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Groton Community Calendar

Thursday, Oct. 13

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Hot dogs, baked beans.

Senior Menu: Roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, beets, peaches, dinner roll.

Region 1A Cross Country Meet at Webster, 3:30 p.m.

Volleyball at Deuel (7th and 8th at 4 p.m., C match at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity)

5 p.m.: Combined 7th/8th FB at Webster

UMC: Bible Study with Ashley, 6:30 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 14

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Mac and cheese, peas.

Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, buttermilk biscuit, peas, mandarin oranges, cookie.

7 p.m.: Football at Mobridge

Saturday, Oct. 15

Volleyball at Milbank Tournament. Groton games in the elementary gym. Groton plays Great Plains Lutheran at 9 a.m.; Groton plays Sioux Valley at noon; Groton plays Hamlin at 1 p.m.; Finals start at 3 p.m.

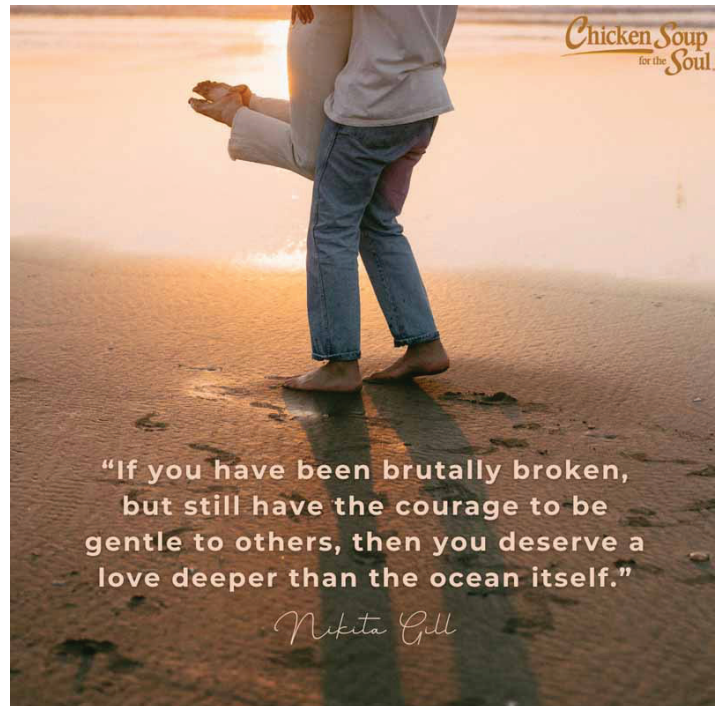
Emmanuel Lutheran worship at Rosewood Court, 10 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Sunday, Oct. 16

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.

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



St. John's worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Zion Lutheran worship with communion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Confirmation retreat for freshmen, 1 p.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

UMC: Conde Worship, 8:30 a.m.; coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday School after children's sermon during worship.



Part time cashier wanted at Ken's Food Fair of Groton. Must be available any hours including weekends. Stop at the store and see Lionel or Matt.

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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FREE ONLINE TUTORING

Students in the Groton Area School District can get free online tutoring through The Dakota Dreams Online Tutoring Program. Free online tutoring is available for K–12 students in South Dakota in the subjects of English/Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Parents can register students for virtual one-on-one tutoring sessions using a simple and secure online platform. Once registered, sessions can either be pre-scheduled or accessed on-demand. All sessions are taught by university students already accepted into the School of Education at Northern State University or Black Hills State University.

The program offers one-on-one virtual tutoring sessions using an online platform seven days a week, excluding holidays. Supporting individual student learning needs, tutors help with homework, specific subjects, and broader educational concepts.

All of the online tutors are current School of Education university students at Northern State University or Black Hills State University.

Registration is available at www.ourdakotadreams.com



Bill Bruns of Frederick has tried for a Black Hills Elk Tag for 31 years. He got this elk on opening day. It is a 6x6. (Photo taken by Lance Vanzee)

The Life of Roger DeHoet

The funeral service for Roger DeHoet, of rural Houghton, SD, will be 10:30am, Friday, October 14, 2022, at New Life Fellowship, Aberdeen, with Pastor Rodney Johnson officiating. Burial will be at Houghton Cemetery. Roger died Sunday, October 9, 2022, at his home near Houghton.

Visitation will be 3:00-6:00pm, Thursday, with a prayer service at 6:00pm, with Pastor Bill Duncan officiating, at Spitzer-Miller Funeral Home, 1111 South Main Street.

Roger Sherman DeHoet was born on February 8, 1940, in Britton, SD, to Dale and Esther (Engel) DeHoet. Roger attended grade school at the Knecht Country School located one half mile from his home. He attended high school in Columbia, SD. After high school, he began his farming career with his brother Bernie and his dad. Due to his dad's poor health, Roger eventually took over the family farm in 1972.

In 1966, Roger met the love of his life, Peggy Bauer. They met while Roger was trapping muskrats on the Sand Lake Refuge. A friend brought this short, dark-haired girl out to meet him. She was wearing white "go-go" boots! They fell in love immediately! Roger and Peggy were married June 21, 1969, in Hecla, SD. To this union they were blessed with three daughters and a son, twelve grandchildren, and four great grandchildren. They purchased their farm in 1979 and have lived there for the past 54 years.

Roger had been a member of the Houghton Alliance Church until it closed. He was an avid hunter and enjoyed the outdoors. Another passion of his was metal detecting. However, after 35 years he was unable to continue that hobby due to poor health. He then found a new interest in magnet fishing. He also enjoyed playing cards and telling stories. Roger loved all sports, especially if his children or grandchildren were involved. He was a super fan of the Green Bay Packers and the New York Yankees. He also loved his RED tractors and farm equipment.

He loved Jesus Christ, his personal Lord and Savior, his family, and his many friends.

Roger loved Peggy more than anything. They worked hand in hand on the farm. Roger was a gentle giant with big hands and an even bigger heart!

Grateful for having shared Roger's life are his wife, Peggy DeHoet; children: Rebecca (Cory) Barber, Susan (Gary) Schauer, Jennifer DeHoet, Curtis DeHoet; grandchildren: Bryce Swiggum, Bryana Barber, Brendon Barber, Taylor Gravatt, Savannah Gravatt, Marcus (Kira) Gravatt, Jemini Cantalope, Cole Meyer, Cody Meyer, Madelynn Meyer, Cyruss DeHoet, and Tiara DeHoet; great-grandchildren: Jemma Dahlgren, Jurnee Mennenga, Joy Gravatt, Grace Gravatt; and brother: Bernie DeHoet.

Preceding Roger in death are his parents: Dale & Esther DeHoet, and siblings: Shirley Buntrock, Carroll DeHoet, and Dorothy Krege.





Those selected for the middle school music festival are: Front row (left to right): Teagan Hanten (Percussion), Carlee Johnson (Horn), Brody Lord (Trombone), Blake Lord (Tuba); Middle Row (left to right): Journey Zieroth (Bari Sax), Kyleigh Kroll (Trumpet), Aspen Beto (Clarinet), Emerlee Jones (Alto Sax); Back Row (left to right): Addison Hoeft (Bari Sax), Libby Cole (Trombone), Arianna Dinger (Flute), Novalea Warrington (Flute), and TC Schuster (Tuba) and instructor Desiree Yeigh. (Courtesy Photo)

Thirteen Middle School Band Students Participate at the Northwestern Middle School Music Festival

Middle School students from Groton and fifteen area schools participated in the Northwestern Middle School Music Festival on Tuesday October 11th in Mellette. The students rehearsed with guest directors and performed a concert that was open to the public that same evening.

Thirteen students were selected to play in the Festival Band. The band students are selected from nomination forms filled out by each school's director. Groton was the school that had the highest number of students in the band.

Eighth graders Carlee Johnson, Teagan Hanten, Blake Lord, and Brody Lord were recognized as three-year members of this event. Carlee was the first chair horn section leader, and Blake was the first chair tuba section leader.

The festival band was directed by Mr. Jason Groon. Groon is the current 9-12 Director of Bands for the Harrisburg School District and is a member of the SD National Guard 147th Army Band. Groon has been a music educator for nineteen years and has been honored with the "Young Director Award" and "50 Directors Who Make a Difference Report."

Congratulations to all the students for representing the Groton Middle School Music Department!

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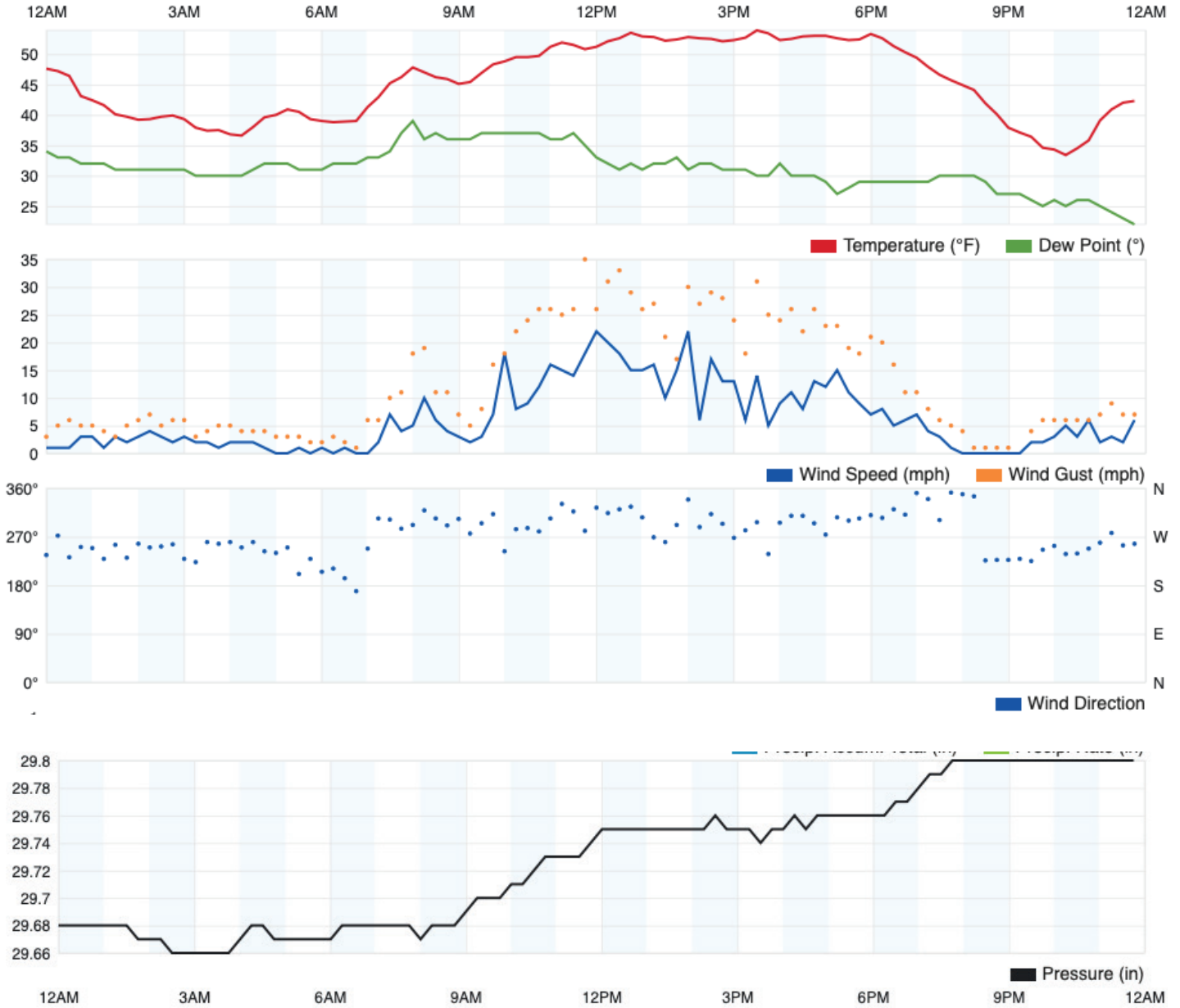


These students were recognized for being selected for three years to the music festival. They are Teagan Hanten (Percussion), Carlee Johnson (Horn), Brody Lord (Trombone), and Blake Lord (Tuba) pictured with their instructor Desiree Yeigh. (Courtesy Photo)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



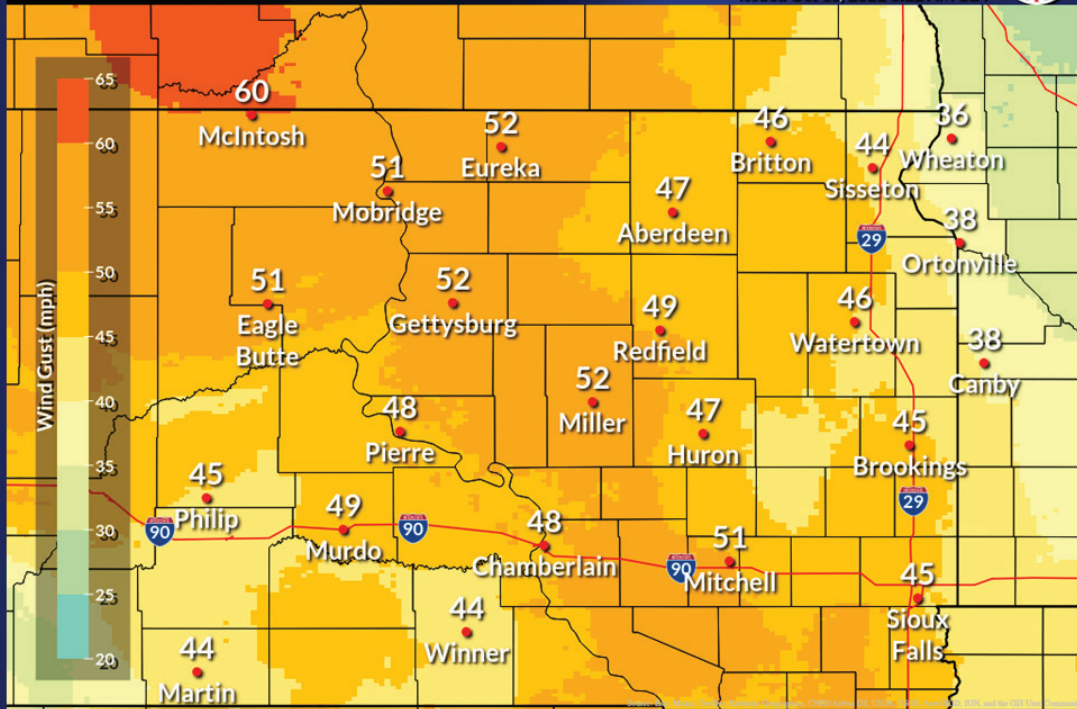
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  Today  Sunny and Windy High: 49 °F Low: 32 °F	Tonight  Increasing Clouds	Friday  Partly Sunny then Partly Sunny and Breezy High: 48 °F	Friday Night  Partly Cloudy Low: 28 °F	Saturday  Partly Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Breezy High: 56 °F
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Maximum Wind Gusts expected Today

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Oct 13, 2022 3:22 AM CDT



NWSAberdeen

www.weather.gov/abr

Expect another day with strong winds out of the Northwest 25 to 40 with gusts up to 50 to 60 mph over South Dakota. Critical fire weather conditions this afternoon due to the combination of strong winds and dry vegetation. Relative humidity values will fall to 15 to 35 percent, with the highest values over west central Minnesota. Stay weather aware today, and take extra precautions to limit activities that could create sparks or fires.

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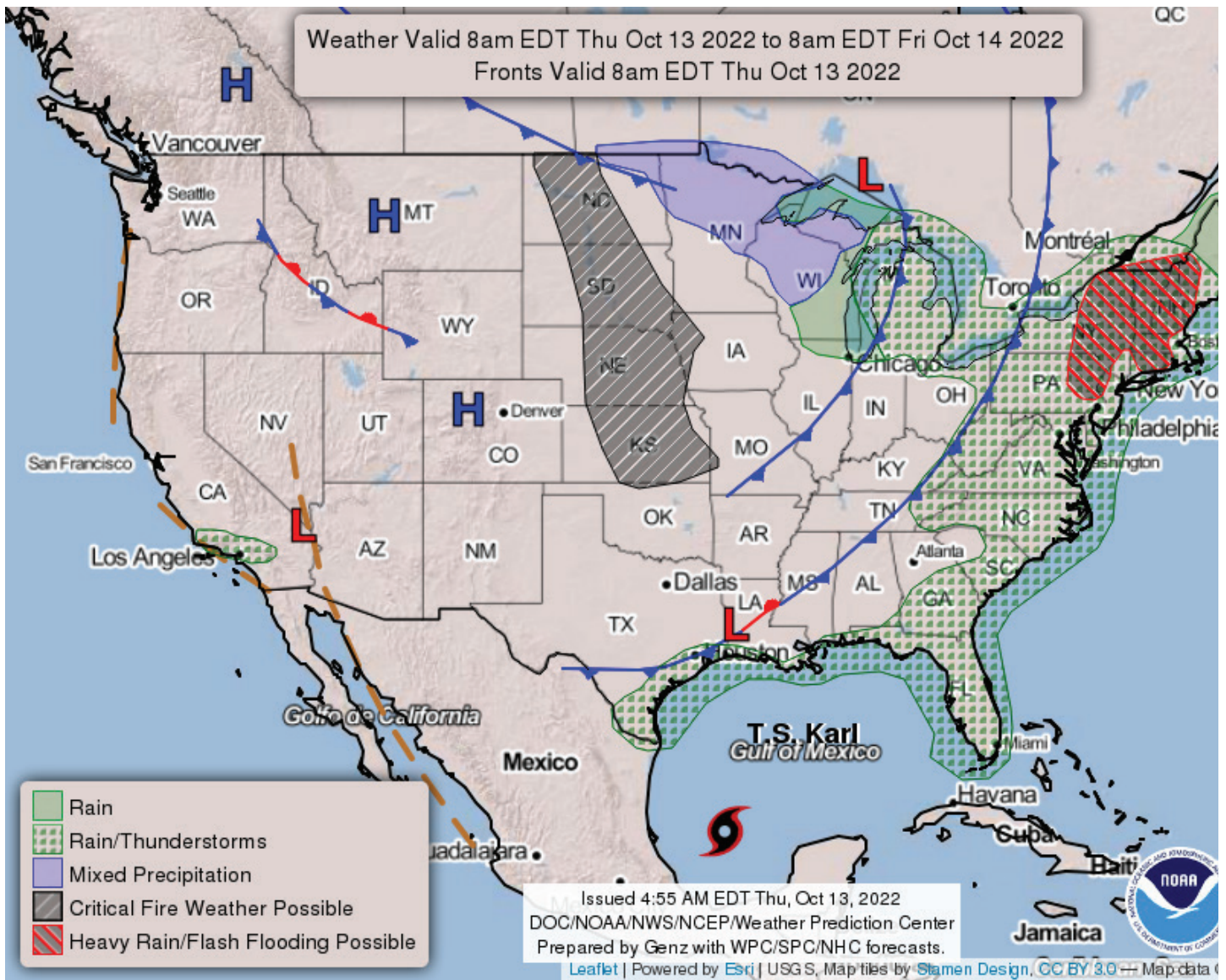
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 54 °F at 3:34 PM
Low Temp: 33 °F at 10:07 PM
Wind: 35 mph at 11:39 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 7 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 87 in 1958
Record Low: 10 in 1909
Average High: 61°F
Average Low: 35°F
Average Precip in Oct.: .98
Precip to date in Oct.: 0.45
Average Precip to date: 19.31
Precip Year to Date: 16.50
Sunset Tonight: 6:52:14 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:46:12 AM



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Today in Weather History

October 13, 1966: Late season thunderstorms brought hail and high winds to southeast South Dakota, causing extensive damage to some soybean fields. The greatest damage was in the Garretson area. The strong winds also damaged many utility lines along with many farm structures. Lightning struck a church at Lake Andes, and the resulting fire destroyed it. The storms occurred from late on the 13th to the morning of the 14th.

1846 - A great hurricane tracked across Cuba, Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Virginia and Pennsylvania. The hurricane inflicted major damage along its entire path, which was similar to the path of Hurricane Hazel 108 years later. The hurricane caused great damage at Key West FL, and at Philadelphia PA it was the most destructive storm in thirty years. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1983: Severe weather in Falls Church, VA, produced 2-3 tornadoes and caused \$1 million in damages. Click [HERE](#) for more information from The Washington Post.

1986 - Four tornadoes struck southeastern Virginia late in the night causing three million dollars damage. Tornadoes at Falls Church VA caused a million dollars damage. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders)

1987 - Fifteen cities in the eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Record lows included 34 degrees at Meridian MS, 28 degrees at Paducah KY, and 26 degrees at Beckley WV. Another surge of arctic air entered the north central U.S. bringing snow to parts of Wyoming and Colorado. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A total of forty-three cities in the eastern U.S. and the Upper Midwest reported record low temperatures for the date, including Elkins WV and Marquette MI where the mercury dipped to 18 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Sixteen cities reported record high temperatures for the date as readings warmed into the 80s and low 90s from the Southern and Central Plains to the Southern and Middle Atlantic Coast. Evansville IND and North Platte NE reported record highs of 91 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

2006: The October 2006 Buffalo storm was an unusual early-season lake effect snowstorm that hit the Buffalo, New York area, and other surrounding areas of the United States and Canada. Downtown Buffalo reported 15 inches from this event. Depew and Alden record 24 inches, the most from this lake effect storm.

2011: Three tornadoes hit central and Eastern Virginia on this day. One of the EF1 tornadoes caused damage to the Sylvania Plantation home that was built in 1746. The storm peeled the roof off the house.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

LOOKING GOOD!

What is in our hearts is there because we allow it to come in and find a place to live. And, whatever is in our hearts will profoundly affect our lives and control our destiny. If it is in our hearts, it is there because we want it there, and it will have a direct impact on our lives.

Within three verses, Solomon describes three different kinds of hearts and the effect they have on our lives. "A happy heart" makes a "cheerful face." So, no matter what is going on in the life of a person who has a "happy heart," we will see a "cheerful face" that automatically brings a ray of sunshine into our lives. Their "inside" may be filled with clouds and rain, sickness and suffering, but their hope in God's goodness and grace will not suppress the happiness He brings into their lives.

People with "discerning hearts" are known for the knowledge they possess. They are driven by a desire to know and to share what they understand. They realize that their knowledge is a gift from God, given from Him, to help others. It is not to be hoarded in our heads, but to be given away as freely and generously as it was received.

A "cheerful heart" is found in one who chooses to take control of life rather than to have life control them. It's taking every gift God gives us and using it as a reason to have a celebration with Him as the "guest" of honor. A "cheerful heart" flows from an attitude of joy and peace because God is "in here" and will never leave me nor forsake me. His being "in here" is a cause for a joy that can be seen "out there" and bring His blessings to others.

Prayer: Father, do something special within each of us that will bring joy to our hearts and smiles to others! May we spread the joy we have in You with others. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit. Proverbs 15:13



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
11/13/2022: Snow Queen Contest
11/19/2022: Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
12/10/2022: Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
07/04/2023 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start (4th of July)
07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

01-11-17-19-23

(one, eleven, seventeen, nineteen, twenty-three)

Estimated jackpot: \$98,000

Lotto America

02-14-20-40-48, Star Ball: 2, ASB: 2

(two, fourteen, twenty, forty, forty-eight; Star Ball: two; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$26,340,000

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: 494,000,000

Powerball

14-30-41-42-59, Powerball: 6, Power Play: 5

(fourteen, thirty, forty-one, forty-two, fifty-nine; Powerball: six; Power Play: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$454,000,000

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. October 10, 2022.

Editorial: The Future Of Free School Lunches For All

Necessity, demanded by adversity, can sometimes produce real benefits.

COVID-19 led to one such situation when the federal government provided free lunches to all American school children during the pandemic. More than 4 billion free lunches were served to children in the U.S., including many thousands in South Dakota, according to a South Dakota News Watch story published in Saturday's Press & Dakotan.

