

# Groton Daily Independent

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## 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)  
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.

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
**Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460**

"Success is blocked by concentrating on it and planning for it... Success is shy--it won't come out while you're watching."

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS



## 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.

## **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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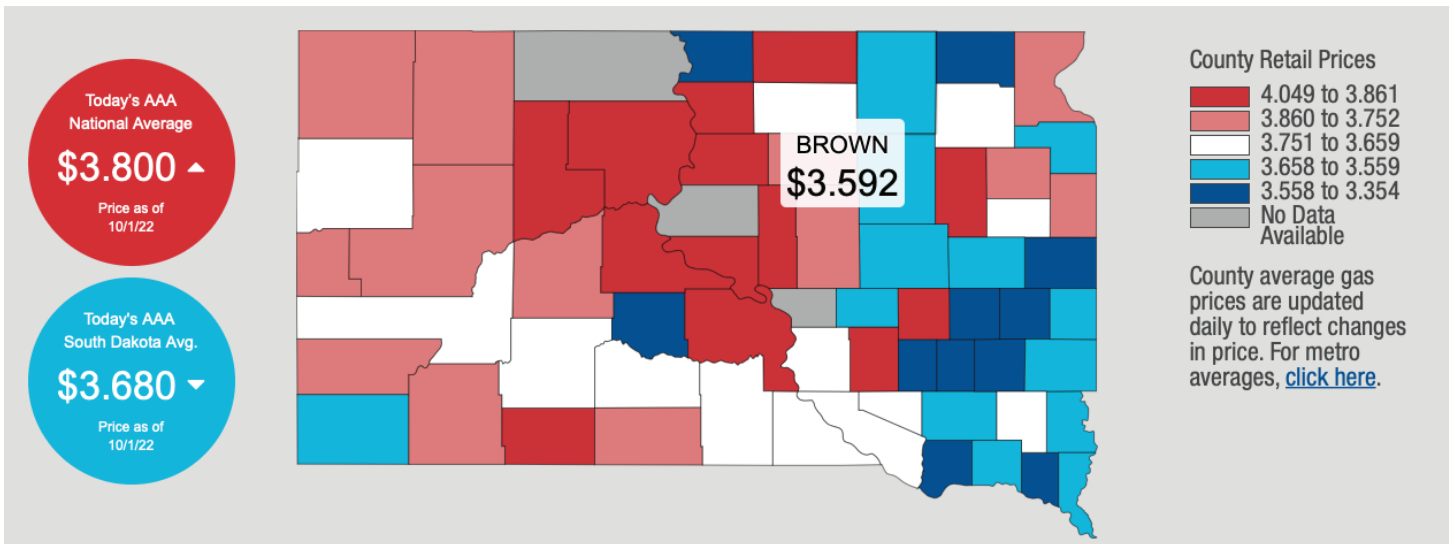
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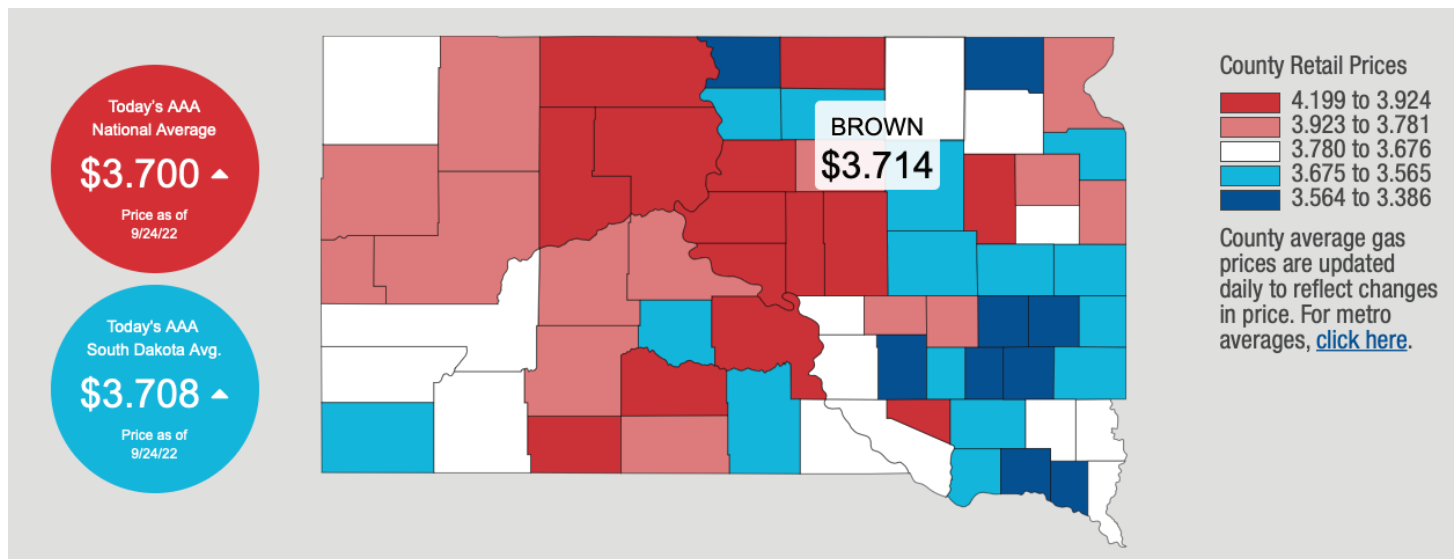
## South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.680	\$3.813	\$4.289	\$4.622
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.689	\$3.821	\$4.291	\$4.637
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.708	\$3.847	\$4.312	\$4.716
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.800	\$3.960	\$4.439	\$4.893
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.158	\$3.272	\$3.647	\$3.293

### This Week



### Last Week



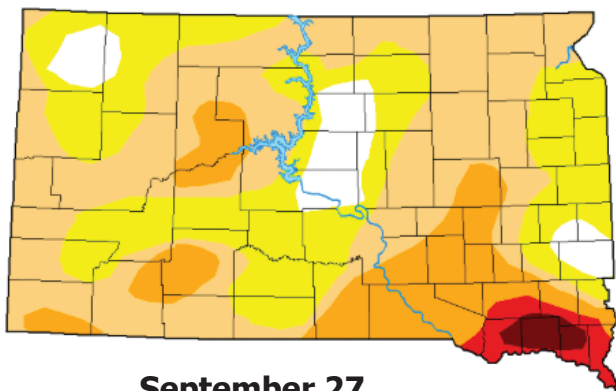
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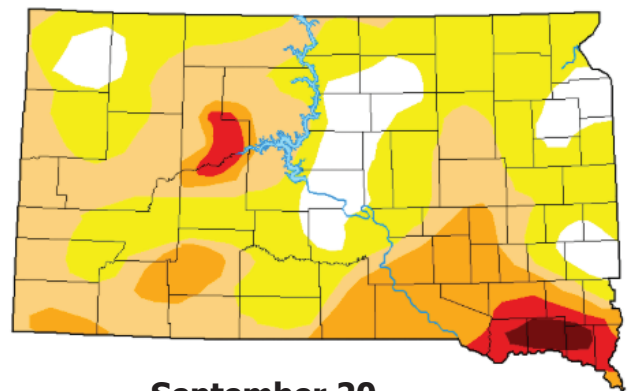
## Drought Classification



## Drought Monitor



September 27



September 20

Half an inch or more of rain fell across parts of North Dakota and Wyoming, with locally an inch or more in parts of Colorado and Nebraska and over 2 inches in parts of Kansas. But most of South Dakota had less than a fourth of an inch of rain as did large parts of Nebraska and Wyoming. More than 70% of the topsoil moisture was short or very short in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming, according to USDA statistics, with the numbers 67% in Colorado and 54% in North Dakota. According to media reports, heat and drought limited forage production in Nebraska and other drought-stricken areas, forcing cattle producers to weigh hay supplies against herd size for the winter. Many growers chopped drought-damaged crops for silage. D0-D2 were pulled back in a few parts of Wyoming, D0-D3 were trimmed in parts of Kansas and Colorado where the heaviest rains fell, and D3 was deleted in western South Dakota. But drought or abnormal dryness expanded in other parts of the High Plains region states, including North Dakota (D0-D2), Colorado (D0-D1), Nebraska (D2-D3), South Dakota (D0-D4), and Kansas (D0-D2 and D4).

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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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## Webster Area pushes Groton Area to 18th place in state rankings

Groton Area suffered a stunning setback Friday night as Webster Area's defense forced four turnovers to post a 28-21 Northeast Conference win.

Less than five minutes into the game, Trey Dunse intercepted the ball and ran it back 65 yards for a Bearcat touchdown. The PAT kick was no good and Webster took a 6-0 lead.

Groton Area would score with 4:18 left in the first quarter on a three yard run by Andrew Marzahn. Nicolas Fernandez kicked the PAT and the Tigers had a 7-6 lead.

Webster would mount another drive that would culminate with a one yard run by Carson Mount. The PAT was a pass from Jan Lesnar to Carter Williams and the Bearcats had a 14-6 lead. Mount would later break free and dash 51 yards to score for Webster with 4:28 left in the half. The PAT pass attempt failed and it was 20-6, Webster, at half time.

Marzahn would score with 8:11 left in the third quarter on a 10 yard run with Fernandez kicking the PAT and it was 20-14.

Webster would have another big play when Brent Bearman would run 60 yards to score with 9:31 left in the game. The two point conversion was good on a Bearman run, and Webster took a 28-14. Groton Area would score with 2:54 left in the game on a six yard pass from Lane Tietz to Tate Larson. Fernandez kicked the PAT and it was 28-21. The Tigers would recover a fumble and had an opportunity to score; however, the Bearcats intercepted the ball at the one yard line and would go on for the win.

Groton Area had more first downs, 24-10. The Bearcats had more yards rushing, 190-158. Marzahn had 17 carries for 96 yards and two touchdowns, Teylor Diegel had eight carries for 47 yards and Lane Tietz had four carries for 15 yards. Bearman would lead Webster with 15 carries for 102 yards which include that 60 yard touchdown run. Mount had 11 carries for 82 yards and Ethan Opitz had five carries for eight yards.

The Tigers completed 20 of 36 passes for 183 yards with one touchdown and two interceptions. The Bearcats completed four of eight passes for 60 yards. Receivers for Groton Area were Larson with seven catches for 59 yards and one touchdown, Diegel had four catches for 49 yards, Marzahn had four catches for 39 yards, Ethan Gengerke had four catches for 32 yards and Colby Dunker had one catch for for yards. Jacob Keller had all four catches for the 60 yards receiving for Webster Area.

Logan Ringgenberg and Holden Sippel each had 12 tackles for Groton Area while Dunker had 11, Brevin Flihs seven and Marzahn had five tackles. Bearman and Keller each had nine tackles for Webster Area.

The Tigers lost two fumbles while the Bearcats lost one of two fumbles. Groton Area had three penalties for 20 yards and Webster Area had five for 51 yards.

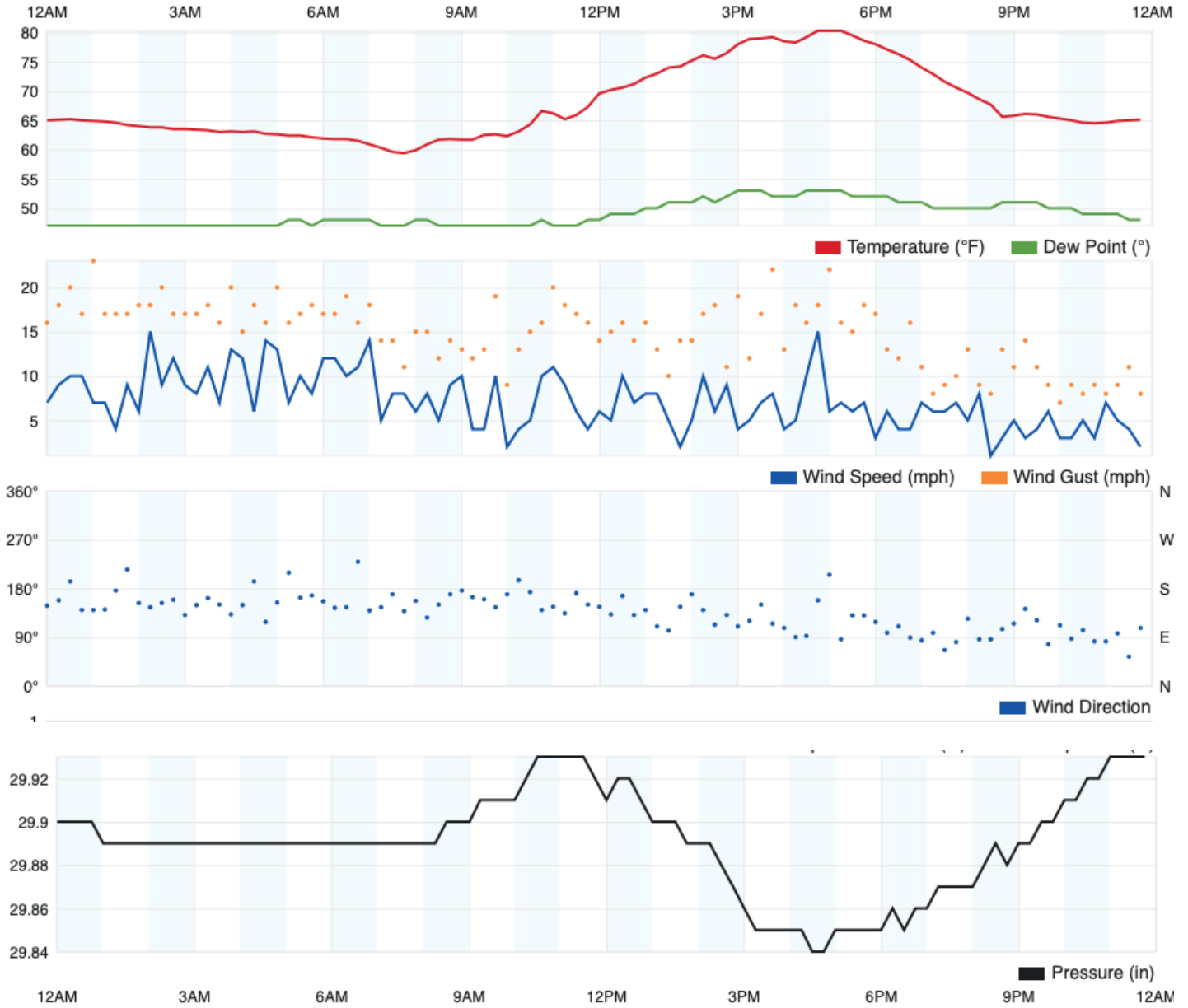
Groton Area is now 3-4 on the season and will travel to Mobridge on October 14. Webster Area is now 2-5 and will host Aberdeen Roncalli on Friday.

Groton Area dropped to 18th place in the power points. The Tigers were 14th prior to the game. Mo-bridge-Pollock is in 17th place.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Partly Sunny

High: 77 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy  
then Slight  
Chance  
Showers

Low: 55 °F

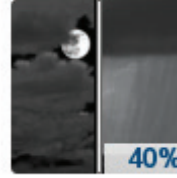
Sunday



Slight Chance  
Showers

High: 78 °F

Sunday  
Night



Mostly Cloudy  
then Chance  
Showers

Low: 56 °F

Monday



Chance  
Showers

High: 72 °F

## Weekend Outlook

High temperatures in the  
mid 70s to lower 80s

Partly sunny today, with  
more clouds on Sunday.  
Increasing chances for  
rain showers Sunday  
night.



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

[www.weather.gov/abr](http://www.weather.gov/abr)

Other than a few sprinkles off and on today and Sunday, conditions will be dry and mild this weekend. Look for increasing chances for rain showers Sunday night.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 81 °F at 4:52 PM

Low Temp: 59 °F at 7:37 AM

Wind: 23 mph at 12:59 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 44 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 92 in 1922

Record Low: 21 in 1974

Average High: 68°F

Average Low: 40°F

Average Precip in Oct.: .08

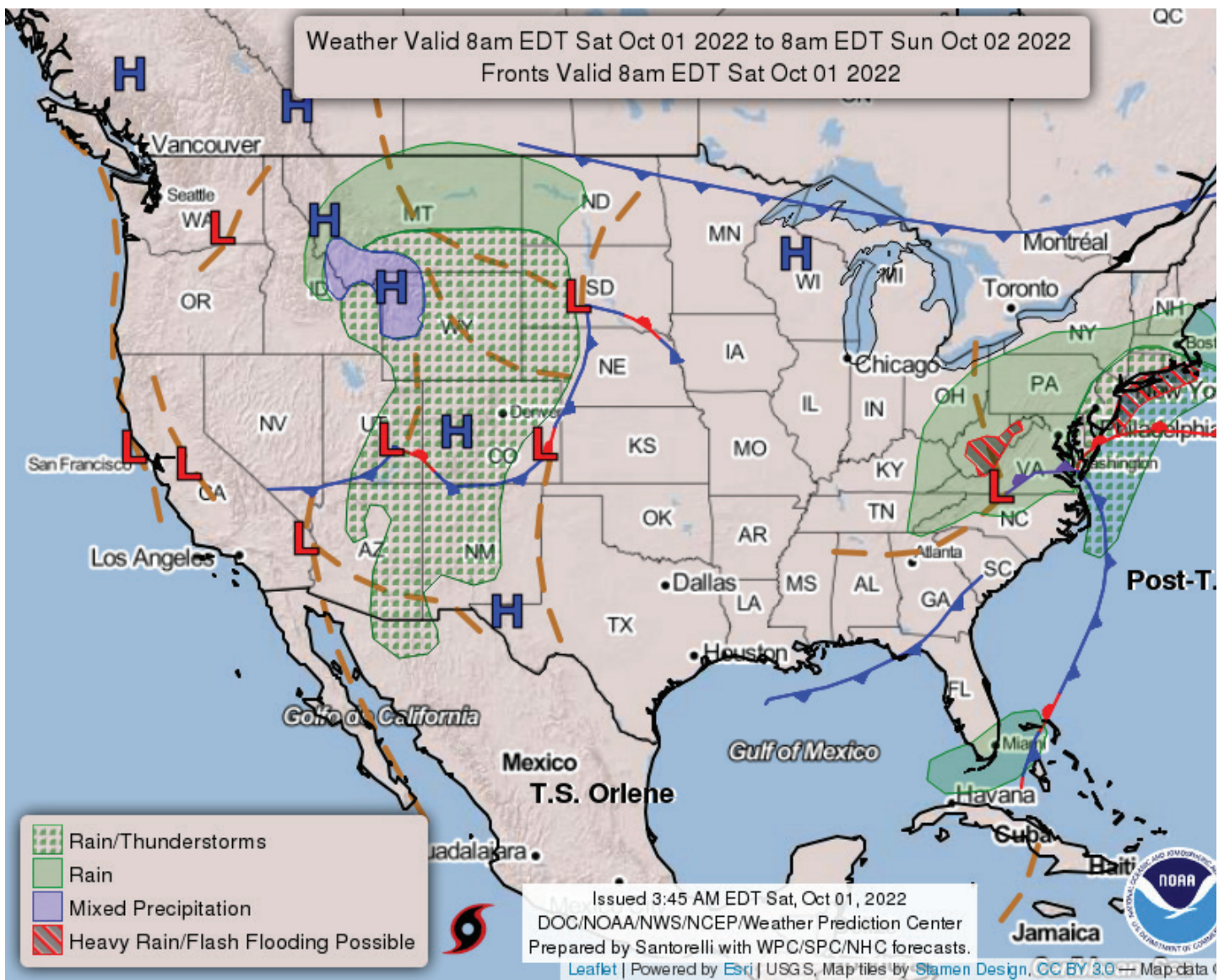
Precip to date in Oct.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 18.41

Precip Year to Date: 16.05

Sunset Tonight: 7:14:25 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:30:46 AM





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## Today in Weather History

October 1, 1971: A rare October tornado developed in Sully County during the evening hours. The brief tornado damaged a ranch home and large barn, 6 miles west-northwest of Onida.

October 1, 1999: A narrow band of heavy snow fell across portions of South Dakota. Snowfall amounts of 4 to 8" were typical in the relatively narrow band, breaking many daily records.

October 1, 2012: Drought continued to intensify and expand across central and northeast South Dakota through October, resulting in severe to exceptional drought conditions. Many locations continued the trend of recording well below-average precipitation totals for the month. The exceptional drought conditions expanded into Stanley, Jones, and southern Lyman counties. Extreme drought conditions spread into southern Dewey, Sully, Hughes, Lyman, Jones, Southwest Hyde, Hamlin, Codington, Grant, and Deuel counties. Severe drought conditions spread into Corson, Dewey, northwest Hyde, Hand, Faulk, Edmunds, McPherson, Brown, eastern Clark, and southern Roberts Counties.

1752 - The second severe hurricane in two weeks hit the Carolinas. The Onslow County Courthouse was destroyed along with all its records, and Beacon Island disappeared. (David Ludlum)

1890: The weather service is first identified as a civilian agency when Congress, at the request of President Benjamin Harrison, passes an act transferring the Signal Service's meteorological responsibilities to the newly-created U.S. Weather Bureau in the Department of Agriculture.

1893: On this day, the village of Caminadaville, Louisiana, was destroyed by a massive hurricane. Caminadaville was a vibrant fishing community in the late 19th century, located on Cheniere Caminada, adjacent to Grand Isle in coastal Jefferson Parish in Louisiana. It took five days for the news of this devastating hurricane to reach New Orleans.

1938: Grannis and Okay, Arkansas set an all-time high-temperature record for October for Arkansas with 105 degrees.

1945: While investigating a Category 1 typhoon over the South China Sea, the typhoon hunter plane was lost. This marks the first of only a few instances of the Hurricane/Typhoon plane was lost during their flight into the storm.

1958: NASA officially begins operations on October 1st, 1958.

1977: While an F3 tornado traveled less than one-mile through Montfort Heights or the greater Cincinnati area, it destroyed 12 homes and damaged 15 others. There were 17 injuries.

1987 - A blast of cold arctic air hit the north central U.S. An afternoon thunderstorm slickened the streets of Duluth MN with hail and snow, and later in the afternoon, strong northerly winds reached 70 mph. Unseasonably warm weather continued in the Pacific northwest. Afternoon highs of 90 degrees at Olympia WA, 92 degrees at Portland OR, and 89 degrees at Seattle WA, were records for the month of October. For Seattle WA it marked the twenty-first daily record high for the year, a record total in itself. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather across central Oklahoma and the eastern half of Texas. Thunderstorms in Texas produced softball size hail northwest of Nocona, and baseball size hail at Troy and Park Springs. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in the southeastern U.S. through the daytime and evening hours. Severe thunderstorms spawned eleven tornadoes, with seven of those tornadoes in Georgia. A tornado southwest of Moultrie, GA, killed two persons and injured a dozen others. Tornadoes also injured one person north of Graceville, FL, and two persons at Bartow, GA. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### PAYING THE PRICE

Making amends means "I've harmed someone." Not an easy thing to do. First, if I have harmed someone, they "certainly deserved it or had it coming to them." Secondly, whenever I apologize, I admit that "I did something that is or was wrong - and that simply is not like me to do something like that." Or, "They are too sensitive - they shouldn't wear their feelings on their sleeves or shoulders. It's about them, not me. I know what I'm doing."

Unfortunately, those options do not agree with God's Word. First, "All have sinned." So, I'm not in any position to harm anyone. Secondly, "No one is righteous, not even one." Well, there goes my reputation. Or, "If you have never committed a sin, pick up a stone and throw it at the first person you see - for they surely have!" So, when I investigate my stone-carrier, it's empty.

"Fools," according to Solomon, "mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright." This includes all of us in one way or another. One who "mocks at making amends" would be a person who has no sense of right or wrong or personal accountability for their actions. They turn a "blind-eye" to God's "ever-present, watchful eye." That's not wise!

To feel unaccountable for our sin implies that we will not be judged by God or man. That surely is foolish, for one day we will all stand before God to be judged. On the other hand, "men of goodwill" are those who want to be "approved" by God and others for the way they act. They want their relationships, beginning with God, to be open and beyond reproach. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" is what making amends is all about.

Prayer: Lord, it's much easier to live in denial than to be a person of honesty and integrity. Give us courage, when we are or do wrong, to seek forgiveness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright. Proverbs 14:9



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)  
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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

### Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White ..... \$48.99/year
- Colored ..... \$79.88/year
- Colored ..... \$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly\* ..... \$31.95/year

\* The E-Weekly is a PDF file emailed to you each week. It does not grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

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State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

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Groton, SD 57445-0034

or scan and email to [paperpaul@grotonsd.net](mailto:paperpaul@grotonsd.net)

## Groton Daily Independent

[www.397news.com](http://www.397news.com)

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- 1 Month ..... \$15.98
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Pay with Paypal. Type the following into your browser window:

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News from the  Associated Press

## Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

PREP FOOTBALL=

Aberdeen Central 17, Watertown 0

Avon 36, Alcester-Hudson 22

Belle Fourche 51, Lakota Tech 20

Bon Homme 62, Chester 7

Britton-Hecla 51, Langford 19

Canistota 52, Deubrook 24

Castlewood 55, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 0

Chamberlain 25, Vermillion 14

Clark/Willow Lake 55, Dakota Hills 0

Colman-Egan 18, Iroquois/ Lake Preston Co-op 2, 20T

Colome 44, Sunshine Bible Academy 13

Dakota Valley 47, Lennox 24

DeSmet def. Arlington, forfeit

Dell Rapids 20, Beresford 6

Deuel 50, Tripp-Delmont/Armour/Andes Central/Dakota Christian 0

Dupree 40, Newell 2

Elk Point-Jefferson 55, Miller/Highmore-Harrold 0

Estelline/Hendricks 63, Waverly-South Shore 18

Faulkton 54, North Central Co-Op 3

Flandreau 21, Jim River 19

Freeman/ Marion/ Freeman Academy Co-op 44, Gayville-Volin 32

Hanson 51, Garretson 0

Harrisburg 36, Sioux Falls Washington 7

Herreid/Selby Area 66, Northwestern 26

Howard 48, Viborg-Hurley 12

Huron 32, Douglas 14

Irene-Wakonda 29, Burke 28

Kimball/White Lake 50, Dell Rapids St. Mary 20

Lead-Deadwood 40, Custer 6

Leola/Frederick 26, Potter County 12

Lyman 54, Bennett County 0

Madison 21, Canton 14

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 48, Wagner 24

New Underwood 38, Jones County 28

Parkston 32, Gregory 25

Philip 20, Kadoka Area 8

Pierre 43, Brandon Valley 34

Platte-Geddes 42, Wolsey-Wessington 24

Rapid City Central 47, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 18

Rapid City Christian 55, Hill City 8

Redfield 37, Parker 12

Sioux Falls Christian 35, Milbank 6

Sioux Falls Jefferson 42, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 17

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Sioux Falls Lincoln 37, Rapid City Stevens 34, OT  
Sioux Valley 55, Baltic 0  
Spearfish 26, Mitchell 21  
Standing Rock, N.D. 50, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 0  
Tea Area 57, Sturgis Brown 7  
Timber Lake 22, Stanley County 20  
Wall 55, Harding County/Bison Co-op 0  
Warner 8, Hamlin 6  
Webster 28, Groton Area 21  
West Central 48, Tri-Valley 0  
Winner 36, Bridgewater-Emery/Ethan 0  
Woonsocket/Wessington Springs/Sanborn Central 42, Mobridge-Pollock 24  
Yankton 38, Brookings 27

## PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Belle Fourche def. Aberdeen Roncalli, 19-25, 25-16, 25-21

## Lakota Nation Invitational=

### Pool A=

Lower Brule def. St. Francis Indian, 25-23, 25-17

Tiospa Zina Tribal def. Lower Brule, 25-17, 25-17

Tiospa Zina Tribal def. Takini, 25-12, 25-6

White River def. Lower Brule, 25-11, 25-15

White River def. St. Francis Indian, 25-21, 25-15

White River def. Takini, 25-10, 25-9

### Pool B=

Custer def. Crow Creek, 22-25, 25-15, 25-19

Custer def. Red Cloud, 25-21, 25-15

Custer def. Santee, Neb., 25-18, 25-13

Oelrichs def. Red Cloud, 25-16, 21-25, 25-22

Oelrichs def. Santee, Neb., 14-25, 25-18, 25-22

Red Cloud def. Crow Creek, 25-23, 25-20

### Pool C=

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte def. Todd County, 22-25, 25-17, 25-15

Lakota Tech def. McLaughlin, 25-14, 25-4

McLaughlin def. Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, 26-24, 20-25, 25-13

Pine Ridge def. Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, 25-17, 21-25, 25-13

Pine Ridge def. Todd County, 25-23, 25-7

### Pool D=

Crazy Horse def. Tiospaye Topa, 25-21, 11-25, 25-18

Little Wound def. Wakpala, 25-17, 25-8

Marty Indian def. Crazy Horse, 25-11, 25-10

Marty Indian def. Tiospaye Topa, 25-17, 25-13

Marty Indian def. Wakpala, 25-15, 25-14

Wakpala def. Crazy Horse, 25-10, 26-24

Wyoming Indian, Wyo. def. Little Wound, 25-18, 27-25

Wyoming Indian, Wyo. def. Marty Indian, 25-9, 25-14

Wyoming Indian, Wyo. def. Tiospaye Topa, 25-11, 25-11

Wyoming Indian, Wyo. def. Wakpala, 25-14, 22-25, 25-16

## Twin City Invitational=

### Blue Pool=

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Gering, Neb. def. St. Thomas More, 25-18, 25-21  
Ogallala, Neb. def. St. Thomas More, 25-15, 25-23  
St. Thomas More def. Torrington, Wyo., 25-19, 18-25, 25-15  
Red Pool=  
Rapid City Stevens def. Chase County, Neb., 25-19, 25-16  
Rapid City Stevens def. McCook, Neb., 23-25, 25-16, 25-23  
Rapid City Stevens def. Scottsbluff, Neb., 25-16, 25-18  
White Pool=  
Chadron, Neb. def. Rapid City Central, 25-23, 25-11  
Crete, Neb. def. Rapid City Central, 25-18, 25-23  
Sidney, Neb. def. Rapid City Central, 25-22, 25-16

Some high school volleyball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

## SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

16-26-37-40-51, Mega Ball: 6, Megaplier: 4

(sixteen, twenty-six, thirty-seven, forty, fifty-one; Mega Ball: six; Megaplier: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$380,000,000

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: 322,000,000

## Governor debate: Noem for abortion ban, Smith wants changes

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem indicated Friday during her reelection campaign's lone debate with her Democratic challenger, state lawmaker Jamie Smith, that if reelected she will uphold the state's abortion ban that provides no exceptions for rape or incest.

