"This is not a situation where people should be concerned about, you know, water running out in days or weeks or even months. But it's very clear that this entire river system is experiencing something that's never happened before," said Wade Crowfoot, California's natural resources secretary.

The cuts would force hard decisions about who has to live with less. Water bills could rise as states tap other sources and adopt technology such as wastewater recycling to make up the difference.

In some places, officials have voluntarily implemented strict conservation measures, including limiting lawn watering and paying farmers not to plant fields, even banning new water hookups. The climate legislation signed Tuesday by President Joe Biden provides \$4 billion that could be used to pay Colorado River users to cut back, but it's not clear how that would work.

The river's shrinkage has inflamed tensions between Rocky Mountain states and their downstream neighbors over who should shoulder the burden. It also pits growing cities against agricultural regions.

In Pinal County, Arizona, Kelly Anderson grows specialty crops for the flower industry and leases land to alfalfa farmers whose crops feed cattle at nearby dairy farms. He expects about half of the area to go unplanted next year, after farmers in the region lose all access to the river.

Though farmers use most of the water, they have less wiggle room to conserve than cities, which can more easily recycle water or tap other sources. The river is a lifeblood in places like California's Imperial Valley, which grows vegetables like broccoli, onions and carrots. Water shortages could send ripple effects throughout the food system.

States aren't the only ones at the table. Native American tribes hold some of the oldest water rights and occupy a unique position in negotiations because the federal government is required to protect their interests.

The Colorado River Indian Tribes along the Arizona-California border have contributed water to boost Lake Mead in the past. They could be called on again.

"Our senior rights do not mean we can or should sit on the sidelines," Colorado River Indian Tribes Chairwoman Amelia Flores said. "We won't let this river die."

Upper basin states — Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming — argue that they shouldn't face cuts because they historically haven't used all the water they were promised a century ago.

They want to protect their share in anticipation of population growth and haven't pursued policies that save water as much as states like Arizona and Nevada.

Zach Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, said many in the Rockies cling to an erroneous belief that their water rights are safe, cuts will continue to hit their downstream neighbors and one wet winter could reverse the river's decline.

"If we don't agree about what the crisis is, we're not going to have the impetus to come up with a solution," he said.

Arizona, Nevada and California say they're willing to put water or money on the table, but so far that hasn't been enough to yield an agreement.

A growing chorus of veteran officials and environmental advocates say both the states and the federal government are sending muddled messages by stressing the gravity of the situation yet delaying meaningful action.

James Eklund, an attorney and former director of the Upper Colorado River Commission, said the shrinking reservoirs present an opportunity to rethink how to manage the river and incentivize conservation — if only officials will take it.

Bureaucrats, he said, continue to think they can postpone changes. The problem is "that doesn't really work here because no action means we're driving toward a cliff."

Biden bill to help millions escape higher health care costs

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Millions of people in the United States will be spared from big increases in health care costs next year after President Joe Biden signed legislation extending generous subsidies for those who buy plans through federal and state marketplaces.

The sweeping climate, tax and health care bill sets aside \$70 billion over the next three years to keep out-of-pocket premium costs low for roughly 13 million people, just before the reduced prices were set to expire in a year beset by record-high inflation.

As the calendar pushed closer to the Nov. 1 open enrollment date, Sara Cariano was growing nervous about her work helping people across Virginia sign up for subsidized, private health insurance on the HealthCare.gov website.

"I expected very difficult conversation with folks to explain why their premiums were spiking," said Cariano, a policy specialist at the Virginia Poverty Law Center.

But the passage of the "Inflation Reduction Act" erased those worries.

"Things aren't going to change for the worst for individuals who are purchasing coverage through the market," she said.

The bill will extend subsidies temporarily offered last year when Congress and Biden signed off on a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill that significantly lowered premiums and out-of-pocket costs for customers purchasing plans through the Affordable Care Act's marketplace. It also continues reduced costs for more individuals and families who live well above the poverty line.

Only Democrats supported the extended health care subsidies and the other proposals in the bill that Biden signed on Tuesday. Republicans criticized the measure as big government overreach that will only worsen inflation. In reality, economists say, the bill will do little to either fan or extinguish the flames of exorbitant prices.

Health insurance premiums in the marketplace are expected to rise significantly next year — roughly 10 percent — according to an analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The extended subsidies, which determine premium payments based on income, will guard most people from those price increases, said Cynthia Cox, a vice president at the foundation.

"Generally speaking, people should not see increases in their premiums," Cox said.

Those who bought plans on the government marketplace saved on average about \$700 in premium payments from the subsidies this year, according to estimates by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

As costs dropped, more people signed up for the coverage over the last year and the number of those without health insurance dropped to an all-time low of 8% in August, the Department of Health and Human Services announced. Roughly 26 million people, 2 percent of them children, remain uninsured in the U.S.

In California, many of the 1.7 million people who purchase health insurance through Covered California, the state-operated insurance marketplace will continue to see savings ranging from \$29 and \$324 per month, depending on their income level.

State officials predict about 220,000 people will be saved from being priced out of coverage. Between 2 million and 3 million people in California might also turn to the state marketplace if they lose coverage through Medicaid when the federal government's COVID-19 public health emergency expires. About 15 million people in the U.S. have been extended Medicaid coverage during the pandemic.

Cost is the biggest factor driving whether a person signs up for coverage or not, said Joseph Poindexter, the senior director of health insurance programs at HealthCare Access Maryland.

Some parents, for example, sign their children up for Medicaid but skip buying coverage for themselves, he said.

"It's really sad to see folks who will say, I'll forgo treatment, or won't go visit the doctor," Poindexter said.

Fewer people have had to make that calculation with the subsidies, Poindexter said, attributing the lowered prices to a 9% increase in new enrollees in the state last year.

House Democrats' campaign chief faces tough race of his own

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

PEEKSKILL, N.Y. (AP) — At a recent rally with union workers and other supporters in the downtown square of this small city on the banks of the Hudson River, New York Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney tried to remind Democrats of everything he thinks the party has accomplished.

He touted the sweeping coronavirus relief legislation passed in early 2021, last fall's infrastructure deal, a plan to boost high-tech manufacturing, the toughest limits on guns in decades and, just recently, a climate and health care law that had been written off.

Democrats are "getting big stuff done," Maloney said in an interview after the event.

He is betting that message will be enough to help him and his party navigate a treacherous political environment this year. As the head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Maloney is responsible for helping the party defy historic trends and maintain — or even expand — its majority in the House. In the meantime, he's also fending off a challenge from the left in next week's primary in a district that could be competitive in the fall general election.

Facing a confluence of hurdles, Maloney insists on staying focused on the party's agenda.

"When things are working, it's the best politics," he said.

The 56-year-old Maloney was seen as a rising Democratic star when he was first elected to the House a decade ago. The first openly gay congressman from New York, he was at the vanguard of a new Democratic Party making inroads far beyond its urban base.

But he's facing a primary challenge next week from state Sen. Alessandra Biaggi, a 36-year-old progressive who has sought to portray Maloney as an out-of-touch operator of the establishment.

"I think he represents everything that is wrong with politics," Biaggi said in an interview.

Maloney counters the establishment has delivered what voters want: pragmatism over activism. "We've had a real summer of success and if things continue like this, I think we're going to surprise a lot of people in November," Maloney said.

He's also gotten the endorsement of The New York Times, which carries a lot of weight with the Democrats in the district's suburbs and exurbs of New York City, along with the endorsement of former President Bill Clinton, whose Chappaqua home is in the area.

Maloney, who worked in the Clinton White House, is a "proven leader," the former president said in his endorsement, which thus far has not been echoed by his wife, former New York senator and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She has stayed out of the race, though her support would carry far more weight: Biaggi worked for her presidential campaign and Clinton led Biaggi and her husband in their vows at their 2019 wedding.

The biggest name backing Biaggi, a lawyer in former Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration and granddaughter of former Bronx Congressman Mario Biaggi, is progressive star Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York. Biaggi, like Ocasio-Cortez, has a history of taking on powerful, more moderate members of her party and espouses an activist, working-people credo.

In the same 2018 progressive wave that carried Ocasio-Cortez into office, Biaggi — despite being heavily outspent — ousted a longtime state senator known for leading a band of Democrats who collaborated with Republicans. She's counting on a similar grassroots approach and desire for change as she aims to topple Maloney.

"I'm going to be on those doors, just like I've been every single weekend, knocking them down off the hinges, push through every single inch," she said as she rallied a group of campaign volunteers in Sleepy Hollow for a weekend of door-knocking.

She's also counting on the unusual circumstances of next week's primary to help her chances. It's the second primary election New Yorkers have had this summer, a delayed date to accommodate the redrawing of political maps after the first attempt at redistricting was thrown out in court.

There was a primary in June for the governors race and other statewide offices, but the primary for

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congressional races was delayed until Aug. 23 so new maps could be drawn.

New Yorkers aren't used to voting in two primaries, especially one in late August, when many are on vacation, and the new maps may leave them unfamiliar with their new district lines and who is considered an incumbent — which could create an opening for someone like Biaggi with activist energy behind her.

While Maloney has represented parts of the newly-drawn 17th District, Biaggi currently represents none of it in her state Senate seat and moved about 15 miles north to become a resident.

Maloney also moved north from New York City when he first ran to represent the region 10 years ago, but he is quick to note that he and his husband already had a second home in the area at the time.

"She has every right to run, but people have a right to know that her district is 95% in the Bronx and I represent several hundred thousand people who are in this district," he said of Biaggi in the interview.

He and his supporters have painted her politics as too far left for the district, pointing to her embrace of the "defund the police" messaging that liberals took up in 2020 amid a broader national reckoning over race and policing.

Biaggi has said in interviews that she's no longer using the term because it doesn't do a great job of conveying the need for policing reforms. Her campaign has armed its volunteers with talking points on her use of the phrase, pointing out that her grandfather was a decorated police officer and she used the phrase while reacting to the horrific video showing the killing of George Floyd.

"This was like, in the heat of a moment where she saw a pretty horrific incident and tweeted that — because we don't need to shy away from that," Cori Marquis, a Biaggi campaign aide, explained to volunteers in Sleepy Hollow as they prepared to knock doors and pitch voters. "She has been very clear in speech, in action, in policy, that she is really committed to working with all stakeholders to reform our criminal justice system."

Biden won the areas in the new congressional district by 5 points in 2020, but northern stretches of it, which Maloney represents, heavily favor the GOP and Donald Trump won his district in 2016. Maloney won his current seat from a Republican a decade ago and has held on to the battleground ever since, which he said was "not a given for a gay guy with an interracial family."

Voters there, he contends, want someone who can work across the aisle but also defeat Republicans.

Maloney's work on matters across the aisle — and to defeat one Republican in particular — has drawn blowback from members of his own party, including harsh criticism from Biaggi.

The House Democrats' campaign arm, which Maloney chairs, spent \$425,000 on a campaign ad in Michigan that boosted the far-right opponent of Rep. U.S. Rep. Peter Meijer, one of 10 Republicans who voted to impeach Trump.

Meijer lost to a Trump-backed candidate, which Maloney said has only boosted the prospects for the Democratic nominee in December. But members of his own party warn it was a dangerous gamble.

"It makes people feel like the Democrats are playing a game and it's not a game," Biaggi said. "I think it represents everything that people hate about politics."

Maloney said he understand people debating the tactic but defended the move.

"My job is to win seats. We are more likely to win that seat now than before the primary, and that is the bottom line. And that is my responsibility. Full stop," he said.

Nigeria's Osun River: Sacred, revered and increasingly toxic

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

OSOGBO, Nigeria (AP) — Yeyerisa Abimbola has dedicated most of her 58 years on Earth to the Osun, a waterway in deeply religious Nigeria named for the river goddess of fertility. As the deity's chief priestess, she leads other women known as servants of Osun in daily worship and sacrificial offerings along the riverbank.

But with each passing day, she worries more and more about the river. Once sparkling and clear and home to a variety of fish, today it runs mucky and brown.

"The problem we face now are those that mine by the river," Abimbola said. "As you can see, the water

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has changed color.”

The river, which flows through the dense forest of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove — designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005 — is revered for its cultural and religious significance among the Yoruba-speaking people predominant in southwestern Nigeria, where Osun is widely worshipped.

But it’s under constant threat from pollution from waste disposal and other human activity — especially the dozens of illegal gold miners across Osun state whose runoff is filling the sacred river with toxic metals. Amid lax enforcement of environmental laws in the region, there are also some who use the river as a dumping ground, further contributing to its contamination.

The servants of Osun, made up of women mostly between the ages of 30 and 60, live in a line of one-room apartments along the side of the Osogbo palace, the royal house of the the Osogbo monarch about 1.5 kilometers (1 mile) north of the grove and river.

They leave behind everything from their secular lives, including marriages, to serve both the goddess and the king. They have little interaction with outsiders, allowing them to devote themselves fully to the goddess, whom they worship daily at a shrine tucked deep inside the grove.

Often seen in flowing white gowns symbolizing the purity the river represents, the women carry out various tasks for the goddess from dawn to dusk, from overseeing sacrificial offerings, mostly live animals and drinks, to carrying out cultural activities in the Osun’s waters. Some say the goddess heals them of afflictions when they drink or bathe in the river, and others say she can provide wealth or fertility.

One servant of Osun, who goes by the name Oluwatosin, said the river brought her a child when she was having difficulties with childbirth. Now the mother of two children, she intends to remain forever devoted to the river and the goddess.

“It is my belief, and Osun answers my prayers,” Oluwatosin said.

The river also serves as an important “pilgrimage point” for Yoruba people in Nigeria, said Ayo Adams, a Yoruba scholar — especially during the Osun-Osogbo festival, a colorful annual celebration that draws thousands of Osun worshippers and tourists “to celebrate the essence of the Yoruba race.” Some attendees say it offers the chance for a personal encounter with the goddess.

But this year, as the two-week August festival neared, palace authorities announced they had been forced to take the unusual step of telling people to stop drinking the water.

“We have written to the state government, the museum on the activities of the illegal miners and for them to take actions to stop them,” said Osunyemi Ifarinu Ifabode, the Osun chief priest.

Osun state is home to some of Nigeria’s largest gold deposits, and miners in search of gold and other minerals — many of them operating illegally — are scattered across swampy areas in remote villages where there is scant law enforcement presence. While community leaders in Osogbo have been able to keep miners out of the immediate area, they’re essentially free to operate with impunity upstream and to the north.

The miners take water from the river to use in exploration and exploitation, and the runoff flows back into it and other waterways, polluting the drinking water sources of thousands of people.

“It is more or less like 50% of the water bodies in Osun state, so the major water bodies here have been polluted,” said Anthony Adejuwon, head Urban Alert, a nonprofit leading advocacy efforts to protect the Osun River.

Urban Alert conducted a series of tests on the Osun in 2021 and found it to be “heavily contaminated.” The report, which was shared with The Associated Press, found lead and mercury levels in the water at the grove that were, respectively, 1,000% and 2,000% above what’s permissible under the Nigerian Industrial Standard. Urban Alert attributes it to many years of mining activity, some of it within 30 kilometers (19 miles) from the river.