However, that program has come to an end, and now many children are struggling to get a nutritious meal at school — a drawback that can have considerable consequences on learning and advancement.

Efforts were made last spring to lobby Congress to extend the broad school lunch program. Among those testifying in Washington was Laura Horacek of the Yankton School District's Child Nutrition Department.

"Research shows students eat their healthiest meals at school," Horacek said in a press release issued last March. "School meal programs need Congress' full support to overcome pandemic-related challenges and ensure students continue to receive nutritious school meals to support learning and combat child hunger."

However, the program expired June 30.

The loss of the free lunch program has been compounded for some families by the higher prices caused by inflation and supply chain issues.

News Watch also noted that some families may have missed out on applying for free- or reduced-lunch programs because they didn't realize the federal program was ending.

This issue is about more than a literal or metaphorical free lunch.

Education officials have long noted that children function better in a classroom environment when they have nutritious food to fuel them.

"A majority of an individual's brain development happens from birth to 5 ... so good nutrition is essential for kids, and missing those meals is something that can impact a child in a way that makes them less successful in life," said Stacey Andernacht, a spokesman for Feeding South Dakota, the largest provider of charitable food in the state.

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News Watch reported that, from August 2021 to August 2022, Feeding South Dakota saw a 40% increase in the number of families visiting its mobile food banks.

This situation also magnifies the issue of food insecurity — which is defined as the inability to afford or get access to enough healthy foods — in the state. “According to the Feeding America Map the Meal Gap database, nearly 75,000 South Dakota residents (about 9% of the population) were considered food insecure in 2020, and only half of those qualify for some level of federal food assistance,” News Watch reported, adding that food insecurity “was highest in Native American communities and reservation areas.”

Proper nutrition for students was an ongoing issue even before COVID-19 arrived, but the pandemic produced an accidental solution that worked well and had good outcomes.

The answer to the issue now is easy on paper but may be more complicated to execute bureaucratically and politically. It needs the political will in Washington to fund what will be seen as a social program. This would also require work between Washington and the state, and between state governments and school districts, to make free school lunches a reality.

The benefits are obvious, and so are the consequences of inaction.

“We should not live in a society where kids go hungry, period,” Bill Egan, a Rapid City teacher, told South Dakota News Watch. “In a nation that’s supposed to be the richest nation in the world, and the best country in the world to live, we should not have kids hungry in our schools. We can send billions of dollars everywhere else, but we need to take care of our future, and our future is our kids.”

END

Noem: No special legislative session for food tax repeal

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said Wednesday she would not call a special legislative session to have lawmakers consider repealing the state’s tax on groceries ahead of the November election, despite calls to do so from a handful of Republican lawmakers as well as her Democratic challenger.

The Republican governor, speaking at a news event at a Sioux Falls grocery store, acknowledged her campaign proposal does not currently have the votes necessary for passage in the state Senate. She will have to win over lawmakers when they are scheduled to reconvene in January.

Repeal of the state tax on groceries, which would cost the state about \$100 million in annual revenue, has become a central issue in her reelection bid against her Democratic opponent, Rep. Jamie Smith.

Noem publicly opposed the repeal in March this year, but changed course last month to promise that she would convince the Legislature to cut the tax if re-elected. Smith supported the repeal several times during his six years in the state House.

“I don’t want to put us in a situation where this bill fails,” Noem said. The governor added that she would work to convince senators that she has expanded South Dakota’s economy to a point that state government would not miss the \$100 million in revenue.

The state has put a record amount of money in budget reserves under Noem’s leadership. But South Dakota’s economic growth has recently 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.

Smith held a news conference Wednesday just a half hour before Noem’s event to push the governor to call the Legislature back to Pierre. The Legislature can convene either by order of the governor or with two-thirds support from both of its chambers.

“It’s an unethical tax for hardworking families because they all need food, especially during times of economic crisis,” Smith said of the 4.5% tax levied on food purchases.

He accused Noem of changing course on repeal for “political convenience” and said the sooner the tax is repealed, the sooner it can save people money at the grocery checkout. Smith said there is little assurance that the governor will fulfill her repeal pledge, let alone serve the entirety of her four-year term.

Noem has made moves to position herself as a White House contender in 2024. But on Wednesday, she pledged she would complete her second four-year term as governor.

"Absolutely that's what I want to do," she said. "Stay home here in South Dakota."

Ukraine's Kyiv area hit by Iranian-made kamikaze drones

By SABRA AYRES Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia's forces used Iranian-made kamikaze drones to attack Ukraine's capital and Odesa regions Thursday and slammed other areas with missiles as Moscow punished the country for a fourth day for a truck bomb attack on a landmark Russian bridge.

A strike carried out near Makrariiv, a small city located 50 kilometers (31 miles) west of Kyiv, destroyed critical infrastructure. Throughout the capital region, residents whose lives had resumed some normalcy when the war moved east months ago again awoke to air raid sirens.

It wasn't clear if the explosive-packed drones caused any casualties. Ukrainian officials said 13 people were killed and 37 wounded in the past day in Russian missile strikes that targeted nine regions of Ukraine.

Russia resumed widespread attacks in Ukraine on Monday following an explosion that damaged the Kerch Bridge, a 12-mile span that links Russian with the annexed Crimean Peninsula. The 12-mile-long bridge carries military supplies to Ukraine as well as importance as a symbol of Russia's power.

The speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament on Thursday said Russian forces struck more than 70 energy facilities in Ukraine this week and threatened an "even tougher" response to future attacks by "the Kyiv regime," although Ukraine has not claimed responsibility for the bridge bombing.

"All the organizers and perpetrators of the terrorist attacks must be found; those who resist must be destroyed," State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin wrote on Telegram.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that a massive barrage of missile strikes all across Ukraine was carried out in retaliation for what he called Kyiv's "terrorist" actions targeting the Kerch Bridge. Putin vowed a "tough" and "proportionate" response to Ukrainian attacks that threatened Russia's security.

Kyiv was hit at least four times during Monday's massive strikes, which killed at least 19 people and wounded more than 100 across the country.

In the southern city of Mykolaiv, overnight shelling destroyed a five-story apartment building as fighting continued along Ukraine's southern front. Mykolaiv regional governor Vitali Kim said an 11-year-old boy was rescued from under the rubble, where he had spent six hours, and rescuers on Thursday morning were searching for seven more people, Kim said.

He said that the building was hit by an S-300 missile, a type ordinarily used for targeting military aircraft but the Russian military appears to be increasingly using for unprecise ground strikes.

Early morning attacks on Ukraine's southern front have become a daily occurrence in Russia's war as Kyiv's forces push a counteroffensive aimed at recapturing territory occupied by Moscow.

Western leaders this week pledged to send more weapons to Ukraine, including air defense systems and weapons Kyiv has said are critical to defeating the invading Russian forces.

Britain said Thursday it would provide missiles for advanced NASAM anti-aircraft systems that the Pentagon plans to send to Ukraine in coming weeks. It's also sending hundreds of additional aerial drones for information gathering and logistics support, plus 18 more howitzer artillery guns.

U.K. Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said "these weapons will help Ukraine defend its skies from attacks and strengthen their overall missile defense alongside the U.S. NASAMS."

The systems, which Kyiv has long wanted, will provide medium- to long-range defense against missile attacks.

The offer came as NATO defense ministers met in Brussels, aiming to help bolster Ukraine's aerial defenses after Russia's attacks this week.

Ukraine's military said its current air defenses have shot down dozens of incoming Russian missiles and Shahed-136 drones, the so-called kamikaze drones that have played an increasingly deadly role in the war.

Ukraine's air force command said Thursday its air defense shot down six Iranian drones from over the Odesa and Mykolaiv regions during the night. Ukrainian officials said that Iranian instructors based in the occupied regions of Ukraine have trained Russians how to operate the drones.

Jan. 6 hearing promises 'surprising' details before election

By LISA MASCARO, MARY CLARE JALONICK and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Jan. 6 committee is set to unveil "surprising" details including evidence from Donald Trump's Secret Service about the 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol in what is likely to be its last public hearing before the November midterm elections.

The hearing Thursday afternoon, the 10th public session by the panel, is expected delve into Trump's "state of mind" and the central role the defeated president played in the multipart effort to overturn the election, according to a committee aide who discussed the plans on condition of anonymity.

The committee is starting to sum up its findings: Trump, after losing the 2020 presidential election, launched an unprecedented attempt to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's victory. The result was the deadly mob siege of the Capitol.

"The mob was led by some extremist groups — they plotted in advance what they were going to do," Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., a committee member, told CNN. "And those individuals were known to people in the Trump orbit."

Chairman Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., is poised to gavel in Thursday's session at an otherwise empty Capitol complex, with most lawmakers at home campaigning for reelection. Several people who were among the thousands around the Capitol on Jan. 6 are now running for congressional office, some with Trump's backing.

The session will serve as a closing argument by the panel's two Republican lawmakers, Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, who have essentially been shunned by Trump and their party and will not be returning in the new Congress. Cheney lost her primary election and Kinzinger decided not to run.

Another committee member, Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Va., a retired Naval commander, is in a tough reelection bid against state Sen. Jen Kiggans, a former Navy helicopter pilot.

Unlike past hearings, this one is not expected to feature live witnesses, though the panel is expected to share information from its recent interviews — including testimony from Ginni Thomas, the conservative activist and wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. She was in contact with the White House during the run-up to Jan. 6.

Fresh information about the movements of then-Vice President Mike Pence, who was presiding over the joint session of Congress on Jan. 6 and was rushed to safety, is also expected, according to a person familiar with the committee's planning who was not authorized to discuss it publicly and requested anonymity.

For weeks the panel has been in talks with the U.S. Secret Service after issuing a subpoena to produce missing text messages from that day. Former White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson described being told by a White House aide about Trump angrily lunging at the driver of his presidential SUV and demanding to be taken from his rally to the Capitol as the mob formed on Jan. 6.

Some in the Secret Service have disputed Hutchinson's account of the events, but it is unclear if the missing texts that the agency has said were deleted during a technology upgrade will ever be recovered. The hearing is expected to reveal fresh details from a massive trove of documents and other evidence provided by the Secret Service.

The committee plans to show new video footage it received from the Secret Service of the rally on the White House Ellipse. Trump spoke there before encouraging his armed supporters to march to the Capitol and "fight like hell."

The hearing also will include new documentary footage captured from the day of the attack.

The Secret Service has turned over 1.5 million pages of documents and surveillance video to the committee, according to agency spokesman Anthony Guglielmi.

Lofgren said that as she learned the information being presented Thursday she found it "pretty surprising."

The committee, having conducted more than 1,500 interviews and obtained countless documents, has produced a sweeping probe of Trump's activities from his defeat in the November election to the Capitol

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attack.

"He has used this big lie to destabilize our democracy," said Lofgren, who was a young House staff member during the Richard Nixon impeachment inquiry in 1974. "When did that idea occur to him and what did he know while he was doing that?"

This week's hearing is expected to be the final investigative presentation from lawmakers before the midterm elections. But staff members say the investigation continues.

The Jan. 6 committee has been meeting for more than a year, set up by the House after Republican senators blocked the formation of an outside panel similar to the 9/11 commission set up after the 2001 terrorist attacks. Even after the launch of its high-profile public hearings last summer, the Jan. 6 committee continued to gather evidence and interviews.

Under committee rules, the Jan. 6 panel is expected to produce a report of its findings, due after the election, likely in December. The committee will dissolve 30 days after publication of that report, and with the new Congress in January.

House Republicans are expected to drop the Jan. 6 probe and turn to other investigations if they win control after midterm elections, primarily focusing on Biden, his family and his administration.

At least five people died in the Jan. 6 attack and its aftermath, including a Trump supporter shot and killed by Capitol Police.

Police engaged in often bloody, hand-to-hand combat, as Trump's supporters pushed past barricades, stormed the Capitol and roamed the halls, sending lawmakers fleeing for safety and temporarily disrupting the joint session of Congress certifying Biden's election.

More than 850 people have been charged by the Justice Department in the Capitol attack, some receiving lengthy prison sentences for their roles. Several leaders and associates of the extremist Oath Keepers and Proud Boys have been charged with sedition.

Trump faces various state and federal investigations over his actions in the election and its aftermath.

EXPLAINER: US weapons systems Ukraine will or won't get

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ukrainian leaders are pressing the U.S. and Western allies for air defense systems and longer-range weapons to keep up the momentum in their counteroffensive against Russia and fight back against Moscow's intensified attacks.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday said allies are committed to sending weapons "as fast as we can physically get them there." And he said defense leaders meeting in Brussels are working to send a wide array of systems, ranging from tanks and armored vehicles to air defense and artillery.

But there are still a number of high-profile, advanced weapons that Ukraine wants and the U.S. won't provide, due to political sensitivities, classified technology or limited stockpiles.

A look at some of the weapons Ukraine will or won't get:

WHAT WEAPONS UKRAINE IS GETTING

In a meeting with about 50 defense leaders this week, Austin and Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, discussed plans to send more air defense weapons to Ukraine and also increase training for Ukrainian troops.

"We know that Ukraine still needs even more long-range fires, and air defense systems and artillery systems along with other crucial capabilities," Austin said Wednesday. He said allies talked about a number of air defense systems.

The U.S. has already provided 20 of the advanced High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, and has promised 18 more.

And the Pentagon has said it will deliver the first two advanced NASAMS surface-to-air missile systems to Ukraine in the coming weeks, providing Kyiv with a weapon that it has pressed for since earlier this year. The systems will provide medium- to long-range defenses against Russian missile attacks.

Germany is now delivering its first IRIS-T surface-to-air missile system, which has a range of about 25

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miles (40 kilometers). It has promised a total of four.

Overall, the U.S. has sent Ukraine \$16.8 billion in weapons and other aid since the war began on Feb. 24. That aid has included hundreds of armored vehicles, 142 155mm Howitzers and 880,000 rounds of ammunition for them, plus thousands of Javelin anti-tank and Stinger anti-aircraft weapons and 60 million rounds of bullets.

WHAT WEAPONS THE US HASN'T SENT

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has repeatedly made it clear that his country needs more advanced weapons to continue the fight. Russia launched a barrage of attacks using drones, heavy artillery and missiles this week.

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the attacks in response to an explosion last weekend on a crucial bridge linking Russia to Crimea. The Russians are also struggling to beat back a fierce counteroffensive by Ukrainian forces, who have just retaken five towns and villages in the southern Kherson region. It was illegally annexed by Russia along with the neighboring Zaporizhzhia region, and Donetsk and Luhansk in the east.

Zelenskyy's pleas for some weapons, however, are so far going unanswered.

A key request is for the Army Tactical Missile System. Known as ATACMS, it is one of the weapons that Zelenskyy has repeatedly requested. It would give Ukraine the ability to strike Russian targets from as far as about 180 miles (300 kilometers).

The system uses the same launchers as the HIMARS rockets that Kyiv has successfully used in its counteroffensive, but has as much as three times the range of those rockets.

A major U.S. concern is that the longer-range capability could be used against targets inside Russia and further provoke Putin, said Brad Bowman, the senior director of the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a Washington-based nonpartisan research institute.

Similarly, the U.S. isn't likely to send Ukraine the highly sophisticated surface-to-air Patriot missile system, which has the ability to shoot down incoming ballistic missiles.

J.D. Williams, a senior defense researcher at the Rand Corp., said the Patriots are connected to some of the United States' most sensitive command-and-control networks and could require U.S. troops on the ground to operate them. The Biden administration has ruled out using U.S. combat forces inside Ukraine.

The U.S. has only a limited number of those systems.

Zelenskyy has also pressed the U.S. since March to provide fighter jets such as F-16s, but the U.S. has repeatedly rejected the idea to avoid further escalation with Russia.

The U.S. also has so far declined to send Ukraine more sophisticated longer-range drones, such as the Gray Eagle, which also would give Ukraine a longer-distance strike capability. There also are concerns about Russia gaining access to such advanced technology if one were to be shot down.

Follow AP's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war: <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

How Moscow grabs Ukrainian kids and makes them Russians

By SARAH EL DEEB, ANASTASIIA SHVETS and ELIZAVETA TILNA Associated Press

Olga Lopatkina paced around her basement in circles like a trapped animal. For more than a week, the Ukrainian mother had heard nothing from her six adopted children stranded in Mariupol, and she was going out of her mind with worry.

The kids had spent their vacation at a resort in the port city, as usual. But this time war with Russia had broken out, and her little ones — always terrified of the dark — were abandoned in a besieged city with no light and no hope. All they had now was her oldest son, Timofey, who was still himself just 17.

The questions looped endlessly in her head: Should she try to rescue the children herself — and risk being killed, making them orphans yet again? Or should she campaign to get them out from afar — and risk them being killed or falling into the hands of the Russians?

She had no idea her dilemma would lead her straight into a battle against Russia, with the highest stakes of her life.

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Russia's open effort to adopt Ukrainian children and bring them up as Russian is already well underway, in one of the most explosive issues of the war, an Associated Press investigation shows.

Thousands of children have been found in the basements of war-torn cities like Mariupol and at orphanages in the Russian-backed separatist territories of Donbas. They include those whose parents were killed by Russian shelling as well as others in institutions or with foster families, known as "children of the state."

Russia claims that these children don't have parents or guardians to look after them, or that they can't be reached. But the AP found that officials have deported Ukrainian children to Russia or Russian-held territories without consent, lied to them that they weren't wanted by their parents, used them for propaganda, and given them Russian families and citizenship.

The investigation is the most extensive to date on the grab of Ukrainian orphans, and the first to follow the process all the way to those already growing up in Russia. The AP drew from dozens of interviews with parents, children and officials in both Ukraine and Russia; emails and letters; Russian documents and Russian state media.

Whether or not they have parents, raising the children of war in another country or culture can be a marker of genocide, an attempt to erase the very identity of an enemy nation. Prosecutors say it also can be tied directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has explicitly supported the adoptions.

"It's not something that happens spur of the moment on the battlefield," said Stephen Rapp, a former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues who is advising Ukraine on prosecutions. "And so your ability to attribute responsibility to the highest level is much greater here."

Even where parents are dead, Rapp said, their children must be sheltered, fostered or adopted in Ukraine rather than deported to Russia.

Russian law prohibits the adoption of foreign children. But in May, Putin signed a decree making it easier for Russia to adopt and give citizenship to Ukrainian children without parental care — and harder for Ukraine and surviving relatives to win them back.

Russia also has prepared a register of suitable Russian families for Ukrainian children, and pays them for each child who gets citizenship — up to \$1,000 for those with disabilities. It holds summer camps for Ukrainian orphans, offers "patriotic education" classes and even runs a hotline to pair Russian families with children from Donbas.

"It is absolutely a terrible story," said Petro Andryushchenko, an adviser to the Mariupol mayor, who claims hundreds of children were taken from that city alone. "We don't know if our children have an official parent or (stepparents) or something else because they are forcibly disappeared by Russian troops."

Russia portrays its adoption of Ukrainian children as an act of generosity that gives new homes and medical resources to helpless minors. Russian state media shows local officials hugging and kissing them and handing them Russian passports.

It's very hard to pin down the exact number of Ukrainian children deported to Russia — Ukrainian officials claim nearly 8,000. Russia hasn't given an overall number, but officials regularly announce the arrival of Ukrainian orphans in Russian military planes.

In March, Russian children's rights ombudswoman Maria Lvova-Belova said 1,000 children from Ukraine were in Russia. Over the summer, she said 120 Russian families had applied for guardianship, and more than 130 Ukrainian children had received Russian citizenship. Many more have come since, including a batch of 234 in early October.

Lvova-Belova has said these children need Russia's help to overcome trauma that has left them sleeping badly, crying at night and drawing basements and bomb shelters. She acknowledged that at first, a group of 30 children brought to Russia from the basements of Mariupol defiantly sang the Ukrainian national anthem and shouted, "Glory to Ukraine!" But now, she said, their criticism has been "transformed into a love for Russia," and she herself has taken one in, a teenager.

"Today he received a passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation and does not let go of it!" she posted on Telegram on Sept. 21, along with a photo. "(He) was waiting for this day in our family more

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than anyone else.”

Lvova-Belova has been sanctioned by the United States, Europe, the U.K., Canada and Australia. Her office referred the AP to her reply in a state-owned news agency that Russia was “helping children to preserve their right to live under a peaceful sky and be happy.”

In August, a post from a senior official at the Moscow Department of Labor and Social Protection thanking the Russian foster families declared: “Our Children...Now they are ours.”

As Lopatkina agonized over what to do, her teenage son’s childhood came to an abrupt end in Mariupol. Suddenly, Timofey had become the father to all his siblings. Three had chronic illnesses or disabilities, and the youngest was just 7.

As intense shelling broke the glass around them, they covered in a basement. When the younger ones were scared, Timofey carried them in his arms. After one airstrike, they moved their beds closer together next to the thickest wall.

But no wall could keep out the war. Every day, Timofey awoke at 6 a.m. in the bitter cold and chopped wood for a bonfire to cook food. All he wanted to do was to finish his work and sleep — only to have to wake up and do it again.

Calluses built up on his hands. His skin grew thicker in other ways. When airplanes rumbled overhead, he no longer ran for shelter.

“When you walk and see brains of people on the road, right on the pavement, nothing matters,” he recalled.

He promised his mother he would look after the younger children. But then the power went out, and he lost touch with her completely.

A friend who had joined the fighting offered to take him out of Mariupol. He refused. He knew he would never forgive himself if he left his siblings behind.

Finally, a local doctor from Mariupol arranged an evacuation to elsewhere in Ukraine. But pro-Russia forces at a checkpoint refused to recognize the children’s documents, photocopies of official papers identifying them and their parents. Timofey’s pleas went nowhere.

Instead, the children ended up in a hospital in the Donetsk People’s Republic, or DPR, a separatist Russian-controlled area in Ukraine. Timofey was only months away from turning 18 — the age when he would be drafted into the DPR army against his homeland.

“For the DPR, I would never go to fight in my life,” he said. “I understood that I had to get out of there one way or another.”

At least, Timofey thought, he could tell his mother he had kept the children safe. He was close to his mother, and they were alike, he and she — both tough survivors who would stick it out to the end no matter what.

Or so he thought, until he reached her.

“It’s great that they are alive,” she replied. “But we are already abroad.”

Timofey was utterly devastated. His parents had fled Ukraine without him. He felt they had thrown him away like garbage, along with five children he hadn’t asked for and couldn’t know how to protect.

“Thanks for leaving me,” he wrote back, furious.

The children of Mariupol aren’t the first Russia has been accused of stealing from Ukraine.

In 2014, after Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, more than 80 children from Luhansk were stopped at checkpoints and abducted. Ukraine sued, and the European Court of Human Rights found the children were taken into Russia “without medical support or the necessary paperwork.” The children were returned to Ukraine before a final decision.

Kateryna Rashevskaya, a human rights defender, said she knows of about 30 Ukrainian children from Crimea adopted by Russians under a program known as Train of Hope. Now, she said, some of those children might well be Russian soldiers. Since 2015, the Young Army Cadets national movement has trained youth in Crimea and Russia for potential recruitment into the military.

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This time around, at least 96 children have been returned to Ukraine since March after negotiations. But Ukrainian officials have tracked down the identities of thousands more in Russia, and the names of many others simply aren't published.

"We cannot ask the Russian Federation to return the children because we don't know who they should return," said Rashevskaya, with the Ukrainian organization Regional Central for Human Rights.

Kira, a 12-year-old girl who saw her father shot and killed, was evacuated from Mariupol to Donetsk with shrapnel wounds on her ear, leg, neck and arm. Kira was reunited with her grandparents only after the office of the Ukraine deputy prime minister got involved.

Her grandmother, Svitlana Obiedynska, said Kira had become withdrawn and lost interest in everything, and negotiations were "very difficult."

"It was not decided at our level," she said. "She wants to be with her family. After all, she has no one else."

