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UMC: Conde worship with communion, 8:30 p.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Worship with communion, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday school after children's sermon during worship.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Worship at Avantara, 3 p.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

Monday, Oct. 3

Senior Menu: Goulash, green beans, baked apples, whole wheat bread.

State Golf Meet at Moccasin Creek CC

4 p.m.: 7th/8th FB Combined game vs. Roncalli at Groton

4:30 p.m.: JV FB game vs. Dakota Hills at Waubay. Pantry at Community Center open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

UMC: The Walk Bible Study by Pastor Brandon, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Friday, Sept. 30
Senior Menu: Chicken tetrazzine, mixed vegetables, honey fruit salad, whole wheat bread.
No School - Faculty Inservice
7 p.m.: Football hosts Webster Area
Pre-School Screening, 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 1
Youth Football at Waubay Jamboree
1 p.m.: Girls Soccer hosts Garretson
10 a.m. to 3 p.m.: Pumpkin Fest at City Park
Common Cents Community Thrift Store Open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at 209 N Main.

Sunday, Oct. 2
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion (St. John's 9:00 am, Zion 11:00 am)

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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Gonsoir takes fellowship program trip to Peru

By Dorene Nelson

Kristen Gonsoir, Groton Area High School chemistry and physics teacher, recently returned from an amazing two-week trip to Peru in July. As a member of SDEA/NEA, (South Dakota Education Association / National Education Association) Gonsoir was awarded this trip through a lengthy application to the NEA Foundation's Global Learning Fellowship program.

The purpose of this fellowship program is to help public school educators develop the knowledge and skills to integrate global competency into their daily classroom instruction and expand their professional development network.

The recipients of this fellowship return to their respective schools to help students thrive in our increasingly interconnected world. Fellows transform their classrooms to give students a global perspective. Global Fellows also work collaboratively throughout the fellowship year in content focus groups to develop curriculum for teaching global citizenship.

"About year ago, I received notification that I had been awarded this honor as South Dakota's representative in the fellowship program," Gonsoir explained. "The trip was funded by the NEA Foundation and was originally scheduled for South Africa."

"COVID had a large impact, not only on our trip being switched to Peru, but also upon the places and buildings we were allowed to visit," she stated. "Protests and unrest in Peru also caused us some issues and restrictions on our travel plans."

"To prepare for this exciting opportunity, my group of 46 teachers met remotely through Zoom meetings once a month to become acquainted with each other and engage in professional development," Gonsoir explained.

"We also needed to learn about the various activities we would be participating in and the places we would be visiting," she stated. "During our zooms we had education specialists from around the globe speak to us regarding global education."

"Each content focus group worked on its own special project to develop lessons to teach others the ideas of

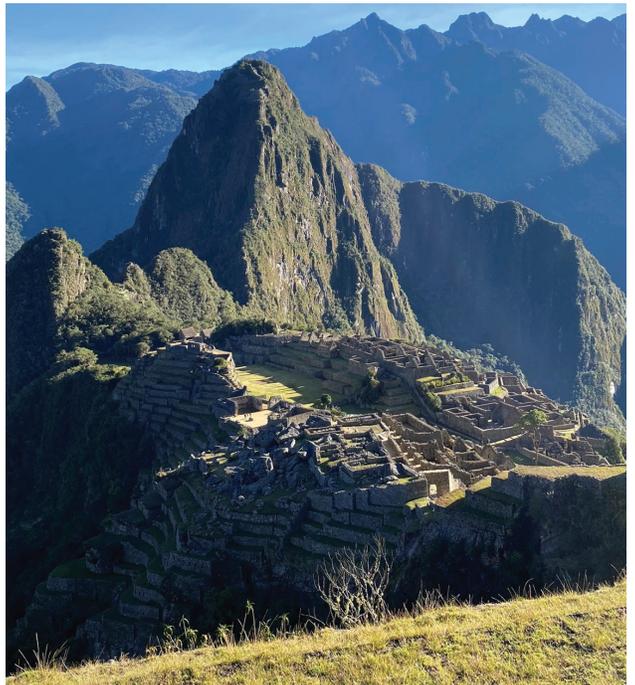
globalization," she said. "These ideas will help students learn about the importance of working together around the world, regardless of their location."

"There are 11 million people in the Lima, Peru area," Gonsoir smiled, "with honking horns, crowded narrow streets, and poor infrastructure. There is no air conditioning nor heating available, the electricity grid is a nightmare, and Wi-Fi is terrible!"

"There is a large gap between the people in Peru who have money and good financial support and those who don't," she explained. "Above all, we were told to NOT DRINK THE WATER!"



Kristen pictured overlooking the ruins at Machu Picchu



Machu Picchu at the top

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"On the plus side, it is very bright and colorful with an obvious Spanish influence in the clothing and buildings," Gonsoir listed. "The houses have two bulls on their roofs for protection and good fortune."

"Some of the food is served cold, even potatoes," she smiled, "and they're very fond of potatoes! I at least tried a taste of everything including coy (guinea pig). I enjoyed the many choices of fish and the wide variety of fresh fruit and vegetables."

"Many of the important buildings that we would have liked to visit were closed due to the unrest that still follows the aftermath caused by the 'Shining Path,'" Gonsoir explained. "The Shining Path started out as a 'people's war' to overthrow the government and establish a democracy."

"Unfortunately the real result was the establishment of a dictatorship that included violence against peasants, elected officials, and the general public," she said. "The Shining Path has been widely condemned for its brutality and is now generally regarded as a terrorist organization."

"The government in Peru requires that all students, ages 3 and older, attend school until age 16," Gonsoir listed. "Two thousand dollars per student is spent on the education process, but, due to their location, many of the schools are inaccessible. By way of contrast, approximately \$17,000



Close up of two animals



Entertainment at Misnimay, a village on the top of the Andes

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per student is spent in the United States.”

“About 70% of the population is self-employed with vendors along the edges of the road being very common,” she said. “Open air markets are widespread for easy access.”

“After crossing into the Andes, the group found silver trinkets, earrings, and jewelry to be common items for sale,” Gonsoir stated. Silver mining is an important industry in the Sacred Valley. “We visited a textile museum and learned how different plants are used to make different colors for the thread.”

“During our drive to the Andes Mountains, we saw grain fields that reminded me of home,” she admitted. “The work is mostly done by hand, but you could see that some of the harvesting had been done by a combine.”

We also enjoyed the llamas and alpacas, animals that are native to the Andes Mountain area.”

“In Peru there is a Sacred Valley Project that makes it possible for girls from remote communities in the Andes to receive their high school degree and begin pursuing their dreams,” Gonsoir explained. “The work focuses on girls because of the unequal access afforded to girls to pursue their secondary education.”

“There are currently three dormitories for this ‘Sacred Valley Project’ for the girls to live in while going to school,” she added, “and more are being planned.”

“No trip to Peru is complete without a visit to Machu Picchu,” Gonsoir stated. “These amazing Peruvian ruins are a challenge to get to but worth the effort if you’re up to the climb!”

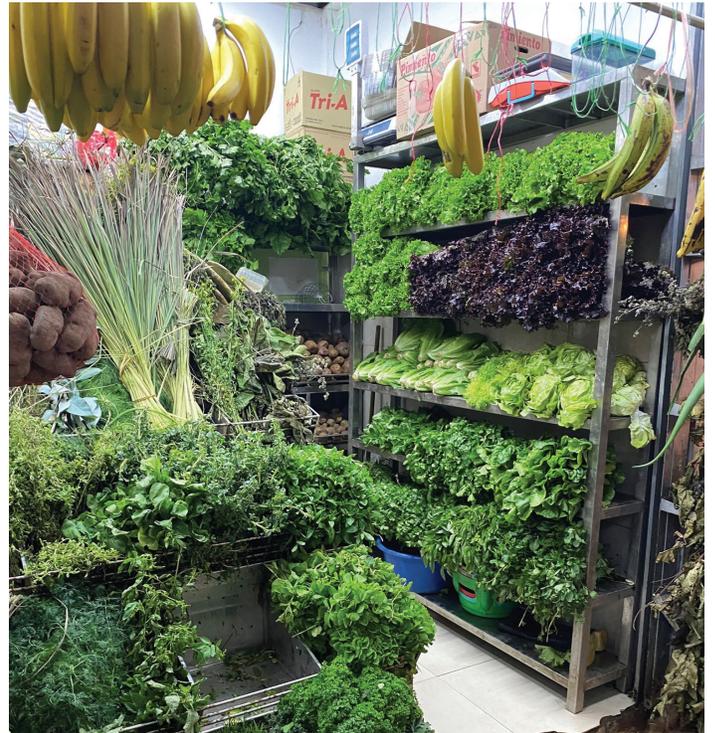
“Now it’s my job to take this experience and what I’ve learned home to my students here in Groton,” she said. “I need to incorporate the ideas of a growing interdependence of the world’s economies, cultures, and populations so that we learn to work with and help others.”

“Our tour guide was excellent, but I was surprised that he was required to have a four-year college degree to qualify for his job,” she smiled. “I guess they need to know a lot of information since you never know what a tourist might ask!”

“I thoroughly enjoyed this trip to Peru and recommend it to everyone!” Gonsoir admitted. “I’m really appreciate the recommendations I received and especially all of the help and support at home from family and friends who made this trip possible for me!”



Heading into the Andes Mountains



Open Air Markets 1 with fresh vegetables

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The summer "Tuesday Night Trap League" came to a close Tuesday night at the Aberdeen Gun Club. On the Base Kamp Lodge Team L-R Bruce Babcock, Lon Gellhaus, Brett Christainson , Tom Mahan, and Greg Denert. (Not pictured Gentry Gauer.) (Courtesy photo from Bruce Babcock)



Team member Greg Denert was high overall average in Class B. The Base Kamp Lodge team placed 4th overall in Class B. (Courtesy photo from Bruce Babcock)

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ANOTHER JARK/WORLIE AUCTION



RETIREMENT CEMENT TOOLS & EQUIPMENT AUCTION

Saturday, Oct. 1, 2022
Sale Time: 10:00 AM

507 E. RR Ave, Groton, SD



SKID STEER – WHEEL LOADER

• Mustang 2056 Turbo w/2 speed Cab, AC/Heat, Hydr. Tach, 6' Bucket, 2302 hours, ('10) • 5' Mustang Skid Steer Bucket (cement) • Kobelco LK300A Wheel Loader w/Bucket, Forks, 16.9-24 Tires, Eng. Overhauled 4084 hrs ago (\$23,000)– Runs/Works.

GUN SAFE - TOOLS – EQUIP – TANKS

- Safari 24 Gun Safe (NIB)
- Husqvarna FS309 Cement Saw -Nice
- Subaru Robin Ex17 Cement Saw
- DP-75ASB Diesel Generator (New)
- Wen 5500 Generator (New)!
- Screeds w/Honda & B&S Motors
- BNT-40 14.4v Lithium Rebar Cutter
- Honda Drive Motor w/Vibrating Cable & Water Pump
- Impala 30 ton Hydr. Press
- Mikasa MVC-88GH Packer (Honda)
- Wacker VPA1750 Packer (Honda)
- Wacker Power Float (Honda)
- DeWalt & Jet Table Saws
- Insulated Concrete Blankets
- 8 Sets of Scaffolding
- Bosch Elec. Jack Hammer
- Stihl TS 400 & TS 500 Cement Saws
- Weldmark 135+ Welder
- DP Air Compressor
- Older Floats, Packers & Screeds
- Hammer Drills
- Hand Tools, Trowels, Air Hose Reel
- 5/8" Rod (4', 8', 20')
- 4) 6"x6"x15' St. Tubes (1/4")
- 90) 4x8 Wall Forms
- 4' & 8' Corner Forms
- Newer 2' Forms
- Stakes & Wire Ties
- 2x4's, 2x6's, 2x10's,
- Several 2x12's (15' & 20')
- 500 gal. Propane Tank (needs valve)
- 500 gal. Diesel Tank (1/2 full)
- Lots of Hand Tools

TRACTOR – LOADER – SNOWMOBILE

Case IH 50 CVT FWA Tractor w/L350 Loader, Bucket, Forks, 3 pt, PTO, 2 Hydr, 575 hours! • Case IH BS172H 6' Snow Blower (Nice) • Case IH TLX180H 80" 3 pt. Tiller • Farm King 847 7' Leveler • Fimco 3 pt. Sprayer w/ 50 gal. Tank, Folding Booms • King Kutter 3 pt. 6' Disk • Field Svc Tank • '08 Polaris RMK 700 Snowmobile w/155" Track/ 2 1/4" Lugs (all consigned)



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The boys cross country runners are Kayson Oswald, Gavin Kroll, Derick Schultz, JD Schwan, Nathan Unzen, Ben Hoeft, Jacob Lewandowski, Tristin McGannon. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)

Preschool Developmental Screening Groton Area Schools #06-6

Preschool Developmental Screening is for children ages 3-4 who reside in the Groton Area School District. The child needs to be 3 years of age before the screening date/day. This screening is not required to enter Kindergarten.

The screening consists of adaptive, personal/social, communicating/speaking, motor, and concepts skills. If you believe your child has difficulties in any of these areas please contact the school.

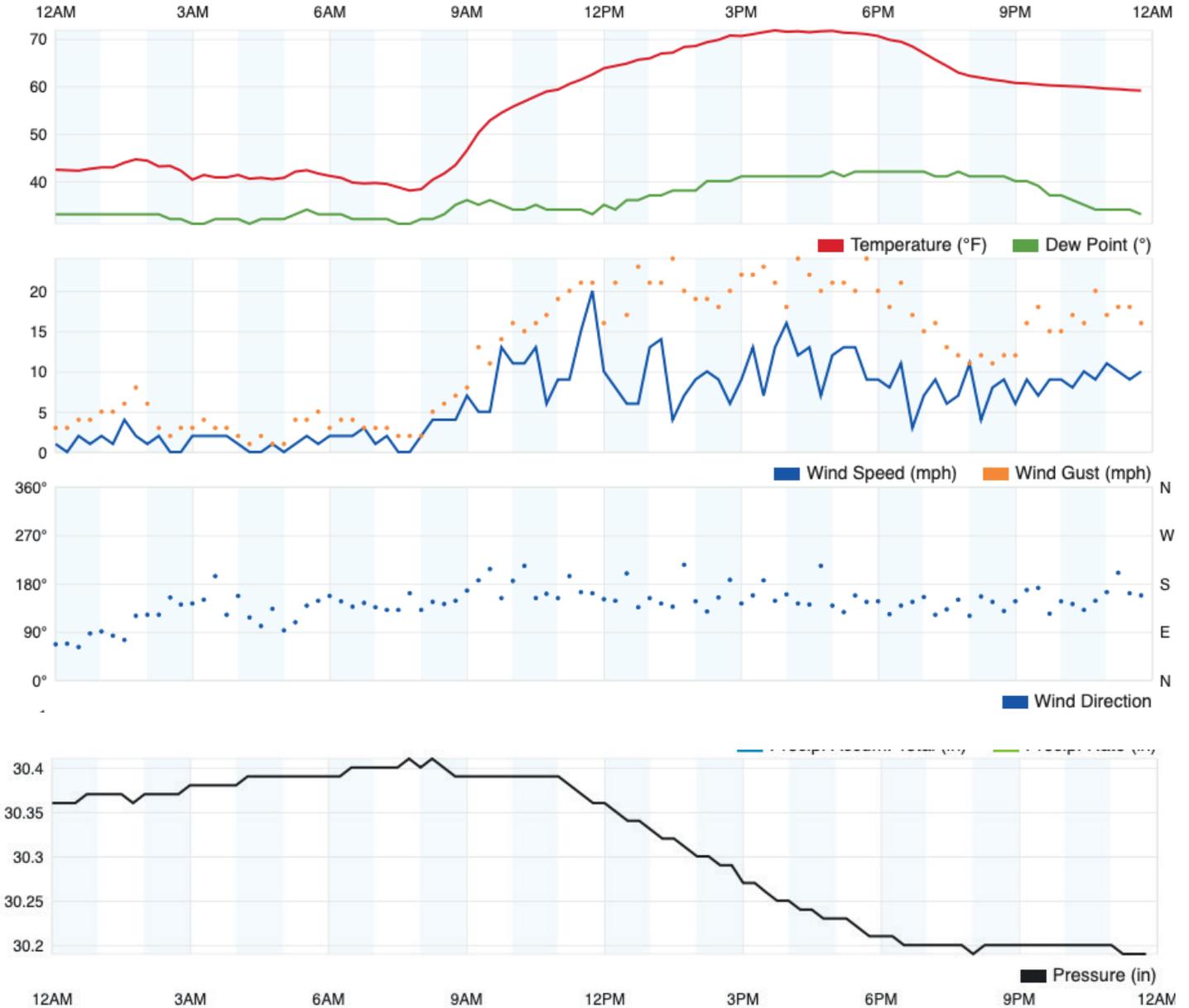
If your child is already receiving services or enrolled at Groton Elementary School they will not need to be screened. If your child has already been screened but you have concerns please contact the elementary school. If you are new to the district and have a child under the age of 5, we also ask you to contact the elementary school.

Screenings will be held on Friday, September 30 8:00-3:30. Information will be sent to families who have already been identified. Please contact Heidi Krueger at 605-397-2317 to schedule a screening time.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Becoming Sunny and Breezy

High: 78 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 52 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 78 °F

Friday Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 51 °F

Saturday



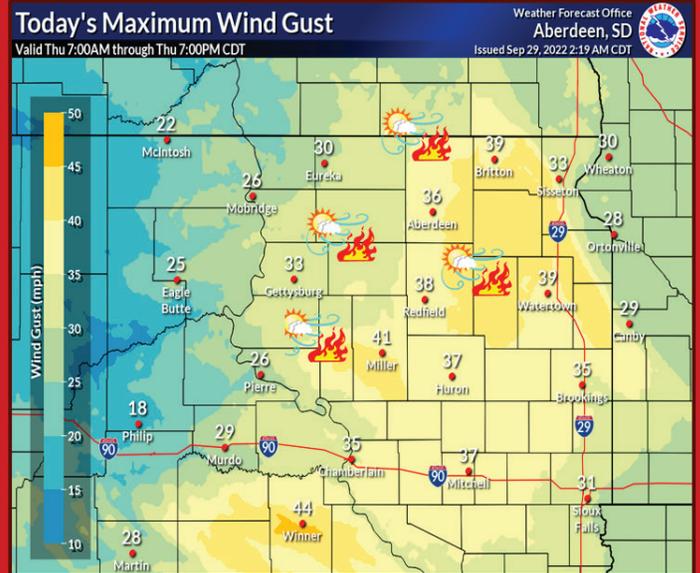
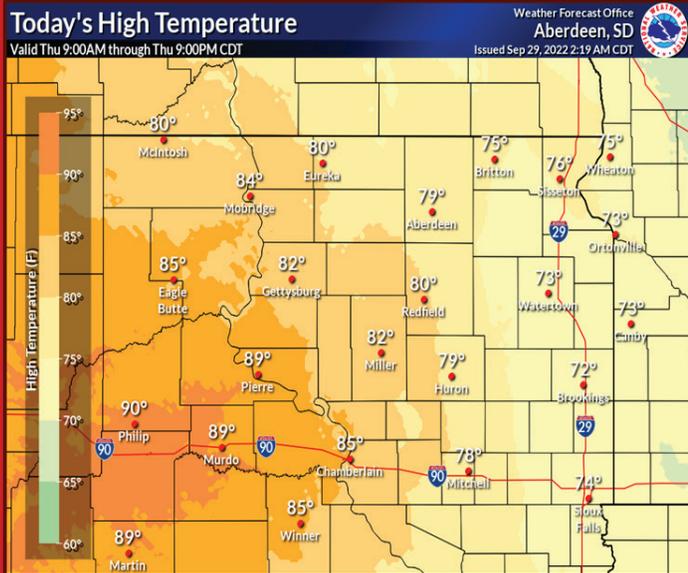
Partly Sunny

High: 75 °F

Warm & Breezy Again Today

September 29, 2022
3:12 AM

**** High to Very High Grassland Fire Danger This Afternoon ****



Weather-Ready Nation
WFO Aberdeen SD

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Gusty winds and dry conditions will lead to high to very high grassland fire danger over the region again this afternoon. Temperatures will also be above normal through week's end.

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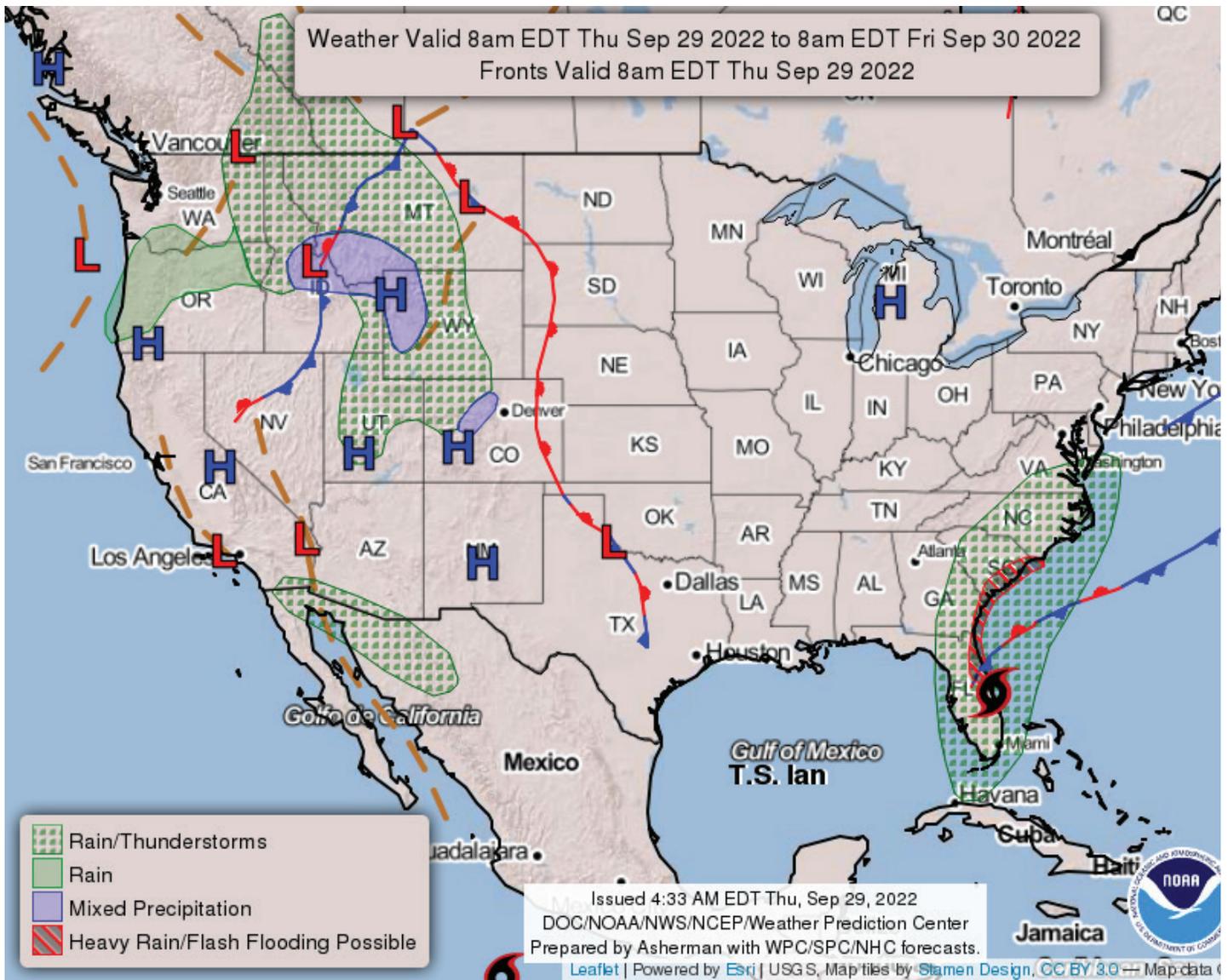
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 72 °F at 3:39 PM
Low Temp: 37 °F at 7:51 AM
Wind: 24 mph at 1:25 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 51 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 95 in 1897
Record Low: 11 in 1939
Average High: 69°F
Average Low: 41°F
Average Precip in Sept.: 1.92
Precip to date in Sept.: 0.07
Average Precip to date: 18.26
Precip Year to Date: 16.05
Sunset Tonight: 7:18:14 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:28:15 AM



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Today in Weather History

September 29, 1982: An early snowfall in the Black Hills resulted in the breakage of tree branches and caused power outages in parts of Lead and Nevada Gulch.

1927 - An outbreak of tornadoes from Oklahoma to Indiana caused 81 deaths and 25 million dollars damage. A tornado (possibly two tornadoes) cut an eight-mile long path across Saint Louis MO, to Granite City IL, killing 79 persons. The damage path at times was a mile and a quarter in width. The storm followed a similar path to tornadoes which struck in 1871, 1896, and 1959. (The Weather Channel)

1959 - A storm produced 28 inches of snow at Colorado Springs, CO. (David Ludlum)

1983 - Heavy rains began in central and eastern Arizona which culminated in the worst flood in the history of the state. Eight to ten inch rains across the area caused severe flooding in southeastern Arizona which resulted in thirteen deaths and 178 million dollars damage. President Reagan declared eight counties of Arizona to be disaster areas. (The Weather Channel)

1986 - A week of violent weather began in Oklahoma which culminated in one of the worst flooding events in the history of the state. On the first day of the week early morning thunderstorms caused more than a million dollars damage in south Oklahoma City. Thunderstorms produced 4 to 7 inches of rain from Hobart to Ponca City, and another round of thunderstorms that evening produced 7 to 10 inches of rain in north central and northeastern sections of Oklahoma. (Storm Data)

1987 - A slow moving cold front produced rain from the Great Lakes Region to the Central Gulf Coast Region. A late afternoon thunderstorm produced wind gusts to 62 mph at Buffalo NY. Warm weather continued in the western U.S. In Oregon, the afternoon high of 96 degrees at Medford was a record for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - High pressure brought freezing temperatures to parts of Vermont and New York State. Burlington VT dipped to 30 degrees, and Binghamton NY reported a record low of 34 degrees. The high pressure system also brought cold weather to the Central Rocky Mountain Region. Alamosa CO reported a record low of 18 degrees, and Gunnison CO was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of just five degrees above zero. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - Seven cities reported record high temperatures for the date, as readings soared into the 80s and low 90s in the Northern Plateau and Northern Plains Region. Record highs included 91 degrees at Boise ID, and 92 degrees at Sheridan WY. The high of 100 degrees at Tucson AZ marked their 51st record high of the year, and their 92nd day of 100 degree weather. (National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WATCH WHERE YOU WALK

One of my mother's most quoted sayings was, "Birds of a feather flock together." When I first heard her say it, I had no idea what she was talking about. However, she did. She realized that one of her most important obligations, as a parent, was to guard me from friends who might lead me away from God. She knew each of my playmates, and as I grew older, my friends, personally.

When I became a parent, that quotation grew in its importance. I came to realize that my choice of friends always flows from the values I hold dearest and live before others. People who enjoy softball or golf, cooking or gardening, worshipping God and studying His Word, form relationships with others because they hold things "in common" - their values.

Solomon said, "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools will be harmed." The advice contained in this proverb is significant because it focuses our attention on the "informal learning process" - not what is taught in classrooms or churches. Much of our learning is "absorbed" through watching others, being with others, and having a desire to imitate or be like others, especially those whom we admire or hold up as heroes.

Someone once asked John Rockefeller what he did to become so successful. "I only associate with people who are successful," he replied. While that might sound trite and an over simplified way of becoming successful, it is profoundly true. The most "life shaping and longest lasting" lessons of our lives come from those that have had the greatest impact on us- lessons that have been "caught" rather than "taught."

Beware of your associates!

