

Groton Daily Independent

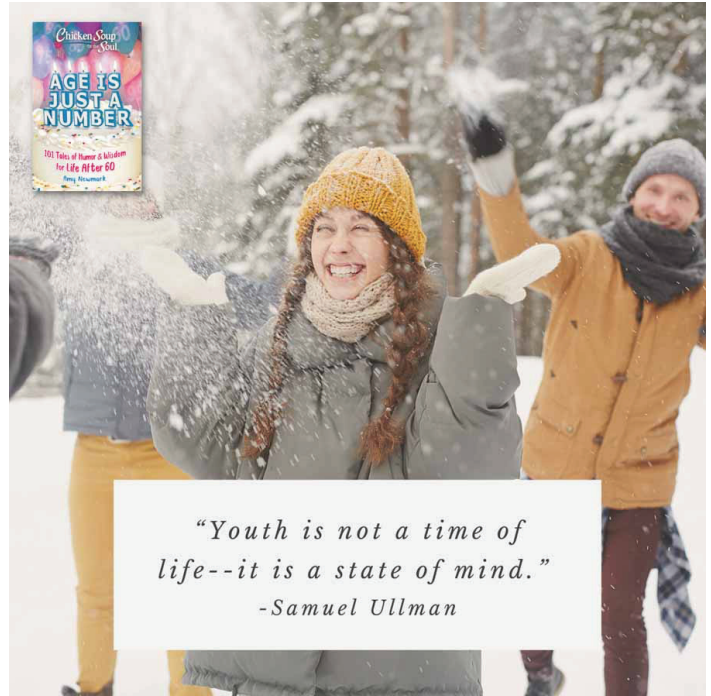
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Groton Community Calendar Saturday, Feb. 18

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.
Boys Basketball hosts Florence-Henry. (7th grade game at 11 a.m. followed by 8th grade game. C game at 1 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity)
Emmanuel Lutheran: Rosewood Court worship, 10 a.m.; Council Retreat at church, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

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



*"Youth is not a time of life--it is a state of mind."
-Samuel Ullman*

Sunday, Feb. 19

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
Open Gym: Grades JK-8; 2:00 PM to 3:30 PM, Grades 6-12; 3:30 PM to 5:00 PM
United Methodist Church: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; No Sunday school; Groton Worship, 10:30 a.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; worship at Avantara, 3 p.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Zion Lutheran worship with communion, 11 a.m. (no Sunday School)

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Girls' Basketball Region 1A Pairings

Class A - Region 1

#1 -

 1 Sisseton	17-2	2/21 TBD
 8 Tiospa Zina	5-14	

#2 -

 4 Aberdeen Ronc...	10-9	2/21 TBD
 5 Redfield	10-10	

#3 -

 2 Milbank	12-7	2/21 TBD
 7 Webster Area	7-12	

#4 -

 3 Groton Area	12-8	2/21 TBD
 6 Waubay/Summit	9-10	

#5 -

#1 WINNER	2/23 TBD
#2 WINNER	

SODAK 16 QUALIFIER



#6 -

#3 WINNER	2/23 TBD
#4 WINNER	

SODAK 16 QUALIFIER









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Region 1A Standings

Girls Basketball









Friday









#	Name	Season			Seed Pts
		W	L	PCT	PTS
1	 Sisseton	17	2	.895	44.263
2	 Milbank	12	7	.632	41.526
3	 Groton Area	11	8	.579	40.789
4	 Aberdeen Roncalli	10	9	.526	40.684
5	 Redfield	9	10	.474	39.789
6	 Waubay/Summit	9	9	.500	38.667
7	 Webster Area	7	12	.368	38.316
8	 Tiospa Zina	5	13	.278	37.556

Saturday

#	Name	Season			Seed Pts
		W	L	PCT	PTS
1	 Sisseton	17	2	.895	44.579
2	 Milbank	12	7	.632	41.526
3	 Groton Area	12	8	.600	41.100
4	 Aberdeen Roncalli	10	9	.526	40.842
5	 Redfield	10	10	.500	40.000
6	 Waubay/Summit	9	10	.474	39.000
7	 Webster Area	7	12	.368	38.474
8	 Tiospa Zina	5	14	.263	37.632

Boys Basketball

#	Name	Season			Seed Pts
		W	L	PCT	PTS
1	 Waubay/Summit	14	3	.824	42.765
2	 Groton Area	12	4	.750	42.375
3	 Milbank	11	6	.647	41.882
4	 Tiospa Zina	9	7	.562	41.438
5	 Aberdeen Roncalli	9	11	.450	39.750
6	 Redfield	8	11	.421	39.211
7	 Webster Area	4	13	.235	37.353
8	 Sisseton	1	18	.053	36.105

#	Name	Season			Seed Pts
		W	L	PCT	PTS
1	 Waubay/Summit	15	3	.833	43.000
2	 Groton Area	13	4	.765	42.118
3	 Milbank	12	6	.667	41.667
4	 Tiospa Zina	10	7	.588	41.588
5	 Aberdeen Roncalli	9	11	.450	39.600
6	 Redfield	8	12	.400	39.050
7	 Webster Area	4	14	.222	37.444
8	 Sisseton	1	18	.053	36.263

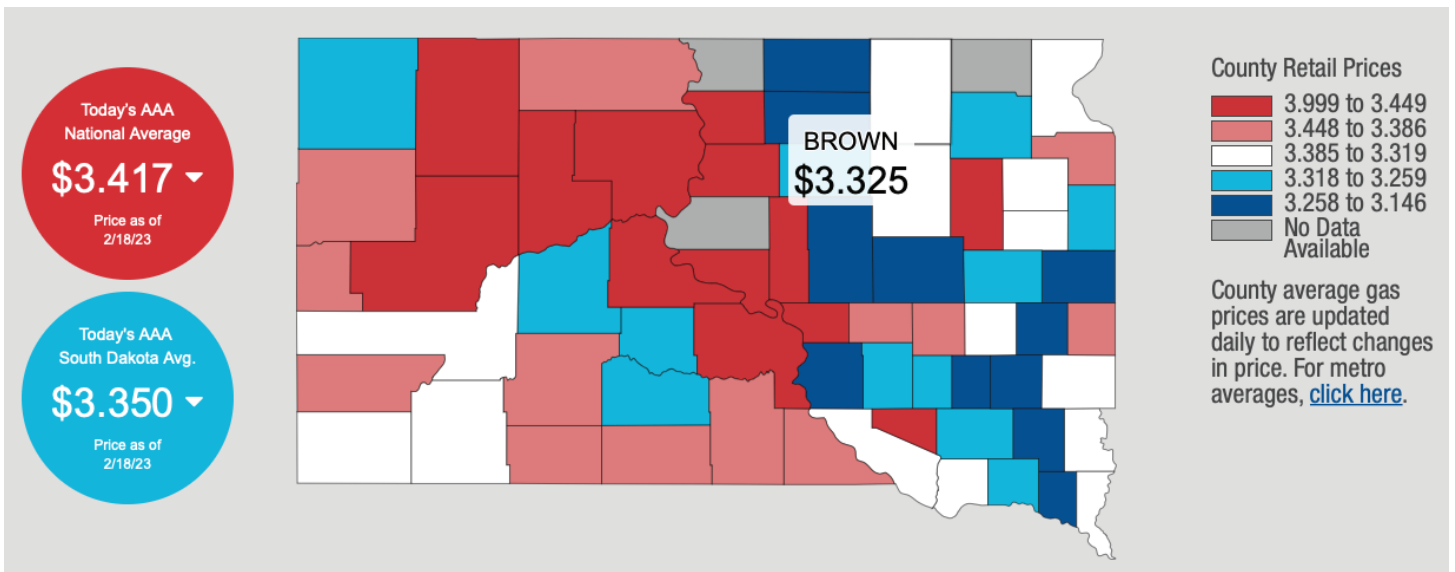
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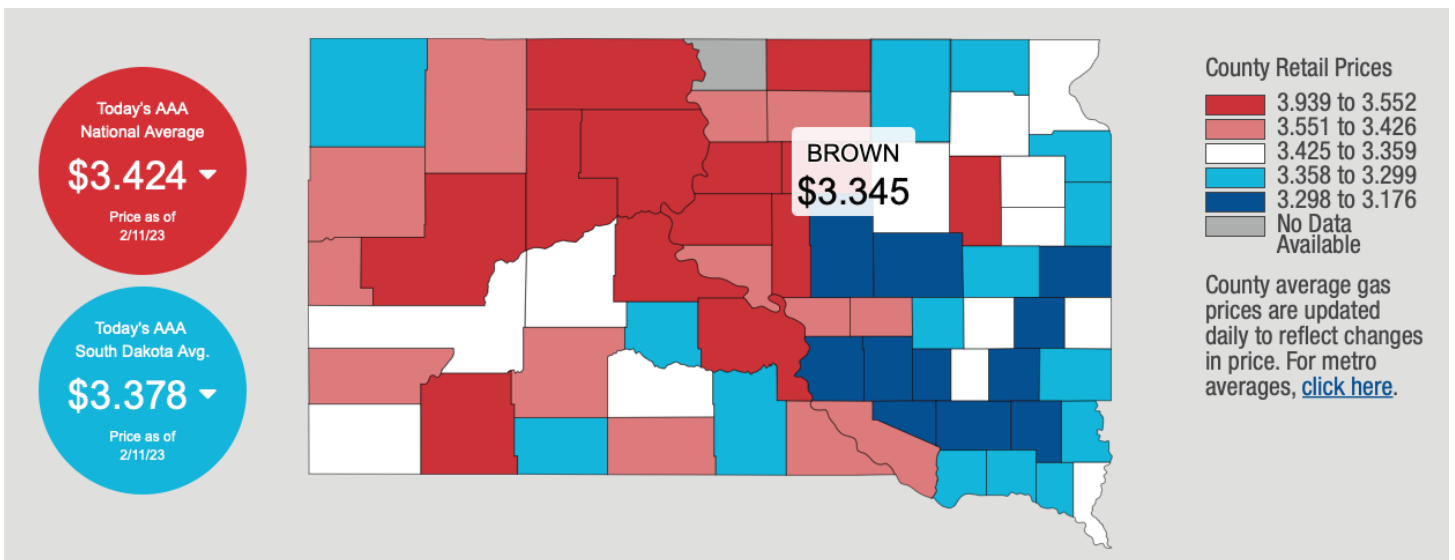
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.350	\$3.518	\$3.953	\$4.264
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.355	\$3.508	\$3.955	\$4.277
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.378	\$3.531	\$3.986	\$4.307
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.251	\$3.419	\$3.881	\$4.284
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.385	\$3.471	\$3.823	\$3.750

This Week



Two Weeks Ago



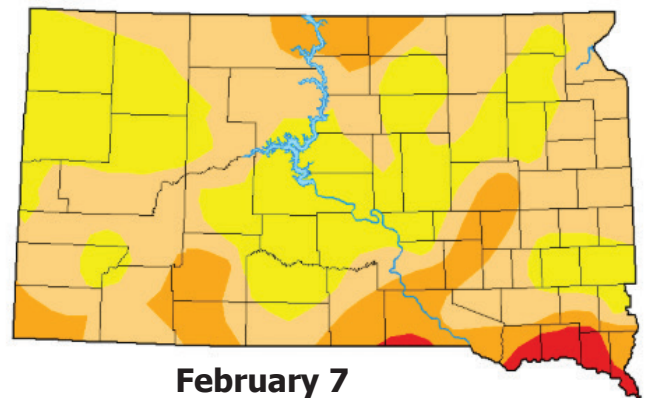
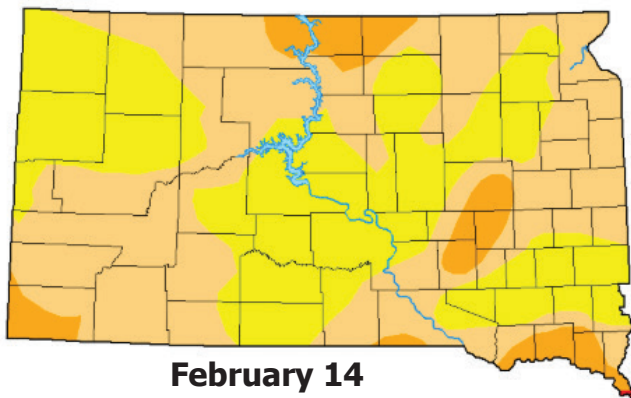
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



Temperatures for the week were warmest over the eastern and northern extent of the region with departures 10-15 degrees above normal while the western areas were 5-10 degrees below normal in portions of Wyoming and Colorado. Most of the region was dry this week with the exception of eastern Kansas where over 200% of normal precipitation was recorded for the week. As temperatures warmed up and the benefits of the snowpack over portions of southern South Dakota and northern Nebraska started to be observed, improvements were made this week to the drought intensity levels along the South Dakota and Nebraska borders. A full category improvement was also made to conditions in eastern Kansas where more moderate drought was eliminated and improvements to severe and extreme drought were made in southeast portions of the state. Some slight degradation was introduced in Wyoming where severe drought was expanded in the east and southwest portions of the state.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #16 Results

Team Standings: Shihtzus – 6, Foxes – 6, Chipmunks – 5, Coyotes – 4, Jackelopes – 2, Cheetahs – 1
Men's High Games: Lance Frohling – 222, 221, Aaron Severson – 211, Brad Waage – 181, 181, Ryan Sperry – 181

Women's High Games: Alexa Schuring – 180, Sue Stanley – 179, Vicki Walter – 172

Men's High Series: Lance Frohling – 605, Brad Waage – 531, Aaron Severson – 496

Women's High Series: Sue Stanley – 477, Vicki Walter – 169, Alexa Schuring – 423

Fun Game – Most 8 Spares – Chipmunks with 14!

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

February 21, 2023 – 7:00pm

City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

- Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1

(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)

- Minutes
- Bills
- January Finance Report
- Second Reading of Ordinance No. 767 – Amending Rates for Groton Municipal Electric Customers
- Second Reading of Ordinance No. 766 – 2023 Summer Salary Ordinance
- Skating Rink Hours
- Soda Contract Discussion
- Swimming Pool Rates
- Baseball Concessions/Park Bathrooms – LWCF Grant
- Community Center Surplus
- Economic Development
- Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
- Adjournment

Tiger basketball teams have clean sweep over Britton-Hecla

Groton Area basketball teams had a clean sweep of Britton-Hecla Friday night in Britton. Cole Simon was on fire in the boys varsity game, having 21 points, five steals and three assists in what Coach Brian Dolan said was his best game of the season. Simon had a near perfect night, making four of four two-pointers, four of five three-pointers and one of one from the line. The Tigers defeated Britton-Hecla, 70-35, leading at the quarters tops at 22-9, 43-20 and 57-26.

Jacob Zak had 13 points, two rebounds and one assist. Lane Tietz had eight points, four assists, three steals and one block. Tate Larson had seven points, three rebounds, three assists and two steals. Taylor Diegel had six points, one rebound, one assist and one steal. Logan Ringgenberg had six points, three rebounds, one steal and one block shot. Keegan Tracy had three points and two assists. Ryder Johnson had two points, two rebounds, one assist and two steals. Gage Sippel and Holden Sippel each had two points. Cade Larson had two rebounds, one assist, one steal and one block shot. Braxton Imrie had one assist.

Groton Area made 20 of 25 two-pointers for 80 percent, eight of 17 three-pointers for 47 percent, six of eight free throws for 75 percent, had 13 rebounds, 10 turnovers, 17 assists, 14 team fouls and three block shots. Britton-Hecla had 20 turnovers, 15 of which were steals.

BoDell Davidson led the Braves with seven points followed by Daniel Person with five, Landon Carlson and Ashton Mills each had four points, Gage Storley and Jaxon Zuehlke each had three points, Ty Fagerland, Wyatt Tosse, Dawson Treeby and William Richter each had two points and William Schuller added a free throw.

The Braves made 10 of 22 field goals for 45 percent, 11 of 14 free throws for 78 percent and had eight team fouls.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 63-29. No one hit double figures but 15 of 16 players scored for Groton Area. Scoring was as follows: Gage Sippel 7, Braxton Imrie 6, Keegan Tracy 6, Dillon Abeln 5, Caden McInerney 5, Taylor Diegel 4, Ryder Johnson 4, Holden Sippel 4, Colby Dunker 4, Turner Thompson 4, Logan Warrington 3, Logan Ringgenberg 2, Carter Simon 2, Logan Pearson 2 and Blake Pauli 1. Grandpa sponsored the junior varsity on GDILIVE.COM.

In the girls varsity game, the Lady Tigers had a 26-point run to take a 35-6 lead en route to a 53-29 win. Groton Area led at the quarterstops at 17-6, 33-6 and 44-17.