Despite the drinking ban issued by the palace, during a recent visit AP witnessed residents trooping to the river daily to fill up gallon containers for domestic use.

Dr. Emmanuel Folami, a physician based in Osogbo, the state capital, said drinking the toxic water or otherwise using it for purposes that risk human exposure is a “big health concern” that could cause lead

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poisoning.

In March, the Osun state government announced the arrest of “several individuals for illicit mining, seizures and site closures,” and promised it was studying the level of pollution of the river and ways to address it.

But activists question the sincerity and commitment behind such efforts: “If we cannot see the state government taking action within its own jurisdiction as a (mining) license holder, what are we going to say about the other people?” said Adejuwon of Urban Alert, which is running a social media campaign with the hashtag #SaveOsunRiver.

Abimbola, a servant of Osun since she was just 17 years old, said the goddess is tolerant and giving. She thanks Osun for her blessings — a home, children, good health.

“Every good thing that God does for people, Osun does the same,” she said.

Yet she and others warn that even Osun has her limits.

There may be problems if the river remains contaminated and Osun “gets angry or is not properly appeased,” said Abiodun Fasoyin, a village chief in Esa-Odo, where much of the mining takes place, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of Osogbo.

“The riverbank will overflow and sweep people away when it is angry,” Abimbola said. “Don’t do whatever she doesn’t want.”

China’s response to Pelosi visit a sign of future intentions

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — China’s response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan was anything but subtle — dispatching warships and military aircraft to all sides of the self-governing island democracy, and firing ballistic missiles into the waters nearby.

The dust has still not settled, with Taiwan this week conducting drills of its own and Beijing announcing it has more maneuvers planned, but experts say a lot can already be gleaned from what China has done, and has not done, so far. China will also be drawing lessons on its own military capabilities from the exercises, which more closely resembled what an actual strike on the island claimed by Beijing as its own territory would look like, and from the American and Taiwanese response.

During the nearly weeklong maneuvers that followed Pelosi’s early August visit, China sailed ships and flew aircraft regularly across the median line in the Taiwan Strait, claiming the de facto boundary did not exist, fired missiles over Taiwan itself, and challenged established norms by firing missiles into Japan’s exclusive economic zone.

“I think we are in for a risky period of testing boundaries and finding out who can achieve escalatory dominance across the diplomatic, military and economic domains,” said David Chen, an analyst with CENTRA Technology, a U.S.-based consulting firm.

Pelosi was the highest-level member of the U.S. government to visit Taiwan in 25 years, and her visit came at a particularly sensitive time, as Chinese President Xi Jinping prepares to seek a third five-year term as leader of the ruling Communist Party later this year.

Under Xi, China has been increasingly forceful in declaring that Taiwan must be brought under its control — by force if necessary — and U.S. military officials have said that Beijing may seek a military solution within the next few years.

Tensions were already high, with China conducting regular military flights near Taiwan and the U.S. routinely sailing warships through the Taiwan Strait to emphasize they are international waters.

China accuses the U.S. of encouraging the island’s independence through the sale of weapons and engagement between U.S. politicians and the island’s government.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying called Pelosi’s visit a “serious provocation” and accused Washington of breaking the status quo and “interfering in China’s internal affairs.”

“China is not the old China of 120 years ago, and we are not Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan — we will not allow any foreign force to bully, suppress or enslave us,” she told reporters in Beijing. “Whoever wants to do so will be on a collision course with the Great Wall of steel forged by the 1.4 billion Chinese people.”

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The U.S. continues to insist it has not deviated from its "one-China" policy, recognizing the government in Beijing while allowing for informal relations and defense ties with Taipei.

China held off on its maneuvers until Pelosi had left Taiwan, and turned back its forces before they approached Taiwan's coast or territorial airspace, which showed a "modicum of restraint," Chen said. But, he noted, another congressional visit following Pelosi's triggered the announcement of more exercises.

"We are likely entering a period of regular military demonstrations in and around China's maritime domain," he said.

"The Chinese Communist Party is also quite capable in creating cross-domain responses, as has been seen in the cyber realm. Beyond that, we could see escalatory moves in space, in the South China Sea, Africa, the Indian Ocean, or the South Pacific."

Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said the scale and coordination of the exercises suggested China was looking past Taiwan toward establishing dominance in the western Pacific. That would include controlling the East and South China Seas via the Taiwan Strait, and having the capability to impose a blockade to prevent the U.S. and its allies from coming to the aid of Taiwan in the event of an attack.

Short of an armed conflict, a blockade of the Taiwan Strait — a significant thoroughfare for global trade — could have major implications for international supply chains at a time when the world is already facing disruptions.

In particular, Taiwan is a crucial provider of computer chips for the global economy.

Though ostensibly a reaction to Pelosi's visit, it is clear China's exercises had been long planned, said Mareike Ohlberg, a senior fellow in the Asia Program of the German Marshall Fund think tank.

"I do think they were looking for an opportunity to escalate," she said. "This is not something you prep after the announcement (of the visit) and then pull off that quickly and that easily."

The U.S. held back throughout the maneuvers, keeping an aircraft carrier group and two amphibious assault ships at sail in the region, but not close to the island. Taiwan avoided any active countermeasures.

Kurt Campbell, the Biden administration's coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs, said this week that the U.S. was taking a "calm and resolute" long-view approach that would include continued transits of the Taiwan Strait, supporting Taiwan's self-defense capabilities, and otherwise deepening ties with the island.

To that end, the U.S. announced Thursday that it was opening talks with Taiwan on a wide-ranging trade agreement.

Campbell said Washington sees China's actions as "part of an intensified pressure campaign against Taiwan, which has not ended."

"We expect it to continue to unfold in the coming weeks and months," he said.

The U.S. Department of Defense has acknowledged China's increasingly capable military, saying it has become a true rival and has already surpassed the American military in some areas, including shipbuilding, and now has the world's largest navy.

The reserved American response to the recent exercises seemed calculated to avoid any accidental confrontation that could have escalated the situation, but could also feed China's confidence, Ohlberg said.

"The base of China's thinking is that the U.S. is in decline and that China is on the rise, and I guess the response would have been seen in Beijing as confirming that thinking," she said.

The U.S. and China came perhaps the closest to blows in 1996, when China, irked by what it saw as increasing American support for Taiwan, fired missiles into the waters some 30 kilometers (20 miles) from Taiwan's coast ahead of Taiwan's first popular presidential election.

The U.S. responded with its own show of force, sending two aircraft carrier groups to the region. At the time, China had no aircraft carriers and little means to threaten the American ships, and it backed down.

China subsequently embarked on a massive modernization of its military and the recent exercises demonstrate a "quantum leap" of improvement from 1996, showing a joint command and control coordination not seen before, Chen said.

Before being confident enough to launch an actual invasion of Taiwan, however, the Chinese military still needs to do more to assure the country's political leadership it would be successful, he said.

"These latest exercises are probably part of proving that capability, but more needs to be hammered out

before they could be confident in conducting a full-scale Taiwan amphibious invasion," he said. "They've only demonstrated the maritime blockade and air control parts of that campaign, without opposition."

Following the visit, China released an updated "white paper" on Taiwan outlining how it envisioned an eventual annexation of the island would look.

It said it would follow the "one country, two systems" format applied in Hong Kong, which critics say has been undermined by a sweeping national security law that asserts Beijing's control over speech and political participation. The concept has been thoroughly rejected in Taiwanese public opinion polls in which respondents have overwhelmingly favored their current de facto independence.

Tellingly, the new white paper discarded a pledge in its previous iteration not to send troops or government officials to an annexed Taiwan.

China has refused all contact with Taiwan's government since shortly after the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party. Tsai was overwhelmingly reelected in 2020.

China's bellicose response to Pelosi's visit may have the unintended effect of strengthening the DPP in midterm elections later this year, said Huang Kwei-bo, vice dean of the College of International Affairs at Taiwan's National Chengchi University.

Ideally, it would be in Taiwan's best interest if both sides backed off and found "reasoned ways" to settle differences, he said.

"There's an old saying that when two big elephants fight, the ant and the grass suffer," he said.

North Korea dismisses Seoul's aid offer as 'foolish' repeat

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said her country will never accept South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's "foolish" offer of economic benefits in exchange for denuclearization steps, accusing Seoul of recycling proposals Pyongyang already rejected.

In a commentary published by state media Friday, Kim Yo Jong stressed that her country has no intentions to give away its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles program for economic cooperation, saying "no one barter its destiny for corn cake."

She questioned the sincerity of South Korea's calls for improved bilateral relations while it continues its combined military exercises with the United States and fails to stop civilian activists from flying anti-Pyongyang propaganda leaflets and other "dirty waste" across their border.

She also ridiculed South Korea's military capabilities, saying the South misread the launch site of the North's latest missile tests on Wednesday, hours before Yoon used a news conference to urge Pyongyang to return to diplomacy.

"It would have been more favorable for his image to shut his mouth, rather than talking nonsense as he had nothing better to say," she said about Yoon.

South Korea's Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean affairs, expressed "strong regret" over Kim Yo Jong's comments, and Yoon's office called for Pyongyang to show "self-restraint" and "think deeply" about Seoul's offer.

"This attitude from North Korea will not only threaten peace on the Korean Peninsula but result in further difficulties for the North by worsening its international isolation and economic situation," Lee Hyo-jung, a Unification Ministry spokesperson, said during a briefing.

Kim Yo Jong last week had threatened "deadly" retaliation against the South over the COVID-19 outbreak in the North, which it dubiously claims was caused by leaflets and other objects dropped from balloons launched by southern activists.

Yoon during a nationally televised speech on Monday proposed an "audacious" economic assistance package to North Korea if it takes steps to abandon its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles program. The offers of large-scale aid in food and health care and modernizing electricity generation systems and seaports and airports weren't meaningfully different from previous South Korean proposals rejected by

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the North, which is speeding the development of an arsenal Kim Jong Un sees as his strongest guarantee of survival.

Kim Yo Jong, one of the most powerful officials in her brother's government who oversees inter-Korean affairs, said Yoon displayed the "height of absurdity" with his offer, saying it was realistic as creating "mulberry fields in the dark blue ocean."

She said South Korea's words and actions would only incite "surging hatred and wrath" from North Koreans and insisted Pyongyang has no immediate plans to revive long-stalled diplomacy with Seoul. "It is our earnest desire to live without awareness of each other," she said.

Inter-Korean ties have worsened amid a stalemate in larger nuclear negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. that derailed in 2019 because of disagreements over a relaxation of crippling U.S.-led sanctions on the North in exchange for disarmament steps.

There are concerns that Kim Yo Jong's threats last week over the leafletting portends a provocation, of which the possibilities may include a nuclear or missile test or even border skirmishes. The United States and South Korea kick off their biggest combined training in years next week to counter the North Korean threat. The North describes such drills as invasion rehearsals and has often responded to them with missile tests or other provocations.

During Wednesday's news conference, Yoon expressed hope for meaningful dialogue with the North over his aid-for-disarmament proposal. Maintaining a reserved tone, Yoon said his government has no plans to pursue its own nuclear deterrent and doesn't desire political change in Pyongyang that's brought by force.

Yoon spoke hours after South Korea's military detected North Korea firing two suspected cruise missiles toward the sea and identified the western coastal site of Onchon as the launch location. Kim Yo Jong in her column said the weapons were fired from a bridge in the city of Anju, north of Onchon and farther inland, and ridiculed South Korean and U.S. capacities to monitor North Korean missile activity. The South's military has yet to release its analyzed flight details of those missiles.

"If the data and flight trajectory (of the missiles) are known, (the South) will be so bewildered and afraid," Kim Yo Jong said. "It will be a thing worthy of seeing how they will explain about it before their people."

The latest launches extended a record pace in North Korean missile testing in 2022, which has involved more than 30 ballistic launches, including the country's first demonstrations of intercontinental ballistic missiles in nearly five years.

North Korea's heightened testing activity underscores its dual intent to advance its arsenal and force the United States to accept the idea of the North as a nuclear power so it can negotiate economic and security concessions from a position of strength, experts say.

Kim Jong Un could up the ante soon as there are indications that the North is preparing to conduct its first nuclear test since September 2017, when it claimed to have developed a thermonuclear weapon to fit on its ICBMs.

3 charged with killing Boston gangster Whitey Bulger in 2018

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Three men, including a Mafia hitman, have been charged in the 2018 prison killing of notorious Boston crime boss James "Whitey" Bulger, the Justice Department said Thursday.

Bulger's death raised questions about why the known "snitch" was placed in the West Virginia prison's general population instead of more protective housing.

The men — Fotios "Freddy" Geas, 55, Paul J. DeCologero, 48, and Sean McKinnon, 36 — were charged with conspiracy to commit first-degree murder. Prosecutors allege Geas and DeCologero struck Bulger in the head multiple times, causing his death. McKinnon is charged separately with making false statements to a federal agent.

Bulger, who ran the largely Irish mob in Boston in the 1970s and '80s, served as an FBI informant who ratted on his gang's main rival, according to the bureau. He later became one of the nation's most-wanted fugitives. Bulger strongly denied ever being a government informant.

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Authorities have not revealed a possible motive for Bulger's killing, which came hours after he was transferred to USP Hazelton in West Virginia from a prison in Florida. He had been serving a life sentence for 11 murders and other crimes.

Geas and DeCologero are also charged in West Virginia federal court with aiding and abetting first-degree murder, along with assault resulting in serious bodily injury. Geas faces a separate charge of murder by a federal inmate serving a life sentence.

"In the truest of ironies, Bulger's family has experienced the excruciating pain and trauma their relative inflicted on far too many, and the justice system is now coming to their aid," Massachusetts U.S. Attorney Rachael Rollins said in an emailed statement.

Geas, who authorities say was a Mafia hitman, remains in prison in Hazelton. DeCologero is being held in another federal prison facility. McKinnon was released from prison last month after pleading guilty in 2015 to stealing guns from a firearms dealer. He was on federal supervised release when the indictment was handed down, and was arrested Thursday in Florida.

Geas and DeCologero were identified as suspects shortly after Bulger's death, according to law enforcement officials at the time, but they remained uncharged as the investigation dragged on for years.

Bulger's family sued the Federal Bureau of Prisons and 30 unnamed employees of the prison system over his death, alleging it appeared the gangster was "deliberately sent to his death." A federal judge dismissed the family's lawsuit in January.

Hank Brennan, who represented Bulger and his family, accused the Department of Justice of waiting to bring charges until after the family's lawsuit was dismissed to avoid having information come out in the criminal case that could be used against the government in the family's civil case.

"They are simply protecting themselves like they've always done," Brennan said. "There could be no ongoing investigation that took this long."

The three men were placed in solitary confinement throughout the probe, family members told The Boston Globe. McKinnon's mother told the newspaper that her son, who was Geas' cellmate at the time of Bulger's killing, told her he didn't know anything about the slaying.

Daniel Kelly, an attorney for Geas, said Thursday that the charges aren't a surprise, but don't justify his client's continued placement in solitary confinement. It wasn't immediately clear if McKinnon and DeCologero had attorneys to comment on their behalf.

DeCologero was part of an organized crime gang led by his uncle on Massachusetts' North Shore called the "DeCologero Crew."