The Republican governor explained her position simply as "pro-life," while pledging to push for expanded parental leave in the state and alleviate the toll of inflation on people's budgets. Smith called Noem's stance extreme and said it was endangering women's lives and causing concern among physicians for its lack of clarity on when an abortion is allowed — only to save the life of a pregnant woman.

"It's clear to me that South Dakotans overwhelmingly support a woman's right to an abortion," Smith said. "We talk about freedom all the time, except the freedom to make this choice."

The gubernatorial race's lone head-to-head meeting of the two candidates featured Noem touting her record of a hands-off approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. Smith, who is facing an uphill election in the heavily Republican state, cast himself as a moderate. Here are the key takeaways from the Friday night clash that was hosted by KSFY-TV:

### POCKETBOOK ISSUES

Noem claimed the state has the "strongest economy" in the nation, crediting her decision to forgo government restrictions during the pandemic. But she also turned attention to the squeeze that inflation is putting on household budgets. She said she hears from many people who are "struggling because they can't pay their grocery bill. They're struggling because they can't pay gas prices."

Earlier this week, she promised to push for repeal of the state's 4.5% tax on food sales.

But Smith was quick to point out that was an initiative he has been pushing for years, and when the House passed the proposal in March, support from Noem was lacking. Noem publicly opposed the proposal after the state Senate dismissed it in March, but she said Friday that it was an idea she supported and her office had been working on it.

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Recently, South Dakota's economic growth has lagged behind the rest of the country. Last year, it had the 15th lowest growth in gross domestic product — the broadest measure of economic output — among states. However, South Dakota has seen one of the nation's highest rates of growth in personal income in recent years.

## ETHICS COMPLAINTS AGAINST NOEM

The Republican governor deflected questions on a pair of ethics investigations against her by blaming the state's former attorney general, Republican Jason Ravnsborg, for filing the complaints to the state's Government Accountability Board. She pointed out that she had pressed Ravnsborg to resign after he struck and killed a pedestrian with his car in 2020 and suggested the complaints were just an attempt to get retribution.

A state ethics board in August acted on the complaints against Noem. She was accused of misconduct for interfering in a state agency as it was preparing to deny her daughter a real estate appraiser license, as well as misusing the state airplane by traveling to events hosted by political organizations.

"This matter is closed and it is something that is very clear my daughter never once received special treatment," Noem said, adding that she had followed the law and precedent in her use of the state plane.

However, the Government Accountability Board's three retired judges voted unanimously last month to find that there was evidence that the governor engaged in a conflict of interest and committed malfeasance in the episode with her daughter's licensure, but it also kept the board's action on the complaint a secret. The board also requested that the state's Division of Criminal Investigation examine her use of the state airplane.

Smith took the opportunity to swipe at Noem: "South Dakotans, you can tell the difference between right and wrong."

But it was Noem who mostly prodded Smith. She repeatedly tried to tie him to President Joe Biden and called him "extreme."

## EDUCATION

Smith touted his work as a teacher and coach and sought to criticize Noem for leaning on the work of a conservative college in Michigan, Hillsdale College, to remake the state's social studies standards.

Noem in turn said she was working to elevate parents' voices in education and accused Smith of being a proponent of so-called critical race theory — an academic framework that examines American history through the lens of racism. He said that is not a problem in South Dakota's schools.

## WHAT'S NEXT

Noem had declined an invitation to a debate hosted by South Dakota Public Broadcasting, but Smith challenged her to meet him again.

If she doesn't, the public broadcaster has said it plans to host a debate just with Smith and Libertarian candidate Tracey Quint, who also joined the Friday debate.

## Dozens dead from Ian, one of strongest, costliest US storms

By MEG KINNARD and ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — Rescuers searched for survivors among the ruins of Florida's flooded homes from Hurricane Ian while authorities in South Carolina waited for daylight to assess damage from its strike there as the remnants of one of the strongest and costliest hurricanes to ever hit the U.S. continued to push north.

The powerful storm terrorized millions of people for most of the week, battering western Cuba before raking across Florida from the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean, where it mustered enough strength for a final assault on South Carolina. Now weakened to a post-tropical cyclone, Ian was expected to move across central North Carolina on Saturday morning and reach south-central Virginia by the afternoon.

At least 30 people were confirmed dead, including 27 people in Florida mostly from drowning but others from the storm's tragic aftereffects. An elderly couple died after their oxygen machines shut off when



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they lost power, authorities said.

Meanwhile, distraught residents waded through knee-high water Friday, salvaging what possessions they could from their flooded homes and loading them onto rafts and canoes.

"I want to sit in the corner and cry. I don't know what else to do," Stevie Scuderi said after shuffling through her mostly destroyed Fort Myers apartment, the mud in her kitchen clinging to her purple sandals.

In South Carolina, Ian's center came ashore near Georgetown, a small community along the Winyah Bay about 60 miles (95 kilometers) north of historic Charleston. The storm washed away parts of four piers along the coast, including two connected to the popular tourist town of Myrtle Beach.

The storm's winds were much weaker Friday than during Ian's landfall on Florida's Gulf Coast earlier in the week. Authorities and volunteers there were still assessing the damage as shocked residents tried to make sense of what they just lived through.

Anthony Rivera, 25, said he had to climb through the window of his first floor apartment during the storm to carry his grandmother and girlfriend to the second floor. As they hurried to escape the rising water, the storm surge had washed a boat right up next to his apartment.

"That's the scariest thing in the world because I can't stop no boat," he said. "I'm not Superman."

Even though Ian has long passed over Florida, new problems continued to arise. A 14-mile (22-kilometer) stretch of Interstate 75 was closed late Friday in both directions in the Port Charlotte area because of the massive amount of water swelling the Myakka River.

Ross Giarratana, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Tampa, said the Myakka was cresting at a record 12.73 feet (3.88 meters) Saturday morning.

Further southeast, the Peace River was also at a major flood stage early Saturday in Polk, Hardee and DeSoto counties. The majority of those points have not yet crested, Giarratana said.

"It was crazy to look at just how quickly the rivers were rising," he said. "We knew that we were in for some record stuff."

The official death toll climbed throughout the day Friday, with authorities warning it would likely rise much higher once crews made a more comprehensive sweep of the damage. Searches were aimed at emergency rescues and initial assessments, Florida Division of Emergency Management Director Kevin Guthrie said. He described one submerged home as an example.

"The water was up over the rooftop, right, but we had a Coast Guard rescue swimmer swim down into it and he could identify that it appeared to be human remains. We do not know exactly how many," Guthrie said.

The dead included a 68-year-old woman swept into the ocean by a wave and a 67-year-old man who fell into rising water inside his home while awaiting rescue.

Authorities also said a 22-year-old woman died after an ATV rollover from a road washout and a 71-year-old man suffered a fatal fall from a rooftop while putting up rain shutters. Another three people died in Cuba earlier in the week.

Hurricane Ian has likely caused "well over \$100 billion" in damage, including \$63 billion in privately insured losses, according to the disaster modeling firm Karen Clark & Co., which regularly issues flash catastrophe estimates. If those numbers are borne out, that would make Ian at least the fourth costliest hurricane in U.S. history.

In the Sarasota suburb of North Point, Florida, residents of the Country Club Ridge subdivision waded through waterlogged streets Friday. John Chihil solemnly towed a canoe and another small boat through the ankle-deep water.

"There's really not much to feel. It's an act of God, you know?" he said. "I mean, that's all you can do is pray and hope for a better day tomorrow."

## Worst Brazil forest fires in a decade, yet election silence

By FABIANO MAISONNAVE Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — September has come and gone, marking another painful milestone for the

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world's largest rainforest. It's the worst month for fire in the Amazon in over a decade.

Satellite sensors detected over 42,000 fires in 30 days according to Brazil's national space institute. It is the first time since 2010 that fires in the Amazon surpassed 40,000 in a single month.

This September was two and a half times worse than last. Coming at the peak of the dry season, it's usually the worst month not only for fire but also for deforestation.

The official data for forest loss only goes through September 23 so far, yet is already 14% more devastating than September 2021. In just those three weeks, the Amazon lost 1,120 square kilometers of rainforest (434 square miles), an area larger than New York City.

The surge in forest fire occurs amid a polarizing presidential campaign. Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro is seeking a second four-year term against leftist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who ruled Brazil between 2003 and 2010 and leads in the polls. The first round of the election is on Sunday.

Despite the smoke clogging the air of entire Amazon cities, state elections have largely ignored environmental issues. Besides the President, Brazilians will also elect governors and state and national parliaments.

In Para state, worst for both deforestation and fire, the subject of deforestation was barely touched on during a TV debate among gubernatorial candidates held Tuesday by the Globo network.

Over an hour and a half, only one candidate mentioned the steep increase in deforestation. Globo, Brazil's leading television network, did not even select it as one of eight debate topics.

Protecting the forest is not a high-priority for the population, after years of pandemic and a deteriorating economy, Paulo Barreto, a researcher with the nonprofit Amazon Institute of People and the Environment, told the Associated Press. "But the fact that journalists don't ask is an even bigger problem." Deforestation can lead to more poverty, he said. "On the other hand, there are growing economic opportunities related to conservation."

Fire in the Amazon is almost always deliberately set, to improve cattle pasture or burn recently-felled trees once they are dry. Often the fires burn out of control and reach pristine forest areas.

Studies have shown that deforestation rates peak in election years, and 2022 has been particularly intense because of Bolsonaro's anti-environmental rhetoric, according to analysts.

"With a chance of changing the government to one that promises more rigor, it seems that the deforesters are taking advantage of the possibility that the party's over," Barreto said.

Since Bolsonaro took office, in 2019, deforestation has been on the rise, as his administration has defanged environmental authorities and backed measures to loosen land protections, emboldening environmental offenders.

The far-right leader has repeatedly denied that fire is even increasing, despite official data from his government agency. On Thursday night, during the final Presidential debate before the vote, he said that forest fires occur periodically in the Amazon, dismissed the criticism as a "war of narratives," and said Brazil "is an example to the world" on conservation.

It was an answer to Simone Tebet, a senator who is close to agribusiness leaders and considered a moderate in the race. In one of the few moments free of personal insults, she criticized Bolsonaro's environmental record in a segment related to climate change.

"Your administration is the one that has set biomes, forests and my Pantanal wetlands on fire. Your administration favored miners and loggers, and protected them," she said. "You, in this regard, were the worst president in Brazil's history."

During his campaign, da Silva promised to restore law enforcement and gained support from Indigenous and environmental leaders, such as former Environment Minister Marina Silva. She had broken publicly with the former president over his push to build hydroelectric dams and other development initiatives in the Amazon.

In announcing her support during a meeting with da Silva a few weeks ago, she called Bolsonaro a threat to Brazil's democracy. She said the country is facing a critical moment on issues ranging from the environment to the economy.

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## Supreme Court poised to keep marching to right in new term

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With public confidence diminished and justices sparring openly over the institution's legitimacy, the Supreme Court on Monday will begin a new term that could push American law to the right on issues of race, voting and the environment.

Following June's momentous overturning of nearly 50 years of constitutional protections for abortion rights, the court is diving back in with an aggressive agenda that seems likely to split its six conservative justices from its three liberals.

"It's not going to be a sleepy term," said Allison Orr Larsen, a William and Mary law professor. "Cases the court already has agreed to hear really have the potential to bring some pretty significant changes to the law."

Into this swirling mix steps new Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the court's first Black woman. Jackson took the seat of Justice Stephen Breyer, a member of the court's liberal wing, who retired in June. She's not expected to alter the liberal-conservative divide on the court, but for the first time the court has four women as justices and white men no longer hold a majority.

The court, with three appointees of President Donald Trump, could discard decades of decisions that allow colleges to take account of race in admissions and again weaken the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, the crown jewel of the civil rights movement.

In a separate elections case, a Republican-led appeal could dramatically change the way elections for Congress and the presidency are conducted by handing more power to state legislatures and taking it away from state courts.

Also on the agenda is a clash over the rights of a business owner with a religious objection to working with same-sex couples on their weddings.

In the term's first arguments Monday, the justices are being asked to limit the reach of the Clean Water Act, nation's main law to combat water pollution. The case involves an Idaho couple who won an earlier high court round in their bid to build a house on property near a lake without getting a permit under that law.

The outcome could change the rules for millions of acres of property that contain wetlands.

A Supreme Court decision for the couple could strip environmental protections from 45 million acres and threaten water quality for millions of people, said Sam Sankar, senior vice president of the Earthjustice environmental group.

"It's going to help a lot of industries. It's going to hurt real people," Sankar said.

But Damien Schiff, representing the couple, said a favorable court ruling could free ordinary property owners from worrying about large fines and years of delays. "You don't have to be a large industrial company or large property owner to have a problem," Schiff said.

There's little expectation that the outcomes in the highest-profile cases will be anything other than conservative victories, following last term's outcomes. In their first full term together, the conservatives ruled not only on abortion, but expanded gun rights, enhanced religious rights, reined in the government's ability to fight climate change and limited Biden administration efforts to combat COVID-19.

Deborah Archer, president of the American Civil Liberties Union, underscored the long odds facing defenders of affirmative action in college admissions.

"It is most certainly an uphill climb. We're in a scary place where we are relying on Justice Roberts," Archer said.

Her assessment stems from Chief Justice John Roberts' long-standing support, both as a judge and a White House lawyer in the 1980s, for limits on considerations of race in education and voting.

"It's a sordid business, this divvying us up by race," Roberts wrote in a 2006 redistricting case from Texas.

Last term's epic decisions might have produced bruised feelings among the justices anyway. But the leak of the abortion decision in early May, seven weeks before it was released, exacerbated tensions on the court, several justices have said. The court has apparently not identified the source of the leak, Breyer said in a recent interview on CNN.

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Justice Elena Kagan delivered a series of talks over the summer in which she said the public's view of the court can be damaged especially when changes in its membership lead to big changes in the law.

"It just doesn't look like law when some new judges appointed by a new president come in and start just tossing out the old stuff," Kagan said in an appearance last month at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island.

Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito both took issue with Kagan, if obliquely. Roberts said it was wrong to equate disagreement with the court's decisions with questions of legitimacy.

In a comment Tuesday to The Wall Street Journal, Alito didn't name Kagan. "But saying or implying that the court is becoming an illegitimate institution or questioning our integrity crosses an important line," he said, according to the newspaper.

Separately, Virginia "Ginni" Thomas, the wife of Justice Clarence Thomas, was interviewed on Thursday by the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection. She stood by the false claim that the 2020 election was fraudulent, according to the committee chairman, Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss.

Ginni Thomas, a longtime conservative activist, texted with White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and contacted lawmakers in Arizona and Wisconsin in the weeks after the election. In January, her husband was the only justice to vote to keep documents from the National Archives out of the committee's hands.

Polls have shown a dip in approval for the court and respect for it. The latest Gallup Poll, released last week, reflected Americans' lowest level of trust in the court in 50 years and a record-tying low approval rating.

In a talk to judges and lawyers in Colorado last month, Roberts reflected on the last year at the court, calling it an "an unusual one and difficult in many respects." Following the leak, the court was ringed with an 8-foot security fence, and Roberts called it "gut-wrenching" to drive to work past the barricades. He also said it was "unnatural" to hear arguments without the public present, a concession to the coronavirus pandemic.

Now the barricades are down and the public will be allowed inside the courtroom for arguments for the first time since March 2020. The court will keep one pandemic practice, broadcasting live audio of arguments.

Roberts seemed eager to look ahead. "I think just moving forward from things that were unfortunate in the year is the best way to respond to it," he said.

Last term, the court moved "firmly in a rightward direction," said Irv Gornstein, executive director of the Supreme Court Institute at Georgetown University's law school. "There is no reason to think this coming term or any term in the foreseeable future will be any different."

## Untested rape kits plagued Memphis long before jogger case

By JONATHAN MATTISE and ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Problems with rape kit evidence testing keep haunting Memphis.

A city long plagued by a heavy backlog of untested sexual assault kits was shaken by Cleotha Henderson's arrest in the killing of Eliza Fletcher after she was abducted during a morning jog last month.

So when authorities said his DNA was linked to a rape that occurred nearly a year earlier — charging him separately days after he was arrested in Fletcher's killing — an outraged city turned to the obvious question: Why was he still on the streets?

The case of Henderson, who already has served 20 years in prison for a kidnapping he committed at 16, has reignited criticism of Tennessee's sexual assault testing process. That has included calls for shorter delays from the testing agency, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, and questions about why Memphis didn't seek to fast-track a kit that could have been tested in days.

Instead, it took nearly a year, unearthing key evidence too late to charge Henderson before Fletcher's killing.

The tragic outcome brings back memories from the early 2010s, when Memphis revealed a backlog of about 12,000 untested rape kits that took years to whittle down and led to a lawsuit that's still ongoing. The new rape charges have spurred another lawsuit accusing the Memphis Police Department of negli-



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gence for the delay.

The scenario also has raised broader concerns about Tennessee's struggles with a problem that has been in the national spotlight for decades and that some states have addressed.

In response, GOP Gov. Bill Lee and Republican legislative leaders have fast-tracked money for 25 additional TBI lab positions, including six in DNA processing. The agency had requested 50 more this year, but Lee funded only 25 in his proposed budget and lawmakers approved that amount.

Meghan Ybos, a rape victim involved in the backlog lawsuit, blames the city for not curbing a problem known for years despite receiving more than \$20 million in grants to address the backlog.

"I don't think the shortcomings of Memphis law enforcement are limited to the handling of rape kits," Ybos said, "but I think the public should be outraged at the lack of transparency about what Memphis has done with tens of millions of grant money that the city and county have received to test rape kits, train police, hire victim advocates, prosecute cold rape cases and more."

As of August, Tennessee's three state labs averaged from 28 to 49 weeks to process rape kits under circumstances that don't include an order to rush the test. More than 950 rape kits sat untested in labs.

TBI attributed the delays to staffing woes and low pay that complicates recruiting and keeping scientists.

TBI Director David Rausch laid out further moves in hopes of processing all evidence in eight to 12 weeks within the next year: Overtime, weekend hours, more outsourcing to private labs and using retired TBI workers for new worker training to free up current employees.

Tennessee doesn't require specific turnaround times for newly collected rape kits, though 19 other states do, according to the Joyful Heart Foundation, which is pushing Tennessee to follow suit. Massachusetts requires processing kits within 30 days, but most of the states require testing within 60, 90 or 120 days.

Tennessee's House and Senate speakers haven't flagged turnaround mandates as a priority. TBI, meanwhile, said any turnaround requirement would need proper funding.

Ilse Knecht, policy and advocacy director for the Joyful Heart Foundation, said Tennessee's problems aren't unique. Without an official U.S. count of rape kits awaiting analysis, Knecht estimated there are likely more than 200,000 untested kits in law enforcement or hospital storage nationally.

"Every single one of these kits that is sitting on a shelf could represent someone like the offender in this case, where you look at their criminal history and they're committing all kinds of crime, they've been doing it for decades, and the evidence that could stop them is sitting on a shelf somewhere," Knecht told The Associated Press.

Henderson was charged with first-degree murder in the kidnapping and killing of Fletcher, a mother of two and a kindergarten teacher who was on a pre-dawn run Sept. 2 when she was forced into an SUV on the University of Memphis campus. Her remains were found on Sept. 5 behind a vacant Memphis house.

Henderson, who also has gone by Cleotha Abston, has not entered a plea in the killing but was rebooked in jail on Sept. 9 on charges related to the September 2021 rape of a Memphis woman. Henderson has pleaded not guilty to charges in that attack, including aggravated rape.

The new lawsuit brought by the woman who says she was raped in that attack says Memphis police could have prevented Fletcher's death if they had investigated the 2021 rape more vigorously.

"Cleotha Abston should and could have been arrested and indicted for the aggravated rape of (the alleged victim) many months earlier, most likely in the year 2021," the lawsuit says. The AP isn't naming the woman.

Rape kits contain semen, saliva or blood samples taken from a victim. Specimens containing DNA evidence are uploaded to the FBI's Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS, to check for a match.

In Memphis, backlogs have long been a problem. About 12,000 untested rape kits were disclosed there in 2013. A task force was formed, and police began using results to start investigations — and get some convictions.

The city has said the backlog revealed in 2013 has been eliminated. But long delays in testing rape kits persist in Tennessee, including cases from Memphis.

In the Henderson case, Memphis police said a sexual assault report was taken Sept. 21, 2021. A rape

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kit was submitted two days later to TBI, the bureau said.

"An official CODIS hit was not received until after" Fletcher's abduction, police said, and probable cause to make an arrest "did not exist until after the CODIS hit had been received."

TBI said no request was made for expedited analysis and no suspect information was included in the submission.

The kit eventually was pulled from evidence storage and an initial report was completed Aug. 29, the bureau said.

The 2021 DNA matched Henderson's in the national database on Sept. 5, three days after Fletcher's abduction, authorities said. TBI reported the match to Memphis police.

Under Tennessee law, police agencies generally have 30 days to send rape kit evidence to TBI or another lab, but there's no mandate on processing times.

TBI said its budget request was conservative — \$10.2 million for 40 scientists and 10 lower-level positions. A West Virginia University forensic calculator said TBI labs needed another 71 positions, the bureau noted.

In DNA testing, the labs currently have six supervisors and 26 special agent/forensic scientist positions, some in hiring or lengthy new hire training. TBI hopes to start the 40 scientists — 14 in DNA — by late this month and others by late March.

Still, many have grown impatient at a situation they say called for urgency.

"These are our most vulnerable victims," said Josh Spickler, executive director of Just City, a Memphis organization pressing for a fairer criminal justice system. "To have a backlog like that build up, and still, to this day, have it be the norm that a rape kit test takes the many months that it does, is really not acceptable."

## Arizona judge won't suspend ruling that halted all abortions

By BOB CHRISTIE Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — An Arizona judge on Friday declined to put her order that allowed enforcement of a pre-statehood law making it a crime to provide an abortion on hold, saying abortion rights groups that asked her to block the order are not likely to prevail on appeal.

The ruling from Pima County Superior Court Judge Kellie Johnson means the state's abortion providers will not be able to restart procedures. Abortions were halted on Sept. 23 when Johnson ruled that a 1973 injunction must be lifted so that the Civil War-era law could be enforced.

Republican Attorney General Mark Brnovich sought the order lifting the injunction. Attorneys with his office told the judge that, since the U.S. Supreme Court's June 24 decision said women do not have a constitutional right to obtain an abortion, there was no legal reason to block the old law.

Planned Parenthood and its Arizona affiliate had urged Johnson to keep the injunction issued shortly after Roe v. Wade was decided in 1973. They argued that laws enacted by the state Legislature in the ensuing 50 years should take precedence.

Planned Parenthood's lawyers on Monday asked Johnson to put her ruling on hold to allow an appeal.

Before last Friday's ruling allowing enforcement of the old law, abortions were legal in Arizona until the fetus was viable, usually at about 24 weeks of pregnancy. But on Saturday, a law enacted by the state Legislature last spring banning abortion at 15 weeks took effect.

Gov. Doug Ducey has said that law takes precedence, but his lawyers did not seek to argue that position in court. Brnovich and some Republican lawmakers insist the old law is in force.

Brittany Fonteno, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Arizona, said she was "outraged" by the ruling.

"It is impermissible that Arizonans are waking up each morning to their elected officials making conflicting statements about which laws are in effect or claiming that they do not know, and yet the court has refused to provide any clarity or relief," Fonteno said.

Some clinics in Arizona have been referring patients to providers in California and New Mexico since Johnson lifted the injunction on the old law, and they were prepared to restart abortions. The pre-statehood

law carries a sentence of two to five years in prison for doctors or anyone else who assists in an abortion. Last year, the Legislature repealed a law allowing charges against women who seek abortions

Ashleigh Feiring, a nurse at abortion provider Camelback Family Planning in Phoenix, said her office will keep looking for ways to serve patients.

"We're trying to think of everything we can to get loopholes in the law," Feiring said Friday, adding that the facility would be willing to once again provide the procedure.

Feiring said her office continues to do post-miscarriage care and provide patients with ultrasounds so they know how many weeks pregnant they may be. That's important, because abortion pills can only be used in the first 10-12 weeks of a pregnancy.

Feiring said some patients are able to get an abortion pill prescription from a provider in Sweden and get it filled through the mail by a pharmacy in India, but that takes about three weeks. Arizona law bans delivery of the abortion pill through the mail, and U.S. providers generally will not take that risk.

Since Roe was overturned, Arizona and 13 other states have banned abortions at any stage of pregnancy. About 13,000 people in Arizona get an abortion each year, according to Arizona Department of Health Services reports.