Sydney Leicht led the Tigers with 14 points, three rebounds and two steals. Jaedyn Penning had seven points, five rebounds, one assist and two steals. Kennedy Hansen had six points, two rebounds and three assists. Rylee Dunker had five points, three rebounds and one steal. Brooklyn Hansen had five points and one steal. Brooke Gengerke had four points,

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two rebounds and two steals. Laila Roberts had three points, two rebounds and two steals. Mia Crank had three points and three rebounds. Aspen Johnson had two points and three rebounds. Jerica Locke had two points, three rebounds, six assists and six steals. Emily Clark had two points. Faith Traphagen had five rebounds and four steals. Elizabeth Flihs and Talli Wright each had two rebounds and one assist.

Groton Area made 16 of 48 two-pointers for 33 percent, three of 15 three-pointers for 20 percent, 12 of 19 free throws for 63 percent, had 35 rebounds, 16 turnovers, 12 assists and 12 team fouls. Britton-Hecla had 24 turnovers, 20 of which were steals by the Tigers.

Tiyanna Schott led the Braves with nine points followed by Sterling Brassfield with eight, Alyssa James had five, Jayden Bender three and Heather Storbakken and Annika Tank each had two points.

Britton-Hecla made 13 of 40 field goals for 33 percent, five of 12 free throws for 42 percent and had 15 team fouls.

The Lady Tigers won the junior varsity game, 42-13. Elizabeth Flihs led Groton Area with 10 points followed by Taryn Traphagen with seven, Kennedy Hansen had five, Laila Roberts and Brooklyn Hansen each had four points and McKenna Tietz, Mia Crank and Emily Clark each had two points.

Anne Jensen led the Braves with seven points. Rich & Tami Zimney sponsored the game on GDILIVE.COM.

Varsity games sponsors were Bahr Spray Foam, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Chamber of Commerce, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Locke Electric, Milbrandt Enterprises Inc., Spanier Harvesting & Trucking, Thunder Seed with John Wheeting.

- Paul Kosel

GDILIVE.COM

Boys Basketball Action hosting Florence-Henry

Saturday, Feb. 18, 2023

Livestreaming begins at 11 a.m.

JH and C games sponsored by

GDI Living Heart Fitness Center

JV Game sponsored by Steve & Betty Dunker

Varsity to follow 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

Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.

Spanier Harvesting & Trucking

Bahr Spray Foam

Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.

GDI Subscribers can watch for free

You're Invited!

RESET

women's conference

ROSE HILL CHURCH

12099 ROSE HILL RD, LANGFORD SD

SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2023

9:30 AM - 2:00 PM

*Women and girls of all generations
are welcome to enjoy a day to reset.*

GUEST SPEAKERS

**PASTORS LISA PALMER
AND MICAH LOMBARDI, A
MOTHER-DAUGHTER TEAM**



REGISTER ONLINE

**THIS IS A FREE EVENT.
REGISTER BY SCANNING
THE QR CODE OR AT
ROSEHILLEFC.COM**

CHILDCARE WILL BE AVAILABLE

Hometown Healthcare Heroes: Bowdle Healthcare Center: Bowdle

Congratulations to February's Hometown Healthcare Heroes recipient, Bowdle Healthcare Center in Bowdle.

To help member facilities with workforce needs, SDAHO launched the Hometown Healthcare Heroes campaign. This storytelling campaign is designed to recognize career opportunities at member facilities and celebrate the people that work there and the communities they live.

Bowdle Healthcare Center serves the north central part of South Dakota, offering a full spectrum of care for all ages. This includes a critical access hospital, long-term care center, clinic, public health, outreach with specialty providers, ambulance service, telemedicine and physical, occupational & speech therapy.

TiAnn Boggs, is the Director Rehab and the Speech Language Pathologist with Bowdle Healthcare Center. "We provide a variety of services, including swing bed services which is something I am really proud of as the Director of Rehab, as that is something we have a big part in. I also really appreciate how far providers go here, it's above and beyond for their patients." TiAnn Boggs, Dir. Rehab & Speech Language Pathologist.

After attending college TiAnn worked in another state at a much larger facility. After returning to South Dakota to grow her career, she has come to appreciate smalltown healthcare. "I doctored in a larger community before coming home, just with pediatricians. The healthcare professionals there were specialized, and they cared about their patients, but when they made an appointment for their patients to see another specialist that would be the end of it. Here at Bowdle Healthcare Center the providers fight to get their patients the best specialist provider and the best time slots. Then they will follow up with their patients. There is a circle of follow through in these smaller communities." TiAnn Boggs, Dir. Rehab & Speech Language Pathologist Bowdle Healthcare Center

Melanie Kaiser, RN, is the Home Health and Public Health Manager with Bowdle Healthcare Center. She says everyone is so warm and friendly and welcoming and eager to help whenever needed, and that includes help for their colleagues and their patients. "You are not a number here. You are definitely a person. They take great pride in helping and giving everyone that individual care that people need." Melanie Kaiser, RN, Home Health & Public Health Manager, Bowdle Healthcare Center

Bowdle Healthcare Center has a mixture of long-term staff in addition to new additions. "We have people that have been here their whole lives, and people who have moved here and have been recruited here. There is a mixture of new faces and old faces." TiAnn Boggs, Dir. Rehab & Speech Language Pathologist Bowdle Healthcare Center

Bowdle has the distinction of having the "tallest water tower" in South Dakota, standing 150 feet in the air. The community offers a k-12 school system with bus service. Residents have a wide range of activities in and around the area including, fishing, boating, camping, in addition to an ice-skating pond for colder months. " I like to ride my bike and I like to garden, especially in the summer. In the winter, we are not very far from the Black Hills to go snow skiing." Melanie Kaiser, RN, Home Health & Public Health Manager, Bowdle Healthcare Center

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Celebrations are a big part of north central South Dakota, including "Tower Days, which takes place the last weekend of June. During the warmer months, nearby community's also host festivals and events attracting attendees from around the area. "Within a 20-to-25-mile radius, every town has a celebration every weekend. You can go and see old friends, new friends, listen to music. You can catch up and just relax." TiAnn Boggs, Dir. Rahab & Speech Language Pathologist Bowdle Healthcare Center

Bowdle offers residents the amenities and entertainment it needs for groceries, shopping, entertainment and more. TiAnn says if you can't get what you need in town you can order it. "Amazon comes here and so does Wal-Mart. We have Fed-Ex and UPS, so getting what you need is not difficult especially if you plan ahead." TiAnn Boggs, Dir. Rahab & Speech Language Pathologist Bowdle Healthcare Center

Career Opportunities with Bowdle Healthcare Center:

- Nurses & CNA's in the nursing home
- RN's in the hospital
- RN (part-time) Public Health Department
- Bill Receptionist
- X-Ray Technicians
- Physical Therapist

To learn more about Bowdle Healthcare Center or apply, visit:
www.bowdlehc.com/employment/



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Legislative roundup: Flush with cash

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 17, 2023 1:51 PM

This week in Pierre was a reminder that despite tense debates over cattle branding, elections, and vaccines, the business of state government – and the work of lawmakers – is tied tightly to the state budget. Competing revenue estimates landed at the Capitol on Tuesday during the day and into the evening, with our own Makenzie Huber on the ground for the ensuing discussion.

The short story? There's a lot of cash in state coffers.

The Joint Appropriations Committee had a few numbers to choose from, but ultimately adopted a \$2.3 billion estimate for the rest of the current fiscal year – an 8.2% jump over last year.

The big numbers have some lawmakers thinking tax cuts, and there's quite a list of options. Gov. Noem's favored proposal is a food tax repeal, via House Bill 1075. That bill's alive and awaits a committee hearing next week in the Senate. Some other ideas – compromises from Democrats that would have cut the tax, not repeal it, for example – died in committee this week.

Also gone? HB 1159, which would have exempted feminine hygiene products from the state's sales tax.

The fate of a few others is still in question. There's HB 1137, which would cut the sales tax from 4.5% to 4% on everything and HB 1043, which would trim property tax burdens.

One significant tax bill is already law, thanks to Noem's signature on Feb. 1. That one cuts unemployment costs for employers. Unemployment rates hit record lows in 2022.

Noem was out of her office for much of the week, but she did sign the controversial HB 1080, which prohibits certain kinds of health care for transgender youth.

Watch our website in the coming days for a story from Makenzie on GOP leadership's evolving approach to tax reform.

Here's a look at some of the other bills we've been tracking.

Carbon pipelines: A Senate committee torpedoed a House-backed bill to write carbon out of eminent domain law, which allows companies to buy or use land for a project in the public interest regardless of how a landowner feels about it. HB 1133 would have removed the option of eminent domain for two carbon pipeline projects that aim to cut through South Dakota, which could have killed the projects unless the backers earned the support of each and every landowner along the route.

Foreign ag land purchases: House Majority Leader Will Mortenson's HB 1189, which requires the reporting of foreign agricultural land ownership, sailed through the House on Monday. A Gov. Noem-backed bill to create a "Committee on Foreign Investment," Senate Bill 185, passed out of committee. Searchlight's Josh Haiar will be in Pierre next week for the floor debate on that one.

Bar exam bill bounces: HB 1076, Rep. Mary Fitzgerald's attempt to create an apprenticeship program as an alternative path to bar admission for USD Law grads, was pulled at her request on Tuesday. The Unified Judicial System is working on alternatives through a study committee.

Opioid harm reduction: HB 1041 continued its march to the governor's desk this week, passing through the full Senate without a single no vote. The bill would legalize fentanyl test strips, which can detect the presence of the sometimes-deadly synthetic opioid in other drugs.

Pro-America history: HB 1070, which would create a "Center for American Exceptionalism" in the Black Hills for the creation and dissemination of supplemental U.S. history curricula, earned an 8-1 endorsement from the House Appropriations Committee after being amended.

Ag nuisance lawsuits: These will be more difficult to win if HB 1090 becomes law. It's one step closer,

having gotten a 4-1 vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday. It's already passed the House. A Senate floor vote comes next.

Prescription drugs: HB 1135 would make drug pricing more transparent. It passed the House 62-5 on Wednesday and heads to a Senate committee. Here's Makenzie's explainer on why this matters.

County seats: SB 56 would make it harder to move a county seat. The House and Senate both signed off on the bill this week, after some revisions from the House Local Government Committee last week. Next stop: the governor's desk.

Drag shows: HB 1116 would bar state resources "in hosting lewd or lascivious content." It came after a dust-up over a drag show at South Dakota State University billed as kid-friendly. HB 1116 was amended to scrub explicit references to drag shows and passed 60-10 out of the House on Wednesday. Now it's on to a Senate committee. Another bill on the topic was tabled earlier this week.

Vaccines: HB 1235 would have offered a way out of vaccine mandates for people with strongly held beliefs on the subject. That one passed a House committee 7-6 this week but died 39-30 on the House floor. Another bill dealing with vaccines in school children, SB 125, died in committee on Wednesday.

Lobbyist spouses: A bill barring the spouses of lawmakers from acting as lobbyists, SB 197, advanced out of the Senate on Valentine's Day. The bill was an outgrowth of the controversy over the behavior of Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller and her husband, who is a registered lobbyist for South Dakota Citizens for Liberty. Frye-Mueller was censured this month over comments she made to a Legislative Research Council staffer. Next up for SB 197: a House committee.

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.

Lawmaker withdraws effort to drop bar-exam requirement for lawyers

Legislation to create apprenticeship failed to earn support in the face of Supreme Court study group

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 17, 2023 11:53 AM

A bill that aimed to create an apprenticeship program as an alternative to the bar exam for South Dakota lawyers has been withdrawn by its sponsor.

House Bill 1076 is sponsored by Rep. Mary Fitzgerald, R-Spearfish. It would have allowed University of South Dakota Knutson School of Law graduates to bypass the bar exam and instead earn a law license by completing 1,000 hours of supervised practice with an experienced lawyer in the state.

Fitzgerald declined to comment on what, if anything, might happen next. A withdrawn bill, or even one defeated in committee, can be revived during the legislative session in a variety of ways.

HB 1076 was the second attempt to do away with the bar exam requirement for USD Law grads in as many years. The 2022 version would have stricken the bar exam requirement without a supervised practice component.

Fitzgerald and those supportive of bar exam changes argue that the multiple choice portion of the test punishes slower readers, doesn't reflect the work of lawyering in practice and serves to limit the pool of available lawyers in a state where rural areas often lack legal services. South Dakota's unique scoring system, they argue, makes it more difficult to pass than it might be in other states.

Defenders of the exam say it serves as a bulwark against incompetence in the legal profession, and that the scoring system can be more helpful for examinees who perform well on the bar's essay section.

Unlike in 2022, HB 1076 came on the heels of a move by the Unified Judicial System to explore the role of the bar exam.

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During his State of the Judiciary speech last month, South Dakota Supreme Court Chief Justice Steven Jensen told lawmakers about a recently formed study committee that aims to explore potential alternative pathways to licensure.

The National Conference of Bar Examiners (NCBE) is already in the process of producing a "Next Gen" bar exam, he said, and bar exam passage rates in South Dakota have bounced back after a dip in the mid- to late 2010s.

Neil Fulton, dean of the USD Law School and a member of the study committee, has given multiple interviews on the topic in recent weeks, stressing the importance of the committee's work in light of the forthcoming bar exam changes at the national level.

Fitzgerald previously told South Dakota Searchlight that she's struggled to find co-sponsors or supporters to testify for HB 1076. Many have opted to wait for the study committee to complete its work before adjusting law licensure requirements in the state.

Roger Baron, a former USD Law School professor and champion for bar exam reform, said this week that he "agrees 100%" with Chief Justice Jensen on the importance of a competency measure for lawyers in South Dakota, but said he hopes to see serious discussions from the study committee about the bar exam's role as a measurement.

"I am absolutely certain that 10 years down the road, we will look back and realize that the Court's reliance on the NCBE resulted in several highly competent graduates being denied licensure," Baron 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.

COMMENTARY

Lawmakers love 'local control,' until they want the power

DANA HESS

FEBRUARY 17, 2023 11:51 AM

If you want to get South Dakota lawmakers to talk in hushed, reverent tones, just say these two magic words: local control.

Legislators purport to love the fact that local citizens serve on their school boards to decide on budgeting, personnel and a thousand other decisions that go into the care and feeding of a school district.

Lawmakers love local control. That is, they love it until such time as they want to be the ones who are in control. Each legislative session is awash in education bills, many of which, if passed, chip away at the notion that local boards are in control of their schools.

On the Legislative Research Council website there's a subject index for legislation. In the 2022 session, the list of education bill subject headings included "schools," "school curriculum," "school districts," "students," "teachers," "state aid to education" and "boards of school districts."

Granted, some bills appear under more than one subject heading. Still, for school boards that are supposed to be deciding their own destiny, that's a lot of legislation aimed their way.

Happily, some bills designed to tell boards how their schools should be run don't have a long shelf life. In the 2022 session, bills like these went down in defeat:

Requiring schools to display the state motto or state seal.

Requiring school boards to consult with law enforcement on the design of new school facilities.

Requiring a moment of silence at the beginning of the school day.

Protecting elementary and secondary students from political indoctrination.

Some bills, however, pass through the Legislature, despite their tendency to wrest control from school boards. The last session saw the passage of SB 46, a bill to protect fairness in women's sports.

The bill assures that the only girls playing girls' sports in South Dakota are identified as female on their birth certificates. This is the culmination of an almost decade-long legislative battle to do something, anything, about the South Dakota High School Activities Association transgender policy.

That policy put in place a process to determine if a student who identifies as a sex other than the one listed on the birth certificate could participate in activities. As an example, if a student born a boy but identifying as a girl wanted to play girls' sports, the policy called for a series of investigations into the veracity of that claim before the student would ever be allowed to try out for the sport.

It seems that a female track star in Connecticut lost a race to a girl who used to be a boy. Her anger at that defeat reached all the way to South Dakota, where SB 46 was endorsed by the Legislature and signed by the governor, despite the fact that all the activities association's member schools endorsed the transgender policy.

An even greater blow to local control was struck in 2016 with the passage of a half-cent sales tax. The majority of money generated by the increase went to school districts to increase teacher pay and get South Dakota out of the basement in state teacher pay rankings (nevertheless, the state still ranks 50th in average teacher salary). In this case, the Legislature was the one in control, mandating that the new money for school districts be used for teacher pay and only teacher pay. Those school districts that failed to comply would see their share of the funds dry up.

Too often, the message from the Legislature to school boards is clear: We trust you to run your school districts the way you see fit, until such time as we have to step in and show you the error of your ways.

