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Groton Community Calendar

Tuesday, Jan. 31

Senior Menu: Ham, sweet potatoes, mixed vegetables, tropical fruit, dinner roll.

School Breakfast: Pancake on a stick.

School Lunch: Tacos.

Boys Basketball at Langford: JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

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

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.



The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, Feb. 1

Senior Menu: Breaded cod, parsley buttered potatoes, squash, Mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Hashbrown pizza.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

United Methodist Church: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

Groton Chamber Board Meeting, noon, at City Hall
Groton Lions Dress Consignment, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Groton Community Center

St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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That's Life/Tony Bender

Vision, faith, and resolve make the difference

You don't have to drive far to see ghost towns on the Northern Plains. Sometimes I idly wonder why one town died and why its neighbor didn't.

Some of had to do with the railroad. In the beginning, towns needed to be spaced along the route every 10 miles because steam engines needed to be serviced at those intervals. Being along a railroad could make or break you. Or both. Railroad towns were built and when the trains didn't stop there anymore many of them crumbled.

Ashley, ND actually moved, lock, stock and barrel, three miles from Hoskins, where a nice recreational lake graces the landscape, to a location where the railroad was to be located. They moved the town! That took resolve and vision.

Of course, the railroad lines don't service all these communities anymore, but with a solid foothold, some geographical luck, and selfless ingenuity by community builders who, in those days, were as patriotic about their fair cities as many are about Uncle Sam, many communities thrived. After 135 years, Ashley's still standing.

Until a few years ago, the last vestiges of Hoskins, Reinie's Barber Shop, had a place on Main Street but time finally did it in. You won't find Reinie putting with his buddies out on that splendid Ashley golf course, anymore, either. Reinie was one of those beloved community boosters. Times change. The faces change. Sometimes the community spirit and vision endures, sometimes it doesn't.

This is all at the forefront of my mind because of a decision facing the Ashley School District patrons in a week. There's a \$4.85 million issue on the ballot to renovate a school that was constructed when Eisenhower was president and the Interstate system he envisioned sprang into existence, transforming the country and its economy.

The school renovation involves a good chunk of money and it'll mean taxes on a \$100,000 home will go up about \$175. An acre of land will be taxed about \$1.60 more a year. On a fixed retirement income, in inflationary times, that can mean something. So, just as it was every step along the way, people are being asked to build something for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. To sacrifice. To invest in a future. To have the same vision community builders had nearly 65 years ago.

I've been back here for 25 years. I was born in Ashley. When Eisenhower was president. We invested here, purchasing the Ashley Tribune and Wishek Star because we saw a future and a present—wonderful communities in which to raise our kids, a school where they could have elbow room and individual instruction when needed.

We understood geography, too. The communities were far enough away from big cities—about 100 miles in every direction, which meant these towns necessarily had an independent streak. We arrived on the eve of Wishek's Centennial. Now, the 125th is just around the corner. We've seen businesses spring up, expand and flourish. And yeah, a few didn't make it.

I witnessed first-hand the successes and attrition along the railroad line from Aberdeen, SD to Edgeley, ND, a stretch two small crews with muscle and cherry-pickers covered one summer in the late 70's, retrieving, grading, and bundling railroad ties. I remember the first half-day we tested out the system and the specially-built wagons that had been welded for the job. We almost died. My crew consisted of a marshmallowy lead guitar player, a 50-ish chain smoker, me, and a Baptist minister.

Despite that first miserable day, we got into the best shape of our lives. Railroad tie by railroad tie, we walked the line, saw veritable ghost towns and bustling small towns.

Frederick, where I spent my formative years, still has an expansive consolidated school thanks to a vision that was falling into place in the late 60's. The business community would never grow beyond the necessities because of geography—26 miles from Aberdeen, 12 miles from Ellendale—but that gleaming school remains the town's heartbeat.

I published the Adams County Record in Hettinger, ND for about eight years, and soon recognized the genius of the doctors who started the regional hospital there. A small army of medical professionals located among desolate buttes because they imagined an unlikely future we now see. They willed it. Other communities around it shrank; Hettinger's still standing. Not without losses and change, but where would the community be without that medical center?

We're forever evolving, being tested.

Crossroads. Decisions. Will. Faith. Endurance. Perseverance. Vision. Sacrifice. Those are the things that separate the standing and the fallen.

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January 23-29, 2023

Hello from Washington, DC! After our in-state work period, we finally had our first full week of the 118th Congress. We are still waiting for our committee assignments, meaning that hearings and votes have been pretty slow. We certainly aren't letting that stop us, however, from meeting with South Dakotans and hitting the ground running on our policy priorities for the next two years. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:



South Dakota groups I visited with: I met with members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the Oglala Lakota Housing Authority. I also had the opportunity to visit with a few students from Lincoln High School in Sioux Falls who were visiting Washington this past week.

Meetings this past week: Meeting with the Republican members of the Senate Armed Services Committee; Rob Nichols, President of the American Bankers Association; Alex Wang, CEO of Scale AI; LTG Andrew Rohling, Deputy Commanding General of United States Army Europe-Africa; Yousef Al Otaiba, the United Arab Emirates' Ambassador to the United States; and Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI. You might be familiar with OpenAI's product ChatGPT, which has made the news quite a bit lately.

We also had our weekly Senate Bible Study (James 4:10 was our verse of the week) and Senate Prayer Breakfast (Senator Marsha Blackburn from Tennessee was our speaker).

Met with South Dakotans from: Pine Ridge and Sioux Falls.

Topics discussed: Artificial Intelligence's present and rising role in our world, housing challenges and opportunities on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and priorities for the upcoming Congress. I also had the opportunity to speak on CSPAN's Washington Journal last Thursday morning about the conflict in Ukraine. If you're interested, you can watch the video here.

Votes taken: 2 – One of these was on the nomination of Brendan Owens to the Department of Defense as Assistant Secretary for Energy, Installations, and Environment. I voted yes.

Hearings: Hearings were pretty light this week given that we have yet to receive our committee assignments for the 118th Congress! We had one hearing this week in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee titled "Countering Russian Aggression: Ukraine and Beyond."

Classified briefings: I had one classified briefing with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen and Sioux Falls.

In Case You Missed It: During our in-state work period, I sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) urging the leader to schedule a vote on the Family and Small Business Taxpayer Protection Act, H.R. 23. This legislation, which passed the House of Representatives on January 9, 2023, would stop the hiring of 87,000 new IRS agents and auditors which would make the IRS a larger employer than the Pentagon, State Department, FBI and Border Patrol combined. Additionally, it would return over \$71 billion to American taxpayers over a ten-year period and provide immediate relief from costly IRS audits

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to everyday American families who are already constrained by record inflation.

Steps taken this past week: 45,736 steps or 21.44 miles.



Photo of the Week: South Dakota native and retired U.S. Navy Captain E. Royce Williams recently received the Navy Cross from the Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro. My office worked with the Navy to properly recognize Capt. Williams with an upgrade of his previously-awarded Silver Star Medal, which he received for his service during the Korean War. Captain Williams is a real life Top Gun. On November 18, 1952, then-Lieutenant Williams led three F9F Panthers against seven Soviet MiG-15s, which according to the U.S. Naval Institute, were "superior to the F9F in almost every fashion." His mission, which was the only direct overwater combat between

U.S. Navy fighters and Soviet fighters during the Cold War, led to the protection of Task Force 77 from enemy attack. You can read more about Capt. Williams in this story from KOTA TV.

Additionally, my office assists veterans and their families with lost or overdue military awards. The contact information for each office can be found at <https://www.rounds.senate.gov/contact/office-locations>.

Grants available for Child Care Expansion and Startup

PIERRE – Governor Kristi Noem has approved the release of \$12.5 million in federal funding over the next year to fuel the expansion and startup of new child care facilities in South Dakota. These grants will be administered by the Department of Social Services (DSS).

"Over the past several months, we have held listening sessions to receive feedback from parents, child care providers, and communities to hear where state investments can be best utilized. Our joint goal is to increase the options available to parents across the state," said Governor Kristi Noem. "We can do this by expanding our state's capacity of high-quality, flexible child care options. And we are looking at opportunities to streamline child care regulations to increase access, as well."

The following providers will be eligible to apply for these grants: traditional day care centers, in-home providers, employer-sponsored programs, community collaboratives, public/private partnerships, non-profit providers, municipalities, schools, and other community organizations, such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs.

"The continued growth of South Dakota's thriving economy will rely on the provision of safe, reliable, and sustainable child care solutions for working parents," said DSS Cabinet Secretary Matt Althoff. "We highly value those that care for our children. These grants are a reflection of how important child care is in fostering a healthy workforce that maintains our growing economy."

Grant requests can be made for a wide variety of needs, including facility expenses, payroll and benefit increases, pre-operational health and safety resources needed to meet licensing requirements, and equipment and supply purchases needed to start a strong, safe program.

There are \$25.5 million in outstanding ARPA child care dollars, and DSS will announce how these will be utilized in the near future.

For questions about expansion and startup grants, planning grants, or child care licensing contact your local DSS Office of Licensing and Accreditation, email sdchildcaregrants@state.sd.us, or call 605.688.4330 ext. 6000209.

For more information on the new program visit <https://sddss.force.com/ChildCareStartUps>.

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

Police Department did not name the officer, but the news comes officer Preston Hemphill was removed yesterday.

- Twenty-four Republican senators have vowed to oppose a debt ceiling increase unless it is accompanied by "real structural spending reform that reduces deficit spending."
- Any military option pursued by the U.S. against Iran would result in all-out conflict with regionwide ramifications, Iranian officials told Newsweek after a drone strike against at least one defense factory in the city of Isfahan.
- Cindy Williams, who starred as Shirley Feeney opposite of Penny Marshall in the Happy Days spinoff Laverne & Shirley, died Wednesday after a brief illness. She was 75.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia is probably seeking to target areas in the eastern Donetsk region that it doesn't already control as part of an effort to divert Ukrainian troops from the city of Bakhmut, U.K.'s British Ministry of Defence said.

- The Manhattan district attorney's office is reportedly set to begin presenting evidence to a grand jury on Monday over Donald Trump's alleged role in paying hush money to film star Stormy Daniels. Trump's former attorney Michael Cohen is expected to be a key witness in the probe.

- President Joe Biden campaigned on a pledge to work toward abolishing the death penalty, but advocates say he is far from making good on that promise.

- A seventh Memphis police officer has been disciplined in connection with the death of Tyre Nichols. The Memphis

H E L P
W A N T E D

Position available for full-time Police Officer. Experience and SD Certification preferred. Salary negotiable DOE. Please send application and resume to the City of Groton, PO Box 587, Groton, SD 57445. This position is open until filled. Applications may be found at <https://www.city.grotonsd.gov/forms/Application-ForCityEmployeePO.pdf>. For more information, please call 605-397-8422. Equal opportunity employer.

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Many people helped out at the Robotics Pancake Feed held Sunday at the Groton Community Center.

Lions members (l-r) Topper Tastad, Dave Pigors, Nancy Radke, Deb Frederickson, Nancy Larsen

Groton Robotics-back row (l-r) Melissa Schultz, Weston Dinger, Neil Warrington, Jack Dinger, Ethan Clark, Logan Clocksene, Liz Clocksene, BJ Clocksene, Shane Clark; middle row (l-r) Emily Dinger, Gretchan Cleveland, Laura Clark, Bradyn Wienk; front row (l-r) Connor Kroll and Grant Cleveland. (Courtesy Photo)

Groton Lions paired up with Groton Robotics for a successful Pancake Feed!

Thank you to all those who came out to the community center on Sunday to support the Groton Robotics teams, including parents and Lion club members. The event was a huge success! People were able to visit with robotist and check out their robots used in tournaments. It was decided to pair the event with the Carnival of Silver Skates so families could come out and enjoy a big breakfast before heading to the rink! Dine-in or take-out options were available. We hope to see you next year! STAY TUNED!

Groton Robotics is open for all kids grade 6th-12th, contact Neil Warrington or Weston Dinger to find out more! The group meets once a week and travels to about 5 Saturday tournaments a year located in Canton, Harrisburg, Mitchell, Rapid City, Sioux Falls and Valley city, ND. Groton hosts one tournament a year, typically in January. Please visit the Groton Tigers Robotics Facebook page for the latest updates and tournament information. Our next tournament will be in Rapid

City at the School of Mines on Saturday, February 11th. Visit our Facebook page for the link to view the livestream, pictures, and tournament results!

Submitted by Groton Robotics

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Some of the Robotics team members helping with the serving are Garrett Schultz, Ethan Clark, Corbin Weismantel and Axel Warrington. (Courtesy Photo)



BJ Clocksene helped make the pancakes for the Robotics Pancake feed held Sunday. (Courtesy Photo)



Jack Dinger, Gretchan Cleveland and Kianna Sanders were the greeters at the pancake feed. (Courtesy Photo)

GDILIVE.COM

Looking for sponsors for these upcoming games.

Deuel Boys and Girls JV
JH Boys Games with Aberdeen Christian on Feb. 6
North Central Boys JV Game
Elk Point-Jefferson Girls JV Game in Groton on Feb. 9
Redfield Girls JV and C games
Mobridge-Pollock Girls JV

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Higher Power Sports



➤ **FREE Event**

➤ **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC!**

Groton Fellowship of Christian Students
presents **TWO motivational speakers,**

Tim Weidenbach & Deb Hadley

➤ **Sunday,
February 5th
3:16pm**
➤ **at the Groton
Methodist
Church**



Tim's Character Coaching & Be Kind Talk:

Higher Power Sports supports & serves HS & College athletes, coaches & families throughout the Midwest. He focuses on leadership, perseverance, opportunity, integrity, loyalty & making an impact on the teams he serves. Tim shares a fun & inspiring message on how kindness is contagious & encourages acceptance.

Deb's Overcoming Adversity Presentation:

Adversity is inevitable. Deb has had more than her share of loss. Often our students are caught off guard & lack the skill set to cope with hardships that come their way. Broken relationships, setbacks from COVID, bullying, lack of playing time, academic struggles, poor body image & low self-esteem, struggles at home &/or the death of loved ones, are some of the possibilities that can send the life of a student spiraling out of control. The goal of this seminar is to equip today's youth with the tools to help prepare them to handle the hardships that come their way & inspire them to turn their setbacks into opportunities to better their lives!

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DAK XII – NEC “CLASH”

Girls Basketball / February 4, 2023
@ Madison High School

SCHEDULE

AUX GYM

- 11:45 / #11 Seeds / Webster Area (38.250) vs Dell Rapids (36.786)
- 1:15 / #10 Seeds / Deuel (38.917) vs Madison (38.500)
- 2:45 / #9 Seeds / Redfield (39.077) vs Tri-Valley (39.167)
- 4:15 / #8 Seeds / Clark-Willow Lk (39.538) vs West Central (39.909)
- 5:45 / #7 Seeds / Tiospa Zina (39.571) vs Dak Valley (39.929)

MAIN GYM

- 11:00 / #6 Seeds / Ab Roncalli (41.917) vs ElkPoint-Jeff (40.917)
- 12:30 / #5 Seeds / Groton Area (43.077) vs Canton (41.333)
- 2:00 / #4 Seeds / Milbank (43.250) vs Tea Area (41.636)
- 3:30 / #3 Seeds / Parkston (43.333) vs Lennox (43.071)
- 5:00 / #2 Seeds / Sisseton (45.083) vs SF Christian (45.000)
- 6:30 / #1 Seeds / Hamlin (46.923) vs Vermillion (46.500)

***** Game times are NOT rolling *****

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#577 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

New-case rates seem to have stabilized, even decreased somewhat; that is good but not great news. We're now at a seven-day new-case average of just 46,021, a bit below where we were at last Update, four days ago. The bad news is that, although we're slowing down, we've passed another million total cases and are now at 12,008,656. Here's the recent history.

July 21 – 90 million – 7 days

July 29 – 91 million – 8 days

August 8 – 92 million – 10 days

August 17 – 93 million – 9 days

August 29 – 94 million – 12 days

September 9 – 95 million – 11 days

September 28 – 96 million – 19 days

October 26 – 97 million – 28 days

November 19 – 98 million – 23 days

December 8 – 99 million – 20 days

December 23 – 100 million – 15 days

January 6, 2023 – 101 million – 14 days

January 27 – 102 million – 21 days

Hospitalizations are lower at 33,451 from 3,148 a few days ago. The seven-day deaths average is at 521, not much decreased from last Update's 548. Still, I guess that's progress. Total deaths are at 1,114,228.

XBB.1.5 has reached true dominance in the US, now accounting for 61.3 percent of cases. XBB is at just 2.8 percent, which makes the XBB sub variants together responsible for 64.1 percent, nearly two-thirds, of new cases. The BQ subvariants account for another 31.1 percent. So these two families of subvariants are responsible for 92.4 percent of cases. No other subvariants much matter at this point.

However, there is a new subvariant on the horizon—just what we needed. This one is CH.1.1, also called Orthus. It accounts for only 1.5 percent of US cases, but it has the potential to be more transmissible than what's circulating now and to evade immunity as well as causing more severe disease. That's the trifecta—not a good thing at this point. The immediate concern with this subvariant is the reemergence of a mutation, L452R, that was last seen in Delta (B.1.617.2) which confers additional transmissibility and also the potential for more severe disease. You may recall that Delta was particularly deadly, so we do not want anything like that to pop up at this—or any—point. We do know that levels of CH.1.1 have been increasing globally since November. It does not appear to be a recombinant, but rather an example of convergent evolution, the process by which variants gain mutations beneficial to the virus like L452R by a process of happening across common workarounds for our defenses.

This subvariant emerged in Southeast Asia. It accounts for more than one-fourth of new cases in the UK and New Zealand and is now up to one-tenth of cases worldwide. It is also gaining on other subvariants in Hong Kong and Papua New Guinea. Additionally, we are seeing rising numbers of this subvariant in Cambodia and Ireland. Levels are doubling ever two weeks, which is worrisome. It is highly successful at binding ACE2 receptors, the site on host cells where SARS-CoV-2 gains entry to the cell; this makes it a good candidate for evading antibodies. That L452 mutation may give it a competitive advantage against other subvariants.

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This CH.1.1, a descendant of BA.2.75, along with another new subvariant, CA.3.1, seem to show additional immune evasiveness over currently dominant strains. This is not a great situation. It may be, as a descendant of BA.2.75, that this is about equivalent to XBB subvariants which are also BA.2.75 offspring, but we still aren't sure about that. It may be that the new bivalent Wuhan-HU-1/BA.5 booster will offer protection against these new subvariants, but there is no guarantee at this point. We're not in a good place right now. We'll see where this one goes, but I'm uneasy.

Well, this isn't great news either. We have another study of infant outcomes after the mother has been infected with Covid-19 during the pregnancy. The work was funded by NIH and conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital with live offspring of all mothers who delivered at six hospitals in the spring and summer of 2020. The 7772 infants, 222 of whom were born to mothers with PCR-confirmed infections, were followed for one year after birth and the change in likelihood of neurodevelopmental sequelae was expressed as an odds ratio (OR), the amount of decrease/increase in the likelihood of an event, for example, an OR of 0.5 would mean the event was half as likely and an OR of 3.0 means it is three times as likely. What we have so far are preliminary findings, but it does appear in this relatively small study that there are issues. The neurodevelopmental milestones babies are generally expected to hit during their first year include things like playing games, putting objects in a container, or picking up small objects between thumb and forefinger; significant delays in hitting these milestones result in a diagnosis of a neurodevelopmental disorder listed by these authors such as disorders of motor function, expressive language disorder, and disorders of speech and language.

Some of the findings are that preterm birth was more likely in exposed mothers (14.4 percent compared to 8.7 percent) and also associated with neurodevelopmental sequelae which were over twice as likely (OR 2.17) in infants of exposed mothers. Third trimester infection showed larger effects with OR 2.34. We will note here that, of course, much longer-term studies can't really be done at this time simply because SARS-CoV-2 hasn't been around long enough for children born during the pandemic to reach school age or the teen-aged years when some neurodevelopmental diagnoses often occur; so there are many neurodevelopmental disorders known to occur following other viral infections like influenza which would not have had time to show up yet, things like "autism spectrum disorders, schizophrenia, . . . cognitive dysfunction, bipolar disorder, and anxiety and depression." There has also not been enough time to discern whether some of the sequelae seen might moderate or disappear with time; we do not know yet how likely it is that these kinds of disorders following Covid-19 in mothers during pregnancy resolve with time, that is, the children later "catch up" with their peers. This is a concern, obviously for individual families and children, but also for society as it allocates resources for the support of these children and their families.

We have something like 3.5 million fewer workers today than we need to fill the available jobs; that's enough to hurt the economy for sure. Worker shortages contribute to inflation because employers have to pay higher wages to attract workers. Now some of that is arguably a good thing to ensure that workers are paid fairly and not exploited; too much means wages rise, then prices rise, then buying slows down, then the economy falters. I'm not an economist (of all the courses I took in college, economics was my least favorite—and it wasn't even close), so I don't know where that sweet spot is; but I do know we're not at it right now. So the question arises, where are all the workers?

Well, some of them are dead due to around 400,000 unexpected deaths among working age people due to the pandemic. These were not all caused by Covid-19, although many were; there were also increases from other direct causes, some of which may well be associated with the pandemic. According to Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell, another 280,000 to 680,000 have long-Covid and are unable to work or unable to work full-time. Then there were premature retirements during the pandemic, some 2.4 million in the first 18 months of the pandemic, some of them perhaps due to long-Covid (these categories

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overlap to some extent) and some due to older workers being scared off by their potential exposure to SARS-CoV-2 because they were at high risk. Figuring this all out is well above my paygrade (especially considering I don't have a paygrade at this point in my life); but I do know we need to figure some things out if we want to keep the economy humming along. This problem isn't going away if we don't begin to address some root causes and find ways to entice or assist workers back into the workforce.

The CDC's Vaccines and Related Biologic Products Advisory Committee (VRBPAC) met on schedule on Thursday to discuss Covid-19 vaccines and boosters. They unanimously recommended phasing out the original vaccine and using vaccines updated for current variants as the standard formulation; all vaccines would be targeted to the same variant(s) and would be interchangeable. The plan/schedule for phasing that in is up to the FDA. The Committee's reasons for accepting this proposal were for the purpose of simplifying dosing and to be sure the vaccines given are up-to-date on current variants. They did not vote on, but did appear to be in support of, a strategy to hold public meetings to guide selection of strains for each updated vaccine formulation.

They also discussed adopting a streamlined vaccination schedule whereby the standard dosing would be one dose of updated vaccine each fall; older adults, the immunocompromised, and very young children could be administered additional doses as needed. They did not vote on that streamlined schedule, but instead asked for more data on hospitalizations of people infected after vaccination. They indicated they would not make a decision until they had this additional information. There were still questions about whether an annual booster is needed at all in some populations (or example, young, healthy people) and whether fall is the best time to boost given this virus has not yet settled into a seasonal pattern or whether it ever will.

It looks like there will be another VRBPAC meeting in late May or early June to discuss whether the vaccine needs updating, which strains might be included, and whether an updated vaccine should be monovalent or multivalent to match the currently circulating variant(s). By that time, we should have a lot more data on which to base a decision. They left open the possibility to have meetings more than annually to keep up with changes in the virus. Vaccine companies weighed in on this and suggested they really need more time to ramp up production of a new vaccine by fall; it is not clear the companies will get this. There's a balancing act involved here: the need to wait as long as possible to determine which variants need targeting versus the need to provide manufacturers sufficient time to roll out a new formulation.

With regard to the issue of vaccine-associated adverse events, the FDA reported to the group that they were not able after reviewing multiple federal databases—the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (MMS), the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS), the Department of Veterans Affairs—to identify a stroke risk in people 65 and over who received the bivalent booster. Richard Forshee, deputy director of the FDA's biostatistics office, reported to the committee, "So far the data that we have seen suggests the absence of a safety risk for the bivalent boosters in age 65 years and older." He went on to say, "We also contacted Pfizer and they consulted their global safety database and they did not see any increase or a signal for ischemic stroke in their systems." Forshee added, "We contacted a number of our international regulatory agencies, and various countries in Europe as well as Israel have indicated no increased risk of stroke on their surveillance systems." All of this adds up to create serious doubt about any risk.

Still, after all that, the FDA scientists also conducted a small analysis for themselves and have some very preliminary data which might suggest a higher stroke risk in those who received the Pfizer bivalent booster and the adjuvanted influenza vaccine at the same time. You may recall that an adjuvant is a vaccine additive that induces a greater and more prolonged stimulus to the immune system; one of the flu vaccines targeted to the elderly has an adjuvant, it is possible this particular influenza vaccine poses a

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risk in conjunction with the bivalent mRNA Covid-19 vaccine boosters. In order to resolve this question, they are launching a study of that potential risk with a goal to have data before the 2023-24 flu season vaccines roll out.

From the first signal back in November, it was anticipated that this signal did not represent a true clinical risk, but the FDA notified the scientific community and did the legwork to evaluate that signal, just in case. There has now been a vigorous and comprehensive review of reams of data in an attempt to find another such signal; that search failed to turn anything up. There was also an independent analysis conducted by FDA scientists, and the only thing they've been able to turn up are some preliminary findings indicating a maybe, sorta kind of risk. And so now they'll more thoroughly study that maybe, sorta because there is a real commitment to safety; and if that maybe, sorta turns into something real, they'll let us know and issue guidelines to reduce any risk. These are not the actions of an evil cabal who is trying to pull the wool over our eyes. Once again, the system is doing precisely what it is supposed to do.

We've seen this coming for a long time, but it finally happened on Thursday: The FDA withdrew its emergency use authorization (EUA) for Evusheld from the market. This is that combination of two long-term monoclonal antibodies, tixagevimab and cilgavimab, used prophylactically in immunocompromised people, some seven million of whom are eligible, from the market. These immunocompromised people include patients receiving certain cancer chemotherapies, folks who've received immunosuppressive drugs following transplants, and others whose immune systems don't work the way they should. Evusheld has lost effectiveness against nearly 95 percent of the new cases we're seeing—primarily XBB and BQ subvariants—so its risk-to-benefit profile is no longer favorable. Because the folks using Evusheld do not typically respond well to vaccination, they've been increasingly vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2 since vaccines began losing effectiveness; they are currently at least four times more likely to end up hospitalized due to Covid-19 than the general population.

At this point we do not have anything else to offer in its place; in fact, we have no monoclonal antibodies at all in current use. Honestly, I don't see that changing because developing a monoclonal is exceptionally expensive; a company with a pretty good success rate might have spent in the range of \$3 billion in 2020 to bring such a drug to market, more if you don't get a lot of hits. If we consider that only 720,000 doses of Evusheld were ever given before it became ineffective (theoretically over \$4000 in cost to the company per dose administered), it's pretty tough for a pharmaceutical company to see monoclonals for Covid-19 as a good investment. With no further federal dollars being spent on this sort of research and development, I expect the monoclonal pipeline is going to stay dried up, leaving immunocompromised and at-risk people in a bind. The CDC recommends immunocompromised people exercise additional precautions—mask, distance, avoid indoor crowds, and get tested and treated with antivirals if the test is positive. There should be more for these people; there is not. I wish things were different, but there we are.

We have a new study out of Australia from the Garvan Institute of Medical Research, the University of New South Wales, and other organizations which looked at T-cell dynamics in children and adults with mild or asymptomatic Covid-19 published this month in the journal *Clinical Immunology*. The research team found that children who are infected do not develop adaptive memory to protect them against reinfections with SARS-CoV-2. What appears to be going on is that children have a strong innate response to the virus that takes it out before they have time to develop a strong adaptive response. This could mean children do not have long-term protection after an infection, not a great situation for them.

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I read a round-up of studies regarding the durability of immunity against SARS-CoV-2 after infection and/or vaccination. Here's what the current state of knowledge tells us:

(1) We know infection activates the immune system, which provides some level of protection after the infection resolves. CDC studies show your risk for infection is quite low for at least six months afterward if your immune system is functioning properly. It is, however, limited if a new variant that escapes current immunity would emerge in that time, and it does wane with time. It does appear that the remaining antibodies and longer-term cell-mediated immune response do help to prevent severe illness over time. We also have evidence that the protection you get from infection varies with the severity of the illness you experienced; the milder the infection, the less and shorter duration the protection. People with moderate or worse infections have higher titers of immunity with longer duration than those with mild infections, so mild infection may not confer much or very long-term immunity. And if your infection was prior to the dominance of the Omicron variant and its subvariants, you need to be particularly cautious in the current environment where Omicron subvariants are just about all that's around; earlier infections do not match well immunologically with these subvariants.

(2) Older people and those who are immunocompromised have lower levels of immunity after recovery from infection. So if you're over 65, have comorbidities, and/or are immunocompromised, you should probably take precautions even after infection, leaving nothing to chance. And if you spend time with people who are compromised, don't relax precautions even after either you or the compromised person recover from infection.

(3) Vaccine-induced immunity does appear to be broader and more durable than infection-induced immunity, but it is not perfect and it doesn't last forever. It does appear from a number of studies that vaccination confers better protection than infection. This is particularly true if you've received the new bivalent booster which has been updated to include more recent variants.

(4) It appears a combination of prior vaccination and prior infection confer the strongest and most durable protection. Still, I would not recommend seeking out infection to boost your response. That would be like jumping out of an aircraft without a parachute in an attempt to avoid the possibility the aircraft will crash with you in it.

And that's it for tonight. Keep yourself well, and we'll talk in a few days.

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Two 13-point rallies boost Flacons past Tigers

Two 13-point runs by Florence-Henry propelled the Falcons to a 47-21 win over the Groton Area Tigers in girls basketball action played Monday in Florence. The Falcons led at the quarters tops at 13-2, 25-7 and 41-14.

Sydney Leicht led the Tigers with seven points and one steal. Brooklyn Hanson had five points, one rebound and one steal. Jerica Locke had four points and four rebounds. Jaedyn Penning had three points and three rebounds. Faith Traphagen had two points, one rebound, one assist and two steals. Aspen Johnson had two rebounds and one steal. Brooke Gengerke had four rebounds and two assists. Elizabeth Flihs and Rylee Dunker each had one steal.

Groton Area made six of 25 two-pointers for 24 percent, one of 11 in three-pointers for 9 percent, six of nine free throws for 67 percent, had 15 rebounds, 21 turnovers, three assists, seven steals and 15 team fouls.

Florence-Henry was led by Caylin Kelly with 15 points followed by Trinity Watson with eight, Taylor Watson seven, Reese Schmidt and Aubrie Hartley each had six, Katelyn Klitzke four, and Haley Hlavacek added one. The Falcons made 18 of 44 field goals for 41 percent, eight of 11 free throws for 73 percent, had 17 turnovers and 11 team fouls.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 39-13. Scoring for Groton Area: Kennedy Hansen 8, Brooklyn Hansen 6, Kella Tracy 6, Laila Roberts 5, Faith Traphagen 4, Talli Wright 4, Taryn Traphagen 2, Elizabeth Flihs 2, Rylee Dunker 2.

The Tigers won the C game, 32-16. Scoring for Groton Area: McKenna Tietz 9, Kella Tracy 7, Talli Wright 6, Mia Crank 3, Sydney Locke 2, Emerlee Jones 2, Emily Clark 2, Ashlyn Warrington 1.

The C and JV games were broadcast and recorded on GDILIVE.COM sponsored by Craig and Tasha Dunker. The varsity game was sponsored by Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Chamber of Commerce, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Locke Electric, Spanier Harvesting & Trucking, Bahr Spray Foam, Thunder Seed with John Wheeting.



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Corrections secretary: Millions for prisons will ease overcrowding, boost security

Lawmakers voice concerns about location, due diligence

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 30, 2023 6:19 PM

PIERRE – In 2022, some inmates at the overcrowded women’s prison in Pierre were bunked in the gym, which closed the gym for every inmate living there.

The gym is open again, lawmakers learned Monday, but now a classroom is closed because it’s filled with overflow inmates.

Department of Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko offered several stories about space-related shuffling during Monday’s hearing of the South Dakota Legislature’s Joint Appropriations Committee, in one case explaining how a housing arrangement gave inmates personal space just 14 inches wide and 24 inches deep.

“We had one room that went from three inmates to six inmates to nine inmates,” said Wasko.

The proposed budget presented to appropriators Monday included details on how the DOC will manage its overflow in the next few years and what it will cost to build new facilities to serve the state’s public safety needs into the future.

For the women, the DOC needs space for low-level offenders. For the men, the need is for inmates at higher security levels – and for a safer, modern building.

The South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls holds 275 more medium- and high-security inmates than American Correctional Association guidelines recommend, and its outdated layout creates an unsafe environment for inmates and officers.