He was convicted of buying heroin that was used to try to kill a teenage girl his uncle wanted dead because he feared she would betray the crew to police. The heroin didn't kill her, so another man broke her neck, dismembered her and buried her remains in the woods, court records say.

Geas was a close associate of the Mafia and acted as an enforcer, but was not an official "made" member because he is Greek, not Italian.

Geas and his brother were sentenced to life in prison in 2011 for their roles in several violent crimes, including the 2003 killing of Adolfo "Big Al" Bruno, a Genovese crime family boss in Springfield, Massachusetts. Another mobster ordered Bruno's killing because he was upset he had talked to the FBI, prosecutors said.

Bulger fled Boston in late 1994 after his FBI handler, John Connolly Jr., warned him he was about to be indicted.

After more than 16 years on the run and with a \$2 million reward on his head, he was captured at age 81 in Santa Monica, California, where he had been living in a rent-controlled apartment near the beach with his longtime girlfriend, Catherine Greig.

His transfer to Hazelton was prompted by disciplinary issues, said a federal law enforcement official, who insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to release details. In February 2018, Bulger threatened an assistant supervisor at the prison in Florida, telling her "your day of reckoning is coming."

A prison workers' union official told the AP that year that sending Bulger to the troubled federal penitentiary that housed other New England gangsters was like giving him a "death sentence."

But Bulger never admitted to working for the FBI. Court papers made public in the civil case brought by

his family showed that he was interviewed by staff after arriving at Hazelton about whether there were reasons he should be kept out of the general population. An intake screening form signed by Bulger said he answered "no" to the question "have you assisted law enforcement agents in any way?"

Browns' Deshaun Watson suspended 11 games, fined \$5 million

By TOM WITHERS AP Sports Writer

BEREA, Ohio (AP) — Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson will serve an 11-game unpaid suspension, pay a \$5 million fine and undergo professional evaluation and treatment as part of a settlement with the NFL following accusations of sexual misconduct by two dozen women.

The league had sought to ban Watson for at least one year for violating its personal conduct policy. He was accused of sexually harassing and coercing the women during massage therapy sessions while he was with the Houston Texans.

Watson signed a \$230 million fully guaranteed contract after being traded to the Browns in March. Because the team structured Watson's deal so he'll make \$1.035 million in his first season, he'll lose \$632,500 in salary during the suspension.

As part of the settlement, Watson can return for the Browns' game in Houston on Dec. 4.

"My whole life I just have to be able to move forward and that's the plan," Watson said shortly after the settlement became public. "I have to be able to move forward with my career, move forward with my family, my personal life and everything."

The settlement ends months of speculation and headed off a ruling from former New Jersey attorney general Peter C. Harvey, who was appointed by Commissioner Roger Goodell after the league appealed a six-game suspension issued by disciplinary officer Sue L. Robinson.

As part of the settlement between the league and the NFL Players Association, Watson will have to be evaluated by behavioral experts and follow their treatment program.

Watson apologized last week before the Browns' preseason opener for the first time since the allegations surfaced. He tried to offer more contrition Thursday while maintaining he never has been inappropriate with women.

"I've always stood on my innocence and always said that I've never assaulted anyone or disrespected anyone and I'm continuing to stand on that," he said. "But at the same time, I have to continue to push forward with my life and my career."

"I'm going to continue to stand on my innocence and keep pushing forward, and I've always stood on not disrespecting or sexually assaulting anyone."

Along with his \$5 million fine, the league and Browns are donating \$1 million each to a fund that will support nonprofit organizations across the country to educate young people on "healthy relationships, promote education and prevention of sexual misconduct and assault, support survivors, and related causes."

Watson can practice until the suspension begins on Aug. 30, but coach Kevin Stefanski said he will not play in any preseason games. He won't be allowed to return to the team's facility until Oct. 10, roughly halfway through the suspension. Watson can begin practicing again on Nov. 18 and be reinstated two weeks later.

Attorney Tony Buzbee, who represents all 24 women who sued Watson, was critical of the NFL's handling of the case and settlement.

"By settling this matter the way he has, Roger Goodell has proven one of two things: Either his recent rhetoric was utter baloney, or his bark is much worse than his bite," Buzbee said in a statement. "My belief is that he is nothing more than a paper tiger."

"The message today to all victims is clear, if you believe you have been sexually assaulted by a powerful person, keep your mouth shut and go away. The NFL has certainly demonstrated that its ownership and the organization doesn't care."

Browns owners Dee and Jimmy Haslam, who have been widely criticized for trading for Watson, stood by the QB. They said they expect him to learn and grow from the experience.

"Since Deshaun came into our building in April, he has done everything we have asked of him and more,"

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Jimmy Haslam said at a news briefing with his wife and Browns general manager Andrew Berry. "And he has been the person, the leader that we expect him to be and I think he understands where he is in his life, it's a pivotal point, and we as an organization are going to do everything we can to help him not only be the best football player he can be but more important to be the best person he can be."

Haslam was asked if he's still comfortable with Watson being on Cleveland's roster.

"Absolutely," he said. "100%"

Dee Haslam was pressed on whether she believes Watson is innocent.

"We respect his opinion. I do think in counseling, Deshaun will grow to learn a lot more about himself," she said.

On Aug. 1, Watson was suspended six games by Robinson, a former federal judge jointly appointed by the league and union to act as an independent disciplinary officer. As part of her ruling, she called his behavior "egregious" and "predatory."

Watson wouldn't comment directly on Robinson's assertions.

"I know who I am," he said. "I know what type of person I am. I know the character of the person I was raised to be and I have always been. That is the biggest thing for me is continue to show who Deshaun Watson really is, and the people that meet me and that are around me, they will figure out who I really am."

Believing the suspension was too light, the league appealed and pushed Watson's case back to Goodell, who had handled all player discipline in the past. The league previously pushed for an indefinite suspension and hefty fine.

At the owners' meetings this month, Goodell said the league's pursuit of a yearlong ban was warranted following its investigation and Robinson's findings.

"She reinforced the evidence," Goodell said. "There were multiple violations that were egregious, and it was predatory behavior."

In her conclusion, Robinson cited Watson's lack of remorse as a factor in her decision.

Watson was asked what was he apologizing for if he's innocent. "For everyone that was affected by this situation," he said. "There were a lot of people that were triggered."

Watson was accused of being sexually inappropriate with the women from March 2020 to March 2021. In the civil lawsuits filed in Texas, the women accused him of exposing himself, touching them with his penis or kissing them against their will. One woman alleged Watson forced her to perform oral sex.

Two separate grand juries in Texas declined to indict Watson, who also settled 23 of the 24 lawsuits.

For now, the suspension ends months of speculation about whether Watson would play in 2022 for the Browns, who outbid several other teams and traded three first-round draft picks to the Texans.

The Browns believe Watson could make them a Super Bowl contender. Without him, they could struggle to simply contend in the AFC North against defending conference champion Cincinnati along with Baltimore and Pittsburgh.

All along, the Browns' plan was to turn their offense over to veteran Jacoby Brissett, who has made 37 career starts. But it's now possible Cleveland will explore other options at quarterback.

The suspension also means Watson will be idle longer. One of pro football's elite QBs, he sat out last season in Houston after demanding a trade and before the sexual allegations surfaced.

Woman says it was her, R. Kelly in key video at 2008 trial

By MICHAEL TARM Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A woman who has been central to R. Kelly's legal troubles for more than two decades testified Thursday that the R&B singer sexually abused her "hundreds" of times before she turned 18 and that it was her and Kelly in a videotape that was at the heart of his 2008 child pornography trial, at which he was acquitted.

Jane — the pseudonym for the now 37-year-old woman as she testified — paused, tugged at a necklace and dabbed her eyes with a tissue as she said publicly for the first time that the girl in the video was her and that the man was Kelly.

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When the prosecutor asked how old she was at the time, she said quietly: "14." Kelly, 55, would have been around 30 years old at the time.

In addition to charges of child pornography and enticement of minors, Kelly faces charges of conspiring to rig that 2008 trial by intimidating and paying off the girl to ensure she didn't testify then.

Some jurors who presided over that 2008 trial, which was on state charges, said that they had no choice but to acquit the R&B star because the girl — by then an adult — didn't testify. On the stand Thursday, Jane conceded that she lied to a state grand jury in 2002 when she said that it was not her in the video.

"I was afraid something bad would happen to Robert," she told jurors about why she didn't tell the truth then, referring to Kelly by his full first name. "I was protecting him."

She added there was another reason she lied about the identity of the person in the video. "I also did not want that person to be me," she told jurors. "I was ashamed."

Dressed in a white dress coat and removing a face mask before testifying, Jane remained on the witness stand for over four hours for the government. Kelly's attorney was scheduled to get her chance to cross-examine Jane starting Friday morning.

A prosecutor asked Jane toward the end of the day Thursday why she decided in recent years to begin speaking honestly about what happened with Kelly, who Jane said she continued to care for and sometimes live with into her 20s.

"I became exhausted living with his lies," she answered. She added that federal prosecutors assured her she would not be charged with lying to authorities if she testified truthfully at this trial.

Earlier, Jane also became emotional when she was asked to explain why Kelly can be seen handing money to her in the video. She said it was a precaution against anyone accusing him of abusing a child if the video ever fell into the hands of authorities.

"If anyone saw the tape ... he wanted it to appear as if I was a prostitute," Jane said.

She described her parents confronting Kelly in the early 2000s about whether he was having sex with their daughter. Kelly dropped to his knees and begged her parents to forgive him, Jane testified. She said she later implored her parents not to do anything to get Kelly in trouble, telling them she loved him.

As she spoke, Kelly mostly stared down at the defense table and rarely looked up at her. She, too, rarely looked in his direction.

Earlier, she testified that Kelly sexually abused her "hundreds" of times before she turned 18 years old, starting when she was 15. She said they were having oral sex in the video and that she was 14 at the time.

Jane told jurors that in the late 1990s when she was 13, she asked the Grammy award-winning singer to be her godfather because she saw him as an inspiration and mentor.

She said within weeks, Kelly would call her and say sexual things. She told jurors she was 15 when they first had intercourse.

Asked by a prosecutor how she would know what to do sexually, Jane answered, "He would tell me what to do." Asked how many times they had sex before she turned 18, she answered quietly: "Uncountable times. ... Hundreds."

A federal judge in New York sentenced Kelly to a 30-year prison sentence this year for his 2021 conviction for using his fame to sexually abuse fans.

During opening statements Wednesday, prosecutor Jason Julien sought to prepare jurors for the testimony of accusers including Jane, reminding them that a core issue at trial remained the exploitation of often scared and confused children — even though the accusers who would speak to jurors are now grown adults.

Kelly's lead attorney, meanwhile, implored jurors not to accept what she said was the prosecution's portrayal of her client as "a monster," explaining that because of intellectual challenges including illiteracy, Kelly was forced to rely on others as his career took off and was sometimes led astray by those close to him.

Speaking softly and tentatively when she first took the stand Thursday, Jane described her upbringing in a musical family in a Chicago suburb, including that she was home-schooled because she was in a touring musical group that she joined when she was about 12.

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Jane first met Kelly in the late 1990s when she was in junior high school. She had tagged along to Kelly's Chicago recording studio with her aunt, a professional singer who worked with Kelly. Soon after that meeting, Jane told her parents that Kelly was going to be her godfather.

Prosecutors have said Kelly shot the video of Jane in a log cabin-themed room at his North Side Chicago home between 1998 and 2000. In it, the girl is heard calling the man "daddy."

In the early 2000s, an aunt of Jane showed her parents a copy of a video she said depicted their daughter having sex with Kelly. When they confronted Kelly, he told them, "You're with me or against me," a government filing says.

The parents took it as a threat.

Kelly, who rose from poverty on Chicago's South Side to become a star singer, songwriter and producer, knew a conviction in 2008 would effectively end his life as he knew it, and so prosecutors say he conspired to fix that trial.

Kelly has been trailed for decades by complaints and allegations about his sexual behavior. The scrutiny intensified after the #MeToo era and the 2019 six-part documentary "Surviving R. Kelly."

Kelly also faces four counts of enticement of minors for sex at the Chicago trial — one each for four other accusers. They, too, are expected to testify.

Two Kelly associates, Derrel McDavid and Milton Brown, are co-defendants. McDavid is accused of helping Kelly fix the 2008 trial, while Brown is charged with receiving child pornography. Like Kelly, they also have denied wrongdoing.

CNN cancels 'Reliable Sources,' host Stelter leaving network

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — CNN has canceled its weekly "Reliable Sources" show on the media after three decades on the air, and said Thursday that its host, Brian Stelter, is leaving the network.

The show will have its last broadcast this Sunday.

"Reliable Sources," and its host, appear to be the first prominent casualties in CNN's effort to become less confrontational politically, a priority of Chris Licht, who became the network's chairman and CEO in the spring, and his boss, David Zaslav, head of the Warner Bros. Discovery parent company.

Stelter has written a book, "Hoax: Donald Trump, Fox News and the Dangerous Distortion of Truth" and been critical of Fox News, making him a frequent target of CNN's conservative critics.

Licht has made it known internally that he's not interested in conflict between CNN and Fox News on the network. The CNN "New Day" anchor Brianna Keilar had also attracted attention for detailed critical pieces on Fox, but they have stopped since Licht took over.

CNN has seen its reputation tumble dramatically among Republican and conservative viewers, some of it because of former President Donald Trump's relentless attacks, but also because of pointed political viewpoints expressed by its personalities. New management has been seeking to turn down the temperature.

Stelter came to CNN from The New York Times, where he was a media writer.

"He departs CNN as an impeccable broadcaster," said Amy Entelis, executive vice president of talent and content development at CNN. "We are proud of what Brian and his team accomplished over the years, and we're confident their impact and influence will long outlive the show."

Stelter said that he was grateful for his nine years at CNN, proud of the show and thankful to its viewers.

"It was a rare privilege to lead a weekly show focused on the press at a time when it has never been more consequential," he said. "I'll have more to say on Sunday."

"Reliable Sources" has been a part of CNN's Sunday schedule since 1993. Bernard Kalb was its initial host, and Howard Kurtz had a 15-year run before Stelter took over in 2013. Kurtz now hosts the "Media Buzz" show on Fox News.

There was a quick release of glee among some of Stelter's critics online. The conservative Daily Wire site tweeted a picture of a roomful of empty chairs, captioning it, "Brian Stelter's fans gathering to watch his last episode."

"Good riddance, Stelter," tweeted radio and Fox News host Mark Levin. "You and your ilk have done grave damage to a free press."

Dan Froomkin, a liberal media critic and head of the Press Watch website, tweeted that it was a terrible move by CNN.

Stelter "was the symbol of a media establishment willing to question itself," Froomkin said. "He was a flawed but essential voice in the national media. His firing is a win for all the wrong people."

The "Reliable Sources" newsletter, a daily compendium of the media's big stories, will continue and will be led by CNN senior media reporter Oliver Darcy.

Apple warns of security flaw for iPhones, iPads and Macs

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Apple disclosed serious security vulnerabilities for iPhones, iPads and Macs that could potentially allow attackers to take complete control of these devices.