Running a school district is tough enough without the constant barrage of bills aimed at making districts better through legislative action rather than local decisions. School boards already have to wade through a sea of red tape for what amounts to a trickle of federal funding. It's a safe bet that each legislative session also brings along at least one new idea about how best to change the state's school funding formula.

Obviously no school district is perfect. However, if South Dakotans are going to continue to embrace the philosophy that local people are in control of their school boards, lawmakers should do them the courtesy of getting out of their way.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

State ag officials push for on-time farm bill to fund slew of programs

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - FEBRUARY 17, 2023 3:33 PM

WASHINGTON – State agriculture officials from across the country sought this month to remind a new crop of lawmakers in Congress of their states' needs for a robust farm bill to address a host of food issues.

Members of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture gathered in Washington for their annual winter meeting in mid-February. They urged Congress to provide a timely, fully funded farm bill to address a wide range of issues affecting agriculture, including technology, conservation and foreign trade.

Throughout its two-day conference, members of the coalition stressed the bipartisan history of the bill and the importance of educating a new Congress on titles that support American food systems amid changing economic and environmental landscapes.

The state officials urged Congress to include nutrition programs in the farm bill, as past versions have done. They also advocated for bolstering crop insurance and allocating more money to research, animal safety, and conservation programs.

"It's just a responsibility we have to make sure that all of our producers, our economies, our communities of every size have a forward-looking and fully funded farm bill," NASDA president Doug Miyamoto, the director of the Wyoming Department of Agriculture, said in an interview.

Miyamoto was appointed to his state post by Republican former Gov. Matt Mead in 2015.

"We've got to make sure that we do this correctly," he added. "We can't start splintering off programs and splintering off ideas in the farm bill, and then hoping that we're going to be able to get a comprehensive farm bill that's on time."

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Mike Naig, secretary of the Iowa Department of Agriculture and an elected Republican, said it's important for lawmakers — especially those who weren't in office when the 2018 bill was written — to remember that the measure is not just a farm bill, but a farm-and-food bill.

"There's a lot of new members of Congress that have never had a chance to vote on a farm bill," Naig said. "A lot of work has to be done to educate folks on that."

Kate Greenberg, the commissioner of the Colorado Department of Agriculture who was appointed by Democratic Gov. Jared Polis, also advocated for considering nutrition and agricultural policy in the same bill to keep the "critical nexus point of production and consumers."

She added members of Congress must put aside their differences to strengthen the "bread and butter of the American economy."

"Let's keep our heads down and focus on the impact of the policy and the appropriations on the American landscape in agriculture," she said.

The five-year farm bill does not appropriate funding, which Congress does annually in separate bills. But it does authorize dollar amounts for discretionary programs that set expectations for actual spending bills. Other programs authorize mandatory funding not subject to annual decisions by lawmakers.

Lloyd Knight, deputy director of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, encouraged Congress to provide certainty to farmers across the country by finishing the farm bill before the current authorizations expire Sept. 30.

Securing new technology, foreign markets, and the safety net

Mike Strain, the Republican commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, advocated for increasing funding for research and development of technology, especially as demand continues to outpace supply for U.S. agricultural goods.

Louisiana sugar production, for example, needs to be twice as efficient as it is today, he said.

Jeff Witte, director of the New Mexico Department of Agriculture, said research provisions would also be key for Western specialty crop farmers who need to address worker shortages.

Farmers in the state have converted from vegetable crops to tree nuts because the labor was cheaper, he said. But that trend could lead to an unwanted imbalance in what food crops are available to consumers, he added.

"If we don't start investing in technology that can do the harvesting of other produce crops, we're going to get way too far behind," he said.

Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industry Commissioner Rick Pate, a Republican, said developing foreign markets through the Foreign Agricultural Service should be a priority in the bill.

U.S. Under Secretary of Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs Alexis Taylor said in a February 1 Senate hearing that for every dollar the U.S. invests in developing foreign markets, U.S. farmers see a \$24 return in the value of their products.

"They think there's a huge return on what travel we can do and the marketing program that they find through our organization," Pate said. "So we just need to continue to take the farmer story to people."

Naig added the new farm bill needs to modernize and reinforce the federal crop safety net.

"I just don't want to see anything undermine the importance of the crop insurance program," he said.

Building conservation and food safety programs

Naig said farmers had broad interest in market-based environmental incentives in the coming farm bill. Concepts like soil health and carbon sequestration have entered the mainstream of agribusiness, but farmers are still wary about their costs.

"What has to be acknowledged is that there's costs associated with implementing some of these practices," Naig said. "So if you want to see significant adoption, how do you help them achieve a return on that investment? If you do that well and do that correctly, you will get implementation at a scale that you couldn't otherwise."

Jordan Seger, deputy director of the Indiana State Department of Agriculture, said he hopes to see federal encouragement of public-private conservation partnerships. He touted Indiana's work with the Nature

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Conservancy and Enterprise Rent-a-Car to regrow wetlands and forests in the state.

"With about one dollar, we can get about seven or more dollars from the federal government, put that all toward private lands, and leverage each other's resources and expertise to get things done quickly," Seger said.

Randy Romanski, who was appointed secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection by Democratic Gov. Tony Evers, said Congress should use the farm bill to get a better handle on animal health, noting outbreaks of avian influenza that have plagued the country since 2015.

Congress could create a national warning network for emerging animal diseases, like avian flu and African swine fever, he said.

"Clearly, this is something that crosses state boundaries," Romanski said. "We need to have systems in place to track, respond to and eradicate diseases when they show up."

Setting terms for state and federal collaboration

The coalition members said Congress should offer clear guidance and resources so states can make choices that suit their constituents.

The federal government should avoid placing mandates on conservation practices, Seger said. Increased collaboration between USDA agencies would also reduce paperwork for states, he added.

Knight, of Idaho, added that Congress must ensure federal programs are fully staffed. Clear guidelines on implementation that are flexible enough to accommodate the diverse needs of farmers throughout the country would also be key, he said.

"It's a big country with a lot of issues and a lot of resources," Knight said.

Colorado's Greenberg said the bill also presents an opportunity to reinforce climate-related policies.

"The thing about climate change is that we're all impacted, and our farmers and ranchers are on the frontlines," Greenberg said. They're the ones who are feeling and experiencing the changes in the environment, and they know it. So how do we address that, not just state-by-state, but as a nation?"

Timeline in question

Members of the group predicted Congress would finish either by its fall 2023 deadline or next year.

Strain said he believed negotiations would likely bleed into 2024.

Regardless of the timeline, the bill must be funded appropriately, without an overemphasis on the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office's score, Strain said.

"You know, it always runs over, or we get to the threat of having to revert to the previous farm bill," he said. "But the other thing is that when we pass it, we can't pass it in such a manner as to just try to get a low CBO score."

Others in the state agriculture delegation expressed cautious optimism over the prospects of a farm bill in 2023, noting that there would be consequences for U.S. farmers if a new bill is not passed on time.

"I'm really encouraged by what (U.S. House Speaker) Kevin McCarthy said this week, that they're going to get it done," Pate said. "People need to understand the impact of that kind of stuff. Just like a government shutdown, these things have consequences when they don't get them done."

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.

Federal government to send medical experts to site of Ohio train derailment

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 17, 2023 2:07 PM

WASHINGTON — The federal government is sending medical personnel and toxicologists to conduct public health testing following the derailment of a train carrying hazardous materials that released into a small town near the Ohio-Pennsylvania border.

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A team from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will be on the ground in East Palestine, Ohio, as well as the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, to support EPA and state health department efforts, administration officials said on a call with reporters Friday.

Ohio's Republican Gov. Mike DeWine and the state's congressional delegation requested additional federal aid on Thursday to conduct public health testing and assessments, according to administration officials, who spoke on background.

On Feb. 3, a Norfolk Southern Railway train derailed in East Palestine, a town of nearly 5,000 residents, leading to the release of dangerous chemicals through a controlled burn to prevent an explosion. It forced residents to evacuate the area.

"This was a horrific mistake," an administration official said. "A trauma visited upon this community."

Ohio lawmakers and EPA administrator Michael Regan have been in East Palestine to hear from residents, who have complained about rashes, headaches and dead fish and wildlife in the area since the derailment and controlled burn.

ATSDR will also send a team to interview people in the derailment area and conduct an assessment of chemical exposure investigation, administration officials said.

Air quality tested

Administration officials said the EPA tested the air quality of 500 homes under a voluntary screening process and detected no air quality levels of concern for vinyl chloride or hydrogen chloride. Five of the rail cars were carrying vinyl chloride, which is used to make plastics, and hydrogen chloride is a toxic chemical that is released by burning vinyl chloride.

Vinyl chloride is classified as a known human carcinogen by the Department of Health and Human Services and the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

Administration officials said the EPA will continue to monitor air, soil and the surface water of the Ohio River and conduct volunteer screenings of residents' homes. The agency will also oversee Norfolk Southern's soil remediation and issued a letter to the rail company, requiring Norfolk Southern to outline its cleanup actions.

"Norfolk Southern responded and has agreed to fund response costs, but we will continue to exercise the full authority under the law to hold the company accountable under the Comprehensive Environmental (Response), Compensation, and Liability Act," an administration official said.

The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act is known as the Superfund law, which gives EPA the authority to seek out the parties responsible — in this case, Norfolk Southern — for the release of pollutants and contaminants into the environment and require those responsible to clean up those toxic releases.

The National Transportation Safety Board, which is an independent federal agency, is investigating the cause of the train's derailment and plans to submit its preliminary findings within a few weeks, administration officials said. NTSB investigators pointed to wheel failure as the likely cause of the crash, according to its preliminary investigation details.

"Surveillance video from a residence showed what appears to be a wheel bearing in the final stage of overheat failure moments before the derailment," according to NTSB investigators. "The suspected overheated wheel bearing has been collected and will be examined by engineers from the NTSB Materials Laboratory in Washington, D.C."

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Five election deniers who are controlling state voting systems

SD's Johnson 'not going to acknowledge' Biden's victory

BY: ZACHARY ROTH - FEBRUARY 17, 2023 12:51 PM

Americans concerned about the health of democracy breathed a sigh of relief when a pack of election deniers in 2022 lost their attempts to control voting in key battleground states — making it unlikely that a rogue state election official could subvert the 2024 presidential election.

Candidates for secretary of state who denied the result of the 2020 presidential race were defeated in all three swing states where they were on the ballot — Arizona, Michigan, and Nevada. And in Pennsylvania, where the governor appoints the chief election official, an election-denier gubernatorial candidate also lost.

But while battleground states may have dodged a bullet in their secretary of state races, Alabama, Indiana, South Dakota, and Wyoming all elected deniers — defined as officials who refused to publicly acknowledge the legitimacy of President Joe Biden's victory or backed court cases that could overturn the election. And the governor of Florida, the nation's third-largest state, appointed a secretary of state who has refused, when asked, to say Biden won the election.

The danger to democracy posed by election deniers shouldn't be viewed in isolation, democracy advocates say. Numerous election deniers, they note, also were elected to Congress, statewide offices, statehouses, and local election posts around the country — meaning these secretaries of state are part of a network of denialism that last year's elections failed to extinguish.

"Election-denier secretaries of state absolutely present a risk of election subversion that the public still needs to be aware of and responding to," said Rachel Homer, counsel for the nonpartisan advocacy organization Protect Democracy. "The risk that the will of the people might not translate into who was actually elected — that's a threat to democracy."

Early developments

None of the newly elected secretaries of state appears close to getting passed into law the kind of major voting overhaul that several campaigned on.

But even beyond legislation, the secretaries of state, who in all five states serve as their state's chief elections officer, can affect access to the ballot and the overall efficiency of the election system. And they have used their short time in office so far to continue baselessly stoking distrust in elections, to hire political allies, and to advance measures that further tighten the rules around voting.

Among the troubling early developments:

Senior staff with years of election administration experience have resigned or been let go from secretary of state offices in South Dakota and Wyoming. In the former state, a combative "America First" political activist who attended the Jan. 6 protests has been hired.

Alabama's new secretary of state abruptly withdrew from a well-regarded interstate compact for sharing voter registration information, and says it's not his job to make voting easier.

Indiana's secretary of state wants to further tighten the rules for mail voting, which has expanded in popularity since the pandemic.

Florida's secretary of state, an appointee of Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, is pushing to expand a controversial "election integrity" unit.

With the possible exception of Florida, these five states likely aren't competitive enough to have a chance of tipping a presidential contest.

But democracy advocates warn that having state election systems serving around 35 million people in the hands of officials who won't acknowledge Biden's win raises a far broader set of dangers: that election outcomes will be subverted, thwarting the will of voters; that denialism is being mainstreamed as a governing ideology, at least in some states; that crucial norms of independence and neutrality for election officials are being eroded; and that new attempts to tighten voting rules, driven by false claims about widespread fraud, will further restrict access to the ballot, especially for minority communities.

Joanna Lydgate, the CEO of States United Action, which works to protect fair elections, raised yet more

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dangers.

"The undermining of public confidence, and the attempts to confuse voters, have a huge impact," said Lydgate. "Democracy relies on public confidence, it relies on participation, it relies on people believing in the system. And when you have people in elected office who are continuing to spread lies and conspiracy theories, that runs a risk of confusing voters and deterring people from participating in the system. So the threat is alive and well."

Here's a closer look at the five secretaries of state:

Monae Johnson, South Dakota

Johnson, a former staffer in the secretary of state's office, was elected in November after winning the GOP nomination over the incumbent at last year's convention.

Johnson disputes the denier label, but asked by South Dakota Searchlight during the campaign whether the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump, she said: "I'm going to leave that question up to those people that are actually in the fight for it." Asked in a different interview whether Biden won legitimately, she said: "I'm not going to acknowledge that."

Johnson has said she doesn't plan to propose any of her own bills this session, but has promised to fight any measure to allow voters to register online — a popular reform that all but 11 states now offer.

Personnel changes in the office have drawn attention. Johnson removed a number of staff, including the state's well-regarded elections director, Kia Warne, who had been with the office since 1993. Warne's replacement, Elaine Jensen, who served as a county elections auditor for 17 years before coming to the secretary of state's office, also left in January after just a few weeks on the job, said Rachel Soulek, the office's elections director and spokesperson.

"You learn who's your friend and who's not your friend when you do things like this," Johnson told an interviewer when asked about the turnover. "You learn who you can trust and who you can't."

Meanwhile, Johnson has hired as a federal and state elections coordinator Logan Manhart, a 24-year-old "America First" political activist and former Trump campaign staffer who attended the Jan. 6, 2021 protests in Washington, D.C., and later defended attendees as "protesting for a cause we believed in." (On the evening of Jan. 6, Manhart, who has not been connected with the attack on the Capitol, called the day's events "disgusting," adding: "Millions of patriots peaceably assembled, and it was tainted by a reckless few.")

Manhart ran last year as a Republican for the state legislature, but dropped out after Democrats charged that he was violating South Dakota election law, which requires officeholders to have lived in the state for at least the previous two years.

On Twitter, Manhart has praised "2,000 Mules," a debunked conspiracist film alleging that the 2020 election was stolen through mass stuffing of vote-by-mail drop boxes. After States Newsroom asked Johnson's office about Manhart's tweets, they were set to private.

Berk Ehrmantraut, the executive director of the South Dakota Democratic Party, called Manhart's intensely partisan public comments "not appropriate for someone who needs to be impartially conducting elections."

"Logan has shown nothing but professionalism since joining the office and has assisted every individual who he has worked with," Soulek told States Newsroom.

Wes Allen, Alabama

Allen, a Republican who took office in January, has said that in 2020, "the election process did not work." And, as a state lawmaker, he supported Texas' effort to have the U.S. Supreme Court overturn Biden's victories in four pivotal states.

Many election officials aim to encourage voting while also keeping elections secure, but Allen has said it isn't his job to try to get more people to vote. Alabama's voting rate in 2022 ranked 46th among states, according to estimates by the U.S. Elections Project.

"Our job is to help give (local election staff and law enforcement) the resources they need to make sure

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our elections are run in the most safe, secure, and transparent way possible," Allen told a conservative radio host last month. "Our job is not to turn people out. That is the job of the candidates — to make people excited to go to the polls."

That philosophy appears to have informed the highest-profile action Allen has taken in office so far: A day after being sworn in, he withdrew Alabama from the Electronic Registration Information Center, known as ERIC, a 32-state data-sharing partnership that has won praise from election-management experts for helping states keep clean and accurate voter rolls.

Explaining the move, Allen cited privacy concerns, but he also said he opposed ERIC because it requires the secretary of state's office to contact eligible but unregistered voters and urge them to register.

During the campaign, Allen called ERIC a "Soros-funded, leftist group" — a reference to George Soros, the billionaire funder of liberal causes and a frequent Republican target. Allen's predecessor in office, John Merrill, a conservative Republican, has said he disagrees about ERIC and has tried to ensure that Allen is "properly educated" on the subject.