When inmates line up for meals, Wasko said there are parts of the facility – known colloquially as “The Hill” – that are so loud that “I can scream, I can yell, I can stomp on the catwalk and you will not hear me.”

“We have had staff that have said that they don’t feel safe,” said Wasko, a nurse by training who came to the DOC 10 months ago after more than two decades of correctional work in Colorado. “I’ll be honest with you, I’ve been doing prisons for a long time, and on The Hill, I don’t feel safe.”

The agency wants \$60 million to add a 308-bed women’s prison in Rapid City to its roster of facilities. It would be located in the northeast part of the city, just southeast of the East North Street/Interstate 90 interchange, and is projected to open in 2024.

In the meantime, the DOC has contracted with the Hughes County Jail to house some female inmates, and has budgeted \$2.8 million to cover the cost.

House Bill 1017 would set aside another \$52 million for land purchases and design of a 1,500-bed men’s prison to replace the antiquated penitentiary in Sioux Falls. Beyond the immediate spending clause, HB 1017 would transfer \$290 million into the state’s incarceration construction fund for future use.

The DOC’s finance director estimated total project costs for the men’s prison at \$540 million across the life of the project, which has no official start date or location.

Cost of men’s prison questioned

The costs caught scrutiny on Monday, with some lawmakers asking Wasko to explain the upward trajectory of the cost and size of the new prisons.

On the women’s prison side, the project grew from 100 beds to 200 and then more than 300 as the DOC dug down into inmate population projections.

There were also issues with the \$3.8 million land purchase.

Wasko told lawmakers that the 20 acres, purchased before she took over the DOC, has less than 15

acres of land suitable for building.

For the men's prison, Wasko said, the DOC hopes to avoid missteps.

"We're looking at a little bit more due diligence on the larger land purchase for House Bill 1072," the secretary said.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, wanted to know how the \$52 million requested for the men's prison would be divided between land and design.

"It's hard for me to see the land costing more than five or \$10 million, and that would leave the balance for design," Venhuizen said. "That seems like a very high number."

Brittini Skipper, the DOC director of finance and administration, said the land near Sioux Falls would cost \$10 million. The remainder would cover design, engineering and architecture fees, Skipper said, but was "based on a preliminary total project cost of \$600 million" for the penitentiary replacement.

"We have since revised that down to about \$540 million," Skipper said. "So if some of that were not used for design, it would be used for the construction."

Location worries loom

The DOC went through all the necessary permitting for the purchase of the women's prison land in Rapid City, Skipper said. No final site has been chosen for the penitentiary replacement project in Sioux Falls.

Both sites could be a cause for concern in their respective communities, according to lawmakers and Wasko.

Rapid City Republican Sen. David Johnson told Wasko that he's heard several concerns about the new women's prison during legislative public forums. Johnson asked for a map of the location because "this is getting a lot of attention in Rapid City."

Rep. Dennis Krull of Hill City seconded that request. He doesn't live in Rapid City, he said, but he's familiar with the kinds of concerns that emerge from neighbors when large projects are pitched.

"There seems to be a general feel out there 'don't put it in my backyard,' whether we're talking about a slaughterhouse or a jail," Krull said.

Wasko told lawmakers that she agrees with Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken, who has said he hopes the new Sioux Falls facility is out of town.

"I don't want another prison in the middle of a metropolitan area, too," she said.

The 1881 building would be demolished if the new penitentiary plan goes through, but the newer Jameson Annex and the Sioux Falls minimum security facilities would remain.

The ideal location for the new 1,500-bed facility, Wasko said, would be near enough to Sioux Falls for current employees to easily access but far enough away to draw job candidates from smaller towns.

But Wasko said the location probably wouldn't be the primary selling point for employees.

"I think that the attractiveness of this project will be that we'll have a state of the art correctional facility that is designed to make offender operations safer and more efficient," she said.

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux falls Argus Leader.

Suspended state senator files lawsuit as staff complaint against her is released

Document alleges lawmaker made offensive comments about breastfeeding and vaccines

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 30, 2023 5:12 PM

A South Dakota state senator allegedly made lewd comments to a legislative staffer about breastfeeding and said vaccines would harm or kill the staffer's baby, according to the staffer's written complaint.

The complaint by the Legislative Research Council staffer against state Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller, R-Rapid City, was released Monday by Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown. Meanwhile, Frye-Mueller filed a lawsuit against Schoenbeck in federal court, alleging her right to free speech has been

violated.

The staffer's name was redacted from the complaint. The staffer wrote that the incident happened Jan. 24 in her office at the Capitol, and was reported Jan. 25. Frye-Mueller has since been suspended by the Senate, and a committee has been formed to potentially recommend expelling, censuring, disciplining or exonerating Frye-Mueller. The lawsuit from Frye-Mueller asks a judge to reinstate her.

The complaint says Frye-Mueller went to the staffer's office to discuss a bill draft. Frye-Mueller allegedly asked about the staffer's baby and whether the baby was vaccinated.

"I told her, 'Yes,'" the redacted complaint states. "Without allowing me to elaborate further, she proceeded to point her finger at me and aggressively say that this will cause him issues. She said my baby 'could get down syndrome, or autism.' She further went on to say that 'he will die from those vaccines.'"

Frye-Mueller allegedly went on to ask the staffer whether she is breastfeeding. After the staffer said she is formula-feeding, Frye-Mueller allegedly said the staffer's husband could suck on the staffer's breasts to produce milk, and that "a good time for that is at night." Frye-Mueller then allegedly gestured to her own chest area and motioned to her own husband, who was in the room. "He smiled and nodded," the complaint says.

Frye-Mueller said Saturday at a press conference in Rapid City that she was offering private advice to the staffer, and that the Senate's actions are unfair.

The Senate Select Committee on Discipline and Expulsion that was appointed last week to review the matter had its first meeting Monday evening and discussed procedure and logistics.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Committee passes resolution that would allow Medicaid work requirements

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 30, 2023 12:03 PM

South Dakotans may find Medicaid on the ballot again in 2024.

The House State Affairs Committee passed a joint resolution Monday morning 11-2. It would ask South Dakota voters to amend the state constitution to let the state impose work requirements on "able-bodied" people eligible for expanded Medicaid.

South Dakota voters approved a constitutional amendment during the 2022 general election with a 56% majority to expand Medicaid eligibility. South Dakota is the 39th state to expand the program, which is a federal-state partnership providing health care insurance for low-income people.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, and Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, proposed the joint resolution.

The resolution would add an exception to the voter-approved amendment, which currently prohibits the state from imposing "greater or additional burdens or restrictions" on eligibility. The exception says the state "may impose a work requirement on any person, eligible under this section, who is able-bodied."

Opponents to the resolution included several health organizations, such as Avera and the American Lung Association, who worry that such an amendment would threaten access to health care for thousands of South Dakotans, add administrative costs to enforce reporting requirements laid out in the resolution, and make it difficult to define who is "able-bodied."

Representatives with the American Lung Association and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society submitted written opposition. It listed studies stating most Medicaid enrollees work unless they have a mental or physical condition interfering with their ability to work. Another study suggested Medicaid coverage made it easier for enrollees to find work.

Venhuizen addressed concerns during the committee meeting, saying the amendment does not mandate a work requirement.

"It doesn't define every detail," Venhuizen said. "It takes the prohibition out of the constitution so we can have this debate."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

New U.S. House Natural Resources chair opposes limits on fossil fuel development

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - JANUARY 30, 2023 7:19 PM

The incoming chairman of the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee wants to allow more mining and believes technology — not limitations on fossil fuel production — is the best way to address climate change.

As part of their organization of the chamber they now control, U.S. House Republicans selected Arkansas' Bruce Westerman to lead the panel that oversees the U.S. Interior Department and the U.S. Forest Service and has a major role in shaping federal energy and environmental policy.

Its power, though, will be severely checked for at least the next two years by a Democratic Senate and president.

In an interview with States Newsroom, Westerman, a forester with a background in engineering, said his direction for the panel would depart from that of Democrats.

He'd rather focus on technology — including nuclear energy, carbon sequestration and biochar, a 2,500-year-old technique of heating wood, manure and other biomass to create carbon charcoal with multiple uses — to reduce carbon emissions and atmospheric buildup, than on limiting industry.

Westerman also said he'd work to open more mining development to gather resources like cobalt, nickel, copper and others needed to build electric vehicles and additional tools of an energy transition, though he added electric vehicles' potential to reduce carbon emissions was overstated.

Congress should have a role in shaping a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, he said, but lawmakers should be mindful that it's a global issue and that developing countries are not trading their own economic growth to limit emissions — and perhaps the United States shouldn't either.

"We can't wreck our economy for something that's not going to be a valid solution," he said.

The following interview, conducted by phone on Jan. 26, has been condensed and edited for clarity.

States Newsroom: Just to start out, what are your priorities for the committee's work this Congress?

Bruce Westerman: You may or may not be aware of our Commitment to America (House Republicans' proposed agenda heading into the 2022 midterms) that we put out. Part of that is energy security, national security, energy independence.

And that's really a broad subject. It involves not just oil and gas, but also all the mining and critical minerals that are needed for the electrification that's being proposed and ties in with Chinese supply chains.

So there's a lot of things tied up in our Commitment to America that the Natural Resources Committee will have a role in. Energy and mining is a huge one of those.

The United States has been blessed with natural resources. There's been a mentality that we're going to lock those resources up and not use them — kind of a not-in-my-backyard mentality — mainly coming from the left. But the fact is that if we're not producing them here, they're being produced somewhere else in the world and they're being produced in a less environmentally friendly way, and less environmental, health and safety regulations on it.

SN: Are you talking about the rare earth metals or other types of mining? Or what in particular?

BW: All of the above.

If you look at China in particular, and their supply, the amount of rare earths and other minerals that they mined and supply to the world, they're almost on a different scale on the charts. And we're very dependent upon products that are made with processed minerals out of China.

We still have a large part of our economy that's based on that. But I think it's pretty low compared to

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the Chinese economy. We use about \$900 billion of processed minerals in the United States a year, and we generate about \$3.3 to \$3.4 trillion of GDP on that, so it's still a huge part of our economy.

But we're also importing a lot of those processed minerals from China. And we're also buying a lot of products that are manufactured in China, which is essentially exporting our wealth to the Chinese government.

We can look at natural resources as a way to leverage our U.S. economy against the Chinese economy. We can talk about Russia in that as well, with oil and gas.

SN: Just to go back for a second. You talked about the mining needed for "the electrification that's being proposed." Like, more electric vehicles? Or what did you mean by that?

BW: All of the above. You can't have electric vehicles without having a place to plug them in. And you can't have a place to plug them in without increasing the size of the grid. You've got to be able to generate more electricity.

If you're going to generate it with wind and solar, you're going to have to have a tremendous amount of things manufactured from elements and minerals to generate that electricity, or we're going to be generating it the way we're generating 69% of it right now and that's with fossil fuels.

So it's a very complicated network of interactions there and all of it is dependent upon energy and minerals.

I think the problem with the Democrats' and the Biden administration's approach is that — what I've been saying is they have two problems. I think they have not defined the problem correctly. Hence, they're trying to go about solving the problem in the wrong way.

I think electric cars are fascinating, but electric cars in the United States are going to do very, very little, if anything, to decrease global carbon emissions. And if all the eggs are in that basket in the U.S., there's going to have to be a tremendous amount of mining for lithium and copper and cobalt, nickel, a lot of ingredients that go into an electric car.

And then at the end of the day, it could have an impact of less than 1% global greenhouse gas reductions, if you were able to convert every passenger car and light-duty truck in America to an electric vehicle overnight.

That's less than 15% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions are emitted from the United States. Twenty-seven percent of that comes from all of transportation, then 57% of that comes from light-duty trucks and passenger vehicles. So now you're down to a little over 2%. And then you look at the fact that only 31% of our electricity comes from a non-carbon-emitting source.

So you're below 1% global impact on carbon emissions and I don't think we're going to get the bang for our buck putting all our eggs in the basket of electric vehicles.

Plus, if you want carbon-free energy, wind and solar, they're two sources, but they're just a blip on the chart. It's going to have to be something like nuclear power or someday maybe fusion power to generate enough electricity to offset the electricity that's being produced by coal, oil and natural gas and biomass right now.

SN: So if Democrats are not defining the question correctly, how would you define it?

BW: That's a great question, I'm glad you asked.

I think Democrats have defined the problem in the context of: The climate is changing. It's changing because of carbon in the atmosphere. We must stop all carbon from going into the atmosphere.

The part they're leaving out of that is that the quality of life in the world is increasing because of innovation in energy. There's a developing world out there that wants to have the same kinds of energy and the benefits that come from having energy. And the world has an insatiable appetite for more energy.

The Democrats' approach is to remove fossil fuels, which maybe someday we can do that, but we're a long way from getting to that point.

And if you look globally, developing countries are building energy-generating systems which utilize fossil fuels much faster than we're building windmills or solar farms, which have much less energy density.

So, we've got to work on a couple of different fronts, innovation being one of them. What the world wants is reliable and affordable energy, and we've got to be the innovators that figure out how to make

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that clean.

The technology we've got right now, you go down the logic diagram, and you end up with nuclear power, because, quite frankly, you can't build enough windmills and solar farms to offset the amount of energy that's produced from fossil fuels right now.

But people have a problem with nuclear power. The largest component of green power that we have right now is hydropower. And you have people wanting to tear dams down. So that's going the opposite direction.

SN: Should we be working to reduce carbon emissions? Or is that sort of secondary to having plentiful energy supplies?

BW: We've got to work to reduce carbon emissions, but you've got to do it in the context of reality that there's a world that has an insatiable appetite for energy.

And when China builds a new coal-fired plant every week, which they've been doing for the past several years, it absorbs any carbon reduction benefits that we've created here in the U.S.

There's too much focus on electric cars, and it's like a red herring that you do this, and it's going to fix the problem and it's not. Show me the math that says it's going to fix the problem. It's much larger scale than that. And if we cut our fossil fuel usage, the rest of the world's not going to.

SN: But does that mean it's not worth doing? It seems like if it's a worldwide effort, that the United States could be a leader in that effort worldwide.

BW: We're already a leader.

We're relying on technology that has to be subsidized. India doesn't have money to subsidize wind farms and solar panels. African nations can't do that.

And you just look at the order of magnitude of how much energy you can produce from a windmill and a solar farm, and, again, we're trying to solve the wrong problem.

The other side of that is we got to work on ways to get carbon out of the atmosphere that's already there. That's why I'm a big proponent of natural solutions and why I think forestry and innovative products like biochar can play a huge role in removing carbon from the atmosphere.

You got to look at both sides of the equation. How much are you putting up, and how much are you taking out?

SN: It sounds like you're saying it's less worthwhile to try and artificially limit fossil fuel supply and usage and more about working on research and development to make energy cleaner and on a larger scale. Is that fair?

BW: We've got to work on it every day, making every form of energy we've got cleaner and safer and healthier.

Now, the problem is there has to be a transition time. There may be a day when we can have carbon-free energy, but the reality is it's nowhere close. Not even remotely close. And we can't solve that in the United States by building electric cars.

SN: But do you think Congress should be working toward that transition and that should be an objective?

BW: I think it should, but it has to be in the realm of reality. It has to be with eyes wide open, knowing that somebody in a developing country that doesn't have the quality of life that they see the rest of the world having, they don't really care about how much carbon is in the atmosphere.

I mean, look no further than China and the number of coal-fired plants they're building so they can generate electricity to create jobs, to manufacture stuff to ship to the rest of the world.

So, I just want people to take a realistic approach to it and not just push stuff that I would call eyewash. It's not a valid solution. My background is in engineering, my undergraduate degree's in engineering. And they teach you problem-solving process and the first thing you have to do to solve a problem is to define the problem correctly.

And I think that our current policy in the country has greatly missed what the definition of a problem is and therefore we're working towards solutions that aren't going to solve any kind of a problem anytime soon.

And it's more than reality. It's, it's not realizing that people desire to have energy, they desire to have a

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better way of life. And they can't afford it.

SN: When you talk about like the developing world and China and India, are you saying that because their carbon emissions we have no control over and they're likely to grow, maybe grow very fast, that then we shouldn't make a tradeoff to limit our own emissions in the United States? Is that sort of what you're getting at?

BW: No. We can't wreck our economy for something that's not going to be a valid solution.

The hope is that America would be the innovators, that we would continually work to make the energy sources we have cleaner and that eventually we'll develop the technology that the rest of the world adopts that is reliable and affordable and that happens to be clean as well.

But the path that we're on is one that would do great harm to our economy and do harm to our ability to actually solve these problems in the future. I wish we were in person; I've got a chart I can show you the global demand for energy global consumption by source. And you just about need a magnifying glass to see where wind, solar, and other renewables fit on the chart.

And it's growing at an exponential rate. The world consumption of energy doubled from 1800 to 1900. It doubled again in 1942 and doubled again in the mid-60s, doubled again in the '80s and doubled again in 2021. And by 2035 we're projected to be 50% higher on global consumption of energy than we are now.

And by far the largest source of energy is coal, oil and natural gas.

SN: Obviously, it's a divided government. Republicans have a slim majority in the House. Are there things that you think you can work with Democrats on?

BW: The (Strategic Petroleum Reserve) bill on not selling oil to China has huge bipartisan support.

The president went into it calling it a partisan issue. But I think we see it had huge bipartisan support.

Specifically with the Natural Resources Committee, I think there are a lot of things we can work on. When it comes to forestry and natural climate solutions, that can be bipartisan. I think if we get the facts out there, the impact of using U.S. energy versus foreign energy, we could get bipartisan support to do that.

There was a lot of money put out in the Infrastructure and Jobs Act, which I think was misnamed, and there was a lot of money put out in the Inflation Reduction Act, which again I think was misnamed. So there's a lot of money out there to build quote green infrastructure.

But people are finding out the green infrastructure people are having the same problems the other kind of infrastructure folks are having and it's that they can't get a permit. You can't build anything because you can't get a permit. And our laws have been weaponized.

So I think there could be bipartisan support to go in and fix some of these regulations with common sense so that you can build solar farms and transmission lines and you can build pipelines and you can manage a forest and do things that are part of the big equation on how you address climate.

SN: Sen. Joe Manchin III (a West Virginia Democrat who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee) had a proposal on that last year. Is that something you'd be interested in revisiting? Or would you all take a different approach to permitting reform?

BW: He and I are supposed to get together here pretty soon and I'm sure we'll talk about permitting.

We've got ideas here in the House. Garret Graves of Louisiana has something called the BUILDER Act that we think has some common-sense reforms in it.

I just saw a story somebody forwarded to me earlier about the number of whales that we think are being harmed by offshore wind energy, so there's a lot of things that we've got to consider and we've got to get the facts and the data and really make a full-faith effort to do what's right. For the country and for the environment and for the future.

SN: You were a forester before you got into politics and I've heard you talk about forest management, and wildfires is of course a huge issue. How do you think the federal approach to forest management could be improved?

BW: Well actually, I'm still a forester. I renewed my license at the end of the year. I'm still a licensed engineer and a licensed forester.

But this is an area that I really hope to see some progress on. A bill that I'm very excited about is one that we call the Save Our Sequoias Act. Worked very closely with Scott Peters, (Democrat) from California

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on this bill.

Actually, Speaker (Kevin) McCarthy and Scott Peters were the cosponsors of the bill in the last Congress. Most of the sequoia groves are in McCarthy's (California) district. And we went out to look at what's happening in our sequoia groves and how we had lost 20% of these iconic trees in like two or three years. And when you get out and see what the issues are and academics and Forest Service and Park Service employees pointing out that here's the problem: These trees have grown up without fire for over 100 years in an environment where they used to get fire every three years or so. It creates ladder fuel (vegetation that allows a fire to move from a forest floor to tree canopies).

And the result of that is we got a good bill last Congress that had 25 Democrats, 25 Republicans and was endorsed by Save the Redwoods League, the Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Defense Fund. So, I think it requires doing the hard work and really looking at the facts. I'm excited to get that bill filed again. Hopefully we'll get through committee. We couldn't even get a hearing on it in the last Congress.

SN: And how is your approach different from how things have been done?

BW: On this particular bill, it would declare a congressional emergency for the sequoia groves. And they're unique and they're very well-defined. There's like 70 of them and sequoias don't grow off of those sites.

So we are declaring a congressional emergency for all the sequoia groves and we're giving the Park Service and Forest Service — there's a little bit of tribal ownership of sequoias and a little bit of state of California ownership of sequoias — but we're giving them the tools and the resources to go in and restore the forest to how it was like in the early 1800s so that they can reintroduce fire to it without destroying the whole forest. And it's following very rigorous science on forest management.

SN: When you restore the forest to its state in the 1800s, is that through thinning?

BW: It requires mechanical thinning. So, what happened after the gold rush in California, Native Americans quit using controlled burns and then the Forest Service came along early 1900s, 1901 or whatever, and they started putting out every fire.

So, you have what's called shade-tolerant species, like white fir and different kinds of pine, that grow very slowly in the understory of these giant sequoias. And what would happen, for centuries, they averaged about 31 fires per century in the sequoia groves. Then it went to three fires per century.

So, these slow-growing trees were over 100 years old, they're pretty good-sized trees, and they got tall enough that the tops of them are in the lower crown of the sequoia.

Then you get wildfire that comes through that then runs up the tree because they've got ladder fuel and it gets into the crowns of the sequoias. And we saw a whole grove of sequoia trees that were totally destroyed by forest fire.

I mean, these things can live to be 3,000 years old ... Trees are like a history book. Because of their annual rains and fire scars, you can do amazing research on what happened over time.

The simple solution is, you go in and cut down these white fir trees and pine tree that are growing up into the crown of the sequoias. And then you've got it where you can use controlled burns, and the fire goes through low to the ground and cleans up the fuels. And that's the way the forest had been managed for millennia.

SN: OK, we better wrap it up here. Is there anything else you wanted to mention?

BW: We did talk about biochars in passing, so if you want to research that we can have a very in-depth conversation.

SN: Biochar? C-H-A-R?

BW: Yeah, biochar. The Incans were making it over a thousand years ago. And you can still dig it up. And when we talk about carbon sequestration, this gives us a way to remove overstocked vegetation from the forest, make a product out of it that's almost pure carbon. Put it in the soil, make the soil more productive and make renewable fuel out of it in the process.

So that's the kind of innovation I'm talking about when we talk about the big picture of climate.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

U.S. House Oversight chair's agenda: Hunter Biden, COVID origins, classified documents

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 30, 2023 3:22 PM

WASHINGTON — House Oversight and Accountability Committee Chair James Comer on Monday previewed his priorities for this Congress, which he says will include a heavy focus on the handling of classified documents, the origins of the COVID-19 virus, and what he described as possible “influence peddling” by Hunter Biden.

The Kentucky Republican addressed reporters and the public at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., taking audience questions and vowing to lead a “substantive committee.”

The panel will begin its work this session with a hearing Wednesday that will examine potential fraud and abuse of federal pandemic relief dollars, including small business loans and unspent funds left over in federal accounts.

“Unfortunately, over the last two years, there hasn’t been a single hearing in the Oversight Committee dealing with the pandemic spending, even though [the federal government] spent record amounts of money. That’s very concerning. I feel like we’re two years behind in oversight. So we’re gonna have to go back two years to try to get caught up,” Comer said.

The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis under Democratic control during last Congress held hearings including on efforts to prevent pandemic relief fraud and examining anti-poverty pandemic initiatives.

For example, issues have surfaced after the Paycheck Protection Program, or PPP loans, that were meant to keep struggling business owners afloat during the economic tumult of the global pandemic.

About 92% of those loans have been forgiven partially or in full, including the funds given to wealthy companies, according to an analysis of Small Business Administration data by NPR.

Classified documents

Reflecting on recent scandals involving classified government material found in the homes and personal offices of former and current U.S. leaders, Comer said Republicans and Democrats alike “all agree there’s a problem.”

After disclosures this month that classified documents were located in President Joe Biden’s think tank office and home, Comer sent letters to the White House and the U.S. Secret Service, requesting more information about who might have had access to the material.

Comer told the press Monday that the White House and the committee have not yet discussed a time to meet about the matter.

“We have to reform the way that documents are boxed up when they leave the president and vice president’s office and follow them in the private sector,” he said.

The committee, as soon as this week, plans to meet with the general counsel for the National Archives and Records Administration, the agency tasked with managing presidential documents.

Comer said he “wasn’t alarmed” by the news that Biden had classified documents in his Penn Biden Center office dating back to his vice presidency and in his Delaware home dating back to his days in the Senate. Department of Justice officials searched Biden’s home earlier this month, in what the president said was a voluntary search.

“I just thought it was ironic that the president was quick to call Donald Trump irresponsible for his handling of classified documents, and then he has the same thing happen,” Comer said.

The FBI in August executed a search warrant at Mar-a-Lago, former President Donald Trump’s Florida home and private club, and found about 100 documents with classified markings out of thousands searched.

“When Mar-a-Lago was raided, I went on TV... and I said ‘Look, this has been rumored to have been a problem with many former presidents about inadvertently taking documents,’” Comer said.

Biden family probe

However, Comer repeatedly said his committee will be taking aim at Biden — not solely over classified

documents, but over whether the president benefited from his Yale-educated lawyer son Hunter's business dealings with foreign powers.

Hunter Biden once sat on the board of the Ukrainian energy company Burisma and became connected with a Chinese energy tycoon who was later reportedly detained as part of an anti-corruption investigation.

"We're investigating the president — this isn't a Hunter Biden investigation, he's a person of interest in the investigation of Joe Biden," Comer said.

The White House has characterized the investigation as a conspiracy theory.

COVID origins

Another issue that Comer said he hopes will be bipartisan: the origins of the COVID-19 virus.

A select committee to examine the topic will be housed under the Committee on Oversight and Accountability.

"No Republicans are accusing Democrats of starting COVID-19. We're wondering if COVID-19 started in the Wuhan (China) lab, so no one said 'Oh, that was started by a Democrat.' But for whatever reason there were never any bipartisan hearings on the origination of COVID," Comer said. "... It should be bipartisan. Hopefully this won't be a select committee like (the) January 6th (select committee), which was considered overtly partisan."

A March 2021 report by the World Health Organization found that it was "likely to very likely" that an animal host carried the virus and transmitted it to humans, but a source was not definitively identified. The United States and several other countries expressed concern about delays and access to data used in the report.

For all of its wide-ranging examinations, there are two topics the Oversight Committee won't be raising: the 2020 election results and police reform.

"At the end of the day, we've got our plate full with excessive spending and public corruption," Comer said.

In light of this month's brutal beating and death of Tyre Nichols by Memphis police, Comer said any discussion of police reform remains under the Judiciary Committee.

"We don't want to reach into other committees' areas of jurisdiction," Comer said. "... Certainly there are bad apples in every profession, bad politicians, bad police officers, and they need to be held accountable."

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability will hold its first full committee organization meeting at 11 a.m. Tuesday.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

USDA to use outdoors recreation to boost economy around national forests, grasslands

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - JANUARY 30, 2023 2:09 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture began planning this month to develop outdoor recreation opportunities near national forests and grasslands, part of a broader Biden administration push to help communities reap economic rewards from the growing recreation sector.

Three USDA agencies — the U.S. Forest Service, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Office of Rural Development — signed a memorandum of understanding last fall pledging to collaborate on plans to develop outdoor recreation economies in "gateway communities" near national forests and grasslands, according to a Jan. 19 press release.

The agency selected its final team to begin developing the first annual plan in mid-January, a Rural Development spokesperson said. The spokesperson declined to be identified by name.

"We know that when we invest in rural and tribal communities and people, we create an economic ripple effect that benefits everyone," the spokesperson said in a written statement to States Newsroom.

Many of the rural communities near national forests and grasslands have experienced significant economic downturns in recent years. The multi-agency effort is meant to help those communities harness

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the economic power of outdoor recreation.

"We want to be intentional about making sure that they are getting economic, social, and physical benefits," Toby Bloom, the national program manager for travel, tourism, and interpretation with the Forest Service, said.

Some communities may have been reliant on a large employer that closed, forcing people to find work elsewhere and leading to a shrinking workforce that discourages further investment, Bloom said.

"If we can address that vicious cycle by creating opportunities, creating jobs, there's a huge amount of jobs that are generated by recreation every year," she added.

Bloom highlighted a mountain biking trail network near Ironton, Ohio, as an example of a community reorienting its economy around outdoor recreation tourism.

The USDA program is an acknowledgement from the government about the clear economic benefits of the outdoor recreation sector for rural areas, Chris Perkins, the senior director at the industry and nonprofit coalition group Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, said.

"What this partnership will do is just make the process of economic development around outdoor recreation a possibility for more communities," Perkins said. "That will help demystify the process. And it will help them access funding and take on challenges before they arise."

The great outdoors: a booming economic sector

Funding for the initiative will come from existing USDA grant, loan and service programs, though specific figures have not been set, the Rural Development spokesperson said.

The spokesperson added that the agencies will prioritize projects that advance Biden administration goals to address climate change, environmental justice, racial equity and improved market opportunities.

Bloom explained that this is the first time the partnership will push recreation opportunities as projects for funding.

"Previously, we never thought about using a recreation lens," Bloom said. "And we're seeing now what an important piece of the economy it is."

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis found that outdoor recreation produced \$454 billion in economic activity, accounting for 1.9% of the nation's gross domestic product in 2021. The agency also found that employment in outdoor recreation grew by 13.1% from 2020 to 2021. The sector supports close to 6.1 million jobs directly nationwide, according to the USDA.

Interest in outdoor activity is only accelerating, Perkins said. The sector grew at three times the rate of the larger U.S. economy last year, as people turned to the outdoors as a tool for physical and mental health, he added.

Rural communities close to public lands also tend to have a lower tax base, as no one is building on the land, Bloom said.

"This is really an attempt to help those communities that are near public lands and water capitalize on the financial opportunities that exist," the program manager said. "Yes, you may have a smaller tax base, but you have these recreation amenities that have the potential to generate as much, if not even more, income."

COVID-19 highlighted the importance of outdoor recreation, Bloom said. The pandemic's early months saw an explosion in outdoor recreation. And while some rural communities handled the influx of tourists effectively, others were left scrambling to accommodate the jump in visitor numbers, she said.

"It's kind of like America rediscovered its outdoors," Bloom said. "And so as federal agencies, we need to help both the visitors have their best peak experience and also help those communities that are receiving visitors be able to manage that visitation and also benefit from it."

The roots of the USDA initiative

President Barack Obama launched the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation in 2011. The council, made up of representatives from USDA, and the departments of Interior, Commerce and Defense, conducted the country's first wide-scale economic analysis of the recreation economy.

Obama's successor, Donald Trump, disbanded the council when he took office in 2017.

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The Biden administration re-established the council last summer, laying the groundwork for the renewed partnership, Bloom said.

The council helped raise the recreation sector's profile with politicians, Bloom said, setting the stage for the USDA agencies to bring their own expertise to the project.

'Open the faucet'

The agencies will help communities plan to create or enhance outdoor recreation opportunities. They will also provide funding for development programs and help communities apply for federal grants.

As the agencies develop their annual plans, an emphasis will be on "sustainable growth," according to the release. That means helping the local outdoors sectors grow at a pace the communities can handle, while also keeping in mind resilience to climate change and natural disasters. "Anybody who opens their eyes has seen the impact of natural disasters on our country," Bloom said. "We really need to start thinking about how we are going to approach recreation, knowing that we have these challenges ahead of us."

Priorities for the first plan will include development of affordable housing around gateway communities and giving more opportunities for people of color, low-income residents and members of the LGBTQ community to visit outdoor recreation spaces.

Affordable housing and accommodations for the existing local workforce should be priorities in the plan, Perkins said, as should equitable access to funding and the planning process for local residents.

"The communities that do best in developing these recreation economies are the ones that have everyone at the table," Perkins said. "So many people are craving recreation right now, it's tough to close that faucet.

"But if you can think about how you want to open the faucet and invite people to your community, and the messaging you want to share with them about how to be a responsible visitor, that's where this work really benefits everyone."

The program is already attracting attention from state-based groups such as the Alaska Outdoors Association and other agencies within the Forest Service, she said.

The program's goal is to boost both environmental stewardship and economic benefit, Bloom said.