Apple released two security reports about the issue on Wednesday, although they didn't receive wide attention outside of tech publications.

Apple's explanation of the vulnerability means a hacker could get "full admin access" to the device. That would allow intruders to impersonate the device's owner and subsequently run any software in their name, said Rachel Tobac, CEO of SocialProof Security.

Security experts have advised users to update affected devices — the iPhone6S and later models; several models of the iPad, including the 5th generation and later, all iPad Pro models and the iPad Air 2; and Mac computers running MacOS Monterey. The flaw also affects some iPod models.

Apple did not say in the reports how, where or by whom the vulnerabilities were discovered. In all cases, it cited an anonymous researcher.

Commercial spyware companies such as Israel's NSO Group are known for identifying and taking advantage of such flaws, exploiting them in malware that surreptitiously infects targets' smartphones, siphons their contents and surveils the targets in real time.

NSO Group has been blacklisted by the U.S. Commerce Department. Its spyware is known to have been used in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America against journalists, dissidents and human rights activists.

Security researcher Will Strafach said he had seen no technical analysis of the vulnerabilities that Apple has just patched. The company has previously acknowledged similarly serious flaws and, in what Strafach estimated to be perhaps a dozen occasions, has noted that it was aware of reports that such security holes had been exploited.

High-level talks in Ukraine yield little reported progress

By DEREK GATOPOULOS and SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Turkey's leader and the U.N. chief met in Ukraine with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday in a high-powered bid to ratchet down a war raging for nearly six months. But little immediate progress was reported.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he would follow up with Russian President Vladimir Putin, given that most of the matters discussed would require the Kremlin's agreement.

With the meetings held at such a high level — it was the first visit to Ukraine by Erdogan since the war began, and the second by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres — some had hoped for breakthroughs, if not toward an overall peace, then at least on specific issues. But none was apparent.

Meeting in the western city of Lviv, far from the front lines, the leaders discussed expanding exchanges of prisoners of war and arranging for U.N. atomic energy experts to visit and help secure Europe's biggest nuclear power plant, which is in the middle of fierce fighting that has raised fears of catastrophe.

Erdogan has positioned himself as a go-between in efforts to stop the fighting. While Turkey is a member of NATO, its wobbly economy is reliant on Russia for trade, and it has tried to steer a middle course between the two combatants.

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The Turkish president urged the international community after the talks not to abandon diplomatic efforts to end the war that has killed tens of thousands and forced more than 10 million Ukrainians from their homes.

He repeated that Turkey is willing to act as “mediator and facilitator” and added, “I remain convinced that the war will end at the negotiating table.”

In March, Turkey hosted talks in Istanbul between Russian and Ukrainian negotiators that failed to end the hostilities.

On the battlefield, meanwhile, at least 17 people were killed overnight in heavy Russian missile strikes on Ukraine’s Kharkiv region, Ukrainian authorities said Thursday.

Russia’s military claimed that it struck a base for foreign mercenaries in Kharkiv, killing 90. There was no immediate comment from the Ukrainian side.

In the latest incident on Russian soil near the border with Ukraine, an ammunition dump caught fire in a village in the Belgorod region, the regional governor said. No casualties were reported. Video posted online, whose authenticity couldn’t be verified, showed orange flames and black smoke, with the sound of multiple explosions.

Elsewhere, Russian officials reported that anti-aircraft defenses shot down drones in the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula at Kerch and near the Belbek airfield in the Black Sea port of Sevastopol. Explosions in recent weeks on the peninsula have destroyed warplanes and caused other damage at military airfields.

Heightening international tensions, Russia deployed warplanes carrying state-of-the-art hypersonic missiles to its Kaliningrad region, an enclave surrounded by NATO members Lithuania and Poland.

One major topic at the talks in Lviv was the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in southern Ukraine. Moscow and Kyiv have accused each other of shelling the complex.

Condemning the Kremlin for what he called “nuclear blackmail,” Zelenskyy demanded that Russian troops leave the plant and that a team from the U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency be allowed in.

“The area needs to be demilitarized, and we must tell it as it is: Any potential damage in Zaporizhzhia is suicide,” Guterres said at a news conference.

Erdogan likewise expressed concern over the fighting around the plant, saying, “We don’t want to experience another Chernobyl” — a reference to the world’s worst nuclear accident, in Ukraine in 1986.

Zelenskyy and the U.N. chief agreed Thursday on arrangements for an IAEA mission to the plant, according to the president’s website. But it was not immediately clear whether the Kremlin would consent to the terms. As for a pullout of troops, a Russian Foreign Ministry official said earlier that that would leave the plant “vulnerable.”

Fears mounted Thursday when Russian and Ukrainian authorities accused each other of plotting to attack the site and then blame the other side. Late Thursday, multiple rounds of Ukrainian shelling struck the city in which the power plant is located, a Russian official reported.

Guterres used the talks in Lviv to name Gen. Carlos dos Santos Cruz of Brazil to lead a previously announced U.N. fact-finding mission to the Olenivka prison where 53 Ukrainian POWs were killed in an explosion in July. Russia and Ukraine have blamed each other for the blast.

Also on the agenda Thursday: an increase in grain exports. Earlier this summer, the U.N. and Turkey brokered an agreement clearing the way for Ukraine to export 22 million tons of corn and other grain stuck in its Black Sea ports since the Russian invasion.

The blockage has worsened world food shortages, driven up prices and heightened fears of famine, especially in Africa. Yet even with the deal, only a trickle of Ukrainian grain has made it out — some 600,000 tons by Turkey’s estimate.

Zelenskyy said Thursday that he proposed expanding the shipments. Guterres, for his part, touted the operation’s success but added, “There is a long way to go before this will be translated into the daily life of people at their local bakery and in their markets.”

Georgia election probe runs into resistance from witnesses

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By KATE BRUMBACK and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Prosecutors investigating whether Donald Trump committed crimes as he sought to overturn his 2020 election defeat in Georgia are running into increasing resistance as they seek to call witnesses to testify before a special grand jury.

The latest illustration of that came Wednesday, when lawyers for Republican Gov. Brian Kemp filed a motion to quash a subpoena for his testimony, accusing the office of Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, a Democrat, of pursuing his testimony for “improper political purposes.” Willis rejected that characterization, describing it as dishonest.

Kemp is just one of several witnesses who have pushed back against Willis’ attempt to compel their testimony in a case investigating potential criminal interference in an election. Late Wednesday, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham formally appealed a judge’s order requiring him to testify before the special grand jury on Aug. 23. And John Eastman, a conservative lawyer who aided Trump’s efforts to undo the 2020 election results, has also pushed back against his subpoena, with a judge in New Mexico on Wednesday rejecting his request and ordering him to travel to Atlanta to testify before the special grand jury.

The witnesses’ reluctance to testify in the case reflects the high stakes of the investigation, which is just one of a long list of serious legal threats that Trump is facing that have intensified in recent weeks. It also demonstrates the power that Trump continues to wield over the Republican Party as he prepares for an expected 2024 presidential campaign.

Willis opened the investigation early last year, prompted by a January 2021 phone call between Trump and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger. During that conversation, Trump suggested the state’s top elections official could “find” the exact number of votes that would be needed to flip the election results in Georgia. Denying wrongdoing, Trump has described the call as “perfect.”

About a month earlier, Trump had called Kemp, asking him to order a special legislative session to overturn Biden’s victory in the state.

Kemp was scheduled to be questioned under oath by Willis’ team on July 25 in a session that was to be recorded and later played for the special grand jury. Asked by The Associated Press later that day to confirm that the governor had appeared for that meeting, Kemp spokesperson Katie Byrd declined to comment, citing “respect for the grand jury process.”

As it turns out, Kemp never met with Willis’ team.

His lawyers wrote in their motion Wednesday that Willis’ team canceled that meeting and issued a subpoena after Kemp’s attorneys asked about the scope of the interview.

Correspondence attached to the motion indicates that communications between Brian McEvoy, a lawyer for the governor, and the district attorney’s office turned sour in mid-June and then fell apart in late July.

In an email calling the investigation “politically motivated,” McEvoy said Kemp would only sit for the interview if Willis’ office agreed not to issue a subpoena for his testimony. He also demanded disclosure of questions and topics beforehand and said neither party could record the interview.

Willis issued a scathing response, accusing McEvoy of being rude to her team and calling his email “offensive and beneath an officer of the court.” She said she had offered the taped interview as a courtesy, but that that offer was now “off the table” and the governor would be subpoenaed.

“There’s an old adage that people take kindness for weakness. You have taken my kindness as weakness and you have continually treated this investigation with disdain,” Willis wrote. “Despite your disdain this investigation continues and will not be derailed by anyone’s antics.”

Kemp’s subpoena called for him to appear before the special grand jury Thursday. Byrd said in an email that he had been excused from appearing pending a ruling on his motion to quash. Fulton County Superior Court Judge Robert McBurney, who’s overseeing the special grand jury, has set an Aug. 25 hearing on the motion.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, on Wednesday, Judge Mary Marlowe Sommer ruled that Eastman was a material witness and had not proved that traveling to Atlanta would cause an undue hardship for him. Rejecting arguments from Eastman’s lawyer, she said any concerns about attorney-client privilege and his right to

assert the Fifth Amendment should be addressed by the judge in Atlanta.

Eastman had told lawmakers during a Dec. 3, 2020, legislative committee hearing at the Georgia Capitol that they had "both the lawful authority and a 'duty' to replace" the certified Democratic presidential electors, citing unfounded claims of widespread election fraud in the state, Willis wrote in a court filing.

He also drafted at least two memos to the Trump campaign and others detailing a plan by which then-Vice President Mike Pence, as president of the U.S. Senate, could refuse to count some of the electoral votes won by Biden, Willis wrote.

And in South Carolina on Wednesday, Graham appealed a judge's Monday order requiring him to testify before the special grand jury. Prosecutors have indicated they're interested in phone calls he made to Raffensperger and his staff in the weeks following the election.

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals will consider Graham's request. Graham's legal team also asked a federal judge to put his special grand jury appearance on hold during the appeal process.

Judge appears willing to unveil some of Mar-a-Lago affidavit

By TERRY SPENCER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday ordered the Justice Department to put forward proposed redactions as he committed to making public at least part of the affidavit supporting the search warrant for former President Donald Trump's estate in Florida.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Bruce Reinhart said that under the law, it is the government's burden to show why a redacted version should not be released and prosecutors' arguments Thursday failed to persuade him. He gave them a week to submit a copy of the affidavit proposing the information it wants to keep secret after the FBI seized classified and top secret information during a search at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate last week.

The hearing was convened after several news organizations, including The Associated Press, sought to unseal additional records tied to last week's search, including the affidavit. It is likely to contain key details about the Justice Department's investigation examining whether Trump retained and mishandled classified and sensitive government records.

The Justice Department has adamantly opposed making any portion of the affidavit public, arguing that doing so would compromise its ongoing investigation, would expose the identities of witnesses and could prevent others from coming forward and cooperating with the government.

The attorneys for the news organizations, however, argued that the unprecedented nature of the Justice Department's investigation warrants public disclosure.

"You can't trust what you can't see," said Chuck Tobin, a lawyer representing the AP and several other news outlets.

In addition to ordering the redactions, the judge agreed to make public other documents, including the warrant's cover sheet, the Justice Department's motion to seal the documents and the judge's order requiring them to be sealed.

Those documents showed the FBI was specifically investigating the "willful retention of national defense information," the concealment or removal of government records and obstruction of a federal investigation.

Jay Bratt, a top Justice Department national security prosecutor, had argued that the affidavit should remain hidden from the public. Unsealing it, he said, would provide a "road map" of the investigation — which is in its "early stages" — and expose the next steps to be taken by federal agents and prosecutors.

He argued it was in the public interest for the investigation, including interviews of witnesses, to go forward unhindered.

As the hearing kicked off, a small caravan of vehicles with Trump flags drove past the federal courthouse in West Palm Beach, Florida. An attorney for Trump, Christina Bobb, was in the courthouse Thursday but said she was only there to observe the court proceeding.

Bratt argued in court that even a redacted version of the document could reveal investigative steps or create the ability for sleuths or those being eyed in the investigation to identify witnesses in the case.

He also contended that the Justice Department had already gone to rare lengths to bring transparency, including making a request for the court to unseal the warrant and property receipt, which were made public last week.

"There is heightened interest," he conceded. "This is likely an unprecedented situation."

Trump, in a Truth Social post last week, called for the release of the unredacted affidavit in the interest of transparency.

Reinhart gave the government until next Thursday to submit its version with the proposed redactions along with written arguments for each, going line by line. He said he would then review the proposal and make his own proposed redactions and then may meet with government lawyers to give them a final argument for why specific information should be withheld.

Justice Department attorneys have argued in court filings that the investigation into Trump's handling of "highly classified material" is ongoing and that the document contains sensitive information about witnesses.

A recent filing by Bratt and Juan Antonio Gonzalez, the U.S. attorney in Miami, says making the affidavit public would "cause significant and irreparable damage to this ongoing criminal investigation."

"If disclosed, the affidavit would serve as a roadmap to the government's ongoing investigation, providing specific details about its direction and likely course, in a manner that is highly likely to compromise future investigative steps," they wrote.

FBI agents searched Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate on Aug. 8, removing 11 sets of classified documents, with some not only marked top secret but also "sensitive compartmented information," according to a receipt of what was taken that was released Friday. That is a special category meant to protect the nation's most important secrets that if revealed publicly could cause "exceptionally grave" damage to U.S. interests. The court records did not provide specific details about information the documents might contain.

Brain-eating amoeba suspected in 2nd Midwest death

By MARGERIE A. BECK and JOSH FUNK Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A child likely died from a rare infection caused by a brain-eating amoeba after swimming in an eastern Nebraska river, health officials said, making it the second such probable death in the Midwest this summer and raising the question of whether climate change is playing a role.

The Douglas County Department of Health based in Omaha, Nebraska, reported Wednesday that doctors believe the child died of primary amoebic meningoencephalitis, a usually fatal infection caused by the *naegleria fowleri* amoeba. Health officials believe the child came into contact with the amoeba on Sunday while swimming in the Elkhorn River just west of Omaha.

Officials have not released the child's identity.

Last month, a Missouri resident died of the same infection likely caused by the amoeba at Lake of Three Fires in southwestern Iowa. Iowa officials closed the lake's beach as a precaution for nearly three weeks.

People are usually infected when water containing the amoeba enters the body through the nose while swimming or diving into lakes and rivers. Other sources have been documented, including tainted tap water in a Houston-area city in 2020. Symptoms include fever, headache, nausea or vomiting, progressing to a stiff neck, loss of balance, hallucinations and seizures.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says *naegleria fowleri* infections are rare — there are about three cases in the United States every year — but that those infections are overwhelmingly fatal.

There were 154 cases reported between 1962 and 2021 in the U.S., with only four survivors, according to the CDC. Of those, 71 cases were reported between 2000 and 2021. Texas and Florida recorded the most infections with 39 and 37 cases respectively, and the amoeba is typically found in southern states because it thrives in waters that are warmer than 86 degrees Fahrenheit (30 Celsius).