## **NIH to fund unproven ALS drugs under patient-backed law**

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — When patients with a deadly diagnosis and few treatment options have tried to get unapproved, experimental drugs, they have long faced a dilemma: Who will pay?

Responsibility for funding so-called compassionate use has always fallen to drugmakers, though many are unwilling or unable to make their drugs available for free to dying patients.

After years of lobbying Congress, patients with the debilitating illness known as Lou Gehrig's disease have found an unprecedented solution: make the federal government pay.

Under a recent law, the National Institutes of Health will begin spending about \$25 million to enroll patients in compassionate use — also called open access — programs of unapproved drugs. The first step, announced Friday, will give patients access to a sugar-based injection called trehalose, that is thought to help nerve cells clear toxic proteins.

Only patients who can't get into conventional drug trials are eligible for the program. And their progress must be tracked to gather data about the treatment and their underlying disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS.

The initiative blurs the line between treatment and research, and it puts the NIH in the position of paying for unapproved drugs in studies that may yield limited data. While it offers a critical new option for ALS patients, it also raises the possibility that limited federal dollars could eventually be tapped for more unproven treatments in other diseases.

"We don't typically expect the government to pay for things until we know they work," said Holly Fernandez Lynch, a University of Pennsylvania bioethicist. "But the system we have in this country relies on drug companies to develop our drugs, and private companies are not in the business of providing their products for free."

Fernandez Lynch and many other experts support the new approach as an innovative solution to the challenges facing ALS patients, who typically survive three to five years after initial symptoms. The disease destroys nerve cells needed to walk, talk and — eventually — breathe.

Up to 90% of ALS patients are ineligible for traditional clinical trials, according to researchers, typically because their disease has progressed too far to show major treatment benefits. Even eligible patients must compete for access. One recent analysis counted 2,000 trial openings in the U.S. for 25,000 people living with ALS.

Patients aren't the only beneficiaries of the NIH program. The government funding essentially replaces costs previously borne by drugmakers.

One long-time patient advocate sees a troubling precedent in that financial shift.

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"My sense is that it's the companies' responsibility, not the taxpayers', to pick up the cost for expanded access programs," said Gregg Gonsalves, a Yale University researcher who has informally advised ALS patients on expanded access. "But the companies have stonewalled patients for years, so as a last resort they went to Congress."

During the 1980s and 1990s, Gonsalves and other HIV activists were instrumental in pushing drugmakers to provide early access to experimental medications.

ALS patients say most companies in their field are tiny startups that can't afford such costs. Drugmakers have other reasons to deny access, including concerns that unexpected safety problems could hurt their approval chances.

The NIH spends the vast majority of its \$45 billion budget on early-stage research focused on identifying the root causes, treatments and potential cures for diseases.

Tracking drug safety is one key aspect of the new program, along with various biological measures of ALS. But the initiative is unlikely to detect whether the drugs are actually working, because patients won't be compared to a placebo group, the gold-standard approach to medical research.

"Unless the drug is a miracle drug, it's unlikely you would see efficacy in this type of research," said Dr. Walter Koroshetz, of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

The initiative is part of broader legislation pushed through Congress last year by patient advocates, including I AM ALS, a nonprofit co-founded by two former Obama White House staffers.

"I'm five years in so I can't qualify for any clinical trials," said Brian Wallach, who launched I AM ALS with his wife after being diagnosed in 2017. "I hope to be eligible for the expanded access pathway."

He describes NIH's new program as a "pilot" that will be reviewed by federal inspectors, as required by the new law.

Wallach spent several years working on the legislation with congressional staffers. It passed the House last year by a 423-3 vote, a rare display of bipartisanship that also underscored the group's political clout.

The far-reaching bill requires the Food and Drug Administration to develop a plan to accelerate drug development and form new partnerships to study neurodegenerative diseases.

The legislation grew out of patients' deep frustration with access to experimental therapies, including a stem cell treatment from the tiny drugmaker Brainstorm Cell Therapeutics.

After the company's 200-patient study failed to show positive results in 2020, Brainstorm allowed a handful of patients to continue receiving injections under expanded access. But company executives said a larger program was infeasible, given that Brainstorm has no revenue.

"We used millions of dollars for our small expanded access program," said Mary Kay Turner, a company executive. "So we did the maximum we could, but it was just a tiny sliver."

Brainstorm plans to submit its drug for FDA approval, despite a rare public statement from the agency last year that company data "do not support the proposed clinical benefit." That followed thousands of calls and messages to the agency from ALS patients.

While many treatments may prove ineffective, Dr. Richard Bedlack of Duke University says getting patients into expanded access programs is still preferable to the current situation, in which they often seek out untested remedies on their own.

"Historically their only option was to go on the internet and try to buy these supplements or alternative therapies," said Bedlack, who consults for several drugmakers.

It remains to be seen how many patients the NIH will enroll under its \$25 million grant. The original law called for \$100 million in funding over four years. House lawmakers have budgeted \$80 million in spending bills for the next fiscal year, though those have not yet passed the Senate.

For now, NIH's Koroshetz notes that the expanded access studies will be more expensive than other NIH trials because the government is bearing the cost of making and distributing the drugs.

He conceded: "It's a little different from our usual grants, where we don't pay the companies at all for the drug."



## Ukraine says Russians shell evacuation convoy, killing 20

By JON GAMBRELL and ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A senior Ukrainian official says Russian forces on Saturday shelled a civilian evacuation convoy in the country's northeast, killing 20 people. Bombardments have intensified as Moscow illegally annexed a swath of Ukrainian territory in a sharp escalation of the war.

Kharkiv region Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said the convoy was struck in the Kupiansky district, calling the attack on people who were trying to flee the area to avoid being shelled "cruelty that can't be justified."

Russian forces have not acknowledged or commented on the attack, apparently the second in two days to hit a humanitarian convoy. Russian troops have retreated from much of the Kharkiv region after a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive last month but continued to shell the area.

The attack comes at a pivotal moment in Russian President Vladimir Putin's war. Facing a Ukrainian counteroffensive, Putin this week heightened threats of nuclear force and used his most aggressive, anti-Western rhetoric to date.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his military vowed to keep fighting to liberate the annexed regions and other Russian-occupied areas.

Ukrainian officials said Saturday that their forces had surrounded thousands of Russian forces holding the strategic eastern city of Lyman, which is located in one of the four incorporated areas. Zelenskyy formally applied Friday for Ukraine to join NATO, increasing pressure on Western allies to help defend the country.

Also Saturday Ukraine's nuclear power provider said that Russian forces blindfolded and detained the head of Europe's largest nuclear plant. It appeared to be an attempt to secure Moscow's hold on the newly annexed territory.

Russian forces seized the director-general of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Ihor Murashov, around 4 p.m. Friday, Ukrainian state nuclear company Energoatom said. That was just hours after Putin signed treaties to absorb Moscow-controlled Ukrainian territory into Russia, including the area around the nuclear plant.

Energoatom said Russian troops stopped Murashov's car, blindfolded him and then took him to an undisclosed location.

Russia did not immediately acknowledge seizing the plant director. The International Atomic Energy Agency, which has staff at the plant, said it was aware of the reports of Murashov's capture, and had contacted Russian authorities for clarification on what happened.

"His detention by (Russia) jeopardizes the safety of Ukraine and Europe's largest nuclear power plant," said Energoatom President Petro Kotin said, demanding the director's immediate release.

The power plant repeatedly has been caught in the crossfire of the war in Ukraine. Ukrainian technicians continued running it after Russian troops seized the power station, and its last reactor was shut down in September as a precautionary measure amid ongoing shelling nearby.

Amid growing international sanctions and condemnation of Russia, a Ukrainian counteroffensive that has embarrassed the Kremlin appeared on the verge of retaking more ground.

A Ukrainian official said Saturday that the Russian-occupied city of Lyman was surrounded, with some 5,000 Russian forces trapped there. Luhansk Gov. Serhiy Haidai claimed that all routes to resupply Russian forces in Lyman were blocked.

"The occupiers asked their leadership for the opportunity to leave, which they refused," Haidai said in a television interview. "Now they have three options: to try to break through, to surrender or to die together."

His claims could not immediately be verified. Russia has not confirmed its forces were cut off, and Russian analysts had said Moscow was sending more troops to the area.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, said Ukraine likely will retake Lyman in the coming days.

Citing Russian reports, the institute said it appeared Russian forces were retreating from Lyman, some 160 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city. That corresponds to online videos purportedly showing some Russian forces falling back as a Ukrainian soldier said they had reached

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Lyman's outskirts.

It said Ukraine also was making "incremental" gains around Kupiansk and the eastern bank of the Oskil River, which became a key front line since the Ukrainian counteroffensive regained control of the Kharkiv region in September.

The Russian army struck the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv twice overnight, once with drones and the second time with missiles, according to regional Gov. Vitaliy Kim. The first attack was conducted with Iranian Shahed-136 kamikaze drones and the second with S-300 missiles, he said on Telegram.

One of the rockets hit a five-story apartment building in the city center, while windows of the surrounding houses were blown out. In another part of the city, a private house and a two-story residential building suffered extensive damage. Five people were injured, including a 3-month-old baby, Kim said.

In its heaviest barrage in weeks, Russia's military on Friday pounded Ukrainian cities with missiles, rockets and suicide drones, with one strike in the Zaporizhzhia region's capital killing 30 and wounding 88.

In a daily intelligence briefing Saturday, the British Defense Ministry said the Russians "almost certainly" struck a humanitarian convoy there with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles. Russia is increasingly using anti-aircraft missiles to conduct attacks on the ground likely due to a lack of munitions, the British military said.

"Russia is expending strategically valuable military assets in attempts to achieve tactical advantage and in the process is killing civilians it now claims are its own citizens," it said.

The attack came while Putin was preparing to sign the annexation treaties, which included the Zaporizhzhia region. Russian-installed officials in Zaporizhzhia blamed Ukrainian forces, but gave no evidence.

Russia now claims sovereignty over 15% of Ukraine, in what NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called "the largest attempted annexation of European territory by force since the Second World War." The NATO chief was meeting Saturday with Denmark's prime minister amid investigations into explosions on Russian pipelines in the Baltic Sea.

## Ole Miss honors James Meredith 60 years after integration

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — The University of Mississippi is paying tribute to 89-year-old James Meredith 60 years after white protesters erupted into violence as he became the first Black student to enroll in what was then a bastion of Deep South segregation.

As it has done on other 10-year anniversaries of integration, the university is hosting celebrations and academic events. On Saturday, Meredith is being honored during the Ole Miss-Kentucky football game, two days after he attended the Rebels' practice to speak to players.

"He came and revolutionized our thinking. He came to open our closed society," Donald Cole, who retired in 2018 as the university's assistant provost and head of multicultural affairs, said during a celebration Wednesday night.

The enigmatic Meredith, who lives in Jackson, has long resisted the label of civil rights leader, as if civil rights are separate from other human rights. He says his effort to enter Ole Miss was his own battle to conquer white supremacy.

Meredith being honored at the Ole Miss-Kentucky game is an ironic echo of history.

Two days before Meredith enrolled on the Oxford campus in 1962, race-baiting Gov. Ross Barnett worked a white crowd into a frenzy at a football stadium in Jackson. Ole Miss fans waved Confederate flags to support their Rebels over the Kentucky Wildcats — and to defy any move toward racial integration.

"I love Mississippi," Barnett declared. "I love her people! Our customs! I love and I respect our heritage!"

The next evening, Barnett quietly reached an agreement with U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy to let Meredith enter Mississippi's oldest public university. Meredith already had a federal court order.

White mobs of students and outsiders erupted when he arrived on the leafy campus with the protection of more than 500 federal law enforcement officers. The attorney general's brother, President John F. Kennedy, deployed National Guard troops to quell the violence, and Meredith enrolled on Oct. 1.

During the event Wednesday at the university, Meredith told an audience: "In my opinion, this is the

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best day I ever lived. But there's some more truth. Celebration is good. I don't think there's anybody in this house or in the state of Mississippi that think the problem has been solved."

Meredith has said for the past several years that he's on a mission from God, to persuade people to abide by the Ten Commandments. He said Wednesday that he sees a special role for Black women to lead the way in restoring moral order to American society.

"There's nothing in Mississippi that God, Jesus Christ and the Black woman cannot fix," Meredith said.

Meredith grew up in segregated Mississippi before finishing high school in Florida. He served in the Air Force and attended Jackson State College, a historically Black school in the state capital, before suing to gain admission to Ole Miss.

A resident and a French journalist were killed in the violence as Meredith enrolled. More than 200 officers and soldiers were wounded and 200 people were arrested.

Federal marshals provided Meredith with round-the-clock protection until he graduated with a political science degree in 1963. Meredith said Wednesday that most of his knowledge about what was happening on campus came from the marshals.

"Most of them were scared to death of the Mississippi people with rifles and shotguns," he said.

U.S. Marshals Service Director Ronald L. Davis named Meredith an honorary deputy marshal during the ceremony Wednesday. Davis, who is Black, said Meredith brought widespread change to American society.

"You chose a path that was not traveled — one with much resistance, one with fear and threats and violence, and you went there anyway," Davis said.

The University of Mississippi had about 21,850 students on all of its campuses in the 2021 fall semester, with about 12.7% Black enrollment. About 38% of Mississippi residents are Black.

Ethel Scurlock, the first Black dean of the university's honors college, said during the keynote speech Wednesday that she had not yet been born when Meredith integrated Ole Miss in 1962 or when he was shot soon after setting out on his March Against Fear in 1966.

"But Mr. Meredith, I am here today," Scurlock said. "I am the unborn baby that you were willing to go to war for."

## Western push on China, Russia at UN rights body faces test

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Western countries are leading a rare two-pronged push at the U.N.'s main human rights body to better scrutinize the human rights records of two big world powers: China, over allegations of abuses during an anti-extremism campaign in western Xinjiang, and Russia, over its government's crack-down on dissent and protest against the war in Ukraine.

Going after two such influential U.N. members — two of the five permanent members of the Security Council no less — at the same time will be no small political task, diplomats and rights advocates say. It testifies to a growing rift between democracies and more autocratic countries, and is shaping up as a gamble of geopolitical clout, the outcome of which will resonate beyond the Geneva conference room where the Human Rights Council meets.

Some Western diplomats insist it's now or never, and say it just so happens the two issues need separate attention.

Britain, Canada, the U.S. and the five Nordic countries are leading a call for council members to agree a debate at its next session in March on alleged abuses against Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim ethnic groups in Xinjiang. They aim to build momentum on an Aug. 31 report by the U.N. human rights chief that raised concerns about possible crimes against humanity during Beijing's anti-extremism drive in the region.

On Tuesday, 26 European Union countries — all of them except Hungary — floated a proposal for the council to appoint a "special rapporteur" on Russia, citing a string of concerns about mass arrests and detentions; harassment of journalists, opposition politicians, activists and rights defenders; and crackdowns — at times violent — on protesters against President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

Both issues will come up for a vote near the end of the council's current session on Oct. 7.

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Intense backroom diplomacy is already underway. Developing countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East make up the majority of the 47 current members of the council. Stalwart allies of China and Russia, including Cuba, Eritrea and Venezuela, are members, as is China itself. Western and European countries have 13 seats.

Some European diplomats have expressed concern that the cultural, political and economic ties — even dependence — that many developing countries have with both Russia and China could torpedo the Western initiatives.

Alexander Pchelyakov, press secretary of the Russian diplomatic mission in Geneva, rejected the “politized” Western proposal on Russia, insisting its “main goals are to punish Russia for pursuing an independent foreign policy course” and to divert attention away from the West’s own problems when it comes to human rights, economics and energy.

The proposal on China is for a simple debate, with no consistent monitoring of the rights situation, and is just about the least intrusive form of scrutiny that the council could seek. The call stops short of creating a team of investigators to look into possible crimes in Xinjiang, or appoint a special rapporteur — a proposal that is on the table with Russia.

John Fisher, global advocacy deputy director at Human Rights Watch, said recently that action on China and Russia are its top two priorities, and they amount to “no small challenge.”

“There was a time when states like China and Russia felt to be almost untouchable,” he said. “But it now feels that states of principle are finally saying ‘enough’ and standing up to those who would seek to disrupt the international rules-based order.”

“Even the fact that these initiatives are under active consideration — and quite likely both to move forward — is itself a signal of the relevance and engagement of the Human Rights Council,” Fisher added.

Western diplomats appear to feel more confident about success with the Russia measure. The council has little power to force countries to act, and there’s little certainty that Moscow would even allow an outside U.N.-backed monitor into Russia as part of the post — if the council seeks to create it.

The Xinjiang debate proposal is shaping up as the bigger ask, diplomats say. The situation is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a less pressing one than in Russia, where a crackdown is continuing. China, ever-protective of its reputation as its global profile and power rise, has said it has largely shuttered what it called training centers in Xinjiang — and what critics derided as detention centers.

One Western diplomat whose country backs the debate on Xinjiang, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, insisted the proposal was a “measured” response. Some supporters of China fret that the plan for a springtime debate is secretly just a foot in the door — a quiet effort that will aim to ramp up pressure on Beijing later on.

A key test will be with Africa, whose countries hold 13 council seats. Some have populations that are predominantly Muslim.

Nicolas Agostini of DefendDefenders, an NGO that promotes human rights in East Africa, told reporters recently that it estimates most African countries will abstain in the Russia vote, but maybe one or two — “we identified Malawi and the Gambia as the two most progressive African states that are members of the council right now” — will vote yes.

“Regarding China, it’s much more complex,” he said, alluding to “extreme Chinese pressure on African states, including members of the OIC — the Organization of Islamic Cooperation — that are African states.”

One African diplomat, also speaking on condition of anonymity because his country is still calibrating its response, said it has a “principled and objective approach” on the China resolution.

“We will have to consider our bilateral relations with the Chinese,” the diplomacy said coyly. “We’re not just going to jump in there (in support of the draft decision).”

## North Korea conducts 4th round of missile tests in 1 week

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Saturday test-fired two short-range ballistic missiles, its



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neighbors said, the fourth round this week of weapons launches that prompted quick, strong condemnation from its rivals.

In an unusually strong rebuke of North Korea's weapons programs, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said North Korea's "obsession" with nuclear weapons is deepening the suffering of its own people, and warned of an "overwhelming response" from South Korea and U.S. militaries should such weapons be used.

"North Korea hasn't abandoned its obsession with nukes and missiles despite the persistent international objection in the past 30 years," Yoon said during an Armed Forces Day ceremony at the military headquarters in central South Korea. "The development of nuclear weapons will plunge the lives of North Korean people in further pains."

"If North Korea attempts to use nukes, it'll face a resolute, overwhelming response by the South Korea-U.S. alliance and our military," Yoon said.

Yoon's comments could enrage North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who in July alleged that Yoon's government was led by "confrontation maniacs" and "gangsters." Kim has also rebuffed Yoon's offers of massive assistance in return for denuclearization.

The North's testing spree this week is seen as a response to recent naval drills between South Korea and the United States and their other training that involved Japan. North Korea views such military exercises by the allies as an invasion rehearsal and argues they reveal U.S. and South Korean "double standards" because they brand the North's weapons tests as provocation.

On Saturday, South Korea, Japanese and U.S. militaries said they detected the two North Korean missile launches. South Korea said the liftoffs occurred from North Korea's capital region.

According to South Korean and Japanese estimates, the missiles flew about 350-400 kilometers (220-250 miles) at a maximum altitude of 30-50 kilometers (20-30 miles) before they landed in the waters between the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Toshiro Ino, Japan's vice defense minister, said the missiles showed "irregular" trajectory.

Some observers say the weapons' reported low and "irregular" trajectory suggest they were likely nuclear-capable, highly maneuverable missiles modeled after Russia's Iskander missile. They say North Korea has developed the Iskander-like weapon to defeat South Korean and U.S. missile defenses and strike key targets in South Korea, including U.S. military bases there.

The five other ballistic missiles fired by North Korea on three occasions this week show similar trajectories to the ones detected Saturday.

"The repeated ballistic missile firings by North Korea are a grave provocation that undermines peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in the international community," South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

Ino called the launches "absolutely impermissible," adding that four rounds of missile testing by North Korea in a week is "unprecedented."

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the launches highlight "the destabilizing impact" of North Korea's unlawful weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs.

On Friday, South Korea, the United States and Japan held their first trilateral anti-submarine drills in five years off the Korean Peninsula's east coast. Earlier this week, South Korean and U.S. warships conducted bilateral exercises in the area for four days. Both military drills this week involved the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

The North Korean missile tests this week also bookended U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris' visit Thursday to South Korea, where she reaffirmed the United States' "ironclad" commitment to the security of its Asian allies.

Worries about North Korea's nuclear program have grown since the North last month adopted a new law authorizing the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in certain situations, a move that shows its escalatory nuclear doctrine.

During his speech Saturday, Yoon said the North Korean law threatens South Korea's national existence and that Seoul will expand military exercises with Washington and bolster South Korea's own missile strike

and surveillance capacities in response.

South Korean officials have typically avoided harsh rhetoric on North Korea to prevent an escalation of animosities. But Yoon's Defense Ministry has recently warned North Korea would self-destruct if it uses its nuclear weapons

This year, North Korea has carried out a record number of missile tests in what experts call an attempt to expand its weapons arsenal amid stalled nuclear diplomacy with the United States. South Korean and U.S. officials say North Korea has also completed preparations to conduct a nuclear test, which would be the seventh of its kind and the first in five years.

Experts say Kim Jong Un eventually wants to use the enlarged nuclear arsenal to pressure the United States and others accept his country as a legitimate nuclear state, a recognition he views as necessary to win the lifting of international sanctions and other concessions.

Multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions ban North Korea from testing ballistic missiles and nuclear devices. The country's missile launches this year are seen as exploiting a divide at the U.N. council over Russia's invasion of Ukraine and U.S.-China competitions.

"North Korea's frequent short-range missile tests may strain the isolated state's resources. But because of deadlock on the U.N. Security Council, they are a low-cost way for the Kim regime to signal its displeasure with Washington and Seoul's defense exercises while playing the domestic politics of countering an external threat," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

## Michigan women fight to preserve abortion, 1 chat at a time

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

UTICA, Mich. (AP) — At a wine bar in suburban Detroit, about a dozen women strategized about how to preserve the right to abortion in their state.

This was not a typical political event; there were no microphones, no literature to hand out and few who would consider themselves activists. Among them was a mother of four whose only previous political experience was pushing for later school start times, a busy medical student and a retired teacher who, at 75, has never felt comfortable knocking on doors or cold calling for a candidate.

"But I feel strongly about abortion," said Mary Ann Messano-Gadula. "Women should be able to take care of their own bodies."

Messano-Gadula, who attended the late September "Vino the Vote" event with two friends, described herself as the most shy of the bunch. But she said she planned to do what organizers asked of attendees — post some Facebook messages and text some friends to try to get them to support an amendment to the state constitution guaranteeing abortion rights.

"I'm going to give it a shot," she said.

Across Michigan this year, similar, more intimate events are playing out alongside the larger, traditional get-out-the-vote efforts, with major stakes for both abortion rights and the candidates — mostly Democrats — who support them.

Michigan is one of a handful of places where abortion rights will be on the ballot in November, after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June and left the issue to states to decide. A ban approved in 1931 was suspended, then struck down by state court rulings, but it is no guarantee that the procedure won't one day be outlawed.

That has mobilized people in Michigan, as it has done in previous elections this cycle, including in Kansas and New York. And it could have major implications beyond the state.

Michigan is one of the country's most competitive presidential battlegrounds. It was also among the states where former President Donald Trump and his allies tried to overturn his 2020 loss to Joe Biden, falsely claiming the election was stolen. Voters this fall also will decide statewide offices, including governor and secretary of state, who will be in place for the 2024 election.

The race for governor already has centered around abortion. Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer filed a lawsuit prior to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling seeking to overturn the 1931 ban and said she "will continue

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using every tool in my toolbox to fight like hell for women and health care providers.” Republican Tudor Dixon, who opposes abortion except to save the life of the mother, has criticized Whitmer for supporting abortion without limits, and suggested voters who support the constitutional amendment could vote in favor of it and still support her campaign for governor.

The issue already has generated intense interest among voters and pushback from Republicans and abortion opponents. Reproductive Freedom for All, the coalition supporting the abortion-rights amendment, collected over 750,000 signatures on petitions to put the question on the ballot — more than any other ballot initiative in Michigan history.

Opponents turned out in force for a meeting of the Board of State Canvassers, the once-staid panel that decides what questions and candidates qualify for the ballot. With anti-abortion protesters outside the building audible inside the hearing room, the board split along party lines, with two Republicans voting no and two Democrats voting yes. That meant the measure didn’t qualify for the ballot, but Reproductive Freedom for All appealed to the Michigan Supreme Court, where justices — a majority of whom were appointed by Democrats — ordered it be put on.

Red, Wine & Blue, the organization that held the wine bar gathering, is among the members of the RFFA coalition in Michigan. Their strategy is to ask suburban women — a key swing demographic in recent elections — to reach out to and talk with friends, family members and other acquaintances and ask them to vote.

The model, known as relational organizing, was used successfully by candidates such as Sen. Jon Ossoff of Georgia, who won a runoff election to help Democrats win control of the U.S. Senate, and Pete Buttigieg, who went from little-known mayor of South Bend, Indiana, to a top candidate for the party’s 2020 presidential nomination.

Greta Carnes, who led the effort for Buttigieg’s campaign, said it is particularly effective in turning out suburban women and on the often sensitive and personal issue of abortion. The approach is also more efficient and effective, because people can contact dozens of people in a matter of minutes via text, and a voter receiving a message from someone they know is more likely to read and consider, rather than delete it.

“Especially on an issue like abortion, we can’t just have activists” knocking on doors, Carnes said.

Lakshmi Vadlamudi, a medical student from Franklin, Michigan, saw firsthand the power of using her personal network when she helped gather signatures to put the abortion question on the ballot this summer. She told a few friends she would be in a parking lot one day collecting signatures, and word spread like wildfire, she said.

Vadlamudi started getting text messages from people wanting her to come to their house so they could sign. Her Indian “aunties” — women with whom she is close but not related — wanted to circulate their own petitions. Some had family members in the medical profession and feared legal repercussions of performing an abortion if the 1931 ban takes effect, while others worried for their daughters or granddaughters. They ended up with 20 filled petitions.

“We got as many as we could get our hands on,” Vadlamudi recalled. “People kept asking,” she said, and interest in the issue hasn’t stopped.

Red, Wine & Blue’s Michigan group is aiming to reach 157,000 voters in the state through these “relational” contacts, according to Katie Paris, the organization’s national director. The group’s leader in Michigan, Kelly Dillaha, said they are recruiting 5,000 women to contact their networks and report back to the group on their progress via an app.

Kathy Nitz, a mother of four from Rochester Hills, started working with Red, Wine & Blue after volunteering at her kids’ schools, leading the PTA and spearheading an effort to start schools later in the morning. Those issues always felt like “safe” topics, she said. Talking about abortion, on the other hand, was a bit like saying the word “Voldemort” — the name that characters in the “Harry Potter” books fear would bring great danger if uttered.

But Nitz has grown more comfortable with the topic, even discussing the nuances with her very Catholic

and anti-abortion mother. And she believes these small conversations among women like herself could add up.

"What I've come to realize as a suburban woman and mother myself is that we're undervalued. We are underappreciated and under estimated, but we're also strong," Nitz said. "We build communities, we make networks. That's what we've always done."