Allen has said he wants to see legislation to restrict "ballot harvesting," in which people collect absentee ballots from multiple voters and deliver them to drop boxes or election offices — sometimes in return for payment.

Though ballot harvesting has in a few cases been linked to genuine fraud or illegal voting, Arizona's anti-ballot-harvesting law was used to jail a local Democratic volunteer and former mayor for collecting and delivering four ballots from community members.

Rodreshia Russaw, the executive director of The Ordinary People Society, an Alabama-based nonprofit that works with formerly incarcerated people, including helping them register to vote, told States Newsroom she's concerned that such a law could disenfranchise large numbers of Black voters, by deterring this kind of work.

"If this type of law is passed, it's going to count thousands of voters out," Russaw said.

A spokesperson for the secretary of state's office did not respond to a request for comment about Allen's record so far and plans for the future.

Cord Byrd, Florida

Byrd, a former state legislator, was appointed secretary of state by DeSantis in May. Unlike some other chief election officials, he hasn't sought to make an issue of the 2020 contest. But, asked soon after taking office whether Biden won the election, he refused to say, pointing to "irregularities in certain states." The Tampa Bay Times reported that Byrd, when asked, repeatedly said Biden was certified for the office by Congress, "but when pressed about whether Biden won the election, Byrd pointed to issues with voting in several other states."

Byrd runs Florida's election integrity unit, created last year by DeSantis to crack down on illegal voting. The unit fields reports of voter fraud. A separate team within the Florida Department of Law Enforcement conducts actual criminal investigations.

Despite the high-profile announcement last summer of 20 arrests, including one man arrested at gunpoint, there have been only two convictions so far, and neither appears to involve serious wrongdoing. (The cases are not brought by the election integrity unit, but instead by local prosecutors — though this week state lawmakers passed a bill that would see them handled by a statewide prosecutors office.)

One conviction came through a plea deal that involved no punishment, and in the other, the defendant is awaiting sentencing after rejecting a deal that would have involved no punishment beyond time served.

Many of those charged have said they thought they were eligible to vote under Florida's 2018 rights-restoration measure, and were sent a voter registration card by the state. Voting advocates say the arrests could scare eligible voters out of getting their rights restored.

Still, Byrd told lawmakers at a hearing last month that fully staffing the controversial unit, including hiring a new director, is a top priority. His budget request would more than double the unit's funding, allowing it to grow from 15 to 27 employees.

"I think for some amount of time the laws went unenforced," Byrd said at the hearing. "And when people

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know the laws aren't going to be enforced, they engage in different behavior."

In January, the unit hired as its assistant director Brooke Renney, an experienced GOP political operative who worked on the election campaign of former Gov. Rick Scott, among other Republicans.

"I will never tell you I know everything about election integrity or administration and what does or doesn't happen in an election," Renney acknowledged in a podcast episode she hosted last year called "Operative Life." Asked by a Florida news station about Renney's qualifications for the role, a spokesman for the Department of State called the question a "smear," adding: "Her experience in the field, including helping Floridians who were victimized by election crimes, gives her valuable insight into the operations of elections and combatting election crimes."

Byrd also wants to add new rules for mail-in voting, which was used by over a third of all Florida voters last year. A 60-page report on mail-in voting prepared by Byrd's office for lawmakers recommended requiring that county election supervisors verify the signature of any voter requesting a mail ballot, and barring voters from requesting a mail ballot by phone. Voting rights advocates have called the ideas "asinine."

A spokesperson for the secretary of state's office did not respond to a request for comment about Byrd's record so far and plans for the future.

Chuck Gray, Wyoming

Gray won a competitive race for the Republican nomination, then was unopposed in the general election. He has called the 2020 presidential election "clearly rigged," and has hosted screenings of "2,000 Mules" at campaign events.

Gray campaigned on a pledge to "expose voter fraud" and "stop cheaters from trying to steal our elections." He has zeroed in on banning ballot drop boxes, which he has said, with little evidence, pose a security risk. In February, Gray went before lawmakers to oppose a Republican bill that would have tightened the rules around the use of drop boxes, without eliminating them.

"A key priority of mine is to end the use of ballot drop boxes," Gray said, "a position which is only strengthened by the increased security risk posed by ballot drop boxes around the country."

Among Gray's other priorities, he has said, are tightening the state's voter ID law, banning "ballot harvesting," and banning private funding of elections offices.

As his chief policy officer and general counsel, Gray hired Joe Rubino, who graduated from law school in 2021 and is the nephew of U.S. Rep. Harriet Hageman, the Trump-endorsed Republican who beat former U.S. Rep. Liz Cheney last year.

Rubino replaced Monique Meese, who had announced her exit in August, citing Gray's questioning of the integrity of the election system. Meese is one of 13 staffers who have resigned from the office since Gray's primary victory, including four out of five executive-level staffers.

A spokesperson for the secretary of state's office did not respond to a request for comment about Gray's record so far and plans for the future.

Diego Morales, Indiana

Morales defeated incumbent Holli Sullivan for the GOP nomination at the party convention, before being elected in November. He was the only successful candidate who was part of the "America First" coalition, which was founded by former Nevada state lawmaker Jim Marchant, a leading election denier.

In an op-ed last year, Morales wrote that he and others had "deep skepticism regarding the accuracy of the 2020 presidential election," calling the contest "a sham." In an interview later in the campaign, Morales called Biden "the legitimate president," without acknowledging that his stance had changed.

During the campaign, Morales called for a slew of far-reaching new voting restrictions, including cutting the early voting period in half, tightening the rules on who can vote by mail, requiring proof of citizenship during registration, and creating an "election task force" to probe illegal voting.

Since taking office, Morales hasn't pushed for any of those measures, and his budget request to lawmakers didn't include funds for the task force.

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But he said in a January interview that he plans to introduce a bill to require people who vote by mail to include a government-issued photo ID. A similar requirement in Florida was unanimously criticized by county election directors as potentially disenfranchising for large numbers of voters.

"My priority is to make Indiana a national model for election confidence and integrity," Morales said in an inaugural speech in January.

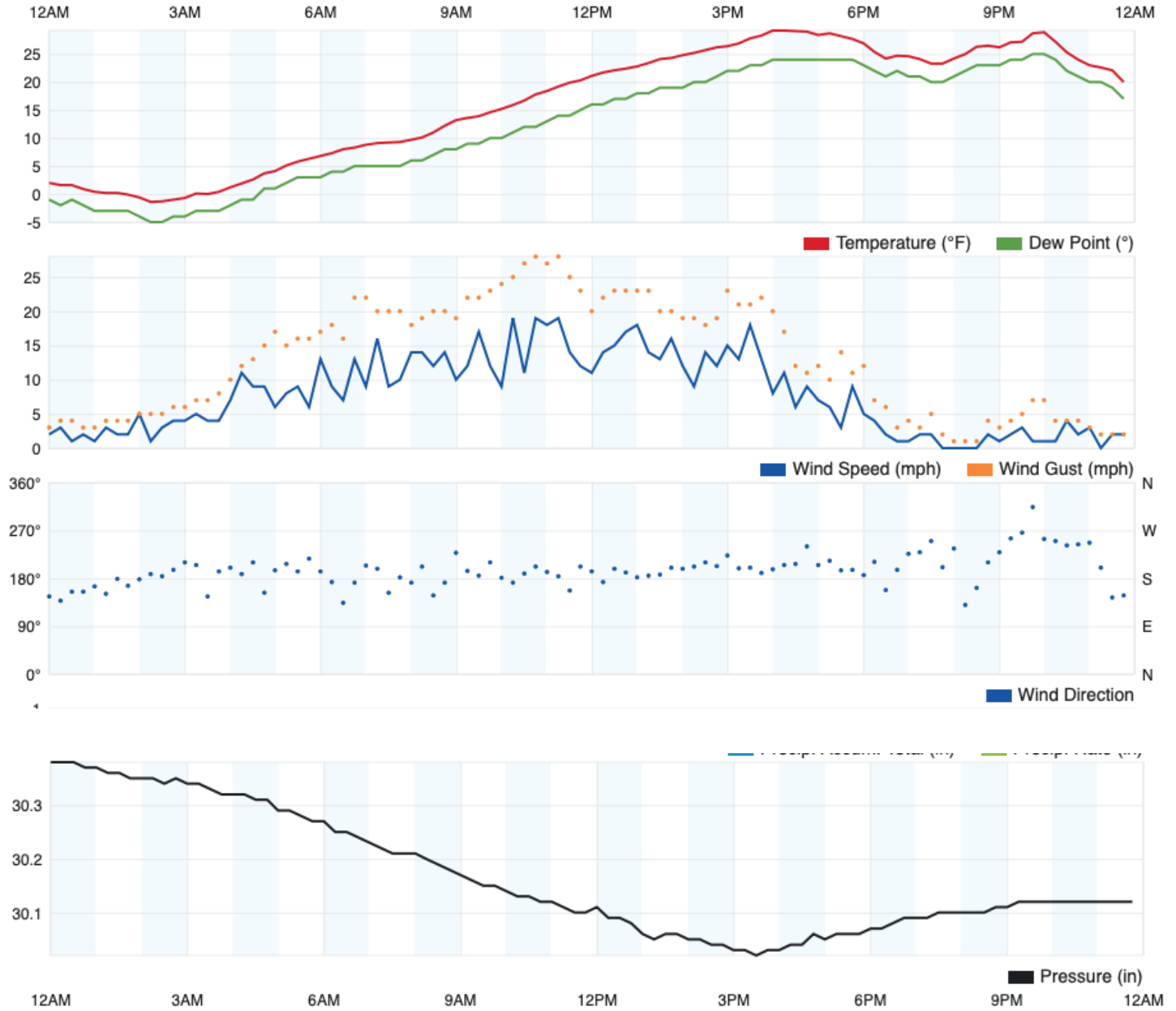
The secretary of state's office did not respond to a request for comment about Morales' record so far and plans for the future.

Zachary Roth is the National Democracy Reporter for States Newsroom.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Washington's Birthday	Monday Night	Tuesday
						
Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Breezy. Slight Chance Snow then Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy and Blustery then Mostly Cloudy	Snow Likely
High: 32 °F	Low: 15 °F	High: 27 °F	Low: 14 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 0 °F	High: 11 °F

Today

Feb 18th, 2023



 **Highs 30 to 50°**

Cooler in SD & wc MN, warmest central SD. 5 to 15° above normal

Sunday

Monday



24 to 40°

31 to 47°

Turning windy, cooler on Sunday. Chance of light snow in SD & wc MN Monday.



February 18, 2023 5:40 AM



High pressure will shift southeast of the area today allowing southerly winds to resume and mild conditions to continue. Daytime highs today should top out a good 5 to 15 degrees above normal (30s east to 40s to near 50 west). A cold front slips into parts of the area on Sunday allowing cooler air to filter in. A clipper system crossing North Dakota into Minnesota on Monday will spread light snow chances into north and northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota. Accumulations will be minor (generally an inch or less).

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 29.2 °F at 4:15 PM

Low Temp: -1.4 °F at 2:15 AM

Wind: 28 mph at 10:45 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 37 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 67 in 1913

Record Low: -32 in 1903

Average High: 29

Average Low: 7

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.37

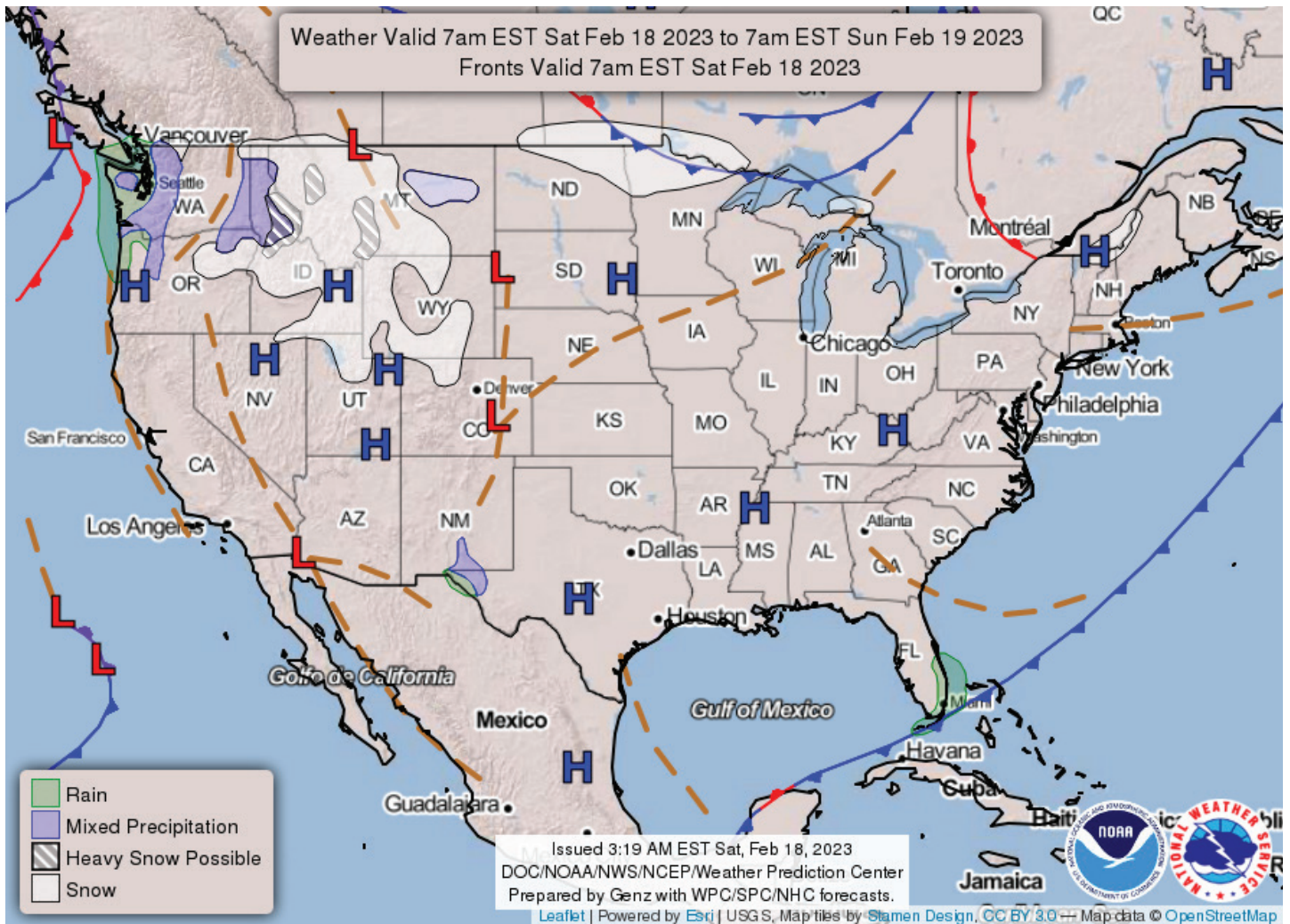
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.92

Precip Year to Date: 0.25

Sunset Tonight: 6:05:00 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:25:56 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 18th, 1962: It started raining during the afternoon of the 18th, and by evening temperatures dropped below freezing resulting in a glaze up to three-quarters of an inch on trees and power lines. Many utility lines were downed by the ice or by falling trees and branches. Temperatures continued to drop during the night, changing the rain to snow by the 19th. Strong winds accompanied this snow causing local blizzard conditions.

1899 - While much of the central and eastern U.S. was recovering from the most severe cold wave of modern history, the temperature at San Francisco soared to 80 degrees to establish a record for month of February. (David Ludlum)

1959 - Some of the higher elevations of California were in the midst of a five day storm which produced 189 inches of snow, a single storm record for North America. (13th-19th) (David Ludlum)

1965: A massive avalanche kills 26 men at the Granduc Copper Mine in British Columbia on this day.