But infections have migrated north in recent years, including two cases in Minnesota since 2010, Douglas County Health Director Dr. Lindsey Huse noted during a news conference Thursday.

"Our regions are becoming warmer," she said. "As things warm up, the water warms up and water levels drop because of drought, you see that this organism is a lot happier and more typically grows in those

situations.”

According to the National Water Information System, the surface water temperature near where the child was swimming was between 86 and 92 degrees.

Jacob Lorenzo-Morales, a researcher at the Universidad de La Laguna in the Canary Islands who has studied *naegleria fowleri*, said Thursday that an increase in infections since 2000 can be blamed on two factors: better knowledge and diagnosis of the disease, and the rising temperature in bodies of water providing “a perfect environment” for the amoeba to thrive.

Researcher Sutherland Maciver, who has studied the amoeba at the Centre for Discovery Brain Sciences at Edinburgh Medical School in Scotland, says not all infections are reported and that the 430 cases that have ever been reported worldwide are almost certainly an undercount. And, he said, scientists cannot say with certainty that the Nebraska case is directly attributable to climate change.

The two researchers co-authored a paper titled “Is *Naegleria fowleri* an Emerging Parasite?” that examined factors behind the increase in reported cases.

Health officials recommend that freshwater swimmers plug their noses, avoid putting their heads underwater and avoid activities such as water skiing and tubing, which could force water into the nose, eyes or mouth. You cannot be infected by drinking contaminated water.

‘Game of Thrones’ prequel keeps dragons, adds diversity

By BROOKE LEFFERTS and MIKE CIDONI LENNOX Associated Press

The prequel to “Game of Thrones” is set to forge its own storytelling path, with a new set of characters and a more diverse team behind the scenes.

“House of the Dragon” takes place two centuries before the events of the original series, which ended its hit eight-season run in May 2019. The 10-episode prequel begins Sunday on HBO and will be available to stream on HBO Max.

The story focuses on House Targaryen, made famous in “Game of Thrones” by Emilia Clarke’s Daenerys and her fearsome dragons. But don’t expect “House of the Dragon” to be a remake of “Game of Thrones,” cast member Steve Toussaint said.

“It’s been done and they did it exceedingly well,” said Toussaint, who plays the very rich Lord Corlys Velaryon. “You know you’re in that world, but you’re seeing a different story, different characters, different motivations.”

Among the new faces in the clan is Prince Daemon Targaryen, played by Matt Smith. His villainous character is a lot more complex than he appears to be on first viewing, the actor said.

“I think the reason I’ve had fun is because he’s maybe not just a villain,” he said. “I think there’s actually a huge amount of fragility and depth and inner madness there. ... It’s not black and white. It can go either way with Daemon at any point.”

Based on George R.R. Martin’s “Fire and Blood,” the drama was co-created by Martin and Ryan Condal, whose credits include the 2016-19 sci-fi drama “Colony.” Condal is an executive producer and co-showrunner with director Miguel Sapochnik, who brings his experience on “Game of Thrones” to the prequel.

“House of the Dragon,” much like its predecessor, focuses on familial succession with a female heir being overlooked. But Sapochnik notes a key difference between the two series: The team making the prequel is more diverse, including a 50-50 split between male and female directors, including Sapochnik, Clare Kilner, Geeta Vasant Patel and Greg Yaitanes.

There was a conscious push to be inclusive behind the scenes, Sapochnik says.

“We really tried to, as much as possible, hire as many female crew as we could, because we think that’s a really important shift that needs to be both recognized, acknowledged, acted upon, maybe give opportunities to people who don’t get opportunities,” he explained.

The team making “Dragon” is equally as diverse, and — for the fantasy genre — boasts a relative bounty of women in the writers’ room. The gender balance affects the show’s story and tone, according to some of its female cast members.

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The series opens with an aristocratic council naming Viserys Targaryen (Paddy Considine) as heir to the Iron Throne, bypassing his older cousin Princess Rhaenyra Velaryon (Eve Best). But Viserys must have his own heir, with dreams of power held by Daemon, his younger brother, and Viserys' daughter Princess Rhaenyra (Emma D'Arcy plays the adult version, Milly Alcock the youth).

"You definitely don't feel like a device or a prop and you don't feel like the the sexy wench or the mother," said Olivia Cooke, who plays the adult Alicent Hightower, longtime friend to Rhaenyra. "You feel that you've got a fully fledged character which is really nourishing to play."

The ensemble cast also includes Emily Carey, Graham McTavish, Fabien Frankel, Rhys Ifans and Sonoya Mizuno.

Carey, who plays the younger Alicent, calls the inclusion of women in all aspects of production a step "in the right direction" for the fantasy genre.

Although virtually every female character faces misogyny, each is "still a fully fledged, three-dimensional female character," Carey said. "They still have multiple other story lines and a whole life away from that misogynistic story line. They're not just put in the show to serve a purpose. And I think that's what makes it so special."

"House of the Dragon" screenwriter Charmaine DeGraté said "it was important for George (R.R. Martin, a prequel executive producer) for it to be this way. Female-driven characters, female-driven shows and female-driven writers rooms just sort of elevates the story. That's a wonderful way to expand the universe."

RFK Jr.'s anti-vaccine group kicked off Instagram, Facebook

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

Instagram and Facebook suspended Children's Health Defense this week after the anti-vaccine group led by Robert Kennedy Jr. repeatedly violated rules prohibiting misinformation about COVID-19.

A nonprofit, Children's Health Defense is one of the most influential anti-vaccine organizations active on social media, where it has spread misleading claims about vaccines and other public health measures designed to control the pandemic.

In a statement, Kennedy compared Facebook's actions to government censorship, even though Facebook is a private company that can set and enforce its own rules about misinformation.

"Facebook is acting here as a surrogate for the federal government's crusade to silence all criticism of draconian government policies," Kennedy said.

Children's Health Defense had hundreds of thousands of followers at the time of the suspension, according to a statement from the organization, which also noted that it has sued Facebook over its moderation policies.

Public health advocates and misinformation experts have criticized Facebook for not acting more swiftly to contain potentially harmful misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines.

Karen Kornbluh, director of the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative at the German Marshall Fund, said too many groups like Children's Health Defense have been allowed to flourish on social media for too long. She noted that the group remains on Twitter.

"Today's step is too late and too little," Kornbluh said, adding that tech companies must address the reasons misinformation spreads so readily on social media.

Facebook and Instagram confirmed the company action on Thursday in a statement to The Associated Press.

"We removed these accounts for repeatedly violating our policies," a spokesman for Meta, Facebook and Instagram's parent company, told the AP. Under the platforms' policies, suspensions are typically only enforced after multiple violations.

Several state affiliates of Children's Health Defense remain on Facebook and Instagram despite the ban of the national organization. Kennedy was kicked off Instagram last year but continues to keep an active account on Facebook.

Trump executive pleads guilty in tax case, agrees to testify

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A top executive at former President Donald Trump's family business pleaded guilty Thursday to evading taxes on a free apartment and other perks, striking a deal with prosecutors that could make him a star witness against the company at a trial this fall.

Allen Weisselberg, a senior Trump Organization adviser and formerly the company's longtime chief financial officer, pleaded guilty to all 15 of the charges he faced in the case.

In a low, somewhat hoarse voice, Weisselberg admitted taking in over \$1.7 million worth of untaxed extras — including school tuition for his grandchildren, free rent for a Manhattan apartment and lease payments for a luxury car — and explicitly keeping some of the plums off the books.

Judge Juan Manuel Merchan agreed to sentence the 75-year-old executive to five months in New York City's Rikers Island jail complex, although he will be eligible for release after little more than three months if he behaves behind bars. The judge said Weisselberg will have to pay nearly \$2 million in taxes, penalties and interest and complete five years of probation.

The plea bargain also requires Weisselberg to testify truthfully as a prosecution witness when the Trump Organization goes on trial in October on related charges. The company is accused of helping Weisselberg and other executives avoid income taxes by failing to report their full compensation accurately to the government. Trump himself is not charged in the case.

Weisselberg will remain free on bail until he is formally sentenced following the company's trial. He said nothing as he left court, offering no reply when a journalist asked whether he had any message for Trump. If Weisselberg fails to comply with the plea terms, prosecutors said they would seek a "significant state prison sentence," and Merchan warned that he could be subject to the maximum punishment for the top charge — grand larceny — of 15 years.

Weisselberg's lawyer Nicholas Gravante Jr. said his client pleaded guilty "to put an end to this case and the years-long legal and personal nightmares it has caused for him and his family."

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said in a statement that Weisselberg's plea "directly implicates the Trump Organization in a wide range of criminal activity and requires Weisselberg to provide invaluable testimony in the upcoming trial against the corporation."

"We look forward to proving our case in court against the Trump Organization," he added.

Testimony by Weisselberg could weaken the company's defense. If convicted, the company could face fines of double the amount of unpaid taxes or potentially be placed on probation and forced to change its business practices.

The company praised Weisselberg on Thursday as a trusted, honorable employee who it said has been "persecuted and threatened by law enforcement, particularly the Manhattan district attorney, in their never-ending, politically motivated quest to get President Trump."

In a statement, the company accused prosecutors of trying to pressure Weisselberg to cast aspersions on Trump, and of stretching to make a criminal case out of familiar executive perks such as a company car.

The company, which was not involved in Weisselberg's guilty plea Thursday, said it has done nothing wrong, won't plead guilty and looks forward "to having our day in court."

Weisselberg, seen as one of Trump's most loyal business associates, is the only person to face criminal charges so far in the Manhattan district attorney's long-running investigation of the company. Weisselberg started working for the Trump Organization in 1973, when it was run by Trump's father, Fred. Following his July 2021 arrest, the company changed his title from CFO to senior adviser. The CFO position remains vacant.

Weisselberg agreed to plead guilty days after a court hearing where Merchan denied his request to dismiss the charges. The judge rejected the defense's argument that the district attorney's office was punishing Weisselberg because he wouldn't offer information that would damage Trump.

The district attorney has also been investigating whether Trump or his company lied to banks or the government about the value of its properties to obtain loans or reduce tax bills.

Then-District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., who started the investigation, directed his deputies last year to

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present evidence to a grand jury and seek an indictment of Trump, according to former prosecutor Mark Pomerantz, who previously led the probe. But after Vance left office in January, his successor, Bragg, allowed the grand jury to disband without charges. Both prosecutors are Democrats. Bragg has said the investigation is continuing.

Prosecutors alleged that the company gave untaxed fringe benefits to senior executives, including Weisselberg, for 15 years. Weisselberg alone was accused of defrauding the federal government, state and city out of more than \$900,000 in unpaid taxes and undeserved tax refunds.

Trump, a Republican, has decried the New York investigations as a "political witch hunt" and has said his company's actions were standard practice in the real estate business and in no way a crime.

Last week, Trump sat for a deposition in New York Attorney General Letitia James' parallel civil investigation into allegations that Trump's company misled lenders and tax authorities about asset values. Trump invoked his Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination more than 400 times.

James, whose probe uncovered the evidence that led to Weisselberg's charges, said in a statement: "Let this guilty plea send a loud and clear message: we will crack down on anyone who steals from the public for personal gain because no one is above the law."

Judge denies bail for Rushdie's attacker, bars interviews

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

MAYVILLE, N.Y. (AP) — A judge refused to grant bail Thursday to the man accused of trying to kill Salman Rushdie as the acclaimed author prepared to give a talk in western New York.

Hadi Matar, 24, appeared in a western New York courtroom after a grand jury indicted him on charges that he rushed the stage at the Chautauqua Institution and stabbed Rushdie multiple times in front of a horrified crowd.

Dressed in a black and white jail uniform, Matar stayed quiet during the hearing while his lawyer unsuccessfully tried to persuade the judge that he should be released while he awaited trial. Public defender Nathaniel Barone said Matar had no criminal record and wouldn't flee the country if released.

Barone also asked the judge to do something to stop reporters from trying to contact Matar at the Chautauqua County jail. The lawyer said the jail had received "several hundred phone calls" from people trying to reach Matar.

Some of that media outreach resulted in Matar giving a brief interview to The New York Post, in which he talked about disliking Rushdie and praised Iran's late supreme leader, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Khomeini issued an edict in 1989 demanding Rushdie's death over his novel "The Satanic Verses," which some Muslims consider blasphemous. A semiofficial Iranian foundation had posted a bounty of over \$3 million.

Matar's lawyer complained that the media coverage could potentially lead to a biased jury.

"He's entitled to a fair trial. He's entitled to due process, no matter what he's accused of," Barone said. Judge David Foley declined that request, but he ordered the lawyers involved in the case not to give interviews.

"No speaking to the press until we have resolved this issue," the judge said.

Rushdie, 75, is getting treatment in a Pennsylvania hospital for severe wounds.

Chautauqua County District Attorney Jason Schmidt said during the court hearing that Matar stabbed Mr. Rushdie a dozen times in the neck, stomach, chest, hand and right eye, before he could be stopped by shocked bystanders.

"He doesn't care about his own freedom, judge, and is so driven by his motives that his mission to kill Mr. Rushdie is greater in his mind and outweighs his own personal freedom," Schmidt told the judge.

The author was seated in a chair at the lakeside retreat Aug. 12, waiting to be introduced for a discussion of protections for writers in exile and freedom of expression when Matar jumped onstage.

Henry Reese, 73, the cofounder of Pittsburgh's City of Asylum, was onstage with Rushdie and suffered a gash to his forehead, bruising and other minor injuries.

Matar, who lived in Fairview, New Jersey, with his mother, is charged with attempted murder and assault.

He could get decades in prison if convicted. He has pleaded not guilty.

Stars Coffee, anyone? Starbucks successor opening in Russia

By JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — People in Moscow who were disappointed when Starbucks closed its coffee shops after Russia sent troops into Ukraine may now feel a caffeine jolt of hope: A nearly identical operation is opening in the capital.

The name's almost the same: Stars Coffee. The logo could be the separated-at-birth twin of the Starbucks mermaid, with flowing hair, a small enigmatic smile and a star atop her head — though instead of a Starbucks crown she wears a Russian headdress called a kokoshnik.

The menu, judging by the company app introduced a day before the store's formal opening Friday, would look familiar to any Starbucks customer.

Starbucks said Thursday it had no comment on the new stores.

Seattle-based Starbucks was one of the most visible of the wave of foreign companies that pulled out of Russia or suspended their operations in response to Russia's military operation in Ukraine. Others include McDonald's, IKEA and fast-fashion giant H&M.

The departure of these companies was a psychological blow to Russians who had become used to the comforts of Western-style consumer culture. But Russian entrepreneurs saw opportunity in suddenly unoccupied stores.

Former McDonald's outlets are reopening and attracting sizable crowds under the name Vkusno — i Tochka. Though the name doesn't roll off the tongue easily and is a little awkward to translate (roughly: It's Tasty — Period), the menu is a testament to imitation being the sincerest form of flattery.

Yunus Yusupov, a popular rap artist who uses the stage name Timati, and restaurateur Anton Pinsky partnered to buy the Starbucks assets, then took the imitation strategy a step further by giving the operation an English-language name.