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to choose friends who honor and worship You, love Your Word and walk with You daily. May we seek to be with friends who honor You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble. Proverbs 13:20



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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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
11/19/2022: Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
12/10/2022: Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
07/04/2023 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start (4th of July)
07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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- Colored \$79.88/year
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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

03-17-24-25-34

(three, seventeen, twenty-four, twenty-five, thirty-four)

Estimated jackpot: \$77,000

Lotto America

13-38-39-44-45, Star Ball: 6, ASB: 3

(thirteen, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty-four, forty-five; Star Ball: six; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$24,330,000

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: 355,000,000

Powerball

06-10-24-33-67, Powerball: 11, Power Play: 3

(six, ten, twenty-four, thirty-three, sixty-seven; Powerball: eleven; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$322,000,000

Noem speaks out on grocery tax, promises to repeal it

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem made a campaign promise Wednesday to repeal the state's tax on groceries, changing course to lend outspoken support to a bipartisan proposal she did not publicly endorse in March.

The Republican governor made the announcement two days ahead of a Friday debate with her Democratic challenger Jamie Smith, a state lawmaker who pushed the repeal of the 4.5% tax on groceries for years and helped broker a bipartisan vote to pass it in the House this year.

Noem billed the campaign promise Wednesday as "the largest tax cut in South Dakota's history," saying it would push \$100 million "directly to families to help them with their budget."

But Smith said the campaign promise was "just another example of Gov. Noem trying to manipulate the voters of South Dakota by proposing a policy she clearly didn't believe in and is doing it for her political gains at this moment."

A spokesman for Noem's campaign, Ian Fury, said that Noem had privately voiced support for the grocery tax cut bill to Senate leadership during budget negotiations. At the time, Republican Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, one of the most powerful lawmakers in the chamber, had said the House proposal was dead on arrival in the Senate. He said in a text message that he remains opposed to the tax cut.

Schoenbeck also told The Dakota Scout that Noem, even in a private conversation in March, was "adamantly opposed" to the House proposal.

The state House passed several tax cut proposals this year, but they did not make it through the Senate. When the House passed a bill to scale back the state's sales tax in February, Noem urged caution and said the state's economy likely faced "some challenges ahead."

Noem has insisted she wanted to cut taxes, but her proposals in this year's legislative session were more modest. A proposal to cut the state's bingo taxes and fees was enacted, but that represented less than \$40,000 in annual revenue.

"She's always in favor of cutting taxes if the numbers work," Fury said.

At a news conference at a grocery store Wednesday, Noem blamed President Joe Biden for inflation that has driven up the costs of groceries and said her proposal would bring "relief to our families."

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Economists say the twists and turns of the pandemic, as well as a flood of emergency government spending, under both Biden and former President Donald Trump, overstimulated the economy.

Noem has made the economic health of South Dakota a central point in her campaign, saying it's a credit to her decision to forgo most government restrictions during the pandemic. The state has set a record amount of money aside in its budget reserves.

But when the South Dakota House passed the cut to the tax on groceries in March, it was Smith who cheered the proposal as a way to alleviate a tax that weighs heaviest on low-income people.

"Raw food — everybody needs it and you don't have a choice," he said at the time.

Disney+ Original Series 'Genius: MLK/X' From National Geographic Sets Ensemble Cast

BURBANK, Calif.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Sep 28, 2022--

Disney+ and National Geographic announced today the following casting of the Original Series "Genius: MLK/X," produced by 20th Television, Imagine Television and Undisputed Cinema: Kelvin Harrison Jr. ("The Trial of the Chicago 7") as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Aaron Pierre ("The Underground Railroad") as Malcolm X, Weruche Opia ("I May Destroy You") as Coretta Scott King, and Jayme Lawson ("The Batman") as Betty Shabazz. Principal photography will begin in October 2022 in Atlanta.

"We are beyond excited to have put together the incredible foursome of Kelvin, Aaron, Jayme and Weruche to bring the depth, complexity, and humanity to these indelible icons," said the Bythewoods. "They are all next level in their chops and their passion to tell this story."

As previously announced, in a first for the franchise, the new season of the Emmy® Award-winning anthology series will focus on two iconic geniuses: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. "Genius: MLK/X" will explore the formative years, pioneering accomplishments, dueling philosophies and key personal relationships of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Harrison Jr.) and Malcolm X (Pierre). While King advanced racial equality through nonviolent protest, Malcolm X argued forcefully for Black empowerment, identity and self-determination. With their formidable wives, Coretta Scott King (Opia) and Betty Shabazz (Lawson), by their sides, King and Malcolm X became synonymous with the civil rights era and the fight for racial and economic justice. While they met only once and often challenged each other's views, neither would have been as successful without the other.

In addition to today's casting news, executive producers Reggie Rock Bythewood and Gina Prince-Bythewood announced a think tank of renowned historians and experts serving as production consultants prior to the start of the writer's room to guide the production, including the following (in alphabetical order):

Jamal Joseph ("Panther Baby: A Life of Rebellion and Reinvention"), formerly a member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army, is a writer, director and professor of professional practice at Columbia University School of the Arts in the film department. Peniel E. Joseph is a writer whose book, "The Sword and The Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.," serves as inspiration for the series and also serves as a series consultant. Michele Norris is a columnist and consultant for Post Opinions and founding director of Peabody Award-winning The Race Card Project. Dr. Kameelah Rashad is the founder and president of the Muslim Wellness Foundation (MWF), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting healing and emotional well-being in the American Muslim community. Dr. Barbara Reynolds is an award-winning journalist, author and minister who penned several books, including "Jesse Jackson, America's David" and "No, I Won't Shut Up: 30 Years of Telling It Like It Is," with a foreword by Coretta Scott King. Ambassador Shabazz, producer, writer, diplomat and eldest daughter of Dr. Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X Shabazz, also serves as consulting producer for the series. Jeff Stetson, whose play "The Meeting" serves as inspiration for the series, is an internationally acclaimed award-winning playwright and screenwriter for film and television. He also serves as an executive producer on the series. Jeanne Theoharis, a political science professor at City University of New York, is the author or co-author of eleven books and numerous articles on the civil rights and Black Power movements. Pastor Michael A. Walrond, Jr., senior pastor of First Corinthian Baptist Church, received numerous honors, accolades and

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recognitions, including induction into Morehouse College's Martin Luther King Jr. Board of Preachers. "We wanted to assemble a consortium of scholars and experts who can not only lend their extensive knowledge, expertise and research but also create a space for meaningful debate and discussion to ensure an honest portrayal of the complexities of these iconic geniuses. The legacies of Martin and Malcolm are critical to our understanding of the social justice movements of today, so we had to get this right. We could not have asked for a more incredible group to guide us through their stories," added the Bythewoods.

Additionally, Channing Godfrey Peoples was named as co-executive producer and will direct the pilot episode for "Genius: MLK/X." Godfrey Peoples made her feature directorial debut with "Miss Juneteenth," for which she received the coveted National Board of Review Award for Best Directorial Debut and was also recognized with multiple nominations from the Gotham Awards and the Film Independent Spirit Awards, among others. Her television credits include Apple TV+ "Roar" and HBO Max's "Generation" for directing and OWN's "Queen Sugar" for screenwriting.

For Imagine Television, Brian Grazer and Ron Howard are executive producers. For Undisputed Cinema, Reggie Rock Bythewood, Gina Prince-Bythewood and Francie Calfo are executive producers. Raphael Jackson Jr. and Damione Macedon are showrunners and executive producers. For MWM Studios, Gigi Pritzker and Rachel Shane serve as executive producers. For EUE/Sokolow, Sam Sokolow is executive producer. Jeff Stetson ("The Meeting") will pen the pilot and serves as executive producer. Channing Godfrey Peoples will direct and also serve as co-executive producer. Ambassador Shabazz serves as consulting producer.

Harrison Jr. is known for bringing to life some of the most dynamic and diverse characters on screens, both big and small. Harrison has been building an impressive list of leading roles that have garnered SAG and AAFCA Awards and BAFTA, Independent Spirit and Gotham Award nominations. His credits include A24's "It Comes at Night," Neon's "Luce," the A24 drama "Waves," Netflix's Oscar®-nominated "The Trial of the Chicago 7," Focus Feature's "The High Note" and the Joe Wright-directed "Cyrano." Most recently, he was seen portraying B.B. King in Baz Luhrmann's "Elvis." Next, Harrison Jr. stars as the title character in Fox Searchlight's "Chevalier," a biopic about the French classical composer and virtuoso violinist Chevalier de Saint-Georges, which will premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival. Additionally, Harrison Jr. will also voice the role of Scar in Barry Jenkins' prequel of Disney's "The Lion King."

Pierre, a graduate of the prestigious LAMDA in London, was nominated for the 2018 Ian Charleson Award for his professional stage debut as Cassio in "Othello," opposite Mark Rylance at Shakespeare's Globe. He most recently played Caesar in Barry Jenkins' award-winning limited series "The Underground Railroad" for Amazon and starred in M. Night Shyamalan's film "Old," in which he played a rapper and for which he recorded a song. Pierre's latest film, "Brother," Clement Virgo's adaptation of David Chariandy's novel, is the story of two Jamaican Canadian brothers whose dreams are dashed by violent reality in 1990s Scarborough. The film recently made its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, where it got rave reviews. Aaron also received the prestigious TIFF Rising Star Award in honor of his body of work. Upcoming, Aaron has recorded the voice of Mufasa in Barry Jenkins' highly anticipated prequel of Disney's "The Lion King" and will be the lead role in Jeremy Saulnier's film "Rebel Ridge" for Netflix. He will also soon be seen in a lead role opposite Saoirse Ronan and Paul Mescal in Garth Davis' feature "Foe" for Amazon Studios.

Opia starred as Terry in "I May Destroy You" for HBO in 2019. For her work, Opia received a BAFTA TV nomination for Best Supporting Actress as well as a Film Independent Spirit Award for Best Ensemble Cast. Other credits include the limited series "Our House," "Top Boy" and the BBC hit show "Inside Number 9." Opia started out on BBC's half-hour hit comedy "Bad Education" and also starred in the film adaptation. On stage, she starred in "Liberian Girl" at the Royal Court to rave reviews.

Lawson can currently be seen in theaters opposite Viola Davis and Joh Boyega in Sony/Columbia's "The Woman King." She appears in MGM/Orion's "Till" for director Chinonye Chukwu and producer Barbara Broccoli (NYFF premiere) and co-stars opposite Sasha Lane in Daniel Goldhaber's "How to Blow Up a Pipeline," which premiered to raves at TIFF and was picked up by NEON for release. Earlier this year, Lawson co-starred as Bella Real in Matt Reeves' "The Batman" for Warner Bros. She made her feature film debut in

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the Sundance feature "Farewell Amor."

"Genius" dramatizes the fascinating stories of the world's most brilliant innovators, exploring their extraordinary achievements along with their volatile, passionate and complex personal relationships. In 2017, National Geographic premiered the first season of the anthology series, which starred Geoffrey Rush as the brilliant scientist Albert Einstein. "Genius: Einstein" earned 10 Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Limited Series, as well as Golden Globe® and SAG Award nominations for Rush. The follow-up season, "Genius: Picasso," starred Antonio Banderas as the titular Spanish painter and matched much of the success of its predecessor, earning seven Emmy nominations — and two wins — as well as Golden Globe and SAG Award nominations for Banderas. The third installment, "Genius: Aretha," starred Cynthia Erivo as Aretha Franklin and premiered as the most-watched telecast for National Geographic in two years. Erivo received Emmy, Critics Choice and Golden Globe nominations for her critically acclaimed role as the Queen of Soul.

Harrison Jr. is represented by WME, Anonymous Content, Del Shaw Moonves Tanaka Finkelstein & Lezcano Law Firm and Presse PR. Pierre is represented by WME, Anonymous Content, Hamilton Hodell, Sloane Offer Weber & Dern and Narrative. Lawson is represented by UTA, Gang Tyre Ramer Brown & Passman, and Shelter PR. Opia is represented by Curtis Brown, Anonymous Content and Sloan, Offer, Weber & Dern. Godfrey Peoples is represented by CAA, Entertainment 360, and Frankfurt Kurnit Klein & Selz.

About Disney+

Disney+ is the dedicated streaming home for movies and shows from Disney, Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars, and National Geographic, along with The Simpsons and much more. In select international markets, it also includes the new general entertainment content brand, Star. The flagship direct-to-consumer streaming service from The Walt Disney Company, Disney+ is part of the Disney Media & Entertainment Distribution segment. The service offers commercial-free streaming alongside an ever-growing collection of exclusive originals, including feature-length films, documentaries, live-action and animated series, and short-form content. With unprecedented access to Disney's long history of incredible film and television entertainment, Disney+ is also the exclusive streaming home for the newest releases from The Walt Disney Studios. Disney+ is available as a standalone streaming service or as part of The Disney Bundle that gives subscribers access to Disney+, Hulu, and ESPN+. For more, visit disneyplus.com, or find the Disney+ app on most mobile and connected TV devices.

About National Geographic Partners LLC

National Geographic Partners LLC (NGP), a joint venture between Disney and the National Geographic Society, is committed to bringing the world premium science, adventure and exploration content across an unrivaled portfolio of media assets. NGP combines the global National Geographic television channels (National Geographic Channel, Nat Geo WILD, Nat Geo MUNDO, Nat Geo PEOPLE) with National Geographic's media and consumer-oriented assets, including National Geographic magazines; National Geographic studios; related digital and social media platforms; books; maps; children's media; and ancillary activities that include travel, global experiences and events, archival sales, licensing and e-commerce businesses. Furthering knowledge and understanding of our world has been the core purpose of National Geographic for 133 years, and now we are committed to going deeper, pushing boundaries, going further for our consumers ... and reaching millions of people around the world in 172 countries and 43 languages every month as we do it. NGP returns 27 percent of our proceeds to the nonprofit National Geographic Society to fund work in the areas of science, exploration, conservation and education. For more information, visit natgeotv.com or nationalgeographic.com, or find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn and Pinterest.

About Imagine Television

Imagine Television was founded in 1986 by Brian Grazer and Ron Howard to create premium scripted television. Over the years, Imagine's productions have garnered multiple awards including 217 Emmy nominations. Recent productions include "Under The Banner of Heaven" from Dustin Lance Black for FX; "Genius: Aretha" showrun by Suzan-Lori Parks and starring Cynthia Erivo; "Swagger" for Apple with Reggie Rock Bythewood and Kevin Durant; "Wu-Tang: An American Saga" for Hulu with The RZA and Alex

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Tse; and "Why Women Kill" for CBS All Access from Marc Cherry. Additional productions include Fox's award-winning series "Empire," Netflix's "Arrested Development," NatGeo's Emmy®-winning "Genius" anthology series, Fox's Golden Globe- and Emmy®-winning Best Drama Series "24"; Fox's "Filthy Rich," NBC's Peabody Award-winning series "Friday Night Lights"; Fox's Emmy®-winning Best Comedy "Arrested Development"; Fox's "Shots Fired" and "Lie To Me"; WB's "Felicity"; ABC's "SportsNight"; and HBO's "From the Earth to the Moon," which won the Emmy® for Outstanding Mini-Series. Howard and Grazer began their collaboration in the early 1980's on the hit film comedies "Night Shift" and "Splash," and continue to run Imagine as executive chairmen.

About 20th Television

One of the Disney Television Studios, 20th Television is a prolific supplier of entertainment programming, including Hulu's most watched comedy ONLY MURDERS IN THE BUILDING from Dan Fogelman, John Hoffman and Steve Martin, HOW I MET YOUR FATHER from Isaac Aptaker and Elizabeth Berger, and critically acclaimed dramas THE DROPOUT from Liz Meriwether, and DOPESICK from Danny Strong and starring Michael Keaton; ABC's new comedy hit ABBOTT ELEMENTARY from Quinta Brunson, and THE WONDER YEARS from Saladin Patterson and Lee Daniels; FX's newest hit THE OLD MAN from Jon Steinberg and starring Jeff Bridges and its blockbuster series AMERICAN HORROR STORY from Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk; NBC's top series THIS IS US from Dan Fogelman; Fox's No. 1 drama, 9-1-1 and its spinoff 9-1-1: LONE STAR from Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Tim Minear, in addition to dozens of others. 20th Television shows have amassed a collective 1867 Emmy nominations and 214 Emmy wins, as well as multiple Golden Globes, Humanitas Prizes and Peabody Awards. The studio's landmark series from its 70 year library include such classics as BATMAN, MODERN FAMILY, M*A*S*H, GLEE, HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER, BONES, EMPIRE, FRESH OFF THE BOAT, 24, BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER, NEW GIRL and THE X-FILES.

People trapped, 2.5M without power as Ian drenches Florida

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — Hurricane Ian left a path of destruction in southwest Florida, trapping people in flooded homes, destroying the only bridge to Sanibel Island, damaging the roof of a hospital intensive care unit and knocking out power to 2.5 million people as it dumped rain across the peninsula on Thursday.

One of the strongest hurricanes to ever hit the United States threatened catastrophic flooding around the state. Ian's tropical-storm-force winds extended outward up to 415 miles (665 km), drenching much of Florida and the southeastern Atlantic coast.

With no electricity and patchy cellphone coverage, many calls for help weren't getting through, even as emergency crews sawed through toppled trees to reach people in flooded homes. "If the line is busy, keep trying," the Lee County Sheriff's Office said in a Facebook post early Thursday.

The National Hurricane Center said Ian became a tropical storm over land early Thursday and was expected to regain near-hurricane strength after emerging over Atlantic waters near the Kennedy Space Center later in the day, with South Carolina in its sights for a second U.S. landfall.

A stretch of the Gulf Coast remained inundated by ocean water, pushed ashore by the massive storm. "Severe and life-threatening storm surge inundation of 8 to 10 feet above ground level along with destructive waves is ongoing along the southwest Florida coastline from Englewood to Bonita Beach, including Charlotte Harbor," the Miami-based hurricane center said.

A chunk of the Sanibel Causeway fell into the sea, cutting off access to the barrier island where 6,300 people normally live. How many heeded mandatory evacuation orders was impossible to know in the storm's immediate aftermath.

In Port Charlotte, the storm surge flooded a hospital's emergency room even as fierce winds ripped away part of the roof from its intensive care unit, according to a doctor who works there.

Water gushed down onto the ICU, forcing them to evacuate their sickest patients -- some on ventilators — to other floors, said Dr. Birgit Bodine of HCA Florida Fawcett Hospital. Staff members used towels and

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plastic bins to try to mop up the sodden mess.

The medium-sized hospital spans four floors, but patients crowded into two because of the damage, and more were expected with people injured from the storm needing help.

"As long as our patients do OK and nobody ends up dying or having a bad outcome, that's what matters," Bodine said.

Law enforcement officials in nearby Fort Myers received calls from people trapped in flooded homes or from worried relatives. Pleas were also posted on social media sites, some with video showing debris-covered water sloshing toward the eaves of their homes.

Brittany Hailer, a journalist in Pittsburgh, contacted rescuers about her mother in North Fort Myers, whose home was swamped by 5 feet (1.5 meters) of water.

"We don't know when the water's going to go down. We don't know how they're going to leave, their cars are totaled," Hailer said. "Her only way out is on a boat."

Hurricane Ian turned streets into rivers and blew down trees as it slammed into southwest Florida on Wednesday with 150 mph (241 kph) winds, pushing a wall of storm surge. Ian's strength at landfall was Category 4, tying it for the fifth-strongest hurricane, when measured by wind speed, ever to strike the U.S.

Ian's center came ashore more than 100 miles (160 kilometers) south of Tampa and St. Petersburg, sparing the densely populated Tampa Bay area from its first direct hit by a major hurricane since 1921.

Ian dropped to a tropical storm early Thursday over land, but was expected to intensify again once its center moves over the Atlantic Ocean and menace the South Carolina coast Friday at near-hurricane strength before moving inland.

At 5 a.m. Thursday, the storm was about 40 miles (70 km) southeast of Orlando and 35 miles (55 kilometers) southwest of Cape Canaveral, carrying maximum sustained winds of 65 mph (100 kph) and moving toward the cape at 8 mph (13 kmh), the center said.

Hurricane warnings were lowered to tropical storm warnings across the Florida peninsula, with widespread, catastrophic flooding remaining likely, the hurricane center said. Storm surges as high as 6 feet (2 meters) were still forecast for both coasts.

"It doesn't matter what the intensity of the storm is. We're still expecting quite a bit of rainfall," Robbie Berg, senior hurricane specialist with the National Hurricane Center, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Up to a foot (30 centimeters) of rain forecast for parts of Northeast Florida, coastal Georgia and the Lowcountry of South Carolina. As much as 6 inches (15 centimeters) could fall in southern Virginia as the storm moves inland over the Carolinas, and the center said landslides were possible in the southern Appalachian mountains.

No deaths were reported in the United States from Ian by late Wednesday. But a boat carrying Cuban migrants sank Wednesday in stormy weather east of Key West.

The U.S. Coast Guard initiated a search and rescue mission for 23 people and managed to find three survivors about two miles (three kilometers) south of the Florida Keys, officials said. Four other Cubans swam to Stock Island, just east of Key West, the U.S. Border Patrol said. Air crews continued to search for possibly 20 remaining migrants.

The storm previously tore into Cuba, killing two people and bringing down the country's electrical grid.

The hurricane's eye made landfall near Cayo Costa, a barrier island just west of heavily populated Fort Myers. As it approached, water drained from Tampa Bay.

More than 2.5 million Florida homes and businesses were left without electricity, according to the PowerOutage.us site. Most of the homes and businesses in 12 counties were without power.

Sheriff Bull Prummell of Charlotte County, just north of Fort Myers, announced a curfew between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. "for life-saving purposes," saying violators may face second-degree misdemeanor charges.

"I am enacting this curfew as a means of protecting the people and property of Charlotte County," Prummell said.

Life-threatening storm surges and hurricane conditions were possible on Thursday and Friday along the coasts of northeast Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, where Ian was expected to move inland, dump-

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ing more rain well in from the coast, the hurricane center said.

The governors of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia all preemptively declared states of emergency.

Kremlin will annex 4 regions of Ukraine on Friday

By JON GAMBRELL and ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia confirmed on Thursday it will formally annex parts of Ukraine where occupied areas held Kremlin-orchestrated “referendums” on living under Moscow’s rule that the Ukrainian government and the West denounced as illegal and rigged.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will attend a ceremony on Friday in the Kremlin when four regions of Ukraine will be officially folded into Russia, spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Peskov said the pro-Moscow administrators of the regions will sign treaties to join Russia during the ceremony at the Kremlin’s St. George’s Hall.

The official annexation was widely expected following the votes that wrapped up on Tuesday in the areas under Russian occupation in Ukraine and after Moscow claimed residents overwhelmingly supported for their areas to formally become part of Russia.

The United States and its Western allies have sharply condemned the votes as “sham” and vowed never to recognize their results. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on Thursday joined other Western officials in denouncing the referendums.

“Under threats and sometimes even (at) gunpoint people are being taken out of their homes or workplaces to vote in glass ballot boxes,” she said at a conference in Berlin.

“This is the opposite of free and fair elections,” Baerbock said. “And this is the opposite of peace. It’s dictated peace. As long as this Russian diktat prevails in the occupied territories of Ukraine, no citizen is safe. No citizen is free.”

Armed troops had gone door-to-door with election officials to collect ballots in five days of voting. The suspiciously high margins in favor were characterized as a land grab by an increasingly cornered Russian leadership after embarrassing military losses in Ukraine.

Moscow-installed administrations in the four regions of southern and eastern Ukraine claimed Tuesday night that 93% of the ballots cast in the Zaporizhzhia region supported annexation, as did 87% in the Kherson region, 98% in the Luhansk region and 99% in Donetsk.

Ukraine too has dismissed the referendums as illegitimate, saying it has every right to retake the territories, a position that has won support from Washington.

The Kremlin has been unmoved by the criticism. After a counteroffensive by Ukraine this month dealt Moscow’s forces heavy battlefield setbacks, Russia said it would call up 300,000 reservists to join the fight. It also warned it could resort to nuclear weapons.

Also on Thursday, Ukrainian authorities said Russian shelling has killed at least eight civilians, including a child, and wounded scores of others. A 12-year-old girl has been pulled out of rubble after an attack on Dnipro, officials said.

“The rescuers have taken her from under the rubble, she was asleep when the Russian missile hit,” said local administrator Valentyn Reznichenko.

Reports of new shelling came as Russia appeared to continue to lose ground around a key northeastern city of Lyman while it struggles to press on with chaotic mobilization of troops and prevent the fighting-age men from leaving the country, according to a Washington-based think-tank and the British intelligence reports.

The Institute for the Study of War, citing Russian reports, said Ukrainian forces have taken more villages around Lyman, a city some 160 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city. The report said Ukrainian forces may soon encircle Lyman entirely, in what would be a major blow to Moscow’s war effort.

“The collapse of the Lyman pocket will likely be highly consequential to the Russian grouping in northern

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Donetsk and western Luhansk oblasts and may allow Ukrainian troops to threaten Russian positions along the western Luhansk" region, the institute said.

The British military intelligence report claimed the number of Russian military-age men fleeing the country likely exceeds the number of forces Moscow used to initially invade Ukraine in February.

"The better off and well educated are over-represented amongst those attempting to leave Russia," the British said. "When combined with those reservists who are being mobilized, the domestic economic impact of reduced availability of labor and the acceleration of 'brain drain' is likely to become increasingly significant."

That partial mobilization is deeply unpopular in some areas, however, triggering protests, scattered violence, and Russians fleeing the country by the tens of thousands. Miles-long lines formed at some borders and Moscow also reportedly set up draft offices at borders to intercept some of those trying to leave.

VP Harris caps Asia trip with stop at DMZ dividing Korea

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

PANMUNJOM, Korea (AP) — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris capped her four-day trip to Asia with a stop Thursday at the Demilitarized Zone dividing the Korean Peninsula as she emphasized the "ironclad" U.S. commitment to the security of its Asian allies in the face of an increasingly hostile North Korea.

The visit comes on the heels of North Korea's latest missile launches and amid concerns that the country may conduct a nuclear test. Visiting the DMZ has become something of a ritual for American leaders hoping to show their resolve to stand firm against aggression.

North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles on Wednesday, while Harris was in Japan, and fired one before she left Washington on Sunday. The launches contribute to a record level of missile testing this year that is intended to move North Korea closer to being acknowledged as a full-fledged nuclear power.

At the DMZ, Harris went to the top of a ridge, near guard towers and security cameras. She looked through bulky binoculars as a South Korean officer pointed out military installations on the southern side. Then an American officer pointed out some of the defenses along the military demarcation line, including barbed-wire fences and claymore mines. He said American soldiers regularly walk patrols along a path.

"It's so close," Harris said.

Harris then visited one of a row of blue buildings that straddle the demarcation line, where an American officer explained how the buildings are still used to conduct negotiations with North Korea. Sometimes they pass messages back and forth and sometimes they use a megaphone, he said.

"That's high tech," Harris joked, before adding, "We've stepped into history."

"It's still going," the colonel said.

Harris agreed. "The past and present are happening every day."

She then walked out of the building and up to the demarcation line. On the North Korean side, two figures dressed in what appeared to be hazmat suits peeked out from behind a curtain in a second-floor window. Then they disappeared back inside.

Harris described the North Korean missile launches as provocations meant to "destabilize the region" and said the United States and South Korea remain committed to the "complete denuclearization" of the North.

"I cannot state enough that commitment of the United States to the defense of the Republic of Korea is ironclad," she said.

"In the South, we see a thriving democracy. In the North, we see a brutal dictatorship," she said before flying out of the border on a U.S. military helicopter.

Earlier, Harris met with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol at his office in Seoul and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to defend the South with a full range of its military capabilities in the event of war, Yoon's office said.

They expressed concern over North Korea's threats of nuclear conflict and pledged an unspecified stronger response to major North Korean provocations, including a nuclear test.

Harris and Yoon were also expected to discuss expanding economic and technology partnerships and

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repairing recently strained ties between South Korea and Japan to strengthen their trilateral cooperation with Washington in the region. Their meeting also touched on Taiwan, with both reaffirming their countries' support for "peace and stability" in the Taiwan Strait, according to Yoon's office, which didn't elaborate.

Harris' trip was organized so she could attend the state funeral of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, but her itinerary was dominated by security concerns, a reflection of fears about China's growing power and North Korea's ramped-up testing activity.

In every meeting, Harris tried to lay to rest any fears that the United States was wavering in its commitment to protect its allies, describing American partnerships with South Korea and Japan as the "linchpin" and "cornerstone" of its defense strategy in Asia.