Russia justifies the deportation of children by saying it has annexed four territories in Ukraine, but the U.N. and the rest of the world called the move in late September a sham. The governor of one of those territories, Serhiy Haidai of Luhansk, has accused Russian officials of drawing up documents that deprive Ukrainian parents of their rights. He too fears that Ukrainian children will be enlisted in the Russian military.

Other officials in occupied territories loyal to Moscow have a more benign view of what Russia is doing. Olga Volkova, who heads an institution for children in Donetsk, had 225 kids evacuated to an area near the Russian seaside city of Taganrog, and 10 were taken in by Russian families in April. After DPR and Russian officials make a list of suitable candidates, her boarding school secures citizenship for them and sends them to new families in Russia.

If there are Ukrainian relatives, they can stay in touch, call and perhaps eventually meet, Volkova said. In the meantime, while the war is ongoing, she noted, the children now still have families of a sort.

"Everyone wants to have a mother, you see?" Volkova said.

Olga Lopatkina was a teacher of music and the arts who had lived a hard life. Now a middle-aged woman with red and pink streaks in her hair fading to white, she lost her own mother as a teenager. In 2014, when fighting with Russian-backed forces broke out in Donetsk, she also lost a home.

But this nightmare with her children, she thought, was the hardest thing yet. Although Mariupol was less than 100 kilometers (60 miles) away from her home in Vuhledar, it was impossible to reach safely because of bombardment. In the meantime, her 18-year-old biological daughter, Rada, was at a boxing competition near Kharkiv, another front-line city.

She told herself every day that the war would end fast. It was the 21st century, after all. Instead, it edged closer.

Lopatkina took in two refugee families from a city near Mariupol, who confirmed her worst fears. One woman said her husband was killed in front of her, and she had to step over his corpse.

Lopatkina hounded Ukrainian officials, the local governor, social services, anybody who could evacuate her children. In calls, Timofey told his mother he was looking after his younger siblings. She was proud and slightly reassured.

Then, on March 1, their connection was lost. She thought her kids were going to be evacuated to Zaporizhzhia, so she and her husband went there, with books of fairy tales and other treats. But two days after they arrived, the state ordered Zaporizhzhia itself to be evacuated instead.

Lopatkina had to make yet another painful decision. Should she wait for an evacuation from Mariupol that might never happen? Or should she go to collect her oldest daughter before losing contact with her too?

"Let's go," she told her husband, Denys.

Lopatkina escaped with Rada to France. In one final plea, she wrote to the governor of Donetsk: "Don't forget my orphans."

When she received the message from Timofey accusing her of deserting them, she was stung but not surprised.

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"I can't even imagine," she said, her voice breaking as she started to cry. "If I were him, I would have reacted the same way, and maybe even worse."

Lopatkina continued to push Russian and Ukrainian officials incessantly. She sent them photocopies of Ukrainian documents proving her guardianship. She told them some of the children were sick, and worried that nobody had even asked about their medication.

The children were paraded on Russian television and told she didn't love them. It broke her heart.

"Every day they turned the children against us," she said. "Your parents abandoned you ... We will transfer you to the best families. Here you will have a better life."

She got a job in a garment factory in France and bought furniture, clothes and toys for children who might or might not return. She chose their bedrooms in her small duplex in the northwest, in Loue. She planned celebrations for missed birthdays.

Then, much to her dismay, she found out that other Ukrainian orphans who were with her children had been issued new identity documents for the DPR. The Donetsk authorities dropped a bombshell. She could have her children back — if she came through Russia to Donetsk to get them in person.

Lopatkina feared a trap. If she went to Russia, she might never be allowed to leave.

"I will sue you," she threatened Donetsk officials in an email on May 18th. "You took my kids. That is a crime."

For some Russian families, taking in Ukrainian orphans isn't a crime. It's a gift.

One professional foster mother was called in by the Moscow social services to "come and look" at the eastern Ukrainian kids who had recently arrived. She already had six Russian foster kids under her roof, some with disabilities. She took in three more from Mariupol.

"We still have love untapped," she said. "There are children who need to be given affection, love, care, family, mom and dad. If we can give it, why not?"

She said she had reached out to the children's Ukrainian foster mother, who didn't mind the arrangement.

The AP couldn't reach the Ukrainian mother. But the children didn't hide their resentment of her, described life with her as constrained and made no effort to call her.

They said she had dropped them off at a bunker in Mariupol. The Russian military got them out, and they had to choose between adoption by a Russian family and life in a Russian orphanage.

After a guardianship trial in now-occupied Mariupol, the Russian mother has custody of the children. They have become Russian citizens and call her mom, she said.

"We don't talk about the war," she said. "Politics remains politics. This is not our business."

At her house with a courtyard and inflatable swimming pool, the children said they felt welcome and accepted. The 15-year-old girl is eager to start a new life in Russia — but in part because returning to her old one is impossible. Her school was bombed, one of her classmates died and almost everyone has left.

"Trying to start on a new page is never bad," she said. "Why not?"

Her 17-year-old foster brother interrupted. Two of his friends had died also, he said.

He thinks starting his life anew will give him experience, and he looks forward to seeing Russia. But he is also worried about not being accepted as a Ukrainian. He will give it a go for a decade to try and make a fortune, and then return to Ukraine.

"My friends are there, they can support me," he said. "I was born there ... I know everything there, I'm just used to it."

Hundreds more orphans from Ukraine were housed in a leafy seaside camp near Taganrog, an upscale facility with a large dining room and playgrounds. Yaroslava Rogachyova, 11, had been evacuated from a children's institution in Donetsk, and was waiting to be sent to a foster family in Moscow with her two sisters. She said she will miss the sea and Donetsk, but she has already met her new family and likes them.

"I'm going to Moscow, I've already seen the family and everyone," she said. "I liked the mom from the very beginning."

In the DPR, Timofey didn't want a new life — he wanted his old one back. Angry and miserable, he ar-

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gued with officials and ate almost nothing.

His only escape was reading a book he never finished, and sneaking out to see a girl. One day he returned with a tattoo of three daggers on his legs, which could symbolize protection, bravery or power.

The new reality in a new place terrified Timofey, eclipsing his anger at his mother. On a call, she explained what had happened. He was deeply relieved.

"I missed my parents," he said. "It was very difficult for me without my mother and father's support ... I constantly cried like a girl, 'Mom, it's hard for me, I'm tired.'"

The little children repeatedly asked when they could go home to their mother. They were badly fed, slapped and cursed, Timofey said.

Then they heard hospital officials wouldn't let them go home at all. Timofey's 13-year-old foster brother, Sasha, was so furious that he slammed his hand on a slide and broke a finger.

"I really missed my parents," Sasha said. "I didn't need anything but my parents."

Two officials pulled Timofey aside and told him a court in the DPR would strip Lopatkina and her husband of their guardianship. His younger siblings would go first to an orphanage, then to new families in Russia. Timofey would go to school in Donetsk.

He was enraged. "That can't be done," he said. "It is illegal."

The officials replied that parents who didn't come to collect their children didn't want them. Timofey stormed out.

"I was so disappointed, I didn't believe in anything," he said. "I was terrified."

He was determined to keep together the only family he had known, and he worried that his siblings would end up with Russian families who wanted them only for the state aid. He told his mother he could marry his new girlfriend and adopt his siblings when he turned 18.

Then Lopatkina's efforts finally paid off.

She was working with Darya Kasyanova, the director of the nonprofit SOS Children's Villages, who already had helped to negotiate the release of 25 Ukrainian children from Russia. Sending the children in the first place to Russian territories instead of Ukraine was "a violation of the rights of the child," Kasyanova said.

After two months of negotiation and an initial objection from a senior Russian official, DPR authorities finally agreed to allow a volunteer with power of attorney from Lopatkina to collect the children. They asked Timofey if he and his siblings wanted to go back to his foster family or stay in Donetsk.

"Now that I have a chance, I will, of course, go home to my parents," he told them.

A document was drafted and signed. At last, they were going to France.

After a delay because of shelling, they finally left on a three-day bus trip through Russia and Latvia to Berlin.

They were grilled at the Russian border and panicked. Timofey texted his mother. But the volunteer got them through.

Timofey met his father at a bus stop in Berlin. He couldn't quite believe it. They drove to France, where Timofey went to pick his mother up from the garment factory as a surprise.

Lopatkina was sewing frantically, replaying the moment her kids were stopped at the border a dozen times in her head. She had already begun thinking of what new plan she could hatch to get them back.

When Timofey arrived, she was in shock. For him, the euphoria was wild, a high like nothing he had ever experienced before.

Back at the house, the other children were waiting. They ran toward their mother, losing their shoes, and jumped into her arms. She ruffled their hair and held their faces. It was all happening faster than her brain could process.

"Let me see you!" she screamed. "Aaaaah!" The two dogs joined the party, barking.

It took Timofey a couple of days before he could believe he was really back with his parents. No resentment was left, he said. He erased the angry message he had sent his mother from his phone and from his mind.

"I kept my promise," he said. "The burden of responsibility was gone. I said: 'Mother, take the reins, that's all ... I'm a child now.'"

Social Security recipients expected to get big benefit boost

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Millions of Social Security recipients will learn soon just how high a boost they'll get in their benefits next year.

The increase to be announced Thursday, expected to be the largest in 40 years, is fueled by record high inflation and is meant to help cover the higher cost of food, fuel and other goods and services. How well it does that depends on inflation next year.

The boost in benefits will be coupled with a 3% drop in Medicare Part B premiums, meaning retirees will get the full impact of the jump in Social Security benefits.

The announcement comes just weeks before the midterm elections, and at a time when Democrats and Republicans are sparring about high prices now and how best to shore up the program financially in the future.

President Joe Biden has pledged to protect both Social Security and Medicare. "I'll make them stronger," he said last month. "And I'll lower your cost to be able to keep them."

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement Wednesday that the combination of a Social Security benefit boost and a decline in Medicare premiums will give seniors a chance to get ahead of inflation. "We will put more money in their pockets and provide them with a little extra breathing room," she said.

About 70 million people — including retirees, disabled people and children — receive Social Security benefits. This will be the biggest increase in benefits that baby boomers, those born between the years 1946 and 1964, have ever seen.

Willie Clark, 65, of Waukegan, Illinois, says his budget is "real tight" and the increase in his Social Security disability benefits could give him some breathing room to cover the cost of the household expenses he's been holding off on.

Still, he doubts how much of the extra money will end up in his pocket. His rent in an apartment building subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is based on his income, so he expects that will rise, too.

Social Security is financed by payroll taxes collected from workers and their employers. Each pays 6.2% on wages up to a cap, which is adjusted each year for inflation. The maximum amount of earnings subject to Social Security payroll taxes for 2023 is \$155,100.

The financing setup dates to the 1930s, the brainchild of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who believed a payroll tax would foster among average Americans a sense of ownership that would protect the program from political interference.

Next year's higher payout, without an accompanying increase in Social Security contributions, could put additional pressure on a system that's facing a severe shortfall in coming years.

The annual Social Security and Medicare trustees report released in June says the program's trust fund will be unable to pay full benefits beginning in 2035.

If the trust fund is depleted, the government will be able to pay only 80% of scheduled benefits, the report said. Medicare will be able to pay 90% of total scheduled benefits if the fund is depleted.

In January, a Pew Research Center poll showed 57% of U.S. adults saying that "taking steps to make the Social Security system financially sound" was a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year. Securing Social Security got bipartisan support, with 56% of Democrats and 58% of Republicans calling it a top priority.

Some solutions for reforming Social Security have been proposed — but none has moved forward in a sharply partisan Congress.

Earlier this year, Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., issued a detailed plan that would require Congress to come up

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with a proposal to adequately fund Social Security and Medicare or potentially phase them out.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., publicly rebuked the plan and Biden has used Scott's proposal as a political bludgeon against Republicans ahead of midterm elections.

"If Republicans in Congress have their way, seniors will pay more for prescription drugs and their Social Security benefits will never be secure," Jean-Pierre said.

North Korea takes inspiration from Putin's nuke threats

By FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — For decades North Korea has threatened to turn enemy cities into a "sea of fire," even as it doggedly worked on building a nuclear weapons program that could back up its belligerent words.

Now, as North Korea conducts another torrid run of powerful weapons tests — and threatens pre-emptive nuclear strikes on Washington and Seoul — it may be taking inspiration from the fiery rhetoric of the leader of a nuclear-armed member of the U.N. Security Council: Russia's Vladimir Putin.

With Putin raising the terrifying prospect of using tactical nukes to turn around battleground setbacks in Ukraine, there's fear that this normalization of nuclear threats is emboldening North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as he puts the finishing touches on his still incomplete nuclear program.

"Putin and Kim feed off each other, routinizing the right to nuke a peaceful neighbor by repeating it without repercussion," said Sung-Yoon Lee, an expert on North Korea at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. "Putin's threats sound more credible than Kim's, as there is bloodshed in Ukraine every day. But Kim's threats must not be dismissed as empty bluster."

After more than 40 missile launches this year — its most ever — there are a host of fresh signs that North Korea is becoming more aggressive in making its nuclear bombs the centerpiece of its military.

A recent two-week barrage of missile launches was meant, according to North Korean media, to simulate the use of its tactical battlefield nuclear weapons to "hit and wipe out" potential South Korean and U.S. targets. It's believed to mark the first time that North Korea has performed drills involving army units tasked with the operation of tactical nuclear weapons.

The tests — all supervised by Kim — included a nuclear-capable ballistic missile launched under a reservoir; ballistic missiles designed for nuclear strikes on South Korean airfields, ports and command facilities; and a new-type ground-to-ground ballistic missile that flew over Japan.

State media announced Thursday the tests the previous day of long-range cruise missiles, which Kim described as a successful demonstration of his military's expanding nuclear strike capabilities and readiness for "actual war."

There are also indications that North Korea is taking steps to deploy tactical nuclear weapons along its frontline border with South Korea. The North has also adopted a new law that authorizes preemptive nuclear attacks over a broad range of scenarios, including non-war situations, when it perceives a threat to its leadership.

North Korea is still working to perfect its nuclear-tipped missile technology, but each new test pushes it closer to that goal.

"North Korea has been clearly emulating Putin's approach in his war on Ukraine while using it as a window to accelerate arms development," according to Park Won Gon, a professor of North Korea studies at Seoul's Ewha Womans University.

In what's seen as a reference to his nuclear arsenal, Putin has declared his readiness to use "all means available" to protect Russian territory. With a string of defeats in Ukraine leaving Putin increasingly cornered, observers worry that Putin could be tempted to explode a tactical nuclear weapon to avoid a defeat that may undermine his grip on power.

Battlefield nuclear weapons are intended to crush advancing enemy troops in one designated frontline section, and have a low yield compared to nuclear warheads fitted on strategic weapons. But even these types of nuclear weapons would expose huge numbers of civilians in densely populated Ukraine, and possibly Russia and other places, to radiation risks.

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It would also have a devastating political impact, marking the first time nuclear weapons have been used since World War II and prompting rapid escalation that could end in all-out nuclear conflict.

The United States and its allies have said they are taking Putin's threats seriously but won't yield to what they described as Putin's blackmail to force the West to abandon its support for Ukraine. Ukraine said it won't halt its counteroffensive despite Russian nuclear strike threats.

U.S. officials have said they don't believe that Kim is going to launch conventional or nuclear attacks because of what the North Korean leader sees happening in Ukraine. Rather, they see Kim as worried that North Korea may be left behind in the international influence battle and therefore escalating because Putin is getting all the attention.

North Korea's missile launches are seen by many as presaging an eventual test of a nuclear device.

Such tests, besides putting Washington and Seoul on the defensive, may be meant to win talks, on North Korean terms, with Washington that could eventually get the North recognized as a legitimate nuclear power. That, in turn, would force the international community to ease crushing sanctions and, eventually, negotiate the removal of nearly 30,000 U.S. troops in South Korea.

Pyongyang's ultimate goal, according to Lee, the Tufts professor, is to complete what Kim Jong Un's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, began in 1950 with the surprise North Korean invasion of South Korea and establish a Korean Peninsula ruled by the Kim family.

Putin's moves in Ukraine could also help Kim by continuing to distract the United States from focusing on North Korea and deepening a divide on the U.N. Security Council where Russia and China side with North Korea and prevent additional sanctions over the North's recent tests, said Park, the analyst in Seoul.

"North Korea is paying as much attention to the (Ukraine) situation as anyone," Park said. If Putin gets away with using nukes without suffering major repercussions, North Korea will see that as boosting its own nuclear doctrine, Park said.

The Korean Peninsula is still technically at war because the 1950-53 conflict ended with an armistice not a peace treaty, and the two Koreas have a history of bloody skirmishes. North Korea fired artillery during South Korean military drills in 2010 that killed two civilians and two South Korean military members on a front-line island. An international panel also blamed the North for sinking a South Korean warship the same year, killing 46.

Similar future clashes could be followed by North Korean threats to use nuclear weapons, said Park. He noted that conventional military clashes between India and Pakistan increased after Pakistan acquired its own deterrent to counter its nuclear-armed rival, mainly because the perceived balance in strength emboldened the countries to carry out more aggressive military action.

Recent North Korean missile tests came despite a U.S. aircraft carrier in nearby waters and during tri-lateral naval drills between the United States, South Korea and Japan, Park said. "This shows the growing confidence they have in their weapons."

EXPLAINER: Who is leading the crackdown on Iran's protests?

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

They show up at the first signs of protest in Iran — men in black, riding motorcycles, often wielding guns or batons.

They are members of what's known as the Basij, paramilitary volunteers who are fiercely loyal to the Islamic Republic. The shock troops of the ayatollahs have taken on a leading role in quashing dissent for more than two decades.

During the latest protests, which erupted after a young woman died in the custody of the country's morality police last month, the Basij (ba-SEEJ') have deployed in major cities, attacking and detaining protesters, who in many cases have fought back.

One widely-circulated video appears to show dozens of schoolgirls removing their mandatory Islamic headscarves, known as hijab, and shouting at a visiting Basiji official to get lost.

It remains to be seen if the latest round of unrest will eventually fizzle, but much could depend on how

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the Basij and other security forces respond to further protests.

Here's a look at the Basij:

WHEN WAS IRAN'S BASIJ ESTABLISHED?

The Basij, whose official name translates to the Organization for the Mobilization of the Oppressed, was established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution to Islamize Iranian society and combat enemies from within.

During the ruinous Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the Basij led notorious "human wave" attacks against Saddam Hussein's army, with large numbers of poorly armed fighters, many of them teenagers, perishing as they raced across mine fields and into artillery fire.

Beginning with the student revolts of the late 1990s, the Basij took on a domestic role roughly akin to the ruling party of an authoritarian state. It's under the command of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and fiercely loyal to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who routinely praises the Basij as a pillar of the Islamic Republic.

They have established branches across the country, as well as student organizations, trade guilds, and medical faculties. The U.S. Treasury has imposed sanctions on what it says is a multi-billion-dollar network of businesses covertly run by the Basij.

The security apparatus of the Basij includes armed brigades, anti-riot forces and a vast network of informers who spy on their neighbors.

Saeid Golkar, an Iranian scholar at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga who has written a book about the Basij, estimates their total membership is around 1 million, with the security forces numbering in the tens of thousands.

"Because they are ordinary Iranians without a uniform, the Islamic Republic is billing them as pro-regime supporters," he said, referring to those who confront the protesters. "At the same time, most of these people are receiving salaries from the Islamic Republic."

WHY DO IRANIAN FORCES ATTACK THE PROTESTERS?

Experts say many of those who join the Basij do so because of economic opportunities, with membership providing a leg up in university admissions and public sector employment.

But recruits are also put through heavy indoctrination, including an initial 45 days of military and ideological training. They are taught that the Islamic revolution is a godly struggle against injustice, one that is threatened by myriad enemies — from the United States and Israel to exiled Iranian opposition groups and even Western culture itself.

Even if new recruits are initially driven by personal gain, Golkar says, "the indoctrination can help to modify these motivations."

In the eyes of the Basijis, the Islamic headscarf, or hijab, is a bulwark against gender mixing, adultery and corruption — its removal a sign of decadent Western culture. Iran's leaders have cast the latest protests as part of a foreign conspiracy to foment unrest.

Protesters reject that characterization, saying the demonstrations are a spontaneous outpouring of anger at decades of repressive rule, poor governance and international isolation.

HOW DO IRANIAN FORCES CLAMP DOWN ON PROTESTS?

The policing of dissent in Iran begins with heavy surveillance of its citizenry, much of it done by Basijis, who have a presence in nearly every public institution. Iran also restricts internet access, especially during times of protest, and the Basij have a cyber division devoted to hacking perceived enemies.

"There are different strategies. Of course the more visible is the violent one," said Sanam Vakil, an Iran expert at the Chatham House think tank in London.

When protests break out, Basijis wearing black or commando fatigues ride in on motorcycles, sometimes charging directly into the demonstrators in order to disperse them. They operate alongside the regular

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police and Iran's Revolutionary Guard, who are also taking part in the crackdown.

"They have been chasing, clubbing, shooting protesters, trying to round them up, beat them up, throw them into vans to take them to detention centers where protesters are roughed up and pressured," Vakil said.

Basijis can also be found among the protesters themselves, as informers trying to identify ringleaders. Amnesty International said in a report last month that four individuals identified by Iranian authorities as Basijis appear to have been shot and killed by security forces while mingling with protesters.

WILL IRAN SUCCEED IN QUASHING THE PROTESTS?

Iran has stamped out several waves of protests over the years, including the Green Movement of 2009, when millions took to the streets after a disputed presidential election. Hundreds were killed in 2019 when Iran put down demonstrations over the heavily-sanctioned country's prolonged economic crisis.

But the latest protests have a different feel, which could make them harder to extinguish.

They are led by young women fed up with the increasingly heavy-handed enforcement of the country's conservative Islamic dress code. But they draw support from a much wider swath of society, including ethnic minorities and even some workers in Iran's crucial oil industry.

The protesters accuse Iran's morality police of beating 22-year-old Mahsa Amini to death for wearing the hijab too loosely. Authorities deny she was mistreated, saying she died of a heart attack linked to underlying health conditions, an account disputed by her family.

Videos of recent protests show young women twirling their hijabs in the air and cutting their hair, as demonstrators chant "death to the dictator." and other slogans.

When the Basij arrive, the protesters can often be seen fighting back, and sometimes succeeding in driving them off.

But no one expects Iranian authorities to back down anytime soon.

"It's a little too early to say from the outside, with the level of internet censorship, exactly what's happening," Vakil said. "But I think the (government's) hope at the beginning was that the protests would fizzle out, and now the repressive capacity is stepping up."

EXPLAINER: Rituals play role in creating Italian government

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — With its dozens of "revolving door" governments, Italy might give the impression that carving out new ruling coalitions is quick work.

But the process can take weeks, even months, especially if a new government's formation is prompted by the premature demise of Parliament. That's the case now.

On Thursday, when newly elected lawmakers take their seats, the process of giving the country a new government can formally begin.

Giorgia Meloni, who scored a solid victory in the Sept. 25 election, is well-positioned to become the first far-right leader of an Italian government since the end of World War II and the first female premier.

A number of rituals must happen first though.

GETTING SEATED

Italy's governments require the backing of Parliament. Before a new ruling coalition can be formed, newly elected lawmakers must take their seats in the legislature. According to the constitution, that has to happen within 20 days of an election. On Thursday, both the Senate, Parliament's upper chamber, and the lower Chamber of Deputies, will formally hold their first session since the election.

This time, there will be fewer lawmakers. Under a reform to streamline the legislature and reduce spending, the new Senate now has 200 members, down from 315. Similarly, the Chamber of Deputies, has 400 instead of 630. Their main order of business is electing each chamber's president, a process expected to be complete by Friday.

MAKING THE ROUNDS

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After parliamentary elections, Italy's president, as head of state, has to task someone with trying to cobble together a government — formally called "conferring a mandate."

The clear winner of last month's election was far-right Brothers of Italy leader Meloni.

With her main coalition partners — Matteo Salvini's League and former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia — Meloni should be able to command a comfortable majority in Parliament.