## After Ian, river flooding menaces Florida inland towns

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

NORTH PORT, Fla. (AP) — As Hurricane Ian ravaged coastal towns in southwest Florida, residents in this quiet suburb thought they would be safe, having no beach and living outside areas under evacuation orders. But then the water kept flowing in.

Since Ian's passage, water levels have gone up significantly, turning roads into canals, reaching mailboxes, flooding SUVs and trucks, blocking the main access to an interstate highway and leaving families trapped in their waterlogged homes. Now, as days go by, residents here in the Sarasota suburb of North Port are beginning to run out of food and water.

"Water just keeps going up. Who knows when it is going to stop," said Samuel Almanzar, 42. He was rescued by crews Friday along with his father, wife and two children, 11 and 6.

As rescue efforts wrapped up Friday, local officials recommended people whose neighborhoods are flooding to evacuate. They said waters in some areas will continue to rise over the next two days.

The floods in North Port show the impact of Ian has not been confined to the beaches and tourist towns. The heavy rains from the storm have ended up flowing into suburban and inland towns not part of hurricane warnings.

It's the rising rivers that do it because of the hurricane's deluge, which continues to cause havoc long after the winds have passed. And it's leading to rescue efforts not that different from those on the coasts.

Floods were reported all across the center of the state: around Orlando and its theme parks, south to Kissimmee, east to Daytona Beach, Arcadia cattle country. People near rivers were deeply affected.

Near North Port, the Florida Department of Transportation closed a stretch of Interstate 75 in both directions late Friday because of the flooded Myakka River.

Dozens of National Guardsmen arrived earlier Friday in North Port— about 85 miles (140 kilometers) south of Tampa — to speed up efforts started Wednesday by firefighters from other states and counties. And city officials were scrambling to open an evacuation center at a high school.

A mother of two cried on the phone, trying to connect with her parents so they could pick them up after coming out of her flooded neighborhood. A woman showed a map to rescuers to reach families with children in the area upon learning water had started to rise inside their homes. A man waded through waist-deep waters with his 8-year-old daughter, trying to venture out to get supplies.

Megan Blevins, who works at a restaurant in nearby Venice, was trying to help the families of coworkers get out but said some were not accessible due to structures collapsing and leaving certain streets without access.

"We can't get people. We can't get people to them. There are some older folks we are trying to get to because they can't move," she said.

Aimee Bowden, 47, said a tree fell on her house, opening a hole in her kitchen and dining room and letting water pour in. Firefighters going back and forth to pick up families with children evacuated her, with her husband and 13-year-old son in a rescue boat.

"I was terrified. You have your whole life uprooted," Bowden said. "You try to just keep thinking about what you need to do."

Just west of North Port, the Myakka River was forecast by the National Weather Service to reach record flood stage Friday at 12.55 feet (3.8 meters) and then crest a bit higher before receding.

The nearby Peace River was set to hit an even higher mark: almost 24 feet (7.3 meters), which is about twice the previous record. It runs through mainly rural areas, especially the cattle town of Arcadia which



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is home to a well-known Florida rodeo.

There was plenty of concern Friday about the steadily rising river.

"The unpredictability of the river is real, and people are in real danger," said DeSoto County Fire Chief Chad Jorgensen in a county post. "If you are in these areas, you need to get out now."

After crossing Florida, Ian moved over the Atlantic Ocean where it curved back into South Carolina on Friday. More than two dozen deaths have been blamed on the storm.

Elvis Padron, 40, a construction worker now applying for political asylum, fled Venezuela with his wife and 8-year-old daughter and crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in February, only to face more hardship.

"My wife refuses to leave. She wants to stay," said Padron, who waded through the waters to find more supplies and tried to convince his wife on the phone they should leave. "I feel like we don't have much time left."

## Tesla robot walks, waves, but doesn't show off complex tasks

By TOM KRISHER and MATT O'BRIEN AP Business Writers

DETROIT (AP) — An early prototype of Tesla Inc.'s proposed Optimus humanoid robot slowly and awkwardly walked onto a stage, turned, and waved to a cheering crowd at the company's artificial intelligence event Friday.

But the basic tasks by the robot with exposed wires and electronics — as well as a later, next generation version that had to be carried onstage by three men — was a long way from CEO Elon Musk's vision of a human-like robot that can change the world.

Musk told the crowd, many of whom might be hired by Tesla, that the robot can do much more than the audience saw Friday. He said it is also delicate and "we just didn't want it to fall on its face."

Musk suggested that the problem with flashy robot demonstrations is that the robots are "missing a brain" and don't have the intelligence to navigate themselves, but he gave little evidence Friday that Optimus was any more intelligent than robots developed by other companies and researchers.

The demo didn't impress AI researcher Filip Piekiewicz, who tweeted it was "next level cringeworthy" and a "complete and utter scam." He said it would be "good to test falling, as this thing will be falling a lot."

"None of this is cutting edge," tweeted robotics expert Cynthia Yeung. "Hire some PhDs and go to some robotics conferences @Tesla."

Yeung also questioned why Tesla opted for its robot to have a human-like hand with five fingers, noting "there's a reason why" warehouse robots developed by startup firms use pinchers with two or three fingers.

Musk said that Friday night was the first time the early robot walked onstage without a tether. Tesla's goal, he said, is to make an "extremely capable" robot in high volumes — possibly millions of them — at a cost that could be less than a car, that he guessed would be less than \$20,000.

Tesla showed a video of the robot, which uses artificial intelligence that Tesla is testing in its "Full Self-Driving" vehicles, carrying boxes and placing a metal bar into what appeared to be a factory machine. But there was no live demonstration of the robot completing the tasks.

Employees told the crowd in Palo Alto, California, as well as those watching via livestream, that they have been working on Optimus for six to eight months. People can probably buy an Optimus "within three to five years," Musk said.

Employees said Optimus robots would have four fingers and a thumb with a tendon-like system so they could have the dexterity of humans.

The robot is backed by giant artificial intelligence computers that track millions of video frames from "Full Self-Driving" autos. Similar computers would be used to teach tasks to the robots, they said.

Experts in the robotics field were skeptical that Tesla is anywhere near close to rolling out legions of human-like home robots that can do the "useful things" Musk wants them to do — say, make dinner, mow the lawn, keep watch on an aging grandmother.

"When you're trying to develop a robot that is both affordable and useful, a humanoid kind of shape and size is not necessarily the best way," said Tom Ryden, executive director of the nonprofit startup

incubator Mass Robotics.

Tesla isn't the first car company to experiment with humanoid robots.

Honda more than two decades ago unveiled Asimo, which resembled a life-size space suit and was shown in a carefully-orchestrated demonstration to be able to pour liquid into a cup. Hyundai also owns a collection of humanoid and animal-like robots through its 2021 acquisition of robotics firm Boston Dynamics. Ford has partnered with Oregon startup Agility Robotics, which makes robots with two legs and two arms that can walk and lift packages.

Ryden said carmakers' research into humanoid robotics can potentially lead to machines that can walk, climb and get over obstacles, but impressive demos of the past haven't led to an "actual use scenario" that lives up to the hype.

"There's a lot of learning that they're getting from understanding the way humanoids function," he said. "But in terms of directly having a humanoid as a product, I'm not sure that that's going to be coming out anytime soon."

Critics also said years ago that Musk and Tesla wouldn't be able to build a profitable new car company that used batteries for power rather than gasoline.

Tesla is testing "Full Self-Driving" vehicles on public roads, but they have to be monitored by selected owners who must be ready to intervene at all times. The company says it has about 160,000 vehicles equipped with the test software on the road today.

Critics have said the Teslas, which rely on cameras and powerful computers to drive by themselves, don't have enough sensors to drive safely. Tesla's less capable Autopilot driver-assist system, with the same camera sensors, is under investigation by U.S. safety regulators for braking for no reason and repeatedly running into emergency vehicles with flashing lights parked along freeways.

In 2019, Musk promised a fleet of autonomous robotaxis would be in use by the end of 2020. They are still being tested.

## Cubans protest in Havana for 2nd night over lack of power

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Groups of Cubans protested Friday night in the streets of Havana for a second night, decrying delays in fully restoring electricity three days after Hurricane Ian knocked out power across the island.

A foreign monitoring group reported that Cuba's internet service shut down for the second time in two days, saying it appeared to be unrelated to problems from the storm but rather an attempt to keep information about the demonstrations from spreading.

Associated Press journalists saw people demonstrating in at least five spots in the city or on its outskirts, including the Barreras and La Gallega districts where residents blocked streets with burning tires and garbage.

Masiel Pereira, a housewife, said that "the only thing I ask is that they restore the current for my children."

A neighbor, Yunior Velásquez, lamented that "all the food is about to be lost" because there was no power for refrigerators.

On Thursday night, people protested at two points in the city's Cerro neighborhood. That area was mostly calm Friday with the power back on, although people were out on the important Villa Blanca Avenue chanting "We want light!" while banging pots with spoons. Police blocked access to the street, but there were no confrontations.

The country of 11 million people was plunged into darkness Tuesday night, a few hours after Ian roared over western Cuba and triggered problems in the power system that eventually cascaded over the whole island.

Power was restored in some parts of the country the next day, but other areas were left without service, including in the capital.

The government did not say what percentage of the overall population remained without electricity Fri-

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day, but electrical authorities said only 10% of Havana's 2 million people had power as of late Thursday. Internet and cellphone service also were out Thursday. Internet service returned Friday morning, at least in some areas, but in the evening it was interrupted again, groups monitoring access to the internet reported.

Alp Toker, director of London-based Netblocks, said the blackout in internet service on Thursday and Friday appeared different from an internet outage that occurred soon after Ian hit.

"Internet service has been interrupted once again in Cuba, at about the same time as yesterday (Thursday)," Toker said in an email to AP on Friday night. "The timing of the outages provides another indication that these are a measure to suppress coverage of the protests."

Doug Madory, director of internet analysis at Kentik Inc., a network intelligence company, earlier described Thursday's event as a "total internet blackout."

Repeated blackouts on Cuba's already fragile electric grid were among the causes of the island's largest social protests in decades in July 2021. Thousands of people, weary of power failures and shortages of goods exacerbated by the pandemic and U.S. sanctions, turned out in cities across the island to vent their anger and some also lashed out at the government. Hundreds were arrested and prosecuted, prompting harsh criticism of the administration of President Miguel Diaz-Canel.

Experts said the total blackout showed the vulnerability of Cuba's power grid and warned that it will require time and resources — things the country doesn't have — to fix the problem.

Cuba's power grid "was already in a critical and immunocompromised state as a result of the deterioration of the thermoelectric plants. The patient is now on life support," said Jorge Piñon, director of the Center for International Energy and Environmental Policy's Latin America and Caribbean program at the University of Texas.

Cuba has 13 power generation plants, eight of which are traditional thermoelectric plants, and five floating power plants rented from Turkey since 2019. There is also a group of small plants distributed throughout the country since an energy reform in 2006.

But the plants are poorly maintained, a phenomenon the government attributed to the lack of funds and U.S. sanctions. Complications in obtaining fuel is also a problem.

## Jimmy Carter to celebrate 98 with family, friends, baseball

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Jimmy Carter, already the longest-living U.S. president in history, will celebrate his 98th birthday Saturday with family and friends in Plains, the tiny Georgia town where he and his wife, 95-year-old Rosalynn, were born in the years between World War I and the Great Depression.

The 39th president's latest milestone comes as The Carter Center, which the Carters established together after their one White House term, marks 40 years of promoting democracy and conflict resolution, monitoring elections, and advancing public health in the developing world.

Jason Carter, the former president's grandson now leading the Carter Center board, described his grandfather, an outspoken Christian, as content with his life and legacy.

"He is looking at his 98th birthday with faith in God's plan for him," the younger Carter, 47, said, "and that's just a beautiful blessing for all of us to know, personally, that he is at peace and happy with where he has been and where he's going."

Carter Center leaders said the former president, who survived a cancer diagnosis in 2015 and a serious fall at home in 2019, already has enjoyed reading congratulatory messages sent by well-wishers around the world via social media and the center's website. But Jason Carter said his grandfather is mostly looking forward to a simple day that includes watching his favorite Major League Baseball team, the Atlanta Braves, on television.

"He's still 100% with it, even though daily life things are a lot harder now," Jason Carter said. "But one thing I guarantee. He will watch all the Braves games this weekend."

James Earl Carter Jr. won the 1976 presidential election after beginning the campaign as a little-known

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one-term Georgia governor. His surprise performance in the Iowa caucuses established the small, Mid-western state as an epicenter of presidential politics. Carter went on to defeat President Gerald Ford in the general election, largely on the strength of sweeping the South before his native region shifted heavily to Republicans.

A Naval Academy alumnus, Navy officer and peanut farmer, Carter won in no small part because of his promise never to lie to an electorate weary over the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal that resulted in Richard Nixon's resignation from the presidency in 1974. Four years later, unable to tame inflation and salve voter anger over American hostages held in Iran, Carter lost 44 states to Ronald Reagan. He returned home to Georgia in 1981 at the age of 56.

The former first couple almost immediately began planning The Carter Center. It opened in Atlanta in 1982 as a first-of-its-kind effort for a former president. The stated mission: to advance peace, human rights and public health causes around the world. Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. He traveled internationally into his 80s and 90s, and he did not retire officially from the board until 2020.

Since opening, the center has monitored elections in 113 countries, said CEO Paige Alexander, and Carter has acted individually as a mediator in many countries, as well. Carter Center efforts have nearly eradicated the guinea worm, a parasite spread through unclean drinking water and painful to humans. Rosalynn Carter has steered programs designed to reduce stigma attached to mental health conditions.

"He's enjoying his retirement," said Alexander, who assumed her role in 2020, about the time Jason Carter took over for his grandfather. But "he spends a lot of time thinking about the projects that he started and the projects that we're continuing."

Alexander cited the guinea worm eradication effort as a highlight. Carter set the goal in 1986, when there were about 3.5 million cases annually across 21 countries, with a concentration in sub-Saharan Africa. So far this year, Alexander said, there are six known cases in two countries.

In 2019, Carter used his final annual message at the center to lament that his post-presidency had been largely silent on climate change. Jason Carter said the center's leadership is still exploring ways to combat the climate crisis. But he offered no timetable. "We won't duplicate other effective efforts," Carter said, explaining that one of the center's strategic principles is to prioritize causes and places that no other advocacy organizations have engaged.

On elections and democracy, perhaps the most unpredictable turn is that Jimmy Carter has lived to see the center turn its efforts to the home front. The center now has programs to combat mistrust in the democratic process in the United States. Carter Center personnel monitored Georgia's recount of U.S. presidential ballots in the state in 2020 after then-President Donald Trump argued the outcome was rigged. Multiple recounts in Georgia and other states affirmed the legitimacy of Joe Biden's victory.

"Certainly, we never thought we would end up coming home to do democracy and conflict resolution around our elections," Jason Carter said. "(But) we couldn't go be this incredible democracy and human rights organization overseas without ensuring that we were adding our voice and our expertise ... in the U.S."

Ahead of the U.S. midterm elections, the center has asked candidates -- regardless of party -- to sign onto a set of fair election principles, including committing to the peaceful transfer of power. Among those who have signed commitments: Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, a Republican, and his Democratic challenger Stacey Abrams.

Carter himself has mostly retreated from politics. For years after his 1980 defeat, Democrats steered clear of him. He enjoyed a resurgence in recent election cycles, drawing visits from several 2020 Democratic presidential hopefuls and, in 2021, from President Joe Biden, who in 1976 was the first U.S. senator to endorse Carter's presidential bid. With inflation now at its highest levels since the late 1970s and early 1980s, some Republicans are bringing up Carter again as an attack line on Biden and Democrats.

Jason Carter said the former president reads and watches the news daily, and sometimes accepts calls or visits from political figures. But, he added, the former president isn't expected to appear publicly to endorse any candidates ahead of November.

"His people that he feels sort of the closest connection with now are the folks in Plains, at his church and other places," Jason Carter said. "But, you know, his partner No. 1, 2 and 3 is my grandma, right? He



has outlived friends and so many of his advisers and the people that he accomplished so much with in the past, but they've never been lonely because they've always had each other."

## **U.S. captives 'prayed for death' on brutal ride from Ukraine**

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. (AP) — Even after three months of captivity that included execution threats, physical torture, solitary confinement and food deprivation, it was the ride to freedom that nearly broke Alex Druke, a U.S. military veteran released last week with nine other prisoners who went to help Ukraine fight off Russian invaders.

His hands were bound. His head was covered by a plastic bag, and the packing tape holding it in place was secured so tightly it caused welts on his forehead. Druke said he and fellow American prisoner Andy Huynh reached their limit in this state during the transit, which occurred in a series of vehicles from eastern Ukraine to an airport in Russia that was surrounded by armed guards.

"For all we went through and all the times we thought we might die, we accepted that we might die, we were ready to die when it came, that ride was the only time that each of us independently prayed for death just to get it over with," Druke told The Associated Press in an interview Friday.

"The mental and emotional torture of those last 24 hours in captivity, that was the worst," he said.

Druke, 40, is healing: The swelling is going down on his head and he's trying to regain some of the 30 pounds (13.6 kilograms) he figures he lost eating a poor diet. But awful memories remain, and he's unsure what comes next aside from trying to focus attention on fellow prisoners who remain in Russian hands.

"The war has not ended," he said, speaking at the home he shares with his mother and other relatives in Tuscaloosa.

Druke and Huynh, a 27-year-old fellow military veteran from Alabama, were among hundreds of Americans who went to Ukraine early on to help in the fight against Russia.

On June 9, they were captured during what Druke described as a reconnaissance mission associated with Ukraine's international legion, composed of foreign volunteers.

"Everyone else managed to make it back to the base safe," he said.

Russian soldiers took the two men to their camp, and then into Russia for "intensive interrogation." While declining to go into specifics, Druke said the treatment was brutal.

"Every one of our human rights were violated," he said. "We were tortured."

The men were taken back to Ukraine to a "black site" in Donetsk for nearly a month of additional interrogation, he said. They were eventually taken to an isolation cellblock within a former Ukrainian prison. There, Druke and Huynh were forced to record propaganda statements for a Russian video camera with soldiers in the room.

"On the positive side, there were times they would put us in a closet, bound and blindfolded, ... while they were waiting for whatever reporter to show up, and it gave Andy and I just a few seconds to whisper things back and forth to check in on each other," he said. "It was the first time we had talked in weeks at that point."

Eventually, after weeks of confinement that included multiple threats, it became apparent that something — either a release, a prison transfer or execution — was in the works, said Druke, who joined the U.S. Army Reserve after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and served two tours in Iraq.

"We knew something was happening because our normal routine was being skewed and they were having us clear all of our personal stuff out of the cell," he said.

But even then, the mental torture continued, he said. "One of the guards said a couple of times, 'I'm pretty sure you guys are getting executed,'" he said.

Instead, they were part of a group of 10 men who were released Sept. 21 in a deal brokered by Saudi Arabia. The others who were released with them were from Croatia, Morocco, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

No one relaxed until the plane was in the air and an official from Saudi Arabia explained what was happening, he said. Landing in New York after a flight from Saudi Arabia, Druke said he and Huynh were

met by a Homeland Security official from an office that investigates war crimes.

Press aides with Homeland Security didn't immediately return an email seeking comment, but the U.N. human rights investigators have said Ukrainian prisoners of war appear to be facing "systematic" mistreatment by Russian captors that includes torture.

## **NFL's handling of concussions questioned after Tua's injury**

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

The NFL's handling of concussions has evolved dramatically from the days when players were given smelling salts on the bench and sent back into the game.

The league and the NFL Players Association have implemented extensive protocols and hired unaffiliated neurotrauma consultants (UNC) to work with team physicians at each game to diagnose concussions.

Still, football is a violent sport and injuries similar to the frightening one Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa suffered Thursday night seem unavoidable unless the NFL bans tackling and turns the game into flag football like it did for the Pro Bowl.

That's not happening, and the most effective means of protecting players remains enforcing strict concussion protocols, which players, fans and others are concerned didn't happen with Tagovailoa.

It would be difficult to prevent what happened to Tagovailoa when 6-foot-3, 340-pound Bengals defensive tackle Josh Tupou slammed him backward into the turf. The main question is why he was even playing just four days after he stumbled off the field and was unable to walk following a hit to his head during a home game against Buffalo.

Tagovailoa's hands froze up and his fingers flexed awkwardly in front of his facemask for several seconds as he laid on the turf in Cincinnati, a scary scene witnessed by millions of viewers. He remained on the ground for several minutes until he was taken away on a stretcher and sent to a hospital.

This time — unlike Sunday when he seemed to exhibit concussion symptoms but was cleared by a team physician and UNC to return — Tagovailoa was diagnosed with a concussion. He was released from the hospital and flew home with the team. Flying hours after suffering a concussion raised questions, but NFL chief medical officer Dr. Allen Sills said the hospital makes that decision.

Tagovailoa's quick return Sunday prompted a joint review by the NFL and NFLPA. The interview process has started and results aren't expected for at least another week. Tagovailoa and the team explained his legs were wobbly because of a back injury.

It's unknown whether there's any correlation between the two incidents. Concussions are common in the NFL, especially when a player is thrown to the ground by a man Tupou's size and his head hits the turf.

Sills said "it's impossible to know" if the injury Tagovailoa sustained Thursday was exacerbated by the hit he took Sunday.

"That's one of the factors that we want to look at," Sills said on NFL Network. "Every injury is one we want to prevent."

Chris Nowinski, a founder of the Concussion Legacy Foundation who played football at Harvard, is adamant Tagovailoa sustained a concussion against Buffalo and shouldn't have played at Cincinnati.

"Tua showed five distinct signs of concussion," Nowinski told The Associated Press. "Anybody who has any training on concussions or cares about Tua as a human is not putting him on field four days after what he showed on Sunday, so this makes it so much worse because we know that this could be career-ending or season-ending. It should be season-ending, in my opinion. And it just shows just a lack of care for him as a human being."

The league and the NFLPA instituted concussion protocols in 2011 when Colt McCoy took a helmet-to-helmet hit in a game and returned without being tested for a concussion. The protocols have been expanded since.

There are three UNCs, who are paid jointly by the NFL and NFLPA, at each game. They work in conjunction with team physicians to diagnose whether a player has a concussion. Independent certified athletic trainers (ATC spotters) sit in a booth and monitor the players on the field to have someone removed from

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the game if they see an impact to the head. Team trainers, coaches or physicians, teammates, game officials, sideline UNCs or booth ATCs also can initiate the protocol.

All players who undergo any concussion evaluation on game day must have a follow-up evaluation conducted the following day by a member of the medical staff. Sills said Tagovailoa was evaluated every day leading up to the game, even though he wasn't in concussion protocol.

Several players have spoken about passing protocol even when they had concussions. Andrew Whitworth, the former Rams offensive lineman, said on Amazon's broadcast he once played through a concussion during a game until a teammate noticed he wasn't right and alerted doctors.

The league has experimented with other means to mitigate head injuries. This year, offensive linemen, defensive linemen, tight ends and linebackers were required for the first time to wear Guardian Caps — a soft-shell, padded covering on top of their helmets — during practices from the start of training camp until the second preseason game.

The average number of concussions among those positions groups dropped from 23 over the previous three-year period to 11 this summer, the league said. Of those 11 concussions, six resulted from blows to the facemask, which didn't have added protection.

Tagovailoa is under pressure to perform this season and has battled injuries in the past, so it's natural for him to want to play regardless of injury. Former players who have criticized the decision to let him play Sunday say they want to protect players from themselves.

"We are all outraged by what we have seen the last several days and scared for the safety of one of our brothers," NFLPA president JC Tretter wrote on Twitter. "What everyone saw both Sunday and last night were 'no-go' symptoms within our concussion protocols. The protocols exist to protect the player and that is why we initiated an investigation. Our job as the NFLPA is to take every possible measure to get the facts and hold those responsible accountable. We need to figure out how and why the decisions were made last Sunday to allow a player with a 'no-go' symptom back on the field.

"Until we have an objective and validated method of diagnosing brain injury, we have to do everything possible, including amending the protocols, to further reduce the potential of human error. A failure in medical judgment is a failure of the protocols when it comes to the well being of our players. We have come a long way over the past 15 years but the last week proves how far we have left to go."

The decision to allow Tagovailoa to return Sunday was made by the team physician and UNC. It was determined Tagovailoa's instability was caused by a back injury. The joint review by the league and NFLPA will examine the steps taken and a report will be issued.

"Based on everybody I've talked to and I know a lot of doctors who are brain injury people and sports medicine people, I don't know anybody who thinks it's sound medicine just based on the observation of what was seen on the field and him stumbling afterward to say it's OK for him to play again in that game and then four days later," said attorney Brad Sohn, who has represented hundreds of players in concussion litigation and is among the possible successors to NFLPA executive director DeMaurice Smith.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said there has never been an incident where a team physician and the UNC disagreed about a concussion.

In 2017, Seattle was fined \$100,000 and the coaching and medical staffs were required to attend remedial training regarding the protocol after a joint review determined the team didn't follow the protocol when Russell Wilson was directed to the sideline for an evaluation after the referee, Walt Anderson, concluded that a medical examination was warranted.

## Judge rules against Abrams group in voting rights lawsuit

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A federal judge on Friday found that Georgia election practices challenged by a group associated with Democrat Stacey Abrams do not violate the constitutional rights of voters, ruling in favor of the state on all remaining issues in a lawsuit filed nearly four years ago.

"Although Georgia's election system is not perfect, the challenged practices violate neither the constitu-

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tion nor the VRA," U.S. District Judge Steve Jones in Atlanta wrote, referring to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He detailed his reasoning in a 288-page order.

The lawsuit was filed in November 2018, just weeks after Abrams narrowly lost the governor's race to Republican Brian Kemp. Throughout that contest, Abrams had accused Kemp, then secretary of state, of using his position as the state's top elections official to promote voter suppression. Kemp vehemently denied the allegations.

Kemp on Friday applauded the ruling, calling it a loss for Abrams.

"Judge Jones' ruling exposes this legal effort for what it really is: a tool wielded by a politician hoping to wrongfully weaponize the legal system to further her own political goals," Kemp said in a statement.

Abrams and Fair Fight expressed disappointment in the decision but said the lawsuit helped bring about positive change in Georgia.

"While the Court's actions are not the preferred outcome, the conduct of this trial and preceding cases and legislative actions represent a hard-won victory for voters who endured long lines, burdensome date of birth requirements and exact match laws that disproportionately impact Black and Brown voters," Abrams said in a statement.

The trial began in mid-April, unfolding while Georgia's primary elections were underway. Those contests set the stage for a rematch between Kemp and Abrams, who captured their parties' gubernatorial nominations for November's general election.

Nearly five dozen witnesses were called over the course of 21 trial days that stretched across more than two months. It was a bench trial, meaning there was no jury and the verdict was up to Jones alone.

Abrams' Fair Fight Action organization filed the lawsuit along with Care in Action, a nonprofit that advocates for domestic workers. Several churches later joined as plaintiffs. It was originally extremely broad and called for a significant overhaul of Georgia's election system. By the time it got to trial, the scope had narrowed significantly after some allegations were resolved by changes in state law and others were dismissed by the court.

"This is a voting rights case that resulted in wins and losses for all parties over the course of the litigation and culminated in what is believed to have been the longest voting rights bench trial in the history of the Northern District of Georgia," Jones wrote.

The issues that remained and which were discussed at length during the trial had to do with the "exact match" policy, the statewide voter registration list and the process for in-person cancellation of absentee ballots. Fair Fight alleged that the negative effects of these policies are disproportionately felt by people of color and new citizens and amount to violations of the U.S. Constitution and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Georgia officials have created a landscape where it's "harder to register, harder to stay registered and ultimately harder to vote," Allegra Lawrence-Hardy, an attorney for Fair Fight and the other plaintiffs, said during her closing argument in late June. The barriers to voting aren't caused by inevitable human errors but instead result from "choices designed to keep certain people from voting," she said.