Yoon, who took office earlier this year, had anchored his election campaign with vows to deepen Seoul's economic and security partnership with Washington to navigate challenges posed by the North Korean threat and address potential supply chain risks caused by the pandemic, the U.S.-China rivalry and Russia's war on Ukraine. But the alliance has been marked by tension recently.

South Koreans have decried a new law signed by President Joe Biden that prevents electric cars built outside of North America from being eligible for U.S. government subsidies, undermining the competitiveness of automakers like Seoul-based Hyundai.

During their meeting, Harris told Yoon that Washington will try to address South Korean concerns as the law is implemented, Yoon's office said.

Scott Snyder, an analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations, said the dispute over electric vehicles has swiftly become a firestorm that U.S. officials cannot ignore, although there may not be a simple solution.

"It's taking on a level of urgency that's making it into a political problem that requires management," Snyder said. "I don't know that it's going to be easy for the Biden administration to do that."

After meeting Yoon, Harris, the first woman to serve as U.S. vice president, held a roundtable with female leaders on gender equity issues.

Yoon has faced criticism for the lack of female representation in government and his downplaying of broader inequalities.

"If we want to strengthen democracy, we must pay attention to gender equity," said Harris, who also raised the issue with Yoon.

There are indications North Korea may up its weapons demonstrations soon as it attempts to pressure Washington to accept it as a nuclear power. South Korean officials said last week that they detected signs North Korea was preparing to test a ballistic missile system designed to be fired from submarines.

The U.S. aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan was to train with South Korean and Japanese warships in waters near the Korean Peninsula on Friday in the countries' first trilateral anti-submarine exercises since 2017 to counter North Korean submarine threats, South Korea's navy said Thursday.

U.S. and South Korean officials also say North Korea is possibly gearing up for its first nuclear test since 2017. That test could come after China holds its Communist Party convention the week of Oct. 16, but before the United States holds its midterm elections Nov. 8, according to Seoul's spy agency.

North Korea has punctuated its testing activity with repeated threats of nuclear conflict. Its rubber-stamp parliament this month authorized the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in a broad range of scenarios where its leadership comes under threat.

Nuclear diplomacy between the U.S. and North Korea remains stalled since 2019 over disagreements on easing crippling U.S.-led economic sanctions against the North in exchange for the North's disarmament steps.

Welfare group reports severe breaches on Romanian fur farms

By STEPHEN McGRATH Associated Press

SIGHISOARA, Romania (AP) — In a dingy basement, chinchillas bred to provide the fashion industry with their fur bite the wire of cages that are stacked floor-to-ceiling with no natural light, as their babies

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struggle across the wire-mesh floors.

The scene captured on video is among the findings from an undercover investigation into conditions on Romania's chinchilla fur farms, carried out last year by the animal welfare charity Humane Society International.

HSI said it uncovered cruel and allegedly illegal practices, and appealed to Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca to completely ban fur farming in the Eastern European country.

On Wednesday, the charity formally submitted a report on its findings — exclusively seen by The Associated Press — to Ciuca, urging him to “stop this atrocious suffering in the name of fashion.”

HSI investigators who looked into 11 chinchilla farms in different parts of Romania said some farmers told them they kill the animals by breaking their necks — a practice that contravenes the killing methods permitted for chinchillas under European Union law.

Chinchillas are a highly sociable species of rodent native to South America, and prized for their soft, silky fur.

“This investigation provides shocking evidence of the deprivation these animals are suffering in Romania for the fur industry,” said Andreea Roseti, Romania's country director for HSI. “Such cruelty brings shame on Romania and we hope that our investigation marks the beginning of the end for the fur industry here.”

One fur farmer allegedly showed an HSI investigator a homemade gas chamber — a grim method of killing permitted under EU law — which had been constructed “using a pressure cooker.” The group also said female chinchillas are kept in almost permanent pregnancy cycles, during which they are forced to wear a “stiff neck brace or collar” to prevent them escaping during mating.

In response to HSI's investigation, a group of Romanian lawmakers filed proposed legislation in parliament on Monday calling for a ban on the breeding and killing of animals solely for their fur. It was signed by five lawmakers from the center-right National Liberal Party.

It's a push for Romania, an EU member since 2007, to “align itself with EU legislation” and join other bloc members that have already introduced such bans, the lawmakers said.

Gheorghe Pecingina, the deputy who initiated the proposal, told The Associated Press it is important that the “cruel” practice ends now because the chinchillas “are killed with barbaric methods” in Romania.

Prime Minister Ciuca's office and the Association of Romanian Leather and Fur Producers didn't immediately reply to AP requests for comment.

Last week Latvian lawmakers voted to amend legislation to ban fur farms, making Latvia the fifteenth of the EU's 27 countries to call time on the industry.

“There is no possibility in which the life of animals or anything connected with these animals should be acceptable in fur farming,” HSI's Roseti said. “These animals are only bred for their fur which is used for fashion ... this is not a reason to keep (them) in those conditions and to kill them.”

Fur Free Europe, a European Citizens' Initiative supported by dozens of animal welfare organizations and registered by the European Commission in March, is running a petition calling for an EU-wide ban on fur farms and on the trading of fur products on the bloc's market. It's raised more than 377,000 signatures so far.

“This is Romania's chance to be on the right side of history,” Roseti said.

Mexico is world's deadliest spot for environmental activists

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

VICAM, Mexico (AP) — Mexico has become the deadliest place in the world for environmental and land defense activists, according to a global survey released Wednesday, and the Yaqui Indigenous people of northern Mexico are still mourning the killing of water-defense leader Tomás Rojo found dead in June 2021.

The murder of Indigenous land defenders often conjures up images of Amazon activists killed deep in the jungle — and Colombia and Brazil still account for many of the deaths. But according to a report by the nongovernmental group Global Witness, Mexico saw 54 activists killed in 2021, compared to 33 in Colombia and 26 in Brazil. The group recorded the deaths of 200 activists worldwide in 2021.

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Latin America accounted for over two-thirds of those slayings — often of the bravest and most well-respected people in their communities.

That was the case with Tomás Rojo, who authorities claim was killed by a local drug gang that wanted the money the Yaquis sometimes earn by collecting tolls at informal highway checkpoints.

Between 2010, when state authorities built a pipeline to siphon off the Yaquis' water for use in the state capital, Hermosillo, to 2020, Rojo led a series of demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, including a months-long intermittent blockade of the state's main highway, which caused millions in losses for businesses and industry.

People who knew Rojo don't believe the toll money theory: They say he was killed by the powerful interests that stand to profit from the Yaquis' land and water rights in the northern border state of Sonora, across the border from Arizona.

"Tomás demonstrated his capacity as a natural leader. He was a descendent of warriors," said Fernando Jiménez, who fought alongside Rojo in a movement to defend the tribe's water after the government built a dam to divert Yaqui water to rapidly growing Hermosillo in 2010.

Rojo's body was found half-buried near Vicam, nearly three weeks after he disappeared. He was initially identified by a red neckerchief he had been wearing when he left home.

Rojo was a descendent of Tetabiate, a Yaqui leader killed in a 1901 battle with the government, which deported the surviving Yaquis to work in slave-like conditions on henequen plantations in far-away Yucatan. The last battle against the Yaquis was fought in 1927, and included the government using airplanes against warriors still armed mostly with bows and arrows.

In 2014, Sonora state authorities tried to arrest Rojo and Jiménez on what Yaqui leaders consider trumped-up charges of kidnapping — that were later dismissed; Rojo avoided capture and fled to Mexico City, but Jiménez was jailed in the state capital in Hermosillo. The two kept the movement alive by speaking in Yaqui language in prison telephone calls.

"In prison, they made you speak Spanish," recalls Jiménez. "They didn't want me to speak my native language because they wanted to know what I was saying."

The Yaquis are the legal owners of at least half the water in the river basin that bears their name and which they have defended through nearly five centuries of massacres and extermination. But they have seen much of their water redirected to feed burgeoning industries and projects to plant vineyards and avocados in the desert.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador last month apologized to the Yaquis for past abuses and promised a series of infrastructure programs to improve their lives. But López Obrador has refused to stop the siphoning off of their water, though the director of the local water district, Humberto Borbón, says it is "100% illegal" and court rulings have backed the Yaquis' position.

The Yaquis find themselves at the center of a perfect storm: Everybody from Mexican drug cartels to water-hungry lithium mines covet their land. But they themselves live in poverty and often don't even have running water in their homes.

César Cota, a bricklayer and farmer who worked alongside Tomás Rojo, sat beside the Yaqui River — now just a dry gully — and recounted 500 years of Yaqui struggle.

Near his home, in the village of Cocorit, Yaqui warriors confronted Spanish conquistador Diego de Guzman in 1533.

"Our ancestors drew a line in the dirt and said, 'If you cross this, you'll be at war with us,'" Cota said. "Since then, we haven't stopped fighting. By now, in 2022, we shouldn't have to still be fighting."

Cota said the river was crucial to the Yaquis. When it flowed regularly, sturdy reeds grew on its banks which the Yaqui used to build everything from houses to funeral biers.

"It's an injustice, it's a great sadness to see our river without water," said Cota. "That river bears our name. That is where animals live, our medical plants, our reeds live. We don't have reeds anymore." When someone dies, relatives have to buy reeds to make their funeral bier.

"If this river were to flow again to the sea (the Gulf of California), that would be the greatest victory we

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could ever have," Cota said.

Rojo's father, Guillermo Rojo, 84, lives in the traditional Yaqui village of Potam. In the family's humble home, almost everything — the fences, the walls, roofs, the sleeping mats and even the hearths — are made of woven reeds. Because of the semidesert landscape, the trees that grow here are small and twisted, so reed mats packed with mud serve as walls and cooking surfaces.

The elder Rojo recalled Tomás, his son, as "iron-willed ever since he was a young boy."

"He didn't forget where he was from, who his ancestors were, and that may be what led him to become a social activist."

The family's tradition is impressive: After Tetabiate — the elder Rojo's grandfather — was killed in battle in 1901, the Mexican government sold the surviving members of his family off as slaves.

"When people ask me who my ancestors were, I tell them I am the descendant of slaves," he said.

Even today, most Yaquis in Potam live in reed houses; only those wealthy enough to buy and operate small electric pumps have running water.

While some still farm the surrounding fields, most Yaquis work as gardeners, bricklayers or laborers in neighboring cities. They farm corn and wheat on only about 42,000 acres (17,000 hectares), because they don't have enough water for irrigation, despite a 1930s presidential decree that guarantees them enough water to irrigate more than three times that much land.

That lack of water threatens the survival of Yaqui culture, whose traditional costumed Lenten-season dance performances are portrayed in statues across the state — even as the people themselves and their culture die off.

With little water, widespread poverty and no farm work available, younger Yaquis have begun to migrate to nearby cities and the U.S. border city of Nogales, and seldom return to fulfill their roles in traditional dances. Drug cartels moved in because they view Yaqui territory as a lucrative path to smuggle drugs to the U.S. And lithium deposits lie to the north of the Yaquis, and reportedly into their territory, as well.

"They have already granted about seven mining concessions in our territory, without ever having consulted us," said Jiménez. "The violence started in our communities, with the rival gangs, abductions and everything led to a decline in Yaqui society. Addiction increased, with the use of methamphetamines undermining our young people."

Rojo's father shook his head and added, "Before, they tried to exterminate us with guns. Now they are trying to exterminate us with addiction."

The drug violence unleashed in Sonora has cost many Yaqui lives. In September 2021, just a few months after Rojo was killed, one of the cartels apparently rounded up five young Yaqui men in the village of Loma de Bacum and massacred them.

The cartel had set up clandestine landing strips for drug flights on Yaqui land. When the Mexican army found and destroyed the landing strips, the cartel reportedly suspected the Yaquis of passing information on the runways to authorities.

The Yaquis say that isn't true and that the young men were just innocent victims. Indeed, some still doubt the official identification of their remains.

But the Yaquis' main complaints have gone unanswered by the government, which has defended the use of water for industrialization in Hermosillo, which has a huge Ford automotive plant and rapidly expanding industry and suburbs.

The Yaquis themselves won't say who they think ordered the killing on Tomás Rojo; they live in a largely lawless state where a drug cartel, corrupt politician or powerful businessman can order such a murder with impunity.

"It's like it is in every case, here in Mexico and everywhere else in the world," said Jiménez. "Governments always tend to conquer the strongest leaders, the strongest voices disappear."

Yankees star Judge hits 61st home run, ties Maris' AL record

By IAN HARRISON Associated Press

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TORONTO (AP) — Aaron Judge had gone seven games since his last home run, 34 plate appearances of fans quieting to a hush and snapping photos with every pitch.

Then with the score tied in the seventh inning on Wednesday night, he drove a 94.5 mph belt-high sinker to left, a no doubt rocket. He had tied Roger Maris' American League record of 61 home runs in a season, what many fans consider baseball's "clean" standard for the sport.

Judge's two-run homer lifted the Yankees to an 8-3 victory over the Toronto Blue Jays and brought relief to the 6-foot-7 slugger, who admitted having to try to block out distraction.

"Getting a chance to sit at 60 for a while there with the Babe was nice," he said, "but getting a chance to now sit at 61 with another Yankee right fielder that hit 61 home runs and MVPs, world champions, this is pretty cool."

Judge has seven games to break the record, starting with a series opener against Baltimore at Yankee Stadium on Friday night.

His 117.4 mph drive off left-hander Tim Lincecum (8-1) snapped a 3-3 tie and took just 3.8 seconds to land 394 feet from the plate. Judge watched the ball clank off the front of the stands, just below two fans who reached over a railing and tried for a catch. He pumped an arm just before reaching first and exchanged a slap with coach Travis Chapman.

"Definitely some relief getting to 61. You try not to think about it, but it creeps into your head," Judge said. "I was hoping it would get over the fence. I didn't know at first. I didn't want to be standing at home plate when it hits the wall."

The ball dropped into Toronto's bullpen and was picked up by Blue Jays bullpen coach Matt Buschmann. He and Toronto closer Jordan Romano held onto the ball before turning it over to Yankees reliever Zack Britton, who made sure it got to Judge.

"We just wanted to get it in the right hands," Romano said, prompting Judge to call it "a classy move."

Judge's mother Patty and Roger Maris Jr. rose and hugged from front-row seats. Judge appeared to point toward them after rounding second base.

"She's been with me through it all, that's for sure," Judge said. "From the Little League days, from getting me ready for school, taking me to my first couple of practices and games, being there for my first professional game, being there for my debut, and then now getting the chance to be here for this, this is so special. We're not done yet."

Judge was congratulated by the entire Yankees team, who gave him hugs after he crossed the plate.

"He's as beloved as they come," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said. "I think everyone is just so excited for him."

Judge moved past the 60 home runs Babe Ruth hit in 1927, which had stood as the major league mark until Maris broke it in 1961. All three stars reached those huge numbers playing for the Yankees.

Maris hit No. 61 for the Yankees on Oct. 1, 1961, against Boston pitcher Tracy Stallard. Maris' mark has been exceeded six times, but all have been tainted by the stench of steroids. Mark McGwire hit 70 home runs in 1998 and 65 the following year, and Bonds topped him with 73 in 2001. Sammy Sosa had 66, 65 and 63 during a four-season span starting in 1998.

McGwire admitted using banned steroids, while Bonds and Sosa denied knowingly using performance-enhancing drugs. Major League Baseball started testing with penalties for PEDs in 2004.

"He should be revered for being the actual single-season home run champ. That's really who he is if hits 62," Maris Jr. said. "I think baseball needs to look at the records. And I think baseball should do something."

Judge is hitting .313 with 130 RBIs, also the top totals in the AL. He has a chance to become the first AL Triple Crown winner since Detroit's Miguel Cabrera in 2012.

Fans fixated on him in the Bronx during the last homestand.

"It's tough at times at Yankee Stadium, for sure, when you got 45,000 standing on their feet for every pitch," Judge said. "You hear the noise. You hear the buzz. But when I step out on that field, when I step in the box, all the hype, all the noise, it goes aside and you got to focus on competing."

He became just the fifth player to hold a share of the AL season record. Nap Lajoie hit 14 in the AL's

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first season as a major league in 1901, and Philadelphia Athletics teammate Socks Seibold had 16 the next year, a mark that stood until Babe Ruth hit 29 in 1919. Ruth set the record four times in all, with 54 in 1920, 59 in 1921 and 60 in 1927, a mark that stood until Maris' 61 in 1961.

Maris was at 35 in July 1961 during the first season each team's schedule increased from 154 games to 162, and baseball Commissioner Ford Frick ruled if anyone topped Ruth in more than 154 games "there would have to be some distinctive mark in the record books to show that Babe Ruth's record was set under a 154-game schedule."

That "distinctive mark" became known as an "asterisk" and it remained until Sept. 4, 1991, when a committee on statistical accuracy chaired by Commissioner Fay Vincent voted unanimously to recognize Maris as the record holder.

After the game, plate umpire Brian O'Nora presented Judge with the lineup card. Judge isn't sure what he will give the Hall of Fame.

"They took my home run bat from my first game and I went in a massive slump after that," he said, "so I don't know if I'll be giving them anything just yet."

Judge and Maris Jr. met for the first time outside the Yankees clubhouse following the game. Maris Jr. has attended every game since Judge hit No. 60 on Sept. 20.

"It's the ninth day I've been here," Maris Jr. said. "He wears 99. Dad wears 9. It's just kind of weird the way it all kind of went together. So now I'm thinking, OK, we're going to go to Yankee Stadium and he'll probably hit 62 on Oct. 1, when dad hit his 61st."

Hurricane Ian strikes Florida hospital from above and below

By ALINA HARTOUNIAN The Associated Press

Hurricane Ian swamped a Florida hospital from both above and below, the storm surge flooding its lower level emergency room while fierce winds tore part of its fourth floor roof from its intensive care unit, according to a doctor who works there.

Dr. Birgit Bodine spent the night at HCA Florida Fawcett Hospital in Port Charlotte, anticipating the storm would make things busy, "but we didn't anticipate that the roof would blow off on the fourth floor," she said.

Water gushed down Wednesday from above onto the ICU, forcing staff to evacuate the hospital's sickest patients — some of them on ventilators — to other floors. Staff members resorted to towels and plastic bins to try to mop up the sodden mess.

The medium-sized hospital spans four floors, but patients were forced into just two because of the damage.

Bodine plans to spend another night at the hospital, when incoming storm injuries could make things worse.

"The ambulances may be coming soon and we don't know where to put them in the hospital at this point," she said. "Because we're doubled and tripled up."

Despite the inundation, Bodine said patients have been mostly understanding and upbeat.

"For us, as much as everything is terrible and we're exhausted ... as long as our patients do OK and nobody ends up dying or having a bad outcome, that's what matters," Bodine said.

In Minnesota, abortion keys Keith Ellison's 2nd term hopes

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Keith Ellison gave up a safe seat in Congress to run for Minnesota attorney general, saying it was his best chance to push back against the policies of Donald Trump. Now locked in a tough reelection fight, he's arguing that he's been far less of a partisan warrior than his critics claim.

Ellison squeaked into office in 2018, taking a post that Democrats had traditionally won easily. But he was a polarizing figure in the eyes of some voters. The outspoken progressive came from the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party, and Republicans tried to draw attention to his past associations with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, though Ellison had publicly renounced Farrakhan when he first ran for

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the U.S. House in 2006.

His bid for a second term as attorney general comes after four tumultuous years that put Minnesota in the world spotlight over the police killings of George Floyd and other Black men. His Republican opponent, hedge fund lawyer Jim Schultz, says Ellison deserves much of the blame for the surge in violent crime that followed.

To fight back, Ellison has used this summer's U.S. Supreme Court decision rolling back abortion rights to rally Democrats and suburban swing voters. He's also urged those voters to look at his work on more everyday issues such as affordable health care and prescription drugs, consumer and business fraud protections and protections for workers against wage theft — all things that belie his image, he said.

"They think I'm going to be a firebrand and I end up being a fairly pragmatic guy," Ellison said in an interview. "That's true of my entire service."

Ellison was already leading a major initiative for greater police accountability when Floyd died under the knee of former Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin in 2020. Ellison went on to lead the prosecution team that got Chauvin convicted of murder the next year, a verdict that potentially averted another eruption of violence.

Ellison also took a step that his Republican critics are now trying to use against him. He strongly backed a charter amendment in Minneapolis that arose from the "defund the police" movement. It would have replaced the city's police department with a loosely defined department of public safety, with details to be worked out later. Voters rejected it.

On the campaign trail, Schultz depicts Ellison as being "at the forefront of the defund-the-police movement" and blames that movement for the departures of hundreds of dispirited police officers in Minneapolis and elsewhere. And he blames those losses for the spike in gun violence, carjackings and other crimes since the pandemic.

"Far left, extreme politicians like Keith Ellison have gotten behind really reckless policies like defunding the police," Schultz said in an interview. "It's deeply wrong. It's immoral."

Violent crime has been rising across Minnesota since the pandemic began, with Minneapolis accounting for much of the increase, while its police force has fallen about 300 officers short of its authorized strength. Minnesota saw a 21.6% statewide increase in violent crime in 2021 from 2020, with violent crime in greater Minnesota rising by 16% and by 23.9% in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area.

Ellison said he doesn't regret supporting the charter amendment, but he said he never supported "defunding the police" and said it didn't accurately describe the amendment.

He also dismissed Schultz's claim that he's hostile to police, saying he regards policing as a noble profession and that Chauvin did more to invite scorn and demoralize officers than anything he ever did.

"I'm the one who prosecuted him for killing George Floyd," Ellison said. "So I'm the one trying to restore the honor and dignity of policing."

Ellison also led the prosecution of former Brooklyn Center Officer Kim Potter, who said she confused her gun for her Taser when she killed Daunte Wright during a traffic stop last year. She was convicted of manslaughter in December. Schultz has said he would support commuting her two-year sentence.

Crime isn't the only issue that has Schultz, a 36-year-old political newcomer, hopeful of being the first Republican to occupy the attorney general's office since 1971. He also accuses Ellison of "unbelievable incompetence" for failing to stop a massive fraud scheme in its early stages, with 49 people charged so far with stealing at least \$250 million from federal programs administered by the state to provide low-income children with nutritious meals during the pandemic. Ellison has countered that his office helped uncover the fraud.

If Ellison is to survive both that attack and the policing criticism to win a second term, abortion rights is likely to be the issue that does it.

Schultz vowed this spring to do everything in his power as attorney general to aggressively defend the unborn. After Roe's reversal, he joined many other Republicans trying to pivot away from abortion and back to crime in a state where abortion rights are protected under the state constitution.

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Meanwhile, Ellison brought New York Attorney General Letitia James to Minnesota in early September to raise money from abortion rights supporters in the legal community. Soon after, he visited an abortion clinic in Moorhead that moved across the border from Fargo, North Dakota, to escape a trigger ban on abortion. Ellison vowed early on that his office won't cooperate if other states seek to prosecute women who come to Minnesota for abortions.

Ellison said the election is about more than abortion rights or crime. Trump's rhetoric, the Jan. 6 insurrection, the Supreme Court's abortion decision and the rise of "MAGA Republicans" have put democracy in doubt, he said.

"Here's what we can't do," Ellison said. "We can't tell people we got this. Quite frankly, I'm glad people see my race as close because it means they're going to show up."

In sacred Brazil dunes, critics see evangelical encroachment

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

SALVADOR, Brazil (AP) — The vast blanket of white sand overlooking Salvador is a place to escape rumbling traffic, pinging phones and crying children. A space to find solitude and, increasingly, God.

Evangelicals have been converging on the massive Abaete dune system for some 25 years but especially lately, with thousands now coming each week to sing, pray and enter trancelike states. Some scrawl prayers on scraps of paper to be burned.

"I never tire of coming up here and glorifying," said Deja Soares, 47, adding that she has seen the paralyzed walk and the blind see. "The things God does here are incredible."

This year the dunes have become a flashpoint after City Hall began building a plaza and welcome center at one spot along their base, with a staircase up the sand soon to follow. A future phase would entail a platform atop the plateau. Defenders of the project say it's necessary to protect the fragile dunes from the increasingly heavy foot traffic.

But it has come under fire from Afro Brazilian religious groups, who have been performing their own rituals in the dunes for generations, and protest what they see as elected officials abusing their power to coopt and Christianize yet another public space. They say their objections reflect evangelicals' rising influence in the country's halls of power and politics straining interreligious relations ahead of Oct. 2 general elections.

This is the second installment in The Associated Press' two-part package about the intersection of politics and religion in Brazil.

While Catholicism is still the largest religion in Brazil, in recent years it has slipped below 50% of the population to lose its status as a majority faith, and is projected to be overtaken by evangelical churches in a decade.

This year there are nearly 500 evangelical pastors running for state and federal legislatures, more than triple the number in 2014, according to data from political analyst Bruno Carazza. Sóstenes Cavalcante, leader of Congress' evangelical caucus, told AP he believes they can win a third of the Lower House's seats, matching their share of the population.

Increased political power has, at times, altered the dynamics of public space nationwide, including in Bahia state, whose capital is Salvador.

One mayor in Bahia recently symbolically bestowed the key to the city on God and subjugated all other spiritual entities to Christ. Another in Salvador's metro region renamed a market "Jeová Jireh," meaning "The Lord Will Provide," and vendors selling specialized products to members of Afro Brazilian faiths were allegedly barred from obtaining stalls. Bahia's state legislature was adorned with a 30-foot panel featuring a Bible and the ark of the covenant.

"There is a project to dispute territory and power that is already being executed," said Lívia Sant'Anna Vaz, a state prosecutor focusing on human rights discrimination.

It was in that context that the dunes project was greenlit by an evangelical pastor who served as infra-

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structure secretary. Workers are toiling day and night to complete it this month.

On Sept. 18 roughly 200 evangelicals made a four-hour pilgrimage to the site, some barefoot as they traversed Salvador's streets to arrive at the steep rise of sand they call the "Holy Mountain."

Clad in flowy white garments, they faced the city and raised their hands as Bishop Wedson Tavares prayed for God to influence the election. With flags of Brazil and Israel in his shaking fists, he blessed elected officials from city councilors on up to President Jair Bolsonaro — a fervent supporter of evangelical interests — and pleaded for his reelection.

"Take the direction, in Jesus' name, of this country, so your people can be happy!" the bishop said, kneeling with his eyes squeezed shut. "Because your word says that when the just govern, the people rejoice!"

Spectacles like that have Jaciara Ribeiro, a priestess of the Afro Brazilian Candomble faith, which has historically faced repression in Salvador, convinced that the public works project is a ploy for evangelicals' electoral support.

"It's a political concession," she said. "They are building as a function of partisan politics. Doing that 'Holy Mountain' is for the evangelical vote. That's it."

Previously she would climb that dune to retrieve barbatimão leaves for rituals honoring the deity Oxalá, but lately she has begun avoiding it. Members of her nearby temple have been insulted when walking past or had Bibles brandished at them, she said.

Roque Soares, director of an environmental nonprofit that helped develop the project, denied that politics are at play and said the aim is to keep the crowds from eroding the dunes and provide them with bathrooms.

The dunes are personal for Soares, who is also an evangelical pastor and a police detective. Decades ago he used to go there to smoke marijuana, sleep with women and hunt birds. After he converted, he said, it was there the Lord cured four hernias that doctors said would require surgery.

"I started coming to this place with another perspective, to seek out God's presence," said Soares, 53. "I found many different people from different denominations, different parts of our city and the interior of our state."

The area affected by the project is only a tiny fraction of the vast dune system. Soares noted it didn't face opposition until an evangelical pastor and city councilman presented a bill to officially christen the location "Holy Mountain The Lord Will Provide."

While backlash forced the withdrawal of that proposal, evangelicals still call the area "Holy Mountain" — as does the mayor. At a packed meeting inside Salvador's convention center, he told hundreds of cheering Christians that he was building "Holy Mountain" so they can manifest their faith. Then a bishop from one of Brazil's largest evangelical churches called four legislative candidates onto the stage and asked the crowd to vote for them.

Amid the dispute, several "Holy Mountain" signs put up by Roque's nonprofit have been damaged, and some evangelicals accuse members of Afro Brazilian faiths of being responsible.