But before President Sergio Mattarella asks Meloni to see if she can assemble a viable coalition, he is expected — but not obliged — to hold a round of consultations with party leaders, including from the potential opposition in the legislature. Those huddles could take two or three days.

RESERVATIONS

Barring surprises, the presidential Quirinal Palace will announce that Meloni has accepted "with reservation" the task of trying to create a new government.

But that doesn't mean she has any doubts she'll succeed — it's a customary phrase used by the president's office.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Once tapped, Meloni and her allied leaders will confer — separately or together — on how to divvy up Cabinet posts.

That's where it can get sticky, as each party jockeys for the most high-profile ministries.

Since Meloni's party won a bigger share of the votes than Salvini's and Berlusconi's forces put together, her campaign allies will have somewhat limited bargaining power.

REPORT TIME

Once Meloni is confident that she has nailed down a solid Cabinet that will pass Mattarella's muster, she'll meet with him to present her list of ministers.

Any disagreement over names is usually dealt with outside of the public eye. But after the 2018 election, Mattarella vetoed the pick of a euroskeptic economist for finance minister. That veto angered the coalition's populist leaders, but ultimately forced selection of another minister acceptable to the president.

UNVEILING

Should Meloni succeed in forming a Cabinet, as journalists wait in a salon of the hilltop Quirinal Palace and a pair of towering, helmeted Corazzieri Carabinieri stand guard, the palace secretary general will emerge and announce that the political leader has "dissolved the reservation" — a formulaic way of saying she has formed a government.

Generally, the premier-to-be then makes a brief statement and reads out the names of the Cabinet ministers.

IT'S OFFICIAL

Then it's back to the Quirinal Palace — usually the next day — for the new government's swearing-in ceremony.

The new premier and each minister pledge to be faithful to the republic, to loyally observe its constitution and laws and to exercise their powers "in the exclusive interest of the nation."

PASS THAT BELL

After the oath-taking, the new premier heads a few blocks away to Chigi Palace, the premier's office, for an official photo.

The outgoing premier hands the incoming one the bell used to open Cabinet meetings. Typically, the protagonists smile for posterity.

But in 2014, as he handed over the bell, outgoing Premier Enrico Letta refused to smile or even look at newly-minted Premier Matteo Renzi, who had ousted him from office through backroom party maneuvers.

FULL POWERS

Italy's constitution requires all new governments to face a confidence vote in each chamber of Parliament within 10 days of the Cabinet's formation. Only then is the government considered to be fully in power.

North Korea says Kim supervised cruise missile tests

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By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un supervised tests of long-range cruise missiles, which he described as a successful demonstration of his military's expanding nuclear strike capabilities and readiness for "actual war," state media said Thursday.

Wednesday's tests extended a record number of weapons demonstrations this year by North Korea, which has punctuated its testing activity with threats to preemptively use nuclear weapons against South Korea and the United States if it perceives its leadership as under threat.

Analysts say Kim is exploiting the distraction created by Russia's war on Ukraine, using it as a window to accelerate arms development as he pursues a full-fledged nuclear arsenal that could viably threaten regional U.S. allies and the American homeland.

South Korean officials say Kim may also conduct a nuclear test in the coming weeks or months, escalating a pressure campaign aimed at forcing the United States to accept the idea of North Korea as a nuclear power that can negotiate economic and security concessions from a position of strength.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said the two missiles during Wednesday's tests flew for nearly three hours, drawing oval and figure eight-shaped patterns above its western seas, and showed that they can hit targets 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) away. The tests demonstrated the accuracy and war-fighting efficiency of the weapon system that has already been deployed at army units operating "tactical" battlefield nuclear weapons, the agency said.

Kim after the tests praised the readiness of his nuclear combat forces, which he said were fully prepared for "actual war to bring enemies under their control at a blow" with various weapons systems that are "mobile, precise and powerful," according to the report.

He said that the tests send "another clear warning to enemies" and vowed to further expand the operational realm of his nuclear armed forces to "resolutely deter any crucial military crisis and war crisis at any time and completely take the initiative in it."

The missiles' flight details and characteristics described in state media resembled what North Korea reported in January following the previous demonstration of its long-range cruise missile system, which was first revealed in September last year.

State media photos of Wednesday's test showed a missile leaving an orange tail of flame as it shot out of a launch vehicle. Kim is seen smiling and clapping from a viewing station established inside an arched structure that appears to be a highway tunnel. Experts say the North may intend to use such structures to conceal its weapons before launch.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it was analyzing the tests. Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said the missiles would pose a potential threat to Japan if North Korean descriptions about their range are true.

The tests were the first known weapons demonstrations by North Korea after it launched 12 ballistic missiles in a span of two weeks through Oct. 9 in what it described as simulated nuclear attacks on South Korean and U.S. targets. Those weapons included a new intermediate range ballistic missile that flew over Japan while demonstrating potential range to reach Guam, a major U.S. military hub in the Pacific, and a short-range missile fired from an unspecified platform inside an inland reservoir.

North Korea said those drills were meant as a warning to Seoul and Washington for staging "dangerous" joint naval exercises involving the nuclear-powered U.S. aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan in recent weeks, which were intended as the allies' show of strength in the face of growing North Korean threats.

The U.S. and South Korean militaries have also conducted live-fire drills. One of the tit-for-tat launches last week nearly caused a catastrophe when a malfunctioning South Korean Hyunmoo-2 missile flipped shortly after liftoff and crashed into a coastal air force base, causing an explosion but injuring no one.

South Korea's military had initially said that the allies had successfully fired four Army Tactical Missile Systems missiles during the same launch event. But the Joint Chiefs of Staff belatedly admitted on Thursday that it had lost contact with one of its two ATACMS missiles and failed to confirm whether it hit the intended target.

Concerns about Kim's expanding nuclear arsenal has grown since his rubber-stamp parliament last month

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passed a new law that authorized preemptive use of nuclear weapons over a broad range of scenarios, including non-war situations, where it may perceive its leadership as under threat. South Korea's military has since warned North Korea that it would "self-destruct" if it uses its bombs by triggering an "overwhelming" response from the allies.

While Kim's intercontinental ballistic missiles targeting the American homeland have gathered much international attention, he has also been expanding his arsenal of shorter-range weapons aimed at overwhelming regional missile defenses. The North describes some of those weapons as "tactical," which experts say communicate a threat to arm them with small battlefield nukes and proactively use them during conflicts to blunt the stronger conventional forces of South Korea and the United States, which stations about 28,500 troops in the South.

There are also increasing worries in Tokyo, where Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada told lawmakers on Thursday that North Korea has likely already mastered the technology to produce nuclear warheads small enough to fit on its ballistic missiles that can reach Japan.

North Korea's provocative tests and threats have prompted calls by South Korean conservatives for the redeployment of tactical U.S. nuclear weapons, which were removed from South Korean soil in the 1990s, or for the South to pursue its own nuclear weapons capabilities.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol refused to give specific answers when asked whether Seoul will consider requesting Washington to bring back its nukes or undertake a NATO-like "nuclear-sharing" arrangement with his country.

"There are various views being expressed in the government and private sectors of our country and the United States regarding the (U.S.) extended deterrence, and we are carefully listening to those opinions and closely examining various possibilities," Yoon told reporters on Thursday. Yoon has repeatedly stressed his government has no plans to seek its own deterrent.

Moon Hong Sik, a spokesperson in Seoul's Defense Ministry, said Thursday the military has not discussed the possibility of pursuing a redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons.

North Korea has fired more than 40 ballistic and cruise missiles over more than 20 launch events this year, exploiting a divide in the U.N. Security Council where Moscow and Beijing have rejected U.S.-led proposals to impose tighter sanctions on Pyongyang over its intensified testing activity.

Nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang have stalled since early 2019 over disagreements in exchanging the release of crippling U.S.-led sanctions against the North and the North's denuclearization steps.

Los Angeles councilmen resist resignation in racism scandal

By BRIAN MELLEY and DON THOMPSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Two Los Angeles City Council members held out Thursday against overwhelming calls for them to resign after a recording surfaced of them making crude and racist remarks in a secret meeting over redistricting tactics.

Gil Cedillo and Kevin de Leon have issued no statements since Nury Martinez, who made remarks about a colleague's Black son along with crass comments about Armenians and Jews, stepped down as council president Monday before resigning her seat Wednesday.

However, acting council President Mitch O'Farrell said he had spoken to Cedillo and "I sense that he is making some progress toward that decision."

Cedillo lost his reelection bid this year and was already due to leave the council in December.

Cedillo and de Leon were under pressure after Martinez, who in 2019 became the first Latina to hold the office of council president, stepped down and resigned.

Martinez described herself on her website as "a glass-ceiling shattering leader who brings profound life experience as the proud daughter of working-class immigrants." She is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley.

Cedillo, de Leon and Martinez were part of a discussion last year with a powerful Latino labor leader,

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who has since resigned, centered on protecting Latino political power while redrawing council district boundaries. The once-a-decade redistricting process can pit one group against another to gain political advantage in elections.

Other council members weren't informed of the meeting, O'Farrell said.

In the recorded conversation, Martinez called council member Mike Bonin a "little bitch." She described the behavior of his Black son on a parade float when he was 2 as "parece changuito," or "like a monkey," the Los Angeles Times reported Sunday.

At another point in the hourlong recording, Martinez called Indigenous immigrants from the Mexican state of Oaxaca ugly, and made crass remarks about Jews and Armenians.

The revelation of the recordings this week sparked outrage and calls for the resignations of all three council members by their fellow Democrats, all the way up to President Joe Biden, who arrived in Los Angeles on Wednesday as part of a West Coast campaign visit.

In her resignation statement, Martinez didn't apologize for her comments, though in words directed at her daughter she said she had fallen short of expectations recently and added: "I vow to you that I will strive to be a better woman to make you proud."

The panel can only request Cedillo and de Leon to voluntarily step aside. It cannot expel members, only suspend them when criminal charges are pending. Members can be censured but that doesn't result in suspension or removal from office.

Meanwhile, the furor over the recording threw the City Council into turmoil. For two days in a row, rowdy demonstrators forced the panel to shut down meetings.

On Wednesday, a crowd of about 50 protesters drowned out the acting president by chanting "no meeting without resignation" and other slogans.

A minimum of 10 out of 15 members necessary for a quorum had assembled, but the meeting was adjourned when one left. None of the three embattled council members showed up.

"Who shut you down? We shut you down!" the raucous crowd cheered as the lights were being turned down.

Also Wednesday, California Attorney General Rob Bonta, another Democrat, said he will investigate Los Angeles' redistricting process, which could lead to civil liability or criminal charges, depending on what is found.

"It's clear an investigation is sorely needed to help restore confidence in the redistricting process for the people of LA," he said.

Jessica Levinson, a Loyola Law School professor who previously was a member of the Los Angeles City Ethics Commission, said she did not see evidence in the recording that would prompt criminal charges.

However, she said a probe could force redrawing council districts even though the current maps are being used to choose new council members next month.

"It is so rare to have audio where ... it gives the impression that they're explicitly drawing lines on the basis of race," Levinson said. "If in the end we determine these lines were illegally drawn, there needs to be a remedy for that, even though practically ... it's a disaster."

Los Angeles City Attorney Mike Feuer has called for creating an independent commission to draw redistricting maps.

Poll: Most in US say misinformation spurs extremism, hate

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

Americans from across the political spectrum say misinformation is increasing political extremism and hate crimes, according to a new poll that reflects broad and significant concerns about false and misleading claims ahead of next month's midterm elections.

About three-quarters of U.S. adults say misinformation is leading to more extreme political views and behaviors such as instances of violence based on race, religion or gender. That's according to the poll from the Pearson Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

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"We're at a point now where the misinformation is so bad you can trust very little of what you read in the media or social media," said 49-year-old Republican Brett Reffeitt of Indianapolis, who participated in the survey. "It's all about getting clicks, not the truth, and it's the extremes that get the attention."

The Pearson Institute/AP-NORC survey shows that regardless of political ideology, Americans agree misinformation is leaving a mark on the country.

Overall, 91% of adults say the spread of misinformation is a problem, with 74% calling it a major problem. Only 8% say misinformation isn't a problem at all.

Big majorities of both parties — 80% of Democrats and 70% of Republicans — say misinformation increases extreme political views, according to the survey. Similarly, 85% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans say misinformation increases hate crimes, including violence motivated by gender, religion or race.

Overall, 77% of respondents think misinformation increases hate crimes, while 73% say it increases extreme political views.

"This is not a sustainable course," said independent Rob Redding, 46, of New York City. Redding, who is Black, said he fears misinformation will spur more political polarization and violent hate crimes. "People are in such denial about how dangerous and divisive this situation is."

About half say they believe misinformation leads people to become more politically engaged.

Roughly 7 in 10 Americans say they are at least somewhat concerned that they have been exposed to misinformation, though less than half said they are that worried that they were responsible for spreading it.

That's consistent with previous polls that have found people are more likely to blame others than accept responsibility for the spread of misinformation.

Half of U.S. adults also believe misinformation reduces trust in government.

"Just because it's on the internet doesn't mean it's true," said 74-year-old Shirley Hayden, a Republican from Orange, Texas. "A lot of it is opinions and a lot of it is just troublemaking. I don't believe any of it anymore."

The poll finds that Americans who rate misinformation as a major problem are more likely to say it contributes to extreme political beliefs and distrust of government than those who do not. They're also more likely to try to reduce the spread of misinformation by running claims by multiple sources or fact-checking websites.

Overall, roughly three-quarters of adults say they have decided not to share something on social media at least some of the time because they didn't want to spread misinformation, including about half who do that most of the time. Similar percentages regularly check the sources of news they encounter and check other sources of information to ensure they're not encountering misinformation.

Only 28% of Americans consult fact-checking sites or tools "most of the time," though an additional 35% do some of the time. About a third say they do so hardly ever or never.

"My Facebook page is loaded with this stuff. I see it on TV. I see it everywhere," 63-year-old Democrat Charles Lopez from the Florida Keys said of the misinformation he encounters. "Nobody does the research to find out if anything is fake or not."

Whether it's lies about the 2020 election or the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, COVID-19 conspiracy theories or disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, online misinformation has been blamed for increased political polarization, distrust of institutions and even real-world violence.

The spread of misinformation in recent decades has coincided with the rise of social media and declines in traditional, often local journalism outlets.

The results of the Pearson Institute/AP-NORC poll didn't surprise Alex Mahadevan, director of MediaWise, a media literacy initiative launched by the Poynter Institute that works to equip individuals with defenses in the fight against misinformation.

"You have uncertainty, polarization, the decline of local news: it's a perfect storm that's created a flood of misinformation," Mahadevan said.

People can teach themselves how to spot misinformation and avoid falling for dubious claims, according to Helen Lee Bouygues, founder and president of the Paris-based Reboot Foundation, which researches and promotes critical thinking in the internet age.

First, rely on a variety of trusted, established sources for news and fact checks, Bouygues said. She also encouraged people to double-check claims that seem designed to play on emotions like anger or fear, and to think twice about reposting content that relies on loaded language, personal attacks or false comparisons.

"There are steps people can take — simple steps — to protect themselves," Bouygues said.

Lopez, the survey respondent from Florida, said he has lost friends after pushing back on misinformation they posted online and that new laws are needed to force tech companies to do more to address misinformation. Maybe that will happen, he said, if voters can pierce the fog of misinformation ahead of next month's election.

"You can always have hope," Lopez said. "We'll see what happens after this election. You may want to call me back then."

Georgia features Deep South's only competitive US House race

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

GEORGETOWN, Ga. (AP) — In an uphill fight against a 30-year incumbent, Republican congressional candidate Chris West was scratching for votes in Georgia's second-smallest county on a recent October evening.

West was telling voters in Georgetown, just across the Chattahoochee River from Alabama, that they should dump longtime Democrat Sanford Bishop if they're unhappy with inflation and gas prices. West said his own experience as a commercial developer would help improve the fortunes of Georgia's 2nd Congressional District, long one of the nation's poorest.

"Sanford has represented this district for 30 years now. And we have been in the top 10 poorest congressional districts for the last 30 years," West told supporters. "And out of 435 districts around the country, why should Georgia 2 have to be in the top 10? It shouldn't be."

West and Bishop are rarities in the Deep South: candidates for a congressional race that is even marginally competitive. Though Georgia has emerged as one of the nation's most politically consequential states for statewide contests, House races here are often an afterthought this year, a reflection of how the latest round of redistricting drained the U.S. of districts where both parties had a chance.

The 2nd District covers Georgia's southwestern corner, including Albany and parts of Macon, Columbus and Warner Robins, but also miles of peanut fields, pine forests and pecan groves sprawling across 30 counties.

Bishop, who is Black, has long styled himself as a moderate, courting the largely white farmers who drive the rural economy and supporting the district's military bases. He focuses more on legislative achievements and what his seniority helps him accomplish than on political red meat, rattling off an eight-minute list including COVID-19 aid, gun control and relief on medical costs when asked about his most recent achievements.

"You asked what we've done in the last two years and we've done a lot," Bishop said in an interview before a rally in Albany.

Bishop's 15 previous victories have rarely been close, although the Democrat squeaked to reelection by fewer than 5,000 votes in 2010's Republican wave. Last year, Georgia Republicans redrew the district to make it somewhat more favorable to their party, sparking fresh interest from GOP candidates.

The 2nd District's status is an outlier after a round of redistricting that reduced the number of competitive congressional seats nationwide. In Georgia, Republicans took two competitive districts in the northern Atlanta suburbs that Democrats had flipped in recent years and drew one safe Republican seat and one safe Democratic seat. That means that even if Bishop wins, Republicans are likely to hold a 9-5 edge in Georgia's congressional delegation, compared to an 8-6 edge now.

Like many Deep South districts, it's an outgrowth of the Voting Rights Act, which required lawmakers to create districts where Black voters had a chance of electing their preferred candidate, despite racially polarized voting. Many of those districts heavily favor Democrats, while adjoining districts are often heavily

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white Republican strongholds, reducing competitiveness. The U.S. Supreme Court is considering a case that would make it harder to create new electoral districts in which Black or Latino voters hold sway.

The 2nd District was never as heavily Black as some other districts, meaning Bishop has always had to pay attention to white constituents as well. The latest round of redistricting nudged the Black voting age population below 48%, but analysts say it still favors Democrats. For Republicans, winning will require almost all white voters to support West, who is white. He's been making campaign stops in Black areas trying to peel off traditional Democrats.

West, an Air Force veteran and lawyer with deep roots around Thomasville, won an upset GOP runoff victory against Jeremy Hunt, a Black military veteran and Yale University law student, by effectively arguing that Hunt was parachuting into the district from Washington.

Now West is betting that people feel the impact of higher prices more acutely than they appreciate the achievements of a Democratic-controlled Congress. He argues that if Bishop was ever a moderate, that's no longer true, pointing to factors including a National Rifle Association rating that has fallen from A to F over time.

The district is spotted with "Farmers for West" signs, as West argues that Bishop's longtime reputation as a friend of the farmer is misleading, saying that "the average farmer doesn't get any help from Sanford" and that it's time to "rotate the crop."

Some former Bishop supporters have been receptive to that message. Joey Collins, a Thomasville farmer with 1,650 acres of pecan trees and 2,000 acres of timberland, said he once gave Bishop \$1,000. But he says that with high diesel, fertilizer and herbicide prices, "I haven't made a dime since Joe Biden became president, not one dime." Now he's backing West.

"He was good for southwest Georgia for a while and the pecan growers, he tried to help us," Collins said of Bishop. "Now, he does whatever the Democratic Party tells him to do."

Bishop says he has been trying to help farmers get higher prices for their crops and reduce input costs. Others don't buy West's claims that farmers are abandoning Bishop in droves. Even Republicans acknowledge Bishop has helped them with some past issues. Freddie Powell Sims, a Democratic state senator from Dawson whose 13-county district is within Bishop's territory, said the incumbent has proved his worth.

"Congressman Bishop has the respect and the blessings of the larger farmers that are in southwest Georgia because he's done so much to answer their requests," Sims said. "When we had the hurricanes, the tornadoes, the floods, all of these things, Sanford Bishop was there. And he didn't have to be."

Then there are Bishop's ethics problems. Two years ago, Bishop was referred to the House Ethics Committee after an inquiry found Bishop may have improperly spent thousands in campaign money for personal country club memberships and may have improperly used congressional funds to pay for holiday parties in his district. Bishop has said he's already paid back some money, but hasn't said how much. Bishop has said his longtime campaign treasurer made mistakes while ill.

"Certainly as soon as I found out that we had some issues, I immediately pledged to cooperate to determine what irregularities might need addressing, because I certainly have never condoned and will not condone inappropriate conduct," Bishop said.

West said he expects more attacks on Bishop's ethics questions in the closing days of the campaign, but it's not clear the Republican will have enough money to spread that message widely. Bishop and Democratic groups have far outraised and outspent West and Republicans. Bishop could also benefit from efforts by Democrats including Sen. Raphael Warnock and gubernatorial challenger Stacey Abrams trying to maximize Black turnout in the region.

That leaves West to fall back on the same grassroots appeal that fueled his primary win.

"We are going to surprise a lot of people in Washington that do not recognize the people down in this district want new leadership," West said. "After 30 years in office, Sanford doesn't have any more excuses. It's time for a change."

Little sign of relief expected in September inflation data

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By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Any Americans hoping for relief from months of punishing inflation might not see much in Thursday's government report on price increases in September.

Lower gas prices will probably reduce overall consumer inflation for a third straight month. But measures of "core" inflation, which are closely watched because they exclude volatile food and energy costs, are expected to return to a four-decade peak.

Economists have estimated that the government's consumer price index jumped 8.1% in September from 12 months earlier, according to a survey by the data provider FactSet. That is a distressingly large gain, though below the 9.1% year-over-year peak that was reached in June.

Core prices are estimated to have risen 0.4% from August to September, slower than the previous month but still a much faster pace than was typical before the pandemic. Measured over the past 12 months, core prices are forecast to have surged 6.5%, up from 6.3% in August. That's far above the 2% inflation that the Federal Reserve has long set as its target rate.

Thursday's report will provide the final inflation figures before the Nov. 8 midterm elections after a campaign season in which spiking prices across the economy have fed widespread public anxiety, with many Republicans casting blame on President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats.

Inflation has escalated families' grocery bills, rents and utility costs, among many other expenses, inflicting hardships on households and deepening gloom about the economy despite strong job growth and historically low unemployment.

As the election nears, Americans are increasingly taking a dim view of their finances, according to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Roughly 46% of people now describe their personal financial situation as poor, up from 37% in March. That sizable drop contrasts with the mostly steady readings that had lasted through the pandemic.

The September inflation report, whatever it shows, isn't likely to change the Fed's plans to keep hiking rates aggressively in an effort to wrest inflation under control. The Fed has boosted its key short-term rate by 3 percentage points since March, the fastest pace of hikes since the early 1980s. Those increases are intended to raise borrowing costs for mortgages, auto loans and business loans and cool inflation by slowing the economy.

Minutes from the Fed's most recent meeting in late September showed that many policymakers have yet to see any progress in their fight against inflation. The officials projected that they would raise their benchmark rate by an additional 1.25 percentage points over their next two meetings in November and December. Doing so would put the Fed's key rate at its highest level in 14 years.

Along with lower gas prices, economists expect to see that the prices of used cars tumbled in September after small declines the previous two months. Wholesale used car prices have dropped for most of this year, though the declines have yet to show up in consumer inflation data. (Used vehicle prices had soared in 2021 after factory shutdowns and supply chain shortages reduced production.)

Large retailers, too, have started offering early discounts for the holiday shopping season, after having amassed excess stockpiles of clothes, furniture and other goods earlier this year. Those price cuts might have lowered inflation in September or will do so in the coming months.

Walmart has said it will offer steep discounts on such items as toys, home goods, electronics and beauty. Target began offering holiday deals earlier this month.

Yet prices for services — particularly rents and housing costs — are remaining persistently high and will likely take much longer to come down. Health care services, education and even veterinary services are still rising rapidly in price.