She highlighted testimony from voters who had trouble registering or casting their ballots, voters who shared their stories because they wanted the court to understand what they faced.

Josh Belinfante, a lawyer for state election officials, said in his closing that Georgia's elections are constitutional and don't violate the Voting Rights Act. Georgia's automatic voter registration policy and significant recent increases in African American voter registration are not the signs of a state that is suppressing voters, he argued.

While Fair Fight collected stories from more than 3,000 voters, they found very few who were unable to cast a ballot and none during the 2020 election, Belinfante noted. Instead, he said, the evidence showed problems were generally resolved quickly once state officials were contacted.

Fair Fight's goal was to get Democrats elected and to make Georgia a blue state, and the organization used a false narrative of voter suppression to motivate people to turn out for its cause, Belinfante said.

"You have to decide has the case matched the rhetoric," Belinfante told Jones. "The answer is no."

The plaintiffs argued state officials provided inadequate training for county election officials on cancel-



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ing absentee ballots, causing significant problems for voters who tried to vote in person after having requested an absentee ballot.

The plaintiffs also challenged two aspects of the state's "exact match" policy for voter registration applications. Plaintiffs say problems arise for voters if the information on their applications doesn't exactly match that in driver's license or Social Security databases or if new U.S. citizens' information hasn't been updated in the driver's license database.

Finally, the plaintiffs said state officials mismanaged the voter registration database. They cited alleged problems with three list-maintenance processes: the cancelation of registration if a person is convicted of a felony, the merger of records believed to be duplicates, and the cancelation of voters believed to be dead.

Jones noted that while the plaintiffs called witnesses who testified about struggles to cast their ballots because of the practices at issue, most were able to vote in the end.

## After #FreeBritney, California to limit conservatorships

By SOPHIE AUSTIN Associated Press/Report for America

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday signed a bill limiting conservatorships that grant legal guardianship over individuals, a move that comes after Britney Spears' conservatorship case garnered national attention amid her attempts to regain control over her finances and livelihood.

The new law, authored by Democratic Assemblymember Brian Maienschein, will require that judges document all alternatives to a conservatorship before granting one. It aligns with similar legislation adopted in other states, following a push from advocates. In a statement, Newsom, a Democrat, said the state is committed to protecting the rights of Californians with disabilities.

People deemed to be unable to make certain life decisions for themselves can be placed into legal conservatorships in which a court-appointed conservator is given control over their finances and other critical aspects of their life, sometimes without their consent. They most often involve people with developmental or intellectual disabilities or those with age-related issues like dementia.

Advocacy groups contend that people like Spears, who was under a conservatorship for nearly 14 years, can become trapped in a system that removes their civil rights and the ability to advocate for themselves.

"This measure is an important step to empower Californians with disabilities to get needed support in caring for themselves and their finances, while maintaining control over their lives to the greatest extent possible," Newsom wrote in a signing statement, calling the new law a "transformative reform to protect self-determination for all Californians."

Spears, the pop singer and Mississippi native who has publicly struggled with her mental health, ended up at the center of a widespread #FreeBritney campaign aimed at regaining the pop singer authority over her medical, personal and financial decisions. She alleged she became a victim of misconduct at the hands of her father, James Spears, who was her conservator.

Fans and advocates rallied online and in person to bring attention to Spears' situation. Documentaries by The New York Times and Netflix on the effects of Spears' conservatorship brought renewed spotlight to the case and the conservatorship process more broadly. She was a 26-year-old new mother who had several public mental health struggles during the height of her career in 2008, when her father sought the conservatorship, at first on a temporary basis.

A Los Angeles judge ended Spears' conservatorship last year, a win followed by legislative proposals to protect the rights of conservatees and efforts to make it more difficult for people to end up in one.

Maienschein, who represents parts of San Diego, thanked the governor in a statement, noting the importance of ensuring the autonomy of people with disabilities.

The new law will give potential conservatees preference for selecting a conservator and make it easier to end probate conservatorships.

Disability rights organization Disability Voices United referred to news of Newsom's decision as historic. "This law affirms that conservatorships should be rare and the last resort," the group wrote. "The default should be that people with disabilities retain their rights and get support when they need it."

## Some officials now say monkeypox elimination unlikely in US

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Some U.S. health officials are conceding that monkeypox is probably not going away anytime soon.

The disease's spread is slowing but the virus is so widespread that elimination is unlikely, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. That conclusion was in a recent CDC report, and echoed Friday by Marc Lipsitch, director of science in the agency's disease-forecasting center.

Lipsitch hesitated to say monkeypox is permanently here to stay, but he said it stands to be a continuing threat for the next few years.

"It's in many geographic locations within the country" as well as in other countries, Lipsitch told The Associated Press. "There's no clear path in our mind to complete elimination domestically."

The virus has mainly spread among gay and bisexual men, though health officials continue to stress that anyone can be infected. It's important that people at risk take steps to prevent spread and that vaccination efforts continue, Lipsitch said.

The CDC report contained some good news: The U.S. outbreak seems to have peaked in early August. The average number of daily cases being reported — fewer than 150 — is about a third what it was reported in the middle of the summer, and officials expect the decline will continue for at least the next several weeks.

Lipsitch attributed the good news to increasing vaccinations, cautious behavior by people at risk and infection-derived immunity in the highest risk populations.

Dr. Tom Inglesby, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, agreed that it's unlikely that spread of monkeypox will stop in the U.S. anytime soon, but he said it's still possible in the long term.

If domestic transmission were stopped, infections may still continue if people catch the virus while traveling internationally, he said. But the declining cases makes it seem like "we've turned a real corner."

"The efforts underway are succeeding, and should be continued, if not intensified," he said.

With case numbers going down, this is a good time for local health departments to take a new stab at doing intensive contact tracing to try to stop chains of transmission, he said.

Monkeypox is endemic in parts of Africa, where people have been infected through bites from rodents or small animals, but it wasn't considered a disease that spreads easily among people until May, when infections emerged in Europe and the U.S.

There have been more than 67,000 cases reported in countries that have not historically seen monkeypox. The U.S. has the most infections of any country — more than 25,600. One U.S. death has been attributed to monkeypox.

More than 97% of U.S. cases are men. The vast majority have been men who reported recent sexual contact with other men.

Though cases have been declining, the proportion of new cases that have information about recent sexual contact is also down, officials said. That's causing a growing blind spot about how the virus may be spreading, Lipsitch noted.

## Army officers appear on Burkina Faso TV, declare new coup

By SAM MEDNICK and ARSENE KABORE Associated Press

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso (AP) — More than a dozen soldiers seized control of Burkina Faso's state television late Friday, declaring that the country's coup leader-turned-president, Lt. Col. Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba, had been overthrown after only nine months in power.

A statement read by a junta spokesman said Capt. Ibrahim Traore is the new military leader of Burkina Faso, a volatile West African country that is battling a mounting Islamic insurgency.

Burkina Faso's new military leaders said the country's borders had been closed and a curfew would be in effect from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. The transitional government and national assembly were ordered dissolved.

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Damiba and his allies overthrew the democratically elected president, coming to power with promises of make the country more secure. However, violence has continued unabated and frustration with his leadership has grown in recent months.

"Faced by the continually worsening security situation, we the officers and junior officers of the national armed forces were motivated to take action with the desire to protect the security and integrity of our country," said the statement read by the junta spokesman, Capt. Kiswendsida Farouk Azaria Sorgho.

The soldiers promised the international community they would respect their commitments and urged Burkinabes "to go about their business in peace."

"A meeting will be convened to adopt a new transitional constitution charter and to select a new Burkina Faso president be it civilian or military," Sorgho added.

Damiba had just returned from addressing the U.N. General Assembly in New York as Burkina Faso's head of state. Tensions, though, had been mounting for months. In his speech, Damiba defended his January coup as "an issue of survival for our nation," even if it was "perhaps reprehensible" to the international community.

Constantin Gouvy, Burkina Faso researcher at Clingendael, said Friday night's events "follow escalating tensions within the ruling MPSR junta and the wider army about strategic and operational decisions to tackle spiraling insecurity."

"Members of the MPSR increasingly felt Damiba was isolating himself and casting aside those who helped him seize power," Gouvy told The Associated Press.

Gunfire had erupted in the capital, Ouagadougou, early Friday and hours passed without any public appearance by Damiba. Late in the afternoon, his spokesman posted a statement on the presidency's Facebook page saying that "negotiations are underway to bring back calm and serenity."

Friday's developments felt all too familiar in West Africa, where a coup in Mali in August 2020 set off a series of military power grabs in the region. Mali also saw a second coup nine months after the August 2020 overthrow of its president, when the junta's leader sidelined his civilian transition counterparts and put himself alone in charge.

On the streets of Ouagadougou, some people already were showing support Friday for the change in leadership even before the putschists took to the state airwaves.

Francois Beogo, a political activist from the Movement for the Refounding of Burkina Faso, said Damiba "has showed his limits."

"People were expecting a real change," he said of the January coup d'etat.

Some demonstrators voiced support for Russian involvement in order to stem the violence, and shouted slogans against France, Burkina Faso's former colonizer. In neighboring Mali, the junta invited Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group to help secure the country, though their deployment has drawn international criticism.

Many in Burkina Faso initially supported the military takeover last January, frustrated with the previous government's inability to stem Islamic extremist violence that has killed thousands and displaced at least 2 million.

Yet the violence has failed to wane in the months since Damiba took over. Earlier this month, he also took on the position of defense minister after dismissing a brigadier general from the post.

"It's hard for the Burkinabe junta to claim that it has delivered on its promise of improving the security situation, which was its pretext for the January coup," said Eric Humphery-Smith, senior Africa analyst at the risk intelligence company Verisk Maplecroft.

Earlier this week, at least 11 soldiers were killed and 50 civilians went missing after a supply convoy was attacked by gunmen in Gaskinde commune in Soum province in the Sahel. That attack was "a low point" for Damiba's government and "likely played a role in inspiring what we've seen so far today," added Humphery-Smith.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Friday that nearly one-fifth of Burkina Faso's population "urgently needs humanitarian aid."

"Burkina Faso needs peace, it needs stability, and it needs unity in order to fight terrorist groups and criminal networks operating in parts of the country," Dujarric said.

Chrysogone Zougmore, president of the Burkina Faso Movement for Human Rights, called Friday's developments "very regrettable," saying the instability would not help in the fight against the Islamic extremist violence.

"How can we hope to unite people and the army if the latter is characterized by such serious divisions?" Zougmore said. "It is time for these reactionary and political military factions to stop leading Burkina Faso adrift."

## Amid rising seas, island nations push for legal protections

By LAGIPOIVA CHERELLE JACKSON Associated Press

APIA, Samoa (AP) — When and if an island nation fully submerges due to rising seas, what happens to the nationalities of its citizens?

This and other related questions are being considered by island nations advocating for changes to international law as climate change threatens their existence.

"Climate change induced sea level rise is a defining issue for many Pacific Island states and like most climate change issues, Pacific Island states have been at the forefront of challenging international law to develop in a way which is equitable and just," said Fleur Ramsay, head of litigation and climate lead of the Pasifika Program at the Australia-based Environmental Defenders Office.

During a recent with The Associated Press, Ramsay noted the shortcomings in the development of international law. For example, under international law, there are discussions of nomadic tribes making claims over lands they have historically passed over. However, rights over historical ocean passages have not yet been explored for citizens of island nations.

"If you ask our people to move, there is no way we would voluntarily leave," said Eseta Vusamu, who is currently working in Samoa but from a village on the island of Ovalau, Fiji. "There are graves there, these are our ancestral lands."

Vusamu's village, Tokou, along with many coastal communities in Fiji, were hard hit during Cyclone Winston in 2016, which led to the relocation of over 3,000 villagers from the coastal areas.

There is already evidence of loss of islands. Between 1947 and 2014, six smaller islands in the Pacific archipelago of the Solomon Islands completely vanished, according to a paper published in Environment Research Letters in 2016. The study identified the complete loss of reef islands and other islands that were experiencing severe shoreline recession, leading to the relocation of some communities. And in its report earlier this year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world's top body of climate scientists, noted risks to coastal areas and ecosystems due to submergence and flooding through sea level rise and increased height of waves.

The issue of protecting sovereignty is a constant topic of discussion for many Pacific Islands leaders. The maritime and resource entitlements that islands stand to lose in the face of land loss were part of talks during the Pacific Small Island Developing States meetings this week in Apia, Samoa. The meetings came on the heels of last week's U.N. General Assembly meetings, in which Pacific Island leaders pushed for changes that would protect island nations as they lose territory to erosion and rising sea levels.

Leaders of Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands and Kiribati called on the international community to help island nations in several ways: preserve the sovereignty of Pacific island countries facing an existential threat of sea rise, finance adaptation programs and support an initiative, the Rising Nations Heritage Project, to be a repository for the cultural heritage of island nations.

Tuvalu Prime Minister Kausea Natano said that Pacific Island nations had done very little to contribute to global warming — he said less than 0.03% of the world's total emissions — but yet could be destroyed by the consequences of a warming planet and rising seas.

"In this century, several Pacific Island nations will lose considerable territory to rising sea level with some becoming completely uninhabitable," said Natano.



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"We need a global settlement that guarantees nation states such as Tuvalu a permanent existence beyond the inhabitable lifetime of our atoll homes," he said.

During his address last week, Vanuatu President Nikenike Vurobaravu called on the International Court of Justice to begin considering climate change.

Vanuatu has been pushing for a non-binding advisory opinion from the Netherlands-based court to clarify how existing international laws can be applied to strengthen action on climate change and protect people and the environment. The advisory opinion, if successful, would address obligations of states under international law to protect the rights of present and future generations against the adverse effects of climate change.

Earlier this year, the Pacific Islands Forum, the regional body of 18 Pacific island member countries and territories, took matters into their own hands, declaring that their maritime boundaries, which are determined by the size of their land masses under the U.N. Convention on Law of the Sea, will be fixed irrespective of changes to the size or shape of the islands in the future. This approach is contentious under international law due to competing interests between nations over the high seas.

In a report by a study group in August 2022, established under the International Law Commission to address sea-level rise in international law, alternatives were proposed to protect the statehood of nations that may lose their territories. Proposals included assuming a presumption of continuity of statehood and maintaining some form of international legal personality without a territory, similar to the Holy See and the Sovereign Order of Malta.

"We all are very much aware that our very existence is dependent on our fortitude, our tenacity, our resilience and only through genuine partnership" can results be achieved, said Sefanaia Nawadra, director general of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program, during this week's meetings in Samoa.

## Stocks end September down 9.3%, worst month since March 2020

By STAN CHOE and ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writers

Wall Street closed out a miserable September on Friday with the S&P 500's worst monthly skid since March 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic crashed global markets.

The benchmark index ended the month with a 9.3% loss and posted its third straight losing quarter. It's now at its lowest level since November 2020 and is down by more than a quarter since the start of the year.

The main reason financial markets continue to struggle is fear about a possible recession, as interest rates soar in hopes of beating down the high inflation that's swept the world.

"Quite frankly, if it's a deep recession you're going to have to see more of a sell-off," said Quincy Krosby, chief equity strategist for LPL Financial. "This is what the market is trying to navigate now."

The Federal Reserve has been at the forefront of the global campaign to slow economic growth and hurt job markets just enough to undercut inflation but not so much that it causes a recession. On Friday, the Fed's preferred measure of inflation showed it was worse last month than economists expected. That should keep the Fed on track to keep hiking rates and hold them at high levels a while, raising the risk of it going too far and causing a downturn.

Vice Chair Lael Brainard was the latest Fed official on Friday to insist it won't pull back on rates prematurely.

"At this point, it's not a matter of if we'll have a recession, but what type of recession it will be," said Sean Sun, portfolio manager at Thornburg Investment Management.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 54.85 points, or 1.5%, to close at 3,585.62 Friday, after flipping between small losses and gains in the early going. It has now posted a weekly loss in six out of the last seven weeks.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 500.10 points, or 1.7%, to 28,725.51. The Nasdaq composite slid 161.89 points, or 1.5%, to 10,575.62. The tech-heavy index sank 10.5% in September and is down 32.4% so far this year.

Smaller company stocks also had a rough September. The Russell 2000 ended the month down 9.7%. On Friday, it lost 10.21 points, or 0.6%, to 1,664.72.

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Higher interest rates knock down one of the main levers that set prices for stocks. The other lever also looks to be under threat as the slowing economy, high interest rates and other factors weigh on corporate profits.

Cruise ship operator Carnival dropped 23.3% for the biggest decline among S&P 500 stocks after it reported a bigger loss for its latest quarter than analysts expected and revenue that fell short of expectations. Rivals Norwegian Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean Group slid 18% and 13.2%, respectively.

Nike slumped 12.8%, its worst day in more than 20 years, after it said its profitability weakened during the summer because of discounts needed to clear suddenly overstuffed warehouses. The amount of shoes and gear in Nike's inventories swelled by 44% from a year earlier.

This year's powerful surge for the U.S. dollar against other currencies also hurt Nike. Its worldwide revenue rose only 4%, instead of the 10% it would have if currency values had remained the same.

Nike isn't the only company to see its inventories balloon. So have several big-name retailers, and such bad news for businesses could actually mean some relief for shoppers if it leads to more discounts. It echoed some glimmers of encouragement buried within Friday's report on the Fed's preferred gauge of inflation. That showed some slowing of inflation for goods, even as price gains kept accelerating for services.

Another report on Friday also offered a glimmer of hope. A measure of consumer sentiment showed U.S. expectations for future inflation came down in September. That's crucial for the Fed because tightly held expectations for higher inflation can create a debilitating, self-reinforcing cycle that worsens it.

Treasury yields initially eased a bit on Friday, letting off some of the pressure that's built on markets, but then turned higher by late afternoon.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury rose to 3.81% from 3.79% late Thursday. The two-year yield, which more closely tracks expectations for Fed action, rose to 4.23% from 4.19%.

Not all stocks took a beating in September. Biogen soared 35%, but it was an outlier. FedEx was among the market's biggest losers, ending the month 29.6% lower.

Looking at the third quarter, which included a market rally in July, Netflix was among the best performers, climbing 34.6%. It's still down 60.9% for the year.

A long list of other worries continues to hang over global markets, including increasing tensions between much of Europe and Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. A controversial plan to cut taxes by the U.K. government also sent bond markets spinning recently on fears it could make inflation even worse. Bond markets calmed a bit only after the Bank of England pledged mid-week to buy however many U.K. government bonds are needed to bring yields back down.

The stunning and swift rise of the U.S. dollar against other currencies, meanwhile, raises the risk of creating so much stress that something cracks somewhere in global markets.

Stocks around the world were mixed after a report showed that inflation in the 19 countries that use Europe's euro currency spiked to a record and data from China said that factory activity weakened there.

## DeSantis drops provocations — for now — in response to Ian

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has whipsawed his way through the national conversation this month, first by putting migrants on planes or buses to Democratic strongholds and then shifting to a more traditional role of crisis manager as one of the strongest hurricanes to ever hit the U.S. barreled into his state.

Facing a reelection in November that could be a precursor to a presidential campaign, the approach has been awkward at points. Navigating one of his state's darkest moments, DeSantis, a Republican, must partner with a Democratic president he has spent the better part of two years demeaning. He's also gladly accepting the type of federal disaster aid and assistance he rejected as wasteful while he was a member of Congress.

But together, the developments over the past two weeks offer insight into how DeSantis might govern if he wins another term as governor or advances in a 2024 presidential contest. He's willing to use — and potentially exceed — the raw executive power of his office to pick at America's most sensitive divides on

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issues like immigration. In a sudden moment of disaster, however, he's capable of striking a more unifying tone in a way that former President Donald Trump — once a close ally and now a potential 2024 rival — rarely demonstrated.

"At the end of the day, I view this as something that you've got folks that are in need, and local, federal and state, we have a need to work together," DeSantis said at a briefing late Thursday, taking a far more conciliatory tone toward an administration he bitterly criticized just days earlier. He expressed appreciation that FEMA has approved every request for aid he has made, and said he welcomed the agency's director to travel with him to view destruction.

The shift in tone is almost certainly temporary. When a 12-story condo building in Surfside, Florida, collapsed last year and killed 98 people, DeSantis appeared with local officials, including Democrats who praised his assistance. He sat next to President Joe Biden during a briefing with first responders and local officials in Miami. Within months, however, he returned to partisan brawls.

Facing another tragedy, DeSantis didn't answer questions this week about whether he would meet with Biden, saying he wasn't sure about the president's travel plans. At a FEMA briefing on Thursday, Biden also aimed to set aside hostilities, saying he would visit Florida when conditions allow and meet with DeSantis "if he wants to meet."

Biden and DeSantis both said they have spoken more than once. And at DeSantis' request, Biden on Thursday declared a major disaster in parts of Florida, freeing up additional federal assistance to state and local governments and individuals.

"We're going to build it back with the state and local government," Biden said.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean Pierre tweeted that Biden and DeSantis spoke again by phone on Friday, as the FEMA administrator is on the ground in Florida.

DeSantis' embrace of federal help is a shift from his early days as a congressman, when he voted against a federal relief package for New York and New Jersey after Hurricane Sandy. That drew criticism this week from some New York-area officials and other Democrats who described the turnaround as a move from cruel to hypocritical.

Richard Conley, a University of Florida political science professor, said DeSantis is doing what he needs to do, pragmatically and politically. While DeSantis is popular in the reliably Republican area of southwest Florida that was hardest hit by Hurricane Ian, he said people will inevitably become frustrated if it takes too long to get help, and will look for someone to blame.

"He's just got to get the job done," said Conley. "The question will be: Going forward, does he look very statesmanlike? Does this help him with an eventual 2024 run? I don't know, it remains to be seen."

Since his early years running for governor, DeSantis has been linked to Trump. DeSantis was a relatively obscure third-term congressman when he announced his 2018 bid for governor — and a Trump endorsement — on Fox News. He echoed some of Trump's favorite lines as he campaigned, pledging, for example, to "drain the swamp" in Tallahassee. Trump took credit for the victory, though their relationship is said to have chilled amid the 2024 talk.

As governor, DeSantis has elevated issues that excite the conservative base and used his resources and the power of his office to get things done his way, even if it pushed the limits of his legal authority.

During the COVID pandemic, DeSantis insisted Florida would remain open. He shunned guidance from federal health experts and once said of Dr. Anthony Fauci that someone should "chuck him across the Potomac." He also stripped funding from school districts that implemented mask mandates.

This spring, DeSantis signed legislation stripping Disney of a special agreement that allowed the theme park to govern itself, after the company criticized a new state law that critics called "Don't Say Gay."

DeSantis also suspended an elected Democratic prosecutor in Tampa from office over statements about not pursuing criminal charges in abortion, transgender rights and certain low-level cases. The prosecutor has since filed a federal free speech lawsuit against the governor.

In recent weeks, Florida under DeSantis' direction paid for two flights of migrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard. DeSantis was the latest GOP governor, frustrated over the federal government's response to

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policing the southern border, to transport the migrants to Democratic cities.

DeSantis defended the move as a way to make immigration a "front-burner issue" ahead of the midterms. Critics questioned the legality, and his Democratic opponent for governor said it represented a new low level of shrewdness.

"It's amazing to me what he's willing to do for sheer political gain," Charlie Crist, his gubernatorial challenger, said.

Conley, who wrote a book about Trump and populism, said he understands the comparisons between the two men, both often provocative Republicans. But he noted key differences, including that DeSantis is more disciplined and restrained with statements on social media.

"He may say controversial things, but I don't think he's going to sit around at 3 or 4 in the morning and contemplate how to get back at (Senate GOP Leader) Mitch McConnell or something" as Trump would do, Conley said.

Trump also drew criticism for his responses to natural disasters, which often failed to convey empathy.

After Puerto Rico was flattened by Hurricane Maria, he flew to San Juan and threw paper towels into the crowd, withheld aid and questioned whether a death toll in the thousands was contrived by Democrats to make him look bad. On a trip to Houston after Hurricane Harvey, he was criticized for not meeting with storm victims. When he returned days later, Trump urged those at a shelter to "have a good time."

Natural disasters have historically put U.S. politicians in predicaments.

Years earlier, President George W. Bush left the impression of overlooking Hurricane Katrina's devastation in New Orleans when he flew over the city while returning to Washington from vacation. He later praised FEMA Director Michael Brown as doing "a heck of a job."

Both New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, and Democratic President Barack Obama felt political effects of a friendly greeting after Hurricane Sandy. The image may have helped Obama project a moderate, bipartisan front days before his election for a second term but conservatives derided Christie for what they called a "hug."

At Thursday's afternoon briefing, DeSantis spoke of surveying the damage, from a wiped out causeway between the mainland and Sanibel Island off Fort Myers to destroyed homes and hundreds of people rescued.

"These are resilient folks," he said. "They will bounce back, but we just want to make sure that we can kind of pave the way for them."

## **Biden vows Russia won't 'get away with' Ukraine annexation**

By MATTHEW LEE, FATIMA HUSSEIN and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States and its allies hit back at Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian regions on Friday, slapping sanctions on more than 1,000 people and companies including arms supply networks as President Joe Biden warned Vladimir Putin he can't "get away with" seizing Ukrainian land.

The Russian annexation, though expected, escalated an already heated conflict that's become fraught with potential nuclear implications.

Biden said his administration would support any effort by Ukraine to retake the annexed territories by force, setting the stage for further hostilities. And Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced that his country would make an "accelerated" bid to join the NATO military alliance, a plan not endorsed by the U.S. or other allies that could add fuel to the fire.

"America and its allies are not going to be intimidated by Putin and his reckless words and threats," Biden told reporters. He added that Putin "can't seize his neighbor's territory and get away with it."

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement that Russia is incorporating four Ukrainian cities and areas was not unexpected following referendums this week that the West had denounced as shams. And the U.S. and Western allies had previewed what their reaction would be.

But the developments dramatically increased tensions to a point not seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis 60 years ago during the Cold War.



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Biden had spoken out against the annexation plans last week at the U.N. General Assembly, where a vast majority of other members also voiced support for respecting the territorial integrity of all nations. On Friday, he used the moment to reiterate that the U.S. and NATO allies would not allow Russia to attack any of the nearby NATO members without facing a strong military response.

"America is fully prepared, prepared with our NATO allies to defend every single inch of NATO territory. Every single inch," Biden said. "And so, Mr. Putin, don't misunderstand what I'm saying. Every inch."

While the Biden administration has identified the suppliers of Russia's weapons and battlefield high-tech as a priority, many of Friday's other sanctions were in line with penalties already enacted on thousands of Russian individuals and companies, and may have comparatively little impact on the war effort. The administration hopes they will serve to further undermine support for Putin's invasion among Russia's elite.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and its European allies are rushing to complete agreement on a measure they hope will do more to damage Russia's economy: a cap on Russia's maritime oil exports that would undermine the prices Putin can demand for his country's oil globally.

For now, Biden said the new U.S. financial penalties, similar to those coming from like-minded countries, will impose severe costs on people and companies "that provide political or economic support to illegal attempts to change the status of Ukrainian territory." The sanctions will apply to countries, people or firms that support or do business with Russia-backed authorities in the newly annexed areas.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, echoing Biden, said the U.S. "unequivocally rejects Russia's fraudulent attempt to change Ukraine's internationally recognized borders. ... This is a clear violation of international law and the United Nations Charter."