At a news conference Thursday, they vowed to reopen all the former Starbucks under their new identity and even expand the business. The U.S. company had built its Russian operation to about 130 stores since entering the country in 2007. The stores were owned and operated by a franchisee, Alshaya Group of Kuwait.

While the close resemblance of the new operations to their predecessors could be seen as riding someone else's inspiration and effort, the Starbucks and McDonald's successors also fit a national-pride concept. Since Russia was walloped by sanctions and foreign pullouts, officials frequently assert that Russia will overcome by relying on its own resources and energies.

"Now the economic situation is difficult, but this is a time of opportunity," Oleg Eskindarov, president of the holding company that partnered in the Starbucks deal, told the state news agency Tass. "For the past four months, we have been very actively looking at exiting companies following the example of Starbucks. There are several more similar examples, but we cannot talk about them yet."

Vance's anti-drug charity enlisted doctor echoing Big Pharma

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — When JD Vance founded "Our Ohio Renewal" a day after the 2016 presidential election, he promoted the charity as a vehicle for helping solve the scourge of opioid addiction that he had lamented in "Hillbilly Elegy," his bestselling memoir.

But Vance shuttered the nonprofit last year and its foundation in May, shortly after clinching the state's Republican nomination for U.S. Senate, according to state records reviewed by The Associated Press. An AP review found that the charity's most notable accomplishment — sending an addiction specialist to Ohio's Appalachian region for a yearlong residency — was tainted by ties among the doctor, the institute that employed her and Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer of OxyContin.

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The mothballing of Our Ohio Renewal and its dearth of tangible success raise questions about Vance's management of the organization. His decision to bring on Dr. Sally Satel is drawing particular scrutiny. She's an American Enterprise Institute resident scholar whose writings questioning the role of prescription painkillers in the national opioid crisis were published in The New York Times and elsewhere before she began the residency in the fall of 2018.

Documents and emails obtained by ProPublica for a 2019 investigation found that Satel, a senior fellow at AEI, sometimes cited Purdue-funded studies and doctors in her articles on addiction for major news outlets and occasionally shared drafts of the pieces with Purdue officials in advance, including on occasions in 2004 and 2016. Over the years, according to the report, AEI received regular \$50,000 donations and other financial support from Purdue totaling \$800,000.

Longtime Ohio political observer Herb Asher cast the charity's shortcomings, including Satel's links to Big Pharma, as a "betrayal."

"A person forms a charity presumably to do good things, so when it doesn't, for whatever reason, that really is a betrayal," said Asher, an emeritus professor of political science at Ohio State University. "That's something voters can get their arms around."

Vance's campaign said the nonprofit is simply on temporary hold during Vance's Senate run against Democratic U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan. It also said Vance was unfamiliar with Satel's connection to Purdue when she was selected for the residency.

"JD didn't know at the time, but remains proud of her work to treat patients, especially those in an area of Ohio who needed it most," the campaign said in a statement.

In an email to the AP this week, Satel said that she "never consulted with" or ever "took a cent from Purdue" and that she didn't know that Purdue had donated money to AEI because the institute maintains a firewall between its scholars and donors. She said she relies "completely on my own experience as a psychiatrist and/or data to form my opinions."

Phoebe Keller, spokesperson for AEI, said the institute's scholars "have academic freedom to follow their own research to conclusions without interference from management."

Purdue Pharma did not respond to a message seeking comment.

Vance has described Our Ohio Renewal's mission variously over the years as "to bring interesting new businesses to the so-called Rust Belt," "to fill some of the (area's) treatment gaps in mental health" and "to combat Ohio's opioid epidemic."

He has acknowledged at points that the charity fell short of his vision, though he has more recently suggested it remains active — including listing himself on a financial disclosure filed this week as "honorary chairman" of the canceled organization.

In his book, Vance recounts the hardship and heartbreak he and his family experienced as a result of his mother's battle with drug addiction, which ravaged Appalachian areas of Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia when the 38-year-old was growing up. She used both OxyContin and heroin.

Ohio remains one of the hardest-hit states for deadly drug overdoses, with about 14 people dying each day, according to the most recent statistics.

Vance expressed hopes in media interviews about the time Satel arrived in struggling Ironton, Ohio, in September 2018, that she would use her experience to develop better treatment methods for addiction that could be "scaled nationally" or perhaps to produce "a paper or book-length publication" detailing her findings. She has yet to do either.

"I am working on a book," Satel told the AP in an email exchange this week, nearly three years after she wrapped up her residency.

D.R. Gossett, CEO of the Ironton-Lawrence County Community Action Organization, who helped oversee Satel's roughly \$70,000 residency, said she "helped people who were struggling in southern Ohio" and "to this day, people are thankful for her presence." That included treating an unspecified number of patients in a region long designated a health care shortage area and what Gossett described as "community planning efforts."

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After the residency ended, Satel's public remarks suggested she remained as convinced as ever that addiction stems from combined behavioral and environmental forces — not the documented overprescribing and aggressive marketing of OxyContin and other opioids that helped families and state, local and tribal governments ultimately secure a \$6 billion national settlement against Purdue in March.

"The data are completely clear that the decline in opioid prescribing had no effect on the overall opioid overdose rate," she said in the email to the AP, blaming the number of growing overdoses on heroin and fentanyl.

It's a familiar position for Satel, whose opinion columns in national publications included an October 2004 Times article, "Doctors Behind Bars: Treating Pain is Now Risky Business," a February 2018 Politico article, "The Myth of What's Driving the Opioid Crisis - Doctor-prescribed painkillers are not the biggest threat" and the March 2018 Slate article, "Pill Limits Are Not a Smart Way to Fight the Opioid Crisis."

Jack Frech, a senior executive in residence at Ohio University who headed an Appalachian Ohio welfare agency for more than 30 years, said there is no doubt that the region was targeted with prescription opioids in the early days of the epidemic. He said the path to addiction to heroin and fentanyl for many residents "started with the overabundance of easily accessible pain pills."

Ryan and his allies are already targeting Our Ohio Renewal in television ads, citing recent Business Insider reporting that called into question the charity's payments to a Vance political adviser and on public opinion polling.

A year after Satel finished up her residency, a friend emailed Vance in October 2020 to express concern that Satel was headlining an AEI event on the origins of the U.S. opioid crisis "without a splash banner saying how much money AEI takes from Purdue Pharma."

"Yeah. It's not good," Vance replied, according to a copy of the email obtained by the AP. "I have a minor affiliation with AEI. Thinking about dropping it because of this and other things." He did. Keller, the AEI spokesperson, said Vance ended his nonresident fellowship at the institute that year and did not renew the affiliation.

Medical professionals and others on the front lines of the drug crisis say the scourge of addiction in Appalachia still needs advocates.

"There's definitely still a major problem," said Trisha Ferrar, who directs The Recovery Center in Lancaster, at the edge of Appalachian Ohio. "Things are very tough and people who are sick are having a lot of challenges. There's just a lot of uncertainty in the world right now that kind of adds to that."

Breathing room for Biden: Big summer wins ease 2024 doubts

By WILL WEISSERT and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and his allies hope big recent wins on climate, health care and more will at least temporarily tamp down questions among top Democrats about whether he will run for reelection.

That optimism may be short lived, at risk if and when former President Donald Trump announces another White House campaign. But for now, the "Will he or won't he" Washington parlor game appears to be on hold.

"I think the naysayers are pretty quiet right now," said former Democratic Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe. "I think they've seen reality."

In just the past several weeks, Biden has signed into law a climate and prescription-drug package that accomplishes many of his party's long-held objectives; Congress has sent him bills that impose strict limits on guns and set out a plan to boost U.S. high-tech manufacturing. A drone strike killed al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri, average gasoline prices have fallen back below \$4 per gallon and there are signs that inflation — while still white-hot — may finally be cooling.

All that has eased a debate over Biden's future that was spreading. Fellow Democrats running for reelection were struggling to answer whether America's oldest president should seek another term. But now they have a fresh agenda they can campaign on heading into the November midterms.

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The president has increased his Democratic fundraising efforts, and next week in Maryland he's holding his first rally for the party of the fall campaign season. He also plans to travel aggressively to boost candidates.

As a former senator, Biden knows some lawmakers may need to create distance from him to best win their races — but also that others could benefit from joint appearances. Aides say Biden may prove most useful amplifying Democrat-championed issues that are broadly popular, like lowering prescription drug costs and protecting abortion rights.

Cedric Richmond, one of Biden's closest White House advisers before leaving for a senior Democratic National Committee job, said he wasn't sure the spate of positive news would put an end to 2024 questions, "but it should."

For "tried and true Democrats, the answer was a simple, 'Yes, he should run. Yes he'll be our nominee. Yes he'll win.'"

But comments like that don't make the news, said Richmond, a former Louisiana congressman. "So the only story was when somebody waffles or blows the question."

Those have included New York Democratic Reps. Carolyn Maloney and Jerry Nadler both declining during a recent primary debate to say if Biden should seek a second term. In a subsequent statement, Maloney said she'd support Biden "if he decides to run," then drew still more scrutiny while appearing on CNN by imploring Biden: "I want you to run. I happen to think you won't be running."

Not all lingering doubt can be attributed to awkward answers, though.

Swing-district Minnesota Democratic Rep. Dean Phillips said he didn't want Biden to run in 2024. West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, whose about-face revived the climate and prescription drug legislation, has refused to say if he'd support a second Biden term. Stars of the progressive left, like New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, have similarly been noncommittal.

But Biden hasn't been abandoned. Prominent Democrats, including New York Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, chair of the House Democratic Caucus, openly praise him during campaign appearances. In an interview, Jeffries ticked off the president's recent wins and included administration successes going back to last year's infrastructure spending and stimulus spending packages, as well as ongoing COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

"If someone were to say that a president had a record of accomplishment that I just described, without putting a time frame on it, the logical response would be: That person had a successful two-term presidency," Jeffries said.

Still, other Democrats say a few positive headlines won't be enough.

"Biden will have good and bad weeks in the news, but the fundamentals remain adverse," said Norman Solomon, national director of RootsAction.org. His progressive activist organization, already frequently critical of the president, has launched a "Don't Run Joe" effort.

Solomon wants Biden to announce he's not running, freeing him to take bigger political risks and achieve a more successful one-term presidency. He suggested that White House advisers who worry about making Biden a lame duck are engaging in a "significant degree of whistling past the political graveyard."

White House allies stress that the 2024 decision will ultimately be Biden's alone. He's on track to follow a similar timeline to former President Barack Obama, who declared for 2012 reelection in April 2011, aides say.

No modern incumbent president has faced such hesitation within his own party, nor been realistically threatened in a primary. Intra-party challengers, if they emerge, could weaken both the president and his party.

Some Biden observers see the president, who came out of political retirement because he believed himself best able to take on Trump in 2020, as less likely to seek reelection if his predecessor ultimately opts not to run.

If Biden runs, he'll have to level with voters about his age — convincing them he's really up for a second term that wouldn't end until he'd be 86. Still, Richmond said such discussions could actually help Biden.

"I'm not going to let people, all of a sudden, say wisdom and experience is a bad thing," he said. "The president of the United States, leader of the free world, that's exactly what you want."

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While Biden's age is unprecedented — so, too, would Trump's at 82 — there's almost as little tradition of presidents not seeking reelection after just four years in office. The last one was Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880.

Texas Democratic state Rep. Jasmine Crockett, a civil rights attorney expected to win an open House seat in Dallas, said if Biden "decides he wants to run, we've got to unite behind that." But she also said the president hasn't fought to preserve voting rights aggressively enough.

"From a public standpoint, especially when it comes to Black folks, it was not taken too kindly that they did not see or hear more coming from the president," Crockett said. "If Black people come out and vote, Democrats win. If Black people stay at home, Democrats lose."

Biden insisted last month that Democrats "want me to run." But a Quinnipiac University poll in July found that only 24% of Americans overall, and 40% of Democrats, said that. The president's approval rating has dropped below 40% for two straight months.

For positive reinforcement, Biden could look to a president at the opposite end of the political spectrum: Ronald Reagan, who took office in 1981 at age 69, making him the country's then-oldest president.

With inflation spiking by the fall of his second year, a Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 6 in 10 Americans said Reagan shouldn't run again, and his approval ratings sank to 35% by the following January. The next year, Reagan romped to reelection, winning every state but Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

McAuliffe, who was beaten in his bid to reclaim the governorship last November by Republican Glenn Youngkin despite Biden having carried Virginia by 10 points the previous year, said the president and Democrats have already seized momentum and "age doesn't matter."

"He's at the top of his game. And this party, which a year ago was in disarray, and different elements of our party fighting one another," McAuliffe said. "Now you've got a party that is united, fired up and legislative accomplishments that every American has wanted for many years."

B1G deal: Big Ten lands \$7 billion, NFL-style TV contracts

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

The Big Ten's new \$7 billion media rights deal will string the conference's top football games across three major networks each week, creating an NFL-style television schedule on Saturdays.

The Big Ten announced Thursday it has reached seven-year agreements with Fox, CBS and NBC to share the rights to the conference's football and basketball games.

The deals go into effect in 2023, expire in 2030 and eventually will allow the conference's soon-to-be 16 member universities to share more than \$1 billion per year, pushing the total value of the agreements past \$7 billion, a person familiar with the terms told The Associated Press.

The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because Big Ten and network officials were not disclosing financial details publicly, but the deal is believed to be the richest ever on an annual basis for a college sports property. The large increase in revenue to the conference won't kick in until the third year of the deal and gradually will increase over the final five years.

"I think what it does, it affords us the opportunity to make sure that we can continually do the things we need to do to take care of our student-athletes, to fortify our institutions, to build our programs," Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren told the AP.

The deal sets a new benchmark in the college sports arms race, which is based heavily on TV money. The Southeastern Conference has a deal with ESPN that starts in 2024 and is also worth upward of \$7 billion, but over 10 years. That deal was announced before the conference moved to expand to 16 schools with the additions of Texas and Oklahoma.

The Big Ten currently has 14 members, stretching from Rutgers and Maryland on the East Coast to Nebraska across the Midwest, and covering some of the biggest media markets in the country, including New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.

In 2024, Southern California and UCLA are scheduled to join the Big Ten, adding the Los Angeles market

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to its footprint.

Former Fox Sports President Bob Thompson said adding teams from the second-largest media market in the country (5.8 million homes) had to make the conference even more appealing to TV networks.

Plus, the West Coast schools should help increase what conference can make off its cable network in that part of the country.

"The economics of that alone are rather large," Thompson said. "If you get 3 million people all of sudden get the Big Ten network as part of their expanded basic (cable package), that's \$3 million a month. Compared to what they had been getting which is like \$3 million a year."

With ESPN out of the equation for Big Ten football after a 40-year relationship, the league is set to lock down three prominent time slots with its network partners.

Fox, which has shared the rights to the Big Ten with ESPN since 2017 and owns a majority stake in BTN, will continue to feature noon Eastern time as its primary game of the day.

Fox and its cable network FS1 will have the rights to more than two dozen football games, at least 45 men's basketball games and women's basketball games.

CBS, starting in 2024, will replace the Southeastern Conference game of the week at 3:30 p.m. Eastern — that is moving to ABC — with a Big Ten game.