1987 - A small but intense low pressure system combined with northerly upslope winds to produce eight inches of snow in five hours at Meeteetsie WY, located southeast of Cody. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms soaked the Central Gulf Coast Region with heavy rain. Totals in southern Louisiana ranged up to 8.50 inches near the town of Ridge, with 6.55 inches at Plaquemine. Thunderstorms in northern Florida drenched Apalachicola with 5.41 inches of rain in 24 hours, and produced wind gusts to 75 mph at Mayo. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Low pressure off the coast of North Carolina brought freezing rain and heavy snow to Virginia and the Carolinas. Snowfall totals in Virginia ranged up to 18 inches at Franklin. Freezing rain reached a thickness of two inches around Charlotte NC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - An intense but slow moving Pacific storm worked its way across Utah over a two day period. The storm blanketed the valleys with 4 to 12 inches of snow, and produced up to 42 inches of snow in the mountains. Heavy snow also fell across northern Arizona. Williams received 22 inches of snow, and 12 inches was reported along the south rim of the Grand Canyon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1992: A thunderstorm spawned a powerful F4 tornado for so far north for the time of the year in southern Van Wert County in Ohio. The tornado touched down just west of US Route 127 and traveled northeastward for about 3 miles. One house was completely leveled, and nine others experienced severe damage. Six people were injured.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

A CUP OF WATER

We had been traveling all night by train, moving rapidly toward our destination. Suddenly things turned upside down. Our passenger train was hit head on by a freight train. It was a frightening experience. Wreckage was all around us; people were screaming in pain. The crew was doing all they could to provide comfort until help arrived.

But God was protecting us, and we were uninjured. Fortunately, we were able to help others in their distress by doing whatever we could to assist those who were injured. Shortly after the accident, we discovered a little girl who was crying so we reached out to help her. She was pleading for water. Unfortunately, we had none. Suddenly, a man appeared out of the wreckage with a container of water and offered to share it with her.

As he gave her a cup of water, he said, "I'm sorry I'm not a doctor and cannot bandage your wounds. And, I am sorry there is no medicine available to ease your pain. But, I am thankful that I can give you what I have: water." He gave her what he could, from what he had.

Jesus emphasized the importance of "a cup of water." Read and hear Him say, "If anyone gives a cup of water in the name of the Messiah, that one will be rewarded!"

Our Lord did not ask us to do great things, just simple things. Jesus never left anyone with a need He could meet. He expects the same of us: "Give to others as I have given to you!"

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may our eyes, ears, and hearts be open to see and hear the needs of those around us. May we share Your love by sharing Your gifts. In Your Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: If anyone gives a cup of water in the name of the Messiah, that one will be rewarded. Mark 9:41



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)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 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
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 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
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.17.23

2 33 38 57 70 13

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$104,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.15.23

3 11 32 37 43 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$36,330,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 9 Mins 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.17.23

24 33 36 42 47 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 39 Mins 18 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.15.23

5 9 11 22 26

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$55,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 9 Mins 18 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.15.23

25 30 44 52 66 22

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 8 Mins 18 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.15.23

31 32 54 60 63 12

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$73,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 8 Mins 18 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 59, Brookings 49
Bridgeport, Neb. 54, Lakota Tech 51
Canistota 60, Colman-Egan 54
Castlewood 74, Estelline/Hendricks 33
Crazy Horse 97, Tiospaye Topa 37
Crow Creek 61, St. Francis Indian 58
Dakota Valley 86, Madison 66
DeSmet 86, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 25
Dell Rapids St. Mary 70, Baltic 62
Ethan 54, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 41
Faith 83, Belle Fourche 56
Gregory 67, Bon Homme 26
Groton Area 70, Britton-Hecla 35
Hanson 52, Corsica/Stickney 36
Harding County 80, New England, N.D. 37
Harrisburg 76, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 51
Highmore-Harrold 79, Potter County 43
Howard 62, Arlington 19
Jones County 78, Bennett County 59
Lennox 59, Dell Rapids 40
Leola/Frederick 47, Herreid/Selby Area 46
Little Wound 54, Stanley County 25
Lyman 74, Kadoka Area 55
Marty Indian 84, Flandreau Indian 41
Milbank 52, Webster 31
Platte-Geddes 60, Wagner 54, OT
Rapid City Stevens 56, Rapid City Central 40
Scotland 59, Menno 44
Sioux Falls Christian 71, Sioux Valley 63
Sioux Falls Jefferson 62, Sioux Falls Lincoln 60
Sioux Falls Washington 49, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 40
Sunshine Bible Academy 53, North Central Co-Op 46
Tea Area 63, Elk Point-Jefferson 53
Tiospa Zina Tribal 63, Redfield 48
Vermillion 60, Parker 32
Watertown 69, Huron 57
Waubay/Summit 63, Great Plains Lutheran 27
Wessington Springs 62, James Valley Christian 51
West Central 60, Chamberlain 33
White River 79, New Underwood 46
Winner 52, Mobridge-Pollock 29
Yankton 74, Douglas 60

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GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 58, Brookings 47
Belle Fourche 55, Faith 42
Bon Homme 60, Gregory 58
Centerville 59, Beresford 42
Crow Creek 89, St. Francis Indian 34
Dakota Valley 52, Madison 28
Dupree 67, Leola/Frederick 45
Elkton-Lake Benton 44, Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. 21
Ethan 46, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 25
Flandreau 77, Chester 41
Florence/Henry 57, Waverly-South Shore 23
Freeman 66, Gayville-Volin 42
Great Plains Lutheran 50, Waubay/Summit 35
Groton Area 53, Britton-Hecla 29
Ipswich 56, Langford 50
Lemmon 53, Bison 46
Little Wound 54, Stanley County 24
Marty Indian 62, Flandreau Indian 24
McLaughlin 33, Pine Ridge 30
Miller 54, Faulkton 27
North Central Co-Op 60, Sunshine Bible Academy 22
Pierre 64, Mitchell 48
Red Cloud 67, Bennett County 21
Redfield 50, Tiospa Zina Tribal 34
St. Thomas More 51, Hot Springs 11
Tea Area 71, Elk Point-Jefferson 40
Timber Lake 56, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 30
Tiospaye Topa 68, Crazy Horse 54
Vermillion 61, Parker 35
Wagner 81, Platte-Geddes 13
Wakpala 64, Oelrichs 31
Wall 59, Hill City 39
Wessington Springs 54, James Valley Christian 43
West Central 67, Chamberlain 25
White River 57, Philip 37
Winner 66, Mobridge-Pollock 45
Yankton 59, Douglas 36

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

North Korea fires missile as US, S. Korea prepare for drills

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Saturday fired a long-range missile from its capital into the sea off Japan, according to its neighbors, a day after it threatened to take strong measures against South Korea and the U.S. over their joint military exercises.

According to the South Korean and Japanese militaries, the missile was fired on a high angle, apparently to avoid reaching the neighbors' territories, and traveled about 900 kilometers (560 miles) at a maximum altitude of 5,700 kilometers (3,500 miles) during an hourlong flight.

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The details were similar to North Korea's Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile test flight in November, which experts said demonstrated potential to reach the U.S. mainland if fired on a normal trajectory.

Japanese government spokesperson Hirokazu Matsuno said no damage has been reported from the missile, which landed within Japan's exclusive economic zone, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) west of Oshima island. Oshima lies off the western coast of the northernmost main island of Hokkaido.

North Korea's Foreign Ministry on Friday threatened with "unprecedentedly" strong action against its rivals, after South Korea announced a series of planned military exercises with the United States aimed at sharpening their response to the North's growing threats.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the launch did not pose "an immediate threat to U.S. personnel, or territory, or to our allies," but said it will continue to monitor the situation. It called on North Korea to "refrain from any further unlawful and destabilizing acts."

The office of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said his national security director, Kim Sung-han, presided over an emergency security meeting where members accused the North of escalating regional tensions. They denounced North Korea for accelerating its nuclear arms development despite signs of worsening economic problems and food insecurity, saying such actions would bring only tougher international sanctions.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Tokyo was closely communicating with Washington and Seoul over the launch, which he called "an act of violence that escalates provocation toward the international order."

The launch was North Korea's first since Jan. 1, when it test-fired a short-range weapon. It followed a massive military parade in Pyongyang last week, where troops rolled out more than a dozen ICBMs as leader Kim Jong Un watched in delight from a balcony.

The unprecedented number of missiles underscored a continuation of expansion of his country's military capabilities despite limited resources while negotiations with Washington remain stalemated.

Those missiles included a new system experts say is possibly linked to the North's stated desire to acquire a solid-fuel ICBM. North Korea's existing ICBMs, including Hwasong-17s, use liquid propellants that require pre-launch injections and cannot remain fueled for prolonged periods. A solid-fuel alternative would take less time to prepare and is easier to move around on vehicles, providing less opportunity to be spotted.

It wasn't immediately clear whether Saturday's launch involved a solid-fuel system.

"North Korean missile firings are often tests of technologies under development, and it will be notable if Pyongyang claims progress with a long-range solid-fuel missile," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. "The Kim regime may also tout this launch as a response to U.S. defense cooperation with South Korea and sanctions diplomacy at the United Nations."

North Korea is coming off a record year in weapons demonstrations with more than 70 ballistic missiles fired, including those with potential to reach the U.S. mainland. The North also conducted a slew of launches it described as simulated nuclear attacks against South Korean and U.S. targets in response to the allies' resumption of large-scale joint military exercise that had been downsized for years.

North Korea's missile tests have been punctuated by threats of preemptive nuclear attacks against South Korea or the United States over what it perceives as a broad range of scenarios that put its leadership under threat.

Kim doubled down on his nuclear push entering 2023, calling for an "exponential increase" in the country's nuclear warheads, mass production of battlefield tactical nuclear weapons targeting "enemy" South Korea and the development of more advanced ICBMs.

The North Korean statement on Friday accused Washington and Seoul of planning more than 20 rounds of military drills this year, including large-scale field exercises, and described its rivals as "the arch-criminals deliberately disrupting regional peace and stability."

South Korea's Defense Ministry officials told lawmakers earlier that Seoul and Washington will hold an annual computer-simulated combined training in mid-March. The 11-day training will reflect North Korea's nuclear threats, as well as unspecified lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war, according to Heo Tae-keun,

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South Korea's deputy minister of national defense policy. Heo said the countries will also conduct joint field exercises in mid-March that would be bigger than those held in the past few years.

South Korea and the U.S. will also hold a one-day tabletop exercise next week at the Pentagon to sharpen a response to a potential use of nuclear weapons by North Korea.

North Korea has traditionally described U.S.-South Korea military exercises as rehearsals for a potential invasion, while the allies insist that their drills are defensive in nature.

The United States and South Korea had downsized or canceled some of their major drills in recent years, first to support the former Trump administration's diplomatic efforts with Pyongyang and then because of COVID-19. But North Korea's growing nuclear threats have raised the urgency for South Korea and Japan to strengthen their defense postures in line with their alliances with the United States.

South Korea has been seeking reassurances that United States will swiftly and decisively use its nuclear capabilities to protect its ally in face of a North Korean nuclear attack. In expanding its military exercises with South Korea, the United States has also expressed commitment to increase its deployment of strategic military assets like fighter jets and aircraft carriers to the Korean Peninsula in a show of strength.

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 preemptive strikes and cruise missiles to counter growing threats from North Korea, China and Russia.

Ghana soccer player Christian Atsu dies in Turkey earthquake

By GERALD IMRAY AP Sports Writer

Christian Atsu, the Ghana international forward who played for Premier League clubs Chelsea and Newcastle, has died in the earthquake in Turkey. He was 31.

Search teams recovered Atsu's body in the ruins of a luxury 12-story building where he had been living in the city of Antakya, Hatay province, his manager said Saturday.

"Atsu's lifeless body was found under the rubble. At the moment, his belongings are still being removed," manager Murat Uzunmehmet told private news agency DHA.

Atsu joined Turkish club Hatayspor in September and scored the winning goal for his new team in a league game at home against Kasimpaşa S.K. on Feb. 5, just hours before the earthquake struck in the pre-dawn hours of Feb. 6.

Antakya, the city where Hatayspor is based, is in the southern region of Turkey hardest hit by the earthquake.

The death toll from the 7.8-magnitude quake in southeastern Turkey and northern Syria passed 43,000 on Friday.

Hatayspor said Atsu's body was being repatriated to Ghana. "There are no words to describe our sadness," the club tweeted.

Ghana President Nana Akufo-Addo posted a photo of Atsu on his official Twitter account and wrote: "Ghana football has lost one of its finest personnel and ambassadors, one who will be difficult to replace. He'll be sorely missed."

Former Ghana captain and teammate Asamoah Gyan tweeted "RIP Brother."

A day after the earthquake there were reports that Atsu had been rescued but Hatayspor, after initially announcing that it had received information that Atsu was alive and on his way to the hospital, said later that the reports of a successful rescue were, heartbreakingly, mistaken and the player was still missing. It had also said the club's sporting director, Taner Savut, was still missing. Savut has not yet been found.

The contractor of the 12-story Ronesans Rezidans building — where Atsu and Savut lived — was detained at Istanbul Airport a week ago, apparently trying to leave the country.

Atsu's agent, Nana Sechere, traveled to Turkey with members of Atsu's family in an attempt to find him, holding onto hopes that he might be alive amid the wreckage. Sechere had urged authorities and Hatayspor officials to step up their efforts in the search for Atsu and Savut.

In a statement Tuesday, Sechere said rescuers had been able to pinpoint Atsu's exact room location in

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his collapsed apartment building over a week after the devastating earthquake but the only thing they recovered were two pairs of his shoes.

Sechere confirmed Saturday that Atsu's body was found. He posted a message on Twitter: "My deepest condolences go to his family and loved ones."

Atsu played more than 60 times for Ghana and scored on his debut as a 20-year-old in 2012. He was part of the Ghana squad at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and starred at the 2015 African Cup of Nations, scoring two goals to help Ghana to the final, where it lost in a penalty shootout to Ivory Coast.

He was named the player of the tournament at that African Cup.

Atsu was signed by Chelsea in 2013 but his time there was limited to appearances in exhibition games and he was sent out on loan to various clubs over the next four years. The winger joined Newcastle on loan in 2016 and was part of the team that won promotion back to the Premier League in the 2016-17 season.

He signed a permanent deal with Newcastle in 2017 and spent four years there. The club said Saturday it was "profoundly saddened" by Atsu's death.

"A talented player and a special person, he will always be fondly remembered by our players, staff and supporters," Newcastle tweeted.

The Ghana Football Association added: "We would like to express our deepest condolences to his wife and children, the family, loved ones and the football community."

Atsu joined Hatayspor last year after a short spell playing in Saudi Arabia.

Ibrahim Kwarteng, a friend of Atsu's in Ghana, told The Associated Press in a recent interview that he knew the player as someone who helped people in his West African home country as much as he could.

Kwarteng runs an organization that helps people convicted of petty crimes get jobs and put their lives back together after being released from jail and Atsu was its single biggest donor, Kwarteng said. Atsu had also started building an orphanage in Ghana and was helping to fund a new breast cancer screening center, Kwarteng said.

Marcos: China laser not enough to activate US defense pact

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — The Philippine president said Saturday the Chinese coast guard's use of military-grade laser that briefly blinded some of the crew aboard a Philippine patrol vessel in the disputed South China Sea was not enough for him to invoke a mutual defense treaty with the United States, but warned that such aggression should stop.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. told a news conference he also reminded China's ambassador to Manila that escalating aggression and incursions into Philippine waters by Beijing's coast guard, navy and government-backed civilian fishing fleets violate an agreement he struck with Chinese President Xi Jinping last month.

"Despite the fact that it was a military-grade laser that was pointed at our coast guard, I do not think that that is sufficient for it to trigger the Mutual Defense Treaty," Marcos said in his first public remarks about the Feb. 6 incident involving two Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels near the disputed Second Thomas Shoal.

Responding to a question, Marcos said he was concerned that activating the 1951 treaty would ratchet up regional tensions.

Marcos spoke to reporters in the northern resort city of Baguio where he delivered a speech before cadets and former graduates of the Philippine Military Academy and repeated a vow to defend the country's territory amid a new territorial spat with China.

"This country will not lose one inch of its territory," Marcos said to applause. "We will continue to uphold our territorial integrity and sovereignty in accordance with our constitution and with international law."

"We will work with our neighbors to secure the safety and security of our peoples," Marcos said without elaborating.

Like his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, Marcos has taken steps to nurture friendly ties with Beijing. He met Xi in the Chinese capital early last month to boost relations and discuss the Asian neighbors' long-seething

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territorial disputes in the strategic waterway that also involve Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei.

China claims the South China Sea virtually in its entirety, putting it on a collision course with other Asian claimants and separately with Washington. The U.S. lays no claims to the disputed sea but has deployed its Navy ships and fighter jets to patrol the waters, promote freedom of mobility and challenge China's territorial claims.

The contested waters have become a delicate front in the broader rivalry between the U.S. and China in Asia and elsewhere.

In the latest flare-up, the Philippines says a Chinese coast guard ship beamed a high-grade laser to block the Philippine vessel from approaching Second Thomas Shoal, which is held by Philippine forces. The Marcos administration sent a strongly worded diplomatic protest to the Chinese Embassy in Manila and Marcos summoned Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian on Tuesday to express his concern.

China responded by saying its coast guard ship used a hand-held laser and another light-emitting gadget to harmlessly measure the distance and speed of the Philippine vessel, which it claimed intruded into Chinese territorial waters and was warned to leave the area.