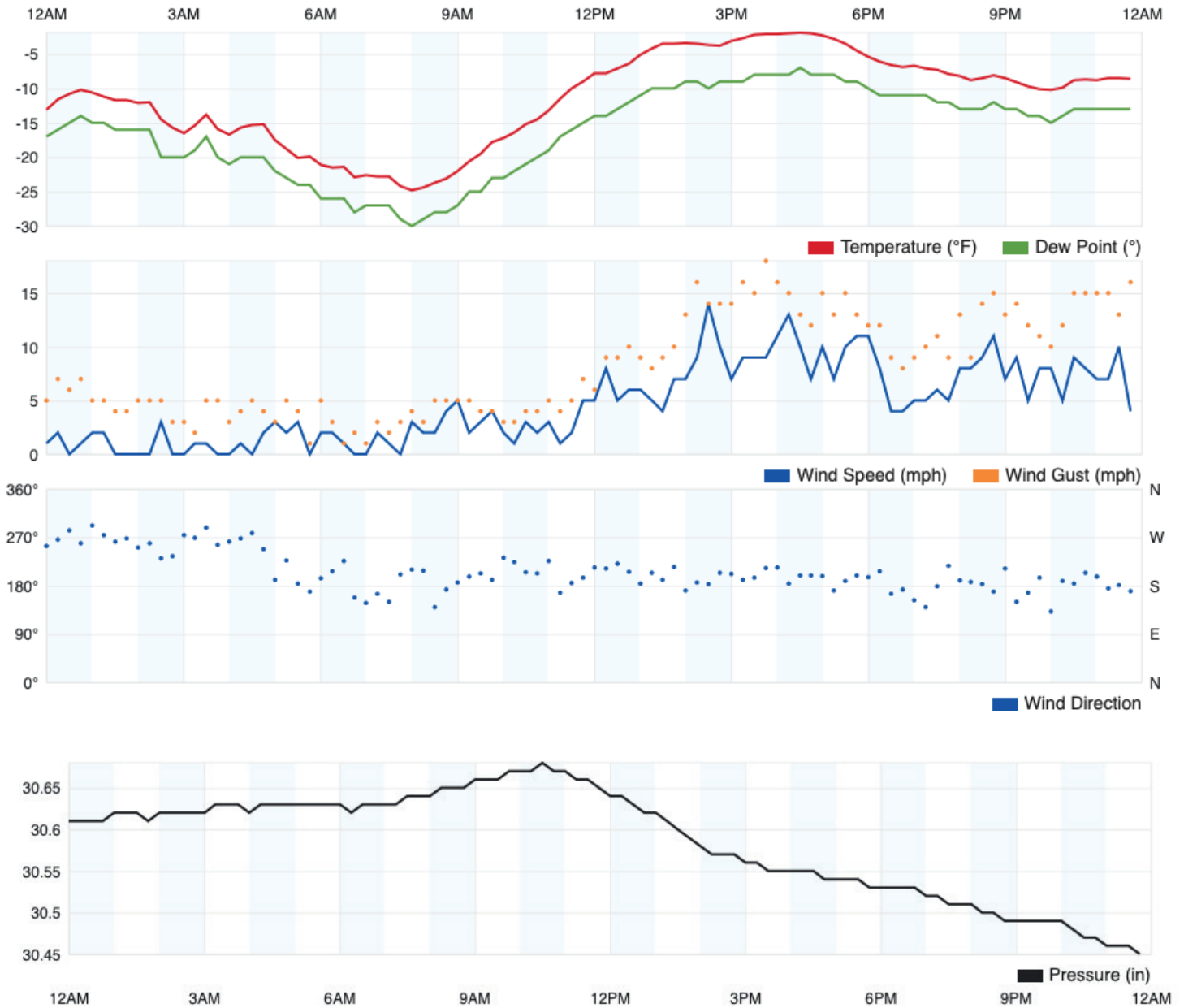
"You can't ask people to decide between putting food on the table and conserving nature," she said. "But if I can help somebody put food on the table by conserving nature, that's a success for me."

Adam Goldstein is the D.C. Bureau intern for States Newsroom. Goldstein is a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, studying digital reporting. He is originally from San Francisco, and loves swimming, cooking, and the San Francisco 49ers.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
						
Cold	Patchy Fog	Areas Fog then Mostly Sunny	Mostly Clear	Partly Sunny and Blustery then Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Cold
High: 10 °F	Low: -8 °F	High: 17 °F	Low: 0 °F	High: 11 °F	Low: -11 °F	High: 10 °F

Today

Jan 31th, 2022



Highs 8 to 24°

Coldest ne SD & wc MN, warmest south central SD. 5 to 15° below normal

Wednesday Thursday



14 to 30°

5 to 25°



January 31, 2023

3:50 AM



Skies for the next few days will continue to be relatively cloud free, however, this will help temperatures stay 5 to 15 degrees below average. Look for a possible return to normal temperatures later in the week.

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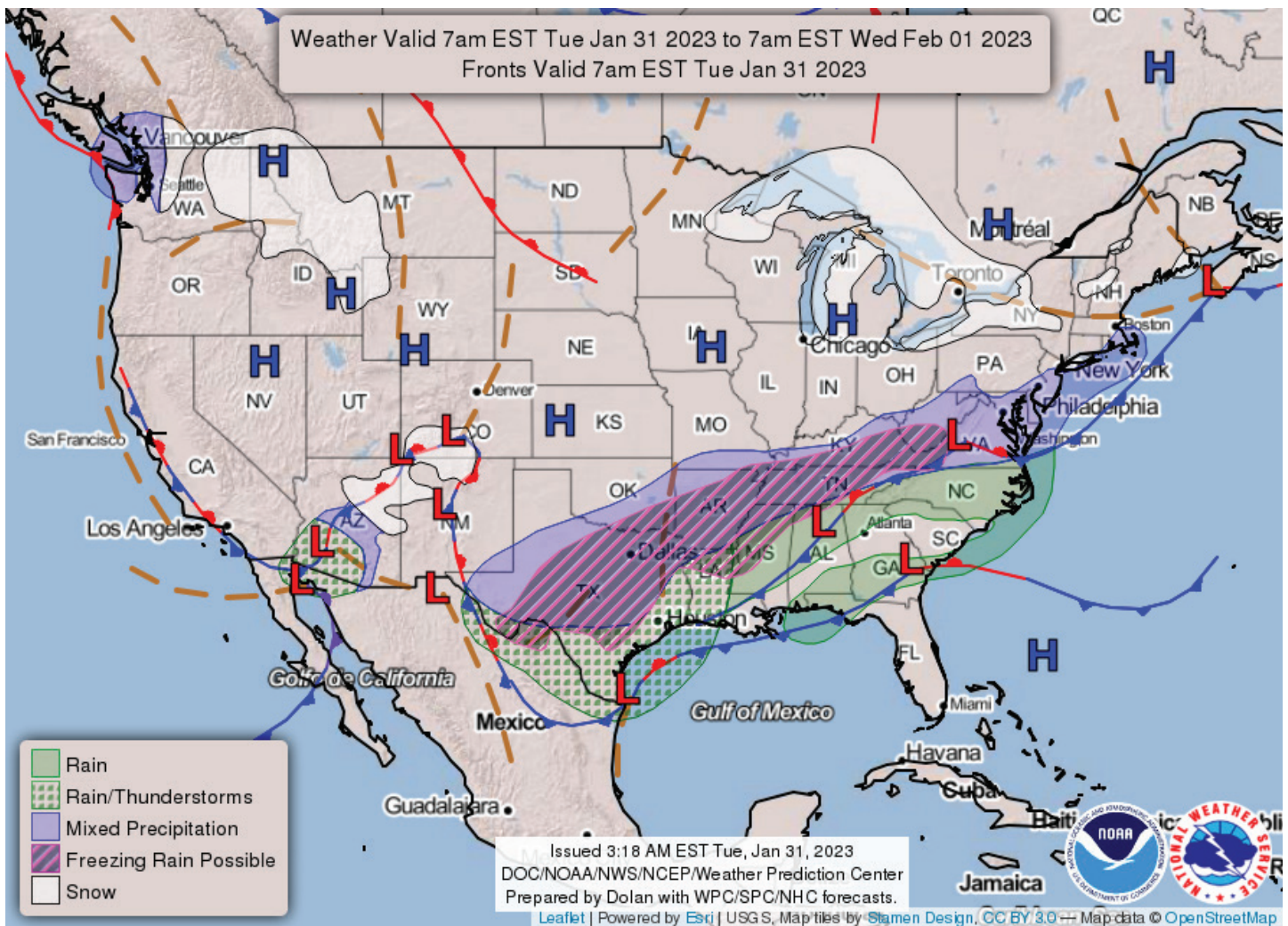
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: -1.9 °F at 4:30 PM
Low Temp: -24.8 °F at 8:00 AM
Wind: 18 mph at 3:45 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 51 in 1924
Record Low: -32 in 1996
Average High: 25
Average Low: 2
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.55
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.55
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:38:58 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:51:29 AM



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Today in Weather History

January 31, 1969: Minnesota experienced many winter storms throughout the month of 1969, where several people had died from heart attacks and auto accidents. Many roads were blocked or iced over several times during the month. Considerable snow during January and frequent periods of strong winds resulted in many days of blowing and drifting snow across northeast South Dakota. There were also many days with freezing rain. The most significant icing occurred on the 22nd and the 27th. There were numerous days where the traffic was at a standstill due to blocked roads and closed airports. Many school closings occurred throughout the month, with many activities canceled. Many rural roads went long periods without being opened, resulting in hardships for farmers. Days of blowing snow were the 8th, 19th, 22nd, 23th, 24th, 26th, 27th, and 31st. Days of freezing rain were the 5th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and the 22nd.

1911: Tamarack, California, was without snow the first eight days of the month, but by the end of January, they had been buried under 390 inches of snow, a record monthly total for the United States. By March 11, 1911, Tamarack had a record snow depth of 451 inches.

1949 - The temperature at San Antonio, TX, plunged to a record low of one degree below zero. Helena MT reached 42 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1950: Seattle, Washington experienced their coldest temperature on record with a reading of zero degrees.

1966 - A blizzard struck the northeastern U.S. When the storm came to an end, twenty inches of snow covered the ground at Washington D.C. (David Ludlum)

1979: A winter storm that started on the previous day and ended on this day spread 2 to 4 inches of rainfall in 24 hours over much of coastal Southern California and two inches of snow in Palm Springs. Snow fell heavily in Palm Springs, and 8 inches fell at Lancaster. All major interstates into Los Angeles were closed. Snow drifts shut down Interstate 10 on both sides of Palm Springs, isolating the city.

1982 - A snowstorm struck Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. Twenty-five inches of snow at Greenville IL, located east of Saint Louis, paralyzed the community. The storm left 4000 motorists stranded for two days. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm in the Pacific Northwest produced wind gusts to 85 mph in Oregon, and nearly two inches of rain in twelve hours in the Puget Sound area of Washington State. Ten inches of snow at Stampede Pass WA brought their total snow cover to 84 inches. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thirty-one cities in the central and northeastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, with many occurring during the early morning hours. Temperatures in western New York State reached the 60s early in the day. Strong northerly winds in the north central U.S. produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero in North Dakota. (National Weather Summary)

1989: The barometric pressure at Norway, Alaska, reached 31.85 inches (1078.4 mb) establishing an all-time record for the North American Continent. The temperature at the time of the record was about 46 degrees below zero. The severe arctic cold began to invade the north-central U.S. The temperature at Grand Fall, Montana, plunged 85 degrees in 36 hours. Valentine, Nebraska plummeted from a record high of 70 degrees to zero in just nine hours. Northwest winds gusted to 86 mph at Lander WY, and wind chill readings of 80 degrees below zero were reported in Montana. Sixty-four cities in the central U.S. reported record highs for the date as readings reached the 60s in Michigan and the 80s in Kansas.

1990 - High winds in Montana on the 28th, gusting to 77 mph at Judith Gap, were followed by three days of snow. Heavy snow fell over northwest Montana, with up to 24 inches reported in the mountains. An avalanche covered the road near Essex with six feet of snow. Snow and high winds also plagued parts of the southwestern U.S. Winds gusted to 54 mph at Show Low AZ, and Flagstaff AZ was blanketed with eight inches of snow. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

MAKING HISTORY

There is a vast difference between a legacy and an inheritance. An inheritance is a collection of "things" that are passed on from one generation to another. It is usually considered to be wealth or the things that can be bought with money or negotiated by "deals" between individuals or sometimes items that are "traded."

A "legacy" is much different. It is composed of the opinions and observations of others who watch us as we make our way through life. It is a result of what we do, the things we say, and how well we serve or do not serve others and our attitudes about the material things and temporal things in life. Unfortunately, for most, it is more important to leave an inheritance for others than a legacy that inspires and challenges others. Most want to be remembered for the balance sheet of life rather than the good they do for God and others.

"For riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations," wrote the wisest and one of the wealthiest men of history. His net worth, as estimated by wealth-managers today, exceeded one hundred-sixty billion dollars. Obviously, he knew how to "make a dollar" but was wise enough to know that money, in the end, was not the goal of life.

Now, as we look at his story, we see what he "left behind" that has meaning, and the enduring value was not his wealth, but his legacy. Year after year and century after century people look to his writings for God's wisdom and guidance, God's insights and promises, God's values and the blessings that come from honoring Him. His wealth is gone. His legacy lives!

Prayer: Lord, grant us Your wisdom and the desire to leave a legacy that blesses others and leads them to Jesus. May our lives be a witness of how great You are. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: For riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations. Proverbs 27:24



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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2023 Community Events

- 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)
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 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)
- 06/16/2023 – SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 – Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 – GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 – Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 – GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 – Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 – Tour of Homes & Holiday Party

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.27.23

4 43 46 47 61 22

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$31,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 46 Mins 28
DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.30.23

2 16 28 32 38 8

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$34,520,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 46
DRAW: Mins 28 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.30.23

9 16 34 46 47 13

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 16 Mins 28
DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.28.23

7 8 15 16 18

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$34,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 46
DRAW: Mins 27 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.30.23

3 25 28 42 61 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 45
DRAW: Mins 27 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.30.23

1 4 12 36 49 5

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$653,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 45
DRAW: Mins 28 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Bon Homme 51, Corsica/Stickney 46
Chester 41, Colman-Egan 38
Colome 59, Avon 52
Dell Rapids St. Mary 69, Garretson 32
Hamlin 63, Milbank 35
Hanson 57, Canistota 44
Harding County 69, Timber Lake 35
Hill City 50, Kadoka Area 49
Howard 82, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 24
Irene-Wakonda 56, Wagner 44
Lyman 69, New Underwood 39
Madison 65, Tri-Valley 48
Mitchell Christian 65, Gayville-Volin 56
Mobridge-Pollock 58, Aberdeen Roncalli 51
Northwestern 79, Potter County 65
Philip 75, Newell 34
Waverly-South Shore 64, Arlington 42
Winner 52, Gregory 50, OT

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 67, Burke 63
Avon 61, Colome 36
Canistota 66, Bridgewater-Emery 33
Castlewood 53, DeSmet 44
Dell Rapids 55, Baltic 40
Estelline/Hendricks 54, Wilmot 28
Florence/Henry 47, Groton Area 21
Gregory 53, White River 40
Hamlin 69, Milbank 35
Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. 74, Alcester-Hudson 59
Howard 58, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 36
Kimball/White Lake 63, Mitchell Christian 21
Lyman 52, New Underwood 44
Mobridge-Pollock 58, Aberdeen Central 47
Philip 61, Newell 40
Sioux Falls Christian 62, Parkston 36
Tri-Valley 52, Madison 48
Wagner 71, Irene-Wakonda 28
Waubay/Summit 61, Langford 29

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

Mayo leads South Dakota State over Kansas City 67-66

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Zeke Mayo scored 24 points and made two free throws with 12 seconds remaining to rally South Dakota State to a 67-66 victory over Kansas City on Monday night.

Mayo had five rebounds for the Jackrabbits (12-11, 7-4 Summit League). William Kyle III scored 20 points and grabbed seven rebounds.

Shemarri Allen led the way for the Kangaroos (10-14, 6-5) with 23 points and five assists. RayQuawndis Mitchell added 19 points and six rebounds, while Allen David Mukeba Jr. tallied eight points and 10 rebounds.

NEXT UP

Up next for South Dakota State is a matchup Thursday with North Dakota at home. UMKC hosts Oral Roberts on Saturday.

Abmas scores 31, Oral Roberts routs South Dakota 103-53

TULSA, Okla. (AP) — Max Abmas scored 31 points, Oral Roberts pummeled South Dakota 103-53 on Monday night, and the Golden Eagles remained unbeaten in the Summit League with their seventh straight win.

Abmas had six rebounds for the Golden Eagles (20-4, 11-0). Issac McBride was 6-of-9 shooting, including 3 for 5 from distance, and 5 for 7 from the foul line to finish with 20 points. Kareem Thompson shot 5 for 9 with two 3-pointers, scoring 13 points and adding 10 rebounds, seven assists, and three steals.

Mason Archambault led the way for the Coyotes (10-13, 5-6) with 11 points. Kruz Perrott-Hunt added 10 points and A.J. Plitzuweit scored seven.

NEXT UP

Oral Roberts' next game is Saturday against UMKC on the road, and South Dakota hosts North Dakota State on Thursday.

South Dakota lawmakers advance Medicaid work requirement

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Republican lawmakers on Monday advanced a proposed constitutional amendment that would allow the state to try and force people on Medicaid to work despite federal policy prohibiting such requirements.

The proposal would change the state constitution and would need voter approval in 2024. All 11 Republicans on the House State Affairs Committee voted Monday to advance the legislation to the full House. The panel's two Democrats voted against it.

South Dakota voters in November approved expanding Medicaid eligibility to people making 138% of the federal poverty level.

Republican Rep. Tony Venhuizen of Sioux Falls, who's sponsoring the legislation to allow the state to require people to work for Medicaid benefits, said it could push them to find jobs. Key proponents of providing Medicaid to more people argued it would undermine expansion before it has even been implemented.

The federal government bars states from requiring work for Medicaid eligibility, but Venhuizen said that could change. The proposed state constitutional amendment would allow voters to decide, he argued.

"I think they see the value in work and in incentivizing work for people who are able," Venhuizen said.

But organizations that supported Medicaid expansion last year said such a requirement fails to account for people who can't keep a job due to disabilities. It would also be costly and difficult to police, said Deb Fischer-Clemens, a lobbyist for Avera Health and several other health care groups.

The Trump administration tried to impose work requirements for public programs, but states that implemented the requirements were challenged in federal courts.

A federal judge ruled that work requirements created numerous obstacles for poor people trying to get health care, which federal and state officials failed to evaluate or resolve adequately.

Strikes, protests hit France in round 2 of pension battle

By JADE LE DELEY and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

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PARIS (AP) — From tiny islands to major cities, demonstrators poured into France's streets Tuesday in the latest clash of wills with the government over its plans to push back the retirement age. Labor unions aimed to mobilize more than 1 million demonstrators in what one veteran left-wing leader described as a "citizens' insurrection."

The nationwide strikes and protests were a crucial test both for President Emmanuel Macron's government and its opponents. The government says it is determined to push through Macron's election pledge to reform France's pension system. Labor unions and left-wing legislators fighting in parliament against Macron's plans are counting on protesters to turn out massively to strengthen their efforts to kill the bill that that would raise the retirement age from 62 to 64.

Veteran left-wing leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon predicted "a historic day" of protests and defeat for Macron, as large crowds of protesters marched in cities and towns outside Paris — ahead of a major demonstration planned later Tuesday through the French capital.

"It's not often that we see such a mass mobilization," Mélenchon, speaking in the southern city of Marseille. "It's a form of citizens' insurrection."

On the tiny western isle of Ouessant, off the tip of Brittany, about 100 demonstrators gathered outside the office of Mayor Denis Palluel and marched on Tuesday morning, he said.

Speaking by phone with The Associated Press, Palluel said the prospect of having to work longer alarmed mariners on the island with arduous ocean-going jobs.

"Retiring at a reasonable age is important, because life expectancy isn't very long," he said.

A first round of strikes and protests brought out between 1 million and 2 million demonstrators earlier this month, including many tens of thousands in Paris. Labor leaders were aiming to at least match or even better those numbers Tuesday, with around 250 demonstrations expected around the country. The government mobilized 11,000 officers to police the protests.

Positions are hardening on both sides as lawmakers begin locking horns in parliament over the government's retirement reform bill.

On Monday, Macron described the reform as "essential." His prime minister, Elisabeth Borne, insisted this past weekend that raising the retirement age to 64 is "no longer negotiable."

Strikers and protesters intend to prove otherwise.

Rail operator SNCF warned of major network disruptions Tuesday because of strikes. It recommended that passengers cancel or postpone trips and work remotely if possible.

Strikes also hit some schools and other sectors. Radio station France Inter played music instead of its usual morning talk shows and apologized to its listeners because employees were striking.

Pakistan blames 'security lapse' for mosque blast; 100 dead

By RIAZ KHAN Associated Press

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) — A suicide bombing that struck inside a mosque at a police and government compound in northwest Pakistan reflects "security lapses," current and former officials said as the death toll from the devastating blast climbed to 100 on Tuesday.

The blast, which ripped through a Sunni mosque inside a major police facility in the city of Peshawar, was one of the deadliest attacks on Pakistani security forces in recent years. It left as many as 225 wounded, some still in serious condition in hospital, according to Kashif Aftab Abbasi, a senior officer in Peshawar.

More than 300 worshippers were praying in the mosque, with more approaching, when the bomber set off his explosives vest on Monday morning, officials said.

The explosion blew off part of the roof, and what was left soon caved in, injuring many more, according to Zafar Khan, a police officer. Rescuers had to remove mounds of debris to reach worshippers still trapped under the rubble.

More bodies were retrieved overnight and early Tuesday, according to Mohammad Asim, a government hospital spokesman in Peshawar, and several of those critically injured died. "Most of them were policemen," Asim said of the victims.

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Bilal Faizi, the chief rescue official, said rescue teams were still working Tuesday at the site as more people are believed trapped inside. Mourners were burying the victim at different graveyards in the city and elsewhere.

Counter-terrorism police are investigating how the bomber was able to reach the mosque, which is in a walled compound, inside a high security zone with other government buildings.

"Yes, it was a security lapse," said Ghulam Ali, the provincial governor in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, of which Peshawar is the capital.

Abbasi, the official who gave the latest casualty tolls, concurred. "There was a security lapse and the inspector-general of the police has set up an inquiry committee, which will look into all aspects of the bombing," he said. "Action will be taken against those whose negligence" caused the attack.

Talat Masood, a retired army general and senior security analyst said Monday's suicide bombing showed "negligence."

"When we know that Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is active, and when we know that they have threatened to carry out attacks, there should have been more security at the police compound in Peshawar," he told The Associated Press on Tuesday, referring to a militant group also known as the Pakistani Taliban or TTP.

Kamran Bangash, a provincial secretary-general with opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf called for an investigation and said Pakistan will continue to face political instability so long as the current government is in power.

"The current government of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif has failed to improve the economy and law and order situation, and it should resign to pave the way for snap parliamentary elections," he said.

The military's media wing declined an Associated Press interview request for the chief of army staff. Asim Munir, who took office in November, has yet to do any media appearances.

Sharif visited a hospital in Peshawar after the bombing and vowed "stern action" against those behind the attack. "The sheer scale of the human tragedy is unimaginable. This is no less than an attack on Pakistan," he tweeted.

On Tuesday he dismissed criticism of his government and call for unity.

"Through their despicable actions, terrorists want to spread fear & paranoia among the masses & reverse our hard-earned gains against terrorism & militancy," he tweeted. "My message to all political forces is one of unity against anti-Pakistan elements. We can fight our political fights later."

Authorities have not determined who was behind the bombing. Shortly after the explosion, TTP commander Sarbakaf Mohmand claimed responsibility for the attack in a post on Twitter.

But hours later, TTP spokesperson Mohammad Khurasani distanced the group from the bombing, saying it was not its policy to target mosques, seminaries and religious places, adding that those taking part in such acts could face punitive action under TTP's policy. His statement did not address why a TTP commander had claimed responsibility for the bombing.

Pakistan, which is mostly Sunni Muslim, has seen a surge in militant attacks since November, when the Pakistani Taliban ended a cease-fire with government forces, as the country was contending with unprecedented floods that killed 1,739 people, destroyed more than 2 million homes, and at one point submerged as much as a third of the country.

The Pakistani Taliban are the dominant militant group in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, and Peshawar has been the scene of frequent attacks. But the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, a regional affiliation of the Islamic State group and a rival of the Taliban, has also been behind deadly attacks in Pakistan in recent years. Overall, violence has increased since the Afghan Taliban seized power in neighboring Afghanistan in August 2021, as U.S. and NATO troops pulled out of the country after 20 years of war.

The TTP is separate from but a close ally of the Afghan Taliban. It has waged an insurgency in Pakistan in the past 15 years, seeking stricter enforcement of Islamic laws, the release of its members in government custody and a reduction in the Pakistani military presence in areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province it has long used as its base.

Earlier this month, the Pakistani Taliban claimed one of its members shot and killed two intelligence

officers, including the director of the counterterrorism wing of the country's military-based spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence. Security officials said Monday the gunman was traced and killed in a shootout in the northwest, near the Afghan border. In 2014, a Pakistani Taliban faction attacked an army-run school in Peshawar and killed 154, mostly schoolchildren.

The Taliban-run Afghan Foreign Ministry said it was "saddened to learn that numerous people lost their lives" in Peshawar and condemned attacks on worshippers as contrary to the teachings of Islam.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is on a visit to the Middle East, tweeted his condolences, saying the bombing in Peshawar was a "horrific attack."

"Terrorism for any reason at any place is indefensible," he said.

Pakistan is also contending with political and economic crises in the wake of the floods and a disputed election.

Condemnations also came from the Saudi Embassy in Islamabad, as well as the U.S. Embassy, which said that the "United States stands with Pakistan in condemning all forms of terrorism."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the bombing "particularly abhorrent" for targeting a place of worship, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan also expressed his condolences, calling the bombing a "terrorist suicide attack."

Europe scrapes out economic growth by dodging gas disaster

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Europe's economy scraped out meager gains at the end of last year as galloping inflation fed by high energy prices and Russia's invasion of Ukraine deterred people from spending in shops and restaurants.

Economic output crept 0.1% higher in the last three months of 2022, European Union statistics agency Eurostat reported Tuesday, avoiding an outright downturn as warmer-than-usual winter weather shelved fears of energy rationing in Europe.

The countries that share the euro currency — 19 in 2022, now 20 after Croatia joined the eurozone in the new year — appeared to have avoided the worst case scenario: forced industrial shutdowns from running out of natural gas after Russia halted most supplies. Warm weather and efforts to find new supply that comes by ship instead of pipeline from Russia have eased that worry for now.

Nonetheless, natural gas prices are still three times higher than before Russia started massing troops on Ukraine's border, after rising to a record of 18 times that level in August. Those prices are hitting utility bills and leading companies to pass on costs to customers by charging more for goods and food.

"Growth was still very weak," said Rory Fennessy, European economist at Oxford Economics. He added that "the positive reading could mask underlying weakness in domestic demand" and that "private consumption is likely to have contracted."

Growth also faced headwinds from reduced activity in China, a major trade partner, due to the severe COVID-19 restrictions that have since been lifted. A possible economic rebound there is a key question for Europe and the global economy this year, given China's previous role as a motor of global growth.

While underwhelming, Europe's growth figure at least raises the chance it will scrape by without a technical recession even if economic expansion is negative in the first three months of this year. Two straight quarters of falling output is one definition of recession, although the economists on the eurozone business cycle dating committee use a broader range of data such as unemployment and the depth of the downturn.

The news comes as the International Monetary Fund raised its forecast for global economic growth this year to 2.9% from 2.7% — not great but an improvement based partly on hopes for China. A stronger global economy is important for Europe given its extensive trade links.

However, Germany's economy, Europe's largest, unexpectedly shrank by 0.2% in the fourth quarter, according to figures released Monday. Fears of lagging economic growth so far have not deterred the European Central Bank from its series of interest rate increases, which are sharply raising the cost of bor-

rowing for businesses and consumers in an attempt to cool off inflation.

Consumer prices jumped 9.2% in December from a year earlier, far above the central bank's goal of 2%. Rate increases are the chief antidote to excessive inflation but can slow the economy by making it more expensive to buy a house or a car on credit or borrow to expand a business.

The central bank's governing council is expected to add another half-percentage point rate hike at its meeting Thursday.

Rate increases by other central banks around the world, including the U.S. Federal Reserve and the Bank of England, also have added strain to the global economy. ECB officials say that raising rates now and capping inflation before it gets baked into the economy avoids the need for more drastic action later.

Talk of fighter jets for Kyiv puts strains on Western unity

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's push for fighter jets to help beat back Russia's invasion force risks straining the unity of Ukraine's Western allies, amid fears that the move could escalate the nearly year-long conflict and draw them deeper into the war.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov was due in Paris Tuesday where discussions about the possible delivery of fighter jets to Ukraine was expected to be on the agenda.

Kyiv officials have repeatedly urged allies to send jets, saying they are essential to challenge Russia's air superiority and to ensure the success of future counteroffensives that could be spearheaded by tanks recently promised by Western countries.

There was no indication that a decision on warplanes to Ukraine might come any time soon and no sign that Western countries have changed their earlier stance on the issue. Ukraine's allies also have ruled out providing Kyiv with long-range missiles able to hit Russian territory, signaling a similarly cautious stance on warplanes.

Both Ukraine and Russia are believed to be building up their arsenals for an expected offensive in coming months. The war has been largely deadlocked on the battlefield during the winter.

Asked about Lithuania's call for Western countries to provide Ukraine with fighter jets and long-range missiles, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the comments "reflected an aggressive approach taken by the Baltic nations and Poland, who are ready to do everything to provoke further escalation without thinking about consequences."

"It's very sad that the leaders of big European countries that drive the European agenda don't fulfill a balancing role to offset such extremist inclinations," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Monday that France doesn't exclude sending fighter jets to Ukraine, but he laid out multiple conditions before such a significant step is taken.

The conditions, he said, include not leading to an escalation of tensions or using the aircraft "to touch Russian soil," and not resulting in weakening "the capacities of the French army."

He also said Ukraine must also formally request the planes, something that could happen when Reznikov sits down for talks in Paris.

After months of haggling, Ukrainian authorities last week persuaded Western allies to send the tanks. That decision came despite the hesitation and caution of some NATO members, including the United States and Germany.

Asked by a reporter Monday if his administration was considering sending Ukraine F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, U.S. President Joe Biden responded "no."

Biden's deputy national security adviser, Jon Finer, said in an MSNBC interview last week that U.S. would discuss fighter jets "very carefully" with Ukraine and allies.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz appeared to balk at the prospect of providing fighter jets, suggesting Sunday that the reason for the entire discussion might be down to "domestic political motives" in some countries.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said Monday there are "no taboos" in efforts to help Ukraine. But he added that sending jets "would be a very big next step."

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As in previous debates about how to help Ukraine, Poland is a leading advocate in the European Union for providing military aid. Poland, Slovakia and the Baltic countries on NATO's eastern flank feel especially threatened by Russia.

NATO-member Croatia's president, meanwhile, criticized Western nations for supplying Ukraine with heavy tanks and other weapons. President Zoran Milanovic argued that those arms deliveries will only prolong the war.

Earlier in the conflict, discussions focused on the possibility of providing Kyiv with Soviet-made MiG-29 fighter jets that Ukrainian pilots are familiar with. In March, the Pentagon rejected Poland's proposal to transfer its MiG-29 fighter jets to Kyiv through a U.S. base in Germany, citing a high risk of triggering a Russia-NATO escalation.

Western warplanes would offer Ukraine a major boost, but countering Russia's massive air force would still be a major challenge.

Ukraine inherited a significant fleet of Soviet-made warplanes, including Su-27 and MiG-29 fighter jets and Su-25 ground attack aircraft.

Switching to Western aircraft would require Ukrainian crews to undergo long training and would also raise logistical challenges linked to their maintenance and repair.

Russia methodically targeted Ukrainian air bases and air defense batteries in the opening stage of the conflict, but Ukraine has been smart about relocating its warplanes and concealing air defense assets, resulting in Russia's failure to gain full control of the skies.

After suffering heavy losses early during the conflict, the Russian air force has avoided venturing deep into Ukraine's airspace and mostly focused on close support missions along the frontline.

The Ukrainian air force faced similar challenges, trying to save its remaining warplanes from being hit by Russian fighter jets and air defense systems.

Brother vs brother: Kelces prepare for Super Bowl showdown

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Donna Kelce is going to have to pull out that now-familiar custom jersey — the one with Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce's front stitched to Philadelphia Eagles center Jason Kelce's back — one more time this season.

At least this time, she'll get to see her boys in person.

For the first time in Super Bowl history, a pair of siblings will play each other on the NFL's grandest stage. Kelce helped the Chiefs return to their third championship game in four seasons on Sunday night when they beat the Bengals for the AFC title, while Jason has the Eagles back for the second time in six years after their NFC title win over the 49ers.