In mid-September, Ribeiro, who is known as Mother Jaciara of Oxum, received word that the federal public defenders' office had sued to suspend the project. She took it as a sign the deity Oxum had heard their pleas, and she wanted to go there to celebrate. But she worried that members of her temple would be afraid to join, intimidated by the evangelical presence.

"They have an army of God. I'd like to have an army of Oxum," she said with a wink.

Forces mustered soon enough, and practitioners of Afro Brazilian faiths gathered days later to protest the project and other measures seen as environmental aggressions against the dunes.

Dressed in white, they marched to Abaete Lagoon, the traditional site in the dunes for most for their rituals, and lined up along the water in a symbolic hug for the area.

From a sound truck, a Candomble priestess urged people to political action. Many wore stickers supporting left-wing legislative candidates, at least two of whom were present, and former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is running against Bolsonaro.

Down the lagoon's shore, an evangelical pastor called three church members into the water to be baptized, plunging their heads beneath the surface and then hugging them tightly.

The pastor, Edy Santos, said afterward that he wasn't bothered by the continuous drumming from the protest and that he refuses to talk politics with his flock, even when they ask.

"Our country is totally divided. It's a division of thoughts," said Santos, 32. "And the church came to unite."

Chinese tycoon Richard Liu faces civil trial in alleged rape

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Chinese billionaire, one of the richest people in the world, is heading to trial in Minneapolis to defend himself against allegations that he raped a former University of Minnesota student after a night of dinner and drinks in 2018.

Richard Liu, the founder and former CEO of e-commerce giant JD.com, has denied raping the woman, and prosecutors did not file criminal charges. The woman, Jingyao Liu, sued in civil court, alleging she was coerced to drink before Richard Liu groped her in a limousine and raped her in her apartment.

Both are expected to testify, and it will be up to a jury to decide who is telling the truth. Jury selection starts Thursday, with opening statements Monday.

"I think our client's credibility is one of the strongest parts of what the jury is going to hear," said Wil Florin, an attorney for Jingyao Liu. "The incredible courage and fortitude that this young lady has shown is truly admirable."

Diane Doolittle, an attorney for Richard Liu, said that the woman has changed her story and that the evidence will clear her client's name.

"We are looking forward to presenting the evidence, presenting the truth, so that the world will know that Mr. Liu is fully and completely innocent of these allegations against him," she said.

The woman alleges the attack happened in 2018 while Richard Liu was in Minneapolis for a weeklong residency in the University of Minnesota's doctor of business administration China program, geared toward high-level executives in China.

Jingyao Liu, a Chinese citizen, was at the university on a student visa and was a volunteer in the program at the time. The Associated Press does not generally name people alleging sexual assault, but Jingyao Liu has agreed to be identified publicly.

Richard Liu and Jingyao Liu are not related. Jingyao Liu was 21 at the time; Richard Liu was 46.

Richard Liu is a celebrity in China, part of a generation of entrepreneurs who created the country's internet, e-commerce, mobile phone and other technology industries since the late 1990s. Forbes estimated his wealth at \$11.5 billion.

Richard Liu, who stepped down as CEO of JD.com this year amid increased government scrutiny of China's technology industry, was arrested on suspicion of felony rape, but prosecutors never filed criminal charges, saying the case had "profound evidentiary problems."

Jingyao Liu sued Richard Liu and JD.com in 2019, alleging sexual assault and battery, along with false imprisonment.

The case drew widespread attention at a time when the #MeToo movement was gaining traction in China. Richard Liu's supporters and opponents waged aggressive public relations campaigns on Chinese social media; censors shut down some accounts that supported Jingyao Liu for "violating regulations."

Jingyao Liu says in her lawsuit that she had to withdraw from classes in fall 2018 and seek counseling and treatment. Her attorney says she has since graduated but has post-traumatic stress disorder. She seeks compensatory damages to cover medical bills, emotional distress and pain and suffering, and Judge Edward Wahl ruled she could also seek punitive damages from Richard Liu.

She is seeking more than \$50,000, a standard figure that must be listed in Minnesota if a plaintiff intends to seek anything above that amount. She is expected to ask a jury to award much more.

According to the lawsuit, on the night of the alleged attack, Richard Liu and other executives went to a Japanese restaurant in Minneapolis, and one of the men invited Jingyao Liu at Richard Liu's request. Jingyao Liu felt coerced to drink as the powerful men toasted her, and Richard Liu said she would dishonor him if she did not join in, she said in her lawsuit.

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According to text messages reviewed by The Associated Press and Jingyao Liu's interviews with police, she said that after the dinner, Richard Liu pulled her into a limousine and groped her despite her protests. She said he raped her at her apartment. She texted a friend: "I begged him don't. But he didn't listen."

After police went to her apartment, Jingyao Liu told one officer, "I was raped but not that kind of rape," according to police. When asked to explain, she changed the subject and said Richard Liu was famous and she was afraid. She told the officer that the sex was "spontaneous" and that she did not want police to get involved.

Officers released Richard Liu because "it was unclear if a crime had actually taken place," according to police. In an interview later with an investigator, Richard Liu said that the sex was consensual and that the woman "enjoyed the whole process very much."

According to police, Jingyao Liu told a sergeant she wanted to talk with Richard Liu's attorney and threatened to go to the media if she did not. Richard Liu's former attorney recorded the phone call, in which Jingyao Liu said that she didn't want the case to be in the newspaper and that "I just need payment money and apologize and that's all."

That phone call will be allowed as evidence in the trial. The jurors will also be told that they may presume any electronic messages deleted by Jingyao Liu contained information unfavorable to her. Both pretrial rulings were considered wins for the defense.

Surveillance videos from the restaurant, its exterior and the halls of the woman's apartment complex will be shown at trial. Richard Liu's attorneys have said the video shows that Jingyao Liu does not appear to be intoxicated or in distress, as she initially claimed, and that she changed her story after the video surfaced.

She says in her lawsuit that she went to her apartment building with Richard Liu to be polite, and that she believed he was simply walking her to the door. Florin, Jingyao Liu's attorney, intends to play body camera video from police that he says shows his client feared Richard Liu because he is powerful.

"Insanely wealthy men, they always have the card that they play: 'Well, I'm being accused of this because I'm wealthy,'" Florin said.

"What happened that night was an evening of consensual sex," Doolittle, one of Richard Liu's attorneys, said. "Mr. Liu regrets that, and he regrets being unfaithful to his wife."

The burden of proof is lower than in a criminal trial, and jurors need only find a preponderance of evidence in either side's favor, said Chris Madel, a Minneapolis attorney who isn't involved in the case.

If jurors proceed to considering punitive damages, that portion of the case requires a different standard of proof. To award punitive damages, jurors must find "clear and convincing evidence" that Richard Liu "deliberately disregarded the rights or safety of others," Madel said.

After cases like this, Madel said, no matter how much evidence is presented, jurors will typically say: "We just listened to him, we listened to her, and we made our minds up."

Ian swamps southwest Florida, trapping people in homes

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — Hurricane Ian, one of the most powerful storms ever recorded in the U.S., swamped southwest Florida on Wednesday, turning streets into rivers, knocking out power to 2 million people and threatening catastrophic damage further inland.

A coastal sheriff's office reported that it was getting many calls from people trapped in flooded homes. Desperate people posted to Facebook and other social sites, pleading for rescue for themselves or loved ones. Some video showed debris-covered water sloshing toward homes' eaves.

The storm surge flooded a hospital's lower level emergency room in Port Charlotte, while fierce winds tore part of its fourth floor roof from its intensive care unit, according to a doctor who works there.

Water gushed down from above onto the ICU, forcing staff to evacuate the hospital's sickest patients — some of whom were on ventilators — to other floors, said Dr. Birgit Bodine of HCA Florida Fawcett Hospital. Staff members used towels and plastic bins to try to mop up the sodden mess.

The medium-sized hospital spans four floors, but patients were forced into just two because of the

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damage. Bodine planned to spend the night at the hospital in case people injured from the storm arrive there needing help.

"The ambulances may be coming soon and we don't know where to put them in the hospital at this point because we're doubled and tripled up," she said. "As long as our patients do OK and nobody ends up dying or having a bad outcome, that's what matters."

The hurricane's center made landfall near Cayo Costa, a barrier island just west of heavily populated Fort Myers. As it approached, water drained from Tampa Bay.

Mark Pritchett stepped outside his home in Venice around the time the hurricane churned ashore from the Gulf of Mexico, about 35 miles (55 kilometers) to the south. He called it "terrifying."

"I literally couldn't stand against the wind," Pritchett wrote in a text message. "Rain shooting like needles. My street is a river. Limbs and trees down. And the worst is yet to come."

A boat carrying Cuban migrants sank Wednesday in the stormy weather in waters east of Key West. The U.S. Coast Guard initiated a search and rescue mission for 23 people and managed to find three survivors about two miles (three kilometers) south of the island chain, officials said. Four other Cubans swam to Stock Island, just east of Key West, the U.S. Border Patrol said. Air crews continued to search for possibly 20 remaining migrants.

The Category 4 storm slammed the coast with 150 mph (241 kph) winds and pushed a wall of storm surge accumulated during its slow march over the Gulf. More than 2 million Florida homes and businesses were without electricity, according to PowerOutage.us. Nearly every home and business in three counties was without power.

The storm previously tore into Cuba, killing two people and bringing down the country's electrical grid.

About 2.5 million people were ordered to evacuate southwest Florida before Ian hit, but by law no one could be forced to flee.

News anchors at Fort Myers television station WINK had to abandon their usual desk and continue storm coverage from another location in their newsroom because water was pushing into their building near the Caloosahatchee River.

Though expected to weaken to a tropical storm as it marches inland at about 9 mph (14 kph), Ian's hurricane force winds were likely to be felt well into central Florida. In the hours since landfall, top sustained winds had gradually dropped to 90 mph (150 kph), making it a Category 1 hurricane crossing the peninsula. Still, storm surges as high as 6 feet (2 meters) were expected on the opposite side of the state, in northeast Florida.

Sheriff Bull Prummell of Charlotte County, just north of Fort Myers, announced a curfew between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. "for life-saving purposes," saying violators may face second-degree misdemeanor charges.

"I am enacting this curfew as a means of protecting the people and property of Charlotte County Prummell said.

Jackson Boone left his home near the Gulf coast and hunkered down at his law office in Venice with employees and their pets. Boone at one point opened a door to howling wind and rain flying sideways.

"We're seeing tree damage, horizontal rain, very high wind," Boone said by phone. "We have a 50-plus-year-old oak tree that has toppled over."

In Naples, the first floor of a fire station was inundated with about 3 feet (1 meter) of water and firefighters worked to salvage gear from a firetruck stuck outside the garage in even deeper water, a video posted by the Naples Fire Department showed. Naples is in Collier County, where the sheriff's department reported on Facebook that it was getting "a significant number of calls of people trapped by water in their homes" and that it would prioritize reaching people "reporting life threatening medical emergencies in deep water."

Ian's strength at landfall tied it for the fifth-strongest hurricane when measured by wind speed to strike the U.S. Among the other storms was Hurricane Charley, which hit nearly the same spot on Florida's coast in August 2004, killing 10 people and inflicting \$14 billion in damage.

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densely populated Tampa Bay area from its first direct hit by a major hurricane since 1921.

Flash floods were possible all across Florida. Hazards include the polluted leftovers of Florida's phosphate fertilizer mining industry, more than 1 billion tons of slightly radioactive waste contained in enormous ponds that could overflow in heavy rains.

The federal government sent 300 ambulances with medical teams and was ready to truck in 3.7 million meals and 3.5 million liters of water once the storm passes.

"We'll be there to help you clean up and rebuild, to help Florida get moving again," President Joe Biden said Wednesday. "And we'll be there every step of the way. That's my absolute commitment to the people of the state of Florida."

The governors of Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina all preemptively declared states of emergency. Forecasters predicted Ian will turn toward those states as a tropical storm, likely dumping more flooding rains into the weekend, after crossing Florida.

'Gangsta's Paradise' rapper Coolio dies at age 59

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. and ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Coolio, the rapper who was among hip-hop's biggest names of the 1990s with hits including "Gangsta's Paradise" and "Fantastic Voyage," died Wednesday at age 59, his manager said.

Coolio died at the Los Angeles home of a friend, longtime manager Jarez Posey told The Associated Press. The cause was not immediately clear.

Coolio won a Grammy for best solo rap performance for "Gangsta's Paradise," the 1995 hit from the soundtrack of the Michelle Pfeiffer film "Dangerous Minds" that sampled Stevie Wonder's 1976 song "Pastime Paradise" and was played constantly on MTV.

The Grammy, and the height of his popularity, came in 1996, amid a fierce feud between the hip-hop communities of the two coasts, which would take the lives of Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. soon after.

Coolio managed to stay mostly above the conflict.

"I'd like to claim this Grammy on behalf of the whole hip-hop nation, West Coast, East Coast, and world-wide, united we stand, divided we fall," he said from the stage as he accepted the award.

Born Artis Leon Ivey Jr., in Monessen, Pennsylvania south of Pittsburgh, Coolio moved to Compton, California. He spent some time as a teen in Northern California, where his mother sent him because she felt the city was too dangerous.

He said in interviews that he started rapping at 15 and knew by 18 it was what he wanted to do with his life, but would go to community college and work as a volunteer firefighter and in airport security before devoting himself full-time to the hip-hop scene.

His career took off with the 1994 release of his debut album on Tommy Boy Records, "It Takes a Thief." Its opening track, "Fantastic Voyage," would reach No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100.

A year later, "Gangsta's Paradise" would become a No. 1 single, with its dark opening lyrics:

"As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I take a look at my life and realize there's not much left, 'cause I've been blastin' and laughin' so long, that even my mama thinks that my mind is gone."

Social media lit up with reactions to the unexpected death.

"This is sad news," Ice Cube said on Twitter. "I witness first hand this man's grind to the top of the industry. Rest In Peace, @Coolio."

"Weird Al" Yankovic tweeted "RIP Coolio" along with a picture of the two men hugging.

Coolio had said in an interview at the time it was released that he wasn't cool with Yankovic's 1996 "Gangsta's Paradise" parody, "Amish Paradise." But the two later made peace.

The rapper would never again have a song nearly as big as "Gangsta's Paradise," but had subsequent hits with 1996's "1, 2, 3, 4 (Sumpin' New)" (1996), and 1997's "C U When U Get There."

His career album sales totaled 4.8 million, with 978 million on-demand streams of his songs, according to Luminate. He would be nominated for six Grammys overall.

And with his distinctive persona he would become a cultural staple, acting occasionally, starring in a reality show about parenting called "Coolio's Rules," providing a voice for an episode of the animated show "Gravity Falls" and providing the theme music for the Nickelodeon sitcom "Kenan & Kel."

He had occasional legal troubles, including a 1998 conviction in Stuttgart, Germany, where a boutique shop owner said he punched her when she tried to stop him from taking merchandise without paying. He was sentenced to six months probation and fined \$30,000.

He was married to Josefa Salinas from 1996 to 2000. They had four children together.

Climate Migration: Blind and homeless amid Somalia's drought

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

DOLLOW, Somalia (AP) — Blindness heightens the remaining senses. The thud of a toppling camel is more jarring, the feel of tightening skin more acute, the smell of death thicker after weeks and months and then years without the rain that's needed to survive.

Perhaps, as panic rose with the wind, Mohamed Kheir Issack and Issack Farow Hassan could even taste the coming famine.

Issack is 80, Hassan 75. The two men are friends and as close as brothers, gripping each other's hands in their mutual darkness as tightly as they hold their canes. Near the end of their lives, the most alarming drought in more than half a century in Somalia has stripped them of their animals and homes.

The Associated Press first met them crouching together in the dust. They were among hundreds of people who had arrived in this border town in recent days, part of an unwilling migration that has seen more than 1 million hungry Somalis flee.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story was produced in partnership with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. This story is part of an ongoing series exploring the lives of people around the world who have been forced to move because of rising seas, drought, searing temperatures and other things caused or exacerbated by climate change.

Somalia has long known droughts, but the climate shocks are now coming more frequently, leaving less room to recover and prepare for the next. Pastoralists and farmers who have known for generations where to take cattle, goats and camels when the usual water sources run dry have been horrified by this drought that has seen four straight rainy seasons fail.

"Droughts before were not like this. We were able to withstand them," Issack said.

When rain does fall, more unpredictably now, hotter temperatures mean it evaporates faster, leaving meager amounts for farming or drinking. East Africa is the world's hardest-hit drought region, according to the U.N.'s desertification agency.

Experts say forecasts indicate that the fifth rainy season now underway will fail, too, and even the sixth one set for early next year. With that, Somalia will be in uncharted lands beyond the memories of even Issack, Hassan and their age-mates.

The two men had always lived in their southern community of Ufurow, about 300 kilometers (186 miles) away, and had never moved from it until now.

Somalia is now said to have the world's fastest urbanization rate as so many people like them emerge from rural areas and cluster around potential sources of aid.

"They know before we do that their way of life is over," U.N. humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths has said.

Here outside the southern town of Dollow, Issack and Hassan waited patiently in the late afternoon light, a wall of children and slender mothers behind them. Long strings of prayer beads were around their necks, a battered mobile phone in a pocket.

On the edge of the rapidly growing camp for displaced people, an official was drawing lines in the dust. He was marking squares, a hopscotch of future homes for the waiting families. What they would build on the spaces little bigger than a king-sized bed, and where they would find the materials, would be their

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problem.

For Issack, Hassan and the rest, the huts would be better than sleeping under the stars, with thorn bushes giving no protection from the mosquitoes and grit flung by the wind. Families hurried in the last hour before sunset to occupy their squares, digging with twigs to make holes for poles of stripped branches.

Twenty-four hours later, their section of the camp looked like any other, with plastic sheeting and fabric, even strips of mosquito nets and clothing, stretched around the branches.

Issack lived in one hut built by his wife, Hassan in another built by his sister.

As fragile as their new existence was, Hassan pounded the dust with his metal cane when asked if they could ever go home again. Absolutely not.

That's in part because their area of Somalia is controlled by an extremist group, al-Shabab, which other people who fled described as having little pity as crops withered and livestock died by the millions. The extremists, affiliated with al-Qaida, continued to heavily tax residents by asking up to half of their harvest, even as people began to starve.

Because al-Shabab makes it almost impossible to reach areas under their control with humanitarian assistance, their presence has played an especially deadly role in droughts. An estimated quarter-million people died in the famine declared in Somalia in 2011, many because al-Shabab wouldn't allow most aid in or, often, suffering people out.

This time, those arriving told the AP that the extremists are allowing some of the mothers, children and elderly who have lost everything to flee.

The fighters stopped and checked the small vehicle carrying Issack and Hassan from Ufurow, then let them pass for their three-day journey here.

"They didn't want us," Issack said.

The men know that as blind and elderly they are among the most vulnerable, used to being left behind even in normal times. While the camp growing around them is roughly organized around the communities that people fled, and Ufurow residents remain their neighbors, the frame of reference has shattered.

"The problem is, we can't see who's here from home or how many of them," Issack said. It will take time to build a mental map of their surroundings, of whose child wanders by, wailing, or who might be coughing in the hut a few meters away.

"We don't know what's happening around us," he said, an extreme of the sentiment the thousands of displaced people in this town are feeling, too.

Their new neighbors gave the men materials to help build their huts. They had arrived with little but utensils and their clothes. The day before moving in, they managed to find a little food and cooked it. It's a step forward from just tea, the meal for many as the aid that had been rumored here is delayed or lacking.

Everything in this new home is unsettling, even undignified. "We have no toilets," Hassan said, and described having to go inside the hut while others collected his feces.

"Today, at least we have this," Issack said, sitting on a foam mattress in a living space he could almost span by reaching out both hands.

A loaded donkey cart arrived nearby, full of boys, the oldest with the reins. Their mothers walked beside it, carrying babies. As newcomers, they'll sleep on the ground until they, too, receive a square drawn in the dust.

They were among 77 households who arrived at the camp on a single day.

The two old men agreed that life and death are in the hands of Allah, and they will die when the time comes. Unlike others in the camp, they are unable to work for themselves. If they want to walk to the registration center to seek help, someone must take them by the hand and guide them.

Their families and friends from home have scattered. The drought has made everyone leave.

Some went to Baidoa, a grim choice as the city swells with an even larger number of people fleeing nearby areas where the U.N. has warned that famine could occur as early as October.

Issack and Hassan's links to those friends and family facing the worst of Somalia's drought are frailer than most. Hassan's phone is at hand, but use of it is limited.

"I cannot dial," he said, frowning slightly at the ground, "but I can answer."

Police: Oakland high school shooting wounds 6 adults

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — At least six adults were wounded in a shooting at a school campus in Oakland on Wednesday, with at least some of the victims found inside the school, authorities said.

The shooting took place around 12:45 p.m. at Rudsdale Newcomer High School, authorities said. The school serves recent immigrants ages 16-21 who have fled violence and instability in their home countries, according to the school's website. It is one of four adjacent schools located on a block in east Oakland.

Officials have not said whether any of the victims might be students age 18 or older.

"The victims were affiliated with the school, and we are determining the affiliation at this time," Oakland Assistant Police Chief Darren Allison said, although he declined to say whether any students or teachers were involved.

Allison said police were seeking at least one suspect but did not have anyone in custody.

Three of the wounded were taken to Highland Hospital in Oakland, while the other three were taken to Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley. Allison said three people remained hospitalized Wednesday evening, two of them with life-threatening injuries, while one person had been released and two others were expected to be released soon.

John Sasaki, a spokesperson for Oakland Unified School District, said in a statement that district officials "do not have any information beyond what Oakland Police are reporting." He said counselors were being made available for students and he could not say whether the schools at the site would be open Thursday.

Television footage showed dozens of police cars and yellow tape on the street outside the school and students leaving nearby campuses.

City Council Member Treva Reid said investigators told her the shooting may be tied to rising "group and gang violence."

James Jackson, chief executive of Alameda Health System, also noted an increase in violence.

"We've seen almost a doubling of the violent crimes victims that we're seeing here at our facility (Highland Hospital). So something has changed," Jackson said.

City Council Member Loren Taylor, who was outside the school, declined to confirm any details about the incident, telling KTVU-TV, "Guns were on our school campuses where our babies were supposed to be protected."

Friend or foe? Japan-China ties complicated after 50 years

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Friend or foe? Or both? On the streets of Tokyo and Beijing, the ties between Japan and China remain complicated and often contradictory, 50 years after the two Asian countries normalized relations as part of the process that brought Communist China into the international fold.

Chinese official media and textbooks memorialize the victims of Japan's brutal invasion during World War II, even as young urbanites slurp "ramen" soup noodles in a two-story restaurant row made to look like Tokyo's narrow alleyways.

In the real Tokyo, Japanese flocked to a festival last weekend to try Chinese dumplings, even as they worried about the growing military prowess of their much larger neighbor and its designs on the self-governing island of Taiwan — which happens to be a former Japanese colony.

"Politics is politics, it has nothing to do with the exchanges between us people," said Zheng Bin, baking a Chinese leek pie at the festival in Yoyogi Park. He has spent half his life in Japan, coming as a student 30 years ago, and now runs six Chinese restaurants in the Tokyo area.

Politics influences people, though, and critical views are on the rise as the two countries mark the 50th anniversary on Thursday of the agreement to establish diplomatic relations, which followed U.S. President Richard Nixon's groundbreaking visit to China earlier in 1972.

A survey last year by Japanese think tank Genron NPO found that 90% of Japanese had a negative

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image of China, and 66% of Chinese felt the same way toward Japan, up from 53% the previous year.

"It's normal that there are problems at the 50th anniversary," said Li Tingjiang, the director of a Japanese studies center at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He cited geopolitics and the social and economic differences between the two countries. "But we shouldn't deny the longstanding positive impact from mutual understanding and cultural exchange over the past 50 years."

TOKYO: CAN PEOPLE EXCHANGES OVERCOME TOXIC TIES?

Japanese college student Momoe Unou went to the Tokyo festival to scout out the food — she wants to sell Chinese dumplings and buns at an upcoming event with exchange students from China.

Until a high school trip to China, her view of the country was based solely on textbooks and TV news — and it wasn't a positive one. Once there, she was struck by the eagerness of her Chinese counterparts to communicate, prompting her to major in Asian studies.

"I would have thought of China as a scary nation if television news were my only source of information about it," she said.

The Japan-China Exchange Festival returned last weekend after a two-year hiatus because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizers hope it will help restart cultural exchange despite tense political ties as Japan is pulled into a growing rivalry between the U.S. and China.

Festival adviser Yasuo Fukuda, a former prime minister who is an active proponent of better ties with China, said the pandemic has reduced communication between the two nations.

"Lack of dialogue increases risks of misunderstanding ... and things that do not happen under normal circumstances could happen," he said in an interview with the AP.

"I hope this festival provides an opportunity for you to think of that day 50 years ago and find our path for the future," he said in remarks at the opening of the two-day event.

Festival goer Masaki Makita, who studied and worked in Shanghai for nearly a decade, has issues with China's policy toward Taiwan and its crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong. He feels media coverage has affected people's views in both countries, probably more so because of the isolation from the pandemic.

"I think news about China that we see in the Japanese media could be somewhat biased, while I don't think China is right either," he said. "But I have many Chinese friends, and it has nothing to do with politics."

BEIJING: CAN SOFT POWER OVERCOME WARTIME HISTORY?

A fatty, garlicky smell greets visitors to Yume Wo Katare restaurant in the Chinese capital. And come they do, lining up at times for the 90 or so bowls of Jiro-style ramen served daily at the shop in the Japanese restaurant row.

Owner Shi Xin, who has lived in Japan, expressed a sense of achievement at bringing back the hearty soup with its thick noodles and winning over fans among both Chinese and Japanese living in Beijing.

"Although it's nothing huge, through small things like food, I hope to promote friendship between China and Japan and contribute to cultural exchange," he said ahead of the dinnertime rush at his 6-year-old restaurant.

Beijing residents expressed a friendliness toward Japan and a fondness for Japanese culture, though some added that the wartime past could not be forgotten, particularly in the runup to China's National Day on Saturday.

"If it's a period like National Day, I think there are expectations that our generation and the younger generations can still remember the history of fighting against Japanese aggression," said 35-year-old Su Mengtong, who was waiting for friends getting COVID-19 tests at a booth near the Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.

"After all, the invasion is a big trauma for our country," he said.

Recent decades have brought Japanese food and pop culture, including movies, TV shows and "manga" comics, said Li, who is currently a visiting scholar in Tokyo.

Ramen, a Japanese export now popular in many countries, actually has Chinese roots, dating from the 19th century when noodle soup was brought to Japan, according to the Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum

in Japan.

But Japan's soft power is not immune from its wartime history. Chinese police detained a woman posing for photos in a kimono at a Japanese-style commercial area in the city of Suzhou in August, shortly before the anniversary of Japan's surrender at the end of World War II.

The incident sparked a heated discussion online, with some saying that a love for Japanese culture doesn't make a person unpatriotic, and others accusing the woman of hurting the feelings of the Chinese people close to a wartime anniversary.

Social media has been the main platform for discontent about Japan. Tens of thousands of people left unfavorable comments about former Japanese leader Shinzo Abe after his assassination in July, because of his association with nationalists who deny or minimize the atrocities committed by Japan's military in China.

Liu Wei, who is in his 50s, said China needs to stand firm on territorial issues — Japan and China have competing claims to islands in the East China Sea — but more generally favors looking forward rather than back.

"That time has already passed," said Liu, who was taking a walk near the war museum. "If you keep holding onto it, it doesn't generate too much positive impact on the future."

Ian swamps southwest Florida, trapping people in homes

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

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"We'll be there to help you clean up and rebuild, to help Florida get moving again," President Joe Biden said Wednesday. "And we'll be there every step of the way. That's my absolute commitment to the people of the state of Florida."

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has requested Biden grant a Major Disaster Declaration for all 67 of the state's counties, which would open a range of federal assistance for residents and funding for public infrastructure repairs. DeSantis has also asked Biden to allow FEMA to provide a 100% federal cost share for debris removal and emergency protective measures for 60 days.

The governors of Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina all preemptively declared states of emergency. Forecasters predicted Ian will turn toward those states as a tropical storm, likely dumping more flooding rains into the weekend, after crossing Florida.