"Services price increases tend to be more persistent than increases in the prices of goods," Raphael Bostic, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, noted in remarks last week.

Rising rental costs are a tricky issue for the Fed. Real-time data from websites such as ApartmentList suggest that rents on new leases are starting to decline.

But the government's measure tracks all rent payments — not just those for new leases — and most of them don't change from month to month. Economists say it could be a year or longer before the declines

in new leases feed through to government data.

China's Xi gets chance to tighten hold on economy at meeting

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — President Xi Jinping, China's most influential figure in decades, gets a chance to install more allies who share his vision of an even more dominant role in the economy for the ruling Communist Party and tighter control over entrepreneurs at a party meeting that starts this weekend.

The only question, economists and political analysts say, is whether China's economic slump might force Xi to temper his enthusiasm for a state-run economy and include supporters of the markets and private enterprises that generate jobs and wealth.

The congress will name a new Standing Committee, China's inner circle of power, and other party leaders, not economic regulators. Those will be appointed by the ceremonial legislature, which meets in March. But the leadership lineup will highlight who is likely to succeed Premier Li Keqiang, the top economic official, and take other government posts.

Xi has called for a "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by reviving the party's "original mission" as economic and social leader. During his term, the emphasis has been on politics over economics and on reducing reliance on foreign technology and markets.

Xi is expected to try to break with tradition and award himself a third five-year term as party leader. A report he is due to deliver at the congress will set economic, trade and technology goals for at least the next five years.

Investors will look for signs of "a more private sector-led economy. But with President Xi in place, there won't be much change," said Lloyd Chan of Oxford Economics. "Any reforms will be carried out in a way that it will be state-led."

The party faces an avalanche of challenges: A tariff war with Washington, curbs on access to Western technology, a shrinking and aging workforce, the rising cost of Beijing's anti-COVID strategy and debt Chinese leaders worry is dangerously high.

Economic growth slid to 2.2% over a year earlier in the first six months of 2022, less than half the official target, sapped by a crackdown on debt in China's vast real estate industry and repeated shutdowns of major cities to fight virus outbreaks.

Loyalty to Xi is regarded as key to promotion. One potential candidate for premier, a post that usually goes to the No. 2 or 3 party leader, declared his allegiance by publishing a newspaper article in July that invoked Xi's name 48 times.

"Xi Jinping prefers to appoint party apparatchiks, cadres who are loyal to himself, rather than technocrats," said Willy Lam, who researches elite Chinese politics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "This is a big problem if we look at future financial and economic advisers to Xi."

Beijing opened its auto industry to foreign ownership and carried out other market-oriented reforms. But it has failed to follow through on dozens of other promised changes. Meanwhile, the party is pouring money into creating computer chip, aerospace and other industries.

Private sector success stories including Alibaba, the world's biggest e-commerce company, and Tencent, a giant in games and social media, are under pressure to align with party plans. They are diverting billions of dollars to chip development and other political goals.

Xi's government wants manufacturers to reduce reliance on global supply chains and use more domestic suppliers, even if that raises costs.

Under the 1950s propaganda slogan "common prosperity," Xi is pushing entrepreneurs to help narrow China's wealth gap by paying for rural job creation and other initiatives.

Li, the No. 2 leader, is due to step down as premier next year but at 67 is a year below party retirement age. It isn't clear whether he might stay on the Standing Committee and take a different government post.

Other regulators and policymakers, some foreign-educated and experienced in dealing with foreign markets and governments, are due to leave office over the coming year if retirement ages are enforced.

They include Vice Premier Liu He, a Harvard-trained reform advocate who is Xi's economic adviser and

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the chief envoy to trade war talks with Washington. Yi Gang, governor of the central bank and a former Indiana University professor, Finance Minister Liu Kun and bank regulator Guo Shuqing also are due to go.

When their successors are picked, the big question will be "whether Xi has unlimited decision-making authority over the economy and technology," Derek Scissors of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington said in an email.

"Is Xi forced by party elites to listen to someone?" Scissors said. "If it's a bunch of toadies, we get more paranoia paraded as policy."

Xi's decision to go abroad for last month's summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Central Asian leaders suggests he was confident he has a third term locked in and didn't need to stay home to make deals.

"Financial markets are hoping for some evidence of internal resistance to Xi" to change course on policy-making, Logan Wright and Agatha Kratz said in a report for Rhodium Group. If Xi strengthens this authority, that would suggest "elevation of the party's priorities above those of China's economic technocrats."

Possible candidates for premier include Wang Yang, who already is a Standing Committee member, according to political analysts. Others are Hu Chunhua and Han Zheng, both deputy premiers, a role that is seen as training for the top job.

Wang, a former party secretary of the southern manufacturing powerhouse province of Guangdong, and Han, who was party secretary of the business capital Shanghai for many years, are seen as politically close to Xi and might represent little change in economic direction.

Hu might represent a potential change. He is seen as politically closer to Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao.

Hu Chunhua, 59, lobbied for the job by citing Xi in every sentence of a July 27 article about farm policy in the main party newspaper.

That showed Hu is "very eager to get that position," said Lam. He said Hu has less economic experience than Li, the premier, "but at least he comes from a different faction" than Xi, which would add to diversity of views.

Potential dark horse candidates include party secretaries Li Qiang of Shanghai or Chen Min'er of the populous city of Chongqing in the southwest.

A potential "economic czar" to succeed Liu, the vice premier, is He Lifeng, chairman of the Cabinet planning agency, the National Development and Reform Commission. A friend of Xi, he is seen as a politician, not a technocrat.

A party statement in August reinforced the dominance of politics by calling for "party building." Last month, the party magazine Seeking Truth published a Xi speech that emphasized the party's need for "self-revolution" to fight corruption and other problems.

That suggests Xi will tighten party control, "further narrowing the space for liberal approaches to economic policy," Neil Thomas of Eurasia Group said in a report.

Trump angrily lashes out after his deposition is ordered

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump angrily lashed out Wednesday, calling the nation's legal system a "broken disgrace" after a judge ruled he must answer questions under oath next week in a defamation lawsuit lodged by a writer who says he raped her in the mid-1990s.

He also called the 2019 lawsuit by E. Jean Carroll, a longtime advice columnist for Elle magazine, "a hoax and a lie."

The outburst late in the day came hours after U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan in Manhattan rejected a request by his lawyers to delay a deposition scheduled for Oct. 19.

Kaplan is presiding over the case in which Carroll said Trump raped her in the dressing room of a Manhattan Bergdorf Goodman store in the mid-1990s. He called the lawsuit "a complete con job."

"I don't know this woman, have no idea who she is, other than it seems she got a picture of me many years ago, with her husband, shaking my hand on a reception line at a celebrity charity event," Trump said.

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"She completely made up a story that I met her at the doors of this crowded New York City Department Store and, within minutes, 'swooned' her. It is a Hoax and a lie, just like all the other Hoaxes that have been played on me for the past seven years," he said.

Then he grumbled: "Now all I have to do is go through years more of legal nonsense in order to clear my name of her and her lawyer's phony attacks on me. This can only happen to 'Trump!'"

Carroll is scheduled to be deposed on Friday.

Roberta Kaplan, Carroll's attorney, said she was pleased with the judge's ruling and looked forward to filing new claims next month "and moving forward to trial with all dispatch" after New York state passed the Adult Survivors Act, allowing her to sue for damages for the alleged rape without the statute of limitations blocking it.

After Trump's statement was released, a spokesperson for Kaplan's firm, Kaplan Hecker & Fink, said the "latest statement from Donald Trump obviously does not merit a response."

Trump's legal team has tried various legal tactics to delay the lawsuit and prevent him from being questioned by Carroll's attorneys. But Judge Kaplan wrote that it was time to move forward, especially given the "advanced age" of Carroll, 78, and Trump, 76, and perhaps other witnesses.

"The defendant should not be permitted to run the clock out on plaintiff's attempt to gain a remedy for what allegedly was a serious wrong," he wrote.

Carroll's lawsuit claims that Trump damaged her reputation in 2019 when he denied raping her. Trump's legal team has been trying to quash the lawsuit by arguing that the Republican was just doing his job as president when he denied the allegations, including when he dismissed his accuser as "not my type."

Trump doubled down on the comment in his statement Wednesday, saying: "And, while I am not supposed to say it, I will. This woman is not my type! She has no idea what day, what week, what month, what year, or what decade this so-called 'event' supposedly took place. The reason she doesn't know is because it never happened, and she doesn't want to get caught up with details or facts that can be proven wrong."

Whether Trump will remain the defendant in the original lawsuit is a key question because if Trump was acting within the scope of his duties as a federal employee, the U.S. government would become the defendant in the case.

The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said in a split decision last month that Trump was a federal employee when he commented on Carroll's claims. But it asked another court in Washington to decide whether Trump's public statements occurred during the scope of his employment.

Kaplan, the judge, said Trump has repeatedly tried to delay the collection of evidence in the lawsuit.

"Given his conduct so far in this case, Mr. Trump's position regarding the burdens of discovery is inexcusable," he wrote. "As this Court previously has observed, Mr. Trump has litigated this case since it began in 2019 with the effect and probably the purpose of delaying it."

The judge noted that the collection of evidence for the lawsuit to go to trial was virtually concluded, except for the depositions of Trump and Carroll.

"Mr. Trump has conducted extensive discovery of the plaintiff, yet produced virtually none himself," Kaplan said. "Completing these depositions — which already have been delayed for years — would impose no undue burden on Mr. Trump, let alone any irreparable injury."

The judge also said the deposition could be useful when Carroll's lawyer next month files the new lawsuit.

Whether the rape occurred is central to the defamation claims, as well as the anticipated new lawsuit, the judge said.

Los Angeles leader in racism scandal resigns Council seat

By BRIAN MELLEY and DON THOMPSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The former president of the Los Angeles City Council resigned from public office Wednesday, three days after a recording surfaced of her making racist remarks in a meeting that is now the subject of a state investigation.

Nury Martinez, the first Latina to hold the top post on the council, announced her decision in a press

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release following a groundswell of outrage and calls for the resignations of her and two other council members involved in the conversation recorded last year.

Martinez made racist remarks about the Black son of a white councilman and other crude comments.

Her resignation statement did not address those comments, though in words directed at her daughter she said she had fallen short of expectations recently and added: "I vow to you that I will strive to be a better woman to make you proud."

The announcement was made several hours after Attorney General Rob Bonta said he would investigate Los Angeles' redistricting process that the three council members discussed with a labor leader in which they schemed to protect Latino political strength in council districts.

Martinez had stepped down as president Monday while still holding onto her council seat. Her decision to give up her seat came as President Joe Biden was due to arrive in Los Angeles a day after he condemned the remarks and called on all three council members — Martinez, Kevin de Leon and Gil Cedillo — to resign.

Bonta, a Democrat like the three council members, said his investigation could lead to civil liability or criminal charges, depending on what is found.

"It's clear an investigation is sorely needed to help restore confidence in the redistricting process for the people of LA," he said.

Bonta spoke in Los Angeles while the council tried unsuccessfully to conduct business nearby amid the uproar that exposed City Hall's racial rivalries. Those involved in the leaked conversation were all Latinos, while Bonta is the first Filipino American to hold the top law enforcement job in the nation's most populous state.

The council reconvened Wednesday, possibly to censure the three members, but it was unable to do business because a crowd of about 50 protesters drowned out the acting president chanting slogans such as, "No meeting without resignation."

A minimum of 10 out of 15 members necessary for a quorum had assembled, but the meeting was adjourned when one left. None of the three embattled council members showed up.

"Who shut you down? We shut you down!" the raucous crowd cheered as the lights were being turned down.

Acting Council President Mitch O'Farrell said that with no sign of anger subsiding, he didn't think the council could resume its work until all three are gone, which he said is inevitable.

"For Los Angeles to heal, and for its City Council to govern, there must be accountability," he said in a statement. "I repeat my call on Councilmembers de Leon and Cedillo to also resign. There is no other way forward."

The council cannot expel members — it can only suspend a member when criminal charges are pending. A censure does not result in suspension or removal from office.

In the recorded conversation, Martinez called council member Mike Bonin a "little bitch." She described the behavior of his Black son on a parade float when he was 2 as "parece changuito," or "like a monkey," the Los Angeles Times reported Sunday.

At another point on the hourlong recording, Martinez called indigenous immigrants from the Mexican state of Oaxaca ugly, and made crass remarks about Jews and Armenians.

Martinez made history in 2019 when she became the first Latina elected to the council presidency and described herself as "a glass-ceiling shattering leader who brings profound life experience as the proud daughter of working-class immigrants" on her website. She is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley.

The discussion with a powerful Latino labor leader, who has since resigned, centered on protecting Latino political power while redrawing council district boundaries. The once-a-decade redistricting process can pit one group against another to gain political advantage in elections.

Jessica Levinson, a Loyola Law School professor who previously was a member of the Los Angeles City Ethics Commission, said she did not see evidence in the recordings that would prompt criminal charges, although Bonta left open that possibility.

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However, she said a probe could force redrawing council districts even though the current maps are being used to choose new council members next month.

"It is so rare to have audio where ... it gives the impression that they're explicitly drawing lines on the basis of race," Levinson said. "If in the end we determine these lines were illegally drawn, there needs to be a remedy for that, even though practically ... it's a disaster."

Los Angeles City Attorney Mike Feuer has called for creating an independent commission to draw re-districting maps.

"It should be clear to everyone by now that if you leave in the hands of elected officials the power to determine their own political districts, this is a recipe for conflict of interest and it is an invitation to back-room deals," Feuer said.

The Los Angeles Times reported that the recording was posted on the social media site Reddit by a now-suspended user. It is unclear who recorded the audio, who uploaded it to Reddit and whether anyone else was present at the meeting.

UN demands Russia reverse 'illegal' annexations in Ukraine

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. General Assembly voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to condemn Russia's "attempted illegal annexation" of four Ukrainian regions and demand its immediate reversal, a sign of strong global opposition to the seven-month war and Moscow's attempt to grab its neighbor's territory.

The vote in the 193-member world body was 143-5 with 35 abstentions. It was the strongest support from the General Assembly for Ukraine and against Russia of the four resolutions it has approved since Russian troops invaded Ukraine Feb. 24.

Ukraine's U.N. ambassador, Sergiy Kyslytsya, called the vote "amazing" and "a historic moment." U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said supporters were "holding our breaths" and called it "a monumental day." European Union Ambassador Olof Skoog called it "a great success" that sends "a resounding message to Russia that they are and remain isolated."

U.S. President Joe Biden said in a statement that the vote demonstrated the world "is more united and more determined than ever to hold Russia accountable for its violations." It is "a clear message" that "Russia cannot erase a sovereign state from the map" and it "cannot change borders by force," he said.

The Western-sponsored resolution was a response to Russia's announced annexation last month of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Moscow acted following Kremlin-orchestrated "referendums" that the Ukrainian government and the West have dismissed as sham votes conducted on occupied land amid warfare and displacement.

During two days of speeches at the assembly's resumed emergency special session on Ukraine speaker after speaker accused Russia of violating key principles of the United Nations Charter — respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all U.N. member nations.

There was intense lobbying by supporters of the EU-facilitated resolution ahead of Wednesday's vote.

U.S. envoy Thomas-Greenfield told the assembly before the vote that when the United Nations was established on the ashes of World War II it was built on an idea — "that never again would one country be allowed to take another's territory by force."

Afterward, she told reporters the vote means "that in the eyes of the world and the United Nations, Ukraine's borders remain the same."

"The resolution also sends an enormously important signal to Moscow and to everyone: It does not matter if you as a nation are big or small, rich or poor, old or new. If you are a U.N. member state, your borders are your own and are protected by international law," Thomas-Greenfield said. "They cannot be redrawn by anyone else by force."

A key issue for the resolution's Western backers was how many countries would support it, and the result went beyond their most optimistic expectations.

The General Assembly voted 141-5 with 35 abstentions March 2 to demand an immediate Russian cease-

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fire, withdrawal of all its troops and protection for all civilians. On March 24, it voted 140-5 with 38 abstentions on a resolution blaming Russia for Ukraine's humanitarian crisis and urging an immediate cease-fire and protection for millions of civilians and the homes, schools and hospitals critical to their survival.

But the assembly voted by a far smaller margin April 7 to suspend Russia from the U.N.'s Geneva-based Human Rights Council over allegations Russian soldiers in Ukraine engaged in rights violations that the United States and Ukraine have called war crimes. That vote was 93-24 with 58 abstentions.

A 2014 resolution affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity and declaring the referendum that led to Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula illegal was adopted by a vote of 100-11 with 58 abstentions.

Among the surprise supporters of Wednesday's resolution were the "yes" votes from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as Brazil.

Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, had appealed to countries to vote against the resolution, calling it "a politicized and openly provocative document" and denouncing its sponsors as "unscrupulous Western blackmailers." He expressed regret the vote was not by secret ballot, as Russia sought but the assembly rejected.

Nebenzia reiterated Russia's claims the referendums were valid, saying "the populations of these regions do not want to return to Ukraine."

The four countries that joined Russia in voting against the resolution were North Korea, Belarus, Syria and Nicaragua.

Ukraine's Kyslytsya expressed profound regret that the four countries made "the wrong choice against the U.N. Charter" and urged them to reconsider their commitment to the U.N.'s principles.

Among the 35 countries that abstained, 19 were from Africa, including South Africa. China and India, the world's two most populous countries, also abstained along with Pakistan and Cuba.

The more powerful Security Council, whose resolutions are legally binding, has been stymied on taking action on Ukraine because of Russia's veto power, which it used Sept. 29 to block condemnation of Russia's attempts to annex Ukrainian territory.

By contrast, the General Assembly, where there are no vetoes, has now approved four resolutions criticizing Russia over Ukraine. Its votes reflect world opinion but are not legally binding.

The resolution adopted Wednesday declares that Moscow's actions violate Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, are "inconsistent" with the principles of the U.N. Charter, and "have no validity under international law and do not form the basis for any alternation of the status of these regions of Ukraine."

It demands that Russia "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders."

And it supports "the de-escalation of the current situation and a peaceful resolution of the conflict through political dialogue, negotiation, mediation and other peaceful means" that respect Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and internationally recognized borders.

Many countries among the more than 70 speakers urged a negotiated end to the war. The EU's Skoog called the appeal for a peaceful solution "very important," but stressed it must be based on Ukraine's territorial integrity.

During Wednesday's debate there was strong support for the resolution.

Australian Ambassador Mitch Fifield called Russia's attempted annexation "illegal and a dangerous escalation" and urged all countries to oppose acts of aggression.

Ambassador Fergal Mythen of Ireland said voters in the "sham" referendums in the four regions "faced intimidation by the Russian military and Russia's illegitimately appointed authorities."

Cambodian Ambassador Sovann Ke didn't indicate how he would vote but said that "the forcible annexation of regions from a sovereign country is a flagrant violation of the U.N. Charter and international laws, which is not acceptable" and urged that internationally respected borders "be fully respected." In the voting, Cambodia supported the resolution.

South Korea's ambassador, Hwang Joonkook, gave unequivocal support "to the sovereignty, political independence and the territorial integrity of Ukraine." He said his country's "own painful experiences" after

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the 1950-53 Korean War "can testify that any attempt to divide a nation in any form or method is merely the beginning of lasting very serious troubles, rather than a solution."

On the other side of that divide, North Korean Ambassador Kim Song supported the "self-determination" of the people in the four regions annexed by Russia as a right protected in the U.N. Charter and said the results must be respected.

He accused the United States and Western countries of "brutally" violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya under "the pretext" of promoting international peace and security without ever having its actions called into question by the Security Council. He argued that U.S. interference in the internal affairs of countries is continuing in the 21st century.

Syrian Ambassador Bassam Sabbagh accused the General Assembly of "being manipulated flagrantly by some Western countries for their own geopolitical interests" and urged countries to oppose efforts "to isolate Russia and to employ double standards."

Alex Jones ordered to pay \$965 million for Sandy Hook lies

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

WATERBURY, Conn. (AP) — Jurors ordered conspiracy theorist Alex Jones on Wednesday to pay nearly \$1 billion to Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting victims' relatives and an FBI agent, who said he turned their loss and trauma into years of torment by promoting the lie that the rampage was a hoax.

The \$965 million verdict is the second big judgment against the Infowars host for spreading the myth that the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history never happened, and that the grieving families seen in news coverage were actors hired as part of a plot to take away people's guns.

The verdict came in a defamation lawsuit filed by some of the families of 26 people who were killed in the 2012 shooting, plus an FBI agent who was among the first responders. A Texas jury in August awarded nearly \$50 million to the parents of another slain child.

Robbie Parker, who lost his 6-year-old daughter, Emilie, said outside the Connecticut court that he was proud that "what we were able to accomplish was just to simply tell the truth."

"And it shouldn't be this hard, and it shouldn't be this scary," said Parker, who became an early target of conspiracy theorists after he spoke at a news conference the day after the shooting. The jury awarded him the most of any plaintiff: \$120 million.

Jones wasn't at court but reacted on his Infowars show.

As courtroom video showed the jury awards being read out, Jones said that he himself had never mentioned the plaintiffs' names.

"All made up. Hilarious," he said. "So this is what a show trial looks like. I mean, this is the left completely out of control."

Jones' lawyer, Norm Pattis, portrayed the trial as unfair and pledged to appeal.

"Today is a very, very, very dark day for freedom of speech," he said outside court.

The jury awarded various sums to the victims' relatives, who testified that they were threatened and harassed for years by people who believed the lies told on Jones' show. Strangers showed up at the families' homes to record them. People hurled abusive comments on social media.

Mark Barden testified that conspiracy theorists urinated on the grave of his 7-year-old son, Daniel, and threatened to dig up the coffin; Barden and his wife were together awarded about \$86 million. Now-retired FBI Agent William Aldenberg, awarded \$90 million, described the horror he saw at the school as he responded alongside other law enforcement, and his outrage at seeing online claims that he was an actor.

Erica Lafferty, the daughter of slain Sandy Hook principal Dawn Hochsprung, testified that people mailed rape threats to her house.

"I wish that after today, I can just be a daughter grieving my mother and stop worrying about the conspiracy theorists," Lafferty said outside court. But she predicted that Jones' "hate, lies and conspiracy theories will follow both me and my family through the rest of our days."

To plaintiff William Sherlach, the verdict "shows that the internet is not the wild, wild West, and that your

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actions have consequences.”

He had testified about seeing online posts that falsely posited that the shooting was a hoax; that his slain wife, school psychologist Mary Sherlach, never existed; that he was part of a financial cabal and somehow involved with the school shooter’s father; and more. He told jurors the shooting deniers’ vitriol made him worry for his family’s safety.

“Going forward — because, unfortunately, there will be other horrific events like this — people like Alex Jones will have to rethink what they say,” Sherlach said.

Testifying during the trial, Jones acknowledged he had been wrong about Sandy Hook. The shooting was real, he said. But in the courtroom and on his show, he was defiant.

He called the proceedings a “kangaroo court,” mocked the judge, called the plaintiffs’ lawyer an ambulance chaser and labeled the case an affront to free speech rights. He claimed it was a conspiracy by Democrats and the media to silence him and put him out of business.

“I’ve already said ‘I’m sorry’ hundreds of times, and I’m done saying I’m sorry,” he told jurors.

Twenty children and six adults died in the shooting on Dec. 14, 2012; relatives of five children and three educators sued in Connecticut. The trial was held at a courthouse in Waterbury, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) from Newtown, where the attack took place.

The lawsuit accused Jones and Infowars’ parent company, Free Speech Systems, of using the mass killing to build his audience and make millions of dollars. Experts testified that Jones’ audience swelled, as did his revenue from product sales, when he made Sandy Hook a topic on the show.

In both the Texas and Connecticut lawsuits, judges found the company liable for damages by default after Jones failed to cooperate with court rules on sharing evidence, including failing to turn over records that might have showed whether Infowars had profited from knowingly spreading misinformation about mass killings.

Because he was already found liable, Jones was barred from mentioning free speech rights and other topics during his testimony.