"Cool scenario to be in, you know?" Travis Kelce said. "My mom can't lose."

Or maybe can't win.

Indeed, there have been plenty of famous NFL siblings over the years, and many had some memorable matchups: Peyton and Eli Manning, Tiki and Ronde Barber. But they never reached the same Super Bowl, or had to put their dear old mom in such a predicament, where one will be hoisting the Lombardi Trophy at the other one's expense.

"It's going to be an amazing feeling playing against him," added Travis, whose team has gotten the better of big brother's Eagles the last three matchups. "I respect everyone over there in the Eagles' organization. You won't see me talk too much trash because of how much I love my brother. But it's going to be an emotional game, for sure."

Jason Kelce was even ever-so-briefly a Chiefs fan Sunday night, pulling on a Kansas City sweatshirt for about the 3 hours between the end of the Eagles' 31-7 rout of San Francisco and the finish of his little brother's 23-20 win over Cincinnati.

"That's it for the rest of the year," Jason said with a smile. "I am done being a Chiefs fan."

He'll leave that to mom and dad.

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While her husband, Ed, has mostly kept private over the years, Donna has been a fixture as she criss-crosses the country to watch her boys. During wild-card weekend last year, she started in Tampa Bay watching the Eagles against the Buccaneers, then hopped a plane to Kansas City in time to watch the Chiefs play the Steelers at night.

She's already seen both of her sons win Super Bowls, too: The Eagles beat the Patriots in 2018 in Minneapolis, and the Chiefs rallied to beat the 49ers in Miami two years later.

She hasn't seen much of them lately, though. The way the playoff schedule worked out for the divisional round and the conference championship games, it was impossible for Donna to make it to see both of her boys in person.

In any case, they've come a long way from their solidly middle-class upbringing in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Jason blazed the trail as the star offensive lineman who earned a scholarship to Cincinnati, and Travis soon followed suit. Both caught the eyes of NFL scout during their college careers, and of one coach in particular: Andy Reid.

It was Big Red who, while coaching the Eagles, used a sixth-round pick on Jason during the 2011 draft. And two years later, after Reid had gotten a fresh start in Kansas City, the Chiefs used a third-rounder to bring Travis into the fold.

"Big brother probably protected Travis from doing some crazy things. He probably talked him from dropping off a ladder into raked-up leaves once or twice," Reid said Monday. "Listen, they're both at heart very competitive and passionate, is the biggest thing. They care and they care about people and they care about they're game."

They also happen to be very good at it.

Jason has been to six Pro Bowls and was just voted an All-Pro for the fifth time, and he's emerged as one of the best offensive linemen in Eagles history. Travis has been to eight Pro Bowls, just made a fourth All-Pro team and is second in NFL history to Jerry Rice in playoff catches, yards and touchdowns.

Football's not the only thing they're good at, either.

The brothers have new a podcast called "New Heights with Jason & Travis Kelce," which takes listeners on a riotous, real-time ride through the NFL season. The weekly shows are recorded on Tuesdays and last between 60 and 90 minutes, the two NFL stars playfully playing off each other as if they were hanging out in mom's basement.

Special guests have included Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts and Chiefs counterpart Patrick Mahomes.

"They have a good mesh there, and a good relationship," Reid said. "I think Travis has grown up a lot. Jason probably came in a bit more mature — Travis was a little immature. But he's really grown into a good person.

"I have invested time in both of those two," Reid added, "so I feel like a part of the family."

Pope's Africa trip spotlights conflict, and church's future

By NICOLE WINFIELD, JEAN-YVES KAMALE and NQOBILE NTSHANGASE Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis is opening a six-day visit to Congo and South Sudan on Tuesday, aiming to bring a message of peace to two countries riven by poverty, conflict and what Francis has called a lingering "colonialist mentality" that still considers Africa ripe for exploitation.

Aid groups are hoping Francis' trip will shine a spotlight on two of the world's forgotten conflicts and rekindle international attention on some of Africa's worst humanitarian crises, amid donor fatigue and new aid priorities in Ukraine.

But Francis' trip will also bring him face-to-face with the future of the Catholic Church: Africa is one of the only places in the world where the Catholic flock is growing, in terms of practicing faithful as well as fresh vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

That makes his trip, his fifth to the African continent in his 10-year pontificate, all the more important as Francis seeks to make his mark on reshaping the church as a "field hospital for wounded souls" where all are welcome and poor people have a special pride of place.

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"Yes, Africa is in turmoil and is also suffering from the invasion of exploiters," Francis told The Associated Press in an interview last week. But he said the church can also learn from the continent and its people.

"We need to listen to their culture: dialogue, learn, talk, promote," Francis said, suggesting that his message would differ from the scolding tone St. John Paul II used in 1980 and 1985 when he reminded Congolese priests and bishops of the need to stick to their celibacy vows.

Congo, Francis' first stop, stands out as the African country with most Catholics hands down: Half of its 105 million people are Catholic, the country counts more than 6,000 priests, 10,000 nuns and more than 4,000 seminarians — 3.6% of the global total of young men studying for the priesthood.

Congolese faithful were flocking to Kinshasa for Francis' main event, a Mass on Wednesday at Ndolo airport that is expected to draw as many as 2 million people in one of the biggest gatherings of its kind in Congo and one of Francis' biggest Masses ever.

"There are people who chartered planes to come here because there were so many of them!" marveled Inniance Mukania, who travelled to Kinshasa from the Kolwezi diocese in southern Congo.

On the eve of the pope's visit, President Felix Tshisekedi met with foreign diplomats in Kinshasa and told them the visit was a sign of solidarity "particularly with the battered populations of the eastern part of the country, prey to acts of violence and intolerance that you are witnessing."

Jesus-Noel Sheke, technical coordinator of the organizing committee for the papal visit, said nearly everything was ready at Ndolo, where organizers have arranged for 22 giant screens to carry the service live.

"There are only a few decorations left," he told journalists of the preparations over the weekend. "They will be done the day before."

The trip was originally scheduled for July, but was postponed because of Francis' knee problems. It was also supposed to have included a stop in Goma, in eastern Congo, but the surrounding North Kivu region has been plagued by intense fighting between government troops and the M23 rebel group, as well as attacks by militants linked to the Islamic State group.

The fighting has displaced some 5.7 million people, a fifth of them last year alone, according to the World Food Program.

Instead, Francis will meet with a delegation of people from the east who will travel to Kinshasa for a private encounter at the Vatican embassy. The plan calls for them to participate in a ceremony jointly committing to forgive their assailants.

While the people of Goma were saddened that Francis won't be visiting the east, "we hope with the visit that the pope can bring a message of peace to the people of Congo who need it," said Providence Bireke, a Goma-based manager with AVSI, an Italian aid group active in the area.

The second leg of Francis' trip will bring him to South Sudan, the world's youngest country where continued fighting has hampered implementation of a 2018 peace deal to end a civil war. Francis first voiced his hope of visiting the majority Christian country in 2017, but security concerns prevented a visit and only contributed to worsening a humanitarian crisis that has displaced more than 2 million people.

The South Sudan stop also marks a novelty in the history of papal travel, in that Francis will be joined on the ground by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Rt. Rev. Iain Greenshields.

The aim of the three-way visit is to show a united Christian commitment to helping South Sudan make progress on the implementation of the 2018 accord. Francis presided over a similar joint initiative in 2019 in the Vatican when he famously got down on hands and knees and kissed the feet of South Sudan's rival leaders, begging them to make peace.

Since then, progress on implementing the accord — in particular creating a unified army comprised of government forces and opposition fighters — has been "painfully slow," said Paolo Impagliazzo of the Sant'Egidio Community, which has spearheaded an initiative to bring the groups that didn't sign onto the 2018 accord into the process.

"The visit will bring hope to the people," Impagliazzo said in an interview in Rome. "And I believe the visit will strengthen the churches — the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, the local church — that are

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playing a critical role in bringing about peace and dialogue in South Sudan.”

One area of particular concern remains the widespread availability of firearms among the civilian population, which has led to continued fighting in areas as cattle herders seek more land or faction leaders seek to gain more territory, he said.

The Small Arms Survey estimated in 2017 that there were some 1.2 million firearms in the possession of South Sudanese civilians, or 1 for every 10 people. The estimate was believed low and pales in comparison to the number of per capita firearms in Europe or the U.S., but remains an outstanding issue that “will not go ahead until we have the possibility to have a unified army,” Impagliazzo said.

Francis has long denounced the weapons industry, calling traffickers “merchants of death.” In the AP interview, he repeated his condemnation.

“The world is obsessed with having weapons,” Francis said. “Instead of making the effort to help us live, we make the effort to help us kill.”

Global shares fall in muted trading ahead of Fed meeting

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Global shares declined in muted trading on Tuesday as investors awaited decisions on interest rates and updates on corporate earnings reports from around the world.

The Federal Reserve’s next decision on interest rates, expected Wednesday, will provide insight into whether the U.S. central bank will further ease its aggressive stance on fighting inflation.

France’s CAC 40 was little changed, inching down less than 0.1% in early trading to 7,081.34, while Germany’s DAX slipped nearly 0.3% to 15,087.53. Britain’s FTSE 100 was down 0.3% at 7,760.82. The future for the Dow industrials fell 0.3% while the contract for the S&P 500 lost 0.4%.

In a positive sign, the IMF said the global outlook has grown slightly brighter as China eases its zero-COVID policies and economies show surprising resilience in the face of high inflation, elevated interest rates and Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine.

Meanwhile, a survey released Tuesday showed Chinese factory activity rebounded in January, adding to signs the world’s second-largest economy might be recovering from a painful slump.

Japan’s benchmark Nikkei 225 fell 0.4% to finish at 27,327.11. Australia’s S&P/ASX 200 edged down nearly 0.1% to 7,476.70. South Korea’s Kospi declined 1.0% to 2,425.08. Hong Kong’s Hang Seng lost 1.0% to 21,839.64, while the Shanghai Composite shed 0.4% to 3,255.67.

“China’s rapid reopening has boosted its domestic growth outlook, Europe’s mild weather has sharply reduced its recession risk, and a string of better inflation news has increased hopes that the Fed may be able to engineer a ‘soft landing’ in the U.S.,” said Stephen Innes, managing partner at SPI Asset Management.

“Despite these shifts, U.S. recession risk remains a major worry and may be the most significant risk to the global cyclical picture,” he said.

Separately, Japan’s index of industrial production declined slightly in December 2022, falling by 0.1% month on month, following a 0.2% increase the previous month.

“Weak external demand and semiconductor shortages remain headwinds for production over the near term,” said Harumi Taguchi, principal economist at S&P Global Market Intelligence.

Markets have been veering recently on worries that the economy and corporate profits may be set for a steep drop-off, along with competing hopes that cooling inflation will get the Federal Reserve to take it easier on interest rates.

Most investors expect the Fed to announce a rate hike of just 0.25 percentage points. That would be the smallest increase since March, following a spate of hikes of 0.75 points and then a 0.50-point increase, and it would mean less pressure on the economy.

Higher rates combat inflation by intentionally slowing the economy, while also dragging down on prices for investments. Inflation has been cooling since the summer amid last year’s blizzard of rate hikes, but the economy has also been showing signs of concern.

Central banks for Europe and for the United Kingdom are also set to announce their latest increases for

rates this week.

Beyond interest rates, more than 100 companies in the S&P 500 are scheduled this week to report how much profit they made in the last three months of 2022. Among them are tech heavyweights Apple, Amazon, and Google's parent company.

Later this week, the U.S. government will also give its latest monthly update on the job market. Hiring has remained resilient across the broad economy, even as housing and other corners weaken sharply under the weight of all the Fed's rate hikes from last year.

Economists expect Friday's report to show that U.S. employers added 187,500 more jobs than they cut during January. That would be a slowdown from December's hiring of 223,000.

In energy trading, benchmark U.S. crude dropped \$1.00 to \$76.90 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. It gave up \$1.78 on Monday to \$77.90 per barrel.

Brent crude, the international standard, dropped \$1.02 to \$83.48 per barrel.

In currency trading, the U.S. dollar fell to 130.15 Japanese yen from 130.43 yen. The euro cost \$1.0816, down from \$1.0852.

Deadline nears for Alec Baldwin in deadly movie set shooting

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Prosecutors planned to file felony charges of involuntary manslaughter Tuesday in the fatal shooting of a cinematographer by actor Alec Baldwin during a rehearsal on the set of a Western movie in 2021.

Cinematographer Halyna Hutchins died shortly after being wounded at a film set ranch on the outskirts of Santa Fe, New Mexico, on Oct. 21, 2021. Baldwin was pointing a pistol at Hutchins when the gun went off, killing her and wounding the film's director.

In recent weeks, Santa Fe District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies has outlined two sets of involuntary manslaughter charges in connection with the shooting against Baldwin and film set weapons supervisor Hannah Gutierrez-Reed.

The district attorney said through a spokeswoman Monday that her office will release charging documents and a statement of probable cause outlining the evidence. Hutchins' death already has led to new safety precautions in the film industry.

Involuntary manslaughter can involve a killing that happens while a defendant is doing something lawful but dangerous and is acting negligently or without caution. Special prosecutor Andrea Reeb has cited a pattern of "criminal disregard for safety" on the set of "Rust."

Prosecutors also said they will release the terms of a signed plea agreement with assistant director David Halls, who oversaw safety on the set. Participants in the un-filmed rehearsal have given conflicting accounts of who handed the gun to Baldwin.

Halls has agreed to plead guilty in the negligent use of a deadly weapon, they said.

Heather Brewer, a spokeswoman for the district attorney's office, said in a statement Monday that prosecutors are "fully focused on securing justice for Halyna Hutchins" and "the evidence and the facts speak for themselves."

Baldwin, also a co-producer on "Rust," has described the killing as a tragic accident. The 64-year-old actor said he was told the gun was safe and has sought to clear his name by suing people involved in handling and supplying the loaded .45-caliber revolver.

In his lawsuit, Baldwin said that while working on camera angles with Hutchins, he pointed the gun in her direction and pulled back and released the hammer of the weapon, which discharged.

Defense attorney Jason Bowles, who represents Gutierrez-Reed, said the charges are the result of a "flawed investigation" and an "inaccurate understanding of the full facts."

Defendants can participate remotely in many initial court proceedings or seek to have their first appearance waived.

Involuntary manslaughter linked to negligence is a fourth-degree felony, punishable by up to 18 months

in jail and a \$5,000 fine under New Mexico law. The second set of manslaughter charges allege recklessness with a provision that could result in a mandatory five years in prison because the offense was committed with a gun.

The decision to charge Baldwin marks a stunning turn of events for an A-list actor whose 40-year career included the early blockbuster "The Hunt for Red October" and a starring role in the sitcom "30 Rock," as well as iconic appearances in Martin Scorsese's "The Departed" and a film adaptation of David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross." In recent years, Baldwin was known for his impression of former President Donald Trump on "Saturday Night Live."

US to increase weapons deployment to counter North Korea

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday said the United States will increase its deployment of advanced weapons such as fighter jets and bombers to the Korean Peninsula as it strengthens joint training and operational planning with South Korea in response to a growing North Korean nuclear threat.

Austin made the comments in Seoul after he and South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-Sup agreed to further expand their combined military exercises, including a resumption of live-fire demonstrations, and continue a "timely and coordinated" deployment of U.S. strategic assets to the region, according to their offices.

Austin and Lee also discussed preparations for a simulated exercise between the allies in February aimed at sharpening their response if North Korea uses nuclear weapons.

Austin's trip comes as South Korea seeks stronger assurances that the United States will swiftly and decisively use its nuclear capabilities to protect its ally in face of a North Korean nuclear attack.

South Korea's security jitters have risen since North Korea test-fired dozens of missiles in 2022, including potentially nuclear-capable ones designed to strike targets in South Korea and the U.S. mainland.

South Korea and the United States have also been strengthening their security cooperation with Japan, which has included trilateral missile defense and anti-submarine warfare exercises in past months amid the provocative run in North Korean weapons tests.

In a joint news conference following their meeting, Austin and Lee said they agreed that their countries' resumption of large-scale military drills last year, including an aerial exercise involving U.S. strategic bombers in November, effectively demonstrated their combined capabilities to deter North Korean aggression.

The allies had downsized their training in recent years to create room for diplomacy with North Korea during the Trump administration and because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We deployed fifth-generation aircraft, F-22s and F-35s, we deployed a carrier strike group to visit the peninsula, you can look for more of that kind of activity going forward," Austin said.

He said the U.S. commitment to protecting its allies with its full range of military capabilities, including nuclear ones, remains "ironclad."

North Korea's ramped-up missile tests have been punctuated by threats to preemptively use its nuclear weapons in a broad range of scenarios in which it perceives its leadership to be under threat, including conventional clashes or non-war situations.

Tensions could further rise in coming months with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un doubling down on his nuclear ambitions.

During a political conference in December, Kim called for an "exponential increase" in nuclear warheads, mass production of battlefield tactical nuclear weapons targeting South Korea, and development of more powerful long-range missiles designed to reach the U.S. mainland.

Experts say Kim's nuclear push is aimed at forcing the United States to accept the idea of North Korea as a nuclear power and negotiating badly needed economic concessions from a position of strength.

Nuclear negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea have been derailed since 2019 because of disagreements over a relaxation of U.S.-led economic sanctions against the North in exchange for steps by

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North Korea to wind down its nuclear weapons and missiles programs.

North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal and provocations have raised the urgency for South Korea and Japan to strengthen their defense postures in line with their alliances with the United States.

In an interview with The Associated Press this month, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said his government was discussing with the Biden administration joint military planning potentially involving U.S. nuclear assets.

In December, Japan made a major break from its strictly self-defense-only post-World War II principle, adopting a new national security strategy that includes the goals of acquiring preemptive strike capabilities and cruise missiles to counter growing threats from North Korea, China and Russia.

10 years after EU's 'never again' tragedy, little's changed

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — A decade ago this year, the head of the European Union's executive branch stood, visibly shaken, before rows of coffins holding the corpses of migrants drowned off the Italian island of Lampedusa. Some of them, small and bone-white, contained the bodies of infants and children.

"That image of hundreds of coffins will never get out of my mind. It is something I think one cannot forget. Coffins of babies, coffins with the mother and the child that was born just at that moment," Jose Manuel Barroso, then president of the European Commission, said in 2013.

More than 300 people died on Oct. 3, 2013 after a fire broke out on a fishing boat that had set off from Libya on the world's deadliest migration route. The boat, which carried almost 500 people looking for better lives in Europe, capsized only hundreds of meters (yards) from shore.

"The kind of tragedy we have witnessed here so close to the coast should never happen again," Barroso said. The EU must boost "our surveillance system to track boats, so that we can launch a rescue operation and bring people back to safe grounds before they perish," he added.

Nothing of the sort will be considered by EU leaders at a summit next week. Indeed, almost a decade on, little has improved.

About 330,000 attempts were made to enter Europe without authorization in 2022 — a six-year high. The International Organization for Migration says more than 25,000 people have died or gone missing trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea since 2014.

The search and rescue mission launched in response to the Lampedusa tragedy was shut down a year later over concern that the Italian navy ships only encouraged people to set out in the hope of being plucked from the sea.

Civilian boats run by charities have been hounded and impounded by governments for trying to save lives. The EU provides vessels and equipment to the Libyan coastguard to prevent people leaving, and Turkey and several other northern African countries get financial support.

At their Feb. 9-10 summit, the EU's 27 heads of state and government are set to renew a call to beef up borders and pressure the often-impoverished countries that people leave or cross to get to Europe, according to a draft statement prepared for the meeting, seen by The Associated Press.

The leaders will give "full support" so that the border and coastguard agency Frontex can deliver "on its core task, which is to help Member States protect the external borders, fight cross-border crime and step up returns" — the EU's euphemism for deportation.

The EU will "enhance cooperation with countries of origin and transit through mutually beneficial partnerships," said the text, which could change before the summit. It did not list the ways the partnerships might be beneficial for those countries, only the means of persuasion that could be used on them.

The EU's aid budget should be put to "the best possible use" to encourage countries to stop people leaving, it said. Those that don't accept their nationals back would find it harder to get European visas. Bangladesh, Gambia, Iraq and Senegal are already being monitored.

After a meeting last week of interior ministers, the EU's Swedish presidency said that "both positive incentives and restrictive measures are required. We must make use of all relevant policy areas in this

regard, such as visa policy, development cooperation, trade and diplomatic relations.”

Border fences are back on the table, even though the European Commission previously declined to help member countries pay for them, arguing they were not in line with “European values.” Several EU countries, notably Hungary, Austria and Slovenia, have erected border fences after well over one million migrants entered Europe in 2015, most of them war refugees from Syria and Iraq.

A Dutch government position paper circulating in Brussels said that “all types of stationary and mobile infrastructure should be part of a broader package of border management measures, while guaranteeing fundamental rights as enshrined in EU and international law.”

The land border between EU member Bulgaria and Turkey, from where many migrants set out, is of particular concern. Asked about it last Thursday, Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson said only that there isn’t enough money to help countries build fences.

The commission wants to speed up asylum processing at the bloc’s borders, and has named a “Returns Coordinator” to expedite deportation. More than 900,000 people applied for EU asylum last year, sparking a border backlog.

In a letter to the leaders, President Ursula von der Leyen said that pilot testing will be done in coming months on “an accelerated border procedure,” including the “immediate return” of those not permitted to stay.

This “Fortress Europe” approach has evolved because of the EU’s failure to agree on the answer to a vexing question: who should take responsibility for migrants and refugees arriving in Europe, and should other members be obliged to help?

The question has rarely arisen over the last year as millions of Ukrainian refugees were welcomed into Europe amid an outpouring of good will, notably from countries like Hungary or Poland that are staunchly opposed to helping take care of migrants from Africa or the Middle East.

The commission’s Pact on Migration and Asylum, unveiled in 2020, was supposed to resolve the problem but little progress has been made. Now, EU officials say that members might endorse the reform plan before the 2024 elections usher in another commission.

Global report highlights link between corruption, violence

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Most of the world continues to fail to fight corruption with 95 % of countries having made little to no progress since 2017, a closely watched study by an anti-graft organization found Tuesday.

Transparency International’s 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, which measures the perception of public sector corruption according to experts and businesspeople, also found that governments hampered by corruption lack the capacity to protect the people, while public discontent is more likely to turn into violence.

“Corruption has made our world a more dangerous place. As governments have collectively failed to make progress against it, they fuel the current rise in violence and conflict – and endanger people everywhere,” said Delia Ferreira Rubio, the chairperson of Transparency International.

“The only way out is for states to do the hard work, rooting out corruption at all levels to ensure governments work for all people, not just an elite few,” she added.

The report ranks countries on a scale from a “highly corrupt” 0 to a “very clean” 100. Denmark is seen as the least corrupt this year with 90 points, and Finland and New Zealand both follow closely at 87. Strong democratic institutions and regard for human rights also make these countries some of the most peaceful in the world, the report said.

However, the report also shows that while western Europe remains the top-scoring region, some of its countries are showing worrying signs of decline.

The United Kingdom dropped five points to 73 — its lowest ever score. The report said a number of scandals from public spending to lobbying, as well as revelations of ministerial misconduct, have highlighted woeful inadequacies in the country’s political integrity systems. Public trust in politics is also worryingly low, it said.

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Countries like Switzerland, at 82, and the Netherlands, which scored 80 points, are showing signs of decline amidst concerns over weak integrity and lobbying regulations — even though their scores remain high in comparison to the rest of the world.

In eastern Europe corruption is seen as remaining rampant as many countries reached historic lows.

Russia in particular was highlighted as a glaring example of corruption's impact on peace and stability.

The country's invasion of Ukraine almost a year ago was a stark reminder of the threat that corruption and the absence of government accountability pose for global peace and security, the report said. It added that kleptocrats in Russia, which is at 28 points, have amassed great fortunes by pledging loyalty to President Vladimir Putin in exchange for profitable government contracts and protection of their economic interests.

"The absence of any checks on Putin's power allowed him to pursue his geopolitical ambitions with impunity," the report concluded. "This attack destabilized the European continent, threatening democracy, and has killed tens of thousands."

Before the invasion, Ukraine, which scored 33 points, had a low score but was undertaking important reforms and steadily improving. Even after the outbreak of the war, the country continued to prioritize anti-corruption reforms. However, wars disrupt normal processes and exacerbate risks, the report pointed out, allowing corrupt actors to pocket funds meant for recovery. Earlier this month investigations exposed alleged war profiteering by several senior officials.

The index rated 180 countries and territories. Somalia was at the bottom with 12 points; South Sudan tied with Syria for second-to-last with 13.

Only eight countries improved last year, among them Ireland with 77 points, South Korea with 63, Armenia at 46, and Angola at 33.

The report also pointed out how after decades of conflict, South Sudan is in a major humanitarian crisis with more than half of the population facing acute food insecurity — and corruption is exacerbating the situation.

In Yemen, at 16, where complaints of corruption helped spark civil war eight years ago, the report said that the state has collapsed, leaving two-thirds of the population without sufficient food in what has become one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

Compiled since 1995, the index is calculated using 13 different data sources that provide perceptions of public sector corruption from businesspeople and country experts. Sources include the World Bank, the World Economic Forum and private risk and consulting companies.

'Laverne & Shirley' actor Cindy Williams dies at 75

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Cindy Williams, who was among the most recognizable stars in America in the 1970s and 1980s for her role as Shirley opposite Penny Marshall's Laverne on the beloved sitcom "Laverne & Shirley," has died, her family said Monday.

Williams died in Los Angeles at age 75 on Wednesday after a brief illness, her children, Zak and Emily Hudson, said in a statement released through family spokeswoman Liza Cranis.

"The passing of our kind, hilarious mother, Cindy Williams, has brought us insurmountable sadness that could never truly be expressed," the statement said. "Knowing and loving her has been our joy and privilege. She was one of a kind, beautiful, generous and possessed a brilliant sense of humor and a glittering spirit that everyone loved."

Williams worked with some of Hollywood's most elite directors in a film career that preceded her full-time move to television, appearing in George Cukor's 1972 "Travels With My Aunt," George Lucas' 1973 "American Graffiti" and Francis Ford Coppola's "The Conversation" from 1974.

But she was by far best known for "Laverne & Shirley," the "Happy Days" spinoff that ran on ABC from 1976 to 1983 that in its prime was among the most popular shows on TV.

Williams played the straitlaced Shirley Feeney to Marshall's more libertine Laverne DeFazio on the show about a pair of blue-collar roommates who toiled on the assembly line of a Milwaukee brewery in the

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1950s and 1960s.

"They were beloved characters," Williams told The Associated Press in 2002.

DeFazio was quick-tempered and defensive; Feeney was naive and trusting. The actors drew upon their own lives for plot inspiration.

"We'd make up a list at the start of each season of what talents we had," Marshall told the AP in 2002. "Cindy could touch her tongue to her nose and we used it in the show. I did tap dance."

Williams told The Associated Press in 2013 that she and Marshall had "very different personalities" but tales of the two clashing during the making of the show were "a bit overblown."

The series was the rare network hit about working-class characters, with its self-empowering opening song: "Give us any chance, we'll take it, read us any rule, we'll break it."

That opening would become as popular as the show itself. Williams' and Marshall's chant of "schlemiel, schlimazel" as they skipped along together became a cultural phenomenon and oft-invoked piece of nostalgia.

Marshall, whose brother, Garry Marshall, co-created the series, died in 2018.

Actor Rosario Dawson shared a video of the opening theme on Twitter on Tuesday.

"Singing this song with so much gratitude for both of you ladies," Dawson tweeted. "Absolute gems. United again... Rest in Paradise Cindy Williams."

The show also starred Michael McKean and David Lander as Laverne and Shirley's oddball hangers-on Lenny and Squiggy. Lander died in 2020.

McKean paid tribute to Williams on Twitter with a memory from the production.

"Backstage, Season 1: I'm offstage waiting for a cue. The script's been a tough one, so we're giving it 110% and the audience is having a great time," McKean tweeted. "Cindy scoots by me to make her entrance and with a glorious grin, says: 'Show's cookin'!' Amen. Thank you, Cindy."

As ratings dropped in the sixth season, the characters moved from Milwaukee to Burbank, California, trading their brewery jobs for work at a department store.

In 1982, Williams became pregnant and wanted her working hours curtailed. When her demands weren't met, she walked off the set, and filed a lawsuit against its production company. She appeared infrequently during the final season.

Williams was born one of two sisters in the Van Nuys area of Los Angeles in 1947. Her family moved to Dallas soon after she was born, but returned to Los Angeles, where she would take up acting while attending Birmingham High School and a major in theater arts at LA City College.

Her acting career began with small roles in television starting in 1969, with appearances on "Room 222," "Nanny and the Professor" and "Love, American Style."

Her part in Lucas' "American Graffiti" would become a defining role. The film was a forerunner to a nostalgia boom for the 1950s and early 1960s that would follow. "Happy Days," starring her "American Graffiti" co-star Ron Howard, would premiere the following year. The characters of Laverne and Shirley made their first TV appearance as dates of Henry Winkler's Fonzie before they got their own show.

Lucas also considered her for the role of Princess Leia in "Star Wars," a role that went to Carrie Fisher.

In the past three decades, Williams made guest appearances on dozens of TV series including "7th Heaven," "8 Simple Rules" and "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit." In 2013, she and Marshall appeared in a "Laverne & Shirley" tribute episode of the Nickelodeon series "Sam and Cat."

Last year, Williams appeared in a one-woman stage show full of stories from her career, "Me, Myself and Shirley," at a theater in Palm Springs, California, near her home in Desert Hot Springs.

Williams was married to singer Bill Hudson of musical group the Hudson Brothers from 1982 until 2000. Hudson was father to her two children. He was previously married to Goldie Hawn and is also the father of actor Kate Hudson.

Former Shanghai bookseller's wife hit with 'exit ban'

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

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HONG KONG (AP) — Chinese police have prevented a woman from returning to her home in Florida in an effort to compel her husband to return to China, she wrote in a letter he made public.

The case appears to be the latest example of Chinese authorities placing an “exit ban” on a person’s relatives to pressure them to return.

In an appeal to authorities, Fang Xie, 51, wrote that the police have told her that she is “innocent” but that she cannot leave until her husband, a former bookseller who left China after his store was shut down for political reasons, gives himself up.

She was barred from boarding a plane in Shanghai last August, her husband Miao Yu said, and hasn’t been able to leave China since.

Exit bans, which critics have likened to hostage-taking, have affected both Chinese citizens and foreigners. The U.S. government includes exit bans as a risk in its travel advisory for people going to China.

Yu declined to provide contact information for his wife, citing concerns about her safety. He did, however, arrange for an Associated Press journalist to join a call between them in which she confirmed that she wrote the letter but declined to comment further.

The Shanghai Public Security Bureau did not immediately respond to faxed questions Monday and a Foreign Ministry spokesperson said she was not aware of the case.

But Chinese prosecutors have previously described the practice of using exit bans on family members to pressure wanted people to return. Prosecutors, in notes about the case of a former Chinese businessman who was accused of stealing \$6 million and had moved to Canada, wrote that they set up a special task force to “vigorously squeeze his survival” and placed exit bans on his son, daughter-in-law and ex-wife as part of a campaign to “control his relatives and shake his emotional support.”

Many countries can bar people accused of crimes or needed as witnesses to legal proceedings from leaving. But scholars say China’s use of travel bans exceeds these international norms.

Yu ran one of Shanghai’s best-known independent bookstores until 2018, when local authorities prevented his Jifeng Bookstore from renewing its lease, effectively pushing it out of business. At that time, Yu said, a representative of the public security bureau told him his shop had hosted “too many sensitive scholars” and “sensitive talks.”

The couple moved to America 2019, when Yu began a master’s degree in political science, and Xie came as the spouse of a student visa holder. They settled in Florida to accompany their children who go to school there. Yu is now studying journalism in Orlando and said he has not remained active in politics since going overseas.

Xie returned to Shanghai to care for her ailing mother in 2022, and Shanghai police told her about the ban two days before she planned to return home in August. Xie tried to leave anyway, but airport border officials stopped her from leaving, saying she was “suspected of endangering national security,” he said.

But police told her a different story, she wrote in an appeal to authorities that Yu published on social media about two weeks ago.

“You clearly told me that I am innocent,” she wrote. “Once my husband returns to China for an investigation then this can be exchanged for my freedom to leave.”

Yu, who had been planning a trip to China to visit relatives and friends after his wife’s return, canceled his own plans.

The couple believes that the issue is three pseudonymous articles which the police accuse Yu of publishing from the United States, about Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and those involved in China’s 1989 pro-democracy protest movement.