Arizona museum exhibit marks end to de Kooning painting saga

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — After a Willem de Kooning painting worth millions was brazenly stolen in 1985 from an Arizona museum, the staff clung to the hope that it would turn up one day. But nobody could have predicted "Woman-Ochre" would find its way back through the kindness of strangers in a neighboring state.

"I would kind of imagine what would that look like," said Olivia Miller, interim director and exhibitions curator at the University of Arizona Museum of Art in Tucson. "Would it just show up as a mysterious package in the mail or something like that? ... I certainly never thought I'd make friends from it."

The 1955 oil painting by the Dutch-American abstract expressionist is finally back home and ready to be shown. It will be the centerpiece of an entire exhibition opening Oct. 8 until May at the University of Arizona Museum of Art. The whole ordeal of the theft and its return in 2017 via New Mexico will be chronicled in the show. It has spent the past two years at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles for restoration work and display. The painting will be in the same spot it was stolen from — but under a case.

"That's one of many security layers that it will have," Miller said.

Almost like something out of a heist movie, the theft unfolded the morning after Thanksgiving. A man and a woman showed up at the museum where only a security guard and students working the front desk were present, according to the curator at the time.

The woman distracted the guard with small-talk while the man went to an upstairs gallery. He cut the painting right out of the frame, police said. The edges of the canvas were still attached. The entire heist lasted 15 minutes. He left with the painting rolled up.

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There was no security camera system and no leads.

On the theft's 30th anniversary in 2015, the museum displayed the empty frame at a news conference in hopes of generating tips.

A break in the case came in August 2017 when David Van Auker, his partner Buck Burns and their friend, Rick Johnson, bought the painting along with other items at an estate sale in Cliff, New Mexico. The trio own Manzanita Ridge, a furniture and antique store 40 miles (64 kilometers) away in Silver City. When they brought it back to the store, three different customers remarked how it looked like a real de Kooning.

His interest piqued, Van Auker did a Google search. That led him to a 2015 article about the theft. They immediately attempted to contact Miller, University of Arizona and even the FBI, he said. But nobody got back to them right away.

Van Auker became terrified about safeguarding what could be the actual painting reportedly worth \$100 million.

"I sat up all night with three guns and the painting behind a sofa," he recalled. "I thought somebody would end up coming and killing us for this painting."

He even left a voicemail for Miller making it clear that he was not interested in any reward or taking advantage of the situation. Miller found the voicemail endearing and wants to include it in the exhibition.

"My favorite part was he says something along the lines of 'Put this on record. I want you to have the painting back. If it's yours, the university's — just come and get the painting,'" she said, chuckling.

Miller and a conservator with the university made the the three-hour drive from Tucson to Silver City the next day. They found there were enough indications to take the painting back for further verification. A conservator deemed it a real de Kooning.

Its return triggered an FBI probe. But the case is now considered closed "following a thorough investigation," Brooke Brennan, a spokeswoman for the FBI Phoenix office, said.

The estate the painting came from belonged to Jerry and Rita Alter. The art work had been hanging behind a bedroom door. Relatives also discovered a photo that showed the couple had been in Tucson on Thanksgiving Day in 1985. Jerry Alter died in 2012 and his wife in 2017. Authorities never publicly called them suspects.

Miller earlier this year met with the couple's nephew. When the story first came out, he didn't believe they could have committed such a crime.

"Now that the shock has worn down for him, he now can see that they could have been the ones who stole the painting," Miller said.

Van Auker sometimes imagines if the painting had fallen into different hands in New Mexico. The thrill of playing a role in its return never fades.

He definitely wouldn't trade the experiences of the last five years for any money. His store's business has doubled or tripled at times because people were touched by their actions. He, Burns and Johnson have been hailed as heroes at events in Tucson and the Getty Museum. They've stayed friends with Miller and the rest of the museum staff, even hosting them at their guest house back in Silver City.

Not a surprise considering what Van Auker said to Miller when she left with the painting back in 2017.

"I said to Olivia 'we're bound for life now.' She turned to me and said 'Yup I know that.'"

Packers proving they can win by relying on their defense

By STEVE MEGARGEE AP Sports Writer

GREEN BAY, Wis. (AP) — The Green Bay Packers' defense is meeting offseason expectations and giving this storied franchise a new look.

A team that has relied on Hall of Fame-caliber quarterback production for the past three decades is winning primarily because of the defense.

The Packers are scoring just 16 points per game thus far as reigning MVP quarterback Aaron Rodgers adapts to a receiving group missing two-time All-Pro Davante Adams, now with the Las Vegas Raiders.

It hasn't mattered because Green Bay's defense has been so good.

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"We already knew in the beginning of the year we were going to have to win games different ways," defensive tackle Kenny Clark said.

"We understand that. We understand the talent we have on defense. Our mindset as a defense is being the best group out there each and every game. Whatever it takes to help us win the game, that's what we've got to do."

That's pretty much what they've done after a bumpy start.

Green Bay (2-1) allowed 17 points in the first half of a 23-7 season-opening loss at Minnesota but has given up a total of 28 points in the 10 quarters since. The Packers rank sixth in scoring defense (15.0) and sixth in total defense (302.7).

They're allowing opponents to convert just 22.6% of their third down opportunities, the best such rate for any defense in the league.

The Packers are encouraged by those early results, but realize they have plenty of work ahead.

"It's only been three games," safety Adrian Amos said. "I take everything in the first three weeks with a grain of salt. We're on to next week."

That means preparing for the New England Patriots (1-2) and their uncertain quarterback situation.

Mac Jones injured his left leg in the Patriots' 37-26 loss to the Baltimore Ravens, meaning the Packers don't know whether they'll be facing him or backup Brian Hoyer.

Green Bay has its own injury issues in the secondary after star cornerback Jaire Alexander missed most of a 14-12 victory at Tampa Bay with a groin issue. Alexander was a limited practice participant Wednesday.

But the fact the Packers limited a Tom Brady-led offense to a dozen points without having their best cornerback shows what this defense is capable of accomplishing.

"Everybody is a starter in this defense," cornerback Rasul Douglas said. "Like literally, you can go to every guy, he's a starter. That's what we know. We all have one standard. It doesn't matter who's out there in the game."

The Packers spoke openly in the offseason about their high expectations for a defense that tied for 13th in points allowed per game (21.8) and ranked ninth in yards allowed per game (328.2) last season.

Sure enough, a team generally known for its big names on offense is featuring plenty of star power on the other side of the ball.

Rashan Gary is the first Packer since Cullen Jenkins in 2010 to have at least one sack in each of the first three games of a season.

Clark, a two-time Pro Bowl selection, had two sacks at Tampa Bay. De'Vondre Campbell, an All-Pro linebacker last season, had 14 tackles and got his hand on Brady's pass to foil a potential tying 2-point conversion attempt with 14 seconds left in that game.

Yet the Packers still believe they have plenty of room for improvement.

"We saw it on tape today," Douglas said. "We watched the tape of them. It's like, 'Man, we could've done this. Dang, we could've done that.' We could've made that play."

Green Bay's offense figures to improve over the course of the season as the Packers' rookie receivers mature and tackles David Bakhtiari and Elgton Jenkins return from torn anterior cruciate ligaments.

Until then, the defense will continue to pick up the slack as the Packers chase a fourth straight NFC North title.

"I don't think we've really put a cap to what our defense can do," Amos said. "We've just got to build it week by week."

NOTES: The Packers signed CB Corey Ballentine to the practice squad. ... Jenkins and OT Caleb Jones (illness) didn't practice Wednesday. ... Bakhtiari, RB A.J. Dillon (knee), LB Jonathan Garvin (hip), WR Allen Lazard (ankle), TE Marcedes Lewis (groin) and WR Christian Watson (hamstring) practiced on a limited basis.

Rohingya seek reparations from Facebook for role in massacre

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

With roosters crowing in the background as he speaks from the crowded refugee camp in Bangladesh

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that's been his home since 2017, Maung Sawyeddollah, 21, describes what happened when violent hate speech and disinformation targeting the Rohingya minority in Myanmar began to spread on Facebook.

"We were good with most of the people there. But some very narrow minded and very nationalist types escalated hate against Rohingya on Facebook," he said. "And the people who were good, in close communication with Rohingya. changed their mind against Rohingya and it turned to hate."

For years, Facebook, now called Meta Platforms Inc., pushed the narrative that it was a neutral platform in Myanmar that was misused by malicious people, and that despite its efforts to remove violent and hateful material, it unfortunately fell short. That narrative echoes its response to the role it has played in other conflicts around the world, whether the 2020 election in the U.S. or hate speech in India.

But a new and comprehensive report by Amnesty International states that Facebook's preferred narrative is false. The platform, Amnesty says, wasn't merely a passive site with insufficient content moderation. Instead, Meta's algorithms "proactively amplified and promoted content" on Facebook, which incited violent hatred against the Rohingya beginning as early as 2012.

Despite years of warnings, Amnesty found, the company not only failed to remove violent hate speech and disinformation against the Rohingya, it actively spread and amplified it until it culminated in the 2017 massacre. The timing coincided with the rising popularity of Facebook in Myanmar, where for many people it served as their only connection to the online world. That effectively made Facebook the internet for a vast number of Myanmar's population.

More than 700,000 Rohingya fled into neighboring Bangladesh that year. Myanmar security forces were accused of mass rapes, killings and torching thousands of homes owned by Rohingya.

"Meta — through its dangerous algorithms and its relentless pursuit of profit — substantially contributed to the serious human rights violations perpetrated against the Rohingya," the report says.

A spokesperson for Meta declined to answer questions about the Amnesty report. In a statement, the company said it "stands in solidarity with the international community and supports efforts to hold the Tatmadaw accountable for its crimes against the Rohingya people."

"Our safety and integrity work in Myanmar remains guided by feedback from local civil society organizations and international institutions, including the U.N. Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar; the Human Rights Impact Assessment we commissioned in 2018; as well as our ongoing human rights risk management," Rafael Frankel, director of public policy for emerging markets, Meta Asia-Pacific, said in a statement.

Like Sawyeddollah, who is quoted in the Amnesty report and spoke with the AP on Tuesday, most of the people who fled Myanmar — about 80% of the Rohingya living in Myanmar's western state of Rakhine at the time — are still staying in refugee camps. And they are asking Meta to pay reparations for its role in the violent repression of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, which the U.S. declared a genocide earlier this year.

Amnesty's report, out Wednesday, is based on interviews with Rohingya refugees, former Meta staff, academics, activists and others. It also relied on documents disclosed to Congress last year by whistleblower Frances Haugen, a former Facebook data scientist. It notes that digital rights activists say Meta has improved its civil society engagement and some aspects of its content moderation practices in Myanmar in recent years. In January 2021, after a violent coup overthrew the government, it banned the country's military from its platform.

But critics, including some of Facebook's own employees, have long maintained such an approach will never truly work. It means Meta is playing whack-a-mole trying to remove harmful material while its algorithms designed to push "engaging" content that's more likely to get people riled up essentially work against it.

"These algorithms are really dangerous to our human rights. And what happened to the Rohingya and Facebook's role in that specific conflict risks happening again, in many different contexts across the world," said Pat de Brún, researcher and adviser on artificial intelligence and human rights at Amnesty.

"The company has shown itself completely unwilling or incapable of resolving the root causes of its human rights impact."

After the U.N.'s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar highlighted the "significant"

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role Facebook played in the atrocities perpetrated against the Rohingya, Meta admitted in 2018 that “we weren’t doing enough to help prevent our platform from being used to foment division and incite offline violence.”

In the following years, the company “touted certain improvements in its community engagement and content moderation practices in Myanmar,” Amnesty said, adding that its report “finds that these measures have proven wholly inadequate.”

In 2020, for instance, three years after the violence in Myanmar killed thousands of Rohingya Muslims and displaced 700,000 more, Facebook investigated how a video by a leading anti-Rohingya hate figure, U Wirathu, was circulating on its site.

The probe revealed that over 70% of the video’s views came from “chaining” — that is, it was suggested to people who played a different video, showing what’s “up next.” Facebook users were not seeking out or searching for the video, but had it fed to them by the platform’s algorithms.

Wirathu had been banned from Facebook since 2018.

“Even a well-resourced approach to content moderation, in isolation, would likely not have sufficed to prevent and mitigate these algorithmic harms. This is because content moderation fails to address the root cause of Meta’s algorithmic amplification of harmful content,” Amnesty’s report says.

The Rohingya refugees are seeking unspecified reparations from the Menlo Park, California-based social media giant for its role in perpetuating genocide. Meta, which is the subject of twin lawsuits in the U.S. and the U.K. seeking \$150 billion for Rohingya refugees, has so far refused.

“We believe that the genocide against Rohingya was possible only because of Facebook,” Sawyeddollah said. “They communicated with each other to spread hate, they organized campaigns through Facebook. But Facebook was silent.”

Review: ‘Smile’ turns twisted grin into bland horror flick

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

I have mostly frowny faces for “Smile,” a bluntly unsettling and blandly grim new horror flick that wrings as much mileage as it can out of a twisted grin.

Parker Finn’s directorial debut, which opens in theaters Friday, adapts his own 11-minute short into a jump scare-rich thriller about a hospital emergency ward therapist, Dr. Rose Cutter (Sosie Bacon), whose visit with a newly admitted patient rapidly turns gruesome. The young woman (Caitlin Stasey), beside herself with fear, suddenly flashes an ear-to-ear smile before slicing an ear-to-ear cut across her neck.

Rose at first brushes off the disturbing encounter. It’s clear that, despite her profession, this has been her way of dealing with trauma since she witnessed the overdose death of her mother as a child. Soon, Rose is seeing that creepy smile on other faces. Increasingly unhinged and paranoid, she believes she’s been cursed by an evil presence that, she comes to believe, is passed from person to person the way the unseen demon of “It Follows” was transferred through sex.

The devilish grin is both the movie’s poster-ready image and an impossible-to-miss metaphor for putting a bright face on unexamined pain. Somewhere, you might imagine, the Joker is tapping his foot, miffed.

“Smile,” of course, isn’t the first film to think trouble can lurk behind a smile. That’s just one of many derivative elements to “Smile,” a horror movie that makes a few feeble gestures at sliding toward the so-called elevated variety of horror (like a couple upside-down shots that recall the vastly superior “Midsommar”). But there’s nothing in the film’s limp cinematography or flat atmospherics that suggest anything but cheap thrills.

Trauma, of course, has become a favorite subject of Hollywood’s in recent years. “Smile” is far from the first to trade on trauma as a plot device but it may do so more than any other film I can remember.

There are moments here and there that suggest “Smile” might actually invest in its protagonist’s grief. Bacon, daughter of Kevin Bacon and Kyra Sedgwick, is impressively committed to the part, and her spiraling fear at both the malignant force haunting her and her own tenuous grip on reality is easily the best thing in “Smile.” (OK, the best thing is the terrific character Rob Morgan, but his appearance is extremely

brief.) But at every turn, "Smile" detours instead to some horror cliché, eventually leading all the way to a monster in a remote cabin.

I know. It should surprise no one that a movie marketed with creepy smiling fans at MLB games might not actually have genuine concerns about pain and healing on its mind. But it still makes "Smile" a cynical and shallow piece of work unlikely to put a you-know-what on too many faces.

"Smile," a Paramount Pictures release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for strong violent content and grisly images, and language. Running time: 115 minutes. One and a half stars out of four.

Tiny Oregon town hosts 1st wind-solar-battery 'hybrid' plant

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A renewable energy plant in Oregon that combines solar power, wind power and massive batteries to store the energy generated there officially opened Wednesday as the first utility-scale plant of its kind in North America.

The project, which can generate enough electricity to power a small city at maximum output, addresses a key challenge facing the utility industry as the U.S. transitions away from fossil fuels and increasingly turns to solar and wind farms for power. Wind and solar are clean sources of power, but utilities have been forced to fill in gaps when the wind isn't blowing and the sun isn't shining with fossil fuels like coal or natural gas.

At the Oregon plant, massive lithium batteries store up to 120 megawatt-hours of power generated by the 300-megawatt wind farms and 50-megawatt solar farm so it can be released to the electric grid on demand. At maximum output, the facility can produce more than half of the power that was generated by Oregon's last coal plant, which was demolished earlier this month.

On-site battery storage isn't new, and interest in solar-plus-battery projects in particular has soared in the U.S. in recent years due to robust tax credits and incentives and the falling price of batteries. The Wheatridge Renewable Energy Facility in Lexington, Oregon, however, is the first in the U.S. to combine integrated wind, solar and battery storage at such a large scale in one location, giving it even more flexibility to generate continuous output without relying on fossil fuels to fill in the gaps.

The project is "getting closer and closer to having something with a very stable output profile that we traditionally think of being what's capable with a fuel-based generation power plant," said Jason Burwen, vice president of energy storage at the American Clean Power Association, an advocacy group for the clean power industry.

"If the solar is chugging along and cloud cover comes over, the battery can kick in and make sure that the output is uninterrupted. As the sun goes down and the wind comes online, the battery can make sure that that's very smooth so that it doesn't, to the grid operator, look like anything unusual."

The plant located in a remote expanse three hours east of Portland is a partnership between NextEra Energy Resources and Portland General Electric, a public utility required to reduce carbon emissions by 100% by 2040 under an Oregon climate law passed last year, one of the most ambitious in the nation.

PGE's customers are also demanding green power — nearly a quarter-million customers receive only renewable energy — and the Wheatridge project is "key to that decarbonization strategy," said Kristen Sheeran, PGE's director of sustainability strategy and resource planning.

Under the partnership, PGE owns one-third of the wind output and purchases all the facility's power for its renewable energy portfolio. NextEra, which developed the site and operates it, owns two-thirds of the wind output and all of the solar output and storage.

"The mere fact that many other customers are looking at these types of facilities gives you a hint at what we think could be possible," said David Lawlor, NextEra's director of business development for the Pacific Northwest. "Definitely customers want firmer generation, starting with the battery storage in the back."

Large-scale energy storage is critical as the U.S. shifts to more variable power sources like wind and solar, and Americans can expect to see similar projects across the country as that trend accelerates. National

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Renewable Energy Laboratory models show U.S. storage capacity may rise fivefold by 2050, yet experts say even this won't be enough to prevent extremely disruptive climate change.

Batteries aren't the only solution that the clean energy industry is trying out. Pumped storage generates power by sending huge volumes of water downhill through turbines and others are experimenting with forcing water underground and holding it there before releasing it to power turbines.

But interest in batteries for clean energy storage has grown dramatically in recent years at the same time that the cost of batteries is falling and the technology itself is improving, boosting interest in hybrid plants, experts say.

Generating capacity from hybrid plants increased 133% between 2020 and 2021 and by the end of last year, there were nearly 8,000 megawatts of wind or solar generation connected to storage, according to the U.S. Department of Energy's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, which is managed by the University of California.

The vast majority of such projects are solar power with battery storage, largely because of tax credits, but projects in the pipeline include offshore wind-plus-battery, hydroelectric-plus-battery and at least nine facilities like the one in Oregon that will combine solar, wind and storage. Projects in the pipeline between 2023 and 2025 include ones in Washington, California, Arizona, Idaho, Iowa, Illinois and Oregon, according to Berkeley Lab.

Many researchers and pilots are working on alternatives to lithium ion batteries, however, largely because their intrinsic chemistry limits them to around four hours of storage and a longer duration would be more useful.

"There is no silver bullet. There's no model or prototype that's going to meet that entire need ... but wind and solar will certainly be in the mix," said PGE's Sheeran.

"This model can become a tool for decarbonization across the West as the whole country is driving toward very ambitious climate reduction goals."

Alzheimer's drug shows promise in early results of study

By TOM MURPHY AP Health Writer

Shares of Biogen and other drugmakers researching Alzheimer's disease soared Wednesday after Japan's Eisai Co. said its potential treatment appeared to slow the fatal disease in a late-stage study.

The drugmaker said early results showed that its treatment, lecanemab, reduced patient clinical decline by 27% when compared to a placebo or fake drug after 18 months of the infused treatment.

Eisai announced results late Tuesday from a global study of nearly 1,800 people with early-stage Alzheimer's.

Patients were monitored using a scale that measures mental decline and their ability to do daily activities like getting dressed or feeding oneself.

Eisai Co. Ltd. said it would discuss full results from the research at a conference in late November. It also plans to publish findings in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

The company is already seeking an accelerated approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and the agency is expected to decide by early next year. Eisai and Biogen will co-promote the drug.

Researchers typically urge caution in evaluating a study until the full results are released. But the initial findings appear to be "quite robust" and will likely support regulatory approval, Mizuho Securities analyst Graig Suvannavejh said in a research note.

A statement from the Alzheimer's Association called the findings the most encouraging to date for potential treatments of the underlying disease causes.

Some 6 million people in the U.S. and many more worldwide have Alzheimer's, which gradually attacks areas of the brain needed for memory, reasoning, communication and basic daily tasks.

Alzheimer's has no known cure. Long-standing treatments on the market just manage symptoms, and researchers don't fully understand what causes the disease.

Last year, Biogen's Aduhelm became the first new Alzheimer's drug introduced in nearly two decades.

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But it has largely flopped after debuting with a price tag of \$56,000 annually, which Biogen later slashed.

Doctors have been hesitant to prescribe it, given weak evidence that the drug slows the progression of Alzheimer's. Insurers have blocked or restricted coverage due to concerns over the drug's high price tag and uncertain benefit.

Earlier this year, the federal Medicare program imposed strict limits on who can get the drug, wiping out most of its potential U.S. market. Biogen announced afterward that it would stop most of its spending on the treatment.

Like Aduhelm, lecanemab, which Eisai developed, aims to clear a protein called beta-amyloid from the brain.

The protein forms a plaque that researchers believe is a contributor to Alzheimer's. They also point to other potential factors like family history and chronic conditions such as diabetes.

Eisai executives say lecanemab focuses more on floating clumps of the protein before it forms the plaque, which is what Aduhelm targets.

Eli Lilly and Co. also is developing a potential treatment, donanemab, that targets the protein.

Shares of Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Biogen Inc. jumped 40% to close Wednesday at \$276.61. The stock had largely tumbled since Aduhelm's debut last year.

Shares of Indianapolis-based Eli Lilly and Co. rose 7.5%.

Record methane leak flows from damaged Baltic Sea pipelines

By JAN M. OLSEN and PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Methane leaking from the damaged Nord Stream pipelines is likely to be the biggest burst of the potent greenhouse gas on record, by far.

The Nord Stream pipeline leaks that were pumping huge volumes of methane into the Baltic Sea and atmosphere could discharge as much as five times as much of the potent greenhouse gas as was released by the Aliso Canyon disaster, the largest known terrestrial release of methane in U.S. history. It is also the equivalent of one third of Denmark's total annual greenhouse gas emissions, a Danish official warned Wednesday.

"Whoever ordered this should be prosecuted for war crimes and go to jail," said Rob Jackson, a Stanford University climate scientist. Two scientists looked at the official worst case scenario estimates provided by the Danish government — 778 million cubic meters of gas — for The Associated Press. Jackson and David Hastings, a retired chemical oceanographer in Gainesville, Florida each calculated that would be an equivalent of roughly half a million metric tons of methane. The Aliso Canyon disaster released 90-100,000 metric tons.

Andrew Baxter, a chemical engineer who formerly worked in the offshore oil and gas industry, and is now at the environmental group EDF thought the Danish estimate was likely too high. He had a more conservative estimate. But it was still more than double the Aliso Canyon disaster.

"That's one thing that is consistent with these estimates," he said, "It's catastrophic for the climate."

Kristoffer Böttzauw, head of the Danish Energy Agency, said emissions from the three leaks on the underwater Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines correspond to approximately 32% of annual Danish carbon dioxide emissions. Danish emissions in 2020 were approximately 45 million tonnes of CO2.

Sabotage was suspected to have caused the leaks, and seismologists said Tuesday that explosions rattled the Baltic Sea before they were discovered. Some European officials and energy experts have said Russia is likely to blame since it directly benefits from higher energy prices and economic anxiety across Europe. But others cautioned against pointing fingers until investigators are able to determine what happened.

Methane seen bubbling at the ocean surface was an indication of "a strong upward flow," according to Paul Balcombe, a member of the engineering faculty at the department of chemical engineering at Imperial College London.

The loss of pressure in the pipe likely meant a large amount of gas was already lost, he said. The impacts of the gas leak are still coming into focus, Balcombe said, but are likely to be significant.

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"It would have a very large environmental and climate impact indeed, even if it released a fraction of this," he said.

Methane is a major contributor to climate change, responsible for a significant share of the climate disruption people are already experiencing. That is because it is 82.5 times more potent than carbon dioxide at absorbing the sun's heat and warming the Earth.

Böttzauw, told a press conference that the agency expects the gas to be out of the pipes, that run from Russia to Germany, by Sunday.

"We believe that half the gas is out by now of one of the two pipes," Böttzauw said. "We are talking about a huge spill of several million cubic meters of gas."

The Danish agency statement added that its calculation was based on information from operators Nord Stream AG and Nord Stream 2 AG about the content of natural gas in the three pipelines that are leaking.

The incidents come as the EU struggles to keep a lid on soaring gas and electricity prices.

"As long as there is gas, it dangerous to be there," Böttzauw said, declining to say when experts would be able to go down and see the pipes, which he said was made of 12-centimeter (5-inch) thick steel coated with concrete. They lie on the seabed between 70 and 90 meters (230 feet and 295 feet) deep.

The leaks all were in international waters. Two were within the Danish exclusive economic zone while the third is in the Swedish equivalent.

Jurors must decide how much Newtown families suffering worth

By DAVE COLLINS and PAT EATON-ROBB Associated Press

WATERBURY, Conn. (AP) — After watching days of testimony that included the parents of slain children breaking down on the witness stand, a Connecticut jury soon will have the difficult task of coming up with a dollar amount that conspiracy theorist Alex Jones should pay for promoting the idea that the Sandy Hook school shooting was a hoax.

A judge last year found Jones and his company, Free Speech Systems, liable by default for defaming and inflicting emotional distress on the plaintiffs — eight families who lost loved ones in the 2012 massacre and an FBI agent who was among the first responders. The jury of three men and three women is now charged with determining damages.

One by one, family members have taken the stand to talk about the horrors of losing a loved one, and how that has been compounded by a decade of harassment, fear and pain inflicted by those who believed the lie that the shooting never happened.

In often emotional testimony, they have detailed death and rape threats, mail from conspiracy theorists that included photos of dead children and in-person confrontations with people telling them their children or wives or mothers never existed.

At one point, a juror broke into tears and was comforted by another member of the panel.

Robbie Parker, who gave a live statement to the media about his daughter Emilie the day after she was murdered, took the stand Wednesday, following testimony from his wife Alissa. Robbie Parker had been captured on camera cracking a nervous smile as he approached the microphone the day after the shooting, after his father made a little joke of encouragement, referring to him by the name of the school mascot he once portrayed. It was a moment Jones pounced on to publicly call him a "crisis actor" on his Infowars show.

Parker said soon after that, he began getting hateful comments on social media.

"What was just this littering of comments, by Tuesday (four days after the shooting) became just a burning trash pile," he said.

Alissa Parker cried while describing the abuse they faced in the days after the shooting because of Jones' comments. She said they decided to have a closed casket funeral out of fear that someone would take a photo of their daughter's body and use it to further the conspiracy theories.

"Just the things they were saying about my sweet daughter," she said through tears. "Things like, 'Watch your back, we're watching you and we're coming after you and your daughter.' Just horrible things. They

called Emilie a whore, just the most horrific things you could ever imagine.”

How jurors arrive at a dollar figure is cloaked in secrecy. Although given some basic instructions, there are no specific ones from the judge on how exactly to arrive at dollar figures.

Jurors, however, have been shown evidence and heard testimony on the millions of dollars Jones and his company have made over the years.

Jones’ lawyer, Norman Pattis, is trying to limit any damages the jury awards. In cross examining witnesses, he has tried to show that Jones wasn’t directly linked to many instances of harassment and threats, and he has accused the victims’ relatives of exaggerating the harm the lies caused them.