Jones now faces a third trial, in Texas, in a lawsuit filed by the parents of another child killed in the shooting.

It is unclear how much of the verdicts Jones can afford to pay. During the trial in Texas, he testified he couldn’t afford any judgment over \$2 million, and his lawyers plan to appeal and try to reduce the damages there. Free Speech Systems has filed for bankruptcy protection.

But an economist testified in the Texas proceeding that Jones and his company were worth as much as \$270 million.

A lawyer for the families in the Connecticut case, Josh Koskoff, said that “if this verdict shuts down Alex Jones, good.”

“He’s been walking in the shadow of death to try to profit on the backs of people who have just been devastated,” Koskoff said. “That is not a business model that should be sustainable in the United States.”

US will take in some Venezuelans, expel others to Mexico

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Biden administration agreed to accept up to 24,000 Venezuelan migrants at U.S. airports, similar to how Ukrainians have been admitted since Russia’s invasion, while Mexico has agreed to take back Venezuelans who come to the U.S. illegally over land, the U.S. and Mexico said Wednesday.

Effective immediately, Venezuelans who walk or swim across the border will be immediately returned to Mexico under a pandemic rule known as Title 42 authority, which suspends rights to seek asylum under U.S. and international law on grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Any Venezuelan who illegally enters Mexico or Panama after Wednesday will also be ineligible to come to the U.S. under the offer.

The U.S. offer of parole for up to 24,000 Venezuelans is modeled on a similar program for Ukrainians who fled Russia’s invasion and will hinge on Mexico “keeping in place its independent but parallel effort”

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to take back Venezuelans who come illegally, the Department of Homeland Security said.

The moves are a response to a dramatic increase in migration from Venezuela, which leapfrogged over Guatemala and Honduras in August to become the second largest nationality arriving at the U.S. border after Mexico.

"These actions make clear that there is a lawful and orderly way for Venezuelans to enter the United States, and lawful entry is the only way," said Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. "Those who attempt to cross the southern border of the United States illegally will be returned to Mexico and will be ineligible for this process in the future. Those who follow the lawful process will have the opportunity to travel safely to the United States and become eligible to work here."

Mexico's Foreign Affairs Secretary said in a statement that "those who seek to enter the United States will be able to do so in a more orderly, safe, regular and humane manner. The program discourages undocumented crossings that put migrants' safety at risk."

In a related announcement, Homeland Security said it will make available nearly 65,000 temporary work visas for lower-skilled industries, roughly double the current annual allotment. At least 20,000 of those temporary visas will be reserved for Haiti and northern Central American countries.

Until now, Mexico has agreed to accept migrants expelled under Title 42 only if they are from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, in addition to Mexico, resulting in highly uneven enforcement. The U.S. struggles to expel other nationalities due to costs, strained diplomatic relations and other considerations.

Poor relations with the Venezuelan government have made it nearly impossible to apply Title 42. The pandemic rule has been used 2.3 million times since March 2020 but applied only 2,453 times on Venezuelans.

In August, Venezuelans were stopped 25,349 times, up 43% from 17,652 in July and four times the 6,301 encounters in August 2021, signaling a remarkably sudden demographic shift.

The announcement amounts to a potentially major expansion of Title 42 even though the administration recently sought to end it. Senior officials told reporters they are bound by a federal judge's decision in May to keep Title 42 in place.

Venezuelans who successfully apply online will come to the United States through an airport, similar to an effort that began in April to admit up to 100,000 Ukrainians fleeing war for stays of up to two years. The U.S. has admitted tens of thousands of Ukrainians since then, including including nearly 17,000 in August.

Venezuelans, like Ukrainians, must have a financial sponsor in the United States.

They also must figure out how to reach the U.S. There are currently no flights allowed from Venezuela due to U.S. concerns about the safety of Venezuela's aviation industry. The restriction applies to charter and commercial flights.

Venezuelans do not have to be in Venezuela to be eligible and may come from other countries, administration officials said.

It also remains to be seen if Mexico has limits to how many Venezuelans it will accept from the United States. Mexico said in its statement that it will "temporarily allow some Venezuelan citizens" to be returned. The 24,000 slots that the U.S. is offering is less than the number of Venezuelans that crossed the border illegally from Mexico in August alone.

An estimated 6.8 million Venezuelans have fled their country since the economy tanked in 2014, mostly to Latin America and Caribbean countries. But the U.S. economy's relative strength since the COVID-19 pandemic has caused Venezuelan migrants to look north. The Biden administration's inability to apply Title 42 has provided more incentive.

Mexico, under pressure from the U.S. administration, introduced restrictions on air travel to limit Venezuelan migration to the United States in January, but many then shifted to a dangerous route over land that includes Panama's notorious Darien Gap.

The surge in Venezuelan migration has emerged as a major challenge to authorities in the U.S., Mexico and Central America and a test of a hemispheric agreement reached in June in Los Angeles for countries that host migrants to confront issues together.

NBC reporter's comment about Fetterman draws criticism

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — An NBC News correspondent who interviewed Pennsylvania Senate candidate John Fetterman says an on-air remark she made about him having difficulty following part of their conversation should not be seen as a commentary on his fitness for office after he suffered a stroke.

But reporter Dasha Burns' comment that Fetterman appeared to have trouble understanding small talk prior to their interview has attracted attention — and Republicans have retweeted it as they seek an advantage in the closely followed Senate race between Fetterman and Republican Mehmet Oz.

Fetterman, a Democrat, suffered a stroke on May 13, and his health has emerged as a major issue in the campaign.

Burns' Friday interview with Fetterman, which aired Tuesday, was his first on-camera interview since his stroke. He used a closed-captioning device that printed text of Burns' questions on a computer screen in front of him.

Fetterman appeared to have little trouble answering the questions after he read them, although NBC showed him fumbling for the word "empathetic." Burns said that when the captioning device was off, "it wasn't clear he was understanding our conversation."

"This is just nonsense," business reporter and podcaster Kara Swisher, who had a stroke herself in 2011, said on Twitter. "Maybe this reporter is just bad at small talk."

Swisher recently conducted an interview with Fetterman for her podcast and said, "I was really quite impressed with how well he's doing. Everyone can judge for themselves." Swisher has called attacks on Fetterman because of his health "appalling."

A New York magazine reporter, Rebecca Traister, who interviewed the candidate for a cover story titled "The Vulnerability of John Fetterman," tweeted that his "comprehension is not at all impaired. He understands everything. It's just that he reads it and responds in real time ... It's a hearing/auditory challenge."

Burns said she understands that different reporters had different experiences with Fetterman.

"Our reporting did not and should not comment on fitness for office," Burns tweeted on Wednesday. "This is for voters to decide. What we push for as reporters is transparency. It's our job."

Stories about the interview aired on "NBC Nightly News" and the "Today" show.

Fetterman, 53, has been silent about releasing medical records or allowing reporters to question his doctors. He's been receiving speech therapy and released a letter in June from his cardiologist, who said he will be fine and able to serve in the Senate if he eats healthy foods, takes prescribed medication and exercises.

Problems with understanding and using language are common in recovering stroke victims, said Kevin Sheth, director of the Yale University Center for Brain and Mind Health. Some completely recover, some have continued impairments, he said.

"There is an arc to the trajectory of recovery that varies from person to person," Sheth said.

But he cautioned that, without an examination, people should not make judgments about Fetterman's condition based on his use of a language-assistance device.

Burns' statement about Fetterman has already been tweeted by political opponents, including the National Republican Senatorial Committee and the Republican National Committee.

The conservative website Townhall.com tweeted Burns' quote, without making clear she had been referring to small talk and not the interview itself.

Doug Andres, press secretary for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, tweeted that it was weird to see liberals attack a reporter for doing her job.

"It's almost like that whole thing about respecting and trusting the media is only true when it's convenient for them," he wrote.

Swisher said in her podcast that her mother, a Pennsylvania resident, told her she didn't think Fetterman should be in the U.S. Senate after suffering a stroke — even though her own daughter had recovered from one.

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Swisher said producers of the podcast refrained from cleaning up Fetterman's interview — such as removing extraneous phrases like "um" or "you know" — so listeners could get an unvarnished view of how Fetterman responded to questions.

In the podcast, Fetterman had little trouble with the word "empathy."

"Listen to the interview," Swisher tweeted this week. "Even my rabidly GOP mother had to admit she was wrong."

Roughing-the-passer calls frustrating defenders around NFL

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

Defensive players around the NFL are frustrated about roughing-the-passer penalties, questioning what constitutes a legal hit and wondering how far referees will go to protect quarterbacks.

Two disputed calls in Week 5 — one involving Tom Brady — sparked outrage among players, coaches and fans, prompting many to ask for change. The league plans to discuss roughing calls, but no changes are imminent.

"They make it really hard for a defensive player," Los Angeles Rams linebacker Bobby Wagner said Wednesday. "There's certain things you can't do in mid-air. I've seen some superheroes do it, but this is not the comics."

New Orleans Saints defensive end Cam Jordan joked about a solution.

"I'll bring a blanket with me ... and I'll be able to place it before I put him on the ground ever so gently to caress and sing him a lullaby," Jordan said. "I don't know. We'll have to deal with it just like we've dealt with it the last couple years."

The outcry began when Atlanta's Grady Jarrett was flagged for slinging Brady to the ground during Tampa Bay's 21-15 win Sunday. The more egregious call came Monday night when Kansas City's Chris Jones stripped Raiders quarterback Derek Carr from behind and landed on him while also coming up with the ball. Replays showed it was clearly loose and that Jones cleanly recovered, but referee Carl Cheffers threw a flag for roughing the passer.

"I think it's absolutely insane," Jacksonville Jaguars linebacker Josh Allen said. "First of all, with the Chris Jones one. It was strip-sack, the ball was out, so it was a loose ball before he even took it to the ground. I think that was a stupid call. I don't know what they're protecting on that one. Landing on top of him? It's a loose ball. That one, I can't explain that one."

Jones suggested making roughing-the-passer penalties subject to video review. That decision must go through the league's Competition Committee — comprised of six team owners/executives and four head coaches. Teams can also propose rule changes to be voted on by owners, which require 24 votes to pass.

Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay told The Associated Press on Wednesday he would support replay for these penalties.

"I think that's a wise way to go because there's too much inequity with what's able to be challenged and reviewed and what's not," Irsay said. "You challenge that call in Kansas City, you win every time. It's not even close. So I think that's the way to go. Nothing ever makes it perfect. It's a fast game, and there's emphasis put on safety now, as it should be. But you can't go overboard and ruin the game because the game is special."

Despite the grievances, roughing-the-passer penalties are down 45% from this point last year. Through Week 5 in 2021, 51 were called. Only 28 have been called this season, according to league stats.

A person with direct knowledge of the matter told the AP the league isn't planning to make any rule changes. The topic will be discussed when NFL owners meet in New York next week, but the league doesn't want to be reactionary because of a few blown calls. The league experimented with reviewing pass interference in 2019 and ended it after one season.

Quarterbacks aren't complaining, of course.

"Keep protecting me as much as possible," Cleveland Browns QB Jacoby Brissett said. "As many times I can get one, I'll take one, so I'm not going to complain about that."

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Chiefs QB Patrick Mahomes saw the call go against his team, but he still sees both sides.

"It's something where they're trying to protect the quarterbacks," Mahomes said. "They're trying to find the right medium of protecting us, but at the same time letting us play football. This past week was a small window of bad roughing-the-passer penalties, but in the grand scheme, I think they've done a good job and they're going to get better at it."

Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen pointed out that reviewing roughing calls opens the door to other penalties.

"There's a lot of variables, I think, that go into it," Allen said. "There's a lot of other things that are just so arbitrarily called, personal fouls, unnecessary roughness, the unsportsmanlike conducts. You can talk about holding, too. I mean, there's going to be some that are missed and some that are called that aren't it or they missed one here or there. And there's just a lot of variables. These refs are doing the best that they can given the rules. ... I think you just got to let them play sometimes. It's football."

Football is a violent sport. Quarterbacks are the highest-paid players and the face of the franchise for many teams.

The NFL rulebook allows referees to err on the side of caution to protect QBs. That'll never change, no matter the complaints.

Lawsuit: Utah firm and lawmaker helped Mormons hide abuse

By MICHAEL REZENDES and JASON DEAREN Associated Press

Three children who were sexually abused by their father are accusing a Utah state legislator and a prominent Salt Lake City law firm of conspiring with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to cover up the abuse, allowing it to go on for years.

In a court filing in Cochise County, Arizona, made public Wednesday, the children of the late Paul Adams asked a judge for permission to add Republican state Rep. Merrill F. Nelson and law firm Kirton McConkie as defendants in their lawsuit against the church, widely known as the Mormon church.

The suit accuses the Mormon church of failing to notify police or child welfare officials that Adams was abusing his older daughter.

In 2010, Adams confessed to his bishop, John Herrod, that he had sexually abused his daughter, according to legal records. Herrod reported the abuse to a church "abuse help line" and was advised not to report it to police or child welfare officials. The abuse was kept secret, and Adams continued raping his older daughter and her younger sister for several years. Adams was later charged by federal officials with posting videos of the abuse on the Internet.

Herrod's decision not to report came after speaking with Nelson, according to church records included as evidence in the case. Nelson was a shareholder at Kirton McConkie, which has more than 160 attorneys, according to its website. Nelson was one of several lawyers at the firm who routinely fielded calls made by bishops to the help line.

In their legal filing, the Adams children -- two daughters and a son -- say new evidence from the church "has revealed an ever-increasing group who knew about criminal misconduct in the Adams family but never reported it to the police."

For instance, Kirton McConkie attorney Peter Schofield was also consulted in the Adams case, according to new pretrial testimony that was reviewed by The Associated Press. Like Nelson, Schofield has been associated with the help line for many years, according to legal documents, and is currently one of the lawyers defending the church in the Adamses' suit.

Lawyers for the three Adams children said they had no additional comment on their latest legal filing. A spokesman for the church declined to comment.

Nelson, who recently announced his retirement from the Legislature, did not immediately return a message seeking comment from the AP. He has defended the church's use of the help line in the Adams case. During an AP interview in September, Nelson said, "it seems to me like it did operate as intended." The veteran legislator's remarks came before it was reported that Nelson had fielded the call from Herrod

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about the abuse.

Kirton McConkie, in an emailed statement, said it disagreed with the allegations and characterizations in the court filing. "As a former help line attorney has publicly attested, our team members are dedicated to rescuing children, assisting victims, and helping others comply with the law," the statement said. Schofield had no immediate comment.

In a recorded interview with Department of Homeland Security agents, Herrod said he called the help line and was told that Arizona law barred him from reporting Adams' abuse, leaving him with the impression he could be sued if he did. But Arizona's child-sex-abuse reporting law provides blanket civil and criminal immunity to anyone reporting information about child sex abuse to civil authorities.

In August, the AP reported that Adams told Herrod he sexually abused his older daughter, identified as MJ, in 2010. Church lawyers have said that Herrod, and later another bishop, Robert "Kim" Mauzy, legally withheld information about MJ's abuse from law enforcement under the state's "clergy-penitent privilege."

Although Arizona law requires clergy and other professionals to report child sex abuse and neglect, it permits clergy to withhold the information if it is obtained during a spiritual confession. Arizona is one of 33 states that maintain the clergy-penitent privilege loophole, which exempts clergy of all denominations from the requirement to report child abuse if they learn about the crime in a confessional setting.

The AP's investigation in August revealed a system, centered on the help line, for screening all accusations of child sex abuse within the church before reporting the information to civil authorities.

This included a policy of destroying all records of calls to the help line at the end of each day, according to the AP's findings. Meanwhile, all calls referring to serious instances of abuse, including those involving bishops or abuse on church property, are immediately referred to lawyers with Kirton McConkie, which insists the calls are confidential and out of reach of law enforcement under the attorney-client privilege.

In their court filing, lawyers for the three Adams children argue that the church requirement that bishops call the help line before notifying law enforcement regarding child sexual abuse reports runs counter to Arizona law, which requires clergy and other professions to "immediately report" any information about child sex abuse to police or child welfare officials.

William Maledon, a lawyer representing the church in the Arizona suit, argues that the word "immediately" in the law is open to interpretation. "Who knows what 'immediately' means in that context?" he asked during a July AP interview. "You can make the argument that it means as soon as you determine that you have an obligation to report. That's the way I would interpret it, and I think the way any good lawyer would interpret it."

In addition to Nelson and Kirton McConkie, lawyers for the Adams children are seeking permission to add as additional co-conspirators Paul Adams' then-wife, Leizza Adams, and "LDS Family Services," a separate corporation affiliated with the church. In sworn legal statements, church officials have said calls to the help line are answered by social workers with LDS Family Services. Under Utah's child sex abuse reporting law, social workers are required to report information about actual or suspected child sex abuse to civil authorities, according to the new filing.

Church lawyers say that in the Adams case, all calls to the help line that were made by Herrod and Mauzy were taken by Kirton McConkie attorneys. "All of those were with attorneys or para-professionals," Maledon said in the July interview. "None of them in this case were with anyone other than an attorney or attorney staff."

Paul Adams died by suicide while in custody in 2017, after being arrested by Homeland Security agents. Leizza Adams served more than two years in state prison on child sex abuse charges. Three of their six children were taken in by members of Leizza Adams' extended family. The remaining three were adopted by Arizona families and have filed suit against the church.

Oath Keepers jury hears about massive weapon cache on Jan. 6

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A member of the Oath Keepers who traveled to Washington before the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol testified Wednesday about a massive cache of weapons the far-right extremist

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group stashed in a Virginia hotel room.

Taking the stand in the seditious conspiracy case against Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes and four associates, Terry Cummings showed jurors an AR-15 firearm and an orange box for ammunition that he contributed to the so-called quick reaction force the Oath Keepers had staged at the hotel outside of Washington in case they needed weapons.

"I had not seen that many weapons in one location since I was in the military," said Cummings, a veteran who joined the Oath Keepers in Florida in 2020.

Prosecutors have said teams of Oath Keepers guarded the arsenal of firearms and were prepared to rush them into the hands of extremists in the capital if needed.

The alleged teams and the cache of weapons are a central piece of the Department of Justice's case against Rhodes and four associates charged with seditious conspiracy in the Jan. 6 attack. Members of the Oath Keepers stashed the firearms just outside Washington district limits, given the capitol's tougher gun laws.

Authorities have alleged the teams and the stockpile of arms were designed to get weapons into Oath Keepers' hands quickly if they were needed to support a plot to stop the transfer of power from Republican Donald Trump to Democrat Joe Biden.

Cummings' testimony came in the second week of the trial that is expected to last several weeks. The others on trial are Thomas Caldwell of Berryville, Virginia; Kenneth Harrelson of Titusville, Florida; Jessica Watkins of Woodstock, Ohio; and Kelly Meggs of Dunnellon, Florida.

Defense lawyers have not denied the existence of the quick reaction teams but noted that they were never deployed on Jan. 6. They have accused prosecutors of falsely portraying them as an invasion force.

Defense lawyers have said the Oath Keepers often set up quick reaction forces for events, but insist they were defensive forces only to be used to protect against violence from antifa activists or in the event Trump invoked the Insurrection Act. They are not facing any gun charges for bringing the weapons to Virginia.

Rhodes' lawyers have said they will argue that cannot find him guilty of seditious conspiracy because all the actions he took before Jan. 6 were in preparation for orders he anticipated from Trump under the Insurrection Act, which gives presidents wide discretion to decide when military force is necessary.

Cummings told jurors that he traveled to Washington on Jan. 6 with other Oath Keepers to be part of a VIP security detail for Trump's rally at the Ellipse. He said he saw it as an opportunity to "express my First Amendment rights" and see a sitting president speak, which he had never done.

Cummings said his understanding was the quick reaction forces "would potentially be used not as an offensive situation, but more as a show of force."

Cummings said he was part of a group that acted as a security team for a VIP at Trump's rally before the riot. Cummings and other Oath Keepers left before Trump's speech was finished and went toward the Capitol.

He recalled Meggs talked about entering the Capitol – something Cummings didn't think was a good idea. He then split off to find a bathroom, and when he returned the group was gone. The group entered the Capitol while he was away, he said. Up to an hour later, Cummings rejoined fellow Oath Keepers from Florida, and eventually Rhodes appeared as well.

Cummings said he did not hear any talk about plans to storm or attack the Capitol, though he also said he wasn't in a position of leadership. He has not faced criminal charges, was subpoenaed to testify for the government and acknowledged on the stand that he has contributed to the legal defense fund of some of the defendants.

Authorities have said that Meggs and the Florida Oath Keepers on Jan. 5 brought gun boxes, rifle cases and suitcases filled with ammunition to the Virginia hotel that served as the home for the quick reaction force. Another team from Arizona brought weapons, ammunition, and supplies to last 30 days, according to court papers. A team from North Carolina had rifles in a vehicle parked in the hotel lot, prosecutors have said.

Prosecutors have described surveillance footage that they say shows Oath Keepers rolling bags, large

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bins and what appears to be at least one rifle case into the hotel.

Over several days in early January, Rhodes spent \$15,500 on guns, including an AR-platform rifle, magazines, mounts, sights and other equipment, prosecutors have said. Caldwell, in one message, suggested getting a boat to ferry "heavy weapons" across the Potomac River into the Oath Keepers' "waiting arms."

A former Oath Keeper from North Carolina last week described setting up a quick reaction force for the "Million MAGA March" in Washington on Nov. 14, 2020, in case Trump invoked the Insurrection Act. Thousands of Trump supporters that day gathered at Freedom Plaza along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington to rally behind Trump's false election claims.

The former Oath Keeper, John Zimmerman, told jurors that the Oath Keepers stashed at least a dozen rifles and several handguns in his van parked at Arlington National Cemetery to serve as the quick reaction force on that occasion. He said they never took the guns into Washington.

EXPLAINER: What's next in the Parkland school shooter trial?

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — The jurors who will decide whether Florida school shooter Nikolas Cruz is sentenced to death or life without parole concluded their first day of deliberations Wednesday as the three-month trial nears its conclusion.

Cruz, 24, pleaded guilty last year to the murders of 14 students and three staff members at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Feb. 14, 2018. The trial has only been to determine his sentence.

Cruz's massacre is the deadliest mass shooting that has ever gone to trial in the U.S. Nine other people in the U.S. who fatally shot at least 17 people died during or immediately after their attacks by suicide or police gunfire. The suspect in the 2019 massacre of 23 at an El Paso, Texas, Walmart is awaiting trial.

The jurors are being sequestered during their deliberations, which could take hours or days — no one knows. They have been told to pack for at least two nights.

They deliberated for about six hours Wednesday, including asking to have read back to them the prosecution's cross-examination of a defense psychologist who says Cruz suffers from fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. They also asked late Wednesday to examine Cruz's gun, and that will be allowed Thursday.

Here is a look at the case, how the 12-person jury will come to a decision and what will happen after that.

WHAT DID CRUZ DO?

Cruz, by his own admission, began thinking about committing a school shooting while in middle school, about five years before he carried it out. He purchased his AR-15-style semi-automatic rifle almost exactly a year before the shooting and his planning became serious about seven months in advance. He researched previous mass shooters, saying he tried to learn from their experience. He bought ammunition, a vest to carry it and a bag to hide it. He picked Valentine's Day to make sure it would never be celebrated at the school again.

He took an Uber to the school, arriving about 20 minutes before dismissal. He went inside a three-story classroom building, shooting down the halls and into classrooms for about seven minutes. He returned to some wounded to kill them with a second volley. He then tried to shoot at fleeing students from a third-floor window, but the thick hurricane glass thwarted him. He put down his gun and fled, but was captured about an hour later.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE TRIAL?

Lead prosecutor Mike Satz kept his case simple. He played security videos of the shooting and showed gruesome crime scene and autopsy photos. Teachers and students testified about watching others die. He took the jury to the fenced-off building, which remains blood-stained and bullet-pocked. Parents and spouses gave tearful and angry statements.