U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said China's "dangerous operational behavior directly threatens regional peace and security, infringes upon freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as guaranteed under international law."

Washington, he said, was standing by its treaty ally Manila following the latest sea feud.

Price renewed a warning that an armed attack on Philippine military forces, public vessels or aircraft, including those of the coast guard in the South China Sea, would invoke U.S. mutual defense commitments under the 1951 treaty.

Australia, Japan, Canada, Germany, Denmark and the United Kingdom also expressed alarm following the Chinese coast guard's use of the military-grade laser against the Philippine patrol vessel that they said threatens regional peace and stability.

Turkish teen filmed 'last moments' from quake-hit apartment

By ROBERT BADENDIECK and MUCAHIT CEYLAN Associated Press

ADIYAMAN, Turkey (AP) — A 17-year-old high school student has captured Turkish hearts after he filmed a farewell message to his loved ones as he was trapped under the rubble of his home during last week's earthquake.

Taha Erdem and his family were fast asleep when a 7.8 magnitude quake hit their hometown of Adiyaman in the early hours of Feb. 6.

Taha was abruptly woken by violent tremors shaking the four-story apartment building in a blue-collar neighborhood of the central Anatolian city.

Within 10 seconds, Taha, his mother, father and younger brother and sister were plunging downward with the building.

He found himself alone and trapped under tons of rubble, with waves of powerful aftershocks shifting the debris, squeezing his space amid the mangled mess of concrete and twisted steel. Taha took out his cellphone and began recording a final goodbye, hoping it would be discovered after his death.

"I think this is the last video I will ever shoot for you," he said from the tight space, his phone shaking in his hand as tremors rocked the collapsed building.

Showing remarkable resilience and bravery for a teenager believing he was speaking his last words, he lists his injuries and speaks of his regrets and the things he hopes to do if he emerges alive. During the video, the screams of other trapped people can be heard.

"We are still shaking. Death, my friends, comes at a time when one is least expecting it," says Taha, before reciting a Muslim prayer in Arabic.

"There are many things that I regret. May God forgive me of all my sins. If I get out of here alive today there are many things that I want to do. We are still shaking, yes. My hand isn't shaking, it's just the earthquake."

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The teen goes on to recount that he believes his family are dead, along with many others in the city, and that he will soon join them.

But Taha was destined to be among some of the first saved from the destroyed building. He was pulled from the rubble two hours later by neighbors and taken to an aunt's home.

Ten hours after the quake, his parents and siblings were also saved by local residents who dug at the wreck of the building with their bare hands and whatever tools they could find.

When The Associated Press spoke to the family on Thursday they were living in a government-provided tent, along with hundreds of thousands of others who survived the disaster that hit southern Turkey and north Syria, killing more than 43,000.

"This is my home," said Taha's mother Zeliha, 37, as she watched excavators digging up their old life and dumping it into heavy trucks.

"Boom-boom-boom, the building went down floor by floor on top of us," she recalled, describing how she had kept yelling her son's name while trapped under the debris in the hope that all five of them could die together as a family.

The Erdems' younger children — daughter Semanur, 13, and 9-year-old son Yigit Cinar — were sleeping in their parents' room when the quake hit.

But Taha could not hear his mother's calls through the mass of concrete. Nor could she hear her son's cries in the dark, and both believed the other was lying dead in the destroyed building.

It was only when Zeliha, her husband Ali, 47, a hospital cleaner, and the other children were taken to her sister's home that they realized Taha had survived.

"The world was mine at that moment," Zeliha said. "I have nothing, but I have my kids."

The story of the Erdem family is one of many emotional tales of human fortitude to emerge from the widespread disaster area. Many vividly recount the horrors of being trapped beneath their homes.

Ibrahim Zakaria, a 23-year-old Syrian who was rescued in the coastal Syrian town of Jableh on Feb. 10, told the AP that he survived by licking water dripping down the wall next to him, slipping in and out of consciousness and losing hope of survival in his waking moments.

"I almost surrendered because I thought I will die," he said from his hospital bed. "I thought: 'There is no escape.'"

In the Turkish city of Gaziantep, 17-year-old Adnan Muhammed Korkut, was trapped for four days before he was rescued. He told the private IHA news agency that he grew so thirsty that he drank his own urine.

Muhammet Enes Yeninar, 17, and his 21-year-old brother were saved after 198 hours in nearby Kahramanmaraş.

He said they cried for the first two days, mostly wondering about their mother and whether she had survived, IHA reported. They later began to comfort each other — "talking about brotherhood" and eating powdered protein.

Also in Kahramanmaraş, Aleyna Olmez, 17, was pulled free after 248 hours under the rubble. "I tried to pass the time on my own," she said.

Stories of remarkable survival often emerge during disaster, especially following earthquakes, when the world's media records the fading hope of recovering survivors as each hour ticks by.

Following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, a 16-year-old girl was rescued in Port-Au-Prince 15 days after an earthquake devastated the city. Three years later, a woman trapped under a collapsed building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, was saved after 17 days.

Nigerian cash crisis brings pain: 'Everything is just tough'

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — No one in Godgift Inemesit's family of eight is sure when they will eat each day — except for her three kids, two of whom have malaria. She can't pay for the drugs they need or feed the rest of her family regularly.

Like most Nigerians, the family's savings are trapped in the bank. A changeover to redesigned currency

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has plunged Africa's largest economy into crisis just ahead of a presidential election: There aren't enough new banknotes in a country reliant on cash.

For Inemesit, 28, the shortage of cash means even basics like food and medicine are getting trimmed for her husband, mother, kids ages 4 to 8 and two other relatives. One recent afternoon, only the children had gotten bread and hot drinks.

"We usually eat three square meals, but now we eat once sometimes because there is no money to use," Inemesit said in her house in Banana village, an overcrowded shanty town tucked in the southern corner of the Nigerian capital of Abuja.

"We were told to drop the old currency (notes) in the bank and that new one is coming," she said. "But we don't have the new currency and no old currency. Everything is just tough."

Customers are waiting all day at banks and ATMs to withdraw only enough money — called naira — to last a day. Fights have broken out in bank halls, angry customers have attacked workers and protesters have set financial institutions on fire. Businesses unable carry out transactions have been forced to close, and people are illegally selling new currency notes at higher rates.

As people become more desperate for cash, the impact is likely to spill into the Feb. 25 presidential election. Nigerians hope to elect someone to fix challenges ranging from a security crisis that has killed thousands in the past year to an ailing economy.

The shortage of currency "has already created significant hardship, which could make a greater number of voters vulnerable to vote-buying and ratchet up election tensions even further," said the International Crisis Group, which works to prevent conflict.

Facing increasing pressure to find a solution, President Muhammadu Buhari, who has reached his term limits and leaves office in May, said he directed the Central Bank of Nigeria to "deploy all legitimate resources and legal means" to ensure people "enjoy easy access to cash withdrawal."

"I am deeply pained and sincerely sympathize with you all over these unintended outcomes," he said, while still defending the changes.

Experts blame policymakers for a "rushed" introduction of the new naira notes. Central bank leader Godwin Emefiele argued that some government officials are "buying the new notes and storing them for whatever purposes."

The central bank has said the revamped currency would help curb money laundering before the election, transform the West African nation into a cashless economy and fight inflation of over 21%, a 17-year high.

Inemesit said she — like many others — have started losing interest in the election, dampening hopes of increased voter participation after years of steady decline in turnout.

She voted in 2019 when only 34% of registered voters cast their ballot for president. But as this year's election draws closer, her vote and hopes for a better country have been dashed.

"With what we are facing now, I don't have the aim of voting again. When you don't have the strength to walk to where they are voting, how will you be able to vote?" she said.

The cash shortages have made life even more difficult in Nigeria, where 63% of the population is poor, 33% is unemployed and as of 2021, only 45% of adults had a bank account, according to the World Bank. The crisis has added to the woes of surging inflation and a weakened currency.

The three top contenders in the presidential race have made pledges to deliver democratic change to Nigerians. The ruling party's Bola Tinubu has said he is seeking to "renew hope," while the main opposition party's Atiku Abubakar wants to "rescue" Nigeria. The Labour Party's Peter Obi — who leads the crowded field in recent polls — has promised to "rebuild" the country.

Lack of access to cash has affected consumption patterns and trade for small and medium businesses in the informal sector, a major employer that includes farming, street and market trade, and public transport, said Joachim MacEbong, a senior governance analyst at Stears, a Nigerian intelligence company.

The central bank's yearslong push to make the economy cashless led digital transactions to increase 150% last year. However, unreliable digital payment platforms have forced many businesses to use paper naira.

"The cost of denying people access to cash far outweighs any benefit," MacEbong said.

At ATMs, people are making choices they never would have imagined: Sunny Eze, a father of two, was

hungry but was saving the little money on him for transportation if he couldn't get cash. Esther Ugona waited for about 10 hours to withdraw 10,000 naira (\$22). Nasir Yusuf closed his shop for the day, devoting his time to trying to withdraw cash he needed.

Inemesit, meanwhile, waited in line until 8 p.m. one day last week and returned home empty-handed. Like dozens of others, she was told the bank branch had run out of new banknotes.

"If someone were to tell me that I can have the money but I cannot make use of the money, I would not believe it," she said, frustrated and downcast. With her 1.7 million naira (\$3,680) in the bank, "you have the money, but you cannot see it."

The family's income from selling bags such as luggage and backpacks has fallen drastically as Nigerians with little cash on hand are prioritizing food over other needs.

"People will not leave feeding their family to come and buy bags," she said.

The crisis has left Inemesit too tired and frustrated to think of the upcoming presidential vote.

"The government failed us very well. They disappointed us," she said, grabbing her 4-year-old who was coughing incessantly. "Things are difficult and everything has been increasing prices."

In Baltics, Poland, grassroots groups strive to help Ukraine

By KOSTYA MANENKOV and LIUDAS DAPKUS Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — In a dusty workshop in northern Lithuania, a dozen men are transforming hundreds of wheel rims into potbelly stoves to warm Ukrainians huddled in trenches and bomb shelters. As the sparks subside, one welder marks the countertop: 36 made that day. Hours later, they've reached 60.

People from across Lithuania send old wheel rims to the volunteers gathering weekly in Siauliai, the Baltic country's fourth-largest city. Two cars loaded with wood stoves wait outside the workshop ahead of the long night drive south.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine last February, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — three states on NATO's eastern flank scarred by decades of Soviet-era occupation — have been among the top donors to Kyiv.

Linas Kojala, director of the Europe Studies Center in Lithuania's capital Vilnius, said Ukraine's successful resistance "is a matter of existential importance" to the Baltic countries, which share its experience of Russian rule.

"Not only political elites, but entire societies are involved in supporting Ukraine," Kojala told the AP.

In Siauliai, Edgaras Liakavicius said his team has sent about 600 stoves to Ukraine.

"Everybody here ... understands the situation of every man, every soldier, the conditions they live in now in Ukraine," Liakavicius, who works for a local metal processing plant, told the AP.

Jaana Ratas, who heads an effort in Tallinn, Estonia to make camouflage nets for Ukrainian soldiers, echoed his words.

"My family and most Estonians, they still remember (the Soviet occupation)," she said.

Ratas chose a symbolic location for her project. Five days a week, Estonian and Ukrainian women gather at Tallinn's Museum of Occupations and Freedom to weave the nets from donated fabrics.

Lyudmila Likhopud, a 76-year-old refugee from Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, said the work has lifted her out of depression.

"I started feeling that I can be useful," she told the AP.

In Latvia's capital of Riga, Anzhela Kazakova — who ran a furniture store in the Black Sea port of Odesa — is one of 30 Ukrainian refugees working for Atlas Aerospace, a drone manufacturer that has supplied more than 300 kits to the Ukrainian army.

Ivan Tolchinsky, Atlas Aerospace's founder and CEO, grew up in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, held by Kremlin-backed separatists since 2014. He had long petitioned both the EU and Ukraine to supply drones to Kyiv's forces fighting the separatists. Final permission arrived a day before Moscow's full-scale invasion, he said.

Atlas Aerospace has since increased production 20-fold, Tolchinsky said, and is planning to open a site

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in Ukraine despite withering Russian strikes on infrastructure.

Tolchinsky's drones are just some of the weapons flowing to Kyiv from its Baltic allies. Together with their southern neighbor Poland — another NATO and European Union member with a history of Soviet oppression — the three small states rank among the biggest donors per gross domestic product helping Ukraine.

Lithuania, with a mere 2.8 million inhabitants, was the first country to send Stinger air defense missiles, according to Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov.

One of the latest Lithuanian initiatives is a crowdfunding drive to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian drones and missiles. Launched in late January, it initially aimed to raise 5 million euros by the Feb. 24 first anniversary of the invasion. That goal was reached within weeks, and organizers have since doubled it as donations keep flowing.

One fundraising group has grown into a major player that participates in international tenders purchasing military equipment for Kyiv.

"We have expanded 10 times in less than a year. (We used to supply) five drones in one batch, but now it's 50 or more," said Jonas Ohman, founder of the nongovernmental organization Blue/Yellow. The group recently won a bid for military optics, edging out rivals including the Indian military, and clinched a contract with an Israeli company for multi-purpose high sensitivity radars for Kyiv.

"It's entirely another level now," Ohman said.

In Poland, millions of zlotys have been raised to fund everything from advanced weapons to treating the wounded. Backed by over 220,000 contributors, journalist Slawomir Sierakowski was able to gather almost 25 million zlotys (\$5.6 million) to buy an advanced Bayraktar drone for Ukraine.

Ohman, the head of the Lithuanian NGO, drew parallels between his compatriots' readiness to help Kyiv and local partisan movements fighting Soviet rule after World War II.

"It is about personal responsibility in tough times," he said. "Just like in 1945 when (the) Soviets returned, the government was gone, but the struggle for freedom continued in the woods for years."

Ukraine invasion reshaped global alliances, renewed fears

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Nearly a year after Russia invaded Ukraine, the battlefield has narrowed and stiff resistance has forced Moscow to scale back its military goals. But the diplomatic consequences of the war still reverberate worldwide.

The fighting has reshaped global alliances, renewed old anxieties and breathed new life into NATO and the bond between Europe and the United States.

The invasion drew Moscow closer to Beijing and the pariah states of Iran and North Korea. It also raised broad questions about sovereignty, security and the use of military power, while intensifying fears about China's designs on Taiwan.

"The war underscores the interrelationship between diplomacy and the use of force in a way that has not been thought about in quite the same fashion for many, many years," said Ian Lesser, vice president of the German Marshall Fund think tank.

When Russian forces invaded on Feb. 24, it "marked the complete end of the post-Cold War world," Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said last month in a speech at Johns Hopkins University. "It has come to light that globalization and interdependence alone cannot serve as a guarantor for peace and development across the globe."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has claimed that Ukraine is an "integral part" of Russian history that never achieved "real statehood" — a stance that echoes Chinese President Xi Jinping's position on Taiwan, a self-governed island that Beijing claims as its own.

Some six months after the invasion of Ukraine, China issued a white paper on Taiwan, saying the island "has been an integral part of China's territory since ancient times." The paper said Beijing seeks "peaceful reunification" but "will not renounce the use of force."

China's designs on Taiwan date to well before the war in Ukraine, but China stepped up its pressure over

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the past year or more, including firing ballistic missiles over the island and into Japanese waters in August in response to then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei.

If Russia is allowed to succeed in Ukraine, it could further embolden countries like China, with its visions of an international order "that diverge from ours and that we can never accept," Kishida said.

He pledged to use Japan's presidency of the G7 this year to strengthen "the unity of like-minded countries" against Russian aggression.

"If we let this unilateral change of the status quo by force go unchallenged, it will happen elsewhere in the world, including Asia," he said.

A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be far more complicated than Russia's attack on Ukraine, said Euan Graham, a Singapore-based expert with the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"Russia's incompetent performance on the battlefield in Ukraine has to give pause to any military or senior political leader in China about an adventure on a much more ambitious scale with Taiwan," Graham said.

But the fear is real. Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen extended the nation's compulsory military service in a December announcement that referenced the war in Ukraine.

"They've drawn the lesson from Ukraine that you need to have a larger military reserve if there is a conflict," Graham said.

North Korea, which has threatened to preemptively use nuclear weapons in a broad range of scenarios, was already a regional concern. But Russia's suggestion that it could use nuclear weapons in Ukraine fueled new worries.

South Korea, which is under the protection of the American "nuclear umbrella," last year expanded exercises with the U.S. military that had been downsized under the Trump administration. South Korea is also seeking stronger assurances that Washington will swiftly use its nuclear capabilities in the face of a North Korean nuclear attack.