Yu said he is not the author of the articles, but the police told Xie that they traced them to an IP address associated with Yu.

Yu said his wife can live normally inside China and spends most of her time at her Shanghai home.

The couple speak daily, using the Chinese messaging service WeChat. But separation has been hard on them.

In her letter, Xie writes that she worries about her daughters, who are applying for university this year. “When adolescents lose their mother’s love, it will lead to lifelong regrets.”

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Yu said he feels guilty that his work affected his wife, who did not work at the Jifeng Bookstore. It feels like having an "open wound," Yu said in a video interview from their home in Florida. "I don't know when I will be able to hug my wife and when I will be able to go back to my hometown safely and freely."

Over the past six months, Yu said, he thought about going back to China in exchange for his wife's freedom. He did not go ahead out of fear that his children would be left alone if the authorities banned both of them from leaving. Their twin daughters turned 18 years old this month, he added. They also have a 22-year-old son.

Yu published his wife's letter on WeChat without telling her in advance, he said. It disappeared several hours after he first posted on WeChat but attracted attention from Chinese media outlets. A similar post on his Twitter account drew nearly 170,000 views.

The next day, local police told Xie that her husband's move would make it more difficult to resolve the situation, he said.

Feng Chongyi, a professor of China Studies, University of Technology in Sydney who was prevented from leaving China in 2017, said Chinese authorities regularly make such threats, but argued that publicity through media campaigns played a key role allowing him and others to leave after exit bans.

Yu said he decided to speak to the media because he hoped to gain the U.S. government's attention ahead of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's early February trip to China. "It's a very small hope. But now, I don't have any other good hopes here," he said.

Boeing bids farewell to an icon, delivers last 747 jumbo jet

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Boeing bids farewell to an icon on Tuesday: It's delivering its final 747 jumbo jet.

Since its first flight in 1969, the giant yet graceful 747 has served as a cargo plane, a commercial aircraft capable of carrying nearly 500 passengers, a transport for NASA's space shuttles, and the Air Force One presidential aircraft. It revolutionized travel, connecting international cities that had never before had direct routes and helping democratize passenger flight.

But over about the past 15 years, Boeing and its European rival Airbus have introduced more profitable and fuel efficient wide-body planes, with only two engines to maintain instead of the 747's four. The final plane is the 1,574th built by Boeing in the Puget Sound region of Washington state.

A big crowd of current and former Boeing workers is expected for the final send-off. The last one is being delivered to cargo carrier Atlas Air.

"If you love this business, you've been dreading this moment," said longtime aviation analyst Richard Aboulafia. "Nobody wants a four-engine airliner anymore, but that doesn't erase the tremendous contribution the aircraft made to the development of the industry or its remarkable legacy."

Boeing set out to build the 747 after losing a contract for a huge military transport, the C-5A. The idea was to take advantage of the new engines developed for the transport — high-bypass turbofan engines, which burned less fuel by passing air around the engine core, enabling a farther flight range — and to use them for a newly imagined civilian aircraft.

It took more than 50,000 Boeing workers less than 16 months to churn out the first 747 — a Herculean effort that earned them the nickname "The Incredibles." The jumbo jet's production required the construction of a massive factory in Everett, north of Seattle — the world's largest building by volume.

The plane's fuselage was 225 feet (68.5 meters) long and the tail stood as tall as a six-story building. The plane's design included a second deck extending from the cockpit back over the first third of the plane, giving it a distinctive hump and inspiring a nickname, the Whale. More romantically, the 747 became known as the Queen of the Skies.

Some airlines turned the second deck into a first-class cocktail lounge, while even the lower deck sometimes featured lounges or even a piano bar.

"It was the first big carrier, the first widebody, so it set a new standard for airlines to figure out what to do with it, and how to fill it," said Guillaume de Syon, a history professor at Pennsylvania's Albright Col-

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lege who specializes in aviation and mobility. "It became the essence of mass air travel: You couldn't fill it with people paying full price, so you need to lower prices to get people onboard. It contributed to what happened in the late 1970s with the deregulation of air travel."

The first 747 entered service in 1970 on Pan Am's New York-London route, and its timing was terrible, Aboulafia said. It debuted shortly before the oil crisis of 1973, amid a recession that saw Boeing's employment fall from 100,800 employees in 1967 to a low of 38,690 in April 1971. The "Boeing bust" was infamously marked by a billboard near the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport that read, "Will the last person leaving SEATTLE -- Turn out the lights."

An updated model — the 747-400 series — arrived in the late 1980s and had much better timing, coinciding with the Asian economic boom of the early 1990s, Aboulafia said. He recalled taking a Cathay Pacific 747 from Los Angeles to Hong Kong as a twentysomething backpacker in 1991.

"Even people like me could go see Asia," Aboulafia said. "Before, you had to stop for fuel in Alaska or Hawaii and it cost a lot more. This was a straight shot — and reasonably priced."

Delta was the last U.S. airline to use the 747 for passenger flights, which ended in 2017, although some other international carriers continue to fly it, including the German airline Lufthansa.

Atlas Air ordered four 747-8 freighters early last year, with the final one leaving the factory Tuesday.

Boeing's roots are in the Seattle area, and it has assembly plants in Washington state and South Carolina. The company announced in May that it would move its headquarters from Chicago to Arlington, Virginia, putting its executives closer to key federal government officials and the Federal Aviation Administration, which certifies Boeing passenger and cargo planes.

Boeing's relationship with the FAA has been strained since deadly crashes of its best-selling plane, the 737 Max, in 2018 and 2019. The FAA took nearly two years — far longer than Boeing expected — to approve design changes and allow the plane back in the air.

Tyre Nichols case shows officers still fail to intervene

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

As five Memphis police officers attacked Tyre Nichols with their feet, fists and a baton, others milled around at the scene, even as the 29-year-old cried out in pain and then slumped limply against the side of a car.

Just like the attack on George Floyd in Minneapolis nearly three years ago, a simple intervention could have saved a life. Instead, Nichols is dead and the five officers are charged with second-degree murder and other crimes.

More disciplinary action may be coming now that the harrowing video of Nichols treatment has been released. Memphis police relieved two other officers of duty Monday and say the department is still investigating what happened. The Memphis Fire Department also fired three emergency response workers who arrived on the scene for failing to assess Nichols' condition.

The Memphis and Minneapolis police departments are among many U.S. law enforcement agencies with "duty to intervene" policies. The Memphis protocol is clear: "Any member who directly observes another member engaged in dangerous or criminal conduct or abuse of a subject shall take reasonable action to intervene."

It's not just a policy, it's the law. The three Minneapolis officers who failed to step in and stop former Officer Derek Chauvin from kneeling on Floyd's neck as the Black man said he couldn't breathe were all convicted of federal civil rights violations.

Experts agree peer pressure, and in some cases fear of retribution, is on the minds of officers who fail to stop colleagues from bad actions.

"They're afraid of being ostracized," said George Kirkham, a criminology professor emeritus at Florida State University and former police officer. "You've got to depend on those guys. It's the thin blue line. When you get out there and get in a jam, you've got nobody else to help you but other cops."

Nichols was pulled over in a traffic stop the night of Jan. 7. Body camera video shows he was beaten as officers screamed profanities, even as Nichols seemed confused about what he did wrong. Amid the

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chaos, he ran and was eventually caught at another intersection, a short distance from his mother's house.

Security camera images from that scene show two officers holding Nichols to the ground as a third appears to kick him in the head. Later, another officer strikes Nichols repeatedly with a baton as another officer holds him.

Officers pull Nichols to his feet, though he's barely able to stand. An officer punches him in the face, and Nichols stumbles, still held up by two officers. After more punches, he collapses. But the attack continues.

When it ends, Nichols is slumped against a car. It would be more than 20 minutes before medical attention was rendered, though three members of the fire department arrived on the scene with medical equipment within 10 minutes. Those workers, two medics and a lieutenant who was with them, were the personnel fired late Monday.

Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington-based think tank, said duty to intervene policies became common after officers attacked and badly injured Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992.

"But having a policy and overcoming what many would argue is the culture in policing are two different things," Wexler said. "It's not enough to simply have a policy. You need to practice. You need to talk through it."

In some cases, concerns by officers about retaliation for intervening have proven true.

In Buffalo, New York, Officer Cariol Horne was a year away from collecting her pension when she faced departmental charges after pulling a fellow officer's arm from around the neck of a domestic violence suspect in 2006. She was fired. In 2021 a state Supreme Court judge reinstated her pension and overturned her dismissal.

Last year in Sunrise, Florida, Sgt. Christopher Pullease was criminally charged after an incident caught on video in which an unidentified female officer pulled Pullease by the belt away from a handcuffed suspect after Pullease pointed pepper spray at him. Pullease responded by putting a hand on his colleague's throat and pushing her away, the video showed.

Experts were also perplexed that no police department supervisors were present during the Memphis incident. Had there been, they said, the outcome might have been different.

"I was a supervisor for a long time, and you showing up on the scene even unannounced keeps people from doing, for lack of a better adjective, stupid things," said former New York City Police Sgt. Joseph Giacalone, who teaches at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

Memphis Police Director Cerelyn "CJ" Davis said the police department has a supervisor shortage and called the lack of a supervisor at the incident "a major problem." Davis on Saturday disbanded the city's so-called Scorpion unit, whose officers were involved in the beating.

University of Missouri-St. Louis criminologist David Klinger said decisions on whether to intervene in a police colleague's actions are not always cut and dried. He said one officer may see a weapon that is blocked from the view of another, for example, and stepping in at the wrong time could jeopardize the lives of officers at the scene.

"Training has to be precise about the sorts of circumstances that would warrant an intervention," Klinger said.

In Iowa, potential 2024 GOP Trump challengers quiet for now

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — By this time four years ago, at least a dozen Democratic presidential hopefuls eager to make their case against Donald Trump had either visited Iowa or announced plans to soon visit the leadoff voting state ahead of the 2020 election.

Iowa's campaign landscape is markedly different this year, with a Republican field seemingly frozen by Trump's early announcement of a 2024 campaign. So far, only former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson has visited this year, and U.S. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina is making plans to stop by in the next few weeks.

Even Trump, the only declared candidate in the 2024 race right now, has been absent from Iowa, choos-

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ing instead to kickstart his campaign last weekend in New Hampshire and South Carolina, two other early voting states.

With Iowa's first-in-the-nation GOP caucuses just a year off, the field of would-be White House candidates has largely been content to steer clear of bone-chilling Iowa — and, perhaps more importantly, avoid being the first candidate to announce a bid against the former president.

"No one wants to be on a limb by themselves against Trump," said Alan Ostergren, a Republican lawyer in Des Moines who is involved in GOP politics. "They'll all break at some point. But no one wants to go first."

For now, the quiet in Iowa gives other contenders weighing campaigns — among them former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, former Vice President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, all of whom campaigned in Iowa last year for GOP candidates — time to talk to potential donors, promote their new books and summon the mettle to take on Trump.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a leading GOP presidential prospect coming off a blowout reelection victory, is not expected to make any 2024 moves until the spring, after the Florida Legislature adjourns and he completes a national book tour.

As a warning to other potential competitors, Trump and his team have been lashing out at would-be rivals. The former president has dubbed DeSantis "Ron DeSanctimonious" and said that a DeSantis challenge for the 2024 GOP nomination would be "a great act of disloyalty."

Trump's universal name recognition gives him space to stay away from Iowa for now, GOP operatives say, as his team charts a strategy that's expected to be more organized than his freewheeling 2016 campaign, which resulted in a second-place finish in the state's caucuses.

Although he remains deeply popular within a core of the Republican Party, Trump is facing a number of investigations that could complicate his third bid for the White House. Among them are a criminal investigation over top-secret documents found at his Florida estate, a probe in Washington into his efforts to undo the results of the 2020 presidential election, an investigation in Georgia into his efforts to remain in the presidency after losing reelection, and more probes in New York.

"He's not looked at as someone who should automatically get the nomination. He's no longer in office, and two years have gone by," said Steve Scheffler, Iowa's Republican National committeeman, who has pledged to remain publicly neutral. "Even though the base loves him and his policies, he may have to do more of what others have to do. I definitely think he's more vulnerable."

So far, Trump is the lone 2024 Republican with a paid presence in Iowa. Alex Latcham, the former regional political director for the Iowa Republican Party, now works for Trump's national team but still lives in Iowa. He is helping recruit an Iowa campaign director for Trump.

Unlike four years ago, around the time then-California Sen. Kamala Harris, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren and then-South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, among others, were visiting Iowa, Democrats this year are standing to the side with the expectation that President Joe Biden will seek a second term. In any case, the Democratic National Committee is expected to strip Iowa of its leadoff voting status for the 2024 presidential nominating calendar, though Republicans plan to keep Iowa as its first-voting state.

Despite the relative quiet in Iowa so far this year, potential Republican candidates are still finding ways to make inroads with GOP activists in the state without setting foot there.

At the GOP legislative breakfast on Jan. 9, legislators and party officials flipped through a printed program that included full-page ads from Trump, Pompeo and Scott.

That's in addition to the tens of thousands of dollars that they and others, including Haley and Pence, contributed to Iowa Republican candidates from their political fundraising organizations for their 2022 midterm election campaigns.

Without setting foot in Iowa, DeSantis, too, worked to sow goodwill last year with Republican Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds by inviting her to meet in Florida.

Several would-be presidential candidates are expected to attend an annual spring fundraiser for the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition, a Christian conservative group, on April 22.

Hutchinson, the only 2024 GOP candidate to visit Iowa this year, made a low-profile visit to Iowa early this month, holding private meetings and speaking to a GOP state legislative breakfast. Scott is scheduled

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to speak at the Polk County GOP annual fundraising dinner on Feb. 22.

Gloria Mazza, chair of the Polk County Republican Party, said it's only a matter of time before the behind-the-scenes maneuvering by potential GOP Trump rivals spills out into the open.

"It's going to pop, but it's hard to tell when. It's like a game of chess," Mazza said. "Who is going to make the first move on him?"

Mexicans relish tamales, savoring tradition and nostalgia

By FABIOLA SÁNCHEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — At least three times a week, Mexico City bus driver Nicolás Cuatencos stops by a stand selling tamales to pick up a "guajolota," or "turkey." It's a corn husk-wrapped corn dough and salsa delicacy slid into crusty bun, and it's been his weakness since childhood.

"The flavor, the dough, all of that is really good," a smiling Cuatencos said recently.

But tamales are not only delicious and a high caloric way to fuel the work day. They also invariably carry nostalgia for millions like Cuatencos, who remembers his grandmother preparing tamales for family celebrations and religious festivals like Candlemas Day on Feb. 2.

On that day, Mexican tradition has it that whoever found the baby Jesus figurine in the Rosca de Reyes cake eaten on Three Kings Day on Jan. 6 has to buy tamales for the family on Feb. 2.

Even outside that holiday, vendors set up stands across the city before dawn at subway stops and street corners where tamales steam in giant pots fired by gas burners or charcoal. Other vendors slowly pedal big tricycles down streets offering tamales, which can also be wrapped in banana leaves or other foliage.

Tamales date to pre-Hispanic times when Olmecs, Mexicas and Mayas prepared them for religious rituals, offerings and even placed them in tombs. They have persisted for centuries, spinning off an array of varieties and adjusting to ingredients like the pork and lard brought by Spanish conquerors.

A single offering of the dish is called a tamal in Spanish. It comes from the Nahuatl word "tamalli," which means wrapped.

Tamales are eaten in countries throughout the region under other names like "humita," "pamonhas," "hallaca" and "guanime." But the sheer variety achieved in Mexico is unmatched, said chef and gastronomy researcher Ricardo Muñoz Zurita. He has identified 25 families of tamales in Mexico, which themselves have innumerable variants based on ingredients, wrappings and size.

The tradition comes from a time when farmers would bring their ears of corn to the church for a priest to bless the kernels set aside for the planting of the next crop.

From north to south, hundreds of savory and sweet tamal varieties proliferate in Mexico.

"The popularity of the tamal is so great that I don't think they're going to stop making them in this century because it is not an isolated dish, there is a total tamal culture," Muñoz Zurita said.

Just like his parents and grandparents did, Cuatencos, the 45-year-old bus driver, said he will gather with his wife, children and other relatives Thursday to celebrate Candlemas.

"My kids found the figurine in the cake, but I will bring the tamales," he said, assuring that it is his way of passing the tradition on to his children. "Tamales are going to survive many generations because they are passed from generation to generation."

NATO chief wants firmer ties with Japan to defend democracy

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and HARUKA NUGA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, in Japan as part of his East Asia tour, said "our security is closely interconnected" and called for stronger ties with Japan as Russia's war on Ukraine raises global dangers and shows that democracies need stronger partnerships.

Japan has been quick to join the U.S.-led economic sanctions against Russia's war on Ukraine and provided humanitarian aid and non-combatative defense equipment for the Ukrainians.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has sounded alarm that Russia's aggression in Europe could happen in Asia, where concerns are growing over already assertive China and its escalating tension near

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Taiwan. Japan also has significantly stepped up ties with NATO recently.

"The war in Ukraine also demonstrates that our security is closely interconnected," Stoltenberg said during his visit at the Iruma Air Base north of Tokyo, where he started his Japan visit Tuesday after arriving late Monday from South Korea.

"If President (Vladimir) Putin wins in Ukraine it will be a tragedy for the Ukrainians, but it will also send a very dangerous message to authoritarian leaders all over the world because then the message will be that when they use military force they can achieve their goals," he said. "So the war in Ukraine matters for all of us."

Stoltenberg said his visit to Japan "is a way to further strengthen the partnership between NATO and our highly valued partner Japan."

His is set to meet with Kishida and hold a joint news conference later Tuesday.

Japan, already a close ally of the United States, has in recent years expanded its military ties with other Indo-Pacific nations as well as with Britain, Europe and NATO amid growing security threat from China and North Korea.

Japan issued a new national security strategy in December stating its determination to build up its military and deploy long-range missiles to preempt enemy attacks in a major break from its post-World War II principle that limited itself to self-defense. Japan also hopes to further ease restrictions on arms export to strengthen the country's feeble defense industry.

While in South Korea on Monday, Stoltenberg called for South Korea to provide direct military support to Ukraine to help Kyiv to fight off the prolonged Russian invasion. So far, Seoul has only provided humanitarian aid and other support, citing a long-standing policy of not supplying weapons to countries in conflict.

Stoltenberg also met with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on Monday and discussed Seoul's commitment to support Ukraine and NATO's possible role in dissuading North Korea from its growing nuclear ambitions following an unprecedented number of ballistic missile tests in 2022, Yoon's office said.

Stoltenberg on Sunday mentioned U.S. intelligence reports accusing North Korea of providing weapons to Russia to support its war in Ukraine.

North Korea condemned his visits to South Korea and Japan, saying that NATO was trying to put its "military boots in the region" and attempting to pressure America's Asian allies into providing weapons to Ukraine.

In a statement released by the state-run Korean Central News Agency, North Korea criticized increasing cooperation between NATO and U.S. allies in Asia as a process to create an "Asian version of NATO" that would raise tensions in the region.

Death toll from Pakistan mosque suicide bombing rises to 74

By RIAZ KHAN Associated Press

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) — The death toll from previous day's suicide bombing at a mosque in northwest Pakistan on Tuesday jumped to 74 after rescuers retrieved 15 more bodies from the rubble, police and rescue official said.

Bilal Faizi, the chief rescue official, said they were still removing the rubble after the mosque's roof caved following the attack.

He said the bombing in the northwestern city of Peshawar also wounded more than 150 people. It was not clear how the bomber was able to slip into the walled compound in a high-security zone with other government buildings.

Also, on Tuesday mourners were burying the bombing victims at different graveyards in Peshawar and elsewhere.

Sarbakaf Mohmand, a commander for the Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP, claimed responsibility for the attack in a post on Twitter.

But hours later, TTP spokesperson Mohammad Khurasani distanced the group from the bombing, saying it was not its policy to target mosques, seminaries and religious places, adding that those taking part in

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such acts could face punitive action under TTP's policy. His statement did not address why a TTP commander had claimed responsibility for the bombing.

"The sheer scale of the human tragedy is unimaginable. This is no less than an attack on Pakistan," tweeted Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, who visited the wounded in Peshawar and vowed "stern action" against those behind the bombing. He expressed his condolences to families of the victims, saying their pain "cannot be described in words."

Pakistan, which is mostly Sunni Muslim, has seen a surge in militant attacks since November, when the Pakistani Taliban ended their cease-fire with government forces.

Earlier this month, the Pakistani Taliban claimed one of its members shot and killed two intelligence officers, including the director of the counterterrorism wing of the country's military-based spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence. Security officials said Monday the gunman was traced and killed in a shootout in the northwest near the Afghan border.

The TTP is separate from but a close ally of the Afghan Taliban. The TTP has waged an insurgency in Pakistan in the past 15 years, seeking stricter enforcement of Islamic laws, the release of its members in government custody and a reduction in the Pakistani military presence in areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province it has long used as its base.

Monday's assault on a Sunni mosque inside the police facility was one of the deadliest attacks on security forces in recent years.

More than 300 worshippers were praying in the mosque, with more approaching, when the bomber set off his explosives vest. Many were injured when the roof came down, according to Zafar Khan, a police officer, and rescuers had to remove mounds of debris to reach worshippers still trapped under the rubble.

Meena Gul, who was in the mosque when the bomb went off, said he doesn't know how he survived unhurt. The 38-year-old police officer said he heard cries and screams after the blast.

Peshawar is the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where the Pakistani Taliban have a strong presence, and the city has been the scene of frequent militant attacks.

The Afghan Taliban seized power in neighboring Afghanistan in August 2021 as U.S. and NATO troops pulled out of the country after 20 years of war.

The Pakistani government's truce with the TTP ended as the country was still contending with unprecedented flooding that killed 1,739 people, destroyed more than 2 million homes, and at one point submerged as much as a third of the country.

Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it was "saddened to learn that numerous people lost their lives and many others were injured by an explosion at a mosque in Peshawar" and condemned attacks on worshippers as contrary to the teachings of Islam.

Condemnations also came from the Saudi Embassy in Islamabad, as well as the U.S. Embassy, adding that "The United States stands with Pakistan in condemning all forms of terrorism."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the bombing "particularly abhorrent" for targeting a place of worship, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Cash-strapped Pakistan faces a severe economic crisis and is seeking a crucial installment of \$1.1 billion from the International Monetary Fund — part of its \$6 billion bailout package — to avoid default. Talks with the IMF on reviving the bailout have stalled in the past months.

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan called the bombing a "terrorist suicide attack." He tweeted: "My prayers & condolences go to victims families. It is imperative we improve our intelligence gathering & properly equip our police forces to combat the growing threat of terrorism."

Sharif's government came to power in April after Khan was ousted in a no-confidence vote in Parliament. Khan has since campaigned for early elections, claiming his ouster was illegal and part of a plot backed by the United States. Washington and Sharif dismiss Khan's claims.

Why everyone's debating Riseborough's best actress Oscar nod

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Nothing — not Tom Cruise's snub nor Austin Butler's lingering Elvis Presley inflections

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— has caused quite as much a stir around this year's Oscars as the best-actress nomination for British actress Andrea Riseborough.

Riseborough was unexpectedly nominated for her performance as an alcoholic Texas single mother in the scantily seen indie drama "To Leslie," a pick that shocked Oscar pundits and has since brought scrutiny from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. For a movie that has grossed \$27,322 at the box office, "To Leslie" and Riseborough have made a lot of noise.

At issue is the way Riseborough's candidacy was promoted. Though many awards contenders are backed by orchestrated campaigns paid for by their film's studio, Riseborough rose into the Oscar ranks thanks largely to the grassroots efforts of "To Leslie" director Michael Morris and his wife, actor Mary McCormack. They urged stars to see the film and either host a screening or praise Riseborough's performance on social media. And a whole lot of them did.

So what's the big deal? Cronyism in Hollywood isn't exactly news; it's more or less the modus operandi. But Riseborough's nomination — and the strong response it's engendered — has disrupted this year's Oscar season, with potential repercussions for the Academy Awards in March and the bids of all future Oscar hopefuls.

WHO IS ANDREA RISEBOROUGH?

For about 15 years, the 41-year-old Riseborough has been a regular presence in film, television and London theater, but she's sometimes hard to register because of her chameleonic performances. She appeared in Mike Leigh's "Happy-Go-Lucky" (2008). She made an impression as Riggan's girlfriend in "Birdman" (2014). She played Stalin's daughter in "The Death of Stalin" (2017). In "Mandy" (2018), alongside Nicolas Cage, she played his character's kidnapped girlfriend. Riseborough had several other notable credits in 2022, including David O. Russell's "Amsterdam" and as Mrs. Wormwood in "Matilda the Musical." She's been doing acclaimed work in adventurous independent film for long enough that an Oscar vote for her may have also been partly for her unassuming body of work.

HOW UNEXPECTED WAS RISEBOROUGH'S NOMINATION?

Almost no one expected Riseborough's late-breaking campaign to actually land her a nomination. It wasn't totally out of left field, though. Riseborough's performance in "To Leslie" had been nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. But she wasn't expected to be in the mix in what was generally considered the hardest category to break into this year. Riseborough was nominated along with Cate Blanchett ("Tár"), Michelle Williams ("The Fabelmans"), Ana de Armas ("Blonde") and Michelle Yeoh ("Everything Everywhere All at Once").

"I'm astounded," Riseborough told Deadline shortly after the nominations were announced. "It was so hard to believe it might ever happen because we really hadn't been in the running for anything else. Even though we had a lot of support, the idea it might actually happen seemed so far away."

Two highly regarded performances were left out: Viola Davis in "The Woman King" and Danielle Deadwyler in "Till." That the category's most glaring snubs were both Black women has been a point of discussion. "Till" director Chinonye Chukwu, in a post on Instagram, suggested the system had failed. "We live in a world and work in industries that are so aggressively committed to upholding whiteness and perpetuating an unabashed misogyny towards Black women."

WHAT MADE RISEBOROUGH'S CAMPAIGN DIFFERENT?

Most every acting nominee participates in some kind of Oscar campaign to help highlight their performance and get voters to watch their film. It's a game that's played. The playwright and screenwriter Jeremy O. Harris noted on Twitter: "Do people not realize that what the actresses did for Andrea Riseborough happens in private every night for months starting in October for every movie/performance (with) a chance."

There are rules that limit the kinds of events that are held and even how much someone can email promotions to academy members during the voting period. Most campaigns have veteran strategists behind them and a substantial amount of money. Those pushing Riseborough, though, managed to draw attention to her without such backing. Instead, they counted on A-listers to spread the word.

Kate Winslet, Charlize Theron, Jennifer Aniston, Gwyneth Paltrow, Amy Adams and Courteney Cox all hosted screenings for the film. "You should be winning everything," Winslet told her in a virtual Q&A. Other

stars like Edward Norton, Susan Sarandon, Mira Sorvino and Rosie O'Donnell added their praise for her on social media. Those who supported Riseborough saw in the campaign — no billboards on Sunset, no "For Your Consideration" ads, just a deep Rolodex — a groundbreaking way to circumvent traditional Oscar rituals. In a since-deleted post, actress Christina Ricci wrote of the backlash to Riseborough's nomination: "So it's only the films and actors that can afford the campaigns that deserve recognition? Feels elitist and exclusive and frankly very backward to me."

DID THAT BREAK ANY RULES?

There is no public evidence that Riseborough or anyone on her behalf clearly broke academy regulations. The screenings and endorsements that propelled Riseborough are commonplace. Some have speculated that Riseborough may have received a boost because of the strong passion of her supporters, who might have made her their top nominee.

But if the academy found that anyone violated the rules about contacting academy members "directly and in a manner outside of the scope of these rules," the academy's board of governors "may take any corrective actions or assess any penalties, including disqualification," according to academy bylaws. "Furthermore, any academy member who has authorized, executed or otherwise enabled a campaign activity that is determined by the board of governors to have undermined the letter or spirit of these regulations may be subject to suspension of membership or expulsion from the academy."

Oscar nominations have rarely been rescinded but it has happened. In 2014, composer Bruce Broughton, nominated for best original song, was disqualified after it was revealed he had emailed music branch members to call attention to the song's submission. At the time, Broughton, a former governor for the academy, was a member of the music branch's executive committee.

HOW HAS THE ACADEMY RESPONDED?

The academy has not commented on Riseborough's nomination. But on Friday, it announced that it will conduct a review of the campaign procedures arounds this year's nominees "to ensure that no guidelines were violated, and to inform us whether changes to the guidelines may be needed in a new era of social media and digital communication."

"We have confidence in the integrity of our nomination and voting procedures, and support genuine grassroots campaigns for outstanding performances," the academy added.

California is lone holdout in Colorado River cuts proposal

By FELICIA FONSECA and SUMAN NAISHADHAM Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Six Western states that rely on water from the Colorado River have agreed on a model to dramatically cut water use in the basin, months after the federal government called for action and an initial deadline passed.

California — with the largest allocation of water from the river — is the lone holdout. Officials said the state would release its own plan.

The Colorado River and its tributaries pass through seven states and into Mexico, serving 40 million people and a \$5 billion-a-year agricultural industry. Some of the largest cities in the country, including Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver and Las Vegas, two Mexican states, Native American tribes and others depend on the river that's been severely stressed by drought, demand and overuse.

States missed a mid-August deadline to heed the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's call to propose ways to conserve 2 million to 4 million acre feet of water. They regrouped to reach consensus by the end of January to fold into a larger proposal Reclamation has in the works.

Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Wyoming sent a letter Monday to Reclamation, which operates the major dams in the river system, to outline an alternative that builds on existing guidelines, deepens water cuts and factors in water that's lost through evaporation and transportation.

Those states propose raising the levels where water reductions would be triggered at Lake Mead and Lake Powell, which are barometers of the river's health. The model creates more of a protective buffer for both reservoirs — the largest built in the U.S. It also seeks to fix water accounting and ensure that any

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water the Lower Basin states intentionally stored in Lake Mead is available for future use.

The modeling would result in about 2 million acre-feet of cuts in the Lower Basin, with smaller reductions in the Upper Basin. Mexico and California are factored into the equations, but neither signed on to Monday's letter.

John Entsminger, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, said all states have been negotiating in good faith.

"I don't view not having unanimity at one step in that process to be a failure," he said late Monday. "I think all seven states are still committed to working together."

California released a proposal last October to cut 400,000 acre feet. An acre foot is enough water to supply two to three U.S. households for a year.

JB Hamby, chair of the Colorado River Board of California, said California will submit a model for water reductions in the basin that is practical, based on voluntary action, and aligns with law governing the river and the hierarchy of water rights.

"California remains focused on practical solutions that can be implemented now to protect volumes of water in storage without driving conflict and litigation," he said in a statement Monday.

Nothing will happen immediately with the consensus reached among the six states. However, not reaching a consensus carried the risk of having the federal government alone determine how to eventually impose cuts.

By not signing on, California doesn't avoid that risk.

The debates over how to cut water use by roughly one-third have been contentious. The Upper Basin states of Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah have said the Lower Basin states — Arizona, California and Nevada — must do the heavy lifting. That conversation in the Lower Basin has centered on what's legal and what's fair.

The six states that signed Monday's proposal acknowledged ideas they put forth could be excluded from final plans to operate the river's major dams. Negotiations are ongoing, they noted, adding that what they proposed does not override existing rights states and others have to the Colorado River.

"There's a lot of steps, commitments that need to be made at the federal, state and local levels," said Entsminger of Nevada.

Monday's proposal included accounting for the water lost to evaporation and leaky infrastructure as the river flows through the region's dams and waterways. Federal officials estimate more than 10% of the river's flow evaporates, leaks or spills, yet Arizona, California, Nevada and Mexico have never accounted for that water loss.

The six states argued that Lower Basin states should share those losses — essentially subtracting those amounts from their allocations — once the elevation at Lake Mead sinks below 1,145 feet (349 meters). The reservoir was well below that Monday.

Reclamation will consider the six states' agreement as part of a larger proposal to revise how it operates Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams — behemoth power producers on the Colorado River. The reservoirs behind the dams — Lake Powell and Lake Mead — have reached historic lows amid a more than two-decade-long drought and climate change.

Reclamation plans to put out a draft of that proposal by early March, with a goal of finalizing it by mid-August when the agency typically announces the amount of water available for the following year. Reclamation has said it will do what's needed to ensure the dams can continue producing hydropower and deliver water.

Those annual August announcements have led to mandatory cuts for the past two years for Arizona, Nevada and Mexico in the river's Lower Basin. California has so far been spared from cuts because it has some of the oldest and most secure water rights, particularly in the Imperial Valley where much of the country's winter vegetables are grown, along with the Yuma, Arizona, region.