Last week, Jones got into a heated exchange with plaintiffs’ attorney Christopher Mattei, accusing the lawyer of “ambulance chasing” and saying he was done apologizing for claiming the shooting was staged. In recent years, Jones has acknowledged the massacre happened, but says the families of victims are being used to push a gun-control and anti-free speech agenda.

Outside the courthouse and on his Infowars show, Jones has referred to the proceedings as a “show trial” and a “kangaroo court” and called Judge Barbara Bellis a tyrant, posting an image of her with lasers shooting from her eyes.

Jones is expected to retake the stand next week. Closing arguments and jury deliberations are expected to follow soon afterward.

In a similar trial last month in Austin, Texas, home to Jones and Infowars, a jury ordered Jones to pay nearly \$50 million in damages to the parents of one of the children killed in the shooting, because of the hoax lies. A third such trial in Texas involving two other parents is expected to begin near the end of the year.

Guilty plea in hit-run death of ‘Gone Girl’ actor Lisa Banes

NEW YORK (AP) — The man charged with fatally striking “Gone Girl” actor Lisa Banes with an electric scooter last year pleaded guilty to manslaughter Wednesday and is expected to be sentenced to one to three years in prison.

Brian Boyd, 27, will be sentenced Nov. 30 in the death of Banes, who was hit by the scooter Boyd was operating as she crossed a New York City street in June 2021.

Banes was hospitalized and died on July 14, 2021, at age 65. She had appeared in movies including “Gone Girl” in 2014 and “Cocktail” in 1988 and on TV shows including “Nashville,” “Madam Secretary,” “Masters of Sex” and “NCIS.”

Boyd, who fled after crashing into Banes, was arrested weeks later. He pleaded guilty Wednesday to second-degree manslaughter and leaving the scene of an incident without reporting,

The sentence promised to Boyd was less than the three to nine years that prosecutors from the Manhattan district attorney’s office had sought.

“Brian Boyd drove recklessly with no regard for pedestrians, fatally striking a beloved actress and New Yorker before speeding off to avoid accountability,” Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said in a statement. “Lisa Banes will be remembered for her contributions to the rich fabric of New York City through her roles on screen and on Broadway. I offer her friends, family, and the many who loved her during her decades-long career my deepest condolences.”

Boyd’s attorney said she had no comment.

Vaccine appears to protect against monkeypox, CDC says

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — At-risk people who received a single dose of the monkeypox vaccine in U.S. efforts against the virus appeared to be significantly less likely to get sick, public health officials announced Wednesday, even as they urged a second dose for full protection.

It was the first look public health officials have offered into how the Jynneos vaccine is affecting monkeypox, a virus that is primarily spread among men who have sex with infected men.

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"These new data provide us with a level of cautious optimism that the vaccine is working as intended," Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Wednesday.

Roughly 800,000 first and second doses of the vaccine have been administered across the country to people who are considered high risk for becoming infected with the virus, White House National Monkeypox Response Coordinator Bob Fenton said.

There is no scientifically conclusive data available to prove effectiveness of the Jynneos vaccine against monkeypox.

But the CDC's new real-world figures show that unvaccinated men, between the ages 18 and 49 who were considered eligible for the vaccine, were 14 times as likely to become infected with monkeypox as those who had one dose at least two weeks earlier. The data came from 32 states for cases between July 31 through Sept. 3.

Still, Walensky said, lab studies show the highest level of immunity from the virus is reached after people get a second dose of the vaccine, calling it "really important."

The U.S. leads the world in monkeypox cases. So far more than 25,000 infections of the virus, which can cause rash, fever, body aches and chills, have been reported.

The country suffered from early problems in its response, with U.S. officials struggling to distribute the vaccine after the first case was detected in May. As some cities and counties tried to stretch the limited supply this summer they stopped offering the recommended second dose of the shot.

Now, public health officials are trying to catch up, reminding people to get their second dose. About 150,000 second doses had been administered as of Sept. 17, according to CDC.

"We're really asking providers to do outreach to get people their second doses," Walensky said.

Public health officials also announced changes Wednesday to who is eligible for the vaccine and how they can get it.

The new CDC guidance is intended to reach more people who might be at risk for monkeypox exposure. The guidance makes gay, bisexual men and transgender people who have had more than one sexual partner in the past six months eligible for the vaccine. It also allows the vaccine to be administered on the shoulder or upper back so marks from the shot can be covered with clothing.

The number of new monkeypox cases has declined in recent weeks, but there are signs of worsening racial disparities, with Black people making up roughly 47 percent of new cases reported the week of Sept. 11.

Cuba begins to turn on lights after Ian blacks out island

BY ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Cuban officials said they had begun to restore some power Wednesday after Hurricane Ian knocked out electricity to the entire island while devastating some of the country's most important tobacco farms when it hit the island's western tip as a major storm.

At least two people were reported killed.

The Energy and Mines Ministry announced it had restored energy to three regions by activating two large power plants in Felton and Nuevitas and was working to get others back on line.

Lights started to flicker on in the capital, Havana, but much of the city and other parts of western Cuba remained without power on Wednesday in the wake of the major hurricane, which had advanced northward to Florida. It was the first time in memory — perhaps ever — that the whole island had lost power.

"A blackout this big has never occurred in my lifetime," said Yamila Morena, a 51-year-old homemaker who lives with her son in central Havana. "We can't sleep at all without a fan, without air entering."

On Tuesday, Ian hit a Cuba that has been struggling with an economic crisis and has faced frequent power outages in recent months. It made landfall as a Category 3 storm on the island's western end, devastating Pinar del Río province, where much of the tobacco used for Cuba's iconic cigars is grown.

Tens of thousands of people were evacuated and others fled the area ahead of the arrival of Ian, which caused flooding, damaged houses and toppled trees. State media reported two deaths in the province: a woman killed by a falling wall and another by a collapsed roof.

Ian's winds damaged one of Cuba's most prestigious tobacco farms, Finca Robaina, where photos on

social media showed wood-and-thatch roofs smashed to the ground, greenhouses in rubble and wagons overturned.

"Although the first impact is very painful, there's nothing to do but overcome the adversity," said President Miguel Díaz-Canel.

The U.S. National Hurricane Center said Cuba suffered "significant wind and storm surge impacts" when the hurricane struck with top sustained winds of 125 mph (205 kph).

Ian was even stronger Wednesday when it made landfall on the Florida coast.

In Cuba, local government station TelePinar reported heavy damage at the main hospital in Pinar del Rio city, tweeting photos of collapsed ceilings and downed trees. No deaths were reported.

Videos on social media showed downed power lines and cut off roads in the provinces of Pinar del Rio, Artemisa and Mayabeque. A hospital in Pinar del Río was damaged.

"The town is flooded," said farmer Andy Muñoz, 37, who lives in Playa Cajío in Artemisa.

He said many people lost their belongings due to the storm surge.

"I spent the hurricane at home with my husband and the dog. The masonry and zinc roof of the house had just been installed. But the storm tore it down," said Mercedes Valdés, who lives along the highway connecting Pinar del Río to San Juan y Martínez. "We couldn't rescue our things ... we just ran out."

Records contradict Majewski's account of military punishment

By BRIAN SLODYSKO and JAMES LAPORTA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican J.R. Majewski has centered his campaign for a competitive Ohio congressional seat around his biography as an Air Force veteran. But one of the big questions that has surfaced is why Majewski was told he could not reenlist in the Air Force after his initial four years were up.

Majewski's campaign said last week that he was punished and demoted after getting in a "brawl" in an Air Force dormitory in 2001. Military records obtained since then by The Associated Press, however, offer a different account of the circumstances, which military legal experts say would have played a significant role in the decision to bar him from reenlisting. They indicate Majewski's punishment and demotion were the result of him being stopped for driving drunk on a U.S. air base in Japan in September 2001.

The documents, which were provided to the AP and independently authenticated, present yet another instance where the recorded history of Majewski's service diverges from what he has told voters as he campaigns while using his veteran status as a leading credential.

In a statement, Majewski acknowledged that he was punished for drunken driving, though he didn't address why his campaign previously said his demotion was the result of a fight.

"This mistake is now more than 20 years old. I'm sure we've all done something as young adults that we look back on and wonder 'what was I thinking?' and I'm sure our parents and grandparents share these sentiments," Majewski said.

Since starting his campaign to unseat longtime Democratic Rep. Marcy Kaptur, Majewski has repeatedly said he was a combat veteran who served a tour of duty under "tough" circumstances in Afghanistan. By his own account, he once went more than 40 days in the country without a shower due to a lack of running water.

His story came under intense scrutiny last week when the AP, citing military documents obtained through public records requests, reported that he did not deploy to Afghanistan as he claimed, but instead spent six months based in Qatar, a longtime U.S. ally, where he helped load and unload aircraft.

The latest revelation that Majewski was demoted for drunken driving adds another wrinkle. Last week, the AP asked Majewski's campaign why his military service records showed that he was not allowed to reenlist in the Air Force and left the service after four years at a rank that was one notch above where he started.

At the time, his campaign said in an email that Majewski was "in a fight in the dormitory with another servicemember" which "knocked his rank down." His campaign added that he later gained some of that rank back.

The personnel records obtained by the AP make no mention of a fight. Instead, they state that Majewski

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was demoted for drunken driving at Kadena Air Base in Japan on Sept. 8, 2001. And rather than gain his rank back — as Majewski's campaign said — the records indicated he continued to hold the rank of E-2, one notch above entry level, that he was demoted to for the rest of his active duty.

"When you decided to get behind the wheel of a vehicle after indulging in intoxicating liquor you brought discredit upon yourself, 733rd Air Mobility Squadron, and the Air Force," the disciplinary records state, referring to the unit Majewski was assigned to at the time. "Further misconduct by you of any type will not be tolerated."

The three-page document details Majewski's punishment, which included a reprimand and 30 days of extra duty in addition to the demotion. It bears Majewski's signature and shows he consulted a lawyer and waived his right to a court-martial. He also waived his right to appeal the punishment and requested that the document not become public, the records show.

The AP was not able to obtain a "written presentation" from Majewski, which was referred to in the disciplinary paperwork. The campaign did not respond to a request from the AP to provide the document.

Eric Mayer, a former West Point graduate and Army infantry officer later turned military lawyer, reviewed Majewski's documents at AP's request. He said that "the overall nature and quality of (Majewski's) military service can be severely questioned simply by virtue of the fact that he got out as a E-2 after four years."

"Basically, his commanding officer told him as long as he behaves himself for the next six months, he won't demote him down all the way to airman basic," Mayer said, referring to the entry-level rank Majewski could have held if he got into more trouble. Mayer also noted that Majewski was given additional duties in his punishment that generally involve "area beautification" and janitorial services.

In some cases, a DUI can be a career-ending violation in the military. But three days after Majewski was pulled over, the U.S. was suddenly at war following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Within months, Majewski was reassigned and deployed to Qatar, which served as the staging ground for operations in Afghanistan, records show.

Military records show Majewski's only deployment was to Qatar. Last Friday, during a defiant news conference, he insisted that he did indeed serve in Afghanistan, though he declined to offer specifics because he said the details were "classified."

But there is a difference between deploying to a country and touching down there. Majewski previously said he was a "combat veteran" who deployed to Afghanistan, a term that conveys he received orders assigning him to a specific base in the country.

Majewski previously said he could not discuss flights he says he took to Afghanistan because they were "classified."

In his statement Wednesday, he said he was aboard "outbound transport flights to forward bases and combat zones throughout the Middle East, including Afghanistan" though he acknowledged that he was stationed in Qatar.

He also described his experience joining the Air Force at the age 20 as fulfilling, yet challenging.

"Like any young serviceman away from family in a foreign land and with an assignment schedule in continual motion, it came with periods of difficulty and personal challenges," Majewski said. "I lost my grandmother, who I loved very deeply, and it was tough work. I am proud of my service and the experiences that made me who I am today, but I have never once claimed to have undergone a 'tough combat tour' in Afghanistan or suggested that I was engaged in active firefights."

Majewski's campaign has previously promoted him as a "combat veteran." During an August 2021 interview on the One American Podcast, Majewski said that he had a "tough time in life" while serving a tour of duty in Afghanistan. He echoed that claim in other interviews unearthed by the liberal group Media Matters.

Majewski's claim that he couldn't discuss his forays to Afghanistan because the details were "classified" was a red flag to those who investigate cases of "stolen valor."

"The No. 1 trope that comes out of people when they are either fabricating a military record or, in this case, embellishing a record is they fall back to, 'It's classified,'" said Ed Caffrey, a former Air Force master sergeant who now investigates "stolen valor" cases and teaches journalism at Eastern New Mexico Uni-

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versity. He added: "There's no junior enlisted air transportation specialist who was doing something so secret that 20 years later it still needs to be classified."

Majewski's campaign declined a request to put the AP in touch with those he served with who could vouch that he went to Afghanistan. But he has posted several pages of records to social media that he said back up his claims. Military experts consulted by the AP say the records prove no such thing.

"The AP stated that I had only been deployed to Qatar. My records show my deployment location as classified. In addition, they forgot my deployment to Camp Hialeah in Korea (which is now closed)," Majewski said in one tweet, which contained two separate documents.

One of the documents included in the tweet was a "temporary duty assignment" in early 2001 to South Korea, which are not orders to deploy as Majewski claimed. Key details including the purpose of the trip and its duration were also blurred out in the photo Majewski posted. Additionally, the document's inclusion of the phrases "top secret" and "secret" were references to the security clearances held by Majewski and the noncommissioned officer he traveled with, Air Force experts say. That officer, whose name is redacted, had a "top secret" clearance; Majewski had a "secret" clearance. Members of the military typically need security clearances to do their jobs.

The other document included in the tweet, which does not show a date, indicated Majewski had been medically cleared to go on a different temporary assignment to a "classified" location.

Experts say such forms often list a service member's destination as classified as a matter of routine. "The reason that it says 'classified' is not because he's going to some top secret black ops location," Caffrey said. "It says classified because that's a non-secured form. He's taking that form around with him to different places on base where people who put eyes on it may not have security clearances to see what he's doing."

"It's (operations security). They don't want everyone and their brother to know where he's going. That's not something you want out in the general public," Caffrey added.

Even as scrutiny of Majewski intensifies, he has given no indication that he intends to drop out of the race and has continued to campaign.

"I have nothing to hide," Majewski said at the end of a brief news conference Friday.

Russia poised to annex occupied Ukraine after sham vote

By JON GAMBRELL and ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia positioned itself Wednesday to formally annex parts of Ukraine where occupied areas held a Kremlin-orchestrated "referendum" on living under Moscow's rule that the Ukrainian government and the West denounced as illegal and rigged.

Armed troops had gone door-to-door with election officials to collect ballots in five days of voting. The suspiciously high margins in favor were characterized as a land grab by an increasingly cornered Russian leadership after embarrassing military losses in Ukraine.

Moscow-installed administrations in the four regions of southern and eastern Ukraine claimed Tuesday night that 93% of the ballots cast in the Zaporizhzhia region supported annexation, as did 87% in the Kherson region, 98% in the Luhansk region and 99% in Donetsk.

Pro-Russia officials in the four regions said they would ask Russian President Vladimir Putin to incorporate their provinces into Russia on the basis of announced vote results. Separatist leaders Leonid Pasechnik in Luhansk and Denis Pushilin in Donetsk said they were leaving for Moscow to settle the annexation formalities.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry called the balloting "a propaganda show" and "null and worthless."

"Forcing people in these territories to fill out some papers at the barrel of a gun is yet another Russian crime in the course of its aggression against Ukraine," it said.

Western countries also dismissed the balloting as an attempt by Moscow to legitimize its invasion of Ukraine launched on Feb. 24.

"Regardless of Russia's claims, this remains Ukrainian territory and Ukraine has every right to continue

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to fight for their full sovereignty," said White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre.

"In response, we will work with our allies and partners to impose additional economic costs" on Russia and supporters of any annexation, she said.

Separately, the U.S. announced an additional \$1.1 billion in aid to Kyiv, with funding for about 18 more advanced rocket systems and other weapons to counter drones that Russia has been using against Ukrainian troops. The latest package brings the total of U.S. aid to Ukraine to nearly \$17 billion since the Biden administration took office.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen urged the EU's 27 member countries to agree on a new package of sanctions on Russia because of the proposed annexations.

The Kremlin remained unmoved amid the hail of criticism. Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that at the very least, Russia intended to drive Ukrainian forces out of the Donetsk region, where Moscow's troops and separatist forces currently control about 60% of the territory.

In an interview with The Associated Press, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine was determined to reclaim all the territory that Russia has seized during the war. Mykhailo Podolyak said the annexation by Russia would change nothing on the battlefield.

"Our actions depend not so much on what the Russian Federation thinks or wants, but on the military capabilities that Ukraine has," he said.

State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters in Washington that the U.S. would not object to Ukraine using U.S.-supplied weapons to attack those areas if they are annexed by Russia.

"We have been clear when it comes to certain longer-range systems with our Ukrainian partners that these systems are for use on sovereign Ukrainian territory. If and when this annexation occurs as we expect it will, these areas will remain sovereign Ukrainian territory," Price said.

After a counteroffensive by Ukraine this month dealt Moscow's forces heavy battlefield setbacks, Russia said it would call up 300,000 reservists to join the fight. It also warned it could resort to nuclear weapons.

That partial mobilization is deeply unpopular in some areas, however, triggering protests, scattered violence, and Russians fleeing the country by the tens of thousands.

The mass exodus has created miles-long lines for days at some borders, and local Russian authorities on one area along the border with Georgia said they would start providing food, water, warming stations and other aid to those in line. Moscow also reportedly set up draft offices at borders to intercept some of those trying to leave.

The mobilization prompted the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to warn Americans in Russia to leave immediately because "Russia may refuse to acknowledge dual nationals' U.S. citizenship, deny their access to U.S. consular assistance, prevent their departure from Russia, and conscript dual nationals for military service."

Previous embassy security alerts issued during the war also advised Americans to leave.

Ukraine's military and Western analysts said Russia is sending troops with hardly any training to the front line. The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, cited an online video by a man who identified himself as a member of Russia's 1st Tank Regiment, visibly upset, saying he and his colleagues wouldn't receive training before shipping out to Russian-occupied parts of the Kherson region.

"Mobilized men with a day or two of training are unlikely to meaningfully reinforce Russian positions affected by Ukrainian counteroffensives in the south and east," the institute said.

Meanwhile, the EU expressed outrage over the suspected sabotage Tuesday of two underwater natural gas pipelines from Russia to Germany, and warned of retaliation for any attack on Europe's energy networks.

"All available information indicates those leaks are the result of a deliberate act," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said. Perpetrators have not been identified.

Kremlin spokesman Peskov said allegations that Russia could be behind the incidents were "predictable and stupid," saying the damage has caused Russia huge economic losses. A U.N. Security Council meeting was called for Friday at Moscow's request.

The damage makes it unlikely the pipelines will be able to supply any gas to Europe this winter, according to analysts.

On the battlefield, the U.K. Ministry of Defense said Ukraine's counteroffensive is advancing slowly, meeting a stouter Russian defense.

Local Ukrainian officials reported Russian attacks in the partially occupied Donetsk region that killed five people, and artillery strikes in the southern Ukrainian city of Nikopol. That city saw 10 high-rises and private buildings hit, as well as a school and power lines, said Valentyn Reznichenko, the head of the local military administration.

McConnell backs post-Jan. 6 revisions to elections law

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Tuesday he will "proudly support" legislation to overhaul rules for certifying presidential elections, bolstering a bipartisan effort to revise a 19th century law and avoid another Jan. 6 insurrection.

The legislation would clarify and expand parts of the 1887 Electoral Count Act, which, along with the Constitution, governs how states and Congress certify electors and declare presidential winners. The changes in the certification process are in response to unsuccessful efforts by former President Donald Trump and his allies to exploit loopholes in the law to overturn his 2020 defeat to Joe Biden, and the violent attack on the Capitol by his supporters as Congress counted the votes.

"Congress' process for counting the presidential electors' votes was written 135 years ago," McConnell said. "The chaos that came to a head on Jan. 6 of last year certainly underscored the need for an update."

McConnell made the remarks just before the Senate Rules Committee voted 14-1 to approve the bill and send it to the Senate floor, where a vote is expected after the November election. The only senator to vote against the legislation was Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, one of two senators to stand and object to Biden's certification last year.

The GOP leader's endorsement gave the legislation a major boost as the bipartisan group pushes to pass the bill before the end of the year and ahead of the next election cycle. Trump is still pushing false claims of election fraud and saying he won the election as he considers another run in 2024. McConnell's support for the law could put him even more at odds with Trump, who frequently berates the GOP leader and has encouraged Republicans to vote against it.

The House has already passed a more expansive bill overhauling the electoral rules, but it has far less Republican support. While the House bill received a handful of GOP votes, the Senate version already has the backing of at least 12 Republicans — more than enough to break a filibuster and pass the legislation in the 50-50 Senate.

As he announced his support, McConnell noted that Democrats also objected to legitimate election results the last three times that Republicans won the presidency. "The situation obviously called for careful, methodical and bipartisan work," he said, noting that the bipartisan group that negotiated the bill worked on the language for months.

McConnell called the House bill a "non-starter" in the Senate because of the bipartisan compromise on the Senate language. "We have one shot to get this right," he said.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar, the Democratic chairwoman of the Senate Rules panel, expressed a similar sentiment. The Senate legislation is the bill that "will achieve a strong bipartisan consensus," she said.

Cruz, who stood with Trump as he made false claims of fraud in 2020, called the legislation a "bad bill" and said it would make it harder for Congress to challenge fraudulent elections. He questioned why any Republican would support it.

The bill is all about "Democratic rage" at Trump, Cruz said.

Cruz was the lone dissenter. Among the Republicans who voted for the bill after McConnell's statement was Mississippi Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith — one of only eight senators to oppose Biden's certification in January 2021. Missing the committee vote was GOP Sen. Bill Hagerty of Tennessee, Trump's ambassador to Japan who was in Tokyo attending the state funeral of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Senators made minor tweaks to the legislation at Tuesday's meeting but kept the bill largely intact. The

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bill, written by Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, would make clear that the vice president only has a ceremonial role in the certification process, tighten the rules around states sending their votes to Congress and make it harder for lawmakers to object.

The changes are a direct response to Trump, who publicly pressured several states, members of Congress and then-Vice President Mike Pence to aid him as he tried to undo Biden's win. Even though Trump's effort failed, lawmakers in both parties said his attacks on the election showed the need for stronger safeguards in the law.

If it becomes law, the bill would be Congress' strongest legislative response yet to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack, in which hundreds of Trump's supporters beat police officers, broke into the Capitol and interrupted the joint session as lawmakers were counting the votes. Once the rioters were cleared, the House and Senate rejected GOP objections to the vote in two states. But more than 140 Republicans voted to sustain them.

Differences between the House and Senate bills will have to be resolved before final passage, including language around congressional objections.

While the Senate bill would require a fifth of both chambers to agree on an electoral objection to trigger a vote, the House bill would require agreement from at least a third of House members and a third of the Senate. Currently, only one member of each chamber is required for the House and Senate to vote on whether to reject a state's electors.

The House bill also lays out new grounds for objections, while the Senate does not.

EXPLAINER: How real are Putin's nuclear threats in Ukraine?

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian President Vladimir Putin warns that he won't hesitate to use nuclear weapons to ward off Ukraine's attempt to reclaim control of Moscow-occupied areas that the Kremlin is about to annex.

While the West dismisses that as a scare tactic, a top Putin lieutenant upped the ante by boldly saying the U.S. and its NATO allies wouldn't dare strike Russia, even if it used nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

A look at the nuclear threats over Ukraine:

WHAT DROVE PUTIN TO MAKE THE THREATS?

A Ukrainian counteroffensive forced Russian troops to retreat rapidly from broad swaths of the north-eastern Kharkiv region this month and handed Moscow its most humiliating defeat since the opening weeks of the war.

The Kremlin then speeded up its orchestrated "referendums" in occupied areas, asking if they want to come under Moscow's rule. The voting, denounced as illegal and rigged by Kyiv and the West even before it began, predictably gave Russia the result it wanted.

Moscow says that after incorporating the regions, it will view a Ukrainian attack on them as an act of aggression and will respond accordingly.

Putin raised the stakes further by mobilization of reservists for the war, aiming to call up at least 300,000. But the effort is proving widely unpopular, with tens of thousands fleeing Russia and fueling protests and violence that threaten to destabilize the country.

The mobilization won't provide a quick fix for the military, however. Running out of conventional options, Putin appears to be increasingly erratic and tempted to reach for nuclear weapons to avoid a defeat that could threaten his 22-year rule.

He has repeatedly talked about using them with a terrifying ease. He chillingly has said Moscow's enemies would die before even having time to repent their sins, and once acknowledged that nuclear war would be catastrophic, "but why would we need a world without Russia?"

WHAT'S IN THE NUCLEAR ARSENALS?

Since the Cold War era. Russia and the United States have maintained a nuclear parity, together accounting for about 90% of the world's nuclear arsenals.

According to data exchanged earlier this year under the New START arms reduction treaty between Moscow and Washington, Russia has 5,977 nuclear warheads for its strategic forces and the U.S. has

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5,428. Each warhead is much more powerful than the bombs dropped by the U.S. on two Japanese cities at the end of World War II, the only time atomic weapons were used.

The New START pact limits the U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals that include the nuclear-tipped land- and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear-armed bombers.

In addition, however, Moscow and Washington have large, undisclosed numbers of what are known as tactical nuclear weapons.

These are designed for battlefield use and have a lower yield, compared with the strategic warheads designed to destroy entire cities. These tactical weapons include bombs, artillery ordnance or warheads for short-range missiles and are intended to strike a crushing blow to troops on one designated section of the front line.

WHAT ABOUT USING A TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPON?

A tactical nuclear weapon strike against Ukraine would not have catastrophic consequences on the same scale as an attack with strategic warhead.

But even a low-yield nuclear weapon used on the battlefield, aside from killing troops in the immediate vicinity, would still contaminate a broad area and expose large numbers of civilians in densely-populated Ukraine and neighboring countries to radiation risks. In fact, Russia and its ally Belarus would face the highest contamination risk because of prevailing winds.

Employing even just one low-yield nuclear weapon would also have a devastating political impact, marking the first atomic attack since August 1945. That could set the stage for a rapid escalation and perhaps lead to an all-out nuclear conflict.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan responded to Putin by saying Russia would pay a high, if unspecified, price if it used nuclear weapons against Ukraine.

IS THIS JUST BRINKMANSHIP?

Putin has said his nuclear threat isn't a bluff. His top associate, Dmitry Medvedev, said Tuesday that Russia has the right to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine if Kyiv threatens Russian statehood.

Medvedev declared NATO would stand back if Moscow launched a nuclear strike on Ukraine. "American and European demagogues aren't going to die in a nuclear apocalypse, and so they will swallow the use of any weapons in the current conflict," he said.

Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, tweeted that by dangling the nuclear threat, "Putin is not bluffing, he is deterring."

"He is trying to prevent the West from providing more sophisticated weapons to Ukraine," McFaul said.

Sergei Karaganov, a Moscow political analyst who advised the Kremlin on foreign policy, said Russia "can't afford to lose in Ukraine," adding: "Our enemies should realize that they have put themselves and the entire world on hell's brink."

Karaganov hinted that Moscow could even ponder an escalatory option of striking a NATO ally.

"I'm 99% sure that if a nuclear strike is launched on one of the European countries supporting Ukraine, the U.S. won't use nuclear weapons," he said. "It would take a madman in the White House to respond to a limited use of nuclear weapons by Russia with a nuclear strike. Or a person who hates America and ready to sacrifice, say, Boston for Poznan."

The Pentagon said last week the U.S. has seen no Russian moves that would trigger any change in America's nuclear posture. Spotting such preparations could be difficult, however, even for U.S. spy planes, satellites and cyberintelligence.

Unlike the U.S., which relies on submarines armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles for a large part of its arsenal, most of Russian nuclear forces consists of land-based missiles. Some are mounted on mobile launchers that can be tracked, but many are in silos, making launch preparations more difficult to discern.

More compact battlefield nuclear weapons are even harder to track down, their small size allowing them to be deployed secretly long ahead of their possible use.

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Wednesday that Putin's threats should be taken seriously, arguing: "It's not a sign of weakness but of political wisdom."