Cruz's lead attorney Melisa McNeill and her team never questioned the horror he inflicted, but focused on their belief that his birth mother's heavy drinking during pregnancy left him with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Their experts said his bizarre, troubling and sometimes violent behavior starting at age 2 was misdiagnosed as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, meaning he never got the proper treatment. That

left his widowed adoptive mother overwhelmed, they said.

WHAT'S REQUIRED FOR CRUZ TO GET A DEATH SENTENCE?

The jurors will be voting 17 times — once for each victim. For the jurors to recommend a death sentence for a specific victim, they first must unanimously agree that the prosecution proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the killing involved at least one aggravating circumstance as proscribed under Florida law.

This part should not be difficult — the listed aggravating circumstances include knowingly creating a great risk of death to numerous people, committing murders that were “especially heinous, atrocious, or cruel” or committed in a “cold, calculated, and premeditated manner.” They then must unanimously agree that the aggravating factors warrant consideration of the death penalty.

They then must determine whether the aggravating circumstances “outweigh” the mitigating factors that the defense argued such as his birth mother’s drinking, his adoptive mother’s alleged failure to get him proper psychiatric care and his admission of guilt.

If they do, the jurors can then recommend a death sentence — but that’s not required. A juror can ignore the weighing exercise and vote for life out of mercy for Cruz.

A death sentence recommendation requires a unanimous vote on at least one victim. If one or more jurors vote for life on all victims, that will be his sentence.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE JURY RECOMMENDS A DEATH SENTENCE?

Circuit Judge Elizabeth Scherer will schedule a sentencing hearing, likely months from now. Cruz’s attorneys will have an opportunity to persuade her to override the jury and impose a life sentence, but that rarely succeeds. If sentenced to death, he will be sent to Florida’s Death Row while his case goes through appeals. It will be years before he is executed, assuming the death sentence isn’t overturned and a retrial required.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE JURY IMPOSES A LIFE SENTENCE?

If the jury cannot unanimously agree that Cruz should be executed for at least one victim, he will be sentenced to life without parole — Scherer cannot overrule the jury. She could sentence him immediately or schedule a future hearing.

After he is sentenced, the Florida Department of Corrections would assign him to a maximum security prison where he would be part of the general population. McNeill, in her closing argument, alluded that could be an exceedingly dangerous place for someone like Cruz.

EXPLAINER: Power cuts raise risk at Ukraine nuclear plant

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — A Ukrainian nuclear power plant that has been surrounded by Russian forces lost power Wednesday morning when a Russian missile damaged a distant electrical substation, increasing the risk of radiation disaster, according to the plant’s operator.

The power to Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant was restored about eight hours later, the International Atomic Energy Agency said. But experts say the outage — the second one in five days — shows just how precarious the situation at Europe’s largest nuclear plant is. They say repeated power outages over short periods of time are only making the problem worse.

Here’s a look at the risks:

DISASTER DANGER

Fears of a nuclear catastrophe have been at the forefront since Russian troops occupied the plant during the early days of the war. Continued fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces — as well as the tense supply situation at the plant — have raised the specter of a disaster.

Ukrainian authorities decided several weeks ago to power down the last reactor to reduce the risk of a catastrophe like the one at Chernobyl in 1986, where a reactor exploded and blew deadly radiation across a large vast area.

But the reactor core and used nuclear fuel must still be cooled for lengthy periods to prevent them overheating and triggering dangerous meltdowns like the ones that occurred in 2011 when a tsunami hit

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the Fukushima plant in Japan.

IODINE SUPPLIES

Some European countries are trying to prepare for the worst and started stockpiling iodine tablets to help protect their populations from possible radioactive fallout.

In others, like Germany, authorities have calculated there is a low risk that radiation levels harmful to human health would reach their territory.

In the event of a disaster, the biggest risk outside Ukraine could be to Russia, "depending on which way the wind blows," said Paul Dorfman, a nuclear expert at the University of Sussex in England.

"The main deposit is likely to be in Ukraine and or Russia, but there could be significant radiation pollution in Central Europe, which is why countries around Ukraine are now thinking very seriously about issuing stable potassium iodide tablets," he said.

LIMITED POWER SUPPLY

The Zaporizhzhia plant has been receiving external power to ensure the important task of cooling the reactor and spent nuclear fuel can continue, but the connections are at constant risk of disruption due to the conflict.

As power lines and substations have been damaged in fighting, Ukraine's nuclear operator Energoatom has been forced to repeatedly rely on diesel generators. These generators, which have enough fuel for at least 10 days, have kicked into action when external power has failed — but experts say their repeated use over a short period of time increases the risk of a disaster.

"There are several redundancies and the facilities are now repeatedly on the last one," said Mareike Rueffer, head of the nuclear safety department at Germany's Office for the Safety of Nuclear Waste Management.

"Having to repeatedly fall back on diesel generators also limits the room for maneuver," she added. "In that moment there's no further backup and this is a high-risk technology."

The diesel generators kicked in immediately Wednesday when electricity from the missile-damaged substation was cut. External power from the transmission line was restored hours later.

ONGOING RISK

Shutting down the plant's last reactor several weeks ago significantly reduced the risk of a radiation disaster by gradually increasing the time it would take for a meltdown to occur. But if cooling fails due to a complete loss of power, meltdowns would still happen eventually, said Rueffer.

Dorfman said that in the worst case, Ukraine could see a situation similar to what happened in Fukushima.

"You'd see a heating of the high level spent fuel ponds. You'd see a hydrogen explosion, as we saw in Fukushima," he told The Associated Press. "And then you'd see a significant radiation release."

West to bolster Ukraine air defense; nuke plant loses power

By ADAM SCHRECK and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Unbowed Western powers pledged to supply Ukraine with more potent air defense systems following a furious barrage of retaliatory Russian missile strikes, including one that temporarily knocked Europe's biggest nuclear plant off the invaded country's electrical grid Wednesday.

The Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant suffered a "blackout" when a missile damaged a distant electrical substation, Ukraine's state nuclear operator said. The power loss increased the risk of a radiation emergency because the plant needs electricity to prevent its reactors from overheating.

Energoatom said the external power source was repaired after about eight hours and that the plant's emergency diesel generators — which rely on uncertain fuel deliveries in the war zone — provided backup in the meantime, but a similarly hazardous interruption could happen at any time.

"Russia has seized the plant and is not taking any steps to deescalate. On the contrary, it is shelling important infrastructure daily," the company's press service told The Associated Press.

Hundreds of cities and towns across Ukraine lost electricity after Russia launched a wide-ranging missile assault Monday in retaliation for a truck bomb explosion that damaged a bridge linking Russia with the Crimean Peninsula, which it annexed in 2014.

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With repairs to the grid still in progress, Ukraine's prime minister asked people to reduce evening energy consumption by 25% and prepare for winter by keeping essentials such as warm clothes, candles, flashlights and batteries ready.

As the barrage that killed dozens of Ukrainians this week continued, Ukraine's Western allies met at NATO headquarters in Brussels to calibrate their response.

U.S. Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Ukraine wants its Western partners to provide it with a complete air defense system to contend with Russian warplanes and missiles. Milley spoke to reporters after a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, about 50 nations that meet regularly to assess Kyiv's needs and drum up equipment.

"What Ukraine is asking for, and what we think can be provided, is an integrated air missile defense system. So that doesn't control all the airspace over Ukraine, but they're designed to control priority targets that Ukraine needs to protect," Milley told reporters.

Andriy Yermak, the head of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office, said the meeting was "historic" because decisions to close the sky for Ukraine were being made there. Ukraine has put a priority on bucking up its air defenses, but NATO member nations have worried how to do that without triggering a wider war in Europe.

Zelenskyy's office said Moscow's retaliatory strikes killed at least 14 people and wounded 34 over the last day in the Zaporizhzhia region and the Donetsk region to the east. At least 19 died in Monday's opening onslaught, including five in Kyiv.

A day after Ukraine's Defense Ministry announced the arrival of the first of Germany's four promised IRIS-T air defense systems, the defense minister of the Netherlands said her country would deliver \$14.5 million worth of air defense missiles in light of Russia's latest attacks.

"These attacks reinforce the government's belief that they can only be answered with unwavering support for Ukraine and its people," Defense Minister Kaja Ollongreher said. "The Netherlands, like our partners, will not be intimidated by Russia."

French President Emmanuel Macron, in a television interview Wednesday evening, promised prompt delivery of more cannons and also anti-aircraft systems and missiles.

The U.S. is expected to deliver two advanced NASAMs anti-aircraft systems in the coming weeks.

The nuclear scare and pledges of more Western support came amid a flurry of developments in Russia's 7 1/2-month-old invasion.

Moscow's main domestic security agency said it arrested eight people — five Russians and three citizens of Ukraine and Armenia — over the blast on the Kerch bridge between Russia and Crimea. A truck loaded with explosives blew up while driving across the bridge Saturday, killing four people and causing sections of road to collapse, Russian officials said.

The span opened four years after Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, serving as a symbol of Moscow's regional dominance as well as a crucial route for military supplies for its troops in Ukraine and for Russians traveling to a popular vacation destination.

The Federal Security Service, known by the Russian-language acronym FSB, alleged the detained suspects acted on orders of Ukraine's military intelligence to secretly move the explosives into Russia using forged documents.

Ukrainian Defense Ministry spokesman Andriy Yusov denied the accusation that his country was involved, telling reporters, "The entire activity of the FSB and the Investigative Committee is nonsense."

Zelenskyy's office said in a morning update that strikes on central and western parts of Ukraine had ceased but Russian shelling and attacks involving drones, heavy artillery and missiles continued in eight southeast regions.

More than a dozen missiles were fired at the city of Zaporizhzhia and its suburbs, damaging residential buildings. Part of a larger eponymous region that Moscow has illegally annexed, the city remains in Ukrainian hands while Russian forces control the area where the nuclear plant is located.

In Nikopol, a city of 104,000 across the Dnieper River from the plant, three people were gravely wounded, including a 6-year-old girl. Over 30 multistory residential buildings were damaged, as well as private

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houses and schools, Ukrainian authorities said.

Rafael Grossi, the head of the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency, said the loss of external power at the nuclear plant for the second time in five days again exposed "how precarious the situation is," and he pleaded again for a security zone around the plant.

All six of the Zaporizhzhia reactors were stopped earlier due to the war. But they still require electricity to prevent them and their spent fuel rods from overheating to the point of a meltdown that could release radiation into the atmosphere of Ukraine and potentially other European countries, including Russia.

In the Donetsk region, Russian tanks shelled the city of Avdiivka, damaging residential buildings and a market. Seven people were killed and eight wounded, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, the deputy head of Zelenskyy's office, said via Telegram, posting photos of bodies on the ground by a kiosk with potatoes and bread on the counter.

Before the bombardment of the last three days, Russian forces over the last month had lost ground to a Ukrainian counteroffensive in the east and south, drawing criticism from hawkish commentators in Russia.

Earlier Wednesday, Ukraine's southern command said its forces recaptured five settlements in the southern Kherson region, on the western fringe of an arc of Russian-controlled territory in eastern and southern Ukraine.

Near the southern city of Mykolaiv, Ukrainian forces shot down nine Iranian Shahed-136 drones and destroyed eight Kalibr cruise missiles, the presidential office said.

Astros starters rock hair extensions for postseason `dos

By KRISTIE RIEKEN AP Sports Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — Astros starters Framber Valdez and Luis Garcia look like naturals on the mound, even in the hairiest of situations.

A lot of work to make it seem that easy — at the ballpark and, as it turns out, at the barber shop.

Both pitchers completed their coiffures with an artificial boost this season, adding hair extensions as a means of expressing their individuality. They're showing off those locks this postseason as Houston tries to reach the World Series for the fourth time in six years.

"At first a lot of people were talking about it and joking about this topic," Valdez said in Spanish through a translator. "But at the end of the day I feel comfortable with my hair, and I feel good about my hair, so I'll keep having my hair like this."

Garcia, who opened the season with natural shoulder-grazing curls, this summer opted to add length and volume via braids adorned with beads at the end.

"When I have the braids, everybody knows me more, because it's not a normal look," the 25-year-old said.

For Valdez, who will start Game 2 of the AL Division Series on Thursday against Seattle, the transformation was more dramatic.

To stand out at his first All-Star Game in July, the 28-year-old left-hander added dreadlocks that fall past his shoulders to hair that was previously cropped closely on the sides with a few inches of growth on the top.

Standout `dos aren't unheard of in baseball. Longtime MLB outfielder Oscar Gamble had a resplendent Afro in the 1970s, and more recently, pitcher Noah Syndergaard earned the moniker "Thor" for his flowing blonde locks.

Quirky facial hair has long been a staple in the sport, too — like Rollie Fingers' handlebar mustache or Al Hrabosky's Fu Manchu.

Astros first baseman Yuli Gurriel long had Houston's most notable hairstyle. His spiky top looks like the leaves of a pineapple, and he is known as "La Piña," the Spanish word for the fruit.

Gurriel wasn't initially a fan of Valdez's extensions. He even cracked a few jokes.

"At first, I thought he looked very strange with all of the hair that he came in with," Gurriel said in Spanish through a translator. "But now, I like his style and think it looks really good, and I really like when people change their style because I also like to change mine."

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It's been a better reception than NBA star Jimmy Butler got for his faux-locks this summer. The Miami Heat forward was bombarded by blowback on social media when he unveiled long dreadlock extensions. He denied they were extensions at media day, even though his Instagram posts made it clear they were. By the time he took the court for Miami's first preseason game, the long-haired look was gone.

Valdez took some good-natured teasing from Gurriel and others at first, but neither he nor Garcia have endured mockery like Butler. Both say they don't care if people dislike the unconventional styles.

"My mom likes it," Garcia said. "If it's fine with her, I'm OK."

The hair accoutrements come with a major time investment. Both Valdez and Garcia said the initial installations took more than four hours. Subsequent touch-ups run about 90 minutes to two hours.

Garcia had his extensions all summer but recently took them out to "let his hair rest." He got a fresh set of thin braids — with three clear beads at the end of each — installed Monday after Houston's workout.

He didn't have beads on the first extensions he got in June, and his teammates were perplexed about where a clicking noise was coming from as they took the field this week.

"It was kind of loud when I was walking, and the guys said: 'What is that sound?' And I said: 'This,'" Garcia said, pointing at the beads on his hair.

What does a 15-game winner do for four hours in the barber's chair?

"Just watching Tik Tok during the process and it's fine," Garcia said.

He did run into a small problem when he first added his extensions. His cap no longer fit, and he had to get one two sizes bigger. He laughed recalling that conversation with Houston's equipment staff.

"Hey guys, I have more hair," he said. "I need a new hat."

Houston has had its share of showy hairdos. Catcher Martín Maldonado dyed his pink this season at the behest of his young daughter, then debuted a crimson tone for Game 1 of the ALDS. Pitcher Jose Urquidy and utility player Aledmys Díaz are among a handful of other Astros who've added blonde highlights.

It's the sort of youthful exuberance the sometimes stodgy sport has been trying to encourage.

"It's showing a lot of personality in the game," Díaz said. "In the past, when I got to the league in '16, people were more like old school baseball. You just show up to the park and play the game."

"But right now, with social media and things going on, players like showing off their personalities, and I think that's great for the game."

Maldonado, who has helped both Valdez and Garcia find success on the mound, raved about their looks. He joked with Valdez that he was trying to be the left-handed Luis Castillo soon after he unveiled his extensions. Castillo, a fellow Dominican who will start opposite Valdez for Seattle on Thursday, has longer natural dreadlocks that he's been growing for years.

"So now it's funny they're going to face each other," Maldonado said.

Díaz is very superstitious and believes a new hairstyle can bring good luck. He got a haircut every week for a stretch in 2019 after he started hitting a homer every time he got a trim.

Not to discount Valdez's pitching skills, but Díaz thinks his extensions might have had something to do with his success this season.

"He was doing great after that hair change," Díaz said. "So hopefully he can take it into the playoffs."

Valdez, who ranked second in the AL behind teammate Justin Verlander with a career-high 17 wins this season, scoffed at the notion that the hair extensions brought him luck.

But he's eager to build on his regular-season success in his start Thursday — the playoff debut for his fancy 'do.

"I'm waiting for the postseason to get here and be able to show what I'm capable of doing and show people that we can go to the World Series together as a team," he said. "And I'm looking forward to keep showing my talent."

US clears updated COVID boosters for kids as young as 5

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

The U.S. on Wednesday authorized updated COVID-19 boosters for children as young as 5, seeking to

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expand protection ahead of an expected winter wave.

Tweaked boosters rolled out for Americans 12 and older last month, doses modified to target today's most common and contagious omicron relative. While there wasn't a big rush, federal health officials are urging that people seek the extra protection ahead of holiday gatherings.

Now the Food and Drug Administration has given a green light for elementary school-age kids to get the updated booster doses, too -- one made by Pfizer for 5- to 11-year-olds, and a version from rival Moderna for those as young as 6.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which recommends how vaccines are used, also signed off.

Americans may be tired of repeated calls to get boosted against COVID-19 but experts say the updated shots have an advantage: They contain half the recipe that targeted the original coronavirus strain and half protection against the dominant BA.4 and BA.5 omicron versions.

These combination or "bivalent" boosters are designed to broaden immune defenses so that people are better protected against serious illness whether they encounter an omicron relative in the coming months -- or a different mutant that's more like the original virus.

"We want to have the best of both worlds," Pfizer's Dr. Bill Gruber, a pediatrician, told The Associated Press. He hopes the updated shots will "re-energize interest in protecting children for the winter."

The updated boosters are "extremely important" for keeping kids healthy and in school, said Dr. Jason Newland, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Washington University in St. Louis.

Parents should know "there is no concern from the safety perspective with the bivalent vaccines, whether Moderna or Pfizer," Newland added.

Only people who've gotten their initial vaccinations -- with any of the original-formula versions -- qualify for an updated booster. That means about three-fourths of Americans 12 and older are eligible. As of last weekend, only at least 13 million had gotten an updated booster, White House COVID-19 coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha estimated Tuesday.

To pediatricians' chagrin, getting children their first vaccinations has been tougher. Less than a third of 5- to 11-year-olds have had their two primary doses and thus would qualify for the new booster.

This age group will get kid-size doses of the new omicron-targeting booster -- and they can receive it at least two months after their last dose, whether that was their primary vaccination series or an earlier booster, the FDA said.

"Vaccination remains the most effective measure to prevent the severe consequences of COVID-19," Dr. Peter Marks, FDA's vaccine chief, said in a statement.

While children tend to get less seriously ill than adults, "as the various waves of COVID-19 have occurred, more children have gotten sick with the disease and have been hospitalized," Marks said.

For the updated booster made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech, 5- to 11-year-olds would get a third of the dose that anyone 12 and older already receives. Pfizer said it could ship up to 6 million kid-sized doses within a week of authorization, in addition to ongoing shipments of adult-sized doses.

Until now, Moderna's updated booster was cleared only for adults. FDA just expanded that adult bivalent dosage to 12- to 17-year-olds, and authorized half the dose for kids ages 6 to 11.

As for even younger tots, first vaccinations didn't open for the under-5 age group until mid-June -- and it will be several more months before regulators decide if they'll also need a booster using the updated recipe.

Exactly how much protection does an updated COVID-19 booster shot offer? That's hard to know. Pfizer and Moderna are starting studies in young children.

But the FDA cleared the COVID-19 booster tweaks without requiring human test results -- just like it approves yearly changes to flu vaccines. That's partly because both companies already had studied experimental shots tweaked to target prior COVID-19 variants, including an earlier omicron version, and found they safely revved up virus-fighting antibodies.

"It's clearly a better vaccine, an important upgrade from what we had before," Jha said earlier this week.

Jha urged adults to get their updated shot in October -- like they get flu vaccinations -- or at least well before holiday gatherings with high-risk family and friends. People who've recently had COVID-19 still need

the booster but can wait about three months, he added.

Biden hit on economy as more say finances poor: AP-NORC poll

By JOSH BOAK and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More U.S. adults are now feeling financially vulnerable amid high inflation — a political risk for President Joe Biden and his fellow Democrats one month before the midterm elections.

Some 46% of people now call their personal financial situation poor, up from 37% in March, according to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That's a notable downturn at a particularly inopportune moment for Biden, given that the share of Americans who felt positive about their finances had stayed rock steady over the last few years — even during the economic turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And while a majority of Americans see high prices as beyond Biden's control, they continue to disapprove of his handling of the economy overall.

Overall, 54% say their finances are good in the latest survey. That figure was at least 62% through the global recession caused by the pandemic in 2020, and even in late 2021 and early 2022 as prices began to rise across the country. But inflation's prolonged bite has left the U.S. and wider world facing the possibility of a downturn and, despite solid job growth, more consumers are feeling the pain.

In Salado, Texas, Bethany Saunders saw the rate she paid for electricity double in August, and her water bill jumped as well as she dealt with a summer heat and drought. Her utilities bills totaled \$800, a shock to the 43-year-old, who had carefully budgeted after going without a pay raise for two years.

"That just drained my bank account — I'm not rich, but I knew what I could live on," said Saunders, who voted Republican in 2020 and plans to do so again this year.

Overall, views of Biden and of the direction of the country held steady in October, after improving somewhat in September. Forty-three percent say they approve of how Biden is handling his job as president, while 25% say the country is headed in the right direction. Biden's approval rating had dropped as low as 36% in a July AP-NORC poll, and the percentage saying the country is headed in the right direction dropped as low as 14% in June.

The president has been steadfast in saying he believes the economy can escape a recession, and he said in an interview broadcast Tuesday by CNN that any potential downturn would be modest.

"I don't think there will be a recession," Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper. "If it is, it'll be a very slight recession. That is, we'll move down slightly."

Saunders doesn't think Biden is entirely to blame for her higher bills, but she said his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package from last year with its direct payments to Americans was excessive. Some leading economists say the money helped ignite inflation that reached a 40-year peak in June. The government will release an inflation report on Thursday, and economists expect it to show that prices rose 8.1% in September from a year ago.

"I see him throwing money at things we don't need," Saunders said of Biden. "It makes me think of the Oprah episode that became famous. 'You get a car, you get a car, you get a car.'"

The drop in financial well-being was especially acute among Americans in households making less than \$50,000 a year, just 33% of whom now call their personal finances good compared with 50% in March. Sixty-one percent of those in household making between \$50,000 and \$100,000 call their personal finances good, as do 75% of those making more than that — both down only slightly since earlier in the year.

In the latest poll, 23% call the national economy good. That's similar to the percentage in June but down slightly from 29% in September, when views of the national economy had shown signs of improvement. The drop since September came primarily among Democrats, from 46% then to 35% now. In September, Democrats had appeared increasingly optimistic about the economy compared with earlier in the summer.

Sandra Baker, 56, said she voted for Biden and intends to support Democrats in this year's elections. The Lincoln, Nebraska resident said the president is trying his best to fix the economy and address political divides.

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"He's doing all he can do, but everything else is so screwed up it doesn't really matter," Baker said. "The general vibe — everything the Democrats do — seems to be toward helping the little man and it's always been like that."

But the economy has proved a challenge — with gasoline costs becoming a renewed source of financial pressure. The average price at the pump was \$3.92 a gallon on Wednesday, up roughly 5.5% from a month ago, according to AAA. Support for Biden had picked up after a 99-day drop in gas prices from a June high that ended in September.

Views of Biden's handling of the economy remain underwater. Only 36% say they approve and 63% disapprove. But Americans aren't heaping all the blame for inflation at Biden's feet: 55% say higher than usual prices are mostly because of factors outside Biden's control, while 44% say that's happening mostly because of Biden's policies.

The president has blamed rising energy and food prices on Russia's February invasion of Ukraine. He's also blasted oil companies and refineries for raking in profits off the higher prices, instead of doing more to increase production. Saudi Arabia and other countries tied to OPEC dealt the U.S. a further blow last week by announcing plans to cut oil production by 2 million barrels a day in response to the slowing economy, a move that the administration said would support oil exporters such as Russia.