Without California's participation, the six states' proposal can only go so far to meet the hydrological realities of the river. Water managers in the Lower Basin say the scale of conservation Reclamation is

seeking cannot be met without California, tribes and farmers who draw directly from the Colorado River.

Also unclear is how much Mexico eventually will contribute to the savings. In the best water years, Mexico receives its full allocation of 1.5 million acre feet under a treaty reached with the U.S. in 1944.

IMF upgrades outlook for the global economy in 2023

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The outlook for the global economy is growing slightly brighter as China eases its zero-COVID policies and the world shows surprising resilience in the face of high inflation, elevated interest rates and Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine.

That's the view of the International Monetary Fund, which now expects the world economy to grow 2.9% this year. That forecast is better than the 2.7% expansion for 2023 that the IMF predicted in October, though down from the estimated 3.4% growth in 2022.

The IMF, a 190-country lending organization, foresees inflation easing this year, a result of aggressive interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve and other major central banks. Those rate hikes are expected to slow the consumer demand that has driven prices higher. Globally, the IMF expects consumer inflation to fall from 8.8% last year to 6.6% in 2023 and 4.3% in 2024.

"Global conditions have improved as inflation pressures started to abate," the IMF chief economist, Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, said at a news conference in Singapore. "The road back to a full recovery with sustainable growth, stable prices and progress for all has only started."

A big factor in the upgrade to global growth was China's decision late last year to lift anti-virus controls that had kept millions of people at home. The IMF said China's "recent reopening has paved the way for a faster-than-expected recovery."

The IMF now expects China's economy — the world's second-biggest, after the United States — to grow 5.2% this year, up from its October forecast of 4.4%. Beijing's economy eked out growth of just 3% in 2022 — the first year in more than 40, the IMF noted, that China has expanded more slowly than the world as a whole. But the end of virus restrictions is expected to revive activity in 2023.

Together, China and India should account for half of this year's global growth, while the United States and Europe contribute 10%, according to Gourinchas.

"China's reopening is certainly a favorable factor that's going to lead to more activity," Gourinchas said. "But this is in the context in which the global economy itself is slowing down."

The IMF's 2023 growth outlook improved for the United States (forecast to grow 1.4%) as well as for the 19 countries that share the euro currency (0.7%). Europe, though suffering from energy shortages and higher prices resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, proved "more resilient than expected," the IMF said. The European economy benefited from a warmer-than-expected winter, which held down demand for natural gas,

Russia's economy, hit by sanctions after its invasion of Ukraine, has proved sturdier than expected, too: The IMF's forecast foresees Russia registering 0.3% growth this year. That would mark an improvement from a contraction of 2.2% in 2022. And it's well above the 2.3% contraction for 2023 that the IMF had forecast for Russia in October.

The United Kingdom is a striking exception to the IMF's brighter outlook for 2023. It has forecast its economy will shrink 0.6% in 2023; in October, the IMF had expected growth of 0.3%. Higher interest rates and tighter government budgets are squeezing the British economy.

"These figures confirm we are not immune to the pressures hitting nearly all advanced economies," Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt said in response to the IMF forecast. "Short-term challenges should not obscure our long-term prospects — the U.K. outperformed many forecasts last year, and if we stick to our plan to halve inflation, the U.K. is still predicted to grow faster than Germany and Japan over the coming years."

The IMF noted that the world economy still faces serious risks. They include the possibility that Russia's war against Ukraine will escalate, that China will suffer a sharp increase in COVID cases and that high

interest rates will cause a financial crisis in debt-laden countries.

Asked about the impact of U.S. efforts to limit Chinese access to advanced processor chip technology due to security concerns, Gourinchas cautioned that curbs on semiconductor trade and government pressure to pull back industries to within their own borders and limit reliance on foreign partners "potentially could be harmful to the global economy."

"Diversification of supply chains is much more important in trying to improve resilience, improve growth, improve standards of living, rather than moving toward re-shoring or 'friend shoring,'" Gourinchas said.

The global outlook has been shrouded in uncertainty since the coronavirus pandemic struck in early 2020. Forecasters have been repeatedly confounded by events: A severe if brief recession in early 2020; an expectedly strong recovery triggered by vast government stimulus aid; then a surge in inflation, worsened when Russia's invasion of Ukraine nearly a year ago disrupted world trade in energy and food.

Three weeks ago, the IMF's sister agency, the World Bank, issued a more downbeat outlook for the global economy. The World Bank slashed its forecast for international growth this year by nearly half — to 1.7% — and warned that the global economy would come "perilously close" to recession.

7th Memphis officer disciplined, EMTs fired in Nichols death

By ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Two more Memphis police officers have been disciplined and three emergency responders fired in connection with the death of Tyre Nichols, officials said Monday, widening the circle of punishment for the shocking display of police brutality after video showed many more people failed to help him beyond the five officers accused of beating him to death.

Officer Preston Hemphill, who is white, was relieved of duty shortly after Nichols' Jan. 7 arrest, the police department announced. Later in the day it said another officer had also been relieved, but without naming the person or specifying what role they played in the incident.

That brought the total number of Memphis officers who have been disciplined to seven, including the five Black officers who were fired and charged last week with second-degree murder and other offenses in Nichols' beating and Jan. 10 death.

Also Monday, Memphis Fire Department officials announced the dismissal of emergency medical technicians Robert Long and JaMicheal Sandridge and Lt. Michelle Whitaker. The EMTs had previously been suspended.

Fire Chief Gina Sweat said in a statement that the department received a call from police to respond to a report of a person who had been pepper-sprayed. The workers arrived at 8:41 p.m. as Nichols was handcuffed on the ground and slumped against a squad car, the statement said.

Long and Sandridge, based on the nature of the call and information they were told by police, "failed to conduct an adequate patient assessment of Mr. Nichols," the statement said. Whitaker and the driver remained in the engine.

An ambulance was called, and it arrived at 8:55 p.m., the statement said. An emergency unit cared for Nichols and left for a hospital with him at 9:08 p.m. — 27 minutes after Long, Sandridge and Whitaker arrived, officials said.

An investigation determined that all three violated "multiple" policies and protocols, the statement said, adding that "their actions or inactions on the scene that night do not meet the expectations of the Memphis Fire Department."

The killing of Nichols, who was Black, has led to days of public discussion of how police forces can treat Black citizens with excessive violence, regardless of the race of both the police officers and those being policed.

On body camera footage from the initial stop, Hemphill is heard saying that he stunned Nichols and declaring, "I hope they stomp his ass."

Nichols' death was the latest example in a long string of early police accounts regarding use of force that were later shown to have minimized or ignored violent and sometimes deadly encounters.

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Memphis Police Department officers used a stun gun, a baton and their fists as they pummeled Nichols during the nighttime arrest. Video shows Nichols running away from officers toward his house after he was pulled over on suspicion of reckless driving. Nichols, a 29-year-old father, was heard calling for his mother and seen struggling with his injuries as he sat helpless on the pavement, video footage released Friday showed.

The five officers chatted and milled about for several minutes as Nichols remained on the ground, but there were other authorities on the scene. Two Shelby County sheriff's deputies have been relieved of duty without pay while their conduct is investigated.

In the Nichols case, the police department has been responsible for internal disciplinary measures, such as firings, while the Shelby County district attorney has handled the criminal charges.

Hemphill was the third officer at a traffic stop that preceded the violent arrest but was not at the scene where Nichols was beaten, his lawyer Lee Gerald said. Hemphill turned on his body camera, in line with department policy, he added.

Lawyers for the Nichols family questioned Monday why the department did not disclose Hemphill's discipline earlier and why he has not been fired or charged.

"We have asked from the beginning that the Memphis Police Department be transparent with the family and the community — this news seems to indicate that they haven't risen to the occasion," attorneys Ben Crump and Anthony Romanucci said in a statement. "It certainly begs the question why the white officer involved in this brutal attack was shielded and protected from the public eye, and to date, from sufficient discipline and accountability."

Memphis police spokeswoman Karen Rudolph said information on disciplinary action taken against Hemphill was not immediately released because Hemphill was not fired. The department generally gives out information about an officer's punishment only after a department investigation into misconduct ends, Rudolph said.

Memphis Police Director Cerelyn "CJ" Davis told The Associated Press in an interview Friday that a "lack of supervision in this incident was a major problem."

"When officers are working, you should have at least one supervisor for every group or squad of people," Davis said. "Not just somebody who's at the office doing the paperwork, somebody who's actually embedded in that unit."

Calls for more officers to be fired or charged have been loud and persistent from the Nichols family, their lawyers and community activists who have peacefully protested in Memphis since the video was released. The video was evocative of the arrest of George Floyd in 2020 and officers' failure to intervene.

On Saturday, Nichols' stepfather, Rodney Wells, told The Associated Press that the family was going to "continue to seek justice and get some more officers arrested."

"Questions were raised before the video was released, I raised those questions," Wells said. "I just felt there was more than five officers out there. Now, five were charged with murder because they were the main participants, but there were five or six other officers out there that didn't do anything to render any aid. So they are just as culpable as the officers who threw the blows."

Memphis City Council member Martavius Jones said Monday that police policies on rendering aid and de-escalation appeared to have been violated.

"When everybody saw the video, we see that you have multiple officers just standing around, when Mr. Nichols is in distress, that just paints a totally different picture," Jones said

Jones said he believes more officers should be disciplined.

"At this point, what's going to be helpful for this community is to see how swiftly the police chief deals with those other officers now that everybody has seen the tape and knows that it wasn't only five officers who were at the scene the entire time," Jones said.

The five fired officers and Hemphill were part of the so-called Scorpion unit, which targeted violent criminals in high-crime areas. Davis, the police chief, said Saturday that the unit has been disbanded.

Nichols' funeral service is scheduled for Wednesday at a Memphis church.

Reports: New grand jury in NY examining Trump hush money

NEW YORK (AP) — Manhattan prosecutors investigating Donald Trump have convened a new grand jury to hear evidence in a years-old probe into payments made to keep the porn star Stormy Daniels quiet about an alleged sexual encounter with the former president, according to multiple news reports.

The news outlets, citing unnamed sources, reported that witnesses started testifying before the grand jury on Monday, signaling an escalation in what Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg has alluded to as “the next chapter” in his office’s Trump investigation.

A spokesperson for Bragg’s office declined comment. In a post to his Truth Social platform, Trump blasted Bragg as the “Radical Left Manhattan D.A.” and said the new grand jury was “a continuation of the Greatest Witch Hunt of all time.”

Grand juries have been convened before in New York to explore the possibility of criminal charges against Trump, but to date none have issued an indictment.

The Manhattan grand jury would be the latest legal threat to Trump as he ramps up his presidential campaign.

A special grand jury in Atlanta has investigated whether Trump and his allies committed any crimes while trying to overturn his 2020 election loss in Georgia. Last month, the House Jan. 6 committee voted to make a criminal referral to the Justice Department for Trump’s role in sparking the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. The FBI is also investigating Trump’s storage of classified documents.

The hush-money investigation in New York involves payments of \$130,000 to Daniels and \$150,000 to former Playboy model Karen McDougal to buy their silence in the run-up to Trump’s 2016 election victory. Trump has denied having affairs with either woman.

Trump’s former personal lawyer and fixer, Michael Cohen, made the payment to Daniels through his own company and said he then was reimbursed by Trump. McDougal’s payment was made through the publisher of the supermarket tabloid the National Enquirer, which then squelched her story in a journalistically dubious practice known as “catch-and-kill” to help Trump become president.

The New York Times reported that the National Enquirer’s former publisher, David Pecker, was spotted entering the building where the grand jury was meeting on Monday.

Cohen pleaded guilty in 2018 to federal charges that he violated campaign finance law by arranging the payouts. He served about a year in prison before being released to home confinement because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal prosecutors said Trump was aware of the payouts, but they declined to charge him with any crime.

Cohen previously told The Associated Press he recently met with Manhattan prosecutors for 2½ hours.

The Trump Organization was convicted last month of tax fraud and fined \$1.6 million as punishment for an unrelated scheme in which top executives dodged personal income taxes on lavish job perks.

“Now with the trial having ended, we are now moving on to the next chapter,” Bragg told The Associated Press in an interview after the tax fraud trial.

The Trump Organization in a statement suggested that Bragg, a Democrat, was trying to undermine Trump’s fledgling 2024 presidential campaign. Reviving the investigation years after federal prosecutors had decided not to bring a case is “simply reprehensible and vindictive,” the company said.

Bragg’s predecessor as district attorney, Cyrus Vance Jr., also examined the hush money payments before shifting the probe’s focus to the Trump Organization’s tax and business practices.

President Biden to end COVID-19 emergencies on May 11

By ZEKE MILLER and AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden informed Congress on Monday that he will end the twin national emergencies for addressing COVID-19 on May 11, as most of the world has returned closer to normalcy nearly three years after they were first declared.

The move to end the national emergency and public health emergency declarations would formally

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restructure the federal coronavirus response to treat the virus as an endemic threat to public health that can be managed through agencies' normal authorities.

It comes as lawmakers have already ended elements of the emergencies that kept millions of Americans insured during the pandemic. Combined with the drawdown of most federal COVID-19 relief money, it would also shift the development of vaccines and treatments away from the direct management of the federal government.

Biden's announcement comes in a statement opposing resolutions being brought to the floor this week by House Republicans to bring the emergency to an immediate end. House Republicans are also gearing up to launch investigations on the federal government's response to COVID-19.

Then-President Donald Trump's Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar first declared a public health emergency on Jan. 31, 2020, and Trump later declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national emergency that March. The emergencies have been repeatedly extended by Biden since he took office in January 2021, and are set to expire in the coming months. The White House said Biden plans to extend them both briefly to end on May 11.

"An abrupt end to the emergency declarations would create wide-ranging chaos and uncertainty throughout the health care system — for states, for hospitals and doctors' offices, and, most importantly, for tens of millions of Americans," the Office of Management and Budget wrote in a Statement of Administration Policy.

More than 1.1 million people in the U.S. have died from COVID-19 since 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including about 3,700 last week.

Congress has already blunted the reach of the public health emergency that had the most direct impact on Americans, as political calls to end the declaration intensified. Lawmakers have refused for months to fulfill the Biden administration's request for billions more dollars to extend free COVID vaccines and testing. And the \$1.7 trillion spending package passed last year and signed into law by Biden put an end to a rule that barred states from kicking people off Medicaid, a move that is expected to see millions of people lose their coverage after April 1.

"In some respects, the Biden administration is catching up to what a lot of people in the country have been experiencing," said Larry Levitt, the executive vice president for health policy at Kaiser Family Foundation. "That said, hundreds of people a day are still dying from COVID."

Still, some things will change for Americans once the emergency expires, Levitt pointed out.

The costs of COVID-19 vaccines are also expected to skyrocket once the government stops buying them, with Pfizer saying it will charge as much as \$130 per dose. Only 15% of Americans have received the recommended, updated booster that has been offered since last fall.

People with private insurance could have some out-of-pocket costs for vaccines, especially if they go to an out-of-network provider, Levitt said. Free at-home COVID tests will also come to an end. And hospitals will not get extra payments for treating COVID patients.

Legislators did extend for another two years telehealth flexibilities that were introduced as COVID-19 hit, leading health care systems around the country to regularly deliver care by smartphone or computer.

The Biden administration had previously considered ending the emergency last year, but held off amid concerns about a potential "winter surge" in cases and to provide adequate time for providers, insurers and patients to prepare for its end.

Officials said the administration would use the next three months to transition the response to conventional methods, warning that an immediate end to the emergency authorities "would sow confusion and chaos into this critical wind-down."

"To be clear, continuation of these emergency declarations until May 11 does not impose any restriction at all on individual conduct with regard to COVID-19," the administration said. "They do not impose mask mandates or vaccine mandates. They do not restrict school or business operations. They do not require the use of any medicines or tests in response to cases of COVID-19."

Case counts have trended downward after a slight bump over the winter holidays, and are significantly

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below levels seen over the last two winters — though the number of tests performed for the virus and reported to public health officials has sharply decreased.

On Monday, the World Health Organization said the coronavirus remains a global health emergency, even as a key advisory panel for the group found the pandemic may be nearing an “inflexion point” where higher levels of immunity can lower virus-related deaths. China, for example, reported an unprecedented surge in December after lifting most of its COVID-19 restrictions.

Moments before the White House’s announcement, Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., accused the president of unnecessarily extending the public health emergency to take action on issues like forgiving some federal student loan debts.

“The country has largely returned to normal,” Cole said Monday, introducing a Republican-backed bill calling for an end to the health emergency. “Everyday Americans have returned to work and to school with no restrictions on their activities. It is time that the government acknowledges this reality: the pandemic is over.”

The House was scheduled to vote Tuesday on legislation that would terminate the public health emergency.

The bill’s author, Rep. Brett Guthrie, R-Ky., said he still hopes the House will proceed with a vote. He said he was surprised by the White House move, but thinks the legislation may have played a role in prompting the administration to act.

“I think we should go forward,” he said late Monday as lawmakers returned to the Capitol. “If for some reason they don’t do it on May the 11th, the vehicle is still there for Congress to take back its authority.”

Through sobs, did Alex Murdaugh say he killed his son?

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

“I did him so bad.”

That’s what a South Carolina investigator on Monday testified that Alex Murdaugh had uttered between sobs during a recorded interview three days after Murdaugh’s wife and son were killed.

But to others inside and outside the courtroom, it sounded like Murdaugh said, “They did him so bad,” on the audio from a police interview that was played at the disgraced attorney’s double murder trial after he was asked about a picture of his son’s body.

Court ended Monday before the defense could cross-examine the agent.

Earlier in the day, defense attorneys continued to question the way state authorities collected and analyzed evidence in the shooting deaths of Murdaugh’s wife and son.

Murdaugh, 54, is standing trial on two counts of murder in the shootings of his wife and son at their Colleton County home and hunting lodge on June 7, 2021. His wife, Maggie, 52, was shot several times with a rifle; their son Paul, 22, was shot twice with a shotgun near kennels on the property. Murdaugh faces 30 years to life in prison if convicted.

In the interview played Monday, Murdaugh spoke to the state agent at his brother’s house for about an hour three days after the killings. Murdaugh’s lawyer was close by.

Prosecutors paused the video several times to give State Law Enforcement Division Senior Special Agent Jeff Croft a chance to emphasize some of Murdaugh’s comments. At one point, Murdaugh said his wife was home hours before the killings when he and his son returned from riding around the property. Later in the interview, Murdaugh could be heard saying “It’s just so bad,” before the unclear comment that Croft said sounded like Murdaugh was implying he had killed his son.

In court, Murdaugh appeared to shake his head no when Croft said what he heard.

Murdaugh also broke into sobs on the 2021 recording after mentioning a small disagreement he had with his wife over visiting her family.

“She was a wonderful girl and a wonderful wife. And she was a great mother,” Murdaugh said.

Monday started with cross-examination of another state agent who testified at length about evidence collected from the Murdaugh home and property.

Similarly to the previous days of testimony, officers and crime scene technicians presented evidence

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to the jury that investigators will likely later explain in more detail. Prosecutors described their case as a puzzle in last week's opening statement.

While cross-examining witnesses, though, defense attorneys have asked questions suggesting the metaphorical puzzle pieces either aren't clear or prosecutors aren't putting them all on the table.

State Law Enforcement Division Special Agent Melinda Worley testified Friday about photographs of the bodies, shotgun pellets and DNA swabs from the scene as well as clothes and fingernail clippings from the autopsies.

In Monday's cross-examination, defense attorney Dick Harpootlian honed in on several items, including identifying footprints, one of Worley's specialties. She told him one of the footprints in blood near where Murdaugh's son was shot came from a deputy.

"Is that the preservation of the scene that your standards require?" Harpootlian asked.

"Not exactly, no," Worley responded.

Harpootlian also had Worley come off the stand and work on a rough diagram of the angles of the shots fired at Paul and Maggie Murdaugh, pointing out a significant disparity between the directions the shots at each victim came from.

Worley said that can happen when a shooter is moving.

"One explanation would be movement. One explanation would be two shooters," Harpootlian said.

Alex Murdaugh continued to rock and dab his eyes during more graphic testimony, including when Harpootlian showed a photo of his wife's body to ask Worley if there could have been a shoeprint on his wife's calf that was not formally documented as the scene was examined.

Worley said she couldn't be certain.

Croft was one of the chief agents investigating the double killings and also testified about guns, ammunition, and fired casings gathered from the Murdaugh home after the killings, showing at least four different shotguns and rifles to the jury and testifying that the Murdaughs kept the weapons loaded in their gun room.

In his interview, Murdaugh told Croft that his son was unfocused and would stay with family and friends across the state, leaving his possessions behind instead of bringing them home.

"He did that with clothes, he did that with guns he did that with my boats," Murdaugh said.

Prosecutors in their opening statement said the guns that killed Paul and Maggie Murdaugh have not been found, but markings on casings found around the home that may have been used for target practice matched casings found at the scene.

Alex Murdaugh also faces about 100 charges related to accusations of money laundering, stealing millions from clients and the family law firm, tax evasion and trying to get a man to fatally shoot him so his surviving son could collect a \$10 million life insurance policy. He was being held in jail without bail on those counts before he was charged with murder.

Since the killings, Murdaugh's life has seen a stunningly fast downfall. His family dominated the legal system in tiny neighboring Hampton County for generations, both as prosecutors and private attorneys known for getting life-changing settlements for accidents and negligence cases.

Spreading the joy: Longer parade routes OKd for Mardi Gras

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — COVID-19 precautions wiped out most New Orleans' Mardi Gras festivities in 2021, and a shortage of police officers forced the city to shorten routes for some of its lavish seasonal parades in 2022.

Now, city officials, and business owners are celebrating plans to let the good times roll on longer routes -- and in front of businesses that welcome the crowds -- with security bolstered by neighboring police agencies.

Mayor LaToya Cantrell's official announcement Monday that parade routes were being lengthened was welcome news to Staci Rosenberg, a founder of the Krewe of Muses. It means the all-female organization

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and its signature floats — including a giant stiletto-heeled pump swathed in color-changing lights — will be able to roll again on Magazine Street. The thoroughfare lined with small shops, century-old cottages, bars and restaurants runs through neighborhoods that gave the parade what Rosenberg described as a more intimate, family-friendly atmosphere.

“It was important to send a sign, I think, to the world that we’re back,” Rosenberg said of plans to restore the longer route. “We’ve recovered from all kinds of things — the pandemic, the labor shortage, the police shortage.”

It also means bolstered business at Le Bon Temps Roule, a well known around-the-clock neighborhood bar on Magazine Street. Co-Owner Joe Bikulege said it was closed for 17 months because of the pandemic. Mardi Gras business, he said, usually enables him to put aside money to pay for taxes, insurance, building improvements and other emergencies.

“There’s a lot of people that make their living off Mardi Gras,” he noted.

Cantrell made the announcement, heralded by a brass band, at Gallier Hall, a 19th-century Greek Revival building that once was the seat of city government. She was joined by interim Police Superintendent Michelle Woodfork and, via video hookup, Sheriff Susan Hutson — who worked to broker agreements with other Louisiana law enforcement agencies to beef up manpower.

It marked a chance for Hutson and Cantrell, both of whom are elected officials, to bolster their political fortunes at a time when both have been under pressure. Cantrell, in her second term, is facing a recall effort amid rising crime, unhappiness over delays in street projects and trash pickup, and questions about her use of a city-owned French Quarter apartment. Hutson, who took office last year, inherited a long-troubled city jail and is embroiled in political and legal battles over construction plans and security issues.

Manpower shortages have affected police departments around the country since the beginning of the pandemic and the nationwide protests over the murder of George Floyd. Various estimates put the number of New Orleans police officers at around 900 to 950, about 400 short of the ideal at any time of year.

Exactly how many police officers and sheriff’s deputies from other jurisdictions will help with the parades wasn’t immediately clear. A spokesperson for Hutson’s office said in an email that agreements with other agencies were still being finalized ahead of the major parades.

Carnival season begins each year on Jan. 6 and picks up steam with a growing list of balls and parades. It reaches a climax in the final two weeks before Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday and Lent. Mardi Gras falls on Feb. 21 this year.

Last year, major parades were limited to a route that took floats, marching bands and walking clubs down historic St. Charles Avenue to the downtown area. The restoration of longer routes means the Krewe of Thoth can again roll by New Orleans’ Children’s Hospital after a nearly three-year absence.

It will be a return welcome by Dr. Scott Macicek. “It’s scary when your a child and you’re in the hospital,” Macicek said. “Having as many joyful experiences as we can create is important.”

Joe Bikulege, co-owner of Le Bon Temps Roule. The bar is open around the clock on Magazine Street — a busy thoroughfare left off last year’s route. Bikulege said money made during Mardi Gras bolsters income and helps pay for insurance, taxes and maintenance on his building.

Dems urge Biden to halt aid to Peru over protest crackdown

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — A group of House Democrats is urging the Biden administration to suspend all U.S. security assistance to Peru over a “pattern of repression” of antigovernment protests that has resulted in more than 50 civilian deaths.

The letter, sent Monday and a copy of which was shared with The Associated Press, urges the Biden administration to halt all security assistance until it can confirm that the crackdown has ended and the Peruvian officials responsible for human rights abuses are being held accountable.

Peru’s foreign minister is in Washington this week seeking international support for President Dina Boluarte’s increasingly besieged government. Pressure has been mounting on Boluarte, the vice president

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under President Pedro Castillo, to resign the post she inherited last month when Castillo was impeached and arrested for his ill-fated attempt to close Peru's Congress.

"Security forces have indiscriminately responded with almost no regard for protestors' human rights," according to the letter, which was signed by 20 mostly progressive House Democrats. "Rather than working to deescalate tensions, the Boluarte government has substantially increased tensions — including classifying protesters as 'terrorists' and limiting citizens' right of movement."

The U.S. provides more than \$40 million annually to Peru in security assistance, according to the Washington Office on Latin America. The vast majority is aimed at helping Peru counter drug trafficking.

While initially protesters were demanding Castillo's release from jail, the unrest has spread across the country, galvanizing the support of many poor, indigenous Peruvians who have benefitted little from Peru's mining-driven economic boom.

Protesters demand that both Boluarte and Congress stand down and that new elections be held this year. Lawmakers rejected that Friday, but after another protester died and Boluarte urged them to reconsider, Congress narrowly agreed Monday to debate a proposal to hold elections in October.

Meanwhile, as the protests stretch into their second month, beleaguered security forces have become more forceful.

Among the incidents cited in the letter organized by Rep. Susan Wild of Pennsylvania was the national police raid on student dormitories at San Marcos University in Lima, which included the mass arrest of nearly 200 people. That shocked many Peruvians because campuses have long been off limits to security forces except when crimes are being committed.

The campus invasion drew sharp condemnation from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which said it collected testimony from civil society groups who said law enforcement officers invaded the bedrooms of student leaders, slung racist remarks at indigenous activists and forced women to strip naked and do squats.

Officials from the United Nations and European Union have strongly condemned what they consider the disproportionate use of force. The Biden administration has been more measured, calling for impartial investigations into abuses while also expressing support for Boluarte's efforts to restore calm and seek a political solution.

Amid the unrest, outgoing U.S. Ambassador Lisa Kenna announced an additional \$8 million in U.S. support for coca eradication efforts in the remote Upper Huallaga valley. She has also met with the defense minister and other Cabinet members.

Such actions send an "ambiguous message," according to the letter, which was also signed by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington and Rep. Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, a longtime voice for human rights in Latin America.

"The U.S. government can and must do more," they wrote. "We believe our proposed actions would send a powerful signal in support of fundamental rights and help promote effective engagement for a political resolution."

A copy of the letter was also sent to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

School where boy shot teacher reopens with added security

By BEN FINLEY and DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — The Virginia elementary school where a 6-year-old boy shot his teacher reopened Monday with stepped-up security and a new administrator, as nervous parents and students expressed optimism about a return to the classroom.

Richneck Elementary School in Newport News opened its doors more than three weeks after the Jan. 6 shooting. Police have said the boy brought a 9 mm handgun to school and intentionally shot his teacher, Abby Zwerner, as she was teaching her first-grade class. Zwerner, 25, was hospitalized for nearly two weeks but is now recovering at home.

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Several police cars were parked at the school as teachers arrived.

The sign in front of the building read "Richneck Strong" and was framed by two red hearts. Other signs along the sidewalks read, "We are praying for you," "You are loved" and "We believe in you."

Students were greeted by a line of police officers, Mayor Phillip Jones, and other adults who gave them high-fives as they walked into the school.

Jennifer Roe said she and her fourth-grader, Jethro, saw a therapist after the shooting.

"He's excited to get back to school. He's missed it," Roe said.

"There are concerns, of course," she said. "We talked through it. His therapist gave me a thumbs-up and said he's good."

Jethro said he still had some concern "it might happen again," but that the increased security made him feel better.

"I'm still a little nervous, but I've calmed down a lot," he said.

Melissa McBride, who brought her fourth-grade twins to school, said one of them wasn't sleeping that well after the shooting, but the children felt better after attending an open house at the school last week.

"It was huge to see their friends and everybody being happy," she said.

McBride said she was comforted when she saw the twins "going into school with no hesitation," but that she was still "a little nervous."

Many parents walked their children in, but Jordan Vestre said his third-grader, Jaxon, asked if he could walk in alone. Vestre said he gave Jaxon a hug and "stood back a little teary-eyed and watched him high-five all the police officers and the mayor."

Vestre said his son "fully understands what happened." But he added: "How do you talk to an 8-year-old about a school shooting? It's ridiculous."

Eve Parham said her fourth-grade granddaughter was very excited to return to school, particularly to her archery class. Parham praised the additional safety measures, including the planned distribution of clear backpacks to students.

There were two other shootings in Newport News schools in the 16 months before the Richland shooting. Two 17-year-old students were wounded when a 15-year-old boy fired shots in a crowded high school hallway. Two months later, an 18-year-old student fatally shot a 17-year-old in the parking lot of a different high school.

"Unfortunately, the teacher had to be our sacrificial lamb to bring this to light," Parham said, referring to Zwerner. "I applaud her. And I'm grateful that she's okay and that it caused this reaction."

Eric Billet, who has a second-grader and a fourth-grader at Richneck, said that although he's happy with the increased security, he also fears that Richneck could be "slightly overcorrecting" with some of its new policies, including not wanting students to bring in toys or anything that's not considered educational.

"It's good, but I just don't want it to turn into a prison feel if you start cracking down on too many things," Billet said.

Not all teachers were ready to return.

James Graves, who heads the local teachers union, the Newport News Education Association, said he has heard from several who were told that if they weren't ready to come back, they must use their personal leave time or the Family and Medical Leave Act, which provides some employees with up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave.

"There are teachers who are glad to kind of go back because they care about the kids, and there are teachers who cannot handle trauma and stress the way other teachers can," Graves said. "I want to make sure the teachers who cannot handle that stress because of what happened, that they are taken care of."

The school board chair, Lisa Surles-Law, said roses were handed out to the students and therapy dogs were made available to all first-graders.

Zwerner's classroom remained closed. Her students will be taught in another classroom, Surles-Law said.

"I walked the building a little while ago, and (the teachers) are very excited to welcome their students back," she said.

The shooting sent shockwaves through Newport News, a city of about 185,000 that is known for its shipbuilding industry. It has also raised questions about school security and how a child so young could

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gain access to a gun and shoot his teacher.

Since then, two metal detection systems have been installed and two security officers have been assigned to the school, said district spokeswoman Michelle Price. Before the shooting, one security officer was assigned to Richneck and another elementary school. The officer was not at Richneck at the time of the shooting.

The principal and assistant principal both have left their jobs, and a new administrator has been appointed to lead the school.

Superintendent George Parker, who was fired by the school board last week, has said that at least one school administrator received a tip that the boy may have brought a weapon to school, but no weapon was found when the boy's backpack was searched.

Zwerner's lawyer, Diane Toscano, said that on the day of the shooting, concerned staff at Richneck warned administrators three times that the boy had a gun and was threatening other students, but the administration didn't call police or remove the boy from class.

Police said the handgun was legally purchased by the boy's mother. In a statement released through their attorney, the boy's family said the gun was "secured." Attorney James Ellenson told The Associated Press that his understanding is that the gun was in the mother's closet on a shelf well over 6 feet (1.8 meters) high and had a trigger lock that required a key.

Treasury to increase borrowing amid debt ceiling standoff

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Treasury Department said Monday it plans to increase its borrowing during the first three months of 2023, even as the federal government is bumping up against a \$31.4 trillion limit on its legal borrowing authority.

The U.S. plans to borrow \$932 billion during the January-to-March quarter. That's \$353 billion more than projected last October, due to a lower beginning-of-quarter cash balance and projections of lower-than-expected income tax receipts and higher spending.