CBS will carry 14-15 Big Ten football games a season from 2024-29, including a Black Friday game. Unlike with its longtime SEC deal, CBS will not be guaranteed the first selection of football games each week with the Big Ten. Fox, CBS and NBC will hold a draft for games, allowing each network some opportunities for first selection in a given week.

In 2023, CBS will carry seven Big Ten games while it still has the SEC on CBS at 3:30 p.m. Eastern. The network will continue to be the home of Big Ten men's basketball, including the conference tournament semifinals and finals, and it will begin airing the women's basketball tournament championship.

"When we did our financial analysis, and looked at the major markets — even before USC and UCLA — and the national footprint of the Big Ten, it was a very attractive deal for us," said Sean McManus, chairman of CBS Sports. "And I think the money is fair. It's unprecedented. They're the largest deals in the history of college football."

Starting in 2023, NBC will launch "Big Ten Saturday Night" in prime time and broadcast 15-16 games per season. The agreement with NBC also includes eight football games and dozens of men's and women's basketball games per season to be exclusively streamed on Peacock, the network's online subscription service. NBC also has a separate, longstanding broadcast deal with Notre Dame, which remains unaffiliated with a conference.

Each network will air the Big Ten's championship football game at least once during the length of the deals, with Fox securing the rights to four (2023, '25, '27 and '29).

Warren spent more than two decades working as an executive in the front office of three NFL teams. He said the Big Ten's vision for its new broadcast deal was modeled after an NFL Sunday, with three consecutive marquee games across three different networks, airing from noon to nearly midnight Eastern.

"I just thought where we were in the Big Ten, we had a very unique opportunity because we have the institutions that could do it," Warren said. "We have the fan avidity. We have the breadth, we have the historical foundation, that we were in a position to really do something unique with three powerful brands in Fox, CBS and NBC."

The Big Ten's alignment with three traditional networks shows that while streaming might be the future, linear television is not dead.

"It may be dying in certain aspects. You could say things like scripted dramas. Sitcoms. But for sports and news, it's never been stronger," Thompson said.

"The conferences or leagues are a little reticent to make that big of a jump from the wide, wide distribution of broadcast television," he added. "Now you're going to jump to the streaming service, which in the big scheme of things, the numbers are still relatively small in terms of how many people watch and use them."

Judge limits privilege defense in AZ Mormon sex abuse case

By MICHAEL REZENDES Associated Press

An Arizona judge overseeing a high-profile lawsuit accusing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of conspiring to cover-up child sex abuse has ruled that the church may not refuse to answer questions or turn over documents under the state's "clergy-penitent privilege."

Clergy in Arizona, as in many other states, are required to report information about child sexual abuse or neglect to law enforcement or child welfare authorities. But an exception to that law — the privilege — allows members of the clergy who learn of the abuse through spiritual confessions to keep the information secret.

Judge Laura Cardinal ruled on Aug. 8 that the late Paul Adams waived his right to keep his confessions secret when he posted videos of himself sexually abusing his two daughters on the Internet, boasted of the abuse on social media, and confessed to federal law enforcement agents, who arrested him in 2017 with no help from the church.

"Taken together, Adams' overt acts demonstrate a lack of repentance and a profound disregard" for the principles of the church, widely known as the Mormon church, Cardinal said in her ruling. "His acts can only be characterized as a waiver of the clergy-penitent privilege."

The lawsuit accuses two Arizona bishops and church leaders in Salt Lake City of negligence in not reporting the abuse and allowing Adams to continue abusing his older daughter for as many as seven years, a time in which he also abused the girl's infant sister.

Cardinal issued her order, which the church is expected to appeal, after attorneys for three victims objected when the church refused to turn over disciplinary records for Adams, who was excommunicated in 2013. The victims' attorneys also objected when a church official cited the privilege when refusing to answer questions during pre-trial testimony.

"The judge's order applies to the church's secret records and to what happened at the secret ex-communication hearing," said Lynne Cadigan, an attorney for the three children who filed suit.

Cardinal's order will require church official Richard Fife, a clerk who took notes during the excommunication hearing, to answer questions from the attorneys representing the Adams children. It will also require church officials to turn over records of the disciplinary council meeting.

The church has filed a legal motion asking Cardinal to delay implementing her order until it contests her findings with the Arizona Court of Appeals. Without the delay, church lawyers said, information it considers confidential under the clergy-penitent privilege would be released to attorneys for the Adams children and, potentially, the public.

"The privileged information will have been disclosed and it would be impossible to 'un-ring the bell,'" the church said.

Church officials did not return calls from the AP seeking additional comment on the ruling.

In a motion filed earlier this year asking Cardinal to dismiss the case, the church said its defense "hinges entirely" on whether bishops John Herrod and Robert "Kim" Mauzy were required to report Adams' "confidential confessions" to civil authorities, or were excused from reporting requirements under the privilege.

The lawsuit was filed by three of the six children of Paul and Leizza Adams, and was featured in a recent investigation by the Associated Press. The AP found that a church "abuse help line" used by Herrod and Mauzy to contact church attorneys is 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," AP's investigation found, is housed within the church's risk management department, where church officials work to protect the church from financial losses and lawsuits that could mar the church's reputation.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued a statement late Wednesday that said, "The AP story has significant flaws in its facts and timeline, which lead to erroneous conclusions."

The statement, which did not dispute any facts in the story, said the help-line "has everything to do with

protecting children and has nothing to do with cover-up.”

The investigation was based in part on nearly 12,000 pages of sealed documents from an unrelated West Virginia child sex abuse lawsuit against the church, which provided the most detailed and comprehensive look yet at the so-called help line, which has been criticized by Mormon abuse victims and their attorneys for being inadequate to quickly stop abuse and protect victims.

The sealed records, including sworn statements by high church officials, revealed that all records of calls to the help line are destroyed at the end of each day. They also showed that Mormon church officials consider all calls referred to attorneys with the firm Kirton McConkie, which represents the church, to be confidential under the attorney-client privilege.

During an interview last month, William Maledon, an Arizona lawyer who represents the church in the lawsuit, said the fact that Adams posted videos of his abuse of both daughters on the Internet and boasted about the abuse on social media would have no bearing on the case because neither Herrod nor Mauzy knew that Adams posted the pornographic material.

“The bishops didn’t know anything about that,” Maledon said, adding that Herrod and Mauzy said as much in sworn declarations submitted in the case.

But Cochise County Attorney Brian McIntyre, who has opened a criminal investigation into the church, told the AP months ago that he believes Adams waived any confidentiality rights under the clergy-penitent privilege by posting his abuse and discussing it online.

Adams “disclosed his actual crime to thousands of people on the Internet,” McIntyre said, “so there’s an implied waiver there.”

Designer Armani and guests flee wildfire on Sicilian island

MILAN (AP) — Firefighters worked Thursday to put out the remnants of two wildfires on a Sicilian island that forced fashion designer Giorgio Armani and dozens of others to flee their vacation villas overnight.

A photo from the island of Pantelleria showed flames appearing to encroach on Armani’s villa, but the Italian designer’s press office said they stopped short of the property. Armani and guests evacuated to a boat in the harbor.

The head of the region’s civil protection agency, Salvatore Cocina, said arson was suspected in two wildfires that forced around 30 people to seek refuge in boats or on safer parts of the island. Firefighters used Canadair planes to douse the flames, along with ground teams to protect homes. Authorities said no structures appeared to have been lost.

The island’s mayor, Vincenzo Campo, told Italian news agency ANSA that two planes were working on putting out the last flames on difficult terrain and that the wind had dropped off.

“After the great fear of last evening and the night spent at work, Pantelleria is returning to normal,” Campo said. “It seems the worst is over.”

Local officials appealed for any information that would help identify the cause of the blaze, which started in two places 400 meters (a quarter-mile) apart.

Pantelleria, located between Sicily and Tunisia, is a popular beach and trekking destination that includes ancient archaeological sites and natural geographic formations.

Scientists say global warming will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive. Much of western Europe saw little rain this summer, and drought conditions coupled with hot weather have fueled destructive forest fires.

So far this summer, wildfires in Spain have blackened more than 700,000 hectares, the largest area since the European Union started collecting satellite data in 2006.

The EU’s Earth Observation Program said more torrid weather was forecast for Spain as two “disastrous” wildfires burned in the eastern part of the country. The fires in the Mediterranean provinces of Alicante and Castellón have each charred more than 13,000 hectares, the EU agency said.

Meanwhile, authorities in Portugal reported that a wildfire burning for almost two weeks in the pine forests of Serra da Estrela national park was brought under control. However, officials warned of weather forecasts indicating a dangerous new heat wave would arrive soon.

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High temperatures, strong winds and a severe drought helped sustain the blaze in the park, where deep ravines and steep hillsides make firefighting difficult.

More than 1,100 firefighters remained in the Serra da Estrela, keeping an eye out for hot spots and embers that might be blown into untouched forest, the Civil Protection Agency, a government department, said.

The blaze charred more than 26,000 hectares (64,000 acres) of woodland, according to European Union data -- about one-fourth of the park's area.

On Wednesday, the fire's perimeter measured 160 kilometers, emergency officials said, and jumped 125-meter-wide firebreaks that had been cleared since the area's last major blaze, in 2017.

Fire officials said that was an indication the country is fighting a "new generation" of wildfires that are harder to stop amid the consequences of climate change.

Temperatures in Portugal were due to start climbing, reaching 39 degrees Celsius (102.2 F) in inland areas on Saturday, as the country endures its third heat wave of the summer.

Saudi doctoral student gets 34 years in prison for tweets

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A Saudi court has sentenced a doctoral student to 34 years in prison for spreading "rumors" and retweeting dissidents, according to court documents obtained Thursday, a decision that has drawn growing global condemnation.

Activists and lawyers consider the sentence against Salma al-Shehab, a mother of two and a researcher at Leeds University in Britain, shocking even by Saudi standards of justice.

So far unacknowledged by the kingdom, the ruling comes amid Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's crackdown on dissent even as his rule granted women the right to drive and other new freedoms in the ultraconservative Islamic nation.

Al-Shehab was detained during a family vacation on Jan. 15, 2021, just days before she planned to return to the United Kingdom, according to the Freedom Initiative, a Washington-based human rights group.

Al-Shehab told judges she had been held for over 285 days in solitary confinement before her case was even referred to court, the legal documents obtained by The Associated Press show.

The Freedom Initiative describes al-Shehab as a member of Saudi Arabia's Shiite Muslim minority, which has long complained of systematic discrimination in the Sunni-ruled kingdom.

"Saudi Arabia has boasted to the world that they are improving women's rights and creating legal reform, but there is no question with this abhorrent sentence that the situation is only getting worse," said Bethany al-Haidari, the group's Saudi case manager.

Leading human rights watchdog Amnesty International on Thursday slammed al-Shehab's trial as "grossly unfair" and her sentence as "cruel and unlawful."

Since rising to power in 2017, Prince Mohammed has accelerated efforts to diversify the kingdom's economy away from oil with massive tourism projects — most recently plans to create the world's longest buildings that would stretch for more than 100 miles in the desert. But he has also faced criticism over his arrests of those who fail to fall in line, including dissidents and activists but also princes and businessmen.

Judges accused al-Shehab of "disturbing public order" and "destabilizing the social fabric" — claims stemming solely from her social media activity, according to an official charge sheet. They alleged al-Shehab followed and retweeted dissident accounts on Twitter and "transmitted false rumors."

The specialized criminal court handed down the unusually harsh 34-year sentence under Saudi counterterrorism and cybercrime laws, to be followed by a 34-year travel ban. The decision came earlier this month as al-Shehab appealed her initial sentence of six years.

"The (six-year) prison sentence imposed on the defendant was minor in view of her crimes," a state prosecutor told the appeals court. "I'm calling to amend the sentence in light of her support for those who are trying to cause disorder and destabilize society, as shown by her following and retweeting (Twitter) accounts."

The Saudi government in Riyadh, as well as its embassies in Washington and London, did not respond

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to a request for comment.

Leeds University confirmed that al-Shehab was in her final year of doctoral studies at the medical school.

"We are deeply concerned to learn of this recent development in Salma's case and we are seeking advice on whether there is anything we can do to support her," the university said.

Al-Shehab's sentencing also drew the attention of Washington, where the State Department said Wednesday it was "studying the case."

"Exercising freedom of expression to advocate for the rights of women should not be criminalized, it should never be criminalized," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom expressed concern on Twitter Thursday that the kingdom targeted al-Shehab "for her peaceful activism in solidarity w/political prisoners," as well as for her Shiite identity.

Last month, U.S. President Joe Biden traveled to the oil-rich kingdom and held talks with Prince Mohammed in which he said he raised human rights concerns. Their meeting — and much-criticized fist-bump — marked a sharp turn-around from Biden's earlier vow to make the kingdom a "pariah" over the 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

During her appeal, al-Shehab said the harsh judgement was tantamount to the "destruction of me, my family, my future, and the future of my children." She has two young boys, aged 4 and 6.

She told judges she had no idea that simply retweeting posts "out of curiosity and to observe others' viewpoints," from a personal account with no more than 2,000 followers, constituted terrorism.

WHO: World coronavirus cases fall 24%; deaths rise in Asia

LONDON (AP) — New coronavirus cases reported globally dropped nearly a quarter in the last week while deaths fell 6% but were still higher in parts of Asia, according to a report Thursday on the pandemic by the World Health Organization.

The U.N. health agency said there were 5.4 million new COVID-19 cases reported last week, a decline of 24% from the previous week. Infections fell everywhere in the world, including by nearly 40% in Africa and Europe and by a third in the Middle East. COVID deaths rose in the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia by 31% and 12% respectively, but fell or remained stable everywhere else.

At a press briefing Wednesday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said reported coronavirus deaths over the past month have surged 35%, and noted there had been 15,000 deaths in the past week.

"15,000 deaths a week is completely unacceptable, when we have all the tools to prevent infections and save lives," Tedros said. He said the number of virus sequences shared every week has plummeted 90%, making it extremely difficult for scientists to monitor how COVID-19 might be mutating.

"But none of us is helpless," Tedros said. "Please get vaccinated if you are not, and if you need a booster, get one."

On Thursday, WHO's vaccine advisory group recommended for the first time that people most vulnerable to COVID-19, including older people, those with underlying health conditions and health workers, get a second booster shot. Numerous other health agencies and countries made the same recommendation months ago.

The expert group also said it had evaluated data from the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines for younger people and said children and teenagers were in the lowest priority group for vaccination, since they are far less likely to get severe disease.

Joachim Hombach, who sits on WHO's vaccine expert group, said it was also uncertain whether the experts would endorse widespread boosters for the general population or new combination vaccines that target the omicron variant.

"We need to see what the data will tell us and we need to see actually (what) will be the advantage of these vaccines that comprise an (omicron) strain," he said.

Dr. Alejandro Cravioto, the expert group's chair, said that unless vaccines were proven to stop transmission, their widespread use would be "a waste of the vaccine and a waste of time."

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Earlier this week, British authorities authorized an updated version of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine that targets omicron and the U.K. government announced it would be offered to people over 50 beginning next month.

A look at the world's skinniest skyscraper: Steinway Tower

By KIANA DOYLE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — One skyscraper stands out from the rest in the Manhattan skyline. It's not the tallest, but it is the skinniest — the world's skinniest, in fact.