There are bright spots in the poll for Biden — 55% say they approve of how he's handling the coronavirus pandemic, long one of his strongest issues, and 63% approve of his handling of natural disaster relief following Hurricane Ian, which battered Florida two weeks ago. On the other hand, just 39% approve of how Biden is handling immigration.

Scientists grow human brain cells in rats to study diseases

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Scientists have transplanted human brain cells into the brains of baby rats, where the cells grew and formed connections.

It's part of an effort to better study human brain development and diseases affecting this most complex of organs, which makes us who we are but has long been shrouded in mystery.

"Many disorders such as autism and schizophrenia are likely uniquely human" but "the human brain certainly has not been very accessible," said Dr. Sergiu Pasca, senior author of a study describing the work, published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

Approaches that don't involve taking tissue out of the human brain are "promising avenues in trying to tackle these conditions."

The research builds upon the team's previous work creating brain "organoids," tiny structures resembling human organs that have also been made to represent others such as livers, kidneys, prostates, or key parts of them.

To make the brain organoids, Stanford University scientists transformed human skin cells into stem cells and then coaxed them to become several types of brain cells. Those cells then multiplied to form organoids resembling the cerebral cortex, the human brain's outermost layer, which plays a key role in things like memory, thinking, learning, reasoning and emotions.

Scientists transplanted those organoids into rat pups 2 to 3 days old, a stage when brain connections are still forming. The organoids grew so that they eventually occupied a third of the hemisphere of the rat's brain where they were implanted. Neurons from the organoids formed working connections with circuits in the brain.

Human neurons have been transplanted in rodents before, but generally in adult animals, usually mice. Pasca, a psychiatry professor at the Stanford School of Medicine, said this is the first time these organoids have been placed into early rat brains, creating "the most advanced human brain circuitry ever built from human skin cells and a demonstration that implanted human neurons can influence an animal's behavior."

To examine a practical use of this approach, scientists transplanted organoids into both sides of a rat's brain: one generated from a healthy person's cells and another from the cells of a person with Timothy syndrome, a rare genetic condition associated with heart problems and autism spectrum disorder.

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Five to six months later, they saw effects of the disease related to the activity of the neurons. There were differences in the two sides' electrical activity, and the neurons from the person with Timothy syndrome were much smaller and didn't sprout as many extensions that pick up input from nearby neurons.

Researchers, whose study was funded partly by the National Institutes of Health, said they could do the same sorts of experiments using organoids made from the cells of people with disorders such as autism or schizophrenia — and potentially learn new things about how these conditions affect the brain, too.

Dr. Flora Vaccarino of Yale University — who previously grew lumps containing cerebral cortex that were made with DNA from people with autism — said the study moves the field forward.

"It's extremely impressive what they do here in terms of what these cells can actually show us in terms of their advanced development ... in the rat," said Vaccarino, who wasn't involved with the study.

Such experiments in animals raise ethical concerns. For example, Pasca said he and his team are cognizant of the rats' well-being and whether they still behave normally with the organoids inside them, which he says they do. Still, Pasca does not believe this should be tried in primates. Ethicists also wonder about the possibility of brain organoids in the future attaining something like human consciousness, which experts say is extremely unlikely now.

Some scientists are studying human brain organoids outside of animals. For example, researchers at ETH Zurich in Switzerland published a study in *Nature* earlier this month describing how they are growing brain-like tissue from stem cells in the lab and then mapping the cell types in various brain regions and genes regulating their development. Some are using these structures to study autism.

Pasca said brain organoids could also be used to test new treatments for neuropsychiatric disorders, the largest cause of disability worldwide. Such research, he said, should help scientists make strides that have been extremely difficult until now because it's so hard to get at the human brain — which is "the reason why we're so much more behind in psychiatry compared to any other branch of medicine in terms of therapeutics."

World's 1st space tourist signs up for flight around moon

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The world's first space tourist wants to go back — only this time, he's signed up for a spin around the moon aboard Elon Musk's Starship.

For Dennis Tito, 82, it's a chance to relive the joy of his trip to the International Space Station, now that he's retired with time on his hands. He isn't interested in hopping on a 10-minute flight to the edge of space or repeating what he did 21 years ago. "Been there, done that."

His weeklong moonshot — its date to be determined and years in the future — will bring him within 125 miles (200 kilometers) of the lunar far side. He'll have company: his wife, Akiko, and 10 others willing to shell out big bucks for the ride.

Tito won't say how much he's paying; his Russian station flight cost \$20 million.

The couple recognize there's a lot of testing and development still ahead for Starship, a shiny, bullet-shaped behemoth that's yet to even attempt to reach space.

"We have to keep healthy for as many years as it's going to take for SpaceX to complete this vehicle," Tito said in an interview this week with *The Associated Press*. "I might be sitting in a rocking chair, not doing any good exercise, if it wasn't for this mission."

Tito is actually the second billionaire to make a Starship reservation for a flight around the moon. Japanese fashion tycoon Yusaku Maezawa announced in 2018 he was buying an entire flight so he could take eight or so others with him, preferably artists. The two men both flew to the space station, from Kazakhstan atop Russian rockets, 20 years apart.

Tito kicked off space tourism in 2001, becoming the first person to pay his own way to space and antagonizing NASA in the process. The U.S. space agency didn't want a sightseer hanging around while the station was being built. But the Russian Space Agency needed the cash and, with the help of U.S.-based Space Adventures, launched a string of wealthy clients to the station through the 2000s and, just a year

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ago, Maezawa.

Well-heeled customers are sampling briefer tastes of space with Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin rocket company. Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic expects to take paying passengers next year.

Starship has yet to launch atop a Super Heavy booster from the southern tip of Texas, near the Mexican border. At 394 feet (120 meters) and 17 million pounds (7.7 million kilograms) of liftoff thrust, it's the biggest and most powerful rocket ever built. NASA already has contracted for a Starship to land its astronauts on the moon in 2025 or so, in the first lunar touchdown since Apollo.

Tito said the couple's contract with SpaceX, signed in August 2021 and announced Wednesday, includes an option for a flight within five years from now. Tito would be 87 by then and he wanted an out in case his health falters.

"But if I stayed in good health, I'd wait 10 years," he said.

Tito's wife, 57, said she needed no persuading. The Los Angeles residents are both pilots and understand the risks. They share Musk's vision of a spacefaring future and believe a married couple flying together to the moon will inspire others to do the same.

Tito, who sold his investment company Wilshire Associates almost two years ago, said he doesn't feel guilty splurging on spaceflight versus spending the money here on Earth.

"We're retired and now it's time to reap the rewards of all the hard work," he said.

Tito expects he'll also shatter preconceived notions about age, much as John Glenn's space shuttle flight did in 1998. The first American to orbit the Earth still holds the record as the oldest person in orbit.

"He was only 77. He was just a young man," Tito said. "I might end up being 10 years older than him,"

ACT test scores drop to lowest in 30 years in pandemic slide

By CHEYANNE MUMPHREY AP Education Writer

PHOENIX (AP) — Scores on the ACT college admissions test by this year's high school graduates hit their lowest point in more than 30 years — the latest evidence of the enormity of learning disruption during the pandemic.

The class of 2022's average ACT composite score was 19.8 out of 36, marking the first time since 1991 that the average score was below 20. What's more, an increasing number of high school students failed to meet any of the subject-area benchmarks set by the ACT — showing a decline in preparedness for college-level coursework.

The test scores, made public in a report Wednesday, show 42% of ACT-tested graduates in the class of 2022 met none of the subject benchmarks in English, reading, science and math, which are indicators of how well students are expected to perform in corresponding college courses.

In comparison, 38% of test takers in 2021 failed to meet any of the benchmarks.

"Academic preparedness is where we are seeing the decline," said Rose Babington, senior director for state partnerships for the ACT. "Every time we see ACT test scores, we are talking about skills and standards, and the prediction of students to be successful and to know the really important information to succeed and persist through their first year of college courses."

ACT scores have declined steadily in recent years. Still, "the magnitude of the declines this year is particularly alarming," ACT CEO Janet Godwin said in a statement. "We see rapidly growing numbers of seniors leaving high school without meeting college-readiness benchmarks in any of the subjects we measure."

The results offer a lens into systemic inequities in education, in place well before the pandemic shuttered schools and colleges temporarily waived testing requirements. For example, students without access to rigorous high school curriculum suffered more setbacks during pandemic disruptions, Babington said. Those students are from rural areas, come from low-income families and are often students of color.

The number of students taking the ACT has declined 30% since 2018, as graduates increasingly forgo college and some universities no longer require admissions tests. But participation plunged 37% among Black students, with 154,000 taking the test this year.

Standardized tests such as the ACT have faced growing concerns that they're unfair to minority and low-

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income students, as students with access to expensive test prep or advanced courses often perform better.

Babington defended the test as a measure of college readiness. "Now more than ever, the last few years have shown us the importance of having high-quality data to help inform how we support students," Babington said.

Test scores now are optional for first-year student admission at many institutions. Some colleges, such as the University of California system, even opt for a test-blind policy, where scores are not considered even if submitted.

But many students still take the tests, hoping to get an edge in admissions by submitting their scores. Tyrone Jordan, a freshman at test-optional Arizona State University, said he took the ACT and the SAT to get ahead of other students and help him receive scholarships.

Jordan, who wants to pursue mechanical engineering, said he thinks his rigorous schedule at Tempe Preparatory Academy prepared him for college, and the standardized tests helped support him and his family financially.

"All the test did for me was give me extra financial money," Jordan said.

While Jordan was always planning to take the test, many students struggle with access or choose not to take the test since their universities of choice no longer require it. In Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee and Wyoming, everyone is tested.

LA Council faces uncertainty amid furor over racist remarks

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Where does the Los Angeles City Council go from here?

Three of its members — including the former Council president — are facing calls from President Joe Biden to resign after a recording surfaced of them participating in a closed-door meeting in which racist language was used to mock colleagues while they schemed to protect Latino political strength in Council districts.

Three current or former Council members have been indicted or pleaded guilty to corruption charges, and it's possible resignations in coming days could create new vacancies.

The current mayor, Democrat Eric Garcetti, was named last year to become U.S. ambassador to India but the nomination appears stalled in the Senate because of sexual harassment allegations against one of his former top aides. Elections next month will bring a new mayor and several Council members.

In the short term, it's a looming question if the Council can assemble the required 10 members — out of 15 total — to conduct business on Wednesday, when coincidentally Biden will be in town.

"I have never seen anything like this," said Raphael Sonenshein, executive director of the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles.

"That's the real challenge now, to kind of get to where they are going to conduct business on a regular basis," Sonenshein said. "This chaotic situation is going to be very visible ... both here and nationally."

The Council will attempt to reconvene Wednesday, possibly to censure the three members cited by Biden. A Tuesday meeting was nearly derailed when a raucous crowd of protesters packed the chamber, calling for the resignation of those involved in the meeting — former City Council President Nury Martinez, who is taking a leave of absence, and Councilmen Kevin de Leon and Gil Cedillo, all Democrats.

The Council cannot expel the members — it can only suspend a member when criminal charges are pending. A censure does not result in suspension or removal from office.

The uproar was triggered by a leaked recording of crude, racist comments from a nearly year-old meeting, which also provided an unvarnished look into City Hall's racial rivalries. Those involved in the meeting were all Latinos.

Martinez said in the recorded conversation that white Councilmember Mike Bonin handled his young Black son as if he were an "accessory" and said of his son "Parece changuito," or "he's like a monkey," the Los Angeles Times reported Sunday. She also referred to Bonin as a "little bitch."

At another point on the hourlong recording, Martinez, the first Latina appointed president of the City Council, called indigenous immigrants from the Mexican state of Oaxaca "tan feos," or "so ugly."

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The discussion — which also included a powerful Latino labor leader, who has since resigned — centered on protecting Latino political power during the redrawing of council district boundaries, known as redistricting. The once-a-decade process can pit one group against another to gain political advantage in future elections.

At the ornate Council chamber, an overflow crowd of protesters delayed the start of Tuesday's meeting as they angrily shouted for de Leon and Cedillo to leave the room. Police officers scurried at the edge of the crowd.

De Leon sat impassively at his seat, his eyes cast downward, as protesters called on him by name to exit the chamber. Others on the 15-member Council urged the crowd to settle down and allow the meeting to begin.

Cedillo and de Leon left their seats early, leaving in doubt if they will appear Wednesday.

Martinez stepped down from the leadership job and apologized Monday, saying she was ashamed of her racially offensive language in the year-old recording. However, she did not resign her council seat. She announced Tuesday that "I need to take a leave of absence and take some time to have an honest and heartfelt conversation with my family, my constituents, and community leaders."

She did not appear at the Tuesday meeting.

In emotional remarks at the meeting, Bonin said he was deeply wounded by the taped discussion. He lamented the harm to his young son and the fact that the city was in international headlines spotlighting the racist language. "I'm sickened by it," he said, calling again for his colleagues' resignations.

"Los Angeles is going to heal," he said at one point. "I want to lead with love."

Black and Latino constituents often build alliances in politics. But tensions and rivalries among groups separated by race, geography, partisanship or religion have a long history in Los Angeles and, indeed, the country. The friction can cross into housing, education and jobs — even prisons — as well as the spoils of political power.

The California Legislative Black Caucus said the recording "reveals an appalling effort to decentralize Black voices during the critical redistricting process."

In one of the most diverse cities in the nation, a long line of public speakers at the meeting said the disclosure of the secretly taped meeting brought with it echoes of the Jim Crow era, and was a stark example of "anti-Blackness."

There were calls for investigations, and reforming redistricting policy.

Many of the critics also were Latino, who spoke of being betrayed by their own leaders.

Candido Marez, 70, a retired business owner, said he wasn't surprised by Martinez's language, who is known for being blunt and outspoken.

"Her words blew up this city. It is disgraceful," he said. "She must resign."

The Los Angeles Times reported that the recording was posted on Reddit by a now-suspended user. It is unclear who recorded the audio, who uploaded it to Reddit and whether anyone else was present.

Biden press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Tuesday that the president wanted Martinez, de Leon and Cedillo to resign.

"The language that was used and tolerated during that conversation was unacceptable, and it was appalling. They should all step down," Jean-Pierre said.

Other calls for the councilmembers to resign have come from across the Democratic establishment, including from U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla, Garcetti, mayoral candidates Karen Bass and Rick Caruso and members of Council.

Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom has stopped short of doing so, denouncing the racist language and saying he was "encouraged that those involved have apologized and begun to take responsibility for their actions." Democratic state Sen. Steven Bradford, who represents parts of Los Angeles County, said Newsom should call for the resignation of the three councilmembers.

"Every ethnic caucus in the Legislature has called for the resignations, so I would hope that the governor would ... ask for the resignation as well," Bradford said.

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Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell, serving as acting president of the Council, said the city cannot heal if the three remain in office. He called it a "clear abuse of power" that was "profoundly unacceptable" of elected officials.

"Public opinion has rendered a verdict and the verdict is they all must resign," he said.

Graft convictions extend Suu Kyi's prison term to 26 years

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — A court in military-ruled Myanmar convicted the country's ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi on two more corruption charges Wednesday, with two three-year sentences to be served concurrently, adding to previous convictions that now leave her with a 26-year total prison term, a legal official said.

Suu Kyi, 77, was detained on Feb. 1, 2021, when the military seized power from her elected government. She has denied the allegations against her in this case, in which she was accused of receiving \$550,000 as a bribe from a tycoon convicted of drug trafficking.

Corruption cases comprise the biggest share of the many charges the military has brought against the 1991 Nobel Peace laureate. Suu Kyi has been charged with 12 counts in total under the anti-corruption act, with each count punishable by up to 15 years in prison and a fine.

Suu Kyi had already been sentenced to 23 years' imprisonment after being convicted of illegally importing and possessing walkie-talkies, violating coronavirus restrictions, breaching the country's official secrets act, sedition, election fraud and five corruption charges.

Her supporters and independent analysts say the charges are politically motivated and an attempt to discredit her and legitimize the military's seizure of power while keeping her from taking part in the next election, which the military has promised in 2023.

In recent months, her trials have been held in a purpose-built courtroom in the main prison on the outskirts of the capital, Naypyitaw. She has not been seen or allowed to speak in public since she was arrested. Her lawyers, who had been a source of information on the proceedings, have not been allowed to speak publicly on her behalf or about her trial since a gag order was placed on them last year.

In the case decided Wednesday, Suu Kyi was accused of receiving a total of \$550,000 in 2019 and 2020 from Maung Weik, with separate payments being treated as two offenses.

Maung Weik, a construction magnate, had a close relationship with the army generals in power during a previous military-run government, and has headed two main companies during three decades in business: Maung Weik & Family Co. Ltd., specializing in the trading of metals and agricultural products, and Sae Paing Development Ltd., a real estate and construction company.

He was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2008 for trafficking drugs but was released in 2014 under a semi-democratic transitional government led by former Gen. Thein Sein.

After his release from prison, Maung Weik returned to doing business with former generals and according to a 2017 report in *The Irrawaddy*, an online news magazine, became chairman of Mandalay Business Capital City Development, which was involved in urban development work.

Under Suu Kyi's government, Maung Weik won a major development project that included the construction of houses, restaurants, hospitals, economic zones, a port and hotel zones in Myanmar's central Mandalay region.

He was reportedly interrogated by the army two weeks after its takeover, and shortly after that, in March 2021, military-controlled state television broadcast a video in which he claimed to have given cash payoffs to government ministers to help his businesses.

He said in his video that the money included \$100,000 provided to Suu Kyi in 2018 for a charitable foundation named after her mother, and another \$450,000 in payments in 2019 and 2020 for purposes he did not specify.

A state-controlled newspaper, the *Global New Light of Myanmar*, reported in February that Suu Kyi in her position as state counselor — the country's de facto chief executive — received \$550,000 in four installments in 2019-2020 "to facilitate the business activities of a private entrepreneur."

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Suu Kyi's close colleague, Zaw Myint Maung, who served as a chief minister in the Mandalay region, was separately accused of receiving more than \$180,000 from Maung Weik and was convicted of corruption in June.

Wednesday's verdict sentencing Suu Kyi to two three-year sentences to be served concurrently was conveyed by a legal official who insisted on anonymity for fear of being punished by the authorities.

He added that her lawyers are expected to file an appeal in the coming days.

In separate proceedings, Suu Kyi is still being tried together with the country's former president, Win Myint, on another five corruption charges in connection with permits granted to a Cabinet minister for the rental and purchase of a helicopter.

Suu Kyi has been the face of the opposition to military rule in Myanmar for more than three decades. The previous military government put her under house arrest in 1989, which continued on-and-off for 15 of the next 22 years.

Her National League for Democracy party initially came to power after winning the 2015 general election, ushering in a true civilian government for the first time since a 1962 military coup. However, democratic reforms were small and slow in coming, largely because the military retained substantial power and influence under the terms of a constitution it had enacted in 2008.

The National League for Democracy won a landslide victory again in the 2020 election, but its lawmakers were kept from taking their seats in Parliament by the army, which also arrested the party's top leaders.

The army said it acted because there had been massive voting fraud in the 2020 election, but independent election observers did not find any major irregularities.

The 2021 takeover was met by nationwide peaceful protests that security forces quashed with deadly force, triggering fierce armed resistance that some U.N. experts now characterize as civil war.

According to a detailed list compiled by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a watchdog group now based in Thailand, Myanmar security forces have killed at least 2,343 civilians and arrested 15,821.

Today in History: October 13, Chilean miners rescued

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Oct. 13, the 286th day of 2022. There are 79 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 13, 2010, rescuers in Chile using a missile-like escape capsule pulled 33 men one by one to fresh air and freedom 69 days after they were trapped in a collapsed mine a half-mile underground.

On this date:

In 1775, the United States Navy had its origins as the Continental Congress ordered the construction of a naval fleet.

In 1792, the cornerstone of the executive mansion, later known as the White House, was laid by President George Washington during a ceremony in the District of Columbia.

In 1932, President Herbert Hoover and Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes laid the cornerstone for the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington.

In 1943, Italy declared war on Germany, its one-time Axis partner.

In 1960, the Pittsburgh Pirates won the World Series, defeating the New York Yankees in Game 7, 10-9, with a home run hit by Bill Mazeroski.

In 1972, a Uruguayan chartered flight carrying 45 people crashed in the Andes; survivors resorted to feeding off the remains of some of the dead in order to stay alive until they were rescued more than two months later.

In 1974, longtime television host Ed Sullivan died in New York City at age 73.

In 1999, in Boulder, Colorado, the JonBenet Ramsey grand jury was dismissed after 13 months of work with prosecutors saying there wasn't enough evidence to charge anyone in the 6-year-old beauty queen's slaying.

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In 2003, the U.N. Security Council approved a resolution expanding the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Afghanistan.

In 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, after meeting with human-rights activists in Moscow, told reporters the Russian government under Vladimir Putin had amassed so much central authority that the power-grab could undermine its commitment to democracy.

In 2011, Raj Rajaratnam (rahj rah-juh-RUHT'-nuhm), the hedge fund billionaire at the center of one of the biggest insider-trading cases in U.S. history, was sentenced by a federal judge in New York to 11 years behind bars.

In 2016, Bob Dylan was named winner of the Nobel prize in literature.

Ten years ago: Republicans Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan rallied college students in all corners of all-important Ohio and hammered at President Barack Obama for going easy on China over unfair trade practices; Obama took precious time off the campaign trail to practice for the next debate against his GOP rival. Actor and TV host Gary Collins, 74, died in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump accused Iran of violating the 2015 nuclear accord, but did not pull the U.S. out of the deal or re-impose nuclear sanctions. (Trump would pull the U.S. out of the deal the following May and restore harsh sanctions.) Attorneys general in nearly 20 states filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration over the decision to end a federal subsidy under the Affordable Care Act that lowered out-of-pocket medical costs for consumers with modest incomes.

One year ago: U.S. officials said they would reopen land borders to nonessential travel starting in November, ending a 19-month freeze. The government reported that another jump in consumer prices in September sent inflation up 5.4% from where it was a year earlier, as tangled global supply lines continue to create havoc. At the age of 90, actor William Shatner – best known as Captain Kirk on "Star Trek" – rode into space and back aboard a ship built by Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin company, becoming the oldest person to travel in space.

Today's Birthdays: Gospel singer Shirley Caesar is 85. Actor Melinda Dillon is 83. Singer-musician Paul Simon is 81. Musician Robert Lamm (Chicago) is 78. Country singer Lacy J. Dalton is 76. Actor Demond Wilson is 76. Singer-musician Sammy Hagar is 75. Pop singer John Ford Coley is 74. Actor John Lone is 70. Model Beverly Johnson is 70. Producer-writer Chris Carter is 66. Actor and former NBA star Reggie Theus (THEE'-us) is 65. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., is 64. R&B singer Cherrelle is 63. Singer/TV personality Marie Osmond is 63. Rock singer Joey Belladonna is 62. NBA coach Doc Rivers is 61. Actor T'Keyah Crystal Keymah (tuh-KEE'-ah KRYSS'-tal kee-MAH') is 60. College and Pro Football Hall of Famer Jerry Rice is 60. Actor Christopher Judge is 58. Actor Matt Walsh is 58. Actor Reginald Ballard is 57. Actor Kate Walsh is 55. R&B musician Jeff Allen (Mint Condition) is 54. Actor Tisha Campbell-Martin is 54. Olympic silver medal figure skater Nancy Kerrigan is 53. Country singer Rhett Akins is 53. Classical crossover singer Paul Potts is 52. TV personality Billy Bush is 51. Actor Sacha Baron Cohen is 51. R&B singers Brandon and Brian Casey (Jagged Edge) are 47. Actor Kiele Sanchez is 46. Former NBA All-Star Paul Pierce is 45. DJ Vice is 44. Singer Ashanti (ah-SHAHN'-tee) is 42. R&B singer Lumidee is 42. Christian rock singer Jon Micah Sumrall (Kutless) is 42. Olympic gold medal swimmer Ian Thorpe is 40. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., is 33. Actor Caleb McLaughlin (TV: "Stranger Things") is 21.