"No one is fooled by what Moscow has done," Blinken told reporters at a joint news conference with Canada's visiting foreign minister. "The entire process around these sham referenda was a complete farce. This territory is and will remain Ukraine, and Ukraine has every right to defend its land, to defend its people and to take back the territory that Russia has seized from it."

This suggests the U.S. will support the Ukrainians with weapons and ammunition to help them with military action to retake the annexed areas. The U.S. has warned Ukraine in the past not to use American weapons against Russian territory.

Blinken also spoke out against Putin's nuclear threats..

"This kind of loose talk about nuclear weapons is the height of irresponsibility, and it's something that we take very seriously," he said. "To date" he said, the U.S. has not seen that "Russia is actually doing anything that suggests they are contemplating the use of nuclear weapons."

"I can just tell you that we plan against every possible scenario, including this one."

Biden also pushed back against Putin's comments on Friday in which he accused the West of sabotaging Russia-built natural gas pipelines under the Baltic Sea to Germany. Nordic nations said the undersea blasts that damaged the pipelines this week and have led to huge methane leaks involved several hundred pounds of explosives.

The president said the U.S. and allies are still working to determine who was responsible for the blasts, but excoriated Putin over his accusation.

"Let me say this, it was a deliberate act of sabotage," Biden said. "And now the Russians are pumping out disinformation and lies."

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said that "not many" countries have the ability to carry out such an attack on the pipelines. He stopped short of charging Russia was responsible but made clear the U.S. is suspicious that they may be complicit.

"Russia has done what it frequently does when it is responsible for something, which is make accusations that it was really someone else who did it," Sullivan said. "We've seen this repeatedly over time."

As for a broader guarantee of protection, Ukraine has sought NATO membership for years but has not yet been admitted due to concerns about its domestic governance. As a result of Russia's invasion, Finland and Sweden have applied for fast-track admission into the alliance.

The White House said Sullivan had spoken with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to highlight the U.S. and NATO's "firm commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

But the Biden administration isn't embracing Zelenskyy's push for an accelerated path to NATO member-

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ship. Sullivan said the U.S. was focused on supporting Ukraine through "practical on the ground support." He added that "the process in Brussels should be taken up at a different time."

Earlier, following Putin's announcement, the White House along with the State, Treasury and Commerce departments had announced the new sanctions in a series of coordinated statements. The sanctions expand on what have been escalating penalties against Russia and its proxies since the invasion began on Feb. 24.

Treasury designated hundreds of members of Russia's parliament, leaders of the country's financial and military infrastructure and suppliers for sanctions designations that include asset freezes and bans on Americans doing business with them. The Commerce Department added 57 companies to its list of export control violators, and the State Department added more than 900 people to its visa ban list, making them ineligible for travel to the United States.

Since the start of the invasion, the U.S. and European nations have imposed significant financial penalties on Russia, its leadership and wealthy oligarchs tied to Putin. The allies have gone after the central bank reserves that underpin the Russian economy and have severed many Russian banks from a vital global financial network called SWIFT.

The war is having a devastating impact on the global economy and has contributed to massive disruptions to supplies of energy and food throughout the world. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development this week said the global economy is set to lose \$2.8 trillion in output in 2023 because of the conflict.

Putin appears undeterred. He warned that Russia would never give up the absorbed regions—the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions—and would protect them as part of its sovereign territory.

Both houses of the Russian parliament will meet next week to approve the treaties for the regions to join Russia.

## **Separatists in Iran kill up to 19, including Guard commander**

Associated Press undefined

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranian state-linked media reported late Friday that up to 19 people, including a commander in the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, were killed in an attack by armed separatists on a police base in the eastern city of Zahedan.

It was not immediately clear if the attack, which unfolded earlier in the day as crowds had gathered at a nearby mosque for Friday prayers, was related to the nationwide antigovernment protests gripping Iran. The reports did not identify the separatist group.

In a separate development, Iran said it has arrested nine foreigners linked to the protests, which authorities have blamed on hostile foreign entities, without providing evidence.

State TV said armed separatists concealed themselves among worshippers and attacked a police base near the mosque in Zahedan. The state-run IRNA news agency cited witnesses as saying that 19 people were killed and 15 wounded, but there was no official confirmation.

The semiofficial Tasnim news agency reported that the head of the Guard's intelligence department, Seyyed Ali Mousavi, was shot during the attack and later died.

The Sistan and Baluchestan province borders Afghanistan and Pakistan, and has seen previous attacks on security forces by ethnic Baluchi separatists.

Thousands of Iranians have taken to the streets over the last two weeks in protests over the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who had been detained by the morality police in the capital, Tehran, for allegedly wearing her mandatory Islamic headscarf too loosely.

The protesters have vented anger over the treatment of women and wider repression in the Islamic Republic. The nationwide demonstrations rapidly escalated into calls for the overthrow of the clerical establishment that has ruled Iran since its 1979 Islamic revolution.

The protests have drawn supporters from various ethnic groups, including Kurdish opposition movements in the northwest that operate along the border with neighboring Iraq. Amini was an Iranian Kurd, and the protests first erupted in Kurdish areas.

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Iran's Intelligence Ministry said the nine foreigners arrested include citizens of Germany, Poland, Italy, France, the Netherlands and Sweden, state news agency IRNA reported. It was not immediately clear if they were Iranians with dual citizenship.

The ministry did not provide evidence for any of its claims.

Iran has detained a number of Iranians with dual citizenship over the years, accusing them of spying or otherwise undermining national security. Critics accuse Iran of using such detainees as bargaining chips to secure concessions from the international community.

A number of Europeans were detained in Iran in recent months, including a Swedish tourist, a Polish scientist and others. Two French citizens arrested in June are accused of meeting with protesting teachers and taking part in an antigovernment rally.

Earlier Friday, the London-based rights group Amnesty International said it had acquired leaked government documents showing that Iran had ordered its security forces to "severely confront" protesters as the demonstrations gathered strength earlier this month.

The London-based rights group said security forces have killed at least 52 people since protests over the Amini's death began nearly two weeks ago, including by firing live ammunition into crowds and beating protesters with batons.

It says security forces have also beaten and groped female protesters who remove their headscarves to protest the treatment of women by Iran's theocracy.

Amnesty said it obtained a leaked copy of an official document saying that the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces ordered commanders on Sept. 21 to "severely confront troublemakers and anti-revolutionaries." The rights group says the use of lethal force escalated later that evening, with at least 34 people killed that night alone.

It said another leaked document shows that, two days later, the commander in Mazandran province ordered security forces to "confront mercilessly, going as far as causing deaths, any unrest by rioters and anti-Revolutionaries," referring to those opposed to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, which brought the clerics to power.

Amnesty did not say how it acquired the documents. There was no immediate comment from Iranian authorities.

Iranian state TV has reported that at least 41 protesters and police have been killed since the demonstrations began Sept. 17. An Associated Press count of official statements by authorities tallied at least 14 dead, with more than 1,500 demonstrators arrested.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists says at least 28 reporters have been arrested.

Iranian authorities have severely restricted internet access and blocked access to Instagram and WhatsApp, popular social media applications that are also used by the protesters to organize and share information.

That makes it difficult to gauge the extent of the protests, particularly outside the capital, Tehran. Iranian media have only sporadically covered the demonstrations.

Iranians have long used virtual private networks and proxies to get around the government's internet restrictions.

Shervin Hajipour, an amateur singer in Iran, recently posted a song on Instagram based on tweets about Amini that received more than 40 million views in less than 48 hours before it was taken down. Iran Human Rights Organization, a group based in Norway, said that Hajipour has reportedly been arrested. There was no official confirmation.

## Putin illegally annexes Ukraine land; Kyiv seeks NATO entry

By JON GAMBRELL and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin signed treaties Friday to illegally annex more occupied Ukrainian territory in a sharp escalation of his war. Ukraine's president countered with a surprise application to join the NATO military alliance.

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Putin's land-grab and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's signing of what he said is an "accelerated" NATO membership application sent the two leaders speeding faster on a collision course that is cranking up fears of a full-blown conflict between Russia and the West.

Putin vowed to protect newly annexed regions of Ukraine by "all available means," a renewed nuclear-backed threat he made at a Kremlin signing ceremony where he also railed furiously against the West, accusing the United States and its allies of seeking Russia's destruction.

Zelenskyy then held his own signing ceremony in Kyiv, releasing video of him putting pen to papers he said were a formal NATO membership request.

Putin has repeatedly made clear that any prospect of Ukraine joining the military alliance is one of his red lines and cited it as a justification for his invasion, now in its eighth month, in Europe's biggest land war since World War II.

In his speech, Putin urged Ukraine to sit down for peace talks but insisted he won't discuss handing back occupied regions. Zelenskyy said there'd be no negotiations with Putin.

"We are ready for a dialogue with Russia, but ... with another president of Russia," the Ukrainian leader said.

At his signing ceremony in the Kremlin's ornate St. George's Hall, Putin accused the West of fueling the hostilities to turn Russia into a "colony" and a "crowd of soulless slaves." The hardening of his position, in the conflict that has killed and wounded tens of thousands of people, further raised tensions already at levels unseen since the Cold War.

Global leaders, including those from the Group of Seven leading economies, responded with an avalanche of condemnation. The U.S. and the U.K. announced more sanctions.

U.S. President Joe Biden said of Putin's annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions: "Make no mistake: These actions have no legitimacy."

"America and its allies are not going to be intimidated by Putin and his reckless words and threats," Biden added, noting that the Russian leader "can't seize his neighbor's territory and get away with it."

The European Union said its 27 member states will never recognize the illegal referendums that Russia organized "as a pretext for this further violation of Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Russia vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution Friday that would have condemned the referendums, declared that they have no validity and urged all countries not to recognize the annexation. China, India, Brazil and Gabon abstained on the vote in the 15-member council.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called it "the largest attempted annexation of European territory by force since the Second World War."

The war is at "a pivotal moment," he said, and Putin's decision to annex more territory – Russia now claims sovereignty over 15% of Ukraine – marks "the most serious escalation since the start of the war." Stoltenberg was noncommittal on Zelenskyy's fast-track NATO application, saying alliance leaders "support Ukraine's right to choose its own path, to decide what kind of security arrangements it wants to be part of."

Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of Russia's Security Council, said Zelenskyy's move toward the military alliance amounts to "begging NATO to accelerate the start of World War III."

Zelenskyy vowed to keep fighting, defying Putin's warnings that Kyiv shouldn't try to recapture what it has lost.

"The entire territory of our country will be liberated from this enemy," he said. "Russia already knows this. It feels our power."

The immediate ramifications of the "accelerated" NATO application weren't clear, since approval requires members' unanimous support. The supply of Western weapons to Ukraine has, however, already put it closer to the alliance's orbit.

"De facto, we have already proven compatibility with alliance standards," Zelenskyy said. "We trust each other, we help each other, and we protect each other."

The Kremlin ceremony came three days after the completion in the occupied regions of Moscow-orchestrated "referendums" on joining Russia that Kyiv and the West dismissed as a blatant land grab held



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at gunpoint and based on lies. In his fiery speech, Putin insisted Ukraine treat the votes "with respect." As the ceremony concluded, the Moscow-installed leaders of the occupied regions gathered around Putin, linked hands and chanted "Russia! Russia!" with the audience.

Putin cut an angry figure as he accused the United States and its allies of seeking to destroy Russia. He said the West acted "as a parasite" and used its financial and technological strength "to rob the entire world." He portrayed Russia as pursuing a historical mission to reclaim its post-Soviet great power status and counter Western domination he said is collapsing.

"History has called us to a battlefield to fight for our people, for the grand historic Russia, for future generations," he said.

Moscow has backed eastern Ukraine's separatist Donetsk and Luhansk regions since they declared independence in 2014, weeks after Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Russia captured the southern Kherson region and part of neighboring Zaporizhzhia soon after Putin sent troops into Ukraine on Feb. 24.

The Kremlin-controlled Russian parliament will meet next week to rubber-stamp the annexation treaties, sending them to Putin for final approval.

The orchestrated process went into a celebratory phase Friday night, with thousands gathered in Red Square for a concert and rally that Putin joined. Many waved Russian flags as entertainers from Russia and occupied parts of Ukraine performed patriotic songs. Russian media reported employees of state-run companies and institutions were told to attend, and students were allowed to skip classes.

Putin's land grab and a partial troop mobilization were attempts to avoid more battlefield defeats that could threaten his 22-year rule. By formalizing Russia's gains, he seemingly hopes to scare Ukraine and its Western backers by threatening to escalate the conflict unless they back down — which they show no signs of doing.

Russia controls most of the Luhansk and Kherson regions, about 60% of the Donetsk region and a large chunk of the Zaporizhzhia region, where it seized Europe's largest nuclear power plant.

But the Kremlin is on the verge of another stinging military loss, with reports of the imminent Ukrainian encirclement of the eastern city of Lyman. Retaking it could open the path for Ukraine to push deep into Luhansk, one of the annexed regions.

"It looks quite pathetic. Ukrainians are doing something, taking steps in the real material world, while the Kremlin is building some kind of a virtual reality, incapable of responding in the real world," former Kremlin speechwriter-turned-analyst Abbas Gallyamov said, adding that "the Kremlin cannot offer anything comforting to the Russians."

Russia pounded Ukrainian cities with missiles, rockets and suicide drones in Moscow's heaviest barrage in weeks, with one strike in the Zaporizhzhia region's capital killing 30 and wounding 88.

In the Zaporizhzhia attack, anti-aircraft missiles that Russia has repurposed as ground-attack weapons rained down on people waiting in cars to cross into Russian-occupied territory so they could bring family members back across front lines, said Kyrylo Tymoshenko, deputy head of Ukraine's presidential office.

Russian-installed officials in Zaporizhzhia blamed Ukrainian forces, but gave no evidence.

The strike left deep craters and sent shrapnel tearing into the humanitarian convoy, killing passengers. Nearby buildings were demolished. Bodies were later covered with trash bags, blankets and, for one victim, a blood-soaked towel.

A Ukrainian counteroffensive has deprived Moscow of battlefield mastery. Its hold on the Luhansk region appears increasingly shaky, as Ukrainian forces make inroads with the pincer assault on Lyman, a key node for Russian military operations in the Donbas and a sought-after prize. The Russian-backed separatist leader of Donetsk, Denis Pushilin, said Ukrainian forces have "half-encircled" Lyman. Ukraine maintains a large foothold in the neighboring Donetsk region.

Russian strikes were also reported in the city of Dnipro. Regional Gov. Valentyn Reznichenko said at least three people were killed and five were wounded.

Ukraine's air force said the southern cities of Mykolaiv and Odesa were targeted with Iranian-supplied

suicide drones that Russia has increasingly deployed.

## **Analysis: Russia's war in Ukraine reaches a critical moment**

By TAMER FAKAHANY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — There are moments in history that appear as critical to the world as they are terrifying. Just this century: the 9/11 attacks in 2001; the U.S. "shock-and-awe" war on Saddam Hussein's Iraq two years later; the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 killed millions and upended life; and most recently the Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, bringing ruinous war back to Europe.

Friday seemed one of those watershed moments as Russian President Vladimir Putin signed treaties to illegally annex a large swath of eastern and southern Ukraine, like it did with Crimea in 2014.

Coming seven months into the conflict and with near daily nuclear threats by backs-to-the wall Kremlin leaders, Putin chillingly vowed to protect the newly annexed regions by "all available means." Almost immediately, Ukraine's president countered by applying to join the NATO military alliance, setting Russia up to face off against the West.

Any thought that this kind of harrowing brinkmanship had ended with the 1980s when the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and then U.S. President Ronald Reagan eased the Cold War and the specter of nuclear Armageddon, is now gone.

Even with the horror of Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki burned on humanity's collective consciousness, the world finds itself once again contemplating the possible use of nuclear weapons.

After a series of humiliating setbacks on the battlefield, Putin has made it painfully clear that any attack on the newly annexed regions would be construed as an attack on Russia. He would use any means available in his vast arsenal — the nod to nuclear weapons was barely veiled — and wasn't bluffing, he said.

"We're in an escalation phase, and Russia now is faced with a series of more extreme choices than before," said Nigel Gould-Davies, the former U.K. ambassador to Belarus.

Gould-Davies, who is senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said Russia's attempts to win the war by more moderate means have failed, and Putin is now having to increase the "range and severity of the measures" Russia is taking, including annexation and nuclear threats.

Even as Moscow annexed the four Ukrainian regions in a move that will not be recognized by an overwhelming majority of the world, tens of thousands of Russian men called up to fight in the war were fleeing Russia.

Former Kremlin speechwriter turned political analyst Abbas Gallyamov on Friday linked Russia's reversals in the war with the annexation push. "It looks like an attempt to respond somehow, and it looks quite pathetic. Ukrainians are doing something, taking steps in the real material world, while the Kremlin is building some kind of virtual reality, incapable of responding in the real world," he said.

Driving Putin are years of perceived humiliation at the hands of the West after the demise of the Soviet Union. And the fact that previous bloodshed and atrocities committed against Chechnya and Syria escaped severe international intervention seemed to give him the conviction that he had carte blanche to rebuild an Imperial Russia.

That's not the case now.

Billions of dollars in United States and European military aid are helping highly motivated Ukrainian forces liberate territory in the war amid clear signals from Washington that "catastrophic consequences" will follow any use by Moscow of non-conventional weapons.

On a day like Friday, Sept. 30, as Russia's war in Ukraine enters a flammable, even more dangerous phase, the question remains; Is a wider war looming with devastating results for the world, perhaps not seen since 1939-1945?

## **Russians push baseless theory blaming US for burst pipeline**

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

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The Kremlin and Russian state media are aggressively pushing a baseless conspiracy theory blaming the United States for damage to natural gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea in what analysts said Friday is another effort to split the U.S. and its European allies.

The Russian position is also reverberating on social media forums popular with American conservatives and far-right groups.

NATO leaders believe the damage to the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines between Russia and Germany is the result of sabotage. NATO has refrained from identifying a suspect pending an investigation into the damage.

Russia began blaming the U.S. quickly after the damage was reported Monday night. On Friday, speaking at a ceremony to annex four Ukrainian regions, Russian President Vladimir Putin said "Anglo-Saxons" in the West were behind the "terror attacks" but did not specify any nations.

Pravda and other Russian state outlets reported Thursday that the U.S. operates underwater robots capable of carrying out the acts of sabotage. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman wrote about her suspicions of U.S. involvement in a Telegram post.

"Europe must know the truth!" Maria Zakharova wrote on Telegram Wednesday.

President Joe Biden on Friday dismissed Russia's claims.

"It was a deliberate act of sabotage. And now the Russians are pumping out disinformation and lies," Biden said. "... When things calm down, we're going to send the divers down to find out exactly what happened. We don't know that yet exactly. But just don't listen to what Putin's saying. What he's saying we know is not true."

The assertions of U.S. responsibility cite Biden's threat in February to stop the recently completed Nord Stream 2 pipeline if Russia invaded Ukraine. "If Russia invades ... then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2," Biden said. "We will bring an end to it."

The two Nord Stream lines were not in operation but were filled with tons of methane that began bubbling to the surface following the damage. Russia recently shut off the Nord Stream 1 pipeline as it ramped up energy pressure on Europe. Nord Stream 2 has never been used.

Fox News' Tucker Carlson played the Biden clip on his show Tuesday and brought up the possibility that the U.S. was behind the sabotage.

"If they did this, this will be one of the craziest, most destructive things any American administration has ever done, but it would also be totally consistent with what they do," Carlson said.

Former President Donald Trump also reposted Biden's remarks on Truth Social along with a call for the U.S. to remain "cool, calm" in its relations with Russia. "Wow. What a statement. World War III anyone?" he wrote.

Contacted for a response, a spokeswoman for Fox News forwarded transcripts from past episodes of Carlson's show, including one in which he discussed a conspiracy theory about supposed secret bioweapon research in Ukraine.

A spokeswoman for Trump did not immediately respond to a message on Friday.

The suggestion that the U.S. caused the damage was circulating on online forums popular with American conservatives and followers of QAnon, a conspiracy theory movement which asserts that Trump is fighting a battle against a Satanic child-trafficking sect that controls world events.

The claim's popularity among the American far-right and the speed with which it spread from Russian state media reflect mounting skepticism about America's role in the war in Ukraine, according to Emma Ashford, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Stimson Center and an expert on security and energy.

"Russia is quite good at capitalizing on these divides, but it doesn't create them," she said.

It's not the first time Russia has spread disinformation seeking to redirect blame for the war and undermine Ukraine's allies. Earlier this year, Kremlin-controlled media mounted a disinformation operation asserting the U.S. had been running secret bioweapon labs in Ukraine. Carlson helped amplify that theory too.

Networks allied with the Kremlin have also spread frightening tales about Ukrainian refugees, and blamed atrocities committed during the war on Ukrainians.

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Seen in that context, the conspiracy theory alleging U.S. responsibility for the pipeline damage is consistent, the researchers concluded.

"The central theme is that this is a "false-flag" operation, an American plot designed to convince Europe that it was a Russian attack intended to signal the vulnerability of Europe's energy supplies," the researchers wrote.

## **In Ian's wake, worried families crowdsource rescue efforts**

By BEATRICE DUPUY Associated Press

Many people whose loved ones stayed behind in the pathway of Hurricane Ian are crowdsourcing rescue efforts as they grapple with the helplessness of waiting and not knowing.

In TikTok videos and Facebook posts, families are sharing their desperate pleas and strangers are answering their calls, even as local officials urge people to use official channels for help.

Hannah Foltz had assumed her grandparents, Janet and Larry, evacuated from their mobile home in Naples. But when the 35-year-old in Indiana heard from her mother, she learned they had not only stayed but the water that flooded their home was almost chest deep with the fridge floating. Her 75-year-old grandmother didn't know how to swim.

"We were all in like pure panic mode, sitting in Indiana, crying, feeling helpless," Foltz said.

She turned to a Facebook group of more than 400,000 people, #HurricaneStrong.

"They are terrified, and both have health conditions," she posted in the group along with her grandparents' address.

She didn't expect for even one social media user to head out to her grandparents and report back so quickly. But that was followed by another good Samaritan and then two more.

"Knowing that there are people out there that just literally want to go help a complete stranger," she said. "That was just like a miracle."

An informal digital structure built on the backs of previous disasters was on full display in the midst of Ian's fury. Users shared online forms to request and volunteer for rescues. Facebook groups sprung up with pleas for help, including phone numbers and addresses, and offers from volunteers to step in.

Authorities continue to urge Floridians to use official emergency channels, like 911, to report immediate distress, not social media, which can be unreliable and even put the good Samaritans who respond in danger. U.S. Coast Guard spokesman Erik Villa said that family members should try to get a hold of their loved ones and monitor the area they live in before calling emergency services.

Kingman Schuldt, greater Naples retired fire chief with the International Association of Fire Chiefs, said social media users should also be discreet with how much public information they share about their loved ones online.

"Obviously, when you put a public request for help you have to be careful with how much you put out there because there are bad actors," he said.

The posts are pulling on heartstrings and driving some to rush in to help.

There was a brief moment Wednesday when Heather Donlan's 87-year-old father, Jack, called his daughter for what he thought would be the last time. A pipe had burst in his Naples home and water was coming in from the outside — sealing him inside.

Donlan, whose Naples home was also taking on water, had already dialed 911 about her dad and was told that rescuers would try to get to him, but the roads were impassable. There was no way she could reach him herself.

A firefighter friend recommended she share her post on Facebook and see if anyone in the area could come to her father's aid. Her father had already been in the water for hours and his phone was losing battery.

A local teacher and her sons walked through the water to get to Donlan's dad. They drove him to Donlan's home three miles away, and he was taken to the hospital for dehydration and a wound on his ankle.

"That social media post 100% saved his life," the 48-year-old Donlan said. "The people here on the



ground wouldn't have been able to help if it had not also been for the people willing to re-share, push and post when we didn't have service."

## Gun owners, rights groups challenge Connecticut firearms ban

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Citing a U.S. Supreme Court decision earlier this year, gun rights groups and firearms owners have launched another attempt to overturn Connecticut's ban on certain semiautomatic rifles that was enacted in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

A new lawsuit was filed Thursday in federal court by three gun owners, the Connecticut Citizens Defense League and the Second Amendment Foundation. They are seeking to overturn the state prohibition on what they call "modern sporting arms" such as AR-15-style rifles like the one used to kill 20 first-graders and six educators at the Newtown school in 2012.

"We all deserve to live in safe communities, but denying ownership of the most commonly owned firearms in the country is not the way to achieve it," Holly Sullivan, president of the Connecticut Citizens Defense League, said in a statement.

"The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision ... has opened the door to this challenge, and we believe Connecticut will be hard pressed to prove its statutes are constitutional," she said.

State officials vowed to defend the 2013 gun laws.

"Connecticut's gun laws save lives, and we are not going back," state Attorney General William Tong said in a statement. "We will not allow weapons of war back into our schools, our houses of worship, our grocery stores, and our communities. I will vigorously defend our laws against any and every one of these baseless challenges."

In June, the Supreme Court broadly expanded gun rights in a 6-3 ruling by the conservative majority that overturned a New York law restricting carrying guns in public and affected a half-dozen other states with similar laws. After the ruling, New York and other states have moved to pass new gun restrictions that comply with the decision.

Gun rights groups had attempted to overturn Connecticut's ban on assault weapons before. But in 2016, the high court, with fewer conservative justices, rejected challenges to assault weapons bans in Connecticut in New York passed in response to the Sandy Hook shooting.

The plaintiffs in the new challenge include a female victim of domestic violence and two former state correctional officers who want to possess "modern sporting rifles for defensive purposes," the lawsuit says. Their lawyers include two Republican state representatives, Craig Fishbein of Wallingford and Doug Dubitsky of Chaplin.

They say Connecticut's gun laws violate Second Amendment gun rights as well as 14th Amendment due process rights.

The lawsuit was filed against Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont, public safety Commissioner James Rovella and several state prosecutors.

Lamont said Friday the state gun law was passed to prevent "needless tragedy," had bipartisan support when it was approved and is overwhelmingly supported by state residents.

"We will vigorously defend these commonsense laws that are seeking to reduce violent crime and mass shootings," he said in a statement. "When it comes to the safety of the people of our state, we must stand up and do what is right."

The 2013 state law added more than 100 firearms, including the rifle used in the school shooting, to the state's assault weapons ban and prohibited large-capacity ammunition magazines.

The Newtown shooter, Adam Lanza, fired more than 150 shots within five minutes, using a Bushmaster XM15-E2S rifle and 30-round magazines. The rifle was legally owned by his mother, whom he killed at their Newtown home before going to the school. Lanza killed himself with a handgun at the school as police arrived.

The law also created what officials called the nation's first dangerous weapon offender registry as well as eligibility rules for buying ammunition.

## Abortion ruling intensifies fight over state supreme courts

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

Surrounded by states with abortion bans that took effect after Roe v. Wade fell, Illinois is one of the few places where the procedure remains legal in the Midwest.

Abortion-rights supporters are worried that might not last. Their concern is shared in at least a half-dozen states, and this year it's not just about state legislatures. In Illinois, Democrats hold a supermajority, and the governor, a Democrat, is expected to win reelection.

Instead, Republicans could be on the verge of winning control of the Illinois Supreme Court, where Democrats currently hold a 4-3 majority. Two seats are up for election in November, prompting groups that have normally set their sights on other offices to concentrate attention and money on the judicial campaigns.

"Those are the only things we're focused on, because whoever wins control of the court will decide whether abortion remains legal in Illinois," said Terry Cosgrove, president and CEO of Personal PAC, an abortion rights group that has endorsed the two Democrats running for the high court.