The increased borrowing will take place as Democrats and the White House push for Congress to increase the federal debt limit. President Joe Biden wants the cap raised without any preconditions. The new House Republican majority is seeking to secure spending cuts in exchange for a debt limit increase.

Treasury officials say the debate over the debt ceiling poses a risk to the U.S. financial position.

"Even just the threat that the U.S. government might fail to meet its obligations may cause severe harm to the economy by eroding household and business confidence, injecting volatility into financial markets, and raising the cost of capital — among other negative impacts," Ben Harris, Treasury's assistant secretary for economic policy, said in a statement.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, in a letter to congressional leaders earlier this month, said the department had begun resorting to "extraordinary measures" to avoid a federal government default. She said it's "critical that Congress act in a timely manner" to raise or suspend the debt limit.

In a letter to House and Senate leaders, Yellen said her actions will buy time until Congress can pass legislation that will either raise the nation's borrowing authority or suspend the limit for a period of time. She said it is unlikely that cash and extraordinary measures will be exhausted before early June.

New House Speaker Kevin McCarthy will meet with Biden at the White House this week to discuss the debt limit.

McCarthy told CBS' "Face the Nation" on Sunday: "I want to sit down together, work out an agreement that we can move forward to put us on a path to balance — and at the same time not put any of our debt in jeopardy at the same time."

Brazil's Bolsonaro applies for 6-month U.S. visitor visa

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

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RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has filed a request for a six-month visitor visa to stay in the U.S., indicating he may have no immediate intention of returning home, where legal issues await.

The application was first reported by The Financial Times, citing Bolsonaro's immigration lawyer, Felipe Alexandre. Contacted by The Associated Press, the lawyer's firm, AG Immigration, confirmed the report.

Bolsonaro left Brazil for Florida on Dec. 30, two days before the inauguration of his leftist rival, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The ceremony proceeded without incident, but a week later thousands of Bolsonaro's die-hard supporters stormed the capital and trashed the top government buildings demanding that Lula's election be overturned.

Bolsonaro is being investigated for whether he had any role in inciting that uprising. It is just one of several probes targeting the former president and that pose a legal headache upon his eventual homecoming, and which could strip him of his eligibility in future races — or worse.

For the first time in his more than three-decade political career as a lawmaker then as president, he no longer enjoys the special legal protection that requires any trial be held at the Supreme Court.

It has been widely assumed — though not confirmed — that Bolsonaro entered the U.S. on an A-1 visa reserved for sitting heads of state. If so, he would have 30 days from the end of his presidential term to either leave the U.S. or adjust his status with the Department of Homeland Security.

Meantime, the shape of his political future and his potential return to Brazil has been a matter of rumor and speculation.

Bolsonaro's calculus appears to be to distance himself from the radicals whose destruction in the capital could implicate him in the short term, with the aim of some day returning to lead the opposition, said Mario Sérgio Lima, a political analyst at Medley Advisors.

"He is giving it some time, staying away a bit from the country at a moment when he can begin to suffer legal consequences for his supporters' attitudes," said Lima. "I don't think the fact of him staying away is enough. The processes will continue, but maybe he thinks he can at least avoid some sort of revenge punishment."

Bolsonaro has been staying in a home outside Orlando, Florida, and video has shown him snapping photos with supporters in the gated community and ambling around inside a supermarket.

In the wake of the rampage in the Brazilian capital this month, a group of 46 Democratic lawmakers sent a letter to President Joe Biden demanding Bolsonaro's visa be revoked.

"The United States must not provide shelter for him, or any authoritarian who has inspired such violence against democratic institutions," they wrote.

Bolsonaro's son, a senator, told reporters at an event this weekend that he was not sure when his father would return to Brazil.

"It could be tomorrow, it could be in six months, he might never return. I don't know. He's relaxing," Sen. Flávio Bolsonaro said.

Asked whether Bolsonaro has filed any request for documentation or help with visa processes, Brazil's foreign ministry referred AP to U.S. authorities. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services referred AP to the State Department, which has repeatedly declined comment to questions about Bolsonaro's visa status in the U.S.

Dolphins, humans both benefit from fishing collaboration

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

A fishing community in southern Brazil has an unusual ally: wild dolphins.

Accounts of people and dolphins working together to hunt fish go back millennia, from the time of the Roman Empire near what is now southern France to 19th century Queensland, Australia. But while historians and storytellers have recounted the human point of view, it's been impossible to confirm how the dolphins have benefited — or if they've been taken advantage of — before sonar and underwater microphones could track them underwater.

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In the seaside city of Laguna, scientists have, for the first time, used drones, underwater sound recordings and other tools to document how local people and dolphins coordinate actions and benefit from each other's labor. The most successful humans and dolphins are skilled at reading each other's body language. The research was published Monday in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The Laguna residents work with wild bottlenose dolphins to catch schools of migratory silver fish called mullet. It's a locally famous alliance that has been recorded in newspaper records going back 150 years.

"This study clearly shows that both dolphins and humans are paying attention to each other's behavior, and that dolphins provide a cue to when the nets should be cast," said Stephanie King, a biologist who studies dolphin communication at the University of Bristol and was not involved in the research.

"This is really incredible cooperative behavior," she added. "By working with the dolphins," the people catch more fish, "and the dolphins are more successful in foraging, too."

Dolphins and humans are both highly intelligent and long-lived social animals. But when it comes to fishing, they have different abilities.

"The water is really murky here, so the people can't see the schools of fish. But the dolphins use sounds to find them, by emitting small clicks," much as bats use echolocation, said Mauricio Cantor, an Oregon State University marine biologist and study co-author.

As the dolphins herd the fish toward the coast, the people run into the water holding hand nets.

"They wait for dolphins to signal exactly where fish are – the most common signal is what locals call 'a jump,' or a sudden deep dive," said Cantor, who is also affiliated with the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Florianópolis, Brazil.

The researchers used sonar and underwater microphones to track the positions of the dolphins and fish, while drones recorded the interactions from above, and GPS devices attached to residents' wrists recorded when they cast their nets.

The more closely the people synchronized their net-casting to the dolphins' signals, the more likely they were to trap a large catch.

So what's in it for the dolphins?

The descending nets startle the fish, which break into smaller schools that are easier for dolphins to hunt. "The dolphins may also take one or two fish from the net – sometimes fishers can feel dolphin tugging a little on the net," said Cantor.

The Laguna residents categorize the individual dolphins as "good," "bad," or "lazy" — based on their skill in hunting and affinity for cooperating with humans, said Cantor. The people get most excited when they see a "good" dolphin approaching shore.

"These dolphins and humans have developed a joint foraging culture that allows them both to do better," said Boris Worm, a marine ecologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, who was not involved in the research.

It's not clear how the Laguna cooperation first emerged, but it's survived multiple human and dolphin generations – with knowledge passed down by experienced fishers and dolphins to the next generation of each species.

Still, the researchers in Brazil worry that the Laguna alliance, perhaps one of the last of its kind, may be in danger as well, as pollution threatens the dolphins and artisanal fishing gives way to industrial methods.

"Human-wildlife cooperation is disappearing because we're decimating the wildlife populations," said Janet Mann, a dolphin researcher at Georgetown University, who was not involved in the study.

Scientists hope that greater awareness of the unusual interspecies cooperation can help drive support to protect it. "It's amazing that it's lasted for over a century – can we keep this cultural tradition alive amid many changes?" said Damien Farine, a University of Zurich biologist and study co-author.

Florida GOP leaders want to get rid of gun permits

By BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Saying gun owners don't need a government permission slip to protect their

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God-given rights, Florida's House speaker proposed legislation Monday to eliminate concealed weapons permits, a move Democrats argue would make a state with a history of horrific mass shootings less safe.

Republican leaders, including Gov. Ron DeSantis, have expressed support for the idea, so the bill should not have a problem passing in a legislature with a GOP a super-majority.

"What we're about here today is a universal right that applies to each and every man or woman regardless of race, gender, creed or background," Speaker Paul Renner said at a news conference.

Democrats immediately responded that the proposal could lead to more gun violence and accidents. They said that the bill supporters call constitutional carry will allow people to buy guns with no training or background checks.

"Untrained carry is what it is," said Democratic Rep. Christine Hunschofsky, who was mayor of Parkland when a former Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student fatally shot 17 students and faculty. "You are not making our communities, our schools or any places safer with this."

Renner said law-abiding gun owners will take safety seriously.

"Anybody that is a gun owner and uses guns knows that safety comes first," Renner said. "That's important, but it's not required. So the permit and all aspects of that permit will go away."

Manuel and Patricia Oliver became advocates for tighter gun regulations after losing their 17-year-old son Joaquin in the 2018 massacre at the Parkland high school. They said with more people carrying guns without restrictions, Florida will become a more dangerous state.

"How about a little paperwork, some norms, before we take that step. It's not right and it's not protecting (the carrier) from anything. It is actually putting in danger a lot of people," Manuel Oliver said.

Brevard County Sheriff Wayne Ivey said people who want to do harm to others won't be stopped by the permit requirement.

"Criminals don't get a permit. Not one of them. They don't care about obeying the law. Our law-abiding citizens have that immediate right, guarantee and freedom to protect themselves," Ivey said.

About half the states allow people to carry a gun without a permit, a movement that has been growing particularly among conservative states.

Florida handgun owners would still have to conceal their weapons in public, though there has been discussion to allow gun owners to openly carry weapons.

5 Ukrainian civilians killed as warring sides mull next move

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Fighting remained largely deadlocked Monday in eastern Ukraine where Russian shelling killed five civilians over the past day, according to Ukrainian officials, as the warring sides sized up their needs for renewed military pushes expected in coming weeks.

The casualties included a woman who was killed and three others who were wounded by the Russian shelling of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city in the country's northeast, regional Gov. Oleh Synyehubov said Monday.

Russia's troops seized large areas of the northeastern Kharkiv region in the months following its invasion of its neighbor last February. But Ukrainian counteroffensives that began in August snatched back Russian-occupied territory, notably in Kharkiv.

Those successes lent weight to Ukraine's arguments that its troops could deliver more stinging defeats to Russia if its Western allies provided more weaponry.

Kyiv last week won promises of tanks from the United States and Germany.

Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on Monday hinted at the prospect of more upcoming pledges, saying that "any activity aimed at strengthening Ukraine's defense powers is under consultation with our NATO partners."

Such a move could encounter some familiar political obstacles, however.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz, after demurring for weeks over sending Germany's Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, looks set to dig his heels in over providing fighter jets. Germany would not have the key role in aircraft

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deliveries that it did with the Leopards, which are German-made and require German export approval.

Scholz, who is on a trip to South America, said he regretted the emergence of the discussion on aircraft. He said in Chile on Sunday that a serious debate is necessary and not a "competition to outdo each other ... in which perhaps domestic political motives are in the foreground, rather than support for Ukraine."

Military analysts say more aid is crucial if Ukraine is to block an expected Russian spring offensive and launch its own effort to push back Russian forces.

"The pattern of delivery of Western aid has powerfully shaped the pattern of this conflict," the Institute for the Study of War, a U.S.-based think tank, said late Sunday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said keeping up the pace of allies' support is crucial.

"The speed of supply has been, and will be, one of the key factors in this war. Russia hopes to drag out the war, to exhaust our forces. So we have to make time our weapon," he said Sunday in his nightly video address. "We must speed up the events, speed up the supply and opening of new necessary weaponry options for Ukraine."

With the war approaching its one-year mark and draining both sides' resources, the Western call for weapons for Kyiv is spreading beyond NATO.

The alliance's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, on Monday called for South Korea to send direct military support to Ukraine, too. South Korea is a growing arms exporter with a well-equipped, U.S.-backed military.

France and Australia announced Monday plans to jointly produce and send several thousand 155-millimeter artillery shells to Ukraine. The first deliveries are expected in the first quarter of this year.

On the Russian side, indications are emerging that more manpower may be enlisted for the fight.

The British Ministry of Defense noted Monday that the Kremlin never formally rescinded last September's order for a partial mobilization of reservists that boosted troop numbers for combat in Ukraine. It said Russia may be keeping the door open for further call-ups. The mobilization in the fall was reported to have amassed 300,000 more troops.

"The Russian leadership highly likely continues to search for ways to meet the high number of personnel required to resource any future major offensive in Ukraine, while minimizing domestic dissent," it said in a tweet.

Russian officials have denied plans for additional troop mobilizations, while also tapping into a mercenary force.

With more talk of military aid from Ukraine's allies, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted Western weapons won't stop Russia.

"Ukraine keeps demanding new weapons and the West is encouraging those demands," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters Monday. "It's a deadlock. It results in a significant escalation and makes NATO countries increasingly involved in the conflict."

Ukraine's presidential office said the situation in the eastern Donetsk region, which has been the scene of intense fighting for months, remains "invariably hard."

Heavy fighting continued around Bakhmut and Vuhledar, with regional Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko saying 15 towns and villages came under shelling Sunday. Russian authorities claimed advances in Vuhledar, contentions that could not be independently verified.

Russian forces have been trying for months to capture Bakhmut, with the leadership of the Wagner Group, a private military company led by a millionaire with longtime links to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Ukrainian troops last week said they conducted an organized retreat from Soledar, some 18 kilometers (11 miles) from Bakhmut, under pressure from Wagner, which is believed to include a large number of convicts.

Ukrainian authorities said the southern city of Kherson also has come under Russian shelling. The bombardment damaged residential buildings, a hospital, a school, a bus station, a bank and a post office.

Two foreign vessels were damaged in the port of Kherson, the presidential office added, without elaborating.

Zelenskyy, in a press conference Monday in Odesa, said Russian forces seem to be trying to take revenge on Ukraine because of battlefield successes, "to provide their society with some convincing positive result in the offensive." He pledged to "stop them all little by little, defeat them and prepare our big counterof-

fensive.”

West Virginia advances school mandate on ‘In God We Trust’

By LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Public schools in West Virginia may soon be required to display the phrase “In God We Trust” in every building if a bill passed by the state Senate on Monday becomes law.

The bill was introduced by Republican Sen. Mike Azinger, who said he wants to give kids in schools something to look up to and let them know it’s OK to “say God” in school.

“We know there’s a lot of kids that have problems at home, tough times at home that we don’t know anything about,” Azinger said, speaking on the Senate floor. “Maybe they’ll look up one day and say, ‘In God We Trust’ and know they can put their hope in God.”

The bill is now heading to the West Virginia House of Delegates. It requires public K-12 schools and public institutions of higher learning to display the official U.S. national motto on durable posters or in frames placed in a “conspicuous place” in each building.

The displays must also contain images of the U.S. national and state flags but can’t depict any other words, images or information. They must be either be donated or purchased from private donations.

Similar laws have been passed in Texas, Kentucky, Louisiana, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia and several other states. Mississippi was the first state to pass a law mandating “In God We Trust” be displayed in public schools back in 2001.

Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a law making “In God We Trust” the official U.S. national motto July 30, 1956, two years after pushing to have the phrase “under God” inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance.

“It was adopted during a time of disunity in America, at a time that unity was needed,” Azinger said Monday. “And I think that’s where we are in America in many ways.”

Ex-Twitter execs to testify on block of Hunter Biden story

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Twitter employees are expected to testify next week before the House Oversight Committee about the social media platform’s handling of reporting on President Joe Biden’s son, Hunter Biden.

The scheduled testimony, confirmed by the committee Monday, will be the first time the three former executives will appear before Congress to discuss the company’s decision to initially block from Twitter a New York Post article on Hunter Biden’s laptop in the weeks before the 2020 election.

Republicans have said the story was suppressed for political reasons, though no evidence has been released to support that claim. The witnesses for the Feb. 8 hearing are expected to be Vijaya Gadde, former chief legal officer; James Baker, former deputy general counsel; and Yoel Roth, former head of safety and integrity.

The hearing is among the first of many in a GOP-controlled House to be focused on Biden and his family, as Republicans wield the power of their new, albeit slim, majority.

The New York Post first reported in October 2020 that it had received from former President Donald Trump’s personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, a copy of a hard drive of a laptop that Hunter Biden had dropped off 18 months earlier at a Delaware computer repair shop and never retrieved. Twitter initially blocked people from sharing links to the story for several days.

Months later, Twitter’s then-CEO Jack Dorsey called the company’s communications around the Post article “not great.” He added that blocking the article’s URL with “zero context” around why it was blocked was “unacceptable.”

The Post article at the time was greeted with skepticism due to questions about the laptop’s origins, including Giuliani’s involvement, and because top officials in the Trump administration had already warned that Russia was working to denigrate Joe Biden ahead of the 2020 election. The Kremlin had interfered in

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the 2016 race by hacking Democratic emails that were subsequently leaked, and fears that Russia would meddle again in the 2020 race were widespread across Washington.

"This is why we're investigating the Biden family for influence peddling," Rep. James Comer, chairman of the Oversight committee, said at a press event Monday morning. "We want to make sure that our national security is not compromised."

The White House has sought to discredit the Republican probes into Hunter Biden, calling them "divorced-from-reality political stunts."

Nonetheless, Republicans now hold subpoena power in the House, giving them the authority to compel testimony and conduct an aggressive investigation. GOP staff has spent the past year analyzing messages and financial transactions found on the laptop that belonged to the president's younger son. Comer has previously said the evidence they have compiled is "overwhelming," but did not offer specifics.

Comer has pledged there won't be hearings regarding the Biden family until the committee has the evidence to back up any claims of alleged wrongdoing. He also acknowledged that the stakes are high whenever an investigation centers on the leader of a political party.

On Monday, the Kentucky Republican, speaking at a National Press Club event, said that he could not guarantee a subpoena of Hunter Biden during his term. "We're going to go where the investigation leads us. Maybe there's nothing there."

He added, "We'll see."

Michael Jackson's nephew to star in King of Pop biopic

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Michael Jackson's 26-year-old nephew, Jaafar Jackson, will play the King of Pop in the planned biopic "Michael" to be directed by Antoine Fuqua.

Lionsgate announced Jackson's casting Monday for the film being produced by Oscar-winning "Bohemian Rhapsody" producer Graham King. Jackson is the second-youngest son of Jermaine Jackson, Michael's brother. He's put out music of his own; in 2019, he released his debut single, "Got Me Singing." "Michael" will be Jackson's acting debut.

"I met Jaafar over two years ago and was blown away by the way he organically personifies the spirit and personality of Michael," said King in a statement. "It was something so powerful that even after conducting a worldwide search, it was clear that he is the only person to take on this role."

On Instagram, Fuqua shared a black-and-white photograph of Jackson in character. Fuqua added in a statement that Jackson "has a natural ability to emulate Michael and such a great chemistry with the camera."

On Twitter, Jackson said he's "humbled and honored to bring my Uncle Michael's story to life."

"Michael" will be an authorized portrait of the pop star, who died in 2009. The film, scripted by "Gladiator" and "The Aviator" screenwriter John Logan, is being produced with the cooperation of the singer's estate.

"Jaafar embodies my son," Katherine Jackson said in a statement. "It's so wonderful to see him carry on the Jackson legacy of entertainers and performers."

"Michael" is to begin shooting this year.

Purdue a unanimous No. 1 in AP Top 25; Vols up to No. 2

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

Purdue became this season's first unanimous No. 1 team in the AP Top 25 men's college basketball poll Monday after wins over Michigan and Michigan State last week as chaos ensued behind the Boilermakers among other ranked teams.

More than half of Top 25 teams lost, including second-ranked Alabama, which was routed by Oklahoma in the Big 12-SEC Challenge. That allowed Purdue to grab the remaining No. 1 votes and tighten its grip atop the poll, while Tennessee jumped two spots to second and Houston held onto third in voting by 62 national media members.

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The Boilermakers (21-1) have won eight straight since a one-point loss to Rutgers on Jan. 2.

"We're the No. 1 team in the country because of how unselfish we are as a team," Purdue guard David Jenkins Jr. said. "We had a lot of people doubting us in the beginning because, you know, we may not be the most talented team or whatever, but we're close on the court and off the court and it's really translating to how we're winning."

The Volunteers climbed to their highest perch since reaching No. 1 for four weeks during the 2018-19 season. They routed Georgia before becoming one of three SEC teams to beat Big 12 opponents on Saturday, knocking off No. 10 Texas 82-71 for their fifth consecutive win over a top-10 team.

Perhaps this is the year Rick Barnes finally gets the Vols through the Sweet 16 for the first time as their coach.

"We have a chance to be as good as we want to be," he said. "It's up to one thing: Are we tough enough to embrace the daily grind? And not worry about going to the Final Four or worry about going to the NCAA Tournament, but can we build a team that can be successful that time of year? It starts with truly embracing the grind."

The Crimson Tide dropped to fourth after the blowout loss to the Sooners, when Alabama fell behind by 17 at halftime in an eventual 93-69 defeat. The Tide edged fifth-ranked Arizona by just two points in this week's poll.

"It doesn't have any effect on SEC standings, which is the only good thing to come out of this," Alabama coach Nate Oats said of the lopsided loss. "Hopefully we'll recover from a loss out of conference, but you know, it's not good."

Virginia was sixth and Kansas State, which rebounded from a narrow loss at No. 13 Iowa State by pumeling Florida on Saturday, fell two spots to seventh; the Wildcats face eighth-ranked Kansas in a top-10 showdown Tuesday night.

UCLA dropped to ninth after losing to Southern California and Texas rounded out the top 10.

Baylor continued its climb from unranked to No. 11 following wins over the Jayhawks and Arkansas. The Bears were followed by Gonzaga, Iowa State, Marquette and league rival TCU — the sixth Big 12 team in the top 15.

Xavier, Providence, Saint Mary's, Florida Atlantic and Clemson completed the top 20, while poll returners Indiana and San Diego State joined Miami, UConn and Auburn in rounding out the Top 25.

RISING AND FALLING

The No. 11 Bears and No. 17 Providence made the biggest leaps, each climbing six spots from last week.

"I think our defense is better. Our turnovers are better. When you don't give people easy transition baskets, now its five-on-five in the half court," said Baylor coach Scott Drew, whose team had a date with the Longhorns on Monday night.

"We execute at a pretty high rate," Drew said. "It really comes down to taking care of the ball, making sure we get shots up and when you don't make them, you've got to get rebounds. And our guys are buying into that."

Auburn took the biggest hit of those still in the poll, dropping 10 places after losses to unranked Texas A&M and West Virginia.

IN AND OUT

The Hoosiers returned to the poll at No. 21 and the Aztecs rejoined it right behind them. They took the place of Charleston, which fell out from No. 18 after losing to Hofstra, and New Mexico, which lost to Nevada in double overtime last week.

CONFERENCE CALL

The Big 12's dominance of the SEC in the final year of their head-to-head challenge was rewarded in the poll, where the league led the way with six ranked teams and all of them in the top 15. The Big East has four teams in the poll but none higher than No. 14 Marquette, while the SEC and ACC have three teams apiece.

Blinken urges Israel-Palestinian calm as violence soars

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By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

JERUSALEM (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Israel and the Palestinians on Monday to ease tensions following a spike in violence that has put the region on edge. The bloodshed has alarmed the Biden administration as it attempts to find common ground with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new right-wing government.

Yet aside from appeals for de-escalation and restraint, Blinken did not publicly offer any particular ideas for calming the situation and it was not immediately clear from his meeting with Netanyahu that the administration would be proposing any. Blinken will meet Tuesday with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas.

"We're urging all sides now to take urgent steps to restore calm, to de-escalate," Blinken said after meeting Netanyahu. "We want to make sure that there's an environment in which we can, I hope at some point, create conditions where we can start to restore a sense of security for Israelis and Palestinians alike, which of course is sorely lacking."

Blinken arrived during one of the deadliest periods of fighting in years in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem. An Israeli military raid Thursday killed 10 Palestinians in the flashpoint West Bank town of Jenin, while a Palestinian gunman killed seven people outside a synagogue in an east Jerusalem settlement on Friday. The next morning, a 13-year-old Palestinian boy shot and wounded two Israelis elsewhere in east Jerusalem.

Netanyahu made no reference to the recent flare-up in violence in brief comments after the meeting, instead speaking of the dangers to Israel posed by Iran and his hope for expanding the so-called "Abraham Accords" — normalization agreements with several Arab countries.

"Expanding the circle of peace; working to close, finally, the file of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I think would also help us achieve a workable solution with our Palestinian neighbors," Netanyahu said in his only mention of the Palestinians.

Blinken was more forthright, saying the U.S. supports the expansion of the Abraham Accords but that they cannot be a substitute for a two-state solution that resolves the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"These efforts are not a substitute for progress between Israelis and Palestinians, but as we advance Israel's integration we can do so in ways that improves the daily lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza," he said, adding that the best way to do that would be through a two-state resolution creating an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Netanyahu's government is dominated by far-right politicians who oppose Palestinian independence. Following the weekend shootings, his government approved a series of punitive moves against the Palestinians, including plans to "strengthen" West Bank settlements. The U.S., like most of the international community, considers Israeli settlements on lands claimed by the Palestinians for their state as obstacles to peace.

"Anything that moves us away from that vision is, in our judgment, detrimental to Israel's long-term security and its long-term identity as a Jewish and democratic state," Blinken said.

Israel's options may be limited. Both shooters are believed to have acted individually and were not part of organized militant groups, and punitive steps against the broader population could risk triggering even more violence.

Just before meeting Netanyahu, Blinken said he arrived in Israel from Egypt at "a pivotal moment" and condemned Palestinian attacks that have targeted Israeli citizens. But he also called for restraint in response, saying that all civilian casualties are deplorable.

"To take an innocent life in an act of terrorism is always a heinous crime but to target people outside their place of worship is especially shocking," he said, referring to the Friday night shooting, which occurred on the Jewish sabbath.

"We condemn all those who celebrate these and any other acts of terrorism that take civilian lives no matter who the victim is or what they believe," he said. "Calls for vengeance against more innocent victims are not the answer. And acts of retaliatory violence against civilians are never justified."

On Monday, shortly before Blinken's arrival in Israel, the Palestinian Health Ministry said Israeli forces killed a Palestinian man in the flashpoint city of Hebron, bringing the toll of Palestinians killed in January to 35.

The violence comes after months of Israeli arrest raids in the West Bank, which were launched after a

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wave of Palestinian attacks against Israelis in the spring of 2022 that killed 19 people.

But it has spiked this month during the first weeks of Netanyahu's new far-right government, which has promised to take a tough stance against the Palestinians and ramp up settlement construction.

Blinken's trip follows visits to Israel by President Joe Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan and CIA Director William Burns. Blinken's meeting was the highest-level U.S. engagement with Netanyahu since he retook power last month.

The visit, which was planned before the flare-up, was already expected to be fraught with tension over differences between the Biden administration and Netanyahu's government, which is made up of settlement supporters.

Israeli Army Radio reported late Sunday that the government was also set to approve a rogue outpost deep inside the West Bank, and speed up approval for other such small settlements.

Israel also arrested 42 Palestinians, some relatives of the Jerusalem attacker, in its investigation into the attack. And the firebrand National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir said he has ordered authorities to demolish illegally built Palestinian homes in east Jerusalem in response to the attack.

After the Jenin raid, the Palestinians said they would cancel security coordination with Israel.

The Palestinians believe the Israeli retaliation, including the demolition of homes of attackers' families, amounts to collective punishment and is illegal under international law.

The turmoil has added yet another item to Blinken's lengthy diplomatic agenda in Jerusalem that was already set to include Russia's war on Ukraine, tensions with Iran and crises in Lebanon and Syria; all of which weigh heavily in the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Easing strains on those issues, or at least averting new ones, are central to Blinken's mission despite Netanyahu's opposition to two of Biden's main Mideast priorities: reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and restarting Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

But, with both of those matters stalled and little hope of any resumption in negotiations, the administration is attempting just to keep the concepts on life support.

Trump investigations: Georgia prosecutor ups anticipation

By KATE BRUMBACK and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Former President Donald Trump and his allies have been put on notice by a prosecutor, but the warning didn't come from anyone at the Justice Department.

It was from a Georgia prosecutor who indicated she was likely to seek criminal charges soon in a two-year election subversion probe. In trying to block the release of a special grand jury's report, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis argued in court last week that decisions in the case were "imminent" and that the report's publication could jeopardize the rights of "future defendants."

Though Willis, a Democrat, didn't mention Trump by name, her comments marked the first time a prosecutor in any of several current investigations tied to the Republican former president has hinted that charges could be forthcoming. The remarks ratcheted anticipation that an investigation focused, in part, on Trump's call with Georgia's secretary of state could conclude before ongoing federal probes.

"I expect to see indictments in Fulton County before I see any federal indictments," said Clark Cunningham, a Georgia State University law professor.

Besides the Georgia inquiry, a Justice Department special counsel is investigating Trump over his role in working with allies to overturn his loss in the 2020 presidential election and his alleged mishandling of classified documents.

Trump had appeared to face the most pressing legal jeopardy from the probe into a cache of classified materials at his Florida resort, and that threat remains. But that case seems complicated, at least politically, by the recent discovery of classified records at President Joe Biden's Delaware home and at a Washington office. The Justice Department tapped a separate special counsel to investigate that matter.

Willis opened her office's investigation shortly after the release of a recording of a Jan. 2, 2021, phone call between Trump and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger. In that conversation, the then-president suggested that Raffensperger, a fellow Republican, could "find" the votes needed to overturn

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Trump's narrow election loss in the state to Biden, a Democrat.

"All I want to do is this: I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said on the call.

Since then, the investigation's scope has broadened considerably, encompassing among other things: a slate of Republican fake electors, phone calls by Trump and others to Georgia officials in the weeks after the 2020 election, and unfounded allegations of widespread election fraud made to state lawmakers.

In an interview, Trump insisted he did "absolutely nothing wrong" and that his phone call with Raffensperger was "perfect." He said he felt "very confident" that he would not be indicted.

"She's supposed to be stopping violent crime, and that's her job," Trump said of Willis. "Not to go after people for political reasons, that did things absolutely perfectly."

It is unclear how Willis' case will impact the Justice Department's probes or what contact her team has had with federal investigators. Justice Department prosecutors have been circumspect in discussing their investigations, offering little insight into how or when they might end.

But Willis' comments indicate that the Georgia investigation is on a path toward resolution — with charges or not — on a timetable independent of what the Justice Department is planning to do, legal experts said.

Cunningham, the Georgia State professor, said that Willis' comments implied that the special grand jury's report contained detail about people who the panel and Willis believe should, at minimum, be further investigated.

"She wouldn't be talking about the release of the report creating prejudice to potential future defendants unless she saw in the report peoples' names who she saw as potential future defendants," he added.

Attorney General Merrick Garland in November tapped Jack Smith, a former public corruption prosecutor, to act as special counsel overseeing investigations into Trump's actions leading up to the deadly Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot and into his possession of hundreds of classified documents at the Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida.

Though Smith and his team of prosecutors have issued grand jury subpoenas, he has not revealed when his investigation might conclude or who might be a target.

Garland has declined to discuss the probes, saying only that "no person is above the law" and that there aren't separate rules for Democrats and Republicans.

FBI agents recently searched Biden's Wilmington, Delaware, home, finding six items containing classified documents, the White House said. Further muddling the Justice Department's calculus: Classified records were found this month at the Indiana home of Trump's vice president, Mike Pence.

Public disclosures about Willis' case are the result, to some degree, of the unusual nature of the Georgia proceedings.

Willis in January of last year sought to convene a special grand jury to help her investigation, citing the need for its subpoena power to compel the testimony of witnesses who otherwise wouldn't talk to her. She said in a letter to Fulton County's chief judge that her office had received information indicating a "reasonable probability" that the 2020 election in Georgia "was subject to possible criminal disruptions."

The county's superior court judges voted to grant the request, and the panel was seated in May. The grand jurors heard from 75 witnesses and reviewed evidence collected by prosecutors and investigators. Among the witnesses who testified were former New York mayor and Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and such Georgia state officials as Raffensperger and Gov. Brian Kemp.

The panel lacked the authority to issue an indictment, but its report is presumed to include recommendations for further action, possibly including potential criminal charges.

The special grand jury was dissolved earlier this month after wrapping up its work and finalizing a report on its investigation. The grand jurors recommended the report be made public.

News organizations, including The Associated Press, argued for the report to be released. At a hearing last week, Willis said that a decision was looming on whether to seek an indictment and that she opposed releasing the report because she wanted to ensure "that everyone is treated fairly and we think for future defendants to be treated fairly, it is not appropriate at this time to have this report released."

Attorneys for witnesses and others identified as targets have insisted that Willis is driven by politics

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rather than by legitimate concerns that crimes were committed. Among other things, they pointed to her public statements and initial willingness to speak to print and television news outlets.