North Korea has been strongly supportive of neighboring Russia. Late last year, the U.S. accused Pyongyang of supplying Russia with artillery shells.

Iran has also been helping Russia militarily, providing the bomb-carrying drones Moscow uses to strike power plants and civilian sites throughout Ukraine.

While Western allies have cooperated closely in their responses to the war, a major diplomatic challenge has been to convince much of the rest of the world of the invasion's significance.

Only a handful of countries in Asia have taken tough action against Moscow, and many abstained from the United Nations resolution condemning the attack.

Just weeks before the invasion, China declared a "no limits" friendship with Russia. It has refused to criticize the war and has drawn closer to Russia, buying more of its oil and gas and helping Moscow to offset Western sanctions.

But there are signs of "complicated fault lines" in the China-Russia relationship, Jude Blanchette, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said in a call with reporters.

During September talks in Uzbekistan, the Chinese president raised unspecified "concerns" with Putin over the invasion, though at the same time promised "strong support" to Russia's "core interests."

"I think if Xi Jinping could snap his fingers, he would like to see the war end but in a way that Russia comes out of this with Putin in power and Russia continuing to be a strong strategic partner," Blanchette said.

India, which is heavily reliant on Russia for military equipment, also abstained from the U.N. resolution and has continued to purchase Russian oil.

But as regional rival China moves closer to Russia, India has quietly drifted toward the U.S., especially within the four Quad nations that also include Japan and Australia, said Viraj Solanki, a London-based expert with the IISS think tank.

In Europe, the invasion has reinvigorated NATO after a barrage of criticism from Donald Trump during his presidency that led French President Emmanuel Macron to declare the alliance had experienced "brain death."

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NATO member countries and allies have rallied to support Ukraine, with several changing policies that prohibited the export of weapons to countries in conflict. Perhaps most remarkably, Germany shed post-World War II taboos and provided Leopard battle tanks.

The war also prompted Finland and Sweden to seek NATO membership, which most experts think will be approved this year.

NATO last year singled out China for the first time as a strategic challenge, although not a direct adversary. The alliance warned about China's growing military ambitions, its confrontational rhetoric and its increasingly close ties to Russia.

Beyond NATO, the war has also underscored the importance of the relationship between the U.S. and European Union, which Lesser said has been "absolutely critical" to sanctions and export controls.

China insists that it is the U.S. that started the Ukraine crisis, partially through NATO's expansion into more Eastern European countries. Beijing has also criticized the alliance for suggesting the war could influence China's actions in Asia.

"NATO claims to be a regional defense organization, but it keeps breaking through the territory and field, stirring up conflicts, creating tension, exaggerating threats and encouraging confrontation," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin said Thursday.

The war's long-term effects on global diplomacy are difficult to predict. But Lesser said one thing is certain: It will be "very hard for Russia to recover from the damage to its reputation on many levels."

A core group of countries such as Syria, North Korea, Iran and Venezuela "may be inclined to stick with Russia," he said. But in terms of broader diplomacy, Russia's reputation "has experienced an enormous blow."

Leaderless Michigan GOP seeks new direction in chair race

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — The Michigan Republican Party is set to elect its next chair Saturday from a field led by far-right candidates after sweeping losses to Democrats in last year's midterms left Republicans powerless in the state government and the party in disarray.

The winner, inheriting a state party torn apart by infighting and millions in debt, will be tasked with helping the party win back control of the Legislature and flip one of the nation's most competitive Senate seats while attempting to help a presidential candidate win the battleground state.

Republican delegates will vote to select the party's next leader during a spring convention Saturday in Lansing. The highest-profile candidates in the 10-candidate field are Matthew DePerno and Kristina Karamo, two of the state's loudest election conspiracists who lost by wide margins for top statewide offices in the 2022 midterms.

Other candidates vying for the position include two county GOP chairs, a political consultant, a real estate agent, an information technology specialist and other political newbies.

DePerno is considered the favorite to win and has been endorsed by former President Donald Trump, along with other far-right GOP leaders Michael Flynn and Kari Lake, after losing the attorney general race. Hanging over his bid is an investigation by a special prosecutor reviewing whether to criminally charge DePerno and others for attempting to gain access to voting machines after the 2020 election.

Karamo seeks to lead the party after losing her secretary of state race by double-digits with a campaign centered on election conspiracies. In her campaign announcement for the chair, Karamo said the state is on "the precipice of tyranny, which voting alone will not be able to overcome."

With a field dominated by grassroots activist candidates running on far-right messaging, many longtime Michigan Republicans have already given up on the state party that was once one of the best-funded in the country.

"We lost the entire statehouse for the first time in 40 years, in large part, because of the top of the ticket. All deniers. It turned off a lot of voters," former longtime Republican U.S. Rep. Fred Upton said. "As I look at the state convention, it looks like it could be could well be more of the same."

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The party may take “a cycle or two to correct itself and to get out of the ditch that we’ve been in for the last couple of years,” Upton told The Associated Press.

The state party previously has been led by former U.S. Sen. Spencer Abraham, former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and current national Republican Party Chair Ronna McDaniel. The party built a large volunteer base of grassroots activists, former Chair Bobby Schostak said, while also raising “\$30 to \$35 million each cycle.”

In Schostak’s four years as party chair from 2011 to 2015, Republicans won control of the Legislature and the state elected a Republican governor, Rick Snyder, for the first time in eight years. Trump won the state in the 2016 presidential election.

Democrats now control all levels of power for the first time since the 1980s. They won control of both houses of the Legislature and defeated Republicans by significant margins for governor, attorney general and secretary of state in the 2022 midterms.

Longtime donors withheld millions in donations as the Republican party grew increasingly loyal to Trump, nominating his handpicked candidates, DePerno and Karamo. Tudor Dixon, who lost her race for governor to Whitmer, said her campaign was hurt by the state party not having as much money as in the past.

“I’d love to say that it is just a movement of going and knocking doors. But you’ve got to be able to put the money behind it,” Dixon said.

Following the midterms, Michigan GOP Chair Ron Weiser and co-Chair Meshawn Maddock said they would not seek reelection.

The winner at Saturday’s convention will need to prove “they have the capability to be good stewards of the donor money,” said Schostak, now a major Republican donor in Michigan and nationally.

If donors once again decide in large numbers not to give to the state party, they will need to find other ways of helping candidates ahead of a 2024 presidential election in which Republicans will look to flip the state House and win a U.S. Senate seat for the first time in more than two decades.

“The state party’s a little bit weaker, and they’re not going to have the influence in races that they had before,” state House Republican Floor Leader Bryan Posthumus noted. “That being said, there are a lot of other avenues to pick up that slack and to make sure that we are still effective with or without the party.”

Russian envoy claims West is determined to destroy Russia

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — A week before the anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin’s U.N. ambassador claimed that the West is driven by its determination to destroy Russia and declared: “We had no choice other than to defend our country — defend it from you, to defend our identity and our future.”

Western ambassadors shot back, accusing Russia of using a Security Council meeting it called on lessons learned from the failure to resolve the conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists that began in 2014 to justify what France’s U.N. Ambassador Nicolas De Riviere called “the unjustifiable” – Russia’s invasion of its smaller neighbor on Feb. 24, 2022.

Friday’s meeting in the council — the only international venue where Russia regularly faces Ukraine and its Western supporters — put a spotlight on the deep chasm between the warring parties as the conflict moves into its second year with no end in sight, tens of thousands of casualties on both sides, and new military offensives expected.

Russia’s U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused Western nations including France and Germany of “holding back” on implementing the Minsk agreements brokered by the two countries to end the conflict between Ukraine and the separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk in the country’s mostly Russian-speaking industrial east that flared in April 2014 after Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

“You knew very well that the Minsk process for you is just a smoke screen, so as to rearm the Kyiv regime and to prepare it for war against Russia in the name of your geopolitical interest,” Nebenzia said.

U.S. deputy ambassador Richard Mills accused Russia of failing to implement “a single commitment it made” in the Minsk agreements while the other signatories — France, Germany, Ukraine and the Organi-

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zation for Security and Cooperation in Europe — “sought to implement them in good faith.”

France’s De Riviere said his country and Germany have worked “tirelessly” since 2015 to promote dialogue between parties. “The difficulties encountered in implementing these agreements can never serve as justification or mitigating circumstances for Russia’s choice to end the dialogue with violence,” he stressed.

De Riviere recalled that exactly a year ago, on Feb. 17, 2022, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin reaffirmed to the council that the Minsk agreements were “the only international legal basis” to resolve the conflict in Ukraine, and that rumors of Russian military intervention were unfounded and stemmed from Western paranoia. Four days later, Russia recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, and on Feb. 24 it invaded Ukraine.

“The one and only lesson to be learned here is that Russia, by attacking Ukraine, has chosen alone, to put an end to dialogue and negotiation,” De Riviere said. “It took the decision alone to shatter the Minsk agreements, whose main objective, let us remember, was the reintegration of some regions of Donetsk and Luhansk under full Ukrainian sovereignty, in exchange for broad decentralization.”

Britain’s U.N. Ambassador Barbara Woodward also cited Vershinin’s statement to the council that allegations of a Russian attack were baseless a week before President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion, and said the United Kingdom had learned some lessons.

“Russia lied when we warned of its intention to attack Ukraine,” she said. “Russia was planning for war while we called for diplomacy and de-escalation, and Russia continues to choose death and destruction while the world calls for a just peace.”

Russia’s Nebenzia blamed “a criminal policy by the Ukrainian leadership which was goaded by the collective West” for refusing to implement the Minsk agreements.

After a year of war, he told Western members of the Security Council, “Obviously, we will not be able to live in the future the way we did in the past.”

Nebenzia accused the West of “deep Russophobia,” and a “determination to destroy my country, using others if possible.” And he claimed it is not interested “in building a European and Euro-Atlantic security system together with Russia” because “for you such a system can only be aimed against Russia.”

“We have no trust left in you and we are not able of believing any promises you make — not as regards a non-expansion of NATO in the east, or your desire not to interfere in our internal affairs, or your determination to live in peace,” Nebenzia said.

“You have shown that it’s impossible to negotiate with you,” he said. “You’ve shown how treacherous you are by creating on our borders a neo-Nazi, neo-nationalist beehive and then stirring it up.”

Ukraine’s U.N. Ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya accused Russia of violating the Minsk agreements, citing as an example the Minsk memorandum of Sept. 19, 2014 ordering all military, militias and mercenaries to leave Ukraine that was never implemented.

“The truth is that Putin has proved once and for all to be impossible to negotiate with,” he said. “Russia’s consistent undermining and final killing of the Minsk agreements make that crystal clear.”

Ukraine urges “healthy forces in Russia, if there are any, to come to their senses and force Putin to implement the demands of the U.N. General Assembly to immediately cease the use of force and to withdraw Russian military forces from Ukraine,” Kyslytsya said. “The dictator should give up and recede into the past.”

Why balloons are now in public eye — and military crosshairs

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Wafting across the United States and into the attention of an alarmed national and global public, a giant Chinese balloon has changed Americans’ awareness of all the stuff floating in the air and how defense officials watch for it and respond.

President Joe Biden said Thursday that the U.S. is updating its guidelines for monitoring and reacting to unknown aerial objects. That’s after the discovery of a suspected Chinese spy balloon transiting the country triggered high-stakes drama, including the U.S. shootdowns of that balloon, and three smaller ones days later.

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Biden said Thursday that officials suspect the three subsequent balloons were ordinary ones. That could mean ones used for research, weather, recreational or commercial purposes. Officials have been unable to recover any of the remains of those three balloons, and late Friday the U.S. military announced it had ended the search for the objects that were shot down near Deadhorse, Alaska, and over Lake Huron on Feb. 10 and 12.

In all, the episodes opened the eyes of the public to two realities.

One: China is operating a military-linked aerial surveillance program that has targeted more than 40 countries, according to the Biden administration. China denies it.

Two: There's a whole lot of other junk floating up there, too.

A look at why there are so many balloons up there — launched for purposes of war, weather, science, business or just goofing around; why they're getting attention now; and how the U.S. is likely to watch for and respond to slow-moving flying objects going forward.

WHAT ARE ALL THOSE BALLOONS DOING UP THERE?

Some are up there for spying or fighting. Humans have hooked bombs to balloons since at least the 1840s, when winds blew some of the balloon-borne bombs launched against Venice back on the Austrian launchers. In the U.S. Civil War, Union and Confederate soldiers floated up over front lines in balloons to assess enemy positions and direct fire.

And when it comes to peacetime uses, the cheapness of balloons makes them a favorite aerial platform for all kinds of uses, serious and idle. That includes everything down to "college fraternities with nothing better to do and \$10,000," joked Rep. Jim Himes of Connecticut, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

Himes' role on the committee involved him in a congressionally mandated intelligence and military review of the most credible of sightings of unidentified aerial phenomena, or UFOs. That review also drove home to him and other lawmakers "how much stuff there is floating around, in particular balloons," Himes said.

For the National Weather Service, balloons are the main means of above-ground forecasting. Forecasters launch balloons twice daily from nearly 900 locations around the world, including nearly 100 in the United States.

High-altitude balloons also help scientists peer out into space from near the edges of the Earth's atmosphere. NASA runs a national balloon program office, helping coordinate launches from east Texas and other sites for universities, foreign groups and other research programs. School science classes launch balloons, wildlife watchers launch balloons.

Commercial interests also send balloons up — such as Google's effort to provide internet service via giant balloons.

And \$12 gets hobby balloonists — who use balloons for ham radio or just for the pleasure of launching and tracking — balloons capable of getting up to 40,000 feet and higher.

That's roughly around the altitude that the U.S. military says the three smaller balloons were at when U.S. missiles ended their flights.

Most pilots probably wouldn't even be aware of a collision with such a balloon, said Ron Meadows, who produces balloons — with transmitters the size of a popsicle stick — for middle schools and universities to use for science education.

All it "does is report its location and speed," Meadows said. "It's not a threat to anyone."

Among hobby balloonists, there are suspicions that a balloon declared missing by the Northern Illinois Bottlecap Brigade was one of the ones shot down, as the publication Aviation Week Network first reported. White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Friday the administration was not able to confirm those reports

And it's not just the United States' Mylar, foil and plastic overhead. Wind patterns known as the Westerlies sweep airborne things ranging from Beijing's tailpipe soot and the charred chunks of Siberian forest fires swinging over the Arctic and into the United States. China says its big balloon was a meteorological and research one that got picked up by the Westerlies. The U.S. says the balloon was at least partly

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maneuverable.

WHY ARE WE JUST NOW SPOTTING ALL THESE BALLOONS?

Short answer: Because we are just now looking for them.

Balloons' rise to global prominence got a lift starting in the past few years. Congress directed the Director of National Intelligence to pull together everything the government has learned about unidentified aerial phenomena. That included creating a Defense Department UAP task force.

Last year, in the first congressional hearing on unidentified airborne objects in a half-century, Scott W. Bray, the deputy director of Naval intelligence, told lawmakers that improved sensors, an increase in drones and other non-military unmanned aerial systems, and yes, "aerial clutter" including random balloons were leading to people noticing more unidentified airborne objects.

That awareness kicked into overdrive this month, after the U.S. military and then the U.S. public spotted the Chinese balloon floating down from the High North. While the U.S. says previous Chinese balloons have entered U.S. territory, this was the first one of them to slowly cross the United States in plain view of the public.

That balloon, and what had been growing official awareness of a Chinese military-linked balloon surveillance campaign that had targeted dozens of countries, led U.S. officials to change radar and other sensor settings, screening more closely for slow-moving objects in the air as well as fast ones.

SIDEWINDER MISSILES: A LONG-TERM BALLOON STRATEGY?

Post big Chinese balloon, U.S. defense officials are expected to keep up broader monitoring so that balloons remain on the radar, but fine-tune the response.

Biden's order to the Air Force to shoot down the three smaller airborne objects with Sidewinder missiles left him fending off Republican accusations he was too trigger-happy. Biden says all four shootdowns were warranted since the balloons could have posed dangers to civilian aircraft. Hobby balloons with payloads of only a few pounds are not covered by many FAA airspace rules.

Biden says the U.S. is developing "sharper rules" to track, monitor and potentially shoot down unknown aerial objects.

He directed national security adviser Jake Sullivan to lead an interagency team to review the procedures.

Dominion voting case exposes post-election fear at Fox News

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A court filing in a lawsuit against Fox News lays bare a panic at the network that it had alienated its viewers and damaged its brand by not lining up with President Donald Trump's false claims that he had won the 2020 presidential election.

That worry — a real one, judging by Fox's ratings in the election's aftermath — played a key role in Fox not setting the record straight about unfounded fraud claims, the network's accuser contends.