California eyes making girls flag football a school sport

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

REDONDO BEACH, Calif. (AP) — Elsa Morin gripped the football and launched a perfect spiral. Then the 17-year-old dodged in and out of cones and yanked the flag hanging from another girl's belt for a key defensive play.

"Something about football just gets me really excited," said the senior at Southern California's Redondo Union High School. "I've always just wanted to play."

Morin was among about three dozen girls who recently tried out for the school's flag football team. The scene at Redondo's field is playing out with increasing frequency in California and around the country as girls flag football soars in popularity.

The number of girls playing flag football in U.S. high schools doubled to 11,000 in the decade leading up to 2018-19, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

On Thursday, the southern section of the California Interscholastic Federation is expected to vote on making it an official girls' high school sport. If approved, the state federation — which governs interscholastic sports in California — would take it up next month with a goal of making it an official sport in the nation's most populous state for the 2023-24 school year.

Flag football already is a sanctioned high school girls sport in states including Alabama and Nevada. And it was added as a collegiate sport by the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, with colleges in Florida, Georgia, Kansas and elsewhere fielding teams.

While girls are allowed to play tackle football on high school teams in California, few do. Flag football allows them to experience the sport in a way "that has all the knowledge, skills, and ability and the strategy of traditional football without some of the more violent parts of it," said Paula Hart Rodas, president-elect of the CIF Southern Section's council who previously coached Lawndale High School's flag team.

In flag football, no one gets tackled. A play ends when an opposing player pulls off the flag of a ball-carrier. It also is far cheaper than tackle football since no helmets or pads are needed.

The NFL sees flag football as a way to encourage its female fans. The Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles Chargers started a pilot high school league during the last school year, giving many girls a first shot at playing.

Chase Hartman, the Chargers' former community relations manager, said more than 70 schools filled out interest forms for the new pilot league. The NFL teams selected eight schools to start and provided uniforms and gear.

"The response was quite frankly more than we were prepared for," he said.

Jake Jimenez, coach of the team at Redondo Union, said with COVID-19 still circulating he wasn't sure how many girls would want to play. But nearly three dozen showed up for the first tryouts last school year, and a similar number came out this year. Jimenez could only accept half of them. He hopes that once California sanctions the sport, he can build a junior varsity team and develop a pipeline of players.

"They loved being the pioneer of women in sports and girls in flag football," he said. "We are truly trail-blazers."

He said he'd like to schedule games right before his school's tackle football games to promote the team.

The NFL — which invited a group of pilot league flag players to join tennis legend Billie Jean King for the coin toss at the last Super Bowl — has been driving interest at the high school level. But flag football has been gaining in popularity among younger players for years, especially amid growing concern about the risk of concussions and other injuries from tackle football.

Mark Broersma, commissioner of the Friday Night Lights flag football organization in Southern California, said girls make up a fraction of the 25,000 children from kindergarten to eighth grade who play each year, but their ranks are growing.

"We see an increase in all-girls teams that roll in and play as a team," Broersma said.

Tryouts at Redondo Union were held on a blistering afternoon. Many of the hopefuls played flag football during physical education class in middle school and hoped to score a spot on the high school's second-ever team.

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Despite the competition, the girls cheered each other on as they dodged through cones and spun by defenders trying to pull the flags. They applauded the fastest sprinter — a soccer player who decided to try something new.

The novelty is what drove 17-year-old Aly Young to the sport after she previously competed in soccer and track. Young had always loved football but didn't go out for the tackle team, fearing she'd be injured. Then, she found flag.

"It's a fun environment, it's super competitive," she said.

In recent years, parents and health experts have raised concerns about the risk of head injuries from tackle football, particularly among developing children, with some suggesting younger kids would be safer sticking with flag. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study from last year, for one, found kids playing tackle football had 15 times as many head impacts as those playing flag football.

Morin is one of the few girls playing both tackle and flag. She said she fell in love with football after coming to the United States from France five years ago but was discouraged from initially playing with boys by a prior coach who's no longer at the school.

This year, she's a running back on the school's tackle football team and a leader on the girls' flag team. She rallied the girls trying out for flag even when they fumbled, reassuring them with "you got it, girl!"

She also told them about the fun they had last season when their school won the pilot league's championship.

"We got a lot of opportunity because it was never known that girls play football," Morin told a newcomer while tossing her the ball during warm ups. "It was dope."

Schwarzenegger visits Auschwitz in message against hatred

By VANESSA GERA and RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI Associated Press

OSWIECIM, Poland (AP) — Film icon Arnold Schwarzenegger visited the site of the Auschwitz Nazi death camp on Wednesday, meeting a Holocaust survivor and the son of Holocaust survivors and saying it is time to "terminate" hatred.

The "Terminator" actor and former California governor viewed the barracks, watchtowers and remains of gas chambers that endure as evidence of the German extermination of Jews and others during World War II.

He also met with a woman who as a 3-year-old child was subjected to experiments by the notorious Nazi doctor Josef Mengele.

"This is a story that has to stay alive, this is a story that we have to tell over and over again," he said after his visit to the site of the death camp, speaking in a former synagogue that now is home to the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation.

He stood alongside Simon Bergson, the foundation's chairman, who was born after the war to Auschwitz survivors, and mentioned his own family history.

"I was the son of a man who fought in the Nazi war and was a soldier," the 75-year-old Schwarzenegger said in Oswiecim, the town where the Auschwitz site is located.

He said he and Bergson, who are close in age, were united in their work.

"Let's fight prejudice together and let's just terminate it once and for all," Schwarzenegger said.

Bergson added: "Arnold and I are living proof that within one generation hatred can be shifted entirely. Governor, thank you for joining us here today."

His visit to the site in southern Poland, which was under German occupation during WWII, was his first and came as part of his work with the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation, whose mission is to fight hatred through education.

He received the foundation's inaugural "Fighting Hatred" award in June for his anti-hatred stance on social media. He said he couldn't attend in person then because he was filming a new action series in Canada and was in a "COVID bubble."

He vowed that Wednesday's visit would not be his last.

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"I'll be back," he said, using a famous line from "The Terminator."

Schwarzenegger, who is originally from Austria, has spoken openly in the past about his father, Gustav Schwarzenegger, being a Nazi soldier during the war.

He told Russians in a video posted on social media in March that they were being lied to about the war in Ukraine and accused President Vladimir Putin of sacrificing Russian soldiers to his own ambitions.

In that video he brought up painful memories about how his own father was lied to as he fought, and how he returned to Austria a broken man, physically and emotionally, after being wounded at Leningrad.

Historians estimate that around 1.1 million people were killed at Auschwitz during the war. Around 1 million of them were Jews. Some 75,000 Poles were killed there, as well as Roma, Russian prisoners of war and others.

UK central bank intervenes in market to halt economic crisis

By DANICA KIRKA and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The Bank of England took emergency action Wednesday to stabilize U.K. financial markets and head off a crisis in the broader economy after the government spooked investors with a program of unfunded tax cuts, sending the pound tumbling and the cost of government debt soaring.

The central bank warned that crumbling confidence in the economy posed a "material risk to U.K. financial stability," while the International Monetary Fund took the rare step to urge a member of the Group of Seven advanced economies to abandon its plan to cut taxes and increase borrowing to cover the cost.

The Bank of England said it would buy long-term government bonds over the next two weeks to combat a recent slide in British financial assets. The bank's actions are focused on long-term government debt, where yields have soared in recent days, pushing up government borrowing costs.

"Were dysfunction in this market to continue or worsen, there would be a material risk to U.K. financial stability," the bank said in a statement. "This would lead to an unwarranted tightening of financing conditions and a reduction of the flow of credit to the real economy."

The move came five days after Prime Minister Liz Truss' new government sparked investor concern when it unveiled an economic stimulus program that included 45 billion pounds (\$48 billion) of tax cuts and no spending reductions. It also wants to spend billions to help shield homes and businesses from soaring energy prices, sparking fears of spiraling government debt and higher inflation, which is already running at a nearly 40-year high of 9.9%.

The British pound plunged to a record low against the U.S. dollar Monday following the government's announcement, and yields on U.K. government debt soared. Yields on 10-year government bonds have risen 325% this year, making it much more expensive for the government to borrow to finance its policies.

The Bank of England's plan to buy government debt helped stabilize the bond market, with 10-year bond yields falling to 4.235% in midday trading in London.

Yields, which measure the return buyers receive on their investment, had risen to 4.504% on Tuesday from 3.495% the day before the tax cuts were announced.

The pound traded at \$1.0628 on Wednesday in London, after rallying from a record low of \$1.0373 on Monday. The British currency is still down 4% since Friday, and it has fallen 20% against the dollar in the past year.

Opposition parties demanded Parliament be recalled from a two-week break to confront the economic crisis. But Truss and Treasury chief Kwasi Kwarteng stayed silent and out of sight, gambling that the economic storm will pass.

Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris, one of the few government ministers on view Wednesday, said the government's policies would "make my country richer and more prosperous."

"I think you will find economic policy takes more than a couple of days," he said.

On Monday, the Bank of England had refrained from an emergency interest rate hike to offset the slide in the pound but said it would be willing to raise rates if necessary.

But the bank's next scheduled meeting is not until November, and the lack of immediate action did little to bolster the pound. The bank was able to step in immediately with bond purchases because its Financial

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Policy Committee has a mandate to ensure the stability of the financial system.

The British government said it has fully underwritten the central bank's intervention on government bonds, known as gilts.

"The Bank has identified a risk from recent dysfunction in gilt markets, so the Bank will temporarily carry out purchases of long-dated U.K. government bonds from today in order to restore orderly market conditions," the Treasury said in a statement.

The U.K. government has resisted pressure to reverse course but says it will set out a more detailed fiscal plan and independent analysis from the Office for Budget responsibility on Nov. 23.

Kwarteng met Wednesday with executives from investment banks including Bank of America, JP Morgan, Standard Chartered and UBS in a bid to soothe markets alarmed by its economic plans.

The Treasury said Kwarteng underlined the government's "clear commitment to fiscal discipline" and promised new measures soon to boost economic growth, including deregulation of financial services.

The central bank was spurred to act after volatility in financial markets spilled over into the broader economy, raising borrowing costs for the government, limiting mortgage options for homebuyers and forcing some pension funds to sell long-term government bonds used to manage risk.

Some analysts estimate that the recent spike in bond yields has added about 20 billion pounds to the cost of servicing the U.K.'s ballooning debt.

In addition, British mortgage lenders have pulled hundreds of offers from the market amid expectations the Bank of England will sharply boost interest rates to offset the inflationary impact of the pound's recent slide.

Market reaction to the government's plans also has exposed vulnerabilities in U.K. pension funds. In particular, some defined-benefit pension plans, where employers shoulder the risk of guaranteed payouts for their retirees, have been forced to sell long-term bonds to cover liabilities, creating the potential for a downward spiral in prices.

"The extraordinary intervention came amid growing concern that defined-benefit pension funds ... were at risk of being hammered by the plunge in the value of the pound and sharp moves in the long-term gilts market," said Alice Haine, a personal finance analyst at Bestinvest.

Jagjit Chadha, director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, described Wednesday's action as very much a traditional central bank intervention to limit market turmoil.

"What we need is, is a little bit of calm, a preparedness to commit to the way that we think policies should be designed these days, which is proper scrutiny by experts and understanding of its impact on the economy and a limit to the disruptive tendencies," he said. "You know, we don't need to disrupt this economy anymore."

Review: 'Bros' makes rom-com history and then joins in it

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

"Bros," the latest romantic comedy to hit theaters, is absolutely revolutionary. And totally conventional. It's a film where both extremes can be true at the same time.

The revolutionary part comes from it being the first gay rom-com produced and distributed by a major American studio. And yet it hews very closely to the classic rom-com formula, right down to one of the star-crossed lovers suddenly realizing he's in love and sprinting to reunite with the other as music swells.

That's the genius of "Bros" — telling LGBTQ stories and wrapping it in a familiar storyline that everyone can relate to. At one point, we see our hero watching "When Harry Met Sally" and we quietly cheer as the universe of rom-coms just got another satellite. Some people may complain that it fits too neatly into the straight-people film formula, but revolutions weren't built in a movie.

Billy Eichner stars as Bobby Lieber, a slightly nerdy gay podcaster-turned-museum executive who has hit the age of 40 without having had a serious romantic relationship. The script by Nicholas Stoller and Eichner leans into the schtick Eichner has built as a loud, opinionated comic on "Billy on the Street" but creates room for a wounded, insecure hero.

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Eichner is navigating the fraught world of modern dating in the New York City gay community, which includes graceless app hookups, steroid use, dance-club ogling, legions of commitment-phobes and an emphasis on the physical and superficial — so just like straights!

When sparks fly between him and a hunky meathead — played understated and soulfully by Luke Macfarlane — it's clear that opposites attract. Our hero has a sunken chest, an unwavering belief that Abraham Lincoln was a closeted gay man and a high voice; the muscly hunk is a fan of Garth Brooks, hockey and "The Office." Yet he can also see to the core of our hero: "Getting angry at things is your brand," he tells him.

The filmmakers make sure "Bros" isn't a sanitized view of gay love, earning an R-rating for nudity, sex, lusty kissing and group encounters like throuples and a very funny, awkward four-way with a random guy named Steve. In many parts, it feels very much like every lingering, passionate kiss is blissfully punching through some sort of wall.

Stoller, who also directs, and Eichner load the script with plenty of gentle humor at non-gay targets. "Gay sex was more fun when straight people were uncomfortable," says one character. And a couple of recurring gags involve straight actors winning awards for playing gay — Benedict Cumberbatch, look out! — and the Hallmark Chanel's supposed embrace of non-hetero themes, like with the fictional bisexual titles "Christmas With Either" and the group rom-com "A Holly, Polly Christmas."

Gay stereotypes also get celebrated and pierced — endless vogueing, Grindr photos, "Schitt's Creek" love, Barbra Streisand adoration and internal divisions among the LGBTQ community. Deborah Messing from "Will & Grace" makes a hilarious cameo ("I am not every gay man's best friend!" she wails) and Kaitlin Jenner is mocked as a "trans-terrorist." A key moment is when Eichner pierces the inclusive slogan "Love Is Love" with his retort "No, it's not." Gay love, he says, has different obstacles and complications and ramifications.

In his love affair, identity becomes the drama. Bobby is fiercely proud of being gay and not apologizing for it, while his love interest is more quiet about his sexuality, fatefully asking his lover to tone it down one night while meeting his parents. "A little less yourself," he explains. "I want them to like you." Everyone will understand what that means. That's straight out of a John Hughes rom-com.

It's not a perfect film — the first half sags a little, the jump in Bobby's career is jarring and some soliloquies land with a thud — but name us a perfect rom-com. This one has what the best have: heart, good faith and good old fashioned love. Welcome, "Bros," to the canon.

"Bros," a Universal Pictures release that hits theaters Friday, is rated R for strong sexual content, some drug use and language throughout. Running time: 115 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four.

Churches defend clergy loophole in child sex abuse reporting

By JASON DEAREN and MICHAEL REZENDES Associated Press

It was a frigid Sunday evening at the Catholic Newman Center in Salt Lake City when the priest warned parishioners who had gathered after Mass that their right to private confessions was in jeopardy.

A new law would break that sacred bond, the priest said, and directed the parishioners to sign a one-page form letter on their way out. "I/We Oppose HB90," began the letter, stacked next to pre-addressed envelopes. "HB90 is an improper interference of the government into the practice of religion in Utah."

In the following days of February 2020, Utah's Catholic diocese, which oversees dozens of churches, says it collected some 9,000 signed letters from parishioners and sent them to state Rep. Angela Romero, a Democrat who had been working on the bill as part of her campaign against child sexual abuse. HB90 targeted Utah's "clergy-penitent privilege," a law similar to those in many states that exempts clergy of all denominations from the requirement to report child abuse if they learn about the crime in a confessional setting.

Utah's Catholic leaders had mobilized against HB90 arguing that it threatened the sacred privacy of confessions. More importantly, it met with disapproval from some members in the powerful Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known as the Mormon church, whose followers comprise the vast majority of

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the state Legislature. HB90 was dead on arrival.

In 33 states, clergy are exempt from any laws requiring professionals such as teachers, physicians and psychotherapists to report information about alleged child sexual abuse to police or child welfare officials if the church deems the information privileged.

This loophole has resulted in an unknown number of predators being allowed to continue abusing children for years despite having confessed the behavior to religious officials. In many of these cases, the privilege has been invoked to shield religious groups from civil and criminal liability after the abuse became known to civil authorities.

Over the past two decades state lawmakers like Romero have proposed more than 130 bills seeking to create or amend child sex abuse reporting laws, an Associated Press review found. All either targeted the loophole and failed to close it, or amended the mandatory reporting statute without touching the clergy privilege amid intense opposition from religious groups. The AP found that the Roman Catholic Church has used its well-funded lobbying infrastructure and deep influence among lawmakers in some states to protect the privilege, and that influential members of the Mormon church and Jehovah's Witnesses have also worked in statehouses and courts to preserve it in areas where their membership is high.

In Maryland a successful campaign to defeat a proposal that would have closed the clergy-penitent loophole was led by a Catholic cardinal who would later be defrocked for sexually abusing children and adult seminarians.

In other states, such as California, Missouri and New Mexico, vociferous public and backroom opposition to bills aimed at closing the loophole from the Catholic and Mormon churches successfully derailed legislative reform efforts.

"They believe they're on a divine mission that justifies keeping the name and the reputation of their institution pristine," said David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, speaking of several religious groups. "So the leadership has a strong disincentive to involve the authorities, police or child protection people."

LOOPHOLE PROTECTS CHURCHES FROM SURVIVORS AND PROSECUTORS

Last month, an AP investigation found that a Mormon bishop in Arizona, at the direction of church leaders, failed to report a church member who had confessed that he sexually abused his 5-year-old daughter. The AP found that Rep. Merrill Nelson, a church lawyer and Utah Republican lawmaker, had advised the bishop not to report the abuse to civil authorities because of Arizona's clergy privilege law, according to documents revealed in a lawsuit. That failure to report allowed the church member, the late Paul Adams, to repeatedly rape his two daughters and allegedly abuse one of his four sons for many years.

In response to the case, state Sen. Victoria Steele, a Democrat from Tucson, on three occasions proposed legislation to close the clergy reporting loophole in Arizona. Steele told the AP that key Mormon lawmakers including a former Republican state senator and judiciary committee chairmen thwarted her efforts before her proposals could be presented to the full Legislature.

"It's difficult for me to tell this story without talking about the Mormons and their power in the Legislature," Steele said. "What this boils down to is that the church is being given permission to protect the predators and the children be damned. ... They are trying with all of their might to make sure this bill does not see the light of day."

Latter-day Saints and Catholics hold a number of influential positions as leaders and committee chairmen in the Arizona Legislature, including the speaker of the House, and have been known to advance or block legislation in line with the church's priorities and values.

In one high-profile example, two Republican legislators took a stand in 2019, refusing to vote for a budget until lawmakers passed a measure allowing past victims of child sexual abuse to sue churches or youth groups that turned a blind eye to the abuse. Legislative business ground to a halt for weeks amid fierce opposition from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Roman Catholic Church and insurers along with their allies in the Legislature, which finally approved the measure.

The Adams case is not the only example of the privilege being invoked in cases where a clergy member's failure to report led to prolonged abuse. In Montana, for example, a woman who was abused by a

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member of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the mid-2000s won a \$35 million jury verdict against the church for failing to report her abuse. But in 2020 the state Supreme Court reversed the judgment, ruling that church leaders were under no obligation to report, citing the state's clergy-penitent privilege.

The privilege can also be used to protect religious organizations from criminal liability. In 2013, a former Boise, Idaho, police officer turned himself in for abusing children, something he had reported to 15 members of the Mormon church, none of whom notified authorities. But prosecutors declined to file charges against the church because of Idaho's clergy-penitent privilege law.

The Mormon church said in a written statement to the AP that a member who confesses child sex abuse "has come seeking an opportunity to reconcile with God and to seek forgiveness for their actions. ... That confession is considered sacred, and in most states, is regarded as a protected religious conversation owned by the confessor."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops did not immediately return a request for comment about its campaigns against state bills seeking to do away with the clergy-penitent privilege.

But supporters of the clergy privilege say abolishing it will not make children safer. Some go so far as to say that the ability of abusers to report privately to clergy encourages them to confess and often leads to stopping the abuse.

"It's considered essential to the exercise of religion to have a priest-penitent privilege that will allow people to approach their clergy for the purpose of unburdening themselves, their mind, their soul ... to seek peace and consolation with God as well as with their fellow beings," Utah state Rep. Nelson told the AP. "Without that assurance of secrecy, troubled people will not confide in their clergy."

Jean Hill, the government liaison for Utah's Catholic Diocese who helped organize opposition to Romero's bill, pointed to a single research paper to argue that laws that target privileged, confessional conversations in the context of child abuse have not increased reporting in those communities.

"When you take away every opportunity for people to get help, they go underground and the abuse continues," Hill said.

But the authors of the study Hill cited, published in 2014, have cautioned about reaching such conclusions based on their research.

Frank Vandervort, a law professor at the University of Michigan, and his co-author, Vincent Palusci, a pediatrics professor at New York University, told the AP that the study was limited, partly because churches often wouldn't give them access to data on clergy reporting.

"A single article should not be the basis for making policy decisions," said Vandervort, lead author of the study. "It may be entirely the case that there's no connection between the changing of the laws and the number of reports."

PRIVILEGE NOT 'CONSTITUTIONALLY REQUIRED'

Efforts to rid state laws of the privilege have been successful in only a handful of states, including North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas and West Virginia. Records and interviews with lawmakers in the 33 states that still have the privilege show that intense opposition from powerful religious organizations is more often too much to overcome.

Former California state Sen. Jerry Hill said a bill he introduced in 2019 to require clergy members to report suspicion of child sex abuse or neglect by co-workers was killed after opposition from the Catholic and Mormon churches, as well as other religious groups.

"The opposition of the Catholic Church was instrumental in creating a lot of controversy around the bill and a lot of questions related to religious freedom," Hill said. The Catholic Church made it clear it would sue if the bill passed, Hill said.

Michael Cassidy, a professor at Catholic-affiliated Boston College Law School and a former state prosecutor, said it's not clear how a religious freedom case regarding the clergy privilege would turn out.

Some supporters believe the privilege is securely rooted in the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of religion. But Cassidy said "there is no firm precedent that says the clergy-penitent privilege is constitutionally required."

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"The Supreme Court has never held that," Cassidy said.

He's proposed a middle path: allow clergy to maintain the secrecy of the confessional but carve out an exception for "dangerous persons" including child sex abusers.

Often, legislative efforts to close the clergy loophole run up against lawmakers who are also church members, as well as intimidation from advocacy groups aligned with various religions. It's a one-two punch that has killed many bills quietly before they are even introduced, and has led to the privilege loophole being deemed by child welfare advocates as a poison pill included in mandatory reporting bills, the AP's review found.

In Utah, after religious officials publicly opposed her bill seeking to close the loophole, state Rep. Romero, a lifelong Catholic, received ominous voicemails and emails. Fearing for her staff's safety, she reported some of them to state law enforcement.

"It's utterly despicable that you think that this is all right," said one anonymous caller claiming to represent a group called Young Americans for Liberty. "If you care to, return my message. If not, I'm going to call you every day until you do."

The blowback also got personal: Devout Catholic members of Romero's own family stopped talking to her. "They thought I was trying to attack the Catholic Church and get rid of confession, one of our sacraments," Romero said. "That's how it was presented to them."

In 2003, as the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal swept the nation, a bill seeking to rid Maryland of the privilege in child abuse cases evoked a strong rebuke from Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, then the powerful archbishop of the Diocese of Washington, D.C.

"If this bill were to pass, I shall instruct all priests in the Archdiocese of Washington who serve in Maryland to ignore it," McCarrick wrote in a Catholic Standard column. "On this issue, I will gladly plead civil disobedience and willingly — if not gladly — go to jail."

The bill withered under McCarrick's attack and never emerged from committee. Similar legislation proposed in 2004 suffered the same fate. Today, the clergy-penitent privilege in Maryland remains intact, even though McCarrick has been defrocked for sex crimes.

Virginia updated its mandatory reporting law in 2006. While the bill started out with clergy among those listed as reporters with the privilege intact, they would be removed from the final bill. The privilege, oddly, was left in. The state went on in 2019 to add ministers, priests, rabbis and other religious officials to the list of mandatory reporters of child abuse, but again protected the clergy-penitent privilege.

State Del. Karrie Delaney, a Virginia Democrat who sponsored the bill in 2019 that added clergy to the list of mandated reporters, said that including language to close the privilege would have doomed the bill.

"We wanted to pass the bill," Delaney said. "And we knew that not having that (exemption) in there would have drawn an enormous amount of resistance from particular faith communities that really would have put the bill in jeopardy."

In heavily Catholic Pennsylvania, 40 bills have included changes in mandatory child sex abuse reporting laws over the past two decades. None of them has challenged the clergy-penitent privilege. That comes as no surprise to child sex abuse survivors and their advocates, who have seen the Catholic Church and its lobbyists spend millions in a battle in Pennsylvania over a proposed two-year legal window for survivors to file lawsuits against their alleged abusers.

In other states, legislators said they didn't know clergy had a way around reporting abuse. After learning of the loophole from the AP, Vermont state Sen. Richard Sears, a Democrat, said he would introduce a bill in the next legislative session to try to close it. "I wasn't even aware it existed," Sears said.

In 2003, amid the uproar over the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandals, several states added clergy to their child sex abuse reporting laws, often with the exception for clergy who learn about child sex abuse during spiritual confessions.

That's what happened in New Mexico.

With the privilege protected, the bill sailed easily through both houses and was even supported by The Archdiocese of Santa Fe, which was embroiled in its own church sexual abuse scandal.

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Since then, there have been several bills introduced in the New Mexico Legislature aimed at clarifying language in the reporting law. Only one would have eliminated the clergy-penitent privilege. It died in committee.

"We have repeatedly asked the Legislature to strengthen reporting requirements in schools and religious institutions," state Attorney General Hector Balderas told the AP. He said unreported child abuse is a major problem "resulting in tremendous amounts of trauma."

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Fish fossil catch from China includes oldest teeth ever

By MADDIE BURAKOFF AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A big catch of fish fossils in southern China includes the oldest teeth ever found — and may help scientists learn how our aquatic ancestors got their bite.

The finds offer new clues about a key period of evolution that's been hard to flesh out because until now scientists haven't found many fossils from that era. In a series of four studies, published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*, researchers detail some of their finds, from ancient teeth to never-before-seen species.

The fossils date back to the Silurian period, an important era for life on earth from 443 million years ago to 419 million years ago. Scientists believe our backboned ancestors, who were still swimming around on a watery planet, may have started evolving teeth and jaws around this time.

This let the fish hunt for prey instead of "grubbing around" as bottom feeders, filtering out food from the muck. It also sparked a series of other changes in their anatomy, including different kinds of fins, said Philip Donoghue, a University of Bristol paleontologist and an author on one of the studies.

"It's just at this interface between the Old World and the New World," Donoghue said.

But in the past, scientists haven't found many fossils to show this shift, said Matt Friedman, a University of Michigan paleontologist who was not involved in the research. They've been relying on fragments from the time — a chunk of spine here, a bit of scale there.

The fossils from China are expected to fill in some of those gaps as researchers around the world pore over them.

A field team discovered the fossil trove in 2019, Min Zhu, a paleontologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences who led the research, said in an email. On a rainy day, after a frustrating trip that hadn't revealed any fossils, researchers explored a pile of rocks near a roadside cliff. When they split one rock open, they found fossilized fish heads looking back at them.

After hauling more rocks back to the lab for examination, the research team wound up with a huge range of fossils that were in great condition for their age.

The most common species in the bunch is a little boomerang-shaped fish that likely used its jaws to scoop up worms, said Per Erik Ahlberg of Sweden's Uppsala University, an author on one of the studies.

Another fossil shows a sharklike creature with bony armor on its front — an unusual combination. A well-preserved jawless fish offers clues to how ancient fins evolved into arms and legs. While fossil heads

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for these fish are commonly found, this fossil included the whole body, Donoghue said.