Danny Porter, a Republican who served as district attorney in neighboring Gwinnett County for nearly three decades, said Willis has been navigating unfamiliar territory. Special grand juries are relatively rare in Georgia, and the law doesn't provide much guidance for prosecutors, he said.

Even so, Porter said, it appeared Willis had not crossed any ethical or legal red lines that would call into question the integrity of the investigation.

"Procedurally," he said, "I haven't seen anything that made me go, 'Oh, jeez, I wouldn't have done that.'"

Fed, set to impose smaller hike, may hint of fewer increases

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve is poised this week to raise its benchmark interest rate for an eighth time since March. But the Fed will likely announce a smaller hike for a second straight time, and it could change some key wording in its post-meeting statement about future rate increases.

A change in its statement, if there is one, could be seen as signaling an eventual pause in the Fed's aggressive drive to raise borrowing costs. Chair Jerome Powell is still likely to stress, though, that the Fed's campaign to conquer high inflation is far from over.

When its latest meeting ends Wednesday, the 19-member policymaking committee is expected to raise its key short-term rate, which affects many business and consumer loans, by a quarter-point. In doing so, it would elevate the rate to a range of 4.5% to 4.75%, its highest level in 15 years. The Fed's move would follow a half-point rate hike in December and four three-quarter point hikes before that.

Last year's substantial rate increases reflected near-unanimous agreement among Fed officials that they needed to move quickly to jack up borrowing costs to cool the worst inflation outbreak in more than 40 years. But with signs of weaker economic growth along with steadily lower inflation readings, reduced consumer spending and even some signs of a slowdown in the job market, the Fed is now navigating a more treacherous terrain.

Less spending and hiring could help further ease inflation. But many economists and Wall Street investors worry that the Fed will raise rates too high — and keep them there too long — causing a deep recession in the process. Based on their public statements, policymakers are adamant that if they don't keep fighting inflation with tighter credit, price spikes could re-accelerate and require even more painful measures to quell.

With uncertainty so high, several of the officials have said they favor smaller rate hikes, to allow time to evaluate the impact of their policies.

"If you're on a road trip and you encounter foggy weather or a dangerous highway, it's a good idea to slow down," said Lorie Logan, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas and a former top official at the New York Fed, in a speech earlier this month. "Likewise if you're a policymaker in today's complex economic and financial environment."

As the Fed downshifts its rate increases, it is fueling enthusiasm among Wall Street investors that the hikes will soon stop. Such optimism has sent stock prices higher and bond yields lower since the year began. Higher asset prices tend to encourage spending and accelerate growth — just the opposite of what the Fed wants.

To forestall that brighter outlook, most analysts expect Powell to talk tough at a news conference Wednesday about the need for further rate hikes. He may underscore a projection that Fed officials collectively issued last month that their benchmark rate would surpass 5% in the coming months.

"The communication gets very tricky at this point," said William English, a former Fed staffer and finance professor at Yale School of Management.

Further complicating matters, English and some other economists say, the Fed could change the statement it issues after each meeting to hint that it may be close to suspending its rate hikes.

Since March, the statement has included the phrase, "ongoing increases in the (Fed's rate) will be ap-

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appropriate." English said that phrase could change to something like, "some future increases." That would indicate that the Fed is no longer engaged in an open-ended series of hikes.

Other Fed watchers, like Kathy Bostjancic, chief economist at Nationwide, say they don't foresee any such changes, because the Fed won't want to excite investors.

"They don't want the financial markets to presume a pause is around the corner," Bostjancic said. "They can't change that language until they want to signal a pause is imminent."

Powell has stressed his concern — which most other Fed officials have echoed — that robust pay raises will keep inflation high among restaurants, hotels, health care, financial services and other areas of the nation's service sector. As a result, Powell has said that some "pain" will be necessary to fully quash inflation — including a potentially sharp increase in the unemployment rate.

On Tuesday, the government will issue its most comprehensive measure of wages, known as the Employment Cost Index. If the index shows a clear weakening of wage gains in the final three months of 2022, it could assuage some of Powell's concerns that large pay increases are fueling inflation.

Even so, in recent speeches and interviews, several Fed officials have said they want their key rate to exceed 5%, a level that would require two more quarter-point hikes in addition to a quarter-point increase on Wednesday.

"We're not at 5% yet, we're not above 5%, which I think is going to be needed given where my projections are for the economy," Loretta Mester, president of the Cleveland Fed, said in a Jan. 17 interview with the Associated Press. "I just think we need to keep going."

As the Fed faces a more uncertain environment, some disagreements among officials are emerging. While Powell has stressed the need to slow the job market to combat inflation, for example, Vice Chair Lael Brainard has suggested that other factors, including a decline in corporate profits, could further reduce inflation without requiring widespread layoffs.

France buys new masterpiece for Orsay museum with LVMH gift

By CATHERINE GASCHKA and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France has acquired a stunning Impressionist masterpiece for its national collection of art treasures, with a donation from luxury goods giant LVMH paying the 43 million euros (nearly \$47 million) for "Boating Party" by 19th-century French artist Gustave Caillebotte.

The oil on canvas shows an oarsman in a top hat rowing his skiff on languid waters. The work, remarkable in its realism, delicate colors and almost cinematic perspective, as though the artist was in the boat with the rower, went on display Monday in the Musée d'Orsay. It is the latest addition to the Paris museum's already impressive collection of Impressionist art.

The painting was sold by Caillebotte's descendants. It had been one of the last Impressionist masterpieces still in private hands, said Jean-Paul Claverie, an adviser to LVMH boss Bernard Arnault.

"A work of art of this level, this quality, an absolute masterpiece, there are nearly no more left in the Impressionist period," he said. "This painting was, of course, sought after by the biggest museums in the world," he said.

Managing to keep the painting in France represented "a beautiful victory," said the government's culture minister, Rima Abdul Malak.

Although a prolific painter in his own right, Caillebotte was long better known as a millionaire patron of France's Impressionist artists who revolutionized Western painting in the late 19th century.

Born into a wealthy family, Caillebotte accumulated an enviable collection of dozens of works by his friends Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro and other artists he helped support financially. Before his death, he bestowed their artworks to the French state, hoping they'd be displayed in the Louvre.

After Caillebotte died at age 45 in February 1894, France took possession of 38 of his paintings by Monet, Renoir, Édouard Manet, Paul Cézanne and other artists for its national collection. That donation later formed the core of the Impressionist collection at the Musée d'Orsay, opened in 1986 in a former railway station.

His reputation as an important collector and donor of Impressionist art long overshadowed Caillebotte's

own contributions to the movement as a painter, partly because he didn't include his own work in the collection he bequeathed to the French state.

When Caillebotte died, unmarried and without children, his brother Martial Caillebotte inherited 175 of the artist's works.

Much of his work stayed in his descendants' hands and just a sliver of it ended up in French museums.

2 Cuban sisters' 4,200-mile journey to the US and a new life

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — The Rolo González sisters walked out of Nicaragua's main airport and peered out onto a sea of young men.

The Central American "coyotes" squinted back, trying to find the people they would smuggle to the United States. These were the first steps that 19-year-old Merlyn and 24-year-old Melanie took outside of Cuba. Toting two small backpacks and Melanie's 1-year-old daughter, the women realized just how alone they were.

Their odyssey of more than 4,200 miles (6,000 kilometers) would lead the medical students to question their past lives, race unknowingly against a ticking legal clock and leave them teetering on the edge of death as they tumbled down a cliff.

This is part of an occasional series on how the United States became the world's top destination for asylum-seekers.

The sisters' voyage is one that hundreds of thousands of Cubans have made over the last two years in a historic wave of migration, fueled by a crisis in the island's already-troubled economy sparked in large part by the pandemic and one of the world's highest rates of inflation.

The exodus prompted a January Biden administration measure to cut back on Cuban migrants, whom the U.S. had historically welcomed even as it turned away Haitians, Venezuelans, Mexicans and people from other Latin American and Caribbean nations.

The Rolo González sisters, like other Cuban migrants, lost hope for the future in their country. Their optimism rested in the hazy prospect of life in the U.S. and a brighter future for the little girl who would have no memories of the island.

"All you know is that you're going to a foreign country where you've never been, to put your life in the hands of people you've never met, to another place you don't know," said the younger sister. "You have your destination, but you don't know what awaits you on your journey."

Over the past two years, American authorities have detained Cubans nearly 300,000 times on the border with Mexico. Some have been sent back but the vast majority have stayed under immigration rules dating to the Cold War. That's more than half the population of Baltimore, or nearly 3% of the people in Cuba.

While they had trained as doctors, the Rolo González sisters spent their free time on the outskirts of Havana scraping together enough to buy basics like baby formula for Melanie's daughter.

The women once dreamed of traveling as doctors but they quickly grew disillusioned about life in Cuba due to frequent blackouts, medical supply shortages and other restrictions.

When Melanie's daughter, Madisson, was born, she and her economist husband began to discuss their family migrating to the U.S. He would go first, they decided, and then they would seek to migrate through legal, less dangerous routes.

In May 2022, he flew to Nicaragua. Shortly after, Melanie said, he left her for another woman.

She still planned to migrate, though, now with her little sister.

The vast majority of Cuban migrants over the last year have flown to Nicaragua — where Cubans don't need a visa — and head overland to Mexico. A growing number also take a dangerous route by sea, travel-

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ing on packed, precariously constructed boats almost 100 miles (161 kilometers) to Florida.

The sisters sold a house left to them by their father, along with the refrigerator, television and anything else of value in exchange for American dollars. With money from friends and family in Florida, they had \$20,000.

It bought the Rolo González sisters flights to Nicaragua and passage overland to the U.S. border with one of the smuggling networks.

They took leave from medical school and told only five close friends and family that they were going.

Days before their flight, the two meticulously sorted through stacks of medicine, winter clothes and powdered baby milk — as much of their lives as they could fit into two blue-and-pink backpacks.

The sisters, like many other Cubans, were counting on the relative but soon-to-disappear ease with which Cuban migrants could enter the U.S.

Just after midnight on Dec. 13, the Rolo González sisters walked past a hallway lined with family photos and out of their home potentially forever.

The last thing they told their mother before leaving her standing alone in the Havana airport was "I love you."

"Until then, it seemed unreal to me," said the younger sister. "When I saw myself sitting there on the plane, the only thing I thought about was what we had achieved. When the plane took off, we looked at each other and said 'We're free.'"

They walked out of the Nicaragua airport with a smuggler who had a picture of them on his phone and received instructions via WhatsApp.

It was time to make the first payment: \$3,600 in cash.

Their "guide" was a vague, but constant presence, sending them messages with instructions as they were handed off smuggler to smuggler.

Once they paid, they began a 12-hour drive with the "coyote," arriving at a ramshackle house at midnight. They were awoken before sunrise. With chilly air cutting at their lungs, Melanie and Merlyn began to trek through a rugged mountain dotted with corn and coffee farms — the border between Nicaragua and Honduras.

The sisters continued this way for days, winding up through Honduras and Guatemala by bus, car, and foot along Central America's volcano-speckled landscapes.

They marveled at jagged mountains and rolling clouds as endless as the oceans that had once surrounded them.

"Everything was new," said Merlyn, "It felt like: 'We've left Cuba.'"

Back in Cuba, their mother clung to texts and photos as signs they were okay.

"There's a horrible emptiness in this house. I look over here, look over there and it's like I have nothing," she said.

The Rolo González sisters dozed and rode along with 18 other migrants at 3 a.m. as their old blue van whizzed through dense pine forests in Chiapas, Mexico in a line of five cars carrying mostly Cubans. They were cutting through an informal passage built by smugglers, and the drizzling sky turned the dirt path-way slick.

Merlyn was cradling her niece when the car slipped and spun, flipping over 10 times as it fell. The jolt threw Merlyn and the baby out of the windshield alongside the driver. The young Cuban enveloped her niece with her body. A piece of glass cut a deep gash in the back of the woman's head.

When she landed on the muddy earth, the woman peered down and panicked as she saw the baby's short strands of hair and face coated in blood as she peered up wide-eyed.

Melanie rushed over, checking the vitals of her family with the light of a phone, and bandaged her sister's head the way she had learned in medical school in Cuba.

In the coming days, they would learn that the mother of an 8-year-old Cuban boy had also died that night.

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"We felt like it meant that we had a lot more life to live," said Melanie.

On New Year's Eve the Rolo González sisters waded through the Rio Grande from Juarez to El Paso in the early morning. They were immediately met by Border Patrol agents, detained in Texas and quickly released under 60 days parole.

Days later, the new Biden restriction was announced. They had made it just in time.

Back in Cuba, their mother watched her phone with shaking hands. It had been three weeks since Marialys had seen her daughters and granddaughter.

In Daytona Beach, Florida, family friends waited for them. Balloons decorated their beds and a pink baby cradle in the corner.

Marialys' phone rang. She squinted at the grainy video.

"Look there, there's the car, there they are!" Marialys cried as a silver car rolled up the screen. Three girls swaddled in jackets walked up the driveway.

"Hola, mami," one murmured with a smile.

"Se acabó la pesadilla, mi hija," the mother choked out.

The nightmare is over, my daughter.

New this week: Shania, 'Princess Power' and Pamela Anderson

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's a collection curated by The Associated Press' entertainment journalists of what's arriving on TV, streaming services and music and video game platforms this week.

MOVIES

— If you haven't managed to catch "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" yet, the Marvel sequel arrives on Disney+ on Wednesday with a batch of five Oscar nominations to its name, including best supporting actress for Angela Bassett and original song ("Lift Me Up," music by Tems, Rihanna, Ryan Coogler and Ludwig Göransson; lyrics by Tems and Ryan Coogler). In his review, AP Film Writer Jake Coyle wrote that, "'Wakanda Forever' is overlong, a little unwieldy and somewhat mystifyingly steers toward a climax on a barge in the middle of the Atlantic. But Coogler's fluid command of mixing intimacy with spectacle remains gripping."

— Pamela Anderson has been making headlines again for revelations in the documentary "Pamela, A Love Story," coming to Netflix on Tuesday. After many people trying tell her story for her — including in the recent Hulu series "Pam & Tommy" which Anderson chose not to contribute to and called "salt on the wound" and "not necessary" — she tells her story herself through archival footage and personal journals. Ryan White ("The Keepers," "Ask Dr. Ruth" and "Goodnight Oppy") directs.

— For the kids, "Lyle, Lyle Crocodile" also comes to Netflix on Saturday. The movie based on the popular Bernard Waber series is hybrid live action/ CGI and a musical as well, featuring Shawn Mendes as the titular Crocodile Lyle. Constance Wu, Javier Bardem and Scoot McNairy also star. The story focuses on a family who has recently relocated to New York City and their son (Winslow Fegley) is struggling to adapt until the caviar-loving crocodile enters his life.

— AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr

MUSIC

— Shania Twain kicks off her new album with a strut — the infectious line-dance-inducing "Giddy Up!" "I want people to feel good when they hear the new album. I want to set a celebratory tone," she explains. The five-time Grammy award-winning singer and songwriter's sixth album "Queen of Me" arrives on Friday. Songs among the 12-track set include the glistening pop of "Waking Up Dreaming" and "Inhale/Exhale Air," which she wrote after her battle with COVID-19.

— The Eurovision Song Contest will be held in May and you can get ahead by listening to one of Ireland's shortlisted entries, the moving "Hawaii" from Public Image Ltd. It's the band's first music in eight years and it's a love letter to band leader John Lydon's wife, who is living with Alzheimer's disease. "It is

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dedicated to everyone going through tough times on the journey of life, with the person they care for the most," says the former Sex Pistols frontman. All six of Ireland's hopefuls will compete on Ireland's "The Late Late Show" on Friday, streaming worldwide.

— Take a trip back in time to 2012 for a front-row seat to what The Rolling Stones call "one of the most memorable shows in the band's history." That was the night in New Jersey that featured guest appearances by The Black Keys, Gary Clark Jr., John Mayer, Lady Gaga and Bruce Springsteen. The set is being released as "GRRR Live!" and a video on demand from the band's website will stream for \$9.99. Tune in Thursday at 8 p.m. GMT, 8 p.m. ET, 8 p.m. PT and 8 p.m. AWST on Friday. It has not been available to fans since it originally aired on pay-per-view in 2012.

— Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy

TELEVISION

— Drew Barrymore and Savannah Guthrie have teamed up to executive produce a new animated children's series on Netflix called "Princess Power." The show centers around Penny Pineapple, Kira Kiwi, Bea Blueberry, and Rita Raspberry, all princesses who are devoted to help others while teaching young viewers about inclusivity, diversity, teamwork and friendship. It's based on Guthrie's bestselling children's book "Princesses Wear Pants." Guest stars on "Princess Power" are voiced by Rita Moreno, Andrew Rannells, Tan France, Jenna Ushkowitz and Guthrie as well. All 14 episodes drop Monday.

— The relationship between the U.S. and Russia's President Vladimir Putin may be strained now due to the war in Ukraine, but his clashes with American presidents goes back further than with President Biden. A new PBS "Frontline" documentary called "Putin and the Presidents," delves into Putin's interaction with the last five U.S. presidents as rebuilding the Russian empire seems to be his priority. It debuts Tuesday at 10 p.m. ET on PBS but check station listings to confirm local broadcast info.

— The fishing industry in Iceland is a major export commodity but a controversial quota where individuals and companies are allowed to catch and sell a predetermined number of fish per year is a politically-charged issue. A new series called "Blackport," is based on a true story and follows a couple who take advantage of that quota in the 1980s to control a large part of the market. The success goes to their heads leading to greed, corruption, jealousy and deception. The eight-episode series has been picked up by the streaming service Topic where you can subscribe directly or add its channel on Amazon Prime Video, AppleTV or Roku. The first three episodes drop Thursday with the remaining five doled out weekly.

— Alicia Rancilio

VIDEO GAMES

— From Fallout to The Last of Us to Horizon, there are post-apocalyptic video games in every flavor. But what do people do before the apocalypse? That's the question Scavengers Studio tries to answer in Season: A Letter to the Future. The protagonist, Estelle, knows a cataclysm is coming, so she sets out on her bicycle to record the wonders and unravel the mysteries of her strange world before all heck breaks loose. It's a remarkably chill journey, given the stakes — Estelle is equipped with a camera and a notebook rather than a rocket launcher or a flamethrower. But if you're in the mood for a more pensive approach to the end of the world, Season debuts Tuesday on PlayStation 5/4 and PC.

— Lou Kesten

Super Bowl 57: Chiefs, Eagles meet for title in Arizona

By DAVID BRANDT AP Sports Writer

Patrick Mahomes finally got the best of Joe Burrow.

All he needed was a little shove.

Harrison Butker made a 45-yard field goal with 3 seconds left — after Cincinnati's Joseph Ossai was flagged for a 15-yard penalty for shoving Mahomes after he was out of bounds — and the Chiefs beat the Bengals 23-20 in the AFC championship game to make it back to the Super Bowl.

Kansas City will face the Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl on Feb. 12 in Glendale, Arizona.

The Eagles opened as a 1 1/2-point favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

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There are no shortage of storylines: Kansas City coach Andy Reid goes against his old team — which he led to Super Bowl 39 — in a game that's also the first matchup of Black starting quarterbacks in the Super Bowl with Mahomes and Philadelphia's Jalen Hurts.

On top of that, there's a brother-against-brother showdown between Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce and Philadelphia center Jason Kelce.

" Officially done being a Chiefs fan this season!! " Jason Kelce tweeted immediately after the Chiefs won.

The Chiefs have been making deep postseason runs on a regular basis ever since Mahomes came to town as the franchise quarterback.

This was their fifth straight trip to the AFC title game and will be their third Super Bowl appearance in that span. They beat the 49ers for the NFL title in the 2019 season, but lost to the Bucs the following season.

The Eagles clobbered the Niners 31-7 in the NFC title game earlier Sunday. They've looked dominant in the playoffs so far, also beating the New York Giants 38-7 in the divisional round.

Philadelphia is back in the Super Bowl five years after beating the New England Patriots 41-33 on Feb. 4, 2018.

Now a mostly new generation of Eagles — led by coach Nick Sirianni and Hurts — will come to Arizona to try and win another title.

The Chiefs-Bengals game looked as if it was going to overtime before Ossai's ill-advised play. Mahomes — who was playing on a badly sprained ankle — was running to get a first down in the final seconds as Ossai desperately tried to track him down.

Mahomes was out of bounds when Ossai gave him a shove, sending both players tumbling to the turf. The ensuing 15-yard penalty was enough to push Butker into field-goal range and the kick split the uprights.

A distraught Ossai sat on the bench with his head in his hands, well after the game was over.

The Bengals and Chiefs were playing for the fourth time in less than 400 days and Cincinnati had won the previous three meetings — all by three points. This one was decided by a field goal, too, and all Burrow could do was watch.

The Bengals lost to the Rams in last year's Super Bowl and they just missed another chance at returning to the title game.

NO DRAMA IN NFC

Odds makers thought fans were in for some close conference championship games.

They'll have to settle for a 50% success rate.

The NFC title game was a blowout. Niners rookie quarterback Brock Purdy was injured in the first quarter when Eagles linebacker Haason Reddick drilled his right arm on a play that was ruled a fumble. The Eagles recovered that fumble and the injury proved to be a game-changer.

With Purdy hurt, San Francisco turned to 36-year-old journeyman Josh Johnson, who couldn't do much before eventually leaving with a concussion. Purdy came back into the game, but could barely throw, and the Eagles cruised to the win.

The 49ers dealt with quarterback injuries all season, losing Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo before turning to Purdy, a seventh-round draft pick out of Iowa State. Purdy stepped into a starter's role in December and won his first seven games before Sunday's injury.

Here's a few things to know about the upcoming Super Bowl:

WHAT'S THE UPCOMING SCHEDULE?

FEB. 5

Pro Bowl flag-football game, 3 p.m. EST, ABC/ESPN

FEB. 12

Super Bowl LVII, Philadelphia Eagles vs. Kansas City Chiefs, 6:30 p.m. EST, Fox

RIHANNA AT HALFTIME

Rihanna will take center stage as the headline act for this year's Super Bowl halftime show.

With sales of more than 250 million records worldwide, Rihanna ranks as one of the best-selling female artists ever. Her most recent album was 2016's "Anti." Rihanna last performed publicly at the Grammy

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Awards in 2018.

The singer said she turned down a similar opportunity for the 2019 Super Bowl that was ultimately headlined by Maroon 5. At the time, many artists voiced support for Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who protested police brutality against Black people and minorities by kneeling during the national anthem in 2016.

Country music star Chris Stapleton will sing the national anthem, while R&B legend Babyface will perform "America the Beautiful."

PRO BOWL MAKEOVER

The Pro Bowl is getting a major makeover this year after the NFL eliminated its full-contact all-star game and replaced it with weeklong skills competitions and a flag football game.

The flag football contest is Feb. 5 in Las Vegas at Allegiant Stadium, one week before the Super Bowl.

The Pro Bowl debuted in January 1951 in Los Angeles and stayed there for 21 seasons before the game moved to different cities from 1972-80. Hawaii hosted from 1980-2009, and the game has had several homes in the years since, including Miami, Phoenix, Orlando and Las Vegas.

"The game was kind of silly, I guess," Saints two-time Pro Bowl offensive lineman Ryan Ramczyk said back in September when the news was announced. "Guys weren't out there playing true football. Hopefully, there'll be a lot of interactions with the fans and guys will get their opportunity to go out there and show some skills. I could see that being a good change."

'24,' 'Runaways' actor Annie Wersching has died at 45

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Actor Annie Wersching, best known for playing FBI agent Renee Walker in the series "24" and providing the voice for Tess in the video game "The Last of Us," has died. She was 45.

Wersching passed away Sunday morning in Los Angeles following a battle with cancer, her publicist told The Associated Press. The type of cancer was not specified.

Neil Druckmann, who created "The Last of Us," wrote on Twitter that "We just lost a beautiful artist and human being. My heart is shattered. Thoughts are with her loved ones."

Actor Abigail Spencer, who appeared with Wersching on the sci-fi series "Timeless," tweeted, "We love you Annie Wersching. You will be deeply missed."

Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Wersching appeared on dozens of television shows over the course of her two-decade career.

Her first credit was in "Star Trek: Enterprise," and she would go on to have recurring roles in the seventh and eighth seasons of "24," "Bosch," "The Vampire Diaries," Marvel's "Runaways," "The Rookie" and, most recently, the second season of "Star Trek: Picard" as the Borg Queen.

She also provided the voice and motion capture performance for Tess for the popular video game "The Last of Us."

Wersching was diagnosed with cancer in 2020, according to Deadline, and continued working. She's survived by her husband, actor Stephen Full, and three sons. A GoFundMe page was set up Sunday to support the family.

Analysis: Mahomes, Hurts set for historic Super Bowl matchup

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Black quarterbacks have come a long way in the NFL since Fritz Pollard became the first to play in the league in 1923 and Doug Williams was the first to start and win a Super Bowl following the 1987 season.

Now, Patrick Mahomes and Jalen Hurts will be the first Black QBs to face off in a Super Bowl.

It's fitting that a season which began with 11 Black QBs starting in Week 1 will end with a historic matchup.

Mahomes can become the first two-time winner if he leads the Kansas City Chiefs to victory over the

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Philadelphia Eagles on Feb. 12. Hurts aims to become the fourth Black QB to win the Super Bowl, joining Williams, Mahomes and Russell Wilson.

Steve McNair, Colin Kaepernick, Cam Newton and Wilson also started in the Super Bowl and lost.

Michael Vick was the first Black QB selected No. 1 overall in the draft in 2001. McNair became the first Black QB to win MVP in 2003. Mahomes and Lamar Jackson won it back-to-back years.

They all had to overcome stereotypes to get to this point.

Jackson said a scout from the Los Angeles Chargers asked him to run routes at the NFL combine in 2018. The Baltimore Ravens ended up selecting him with the 32nd pick in the first round and he was MVP in his second season.

Donovan McNabb, a six-time Pro Bowl QB who started five NFC championship games for the Eagles, was told by some college scouts that he had to play running back or wide receiver. He wouldn't switch positions, went to Syracuse to play quarterback and was drafted No. 2 overall in 1999 by Philadelphia.

Hurts began his NFL career in 2020 as an all-purpose QB after the Eagles took him in the second round. Playing behind Carson Wentz, Hurts had 12 rushing attempts, one catch and threw just three passes in his first nine games before taking over as Philadelphia's QB.

He clearly has not forgotten that the decision to draft him in the second round of the 2020 draft was widely criticized by reporters and fans.

"My first year here, (people) probably didn't even want to draft me here," Hurts said Sunday. "It was probably one of those things. But it always handles itself."

Neither Hurts nor Mahomes celebrated their conference championship wins too much. The main goal remains ahead. They each want one more win.

Hurts puffed a victory cigar after the Eagles routed the San Francisco 49ers 31-7 but he showed little emotion, per usual, in his postgame news conference.

"I don't really know how to feel to be honest. You work really hard to put yourself in this position and I'm forever grateful," Hurts said. "Only God knows the things that each individual on this team has been able to overcome for us to come together as a team and do something special as a group. That's what means the most. I always want to go out there and give my best regardless of what's going on because I don't want to let down the guy next to me. That makes us all go harder."

Hurts, a finalist along with Mahomes for AP NFL MVP and Offensive Player of the Year, missed two games late in the season with a shoulder injury. The Eagles haven't had to lean on him in two lopsided playoff wins. He has only 275 yards passing and two TDs along with 73 yards rushing and two scores.

"I know I've been through a lot personally, but I don't want to steer away from the direction of how good this team has been at playing together, being together, and challenging one another," Hurts said. "When we experience some painful times and some tough times, we always found a way to overcome. You want to be going into a situation like this, and we have a chance to go out there and win it all, so we want to prepare to go do that."

Mahomes battled through an ankle injury to help the Chiefs beat the Cincinnati Bengals 23-20 to advance to their third Super Bowl appearance in four years.

He had no intention of lighting up a victory cigar after a hard-fought win.

"I don't think we have any cigars, but we'll be ready to go at the Super Bowl," Mahomes said, poking fun at Joe Burrow's penchant for puffing those after big wins.

Only one QB can win the Super Bowl. Whether it's Hurts or Mahomes, it's another victory for the Black QBs who were overlooked throughout the years.

Today in History: JAN 31, US enters space age

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Jan. 31, the 31st day of 2023. There are 334 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

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On Jan. 31, 1958, the United States entered the Space Age with its first successful launch of a satellite, Explorer 1, from Cape Canaveral.

On this date:

In 1797, composer Franz Schubert was born in Vienna.

In 1863, during the Civil War, the First South Carolina Volunteers, an all-Black Union regiment composed of many escaped slaves, was mustered into federal service at Beaufort, South Carolina.

In 1865, the U.S. House of Representatives joined the Senate in passing the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution abolishing slavery, sending it to states for ratification. (The amendment was adopted in December 1865.)

In 1919, baseball Hall-of-Famer Jackie Robinson was born in Cairo, Georgia.

In 1945, Pvt. Eddie Slovik, 24, became the first U.S. soldier since the Civil War to be executed for desertion as he was shot by an American firing squad in France.

In 1961, NASA launched Ham the Chimp aboard a Mercury-Redstone rocket from Cape Canaveral; Ham was recovered safely from the Atlantic Ocean following his 16 1/2-minute suborbital flight.

In 1971, astronauts Alan Shepard, Edgar Mitchell and Stuart Roosa blasted off aboard Apollo 14 on a mission to the moon.

In 2000, an Alaska Airlines MD-83 jet crashed into the Pacific Ocean off Port Hueneme (wy-NEE'-mee), California, killing all 88 people aboard.

In 2001, a Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands convicted one Libyan and acquitted a second, in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi was given a life sentence, but was released after eight years on compassionate grounds by Scotland's government. He died in 2012.)

In 2015, Bobbi Kristina Brown, the daughter of the late singer Whitney Houston, was found unresponsive in a bathtub at her Georgia townhome and was taken to an Atlanta-area hospital. (She died six months later.)

In 2016, Novak Djokovic maintained his perfect streak in six Australian Open finals with a 6-1, 7-5, 7-6 (3) victory over Andy Murray.

In 2020, the United States declared a public health emergency over the new coronavirus, and President Donald Trump signed an order to temporarily bar entry to foreign nationals, other than immediate family of U.S. citizens, who had traveled in China within the preceding 14 days. The Senate narrowly rejected Democratic demands to summon witnesses for President Donald Trump's first impeachment trial.

Ten years ago: Chuck Hagel emerged from his grueling confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee with solid Democratic support for his nomination to be President Barack Obama's next defense secretary. A gas explosion caused three floors of the headquarters of Mexico's national oil company Pemex to collapse, killing 37 people. Caleb Moore, 25, an innovative freestyle snowmobile rider who'd been hurt in a crash at the Winter X Games in Colorado, died at a hospital in Grand Junction.

Five years ago: Republican congressman Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, who became known for leading a House panel's investigation into the 2012 attacks against Americans in Benghazi, Libya, announced that he would be retiring from Congress after his term expired. Much of the world was treated to a rare triple lunar treat - a total lunar eclipse combined with a particularly close full moon that was also the second full moon of the month.

One year ago: U.S. health regulators gave full approval to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine. North Korea confirmed it had test-launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile capable of reaching the U.S. territory of Guam, the North's most significant weapon launch in years. The New York Times said it had purchased the online word game Wordle for a price in the "low seven figures." Rafael Nadal won a men's record 21st Grand Slam singles title with a comeback five-set victory over second-ranked Daniil Medvedev in the Australian Open final.

Today's birthdays: Composer Philip Glass is 86. Former Interior Secretary James Watt is 85. Princess Beatrix of the Netherlands, the former queen regent, is 85. Actor Stuart Margolin is 83. Former U.S. Rep. Dick Gephardt, D-Mo., is 82. Blues singer-musician Charlie Musselwhite is 79. Actor Glynn Turman is 76. Baseball Hall of Famer Nolan Ryan is 76. Actor Jonathan Banks is 76. Singer-musician Harry Wayne Casey

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(KC and the Sunshine Band) is 71. Rock singer Johnny Rotten is 66. Actor Kelly Lynch is 64. Actor Anthony LaPaglia is 64. Singer-musician Lloyd Cole is 62. Rock musician Al Jaworski (Jesus Jones) is 57. Actor Minnie Driver is 53. Actor Portia de Rossi is 50. Actor-comedian Bobby Moynihan is 46. Actor Kerry Washington is 46. Bluegrass singer-musician Becky Buller is 44. Singer Justin Timberlake is 42. Actor Tyler Ritter is 38. Country singer Tyler Hubbard (Florida Georgia Line) is 36. Folk-rock singer-musician Marcus Mumford (Mumford and Sons) is 36. Actor Joel Courtney is 27.