The same scene is playing out in other states with contentious high court races on the ballot this year. After the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Roe, state judicial races have become even more important for Democratic groups working to protect abortion rights.

"It's increasingly clear that the way access is playing out is at the state level, which puts the role of the court in stark relief," said Sarah Standiford, national campaigns director for Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

The groups' involvement in states such as Illinois, Michigan and Ohio is a preview of how high-stakes normally sleepy court races are becoming.

In Illinois, Appellate Court Justice Mary Kay O'Brien is raising concerns about abortion rights as she runs against Republican Justice Michael Burke in a redrawn district for a seat currently held by a retiring Democratic justice.

"Now with Roe v. Wade being overturned, women's freedom to choose in Illinois is at risk," a recently launched ad for O'Brien says.

Meanwhile, the race for a court seat currently held by a Republican and covering counties northwest of Chicago pits Republican former Sheriff Mark Curran against Democrat Liz Rochford, a judge. Curran touted his opposition to abortion rights when he ran unsuccessfully for Senate two years ago.

About \$97 million was spent on state supreme court elections during the 2019-2020 election cycle, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's law school. Spending records could be shattered this year in states targeted by the right and left.

One group is Alliance for Justice Action Campaign, which supports abortion access. It plans to reach voters in Michigan, North Carolina and Ohio.

"We were already planning to be involved in these states, but Dobbs has heightened our interest and heightened our sense of purpose and sense of mission on it," said Jake Faleschini, the group's legal director for state courts, referring to the U.S. Supreme Court decision.

The races' importance was underscored recently when the Michigan Supreme Court, where Democratic appointees hold a slim majority, overruled a decision by a state certification board and allowed a constitutional amendment ensuring abortion rights on the November ballot.

While Michigan's races are officially nonpartisan, the state's political parties nominate candidates. Democratic-backed Justice Richard Bernstein, who voted with the court's majority to put the abortion rights amendment on the ballot, is up for reelection along with Republican Justice Brian Zahra, who voted against it.

The Republican Party also nominated Paul Hudson, while Democrats nominated Kyra Bolden. The two top finishers in the five-candidate race get seats.

"Folks here in Michigan are angry about the Roe decision. And I think that when they're looking for places to exercise their freedom to vote, they're going to look to the Supreme Court," state Democratic Party Chair Lavora Barnes said.

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Still, the candidates insist they aren't politicians and the role of the court is to be nonpartisan. Zahra, who has served since 2011, described a justice's role as saying "what the law is and not what they think it ought to be."

Abortion rights groups also are closely watching Kansas, where six of the seven Supreme Court justices face a statewide yes-or-no vote to stay on the bench for another six years.

Two of the six were in the 6-1 majority that in 2019 declared access to abortion a "fundamental" right under the state Constitution, while another three were appointed by Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly. The sixth justice on the ballot is considered the state's most conservative member.

Democrats, moderate Republicans and others fear a quiet effort to remove justices after Kansas voters in August decisively rejected a proposed amendment that would have declared the state Constitution does not recognize a right to abortion. If it had passed, the Republican-controlled Legislature could have greatly restricted or banned the procedure.

The state supreme court races that abortion rights supporters say they are most concerned with are ones Republicans already have been targeting, but for other issues.

The Republican State Leadership Committee said it plans to spend more than \$5 million — a record amount for the group — on supreme court races in Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina and Ohio. Spokesman Andrew Romeo said the group's focus is on redistricting.

In North Carolina, where abortion remains legal and Democrats hold a 4-3 majority on the high court, Republicans are trying to flip two seats.

Trey Allen, the Republican hoping to unseat Democratic Justice Sam Ervin IV — whose grandfather presided over the Watergate hearings in the U.S. Senate — has accused the court of becoming too partisan.

"We need justices who are going to follow the law in every case and leave their politics aside," he said during a recent forum.

Democratic Appeals Court Judge Lucy Inman is vowing to keep the court "free of any political agenda" as she runs against Republican Appeals Court Judge Richard Dietz for a seat currently held by a retiring Democrat.

Abortion also is likely to play a major role in a technically nonpartisan Kentucky Supreme Court race this fall between longtime Republican state Rep. Joe Fischer and the incumbent, Michelle Keller. Republicans are pushing hard for Fischer, who sponsored the state's "trigger law" ending abortion that took effect after Dobbs and also is behind a proposed anti-abortion constitutional amendment on the ballot.

In Ohio, Republicans are trying to keep their 4-3 majority on the court, with two GOP justices defending their seats. A third race pits two sitting justices — a Republican and a Democrat — against each other for chief justice.

Ohio's court is likely to be another battleground over abortion after a county judge temporarily blocked a ban that took effect after the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling. Rhiannon Carnes, co-founder and co-executive director of Ohio Women's Alliance Action Fund, said her group has been calling and texting voters, and will be sending direct mail about the court races.

"There has just been so much talk about the federal Supreme Court," she said. "We have to do more in the states about the influence and power of our state supreme court."

## **NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week**

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Ukrainian family killed in Russian attack, despite denials

CLAIM: Grave markers for a Ukrainian family that say they died on March 9 in Iziom prove they were not killed by Russian forces, because Russian troops did not enter the Ukrainian city until weeks later.

THE FACTS: The Ukrainian city of Iziom was being heavily bombarded by Russian forces on March 9

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and the family was killed in the attack, according to people with direct knowledge of the attack on the high-rise building where the family lived, as well as reports from humanitarian groups and Ukrainian officials who documented the destruction. After Ukrainian authorities discovered a mass grave in Izyum this month, social media accounts for the Russian embassy in South Africa openly questioned whether one of the families buried at the site had been truly killed in a Russian offensive on the northeastern city. On its social media accounts, the embassy shared a screenshot of a tweet by Andrii Yermak, head of the office of the president of Ukraine, featuring a photo of the Stolpakov family's grave site. The simple wooden crosses, found in a wooded area among scores of others, mark the date of their deaths as March 9, 2022. "The Russians are killing entire Ukrainian families," Yermak had tweeted. "Izyum. Olesya, 6 years old. Murdered by the Russian uniformed terrorists. Her parents are buried nearby." The Russian embassy in its posts falsely claimed that the family could not have been killed by Russian troops, because they were not in the area at the time. But Russian forces did carry out several strikes on Izyum on March 9, including one that destroyed a high rise on the east bank of the Severodonetsk River, according to a dozen people with direct knowledge that AP journalists have spoken to in recent days. A woman who previously lived in the building and whose mother died in the blast told the AP the Stolpakovs lived in the high rise and were among those killed. Tetiana Pryvalikhina, a 40-year-old who now lives in Kladno in the Czech Republic with her daughter, said in messages on Instagram written in Ukrainian that many of the bodies couldn't be removed until about a month after the attack, making identification difficult. Izyum's deputy mayor Volodymyr Matsokin told the AP that about 50 people died in the attack, including the Stolpakov family. Matsokin was among those who posted numerous photos and videos of the destroyed city on social media during those weeks. Ukrainian news outlets also reported that the family died in the March 9 attack, and the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense said in a Sept. 17 tweet that they died in an aerial attack on their home that day. Denis Krivosheev, a deputy director at Amnesty International, called the Russian embassy's comment "totally disingenuous." While it's true that Russian forces did not establish full control of Izyum until much later, they were clearly heavily shelling the city at the time the family was killed, he said. "The timing totally fits: our respondents were telling us about events at the time including on and close to 9 March," he said in an email. George Barros, a Russia expert at the Institute for the Study of War, a D.C.-based group that's been tracking major developments in the war, agreed. "There is ample documentation of Russian indirect fire against civilian infrastructure in Izyum since at least March 3, several days before Russian forces occupied Izyum," he wrote in an email Monday. During a media briefing on Thursday, Maria Zakharova, a spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow, repeated claims that Russian forces weren't responsible for the March 9 deaths.

— Associated Press writers Philip Marcelo and Beatrice DuPuy in New York, Lori Hinnant in Ukraine and Dasha Litvinova in Tallinn, Estonia, contributed to this report.

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Biden's 2021 comments on hurricane preparedness misrepresented

CLAIM: President Joe Biden called for people in Florida to prepare for Hurricane Ian by getting vaccinated against COVID-19.

THE FACTS: Social media users are misrepresenting an August 2021 video in which Biden urged people in hurricane-prone states to get vaccinated in case they needed to evacuate or stay in a shelter. As Hurricane Ian on Tuesday approached the southwest coast of Florida, where 2.5 million people had been ordered to evacuate, the out-of-context clip of Biden spread widely on social media. "If you're in a state where hurricanes often strike, like Florida or the Gulf Coast or into Texas, a vital part of preparing for hurricane season is to get vaccinated now," Biden says in the video clip. "Everything is more complicated if you're not vaccinated and a hurricane or a natural disaster hits." Some social media users who shared the clip suggested that Biden's comments were in reference to Hurricane Ian's expected landfall in Florida. "Protect yourself from incoming hurricanes by getting vaccinated... right now!" wrote a Twitter user who shared the video on Tuesday. But the video is from Aug. 10, 2021. Biden made the comments prior to a White House briefing from FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell and other officials about how the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting hurricane preparedness. But he didn't say getting vaccinated would protect against hur-



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ricanes. In the full video, Biden discussed what he described as the upcoming "peak" hurricane season in the Atlantic region coinciding with the pandemic. "If you wind up having to evacuate, if you wind up having to stay in a shelter, you don't want to add COVID-19 to the list of dangers that you're going to be confronting," Biden said in the video, later adding: "We can't prevent hurricanes making landfall, but we can prevent people from getting seriously sick and dying from COVID-19." Hurricane Ian made landfall in southwest Florida on Wednesday as a Category 4 storm, leaving destruction in its wake.

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Analysts: China flight cancellations follow normal pattern

CLAIM: There was no flight movement over China as more than 9,000 flights were canceled across the country in a single day last week.

THE FACTS: While flight tracking estimates show that thousands of flights were canceled on several days last week, this remains consistent with the high cancellation rates the country has experienced amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and multiple experts told the AP that last week's air patterns weren't unusual. As baseless claims of a military coup in China spread online recently, social media users asserted that air traffic data showing more than 9,000 flights canceled across the country on a single day was proof that planes were being grounded amid turmoil in the country. "Absolutely no flight movement over China," wrote one Twitter user on Sept. 24 while posting an image of the global flight tracking service FlightRadar24 that showed a handful of planes crossing the country. Others claimed that about 9,500 flights were canceled across China on Sept. 21, accounting for nearly 60% of flights that day. But experts say these numbers, as well as some images from flight tracking services, are being presented out of context. Ian Petchenik, director of communications for FlightRadar24, said the images appearing to capture the service's dashboard over the weekend were likely taken during overnight hours of low flight traffic in China. He added that they also may reflect the fact that FlightRadar24's display can only show so many flights on screen at a time, meaning if a user zooms out far enough, the number of flights in an area will seemingly disappear. Further, China's population is not evenly distributed across the country. Because flight density varies greatly depending on the region, some areas are left looking sparse while other areas are more heavily trafficked. "If you're not understanding what you're looking at or you're purposefully misrepresenting what you're seeing, that becomes an unfortunate byproduct," Petchenik said. FlightRadar24 data shows that just over 6,000 out of nearly 15,000 flights were canceled on Sept. 21, which Petchenik said falls in line with the high level of daily cancellations that China has recorded for more than two years. While airlines in the U.S., Europe and Australia, among others, reduced the number of scheduled flights in their flight programs amid the pandemic, many Chinese airlines opted not to remove any scheduled flights, instead canceling a large number of flights on a daily basis, Petchenik told the AP. "In no way is this surprising, concerning, suspenseful or anything," he said. FlightRadar24 data also shows that the three Wednesdays preceding Sept. 21 all also logged more than 5,000 canceled flights. FlightAware, another major flight tracking data company, confirmed to the AP in a statement that its data listed more than 8,000 scheduled flights across China on Sept. 21, nearly 2,000 of which were canceled. Spokesperson Kathleen Bangs confirmed that the cancellations reflected normal air traffic patterns in China. "It's not uncommon, in fact, it's pretty much business as usual that we see very high cancellations out of China out of a number of major airports every day," Bangs added. Cirium, an aviation analytics firm, also told the AP in a statement that Cirium found that the rate of flight cancellations in China on Sept. 21 was "very similar to other recent days." Social media users spread the false claims of a military coup weeks before China's ruling Communist Party is set to hold a key congress at which leader Xi Jinping is expected to be granted a third five-year term. But Xi reappeared on state television Tuesday after a several-day absence from public view. He was shown visiting a display at the Beijing Exhibition Hall, his first appearance since he returned from a regional summit in Uzbekistan last weekend. Under Chinese pandemic regulations, he would need to stay in quarantine for a week after returning.

— Associated Press writer Sophia Tulp in New York contributed this report.

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Video of EU flag removal in Italy is from 2013, not 2022

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CLAIM: Video shows Italians taking down the European Union flag and replacing it with Italy's flag after a right-wing group, Brothers of Italy, won its national election.

THE FACTS: The video, filmed on Dec. 14, 2013, in Rome, shows a member of a neo-fascist group tearing down the E.U. flag, not Italians demonstrating after the election this week. Following the victory of a party with neo-fascist roots in the country's national election on Monday, social media users are sharing a nearly 10-year-old video to falsely claim it shows a crowd's reaction to what is set to be Italy's first far-right-led government since World War II. The video shows a man climbing up a ladder to a balcony to remove the E.U. flag, displayed outside the E.U. Commission office in Rome. A crowd of people chant and wave Italian flags before police break up the group. "EU Flag Ripped Down as Right-Wing Party sweeps Italian elections," an Instagram post, which features a screenshot of the video states. But the video was filmed and uploaded to YouTube on Dec. 14, 2013. It shows a member of CasaPound, a neo-fascist group, removing the flag. CasaPound said in a statement on its website on Dec. 14, 2013, that its then-vice president, Simone Di Stefano, had been arrested for taking the E.U. flag. The group stated that Di Stefano wanted to replace the E.U. flag with the tricolor flag to protest Italian involvement in the international organization. While it's not immediately clear who first filmed the video, dozens of local news outlets picked up the footage and reposted it that year. CasaPound also used a still frame from the same footage in its statement about the event, showing a man in a red, white and green mask and black jacket holding the blue E.U. flag from a balcony of the commission office. The group shared the video on its YouTube page, with the caption in Italian: "CasaPound blitz at European Union headquarters - flag stolen, police charges - December 14, 2013." On Monday, Brothers of Italy won the most votes in Italy's national election, making Giorgia Meloni the country's first woman premier, the AP reported. Italy's move to the far right places a eurosceptic party in a position to lead a founding member of the European Union and its third-largest economy.

## Palestinians mourn boy who died 'of fear' of Israeli troops

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

TEQUA, West Bank (AP) — A throng of men clutching the body of a 7-year-old Palestinian boy marched through a town in the occupied West Bank toward the child's final resting place on Friday, a day after his parents say he died from fear of Israeli soldiers.

Rayan Suleiman, with bright eyes and a backpack emblazoned with an animated race car, was walking home from school on Thursday when his family says he and his brothers were chased by Israeli soldiers. After the boys bolted home, the troops banged furiously on the door and threatened to arrest the children, their parents say. Just moments later, Rayan, the youngest of the three brothers, was dead.

The story shot across the occupied West Bank, providing an emotive focus for fury over Israel's military tactics and what Palestinians contend is their victimization by the Israeli occupation. The Israeli army called the death a tragedy and said its soldiers were not to blame.

Heavily armed Israeli soldiers routinely arrest Palestinian children in the West Bank, where nearly half a million Israeli settlers live on land that Palestinians want for a future independent state.

Rayan's death also struck a nerve with Palestinian parents. Fear for their children's safety and the dread of soldiers knocking on the door are part of daily life under an entrenched Israeli military rule that is now in its 56th year.

"He was just an innocent boy, just 7 years old, what can he do?" Yasser Suleiman, Rayan's father, told The Associated Press outside the hospital morgue on Friday, choking back tears.

The State Department demanded an investigation. The European Union said it was "shocked" by Rayan's "tragic death." U.N. Mideast envoy Tor Wennesland said he was "saddened" and called for an immediate probe.

Photographs of Rayan's tiny, lifeless body under a sheet in the hospital became a potent new symbol overnight, threatening to fuel already heightened tensions just a day after the deadliest Israeli raid since the military escalated its crackdown on the West Bank earlier this year.

And like many such incidents in the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict, his death has sparked con-

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tention. The Israeli military has denied any violence in the interaction with Rayan's family, saying that just one officer came to the family's house after spotting children throwing stones.

Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, a military spokesman, said the officer spoke in a "very calm manner" with Rayan's father and left.

"There was no violence, no entry into the house," Hecht said.

Rayan's father said his son collapsed after he saw the Israeli soldiers who chased him appear at his front door. Yasser Suleiman said he was trying to reason with the soldiers, who accused his children of throwing rocks. The soldiers threatened to return at night and arrest all three children, including Rayan's older brothers, ages 8 and 10, Suleiman said. Rayan tried to run away and fell on the floor, unconscious.

"He died of fear on the spot," Suleiman said.

Doctors at a hospital in Beit Jala, a Palestinian town south of Jerusalem, could not resuscitate him. A pediatric specialist, Dr. Mohamed Ismail, said Rayan was healthy and had no previous medical conditions.

"The most probable scenario of what happened is that under stress, he had excess adrenaline secretion, which caused the increase of his heart beat," Ismail said. "He developed cardiac arrest."

A forensic doctor is currently conducting an autopsy on Rayan. Until the doctor makes his determination, no death certificate will be issued.

In the meantime on Friday, mourners thronged his body outside his stone house in Tequa, a Palestinian town that borders an Israeli settlement with some 4,000 residents. They kissed his head and feet, shrouded in a Palestinian flag.

"God is great!" they shouted, some jogging to stay ahead of his small body on the wooden pallet. "Oh Rayan, light of the eye!"

At the Suleiman house on Friday afternoon, women wept and wailed over Rayan's bed, displayed in the family's courtyard along with his English school books. His mother was crumpled over, inconsolably crying and calling out for her son. Extended family with watery eyes milled about in mourning.

Rayan's aunt, who was home at the time of the incident, said even she was terrified when Israeli soldiers burst into the home. She said they handed her a paper in Hebrew she couldn't read and yelled, "We want the boys, where are the boys?"

"The kids are always in danger, from settlers from the army, on their way back from school," said Rayan's aunt, who gave her name as Umm Ali, noting that soldiers sometimes patrol a verdant shortcut that kids take from school to their homes. "Rayan is not the first one, he is only the latest."

His brothers are refusing to go to school again out of fear, she added.

Palestinians have seized on Rayan's death as the latest Israeli provocation as deadly violence rises in the West Bank. Following a surge of Palestinian attacks inside Israel last spring that killed 19 Israelis, the Israeli military has conducted almost nightly raids into cities and towns to arrest suspects. Dozens of Palestinians have been killed, making 2022 the deadliest in seven years.

Human rights groups say that across the West Bank, Palestinian children live under constant threat of violence. Under Israeli military law, Palestinian children age 12 and above can go to prison for six months. Israel arrests hundreds of teenagers during night raids each year, bundling them handcuffed and blindfolded into armored cars for interrogation, reported Israeli human rights organization, HaMoked.

"That's hugely traumatizing for the teenage kids being arrested and for their mothers and fathers," said Jessica Montell, executive director of HaMoked. "In this case, it was fatally traumatizing for this little boy."

After Rayan's funeral, small crowds of young men cursed and hurled rocks at Israeli armored vehicles rumbling through the streets of Tequa.

## Nobel Prize season arrives amid war, nuclear fears, hunger

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

This year's Nobel Prize season approaches as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shattered decades of almost uninterrupted peace in Europe and raised the risks of a nuclear disaster.

The secretive Nobel committees never hint who will win the prizes in medicine, physics, chemistry, litera-

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ture, economics or peace. It's anyone's guess who might win the awards being announced starting Monday.

Yet there's no lack of urgent causes deserving the attention that comes with winning the world's most prestigious prize: Wars in Ukraine and Ethiopia, disruptions to supplies of energy and food, rising inequality, the climate crisis, the ongoing fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The science prizes reward complex achievements beyond the understanding of most. But the recipients of the prizes in peace and literature are often known by a global audience and the choices — or perceived omissions — have sometimes stirred emotional reactions.

Members of the European Parliament have called for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine to be recognized this year by the Nobel Peace Prize committee for their resistance to the Russian invasion.

While that desire is understandable, that choice is unlikely because the Nobel committee has a history of honoring figures who end conflicts, not wartime leaders, said Dan Smith, director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Smith believes more likely peace prize candidates would be those fighting climate change or the International Atomic Energy Agency, a past recipient. Honoring the IAEA again would recognize its efforts to prevent a radioactive catastrophe at the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant at the heart of fighting in Ukraine, and its work in fighting nuclear proliferation, Smith said.

"This is really difficult period in world history and there is not a lot of peace being made," he said.

Promoting peace isn't always rewarded with a Nobel. India's Mohandas Gandhi, a prominent symbol of non-violence, was never so honored.

In some cases, the winners have not lived out the values enshrined in the peace prize.

Just this week the Vatican acknowledged imposing disciplinary sanctions on Nobel Peace Prize-winning Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo following allegations he sexually abused boys in East Timor in the 1990s.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed won in 2019 for making peace with neighboring Eritrea. A year later a largely ethnic conflict erupted in the country's Tigray region. Some accuse Abiy of stoking the tensions, which have resulted in widespread atrocities. Critics have called for his Nobel to be revoked and the Nobel committee has issued a rare admonition to him.

The Myanmar activist Aung San Suu Kyi won in 1991 for her opposition to military rule but decades later has been viewed as failing to oppose atrocities committed against the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority.

In some years, no peace prize has been awarded. It paused them during World War I, except to honor the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1917. It didn't hand out any from 1939 to 1943 due to World War II. In 1948, the year Gandhi died, the Norwegian Nobel Committee made no award, citing a lack of a suitable living candidate.

The peace prize also does not always confer protection.

Last year journalists Maria Ressa of the Philippines and Dmitry Muratov of Russia were awarded "for their courageous fight for freedom of expression" in the face of authoritarian governments.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has cracked down even harder on independent media, including Muratov's Novaya Gazeta, Russia's most renowned independent newspaper. Muratov himself was attacked on a Russian train by an assailant who poured red paint over him, injuring his eyes.

The Philippines government this year ordered the shutdown of Ressa's news organization, Rappler.

The literature prize, meanwhile, has been notoriously unpredictable.

Few had bet on last year's winner, Zanzibar-born, U.K.-based writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose books explore the personal and societal impacts of colonialism and migration.

Gurnah was only the sixth Nobel literature laureate born in Africa, and the prize has long faced criticism that it is too focused on European and North American writers. It is also male-dominated, with just 16 women among its 118 laureates.

A clear contender is Salman Rushdie, the India-born writer and free-speech advocate who spent years in hiding after Iran's clerical rulers called for his death over his 1988 novel "The Satanic Verses." Rushdie, 75, was stabbed and seriously injured in August at a festival in New York state.



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The list of possible winners includes literary giants from around the world: Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Japan's Haruki Murakami, Norway's Jon Fosse, Antigua-born Jamaica Kincaid and France's Annie Ernaux.

The prizes to Gurnah in 2021 and U.S. poet Louise Glück in 2020 have helped the literature prize move on from years of controversy and scandal.

In 2018, the award was postponed after sex abuse allegations rocked the Swedish Academy, which names the Nobel literature committee, and sparked an exodus of members. The academy revamped itself but faced more criticism for giving the 2019 literature award to Austria's Peter Handke, who has been called an apologist for Serbian war crimes.

Some scientists hope the award for physiology or medicine honors colleagues instrumental in the development of the mRNA technology that went into COVID-19 vaccines, which saved millions of lives across the world.

"When we think of Nobel prizes, we think of things that are paradigm shifting, and in a way I see mRNA vaccines and their success with COVID-19 as a turning point for us," said Deborah Fuller, a microbiology professor at the University of Washington.

Physics at times can seem arcane and difficult for the public to understand. But the last three years, the physics Nobel has honored more accessible topics: Climate change computer models, black holes and planets outside our solar system.

Some harder-to-understand topics in physics — like stopping light, quantum physics and carbon nanotubes — could capture a Nobel award this year.

The Nobel announcements kick off Monday with the prize in physiology or medicine, followed by physics on Tuesday, chemistry on Wednesday and literature on Thursday. The 2022 Nobel Peace Prize will be announced on Oct. 7 and the economics award on Oct. 10.

The prizes carry a cash award of 10 million Swedish kronor (nearly \$900,000) and will be handed out on Dec. 10.

## Dysfunction in Texas AG's office as Paxton seeks third term

By JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

GATESVILLE, Texas (AP) — Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's staff this month quietly dropped a series of human trafficking and child sexual assault cases after losing track of one of the victims, a stumble in open court emblematic of broader dysfunction inside one of America's most prominent law offices.

The Republican has elevated his national profile in recent years, energizing the right by rushing into contentious court battles that have affected people far beyond Texas. He has fought access to abortion, Democratic immigration policy and the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

But as Paxton seeks to fend off legal troubles and win a third term as Texas' top law enforcement official, his agency has come unmoored by disarray behind the scenes, with seasoned lawyers quitting over practices they say aim to slant legal work, reward loyalists and drum out dissent.

An Associated Press investigation found Paxton and his deputies have sought to turn cases to political advantage or push a broader political agenda, including staff screenings of a debunked film questioning the 2020 election. Adding to the unrest was the secretive firing of a Paxton supporter less than two months into his job as an agency advisor after he tried to make a point by displaying child pornography in a meeting.

The AP's account is based on hundreds of pages of records and interviews with more than two dozen current and former employees, many of whom spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation or because they were not authorized to talk publicly.

In the small town of Gatesville, the fallout was felt this month with the collapse of cases dubbed "Operation Fallen Angel." Six of the people indicted last year on allegations that they were involved in a scheme to force teenage girls to "exchange sexual contact for crystal methamphetamine" are now free. One is being held in the central Texas community on other charges. An eighth died in jail.

"It's absolutely broken. It's just broken. You don't do it this way," Republican District Attorney Dusty

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Boyd said of the attorney general's office, which took over the cases from his five-lawyer team. "I made the mistake of trusting them that they would come in and do a good job."

Paxton and his staff did not respond to voicemails, text messages and email questions sent Tuesday.

For years, Paxton has weathered a storm of troubles like few other elected officials in the U.S., including felony securities fraud charges and a federal investigation into accusations of corruption. He has broadly denied wrongdoing and remained popular with GOP voters, even while losing staff.

One prosecutor said he quit in January after supervisors pressured him to withhold evidence in a murder case. Another attorney signed a resignation letter in March that warned of growing hostility toward LGBTQ employees. By August, records show the division over human trafficking cases — a major emphasis in Texas, where more than 50 migrants died in the back of a trailer in June — had a job vacancy rate of 40%.

"When you're experiencing the type of climactic upheaval in an office, which affects agency-client relationships and trust, there's naturally going to be a lot of movement among staff," said Ron Del Vento, who served as a division chief under Paxton and four previous Texas attorneys general before retiring in 2019.

"Collateral damage is inevitable," he said.

The latest departures are aftershocks of an extraordinary revolt in autumn 2020, when eight of Paxton's top deputies accused the attorney general of using the office to help a political donor who employed a woman with whom Paxton acknowledged having had an extramarital affair. The deputies all quit or were fired after going to the FBI, which opened an investigation that remains ongoing.

In America's largest red state, the accusations have not given GOP voters pause about Paxton, who carried Donald Trump's endorsement into again winning his party's nomination. Paxton faces Democratic challenger Rochelle Garza, a first-time candidate and former ACLU attorney, in the November election.