The 84-story residential Steinway Tower, designed by New York architecture firm SHoP Architects, has the title of "most slender skyscraper in the world" thanks to its logic-defying ratio of width to height: 1-to-23 1/2.

"Any time it's 1-to-10 or more that's considered a slender building; 1-to-15 or more is considered exotic and really difficult to do," SHoP Architects founding principal Gregg Pasquarelli said. "The most slender buildings in the world are mostly in Hong Kong, and they're around 17- or 18-to-1."

The 60 apartments in the tower range in cost from \$18 million to \$66 million per unit, and offer 360-degree views of the city. It's located just south of Central Park, along a stretch of Manhattan's 57th Street known as "Billionaires' Row."

At 1,428 feet (435 meters), the building is the second-tallest residential tower in the Western Hemisphere, second to the nearby Central Park Tower at 1,550 feet (470 meters). For comparison, the world's tallest tower is Dubai's Burj Khalifa, which stands at 2,717 feet (828 meters).

Steinway Tower is so skinny at the top that whenever the wind ramps up, the luxury homes on the upper floors sway around by a few feet.

"Every skyscraper has to move," Pasquarelli said. "If it's too stiff, it's actually more dangerous — it has to have flexibility in it."

To prevent the tower from swaying too far, the architects created a counterbalance with tuned steel plates. And while the exterior has the de rigueur reflective glass, it also includes a textured terracotta and bronze facade that creates wind turbulence to slow the acceleration of the building, Pasquarelli said. About 200 rock anchors descend at most 100 feet (30 meters) into the underlying bedrock to provide a deep foundation.

Steinway Tower has a long history as the former location of Steinway Hall, constructed in 1924. JDS Development Group and Property Markets Group bought the building in 2013, and now they're looking to the future.

"What I'm hoping is that 50 years from now, you've only known New York with 111 West 57th St.," Pasquarelli said. "I hope it holds a special place in all future New Yorkers' hearts." ____

AP contributor Aron Ranen contributed to this report.

Federal study: New climate law to slice carbon pollution 40%

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Clean energy incentives in the new spending package signed this week by President Joe Biden will trim America's emissions of heat-trapping gases by about 1.1 billion tons (1 billion metric tons) by 2030, a new Department of Energy analysis shows.

The first official federal calculations, shared with The Associated Press before its release Thursday, say that between the bill just signed and last year's infrastructure spending law, the U.S. by the end of the decade will be producing about 1.26 billion tons (1.15 billion metric tons) less carbon pollution than it would have without the laws. That saving is equivalent to about the annual greenhouse gas emissions of every home in the United States.

The Energy Department analysis finds that with the new law by 2030, U.S. greenhouse gas emissions should be about 40% lower than 2005 levels, which is still not at the U.S. announced target of cutting carbon pollution between 50% and 52% by the end of the decade. But that 40% reduction is similar to

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earlier calculations by the independent research firm Rhodium Group, which figured cuts would be 31% to 44% and the scientists at Climate Action Tracker, which said the drop would be 26% to 42%.

Most of the projected emissions reductions in the nearly \$375 billion spending package would come in promoting "clean energy," mostly solar and wind power and electric vehicles, the federal analysis said. More than half of the overall projected emission drops would come in how the nation generates electricity, the analysis said. About 10% of the savings in emissions come from agriculture and land conservation.

The new law's provisions that call for oil and gas leasing on federal land and water "may lead to some increase" in carbon pollution, the federal analysis said, but the other provisions to spur cleaner energy cut 35 tons of greenhouse gas for every new ton of pollution from the increased oil and gas drilling.

Outside experts, such as Bill Hare of Climate Action Tracker, say the new law is a big step for the United States, but it's still not enough considering that America is the biggest historic carbon polluter, had done little for decades and lags behind Europe.

"At this point anything going in that direction you count as a win, right? I mean after so long a time of total inaction and knowing how difficult politically it is to get the country moving in a direction like this due to politics and economics and all the other things involved with this issue," National Center for Atmospheric Research climate scientist Gerald Meehl, who wasn't part of the analysis, said about what the new law will do. "You can argue that's not nearly enough, but I think once you start seeing motion, you hope that then we can build on that and kind of keep the ball rolling."

For hire or food, garden sitters save the day during summer

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Take my chard, please!

The season has come when many home gardeners, their numbers booming since the pandemic began, are being rewarded with fully matured, ready-to-pick vegetables and flowers. It's also vacation season, and this summer travel is back.

How do you maintain your garden and take advantage of all that homegrown goodness during extended trips away? Even experienced gardeners can end up with more tomatoes, beans and zucchini than they'd expected come late summer.

Garden sitters are one answer.

Some home gardeners hire professionals, while many just rely on neighbors and hope for the best.

"It's really hard to leave the garden," said Theresa Fiumano-Rhatigan, a longtime home gardener in Brooklyn. She relies on her parents and other nearby relatives as garden sitters during her five weeks each summer in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. "Nobody does it quite like I do."

Having an experienced sitter who isn't afraid to take control can help. Avoid a free-for-all of inexperienced neighbors and friends traipsing through to pick what they want with no care given to the plants and no idea when to water.

"The first thing is to find one friend with a garden you like and make sure you're willing to return the favor," said Adam Choper, associate director for outdoor gardens and sustainable horticulture at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx.

He suggests walking your garden sitter through the process beforehand to make sure things are done just right. Setting up sprinklers or soaker hoses will make things easier while you're away. For container gardens, group the containers together in the shade so your plants won't dry out as quickly if your vacation is just a week or two, Choper said. Some gardeners place containers in kiddie pools with water that a garden sitter need only fill up if necessary.

Choper also recommends putting down mulch before heading out for long periods. That helps the soil conserve water and keeps weeds at bay.

For gardeners without trusted neighbors or loved ones, garden sitters for hire are abundant on local online message boards or at nurseries and horticultural societies.

Rachel Mulkerin tends to about 3,000 square feet of garden space on her 9-acre property in Sherman,

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Connecticut, and has hired special needs helpers she found through her mother, a former adult education teacher.

"It's a wildly mutually beneficial arrangement," she said.

Mulkerin uses about half of what she produces for herself and her family and gives away the rest to those in need in her community.

Through time, gardens have offered a sense of safety and comfort, so entrusting them to others can be difficult, said Ambra Edwards, a gardening historian and co-author of "The Story of Gardening."

Edwards, who gardens herself in England's rural Dorset, considers holiday a reprieve from the toil, but she knows a lot of manic gardeners who can't tear themselves away.

"I've got one friend in particular and she has to travel a lot. She travels the length and breadth of the country. And when she does, she takes all her vegetable plants, all her sweet peas and a particular myrtle in a pot that she got from a very dear friend, now deceased, and loads them in the car. They go with her. She's the snail carrying a house," Edwards said.

Gardeners, generally speaking, are sharers, and sharing vegetables while away not only produces more after picking, but also avoids rotting tomatoes and other crops.

"Rotten tomatoes will cause other tomatoes to rot, and they're also really smelly," Choper said.

Some vegetables, like cucumbers and zucchini, need to be picked so they don't grow into monsters that aren't as pleasant to eat.

A designated garden sitter can take what they want and leave the rest on a front porch or at the end of a driveway after putting out the word of free fresh food.

Heather Grabin in Hampton, New Jersey, has 10 garden plots on her 40-acre property. She also owns a cafe in a city an hour away that doesn't have access to much fresh produce. She uses her vegetables and herbs at her restaurant, and sells some of her excess there at low cost.

Grabin had to delay a three-week trip to California this year because of a new school schedule for her two kids. By the time she and her family left, her tomatoes and zucchini were abundant. With such an overwhelming amount, she went the hired garden sitter route.

"It's different when you're doing it yourself versus when you have to ask someone else to do it for you," she said. "He's been flash freezing everything. It's a lot."

Doug Guttenberg and his wife, Tal, grow herbs in their backyard and vegetables in a community garden plot just a few minutes from their Brooklyn home. They also own a house in Detroit and spend a month in Michigan every summer. They entrust their Brooklyn plants to a neighbor, a fellow gardener, and know firsthand what happens without a sitter after choosing to forgo one last year.

"When we came back, the cucumbers had attacked everything," Tal said. "It was like this tornado of cucumbers. It was a bit crazy, and they didn't even fruit. I mean, no cucumbers came of it."

Fewer Americans file for jobless benefits last week

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Slightly fewer Americans filed for unemployment benefits last week as the labor market continues to stand out as one of the strongest segments of the U.S. economy.

Applications for jobless aid for the week ending August 13 fell by 2,000 to 250,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. Last week's number, which raised some eyebrows, was revised down by 10,000.

The four-week average for claims, which evens out some of the week-to-week volatility, fell by 2,750 to 246,750.

The number of Americans collecting traditional unemployment benefits increased by 7,000 the week that ended August 6, to 1.43 million. That's the most since early April.

Unemployment applications generally reflect layoffs and are often seen as an early indicator of where the job market is headed.

Hiring in the United States in 2022 has been remarkably resilient in the face of rising interest rates and weak economic growth.

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The Labor Department reported earlier this month that U.S. employers added 528,000 jobs in July, more than double what forecasters had expected. The unemployment rate dipped to 3.5%, tying a 50-year low reached just before coronavirus pandemic slammed the U.S. economy in early 2020.

The United States recovered with unexpected strength from 2020's COVID-19 recession, leaving businesses scrambling to find enough workers.

That's not to say the U.S. economy doesn't face challenges. Consumer prices have been surging, rising 8.5% in July from a year earlier — down slightly from June's 40-year high 9.1%. To combat inflation, the Federal Reserve has raised its benchmark short-term interest rate four times this year.

Higher borrowing costs have taken a toll. The economy contracted in the first half of the year — one measure suggesting the onset of a recession. But the strength of the job market has been inconsistent with an economic downturn.

Today in History: August 19, "Old Ironsides" wins a battle

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Aug. 19, the 231st day of 2022. There are 134 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Aug. 19, 1960, a tribunal in Moscow convicted American U2 pilot Francis Gary Powers of espionage. (Although sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, Powers was returned to the United States in 1962 as part of a prisoner exchange.)

On this date:

In A.D. 14, Caesar Augustus, Rome's first emperor, died at age 76 after a reign lasting four decades; he was succeeded by his stepson Tiberius.

In 1807, Robert Fulton's North River Steamboat arrived in Albany, two days after leaving New York.

In 1812, the USS Constitution defeated the British frigate HMS Guerriere off Nova Scotia during the War of 1812, earning the nickname "Old Ironsides."

In 1814, during the War of 1812, British forces landed at Benedict, Maryland, with the objective of capturing Washington D.C.

In 1848, the New York Herald reported the discovery of gold in California.

In 1934, a plebiscite in Germany approved the vesting of sole executive power in Adolf Hitler.

In 1942, during World War II, about 6,000 Canadian and British soldiers launched a disastrous raid against the Germans at Dieppe, France, suffering more than 50-percent casualties.

In 1955, torrential rains caused by Hurricane Diane resulted in severe flooding in the northeastern U.S., claiming some 200 lives.

In 1980, 301 people aboard a Saudi Arabian L-1011 died as the jetliner made a fiery emergency return to the Riyadh airport.

In 1987, a gun collector ran through Hungerford, England, 60 miles west of London, killing 16 people, including his mother, before turning his gun on himself.

In 2010, the last American combat brigade exited Iraq, seven years and five months after the U.S.-led invasion began.

In 2020, Kamala Harris accepted the Democratic nomination for vice president in a speech to the party's virtual convention, cementing her place in history as the first Black woman on a major party ticket. Apple became the first U.S. company to boast a market value of \$2 trillion, just two years after becoming the first U.S. company with a \$1 trillion market value.

Ten years ago: Missouri Congressman Todd Akin, the conservative Republican U.S. Senate candidate, said in an interview on KTVI-TV in St. Louis that it was "really rare" for women to become pregnant when they were raped. (Akin afterwards backed off his on-air comments, saying that he'd misspoken; Akin lost the November election to Democratic incumbent Claire McCaskill.) Tony Scott, 68, director of such Hollywood hits as "Top Gun," and "Days of Thunder," died in Los Angeles after jumping from a suspension bridge.

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Five years ago: Thousands of demonstrators chanting anti-Nazi slogans and denouncing white nationalism upstaged a small group of conservatives in Boston who had gathered for a "free speech rally." In Dallas, police on horseback broke up a scuffle at a cemetery between people rallying against white supremacy and supporters of Confederate monuments. Duke University removed a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee after it was vandalized. Comedian and activist Dick Gregory, who broke racial barriers in the 1960s and later spread messages of social justice and nutritional health, died in Washington, D.C., at the age of 84.

One year ago: As the Taliban moved to consolidate their rule less than a week after seizing power in Afghanistan, they violently dispersed scattered protests for a second day. At Kabul's airport, military evacuation flights continued for Americans and others seeking to leave, but access to the airport remained difficult. A standoff in Texas over new voting restrictions that gridlocked the state Capitol for 38 consecutive days ended when some Democrats who fled to Washington dropped their holdout, paving the way for Republicans to resume pushing an elections overhaul. (The overhaul would win legislative approval on Aug. 31.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Debra Paget is 89. USTA Eastern Tennis Hall of Famer Renee Richards is 88. Former MLB All-Star Bobby Richardson is 87. Actor Diana Muldaur is 84. Actor Jill St. John is 82. Singer Billy J. Kramer is 79. Country singer-songwriter Eddy Raven is 78. Rock singer Ian Gillan (Deep Purple) is 77. Former President Bill Clinton is 76. Actor Gerald McRaney is 75. Actor Jim Carter is 74. Pop singer-musician Elliot Lurie (Looking Glass) is 74. Rock musician John Deacon (Queen) is 71. Bluegrass musician Marc Pruett (Balsam Range) is 71. Actor-director Jonathan Frakes is 70. Political consultant Mary Matalin is 69. Actor Peter Gallagher is 67. Actor Adam Arkin is 66. Singer-songwriter Gary Chapman is 65. Actor Martin Donovan is 65. Pro Football Hall-of-Famer Anthony Munoz is 64. R&B singer Ivan Neville is 63. Actor Eric Lutes is 60. Actor John Stamos is 59. Actor Kyra Sedgwick is 57. Actor Kevin Dillon is 57. Country singer Lee Ann Womack is 56. TV reporter Tabitha Soren is 55. Country singer-songwriter Mark McGuinn is 54. Actor Matthew Perry is 53. Country singer Clay Walker is 53. Rapper Fat Joe is 52. Olympic gold medal tennis player Mary Joe Fernandez is 51. Actor Tracie Thoms is 47. Actor Callum Blue is 45. Country singer Rissi (REE'-see) Palmer is 41. Actor Erika Christensen is 40. Actor Melissa Fumero is 40. Pop singer Missy Higgins is 39. Actor Peter Mooney is 39. Actor Tammin Sursok is 39. Olympic silver medal snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis (jay-kuh-BEHL'-ihs) is 37. Actor J. Evan Bonifant is 37. Rapper Romeo is 33. Actor Ethan Cutkosky is 23.