And then there are the teeth. The researchers found bones called tooth whorls with multiple teeth growing on them. The fossils are 14 million years older than any other teeth found from any species — and provide the earliest solid evidence of jaws to date, Zhu said.

Alice Clement, an evolutionary biologist at Australia's Flinders University who was not involved with the research, said the fossil find is "remarkable" and could rewrite our understanding of this period.

The wide range of fossils suggests there were plenty of toothy creatures swimming around at this time, Clement said in an email, even though it's the next evolutionary era that is considered the "Age of Fishes."

EXPLAINER: Rare seditious charge at center of Jan. 6 trial

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The founder of the Oath Keepers and four associates are on trial in the Capitol attack on charges that include seditious conspiracy — a rarely used Civil War-era accusation that strikes to the heart of what prosecutors say happened that day.

Stewart Rhodes and his followers are the first Jan. 6 defendants to stand trial on such a charge for what prosecutors say was not a suddenly ignited riot but a coordinated plot to stop the transfer of presidential power.

The stakes are high for the Justice Department, which hasn't tried a seditious conspiracy case in a decade and hasn't won a guilty verdict since the 1995 prosecution of Islamic militants who plotted to bomb New York City landmarks.

Prosecutors say Rhodes and his far-right extremist group spent weeks preparing to use violence to stop Biden from becoming president. Rhodes, a Texan, recruited members to come to Washington, amassed weapons and organized armed teams to be on standby outside the city in case they were needed, authorities say.

The plot came to a head, prosecutors say, on Jan. 6 when Oath Keepers were captured on camera shouldering their way through the mob of President Donald Trump's supporters and storming the Capitol in military-style stack formation.

The Oath Keepers, for their part, have said their preparations, training, gear and weapons were to protect themselves against potential attacks from left-wing antifa activists, or to be ready if Trump invoked the Insurrection Act to call up a militia to support his bid to stay in power. Rhodes has said there was no plan to attack the Capitol and the members who went inside went rogue.

Jury selection started on Tuesday for the trial that is expected to last several weeks.

Here's a look at the charge of seditious conspiracy and its history:

WHAT IS SEDITIOUS CONSPIRACY?

The law was enacted after the Civil War to arrest Southerners who might keep fighting the U.S. government.

In order to win a seditious conspiracy case, prosecutors have to prove that two or more people conspired to "overthrow, put down or to destroy by force" the U.S. government or bring war against it, or that they plotted to use force to oppose the authority of the government or to block the execution of a law.

Rhodes, Kelly Meggs, Jessica Watkins, Kenneth Harrelson and Thomas Caldwell aren't charged with conspiring to overthrow the government or levy war.

Instead, prosecutors charge that they conspired to forcibly oppose the authority of the federal government and forcibly block the execution of laws governing the transfer of presidential power.

Specifically, the Oath Keepers are accused of conspiring to forcibly obstruct the execution of the Electoral Count Act and the Twelfth Amendment of the Constitution, which address the counting of electoral votes.

Seditious conspiracy calls for up to 20 years behind bars, if convicted. Rhodes and his associates also face several other serious charges.

WHY CAN IT BE DIFFICULT TO PROVE?

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The charge has rarely been brought in recent memory, and with mixed results.

It's not enough to merely show the defendants advocated the use of force — prosecutors must show they conspired to use force. Seditious conspiracy cases are legally complex, and prosecutors are sometimes reluctant to file the charges because they can be difficult for juries to grasp.

"Juries don't understand them, then when you want to communicate that idea to a larger audience, the public doesn't really understand," said Jeffrey Ian Ross, a criminologist at the University of Baltimore.

While seditious conspiracy has a broad definition, "sometimes juries want more than simple use of force against the government, because the term 'sedition' conjures an image of overthrowing the government," said Barbara McQuade, who was U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan when a judge there cleared militia members of the charge in 2012.

"In the case of Jan. 6, however, because the attack against the government took place at the U.S. Capitol, while it was certifying a presidential election, even these high expectations can be met," McQuade, now a University of Michigan Law School professor, said in an email.

Alan Rozenshtein, a professor at the University of Minnesota Law School, also said prosecutors shouldn't have a difficult time proving seditious conspiracy in the Oath Keepers' case.

"If this is not sedition, I don't know what is," he said.

WHO HAS FACED THE CHARGE BEFORE?

The last time the Justice Department tried a seditious conspiracy case was in 2010 in an alleged Michigan plot by members of the Hutaree militia to incite an uprising against the government.

A judge ordered acquittals of the sedition conspiracy charges at a 2012 trial, saying prosecutors relied too much on hateful diatribes protected by the First Amendment and didn't, as required, prove the accused ever had detailed plans for a rebellion.

Lawyer William Swor, who represented Hutaree militia leader David Stone, has said that prosecutors in the case failed to prove that group members were "more than just talking" and were "actively planning to oppose the government."

Stone's "datribes evince nothing more than his own hatred for — perhaps even desire to fight or kill — law enforcement; this is not the same as seditious conspiracy," the judge said.

The last successful seditious conspiracy trial was in the 1995, when Egyptian cleric Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman and nine followers were convicted in plot to blow up the United Nations, an FBI building, and two tunnels and a bridge linking New York and New Jersey.

Abdel-Rahman, known as the "Blind Sheikh," argued on appeal that he was never involved in planning actual attacks and his hostile rhetoric was protected free speech. He died in federal prison in 2017.

Prosecutors also secured seditious conspiracy convictions in another, now largely forgotten storming of the Capitol building in 1954. Four pro-independence Puerto Rican activists rushed the building and opened fire on the House floor, wounding several representatives.

Also, Oscar Lopez Rivera, a former leader of a Puerto Rican independence group that orchestrated a bombing campaign that left dozens of people dead or maimed in New York, Chicago, Washington and Puerto Rico in the 1970s and early 1980s, spent 35 years in prison for seditious conspiracy before President Barack Obama commuted his sentence in 2017.

And in 1988, jurors in Fort Smith, Arkansas, acquitted white supremacists charged with seditious conspiracy. The defendants were accused of plotting to overthrow the federal government and establish an all-white nation in the Pacific Northwest, and conspiring to kill a federal judge and FBI agent.

WHO FACES SIMILAR CHARGES IN THE JAN. 6 ATTACK?

A total of nine members or associates of the Oath Keepers are fighting seditious conspiracy charges. A second trial for the other Oath Keepers charged in the case is to begin at the end of November.

Three other Oath Keepers have already pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy, are cooperating with investigators and could testify against Rhodes at trial. Rhodes' lawyers have claimed in court documents that those Oath Keepers are lying and pleaded guilty only because they were pressured by the government and hoped to get lighter sentences.

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Several members of another far-right extremist group, the Proud Boys, have also been charged with the crime, including former chairman Henry "Enrique" Tarrío. They are scheduled to stand trial in December.

World Cup Watch: European giants showing flaws before Qatar

LONDON (AP) — All roads now lead to Qatar.

With the conclusion of the group stage of the Nations League, Europe's top soccer countries have played their final competitive games ahead of the World Cup.

Here's how things are shaping up for a continent that has provided the last four winners of the sport's biggest prize.

Spoiler alert: it could be better.

FRANCE

Defending World Cup champion France has won just one of its last six matches, its worst record in the buildup to a World Cup since 1958. It's difficult to draw conclusions from its last two Nations League matches, though, since France had 14 players out injured. If there were hopes the new generation of French midfielders was ready to take over in case Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kanté don't recover in time for the World Cup, they may have been dashed. Eduardo Camavinga endured a disastrous first half in the 2-0 loss to Denmark and he might be fighting for his squad place. Adrien Rabiot, Youssouf Fofana and Aurelien Tchouaméni are better placed in coach Didier Deschamps' pecking order even if there are still concerns. Fofana made a convincing debut in the win against Austria but lost too many balls after coming in as a replacement for Camavinga against Denmark. As for Tchouaméni, he did not live up to expectations against Denmark. Kanté, who is currently sidelined by a hamstring injury, is the player France cannot afford to be without.

By Samuel Petrequin.

ENGLAND

If France's form is troubling, England's is even worse. Make that six games without a victory for England, the team's longest winless run since 1993. Never has England entered a major tournament on such a streak. The goodwill toward coach Gareth Southgate and some of his players, notably Harry Maguire, has dipped among fans and the media. Crucially, there are a number of players either not playing enough for their clubs or simply out of form — and Southgate has suggested he will keep faith with them in Qatar because they have built up enough credit with him after England's runs to the World Cup semifinals in 2018 and the European Championship final last year. Left back, center back and the lack of a creative central midfielder to help run a game are England's biggest weaknesses. Many teams will envy England's attacking options, though there's still a big dependency on striker Harry Kane.

By Steve Douglas.

BELGIUM

Belgium ended its Nations League campaign knowing one thing for sure. And it's not reassuring. With just one preparation game left before the World Cup — a friendly against Egypt on Nov. 18 — Belgium desperately needs Romelu Lukaku. In the absence of the injured striker, Michy Batshuayi simply could not impose himself as a credible replacement. Batshuayi was ineffective in the 1-0 loss to the Netherlands, a match Belgium entered needing to win by three goals or more to advance. Instead, the loss marked the first time since the 2018 World Cup semifinals that Belgium was defeated without scoring. Batshuayi made way for Charles De Ketelaere after halftime, but the AC Milan player couldn't create much in a false No. 9 role. Lukaku is expected to return soon after a thigh injury. Belgium's chances in Qatar might depend on him.

By Samuel Petrequin.

GERMANY

Germany's games against England and Hungary provided more questions than answers two months before the World Cup which Germany last won in 2014. The biggest question: how good is the team, really?

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Answer: Nobody knows. Hansi Flick's team defeated a weakened Italy 5-2 in its previous game in June, but failed to force a breakthrough against a well-organized Hungary and lost 1-0 at home. Germany then threw away a 2-0 lead in England before Kai Havertz rescued a 3-3 draw. Havertz and Bayern Munich's Jamal Musiala were the only positives to be taken from the two games. When the Germans control possession, they lack the decisive final pass, and England's late rally shows they are prone to collapse. The win over Italy was Germany's only win in seven games. It conceded in each, adding defensive questions to the mix for Flick.

By Ciaran Fahey.

SPAIN

Spain, the 2010 champion, is one of the few European powers heading to the World Cup on a high after again reaching the Nations League's final four. Luis Enrique's team rebounded from losing to Switzerland to end a 22-game unbeaten run at home by winning 1-0 at local rival Portugal, potentially one of its main threats in Qatar. Spain hadn't won at Portugal in nearly two decades. La Roja was unbeaten in eight games before losing to Switzerland, a run stretching back to last year's Nations League's final four. Also on a high will be 20-year-old Athletic Bilbao forward Nico Williams, who set up Alvaro Morata's winner against Portugal to likely secure his spot in the World Cup squad. Portugal, meanwhile, will have to live with the disappointment of the last-day elimination at home, and with doubts surrounding Cristiano Ronaldo's form. Ronaldo, who is likely to play in his last World Cup, had some uncharacteristic misses against Spain and isn't currently in Manchester United's first-choice team.

By Tales Azzoni.

OTHERS

Europe might need a first-time champion if the continent is to deny in-form Brazil and Argentina. Croatia, the beaten finalist in 2018, again looks good under the leadership of 37-year midfielder Luka Modrić, topping its Nations League group after home-and-away wins over Denmark. The Danes have been among Europe's most consistent teams with playmaker Christian Eriksen restored to the lineup while the Netherlands, a three-time World Cup finalist and guided by wily coach Louis van Gaal, kept clean sheets in wins over Poland and Belgium in the Nations League. The Dutch have beaten Belgium twice this year. Then there's Serbia and Switzerland, in-form teams coming off back-to-back wins with key strikers scoring. Aleksander Mitrović now has 50 goals for Serbia and Breel Embolo's goals were decisive for Switzerland, including in a 2-1 win at Spain. Serbia vs. Switzerland on Dec. 2 shapes to be an intense rematch of their politically charged game at the 2018 World Cup and they are in the same group as Brazil, which knocked Belgium off the top of the world ranking this year.

By Graham Dunbar.

Do the 'Time Warp' again — 'Rocky Horror' show will travel

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Grab your toilet paper. Bring a flashlight. Don't forget a newspaper — or your fishnets.

A touring, interactive version of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" is hitting the road to celebrate the cult film's birthday with screenings, live shadow casts, the invitation to be inappropriate and one of its original stars — Barry Bostwick.

"It's an excuse to go crazy, be rude, throw stuff, yell and be silly — who doesn't want that?" asks Bostwick. "Everyone there is having fun, a communal experience. Especially now after the pandemic, we need to gather and blow off some steam."

Released in 1975, the sci-fi, cross-dressing rock musical film became a cult favorite and entered the pop culture lexicon for its many iconic and memorable scenes, including the song "The Time Warp" which has been covered by handfuls of artists and the often quoted phrase, "Dammit, Janet!" Other things yelled are less PG-13.

It has morphed into an interactive event in which people throw rice during a wedding scene, place newspapers on their heads and squirt water during a rain storm scene, and toss dried toast during a dinner

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toast scene. People often come dressed in corsets, fishnets, maid costumes, butler costumes and heavy stains of eye shadow.

"It has endured because it was always organic," said Bostwick. "The call-backs and throwing stuff was never introduced by the filmmakers or the studio. It was by fans, who added layer after layer and then that all got standardized."

The story centers on the goody two-shoes Janet and Brad, a young couple with car trouble who stumble on an old castle filled with eccentric characters: cross-dressers, scientists and a maid, included. This leads to some interesting pairings and experimentations. The film made household names of Bostwick, who played Brad, Susan Sarandon as Janet and Tim Curry, the castle's Dr. Frank-N-Furter.

The tour will play in stage theaters across the country, which will throw up a massive screen and show the movie while actors dressed as the characters perform the show in front of the screen and the audience gets seriously weird. Before the show, there are costume contests and fans can see a traveling mini-museum of memorabilia from the film, including a feather boa worn by Curry and a sequined top worn by the character Columbia.

The tour kicks off Saturday in Florida's Pompano Beach before hitting California, Idaho, Ohio, Michigan, Arizona, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Virginia, Vermont and North Carolina. Some of the traditional practices — like shooting squirt guns and tossing rice — have been lost along the way, but if you forget to bring other items, prop bags are available for sale.

Scott Stander, who produces the show as part of his portfolio of concerts, variety shows and celebrity evenings, said part of the appeal of "Rocky Horror" has been its invitation to audiences to cut loose.

"I think part of it is getting to be whatever they want to be. You could be red or blue and it doesn't matter. You will get along — one of the few things you can get an audience in together and nobody talks about anything but having a great time," he said.

"Where can you go dress in fishnet or or be square and act like Brad and hear shout-outs from the audience and have toast flying or toilet paper and just be involved? It's just so different. There's nothing like it."

Bostwick will be at each stop, meeting guests and introducing the film. He has had a very varied career since "Rocky Horror," including roles on "Scrubs," "Cougar Town" and "Spin City," plus winning a Tony Award — but few projects have triggered as much sustained enthusiasm as playing Brad.

"I was at a convention last month and I looked out and saw 2,000 people and most of them were under 25. It gets passed down from one generation and I think becomes a rite of passage to adulthood," he said.

The pandemic forced the annual tour to be held at drive-ins, but the new version is back to in-person gatherings, something Stander feels we've missed.

"I think right now we're looking for anything fun and different to get out and have a good time and forget your troubles, don't you think?"

Clergy strive to reconcile politically divided congregations

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

One member of Rabbi David Wolpe's diverse congregation left because Wolpe would not preach sermons criticizing Donald Trump. Scores of others left over resentment with the synagogue's rules for combating COVID-19. But Wolpe remains steadfast in his resolve to avoid politics when he preaches at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles.

"It is not easy to keep people comfortable with each other and as part of one community," he said. "A great failing of modern American society is that people get to know each other's politics before they get to know their humanity."

Wolpe -- whose congregation includes liberal Democrats and hundreds of conservative Iranian Americans -- is far from alone in facing such challenges. Though many congregations in the U.S. are relatively homogeneous, others are sharply divided. In some cases, divisions are becoming more pronounced as midterm election season heats up, leaving clergy to keep the peace while still meeting the spiritual needs of all of their members.

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A Black pastor in Columbus, Ohio — Bishop Timothy Clarke of the First Church of God — says there are “deep divides” in his predominantly African American congregation of more than 2,000. He cited abortion as a particularly divisive topic in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling in June allowing states to ban the procedure.

“There are good people on both sides,” said Clarke, who addressed the congregation’s differences in a recent sermon.

“I talked about the fact God loves everybody, even those you disagree with,” he said.

The Rev. Paul Roberts, senior pastor of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, said his congregation — like many others — is dealing with one contentious issue after another.

“The whole thing with Trump, Black Lives Matter, the pandemic really has highlighted a sense of uneasiness when you’re covering all these different topics as a church,” he said. “It just seems there isn’t anything that doesn’t have tension over it.”

His church has about 140 regular attendees, a politically and theologically diverse group that’s about half Black and half white. He said a few people left the church over its support for the Black Lives Matter movement, but for the most part it has stayed together.

He attributes that in part to hours of patient dialogue over such issues as mask-wearing and vaccines, which some Black members were wary of because of the history of medical maltreatment of African Americans.

Rabbi Judith Siegal is asking members of her politically divided congregation in Coral Gables, Florida, to sign a code of ethics pledging to respect those with different views.

Newly displayed signs at the synagogue, Temple Judea, hammer home this message.

“No matter who you vote for, your skin color, where you are from, your faith, or who you love, we will be there for one another,” one sign says. “That’s what a community means.”

Siegal said she and her assistant rabbi, Jonathan Fisch, are often asked by members of the Reform congregation to address certain issues

“We’re careful about doing that in a way that’s value-driven, preaching from our tradition and our Torah,” she said. “For example, we know that welcoming immigrants is something that’s important to us as Jews — but we’re never going to tell anyone how to vote.”

The Rev. Sarah Wilson said her congregation at St. Barnabas Lutheran Church in Cary, Illinois, includes Republican business leaders and liberal nurses and teachers. There are partisan differences, as well as conflicting views on abortion, but she aspires to keep political debate out of the church and avoid partisan rhetoric of her own.

“Politics are very important to me — I vote in every election,” she said. “But I’m not here to tell a person how to vote or who to vote for. If people ask me, even for city council, I don’t do that.”

The congregation at the Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and its connected Catholic school community is diverse ethnically, economically, and politically, said the Rev. David Boettner, rector of the cathedral and vicar general of the Diocese of Knoxville, Tennessee.

Mass is celebrated in five languages, and parishioners and student families speak more than a dozen at home; some are financially well off while others struggle to get by, he said.

“We’ve definitely got folks that belong to the Democratic Party and folks that belong to the Republican Party, and folks that probably don’t belong to either,” Boettner said.

Political issues crop up in conversations at church, but Boettner suspects members are less likely to share polarizing views with him because he is their priest. They share more freely on social media, and he has noticed an increase in political posts as the midterm elections approach. Abortion and religious liberty, including the recent Supreme Court rulings, are prominent, he said.

Boettner said he strives for consistency in preaching about the Catholic teachings on moral, social and economic justice issues, while steering clear of endorsing specific policies. Prayers are offered for all leaders, not just those from a particular party.

“The church is not partisan,” Boettner said. “The Catholic Church is probably a great example of a church that offends both Democrats and Republicans alike.”

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In Bluefield, West Virginia, the Rev. Frederick Brown said he has sought "the middle of the road" during nearly three decades as pastor of a diverse but collegial congregation at Faith Center Church.

"Staying in the middle of the road means God thinks it's all important," he said. "When you vote, you can vote your convictions -- but don't attack anyone else's convictions because they're different from yours."

At Sinai Temple, Rabbi Wolpe strives to encourage mutual respect within his congregation. He cites the men's book club as a positive example: In a recent initiative, it alternated reading a book by a left-of-center author, then a book by a conservative.

Yet Wolpe, 64, says political divisions have become deeply entrenched.

"When I was born, people objected to their children marrying someone from another race but didn't object to marrying someone from a different political party," he said. "Now it's the reverse."

NKorea test launches missiles on eve of Harris trip to Seoul

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles toward its eastern waters on Wednesday, its neighbors said, a day before U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is to visit South Korea.

Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement that the North Korean missiles lifted off 10 minutes apart on Wednesday afternoon from its capital region and flew toward the waters off its east coast.

Japanese Vice Defense Minister Toshiro Ino said Japan's military also detected the launches and that the weapons flew in an irregular trajectory.

Ino said that "North Korea's repeated missile firings amid (Russia's) invasion of Ukraine is impermissible." The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff said North Korea's provocations would only deepen its international isolation while pushing South Korea and the United States to strengthen their deterrence.

The launches follow a missile test by North Korea earlier this week.

Harris is to arrive in South Korea on Thursday for talks with President Yoon Suk Yeol and other officials. She also is to visit the tense border with North Korea, in what U.S. officials call an attempt to underscore the strength of the U.S.-South Korean alliance and the U.S. commitment to "stand beside" South Korea in the face of any North Korea threats.

U.S. and South Korean navy ships were also conducting drills off South Korea's east coast in a show of force against North Korea.

The four-day exercise, which began Monday, involves the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan. It is the first training exercise by the allies involving a U.S. aircraft carrier near the Korean Peninsula since 2017.

South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises often draw a furious response from North Korea, which views them as an invasion rehearsal. A short-range North Korean missile launched Sunday was seen as a response to the U.S.-South Korean training.

South Korea and Japan estimated that the North Korean missiles fired Wednesday flew 300-360 kilometers (185-220 miles) with a maximum altitude of 30-50 kilometers (19-30 miles). The low trajectories resembled the flight of the missile fired on Sunday, which some analysts said was likely a nuclear-capable, highly maneuverable weapon modeled after Russia's Iskander missile.

In recent years, North Korea has been adding Iskander-like missiles and other solid-fuel weapons to its arsenal. Some experts say the weapons are designed to carry battlefield nuclear warheads to counter the stronger conventional forces of South Korea and the United States, which stations about 28,500 troops in the South.

North Korea has dialed up its missile testing activities to a record pace in 2022, launching more than 30 ballistic weapons, including its first intercontinental ballistic missiles since 2017. North Korea's Sunan area where Wednesday's launches occurred was the site of various missile tests this year, including two ICBMs.

Earlier this month, North Korea adopted a new law authorizing the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in some situations, as it continues to escalate its nuclear doctrine. U.S. and South Korean officials have also said the North may soon conduct its first nuclear test in five years.

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North Korea's torrid run of weapons tests this year is seen as exploiting divides in the United Nations Security Council over Russia's war against Ukraine and the U.S.-China rivalry. In May, China and Russia vetoed a U.S.-led bid to impose new sanctions on North Korea over its ballistic missile tests this year, which violate U.N. Security Council resolutions.

Earlier Wednesday, South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers that a North Korean nuclear test could happen between mid-October and early November.

According to some lawmakers who attended the meeting, the National Intelligence Service said if the test occurs, it is likely to come after China, North Korea's last major ally, holds a key Communist Party congress on Oct. 16 but before the United States votes in midterm elections on Nov. 8.

The spy service also said North Korea recently began administering COVID-19 vaccines to its people for the first time, Yoo Sang-bum, one of the lawmakers present at the briefing, said without elaborating.

Earlier this month, leader Kim Jong Un told his country's rubber-stamp parliament that North Korea would begin its rollout of vaccines. In August, he made a widely disputed claim that his country had overcome its first COVID-19 outbreak and ordered an easing of pandemic-related restrictions.

Today in History: September 29, Pope John Paul I found dead

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Sept. 29, the 272nd day of 2022. There are 93 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Sept. 29, 1938, British, French, German and Italian leaders concluded the Munich Agreement, which was aimed at appeasing Adolf Hitler by allowing Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland.

On this date:

In 1789, the U.S. War Department established a regular army with a strength of several hundred men.

In 1829, London's reorganized police force, which became known as Scotland Yard, went on duty.

In 1943, General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Italian Marshal Pietro Badoglio signed an armistice aboard the British ship HMS Nelson off Malta.

In 1962, Canada joined the space age as it launched the Alouette 1 satellite from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. The musical "My Fair Lady" closed on Broadway after 2,717 performances.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, creating the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 1978, Pope John Paul I was found dead in his Vatican apartment just over a month after becoming head of the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1982, Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules laced with deadly cyanide claimed the first of seven victims in the Chicago area. (To date, the case remains unsolved.)

In 1986, the Soviet Union released Nicholas Daniloff, an American journalist confined on spying charges.

In 1989, actor Zsa Zsa Gabor was convicted of battery for slapping Beverly Hills police officer Paul Kramer after he'd pulled over her Rolls-Royce for expired license plates. (As part of her sentence, Gabor ended up serving three days in jail.)

In 2000, Israeli riot police stormed a major Jerusalem shrine and opened fire on stone-throwing Muslim worshippers, killing four Palestinians and wounding 175.

In 2005, John G. Roberts Jr. was sworn in as the nation's 17th chief justice after winning Senate confirmation.

In 2020, the first debate between President Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden deteriorated into bitter taunts and near chaos, as Trump repeatedly interrupted his opponent with angry and personal jabs and the two men talked over each other. Trump refused to condemn white supremacists who had supported him, telling one such group known as Proud Boys to "stand back, stand by."

Ten years ago: Omar Khadr, the last Western detainee held at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, returned to Canada after a decade in custody. Former New York Times publisher Arthur Ochs

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Sulzberger died at the age of 86.

Five years ago: Tom Price resigned as President Donald Trump's secretary of Health and Human Services amid investigations into his use of costly charter flights for official travel at taxpayer expense. The United States warned Americans to stay away from Cuba, and ordered home more than half of the American diplomatic corps there; the administration began referring to the mysterious health ailments affecting Americans there as "attacks" rather than "incidents" but acknowledged that neither Cuban nor US investigators could figure out who or what was responsible. San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz accused the Trump administration of "killing us with the inefficiency" after Hurricane Maria.

One year ago: In a major victory for pop star Britney Spears, a judge in Los Angeles suspended the singer's father from the conservatorship that had controlled her life and money for 13 years, saying the arrangement reflected a "toxic environment." (The judge would end the conservatorship weeks later.) Five-time Olympic swimming medalist Klete Keller pleaded guilty to a felony charge for storming the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 riot. Former Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida won Japan's governing party's leadership election, putting him in line to become the country's next prime minister.

Today's Birthdays: Conductor Richard Bonyngé is 92. Writer-director Robert Benton is 90. Singer Jerry Lee Lewis is 87. Soul-blues-gospel singer Sherman Holmes is 83. NASA administrator and former Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., is 80. Actor Ian McShane is 80. Jazz musician Jean-Luc Ponty is 80. Nobel Peace laureate Lech Walesa (lehk vah-WEN'-sah) is 79. Television-film composer Mike Post is 78. Actor Patricia Hodge is 76. TV personality Bryant Gumbel is 74. Rock singer-musician Mark Farner is 74. Rock singer-musician Mike Pinera is 74. Country singer Alvin Crow is 72. Actor Drake Hogestyn is 69. Olympic gold medal runner Sebastian Coe is 66. Singer Suzzy Roche (The Roches) is 66. Comedian-actor Andrew "Dice" Clay is 65. Rock singer John Payne (Asia) is 64. Actor Roger Bart is 60. Singer-musician Les Claypool is 59. Actor Jill Whelan is 56. Actor Ben Miles is 56. Actor Luke Goss is 54. Actor Erika Eleniak is 53. R&B singer Devante Swing (Jodeci) is 53. Country singer Brad Cotter (TV: "Nashville Star") is 52. Actor Emily Lloyd is 52. Actor Natasha Gregson Wagner is 52. Actor Rachel Cronin is 51. Country musician Danick Dupelle (Emerson Drive) is 49. Actor Alexis Cruz is 48. Actor Zachary Levi is 42. Actor Chrissy Metz (TV: "This Is Us") is 42. Actor Kelly McCreary (TV: "Grey's Anatomy") is 41. Rock musician Josh Farro is 35. NBA All-Star Kevin Durant is 34. Actor Doug Brochu is 32. Singer Phillip Phillips is 32. Pop singer Halsey is 28. Actor Clara Mamet is 28.