"He's been one of the greatest attorneys general for the state of Texas and one of the most conservative ones in the entire country," said Abraham George, chairman of the Collin County Republican Party, adding that Paxton deserves the same presumption of innocence as any other American.

After the dramatic exit of Paxton's top staff in 2020, those brought into senior roles included a California attorney who donated \$10,000 to help Paxton fight his 2015 securities fraud indictment and Tom Kelly Gleason, a former ice cream company owner whose father gave \$50,000 to the attorney general's legal defense fund.

Gleason was fired less than two months into his new job as a law enforcement adviser. Paxton's office has not disclosed why, but three people with knowledge of the matter said Gleason included child pornography in a work presentation at the agency's Austin headquarters.

The people said Gleason displayed the video — which one of them described as showing a man raping a small child — in a misguided effort to underscore agency investigators difficult work. It was met with outrage and caused the meeting to quickly dissolve.

Afterward, Paxton's top deputy, Brent Webster, told staff not to talk about what happened, according to one of the people.

Gleason, who began his career as a police officer in the late 1970s, did not respond to voicemails, text messages, emails and letters left at his home and business. A lawyer who has represented him also did not respond to an email seeking comment.

As of August, payroll data show the number of assistant attorneys general — the line lawyers who handle daily case and litigation work — in the criminal prosecutions division was down more than 25% from two years ago. The data, which was obtained under public records law, show the group that handles financial and white-collar cases was cut by more than half and merged with another division.

"This is scary to me for the people of Texas," said Linda Eads, who served as a deputy attorney general in the early 2000s, when she said it was rare for any division to have more than two or three vacancies.

Boyd said staff turnover in Paxton's human trafficking unit contributed to the collapse of the cases in Gatesville. In the last two years, Republican lawmakers have doubled the division's budget to \$3 million, but Boyd questioned whether it was well spent.

On Sept. 13, the attorney general's staff wrote in court papers that they were dismissing three traf-

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ficking cases because a witness had recanted and dropping the other four because they were "unable to locate victim."

"For Pete's sake, you're the AG's office. You can't find the victim?" Boyd said. "The culture is broken."

Bill Turner, who spent five years in the office under Paxton, said he quit in January after senior leaders tried to prevent him from turning over evidence to the defense in a murder prosecution. He would not discuss specifics, saying that could affect ongoing work related to the case.

"We had a difference of opinion on the ethical obligations of a prosecutor and I didn't feel like I could continue working in that environment," said Turner, who was previously an elected Democratic district attorney in Texas.

Two months later, assistant attorney general Jason Scully-Clemmons left the same division, accusing a new wave of executives in his resignation letter of "directing prosecutors to prioritize political considerations." He also said the environment had grown hostile to LGBTQ employees around the time Paxton issued a legal opinion that set in motion child abuse investigations into the parents of transgender youth in Texas.

Several other employees told AP that before Texas' March primary elections, Amber Platt, a deputy over criminal justice cases, convened a meeting to ask about upcoming cases that would help Paxton's reelection prospects. Scully-Clemmons, who declined to comment, referred to the meeting in his letter.

In May, the head of Paxton's election integrity division invited his team to a movie theater for a screening of "2000 Mules," the debunked film that falsely claims to prove the 2020 election was stolen.

"General Paxton will be present, among others, and I think they would love to have a good showing from our office," assistant attorney general Jonathan White wrote in an email.

As senior lawyers have been leaving the attorney general's office, newcomers who've stuck by Paxton have seen their careers and compensation skyrocket.

Aaron Reitz, who finished law school in 2017, was hired as an aide to Paxton's top deputy at a salary of \$135,000 in October 2020. The next month, after the deputy reported Paxton to the FBI and quit, Reitz was promoted to oversee agency legal strategy, a senior job making \$205,000.

In June, Reitz's assistant sent out invitations to a "2000 Mules viewing party," complete with barbecue. More than 90 staff and interns were later told to bring their own lunch.

## Indian opposition party seeks to shed dynastic rule image

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India's main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, is set to choose a person who is not a member of its dominant Nehru-Gandhi family as its next president as it struggles to recover before key upcoming elections.

Although the party has been led historically by the family, interim party president Sonia Gandhi and her son, Rahul Gandhi, have decided to bring in a new face during a challenging time for the party, which has suffered crushing defeats in national and state elections since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party came to power in 2014.

Their choice fell on a trusted party leader, 80-year-old Mallikarjun Kharge from southern Karnataka state. Kharge, a member of Parliament and a former minister of Railways, Labour and Employment, filed his nomination papers on Friday at the party headquarters in New Delhi. His main challenger will be Shashi Tharoor, 66, who spent nearly 30 years at the United Nations before joining the Congress party in 2009.

A little-known former Congress state minister from eastern Jharkhand state, K.N. Tripathi, also filed nomination papers and is a third candidate for the top party post, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

If two contestants remain in the race after the Oct. 8 deadline to withdraw nominations, 9,000 party delegates will vote on Oct. 17 and the result will be announced Oct. 19.

The filing of nominations papers is a major step toward ending the party's struggle to find a new leader after dismal results in the 2019 national elections and Rahul Gandhi's subsequent resignation as party president.

"I tried to convince Rahul Gandhi to accept the party members' wish to assume the post of president,

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but he is sticking to his stand that no one from the Gandhi family will be in the race this time," said Ashok Gehlot, a senior party official.

Rahul Gandhi's family has produced three of India's 15 prime ministers since independence, starting with his great-grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the country's first. Two of them — his grandmother, Indira Gandhi, and father, Rajiv Gandhi — were assassinated. The party governed India for more than 60 years after India gained independence from British colonialists in 1947.

Modi, the current prime minister, has denounced Congress' dynastic politics. The party has been led by non-family members in the past, but Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi have been at the helm of party affairs since 1998.

"The party president is a key post, but never more than now after two general election losses and a vote base at 18% — half that of the ruling Hindu nationalist party," said Mahesh Rangarajan, a professor of history and environmental studies at Ashoka University. "Yet this is the single largest opposition party by far with a history of comebacks, as in 1980, 1991 and 2004."

"The focus is on who, but the crisis is as much of ideas. It is about how to combine bread-butter politics with facing up to the new nationalism of the ruling party," Rangarajan said.

Critics describe key leaders leaving the Congress party — including veteran Ghulam Nabi Azad, who announced his own political party in September — as a revolt against the Nehru-Gandhi family's domination.

In his resignation letter to Sonia Gandhi, who has been serving as interim party president, Azad said that "the entire consultative mechanism was demolished by Rahul Gandhi when he took over as Congress vice president in 2013."

He lamented that "all senior and experienced leaders were sidelined, and a new coterie of inexperienced sycophants started running the affairs of the party."

Rahul is on a 3,500-kilometer (2,185-mile) walking tour of Indian cities, towns and villages over the next five months as he attempts to rejuvenate the party and win the people's support ahead of key state legislature elections in Himachal Pradesh state and Modi's home state of Gujarat. The results are likely to impact the country's next national elections, due in 2024.

## For Naomi Judd's family, tour is a chance to grieve, reflect

By KRISTIN M. HALL AP Entertainment Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Fans of Naomi Judd, the late matriarch of the Grammy-winning country duo The Judds, will have a chance to say goodbye and rejoice in their hits in a final tour helmed by daughter Wynonna and all-star musical partners.

The Judd family continues to grieve her sudden death during a year that should have been a celebration. The tour was announced only weeks before Naomi Judd, 76, took her life on April 30, the day before their induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

"It's devastatingly beautiful to go back to the past and relive some of these memories," said Wynonna Judd this week as she sat on a tour bus after rehearsals. "Yesterday I was in rehearsal and there's a part in the show where they sync up Mom singing with me. And I turned around and I just lost it."

The 11-city tour starts Friday night in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and will include stops in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Fort Worth, Texas, and Nashville before ending in their home state in Lexington, Kentucky. Special guests include Brandi Carlile, Ashley McBryde, Little Big Town, Kelsea Ballerini, Trisha Yearwood, Faith Hill and tour opener Martina McBride.

Judd's husband Larry Strickland, and her two daughters, Wynonna and Ashley, reflected on their mother's legacy, not only in music, but as a caregiver and an advocate. The red-headed duo scored more than a dozen No. 1 hits, combining young Wynonna's powerful vocals with Naomi's family harmonies and stage charm. Reflecting their Appalachian roots with polished pop stylings, their hits included "Why Not Me," "Mama He's Crazy," "Rockin' With the Rhythm of the Rain," and "Love Can Build a Bridge."

Naomi's husband of nearly 33 years said he hopes that fans feel uplifted to hear their hit songs performed again in arenas. But he knows he will struggle when he sees his wife on the big screens or hears



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her voice again.

"I'm having trouble now just seeing pictures of her. I don't know how much I can handle," Strickland said.

Strickland said his wife was excited to tour again with her daughter because she loved the connection with the fans. The storyline of the single mother supporting two daughters becoming one of the biggest duos in country music history, along with Naomi's flashy wardrobe and bubbly approachability, made fans identify with her.

"She loved being on the stage and singing," Strickland said. "She loved people. And she would do her twisting and twirling. She was the harmony singer. She was all about her hair and the little dresses that she would have made. And so that was her world."

Her family has endless stories of Naomi Judd's empathy and passion for helping, her love of animals, especially dogs, and her desire to learn. A nurse by trade before her music career, she was on the board of the American Humane Association and was a member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Her daughter Ashley recalled how she walked around with \$20 and \$50 bills in her bra and would hand them out to people, especially women.

Wynonna Judd said that recently she visited the same hospital outside Nashville where her mom died. And she noticed that on one of the walls in the emergency room were pictures of volunteers who helped assist patients.

"And there's a picture of my mother in the cutest little wig and she has her name tag, 'Naomi Judd,'" she said.

Naomi Judd struggled most of her life with depression, which she shared openly in her book "River of Time: My Descent into Depression and How I Emerged With Hope." Her family said she was also being treated for bipolar disorder and PTSD.

"That's the complexity of this issue, because my mother, even in her darkest hour, would put on her wig and go down to the emergency room and help other people during their emergencies," Wynonna Judd said, her strong voice cracking. "So I find it pretty devastating that she got to a point where she was done helping herself."

Strickland, too, noted how mental illness affected his wife. Despite feeling incredibly excited for the tour, her mental state was deteriorating, he said. Strickland said she was seeing a psychiatrist, but her depression was resistant to treatment, and they were trying different types of medication to help her.

"The lows that she would experience with her mental illness just seemed to get worse," he said.

Since The Judds debuted in the 1980s, the family has lived under the public eye, headlining awards shows and appearing on magazine covers, in books and TV shows. But Naomi's death has only intensified scrutiny, to the point where the family is dispelling rumors that there is a dispute over the estate. Strickland, who is Ashley and Wynonna's stepfather, was named the executor of the estate.

Ashley Judd said it was "obviously natural, good, and proper that Mom's estate would flow to Pop, her partner of 43 years and then upon his eventual passing, come to her daughters."

The actor was with her mother when she died and has advocated for the family's legal request to keep police investigative records relating to her mother's death from being publicly released. After an appeal, the Tennessee Supreme Court sent the case back to the lower court. Ashley Judd said that privacy should be afforded to any family dealing with suicide.

"We are an open family," she said. "We're committed to raising awareness about the walk with mental illness and reducing shame and stigma, guiding people towards resources, and helping families build resistance to and resilience from the devastation. And there's also a certain dignity and decency that's necessary around the actual day of the death."

Wynonna Judd said since her mother's death, people who have had similar experiences have reached out to her to ask that mental illness resources and information are provided to fans during the tour.

"This is very real to me. This is not just show business. This is an opportunity to help someone out there not end their life," she said. "We must get rid of the stigma of the words mental illness because people will not reach out for help."

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Wynonna's relationship with her mother was sometimes filled with drama, but it continues to this day, when she sits under a tree at her home in Tennessee and processes her grief. "I love my mother and she makes me crazy still. Your relationship with your mother never ends," she said. "I still talk to her and it's awesome and it's hard."

The family wants the fans to remember Naomi Judd as a beautiful, talented, smart and colorfully complex woman, who had highs and lows, and was honest about her journey.

"I want them to see that in adversity, in death, there is life," said Wynonna Judd.

## Suicide bomber strikes Kabul education center, killing 19

By EBRAHIM NOROOZI and RAHIM FAIEZ Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — A suicide bomber struck an education center in a Shiite area of the Afghan capital on Friday, killing 19 people and wounding 27, including teenagers who were taking university practice entry exams, a Taliban spokesman said.

The morning explosion at the center took place in Kabul's Dashti Barchi neighborhood, an area populated mostly by ethnic Hazaras, who belong to Afghanistan's minority Shiite community. The Islamic State group has carried out repeated, horrific attacks on schools, hospitals and mosques in Dashti Barchi and other Shiite areas in recent years.

Around 300 recent high school graduates, boys and girls, had come to the Kaaj Higher Educational Center at 6:30 a.m. to take practice exams, said one survivor, 19-year-old Shafi Akbary. The facility helps students prepare and study for the entrance exams, among other activities.

About an hour into the session, the blast went off.

"First, we heard the sounds of a few gunshots at the main gate. Everyone was worried and tried to run to a different direction," said Akbary, speaking to The Associated Press over the phone. "Soon after that, a huge explosion occurred inside the center."

Akbary, who was unharmed, said he saw dozens of bodies and wounded people scattered around him. "I was so afraid and couldn't even move myself to help them. Later, other people ran inside and took us out," he added. Akbary said he has attended classes at the center the past six months.

Khalid Zadran, the Taliban-appointed spokesman of the Kabul police who gave the casualty toll, said students were among the victims of the blast, but he did not specify how many. He said education centers in the area will need to ask the Taliban for additional security when they host events with big gatherings like Friday's exam prep.

Police have arrested a suspect who may have links to the attack, Interior Ministry spokesman Abdul Nafi Takor said later. He was unable to provide any updates on the casualties.

The Emergency NGO Hospital in Kabul said in a tweet it had received 22 patients so far, adding that most of them were women aged 18-25 who were taking an exam.

Husnia Azimi was one of those killed in the suicide bombing. She left home Friday morning to attend the exam, even though her sister Zainab told her it was late and not to go.

"Once she left, it was around 09:00 a.m. that we heard about the explosion," said Zainab. "We didn't hear its sound, but once we got the news, we went to all the hospitals, Ali Jinnah hospital, Watan hospital, and other hospitals.

"But when we went to the Emergency Hospital, we got a call from Ali Jinnah hospital that my sister's dead body was found. Then we went back there and saw her body."

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. But the Islamic State group, the chief rival of the Taliban, has been waging a campaign of violence that has intensified since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August 2021.

Afghanistan's Hazaras, who are mostly Shiite Muslims, have been a frequent target of the violence. In Dashti Barchi, IS carried out a 2020 attack on a maternity hospital that killed 24 people, including newborn babies and mothers, and an attack on a school in 2021 that killed more than 90, mostly schoolgirls. The neighborhood sees frequent bombings of minibuses and, earlier this year, a school and another education

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center were hit near simultaneously, killing six.

The local police chief, Abdul Rahman Nafiz, criticized the center for failing to inform security officials about the practice exam.

"Neither police officials nor intelligence officials were aware of any activity going on or a big exam happening in this center, so the officials from the center were very reckless," he said. "Now our mujaheddin (Taliban police) are here, and they are investigating the incident."

Amnesty International's South Asia campaigner, Samira Hamidi, said Friday's attack showed the "utter failure of the Taliban, as de-facto authorities, to protect the people of Afghanistan.

She said the Taliban have taken few measures to protect the public, especially Shiites and Hazaras "Instead, their actions of omission and commission have only further aggravated the risk to the lives of the people of Afghanistan especially those belonging to ethnic and minority communities," she said.

The U.S. chargé d'affaires for Afghanistan, Karen Decker, condemned Friday's attack in a tweet.

"Targeting a room full of students taking exams is shameful; all students should be able to pursue an education in peace & without fear," she said. "We hope for a swift recovery for the victims & we grieve with the families of the deceased."

The United Nations children's agency UNICEF said it was appalled by Friday's horrific attack. "Children and adolescents are not, and must never be, the target of violence," it said in a tweet.

Since seizing power, the Taliban have banned most girls beyond the sixth grade from attending school. But female high school graduates from previous years can go to university.

## Methane blast in Baltic Sea highlights global problem

CATHY BUSSEWITZ AP Energy Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Scientists have been measuring the scale of the massive methane leak from damaged pipelines in the Baltic Sea, with the latest figures equating the levels of gas escaping to the annual emissions of some whole countries. It is believed to be the single biggest recorded gas leak over a short period of time.

But as serious as the methane escaping from ruptured pipelines may be, there are alarming incidents of massive methane releases around the world frequently.

Climate scientists have found that methane emissions from the oil and gas industry are far worse than what companies are reporting, despite claims by some major firms that they've reduced their emissions. That matters because natural gas, a fossil fuel widely used to heat homes and provide electricity, is made up of methane, a potent climate warming gas. It escapes into the atmosphere from well sites and across the natural gas distribution network, from pipelines and compressor stations, to the export terminals that liquefy gas to ship it overseas.

Scientists measuring methane from satellites in space have found that methane emissions from oil and gas operations are usually at least twice what companies reported, said Thomas Lauvaux, a scientist at University of Reims in France. In the Permian Basin, the largest oil and gas field in the United States, methane emissions were two to three times higher than what companies reported, he said.

"Everybody claims they have reduced their emissions, but it's not true," Lauvaux said.

Governments around the world, especially in the U.S., are also notorious for underestimating how much methane escapes into the air, said Cornell University ecology and biology professor Robert Howarth, who studies natural gas emissions.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency uses voluntary self-reporting from industry instead of independent verification, which is what's needed, Howarth said.

Globally, Turkmenistan is among the worst offenders for releasing methane into the atmosphere, while Saudi Arabia is among the best at capturing it based on satellite observations, Lauvaux said. The U.S. falls somewhere in the middle with some companies capturing methane pretty well and others performing terribly.

Lauvaux and other scientists have observed more than 1,500 major methane leaks globally, and poten-

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tially tens of thousands of smaller leaks, using satellites, he said.

Most of the oil and gas industry's methane emissions come from pipelines and compressor stations, according to Kayrros, a company which analyzes satellite data.

Many of those so-called leaks are not accidental; they occur when companies perform routine maintenance. For example when a pipeline needs repair, operators need to bleed gas out so they can weld without an explosion. But instead of capturing the gas most companies just open the pipeline and release the methane into the air, a practice which is legal in the U.S. and elsewhere. Some companies do capture methane instead of just releasing it, but more could adopt the practice, scientists said.

One way the oil and gas industry tries to reduce methane emissions is by flaring, or burning off, what they consider excess gas. Companies might employ a flare when they're drilling for oil, and gas comes up along with the oil. If they don't have the pipeline infrastructure to transport it to customers, or if they've decided that gas, which is generally cheaper than oil, isn't worth the effort, they may send the gas up a flare stack to burn it off.

In Turkmenistan, scientists found flares malfunctioning for as long as three years. "This gas is just pouring into the atmosphere," Lauvaux said.

A study released Thursday by scientists at the University of Michigan found that flaring releases five times more methane in the U.S. than previously thought. Flares, they found, are often unlit or not working, allowing gas to escape directly into the atmosphere.

Reducing flaring or making sure flares are working properly would go a long way, said Genevieve Plant, a lead author of the study and climate scientist at University of Michigan.

"If we take action soon, it will have a large climate impact," Plant said.

Fossil fuels are by no means the only source of methane. The gas can come from decaying garbage in landfills and livestock agriculture, even plants breaking down in reservoir dams. Fossil methane may make up some 30% of the total.

David Archer is a professor in the geophysical sciences department at University of Chicago and focuses on the global carbon cycle. He thinks much of the methane that has escaped from the Baltic Sea pipelines dissolved in the water.

The leak is dramatic, but it doesn't compare to the daily impact of methane emitters such as agricultural operations, Archer said.

The amounts "from oil wells and cattle are much larger, just harder to visualize. If the explosion in the Baltic looks large, it's because it's concentrated," he said.

## **Inflation hits record 10% in 19 EU countries using euro**

By DAVID McHUGH Associated Press

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Inflation in the European countries using the euro currency has broken into double digits as prices for electricity and natural gas soar, signaling a looming winter recession for one of the globe's major economies as higher prices undermine consumers' spending power.

Consumer prices in the 19-country eurozone rose a record 10% in September from a year earlier, up from an annual 9.1% in August, EU statistics agency Eurostat reported Friday. Only a year ago, inflation was as low as 3.4%.

Price increases were beyond what market analysts had expected and are at their highest level since record-keeping for the euro started in 1997. Energy prices were the main culprit, rising 40.8% over a year ago. Food, alcohol and tobacco prices jumped 11.8%.

"I'm already looking a lot more for special offers," said Myriam Maierhofer, a 64-year-old trainer and coach for staff development, who was shopping Thursday at weekly outdoor market in Cologne, Germany. "I don't throw away so much so quickly, so I've become more economical with food. And this morning, I also turned down the heating in the rooms again."

Inflation has been fueled by steady cutbacks in supplies of natural gas from Russia and bottlenecks in getting supplies of raw materials and parts as the global economy bounces back from the COVID-19 pan-



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demic. The Russian cutbacks have sent gas prices soaring to the point where energy-intensive businesses such as fertilizer and steel say they can no longer make some products at a profit.

Meanwhile, high prices for utility bills, food and fuel are leaving consumers with less money to spend on other things. That is the main reason economists are predicting a recession, or a severe and long-lasting downturn in economic activity, for the end of this year and the first months of next year.

The European Central Bank is raising interest rates to combat inflation by keeping higher prices from being baked into people's expectations for wages and prices, it but can't by itself lower energy prices.

Friday's inflation reading was likely to be a matter of "grave concern" for the ECB, said Jessica Hinds, senior Europe economist at Capital Economics. She said the central bank's rate-setting council was likely to raise its benchmark rates by an outsized three-quarters of a percentage point at its next meeting Oct. 27.

Higher interest rates make it more expensive for people and businesses to borrow, invest and spend, dampening demand for goods and thus restraining inflation. Inflation is far above the ECB's goal of 2% considered best for the economy.

Central banks around the world are rapidly raising rates, led by the U.S. Federal Reserve, which is aiming to bring down inflation that hit 8.3% in August. Eurozone inflation has eclipsed the United Kingdom's 9.9% registered last month.

European officials call the natural gas cutbacks from Russia energy blackmail aimed at pressuring and dividing European governments over Western sanctions and their support for Ukraine. Russia blames technical problems.

The rising gas prices that have resulted mean higher heating bills and higher electricity costs because natural gas is used to generate power, heat homes and run factories.

European Union energy ministers on Friday adopted a windfall levy on profits by fossil fuel companies and other measures to ease the energy crisis, while individual countries also have allocated hundreds of billions to provide relief to households and businesses.

With consumer prices in Germany rising by 10.9%, hitting double digits for the first time in decades, the government announced plans to spend up to 200 billion euros (\$195 billion) to help with surging gas bills in Europe's largest single economy.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Thursday that the government was reactivating an economic stabilizing fund previously used during the global financial crisis and the coronavirus pandemic.

Christian Schrader, 35, who was shopping at the market in Cologne, was less worried about food prices but said that "you start to think about which rooms need to be heated in the flat and try to explain to the children that we only play in one room."

A bigger worry was "the social dimension," he said. "Inflation has often been a driver for social division, for extreme tendencies, for populism. This dimension worries me more."

## Today in History: October 1, Las Vegas shooting kills 58

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Oct. 1, the 274th day of 2022. There are 91 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 1, 2017, a gunman opened fire from a room at the Mandalay Bay casino hotel in Las Vegas on a crowd of 22,000 country music fans at a concert below, leaving 58 people dead and more than 800 injured in the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history; the gunman, 64-year-old Stephen Craig Paddock, killed himself before officers arrived.

On this date:

In 1908, Henry Ford introduced his Model T automobile to the market.

In 1910, the offices of the Los Angeles Times were destroyed by a bomb explosion and fire; 21 Times employees were killed.

In 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China during a ceremony in Beijing. A 42-day

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strike by the United Steelworkers of America began over the issue of retirement benefits.

In 1955, the situation comedy "The Honeymooners," starring Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, Audrey Meadows and Joyce Randolph, premiered on CBS-TV.

In 1957, the motto "In God We Trust" began appearing on U.S. paper currency.

In 1964, the Free Speech Movement began at the University of California, Berkeley.

In 1971, Walt Disney World opened near Orlando, Florida.

In 1987, eight people were killed when an earthquake measuring magnitude 5.9 struck the Los Angeles area.

In 1994, National Hockey League team owners began a 103-day lockout of their players.

In 1996, a federal grand jury indicted Unabomber suspect Theodore Kaczynski in the 1994 mail bomb slaying of advertising executive Thomas Mosser. (Kaczynski was later sentenced to four life terms plus 30 years.) The federal minimum wage rose 50 cents to four dollars, 75 cents an hour.

In 2015, a gunman opened fire at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, killing nine people and then himself. Officials in Michigan declared a public health emergency over the city of Flint's water in response to tests that showed children with elevated levels of lead.

In 2019, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders was diagnosed with a heart attack at a Las Vegas hospital, where he'd been taken after experiencing chest discomfort at a campaign event; doctors inserted two stents to open up a blocked artery.

Ten years ago: Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, addressing the U.N. General Assembly, accused the U.S. and its allies of stoking "terrorism" in his country.

Five years ago: O.J. Simpson was released from a prison in Nevada a few minutes after midnight, after serving nine years for a botched hotel-room heist in Las Vegas. Germany celebrated its first same-sex weddings, after a law took effect putting gay and lesbian couples on an equal legal footing with heterosexual couples.

One year ago: New Defense Department guidance said all civilian workers had to be fully vaccinated for COVID-19 by Nov. 22. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 eclipsed 700,000, with 100,000 people dying over the preceding past three months even as vaccines were available to any American over age 12. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor denied an emergency appeal from a group of teachers to block New York City's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for public school teachers and other staff from going into effect. The Christian Broadcasting Network said Pat Robertson was stepping down as host of the long-running daily television show the "700 Club"; the 91-year-old televangelist said his son, Gordon, was taking over as full-time host.

Today's Birthdays: Former President Jimmy Carter is 98. Actor-singer Julie Andrews is 87. Actor Stella Stevens is 84. Rock musician Jerry Martini (Sly and the Family Stone) is 79. Baseball Hall-of-Famer Rod Carew is 77. Jazz musician Dave Holland is 76. Actor Yvette Freeman is 72. Actor Randy Quaid is 72. R&B singer Howard Hewett is 67. Former British Prime Minister Theresa May is 66. Alt-country-rock musician Tim O'Reagan (The Jayhawks) is 64. Singer Youssou N'Dour is 63. Actor Esai Morales is 60. Retired MLB All-Star Mark McGwire is 59. Actor Christopher Titus is 58. Actor-model Cindy Margolis is 57. Producer John Ridley is 57. Rock singer-musician Kevin Griffin (Better Than Ezra) is 54. Actor Zach Galifianakis is 53. Singer Keith Duffy is 48. Actor Sherri Saum is 48. Actor Katie Aselton is 44. Actor Sarah Drew is 42. Actor Carly Hughes is 40. Actor-comedian Beck Bennett is 38. Actor Jurnee Smollett is 36. Actor Brie Larson is 33. Boston Red Sox infielder Xander Bogaerts is 30. Singer/songwriter Jade Bird is 25. Actor Priah Ferguson is 16. Actor Jack Stanton is 14.