"It's remarkable how weak ratings make good journalists do bad things," the filing quotes Fox Washington news executive Bill Sammon as saying.

The details were included in a trove of private communications unearthed by lawyers and contained in a redacted brief filed Thursday by Dominion Voting Systems. Dominion claims in a \$1.6 billion lawsuit that Fox aired allegations that Dominion had doctored the vote against Trump, even as it knew that was untrue. Fox says it was doing its job as journalists by airing the accusations made by Trump and his allies.

Fox's internal troubles began with a correct call: Declaring on election night 2020 that Democrat Joe Biden had beaten Trump in Arizona. The declaration, coming ahead of other news organizations, infuriated the president and his fans.

The backlash was noted in internal emails. "Holy cow, our audience is mad at the network," said one, quoted by Dominion. "They're FURIOUS," said another.

Five days after the election, Fox News founder Rupert Murdoch communicated to Suzanne Scott, Fox News CEO, that the channel was "getting creamed by CNN. Guess our viewers don't want to watch it," according to court papers.

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Fox News tumbled from first to third in the news network ratings between the Nov. 3, 2020 election and Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20, 2021, according to the Nielsen company. Meanwhile, thousands of Fox viewers flocked to the more conservative Newsmax, where prime-time viewership shot from 58,000 the week before the election to 568,000 the week after.

The change shook the foundations of a network that had consistently led in the news ratings for the better part of two decades.

Fox roared back into the lead by tacking more sharply to the right after Biden took office. But in the immediate aftermath of the election, there was genuine worry at its New York headquarters.

Almost immediately, the network went on "war footing," Dominion said, quoting a Fox executive.

"Do the executives understand how much credibility and trust we've lost with our audience?" Fox prime-time star Tucker Carlson wrote to his producer, according to Dominion's brief. "We're playing with fire, for real ... an alternative like newsmax could be devastating to us."

Dominion contends that Fox executives made the decision to push false narratives to entice their audience back, and points to claims made by Trump allies like attorney Sidney Powell on programs hosted by Maria Bartiromo and Lou Dobbs.

On Nov. 9, Fox News Channel's Neil Cavuto cut away from a news conference held by Trump aide Kayleigh McEnaney when she began to air unsubstantiated allegations. A Fox executive complained in the aftermath that Cavuto was damaging the network's brand.

The court filings also detailed two instances where Fox News reporters were attacked internally for tweeting fact checks. In one, reporter Jacqui Heinrich tweeted that there was no evidence any voting system deleted, lost or changed votes.

"Please get her fired," Carlson messaged fellow anchor Sean Hannity, saying Heinrich was hurting the company, according to Dominion's filing. Heinrich's tweet was later deleted, the court papers said.

Carlson himself tried to "thread the needle," Dominion said. It noted how he publicly stated that Powell had never provided evidence to back up her claims of fraud. "On the other hand, he did not say what he believed privately — that she was lying," Dominion said.

Fox said many of its specific responses will come in a document that Superior Court Judge Eric Davis in Delaware ordered sealed until Feb. 27. Fox said Dominion had mischaracterized the record and cherry-picked quotes stripped of key context.

"There will be a lot of noise and confusion generated by Dominion and their opportunistic private equity owners, but the core of this case remains about freedom of the press and freedom of speech, which are fundamental rights afforded by the Constitution and protected by *New York Times v. Sullivan*," Fox said.

If either side can persuade Davis to grant summary judgment in its favor, the case will end without a jury trial. If not, the trial is scheduled to begin in mid-April.

As a result of *Sullivan* and cases that followed, such defamation cases against journalists are usually very hard to prove, and Fox is also arguing that Dominion is grossly overestimating any economic damage to the company.

Ultimately, though, the case is pulling back the curtain on what happened at the nation's largest media outlet that appeals to conservative viewers at a pivotal time at the network's, and the nation's history.

"Privately, Fox hosts and executives knew that Donald Trump lost the election and that he needed to concede," Dominion argued in the papers released Thursday. "But Fox viewers heard a different story — repeatedly."

Turmoil in courts on gun laws in wake of justices' ruling

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision on the Second Amendment is upending gun laws across the country, dividing judges and sowing confusion over what firearm restrictions can remain on the books.

The high court's ruling that set new standards for evaluating gun laws left open many questions, experts

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say, resulting in an increasing number of conflicting decisions as lower court judges struggle to figure out how to apply it.

The Supreme Court's so-called Bruen decision changed the test that lower courts had long used for evaluating challenges to firearm restrictions. Judges should no longer consider whether the law serves public interests like enhancing public safety, the justices said.

Under the Supreme Court's new test, the government that wants to uphold a gun restriction must look back into history to show it is consistent with the country's "historical tradition of firearm regulation."

Courts in recent months have declared unconstitutional federal laws designed to keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers, felony defendants and people who use marijuana. Judges have shot down a federal ban on possessing guns with serial numbers removed and gun restrictions for young adults in Texas and have blocked the enforcement of Delaware's ban on the possession of homemade "ghost guns."

In several instances, judges looking at the same laws have come down on opposite sides on whether they are constitutional in the wake of the conservative Supreme Court majority's ruling. The legal turmoil caused by the first major gun ruling in a decade will likely force the Supreme Court to step in again soon to provide more guidance for judges.

"There's confusion and disarray in the lower courts because not only are they not reaching the same conclusions, they're just applying different methods or applying Bruen's method differently," said Jacob Charles, a professor at Pepperdine University's law school who focuses on firearms law.

"What it means is that not only are new laws being struck down ... but also laws that have been on the books for over 60 years, 40 years in some cases, those are being struck down — where prior to Bruen — courts were unanimous that those were constitutional," he said.

The legal wrangling is playing out as mass shootings continue to plague the country awash in guns and as law enforcement officials across the U.S. work to combat an uptick in violent crime.

This week, six people were fatally shot at multiple locations in a small town in rural Mississippi and a gunman killed three students and critically wounded five others at Michigan State University before killing himself.

Dozens of people have died in mass shootings so far in 2023, including in California, where 11 people were killed as they welcomed the Lunar New Year at a dance hall popular with older Asian Americans. Last year, more than 600 mass shootings occurred in the U.S. in which at least four people were killed or wounded, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

The decision opened the door to a wave of legal challenges from gun-rights activists who saw an opportunity to undo laws on everything from age limits to AR-15-style semi-automatic weapons. For gun rights supporters, the Bruen decision was a welcome development that removed what they see as unconstitutional restraints on Second Amendment rights.

"It's a true reading of what the Constitution and the Bill of Rights tells us," said Mark Oliva, a spokesman for the National Shooting Sports Foundation. "It absolutely does provide clarity to the lower courts on how the constitution should be applied when it comes to our fundamental rights."

Gun control groups are raising alarm after a federal appeals court this month said that under the Supreme Court's new standards, the government can't stop people who have domestic violence restraining orders against them from owning guns.

The New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals acknowledged that the law "embodies salutary policy goals meant to protect vulnerable people in our society." But the judges concluded that the government failed to point to a precursor from early American history that is comparable enough to the modern law. Attorney General Merrick Garland has said the government will seek further review of that decision.

Gun control activists have decried the Supreme Court's historical test, but say they remain confident that many gun restrictions will survive challenges. Since the decision, for example, judges have consistently upheld the federal ban on convicted felons from possessing guns.

The Supreme Court noted that cases dealing with "unprecedented societal concerns or dramatic technological changes may require a more nuanced approach." And the justices clearly emphasized that the right to bear arms is limited to law-abiding citizens, said Shira Feldman, litigation counsel for Brady, the

gun control group.

The Supreme Court's test has raised questions about whether judges are suited to be poring over history and whether it makes sense to judge modern laws based on regulations — or a lack thereof— from the past.

"We are not experts in what white, wealthy, and male property owners thought about firearms regulation in 1791. Yet we are now expected to play historian in the name of constitutional adjudication," wrote Mississippi U.S. District Judge Carlton Reeves, who was appointed by President Barack Obama.

Some judges are "really parsing the history very closely and saying 'these laws aren't analogous because the historical law worked in a slightly different fashion than the modern law,'" said Andrew Willinger, executive director of the Duke Center for Firearms Law.

Others, he said, "have done a much more flexible inquiry and are trying to say 'look, what is the purpose of this historical law as best I can understand it?'"

Firearm rights and gun control groups are closely watching many pending cases, including several challenging state laws banning certain semi-automatic weapons and high-capacity magazines. Already, some gun laws passed in the wake of the Supreme Court decision have been shot down.

A judge declared multiple portions of New York's new gun law unconstitutional, including rules that restrict carrying firearms in public parks and places of worship. An appeals court later put that ruling on hold while it considers the case. And the Supreme Court has allowed New York to enforce the law for now.

Some judges have upheld a law banning people under indictment for felonies from buying guns while others have declared it unconstitutional.

A federal judge issued an order barring Delaware from enforcing provisions of a new law outlawing the manufacture and possession of so-called "ghost guns" that don't have serial numbers and can be nearly impossible for law enforcement officials to trace. But another judge rejected a challenge to California's "ghost gun" regulations.

In the California case, U.S. District Judge George Wu, who was nominated by President George W. Bush, appeared to take a dig at how other judges are interpreting the Supreme Court's guidance.

The company that brought the challenge — "and apparently certain other courts" — would like to treat the Supreme Court's decision "as a 'word salad,' choosing an ingredient from one side of the 'plate' and an entirely-separate ingredient from the other, until there is nothing left whatsoever other than an entirely-bulletproof and unrestrained Second Amendment," Wu wrote in his ruling.

Sheriff: Gunman kills 6, including ex-wife, in Mississippi

By MICHAEL GOLDBERG and EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

ARKABUTLA, Miss. (AP) — A lone gunman killed six people including his ex-wife and stepfather Friday at multiple locations in a tiny rural community in northern Mississippi, the sheriff said, leaving investigators searching for clues to what motivated the rampage.

Armed with a shotgun and two handguns, 52-year-old Richard Dale Crum opened fire at about 11 a.m. and killed a man in the driver's seat of a pickup truck parked outside a convenience store in Arkabutla, near the Tennessee state line, Tate County Sheriff Brad Lance said.

Deputies were working the crime scene when a second 911 call alerted authorities to another shooting a few miles away. After arriving at a home, they found a woman, whom the sheriff identified as Crum's ex-wife, shot dead and her current husband wounded.

Lance said deputies caught up with Crum outside his own home and arrested him. Behind the residence they found two handymen slain by gunfire — one in the road, another in an SUV. Inside a neighboring home, they discovered the bodies of Crum's stepfather and his stepfather's sister.

"Everybody has crime, and from time to time we have violent crime, but certainly nothing of this magnitude," Lance said in an interview. He added: "Without being able to say what triggered this, that's the scary part."

Crum, 52, was jailed without bond on a single charge of capital murder, and Lance said investigators

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were working to bring additional charges. It was not immediately known if Crum had an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

That initial murder charge was for the killing of Chris Eugene Boyce, 59, the man who was shot outside the store. Boyce's brother was in the truck with him at the time and fled, according to the sheriff. Lance added that Crum chased the brother through a wooded area before he escaped unharmed.

Deputy Tate County Coroner Ernie Lentz identified the others killed as Debra Crum, 60; Charles Manuel, 76; John Rorie, 59; George McCain, 73; and Lynda McCain, 78. Lentz also said Boyce was from Lakeland, Florida.

Ethan Cash, who lives near the store, told WREG-TV he heard a gunshot from inside his house.

"I had just woken up and I look back here, and I see dude walking back here with a shotgun," he said.

Cash added that he went to the scene and found one person who had been shot. He checked for a pulse, but found none.

In the lobby of the Sheriff's Office, Norma Washington told The Associated Press that Boyce was her nephew. She said he and the brother, Doug, who lives in Alaska, had been in town cleaning up a property they inherited from their deceased uncle.

"I lost my brother, and now this one," Washington said. "This has been something else."

It was unclear whether Crum knew either of the brothers.

The killings stunned residents of Arkabutla, home to 285 people and located about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Memphis, Tennessee. It's the hometown of famed actor James Earl Jones, and nearby Arkabutla Lake is a popular fishing and recreational destination.

An elementary school and a high school in nearby Coldwater both went on lockdown while the suspect was being sought, according to the Coldwater Elementary School Facebook page. A short time later, a second post on the page said the lockdown had been lifted and "all students and staff are safe."

April Wade, who lives in Arkabutla and grew up in Coldwater, said both are small communities where most people know each other, "but if you don't, you know somebody who knows somebody."

Speaking from a local tire store in the afternoon, Wade said she and her husband were aware of the shootings but had not yet heard the names of the suspect or victims.

"I think it's crazy," Wade said. "You do not expect something like that to happen so close to home."

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives said its agents were providing assistance to the sheriff's department and state investigators. Lance said one of their top priorities was to determine a motive.

The sheriff, who has lived in the area his entire life and served in law enforcement for 25 years, said he could recall no prior problems with Crum.

The U.S. has seen a deadly start to 2023, including six mass killings in a three-week period in January, according to an Associated Press/USA Today database. It defines a mass killing as four or more people dead, not including the perpetrator.

There have also been a number of mass shootings in which fewer people were slain, such as Monday's shooting at Michigan State University in which three people were killed and five were wounded.

In a statement, President Joe Biden said he and first lady Jill Biden were mourning the six victims and praying for the survivors. He urged Congress to act now on gun law reforms to address what he called "an epidemic" of gun violence.

US ends search for objects shot down over Alaska, Lake Huron

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military said Friday that it has ended its search for airborne objects that were shot down near Deadhorse, Alaska, and over Lake Huron on Feb. 10 and 12.

The statement released late Friday came hours after officials said the U.S. has finished efforts to recover the remnants of the large balloon that was shot down Feb. 4 off the coast of South Carolina, and analysis of the debris so far reinforces conclusions that it was a Chinese spy balloon.

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Officials said the U.S. believes that Navy, Coast Guard and FBI personnel collected all of that balloon's debris off the ocean floor, which included key equipment from the payload that could reveal what information it was able to monitor and collect. White House national security spokesman John Kirby said a significant amount of debris was recovered and it included "electronics and optics" from the payload. He declined to say what, if anything, the U.S. has learned from the wreckage so far.

U.S. Northern Command said in a statement that the recovery operations ended Thursday and the final pieces are on their way to the FBI lab in Virginia for analysis. It said air and maritime restrictions off South Carolina have been lifted.

Northern Command said later that the decision to end the search for the objects shot down over Alaska and Lake Huron came after the U.S. and Canada "conducted systematic searches of each area using a variety of capabilities, including airborne imagery and sensors, surface sensors and inspections, and subsurface scans, and did not locate debris." Northern Command said air and maritime safety perimeters were also being lifted at both those sites.

The announcements capped three dramatic weeks that saw U.S. fighter jets shoot down four airborne objects — the large Chinese balloon on Feb. 4 and three much smaller objects about a week later over Canada, Alaska and Lake Huron. They are the first known peacetime shootdowns of unauthorized objects in U.S. airspace.

While the military is confident the balloon shot down off South Carolina was a surveillance airship operated by China, the Biden administration has admitted that the three smaller objects were likely civilian-owned balloons that were targeted during the heightened response, after U.S. homeland defense radars were recalibrated to detect slower moving airborne items.

Much of the Chinese balloon fell into about 50 feet (15 meters) of water, and the Navy was able to collect remnants floating on the surface, and divers and unmanned naval vessels pulled up the rest from the bottom of the ocean. Northern Command said Friday that all of the Navy and Coast Guard ships have left the area.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden directed national security adviser Jake Sullivan to lead an interagency team to establish "sharper rules" to track, monitor and potentially shoot down unknown aerial objects.

Meanwhile, key questions about the Chinese balloon remain unanswered, including what, if any, intelligence it was able to collect as it flew over sensitive military sites in the United States, and whether it was able to transmit anything back to China.

The U.S. tracked it for several days after it left China, said a U.S. official who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive intelligence. It appears to have been blown off its initial trajectory, which was toward the U.S. territory of Guam, and ultimately flew over the continental U.S., the official said.

Balloons and other unidentified objects have been previously spotted over Guam, a strategic hub for the U.S. Navy and Air Force in the western Pacific.

It's unclear how much control China retained over the balloon once it veered from its original trajectory. A second U.S. official said the balloon could have been externally maneuvered or directed to loiter over a specific target, but it's unclear whether Chinese forces did so.

Tiger Woods goes viral for all the wrong reasons at Riviera

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Tiger Woods had some explaining to do Friday, about a putter so cold he nearly missed the cut at Riviera, and about a chauvinist prank he played on Justin Thomas in the Genesis Invitational.

In his return to elite competition for the first time in seven months, Woods caused quite a buzz in the opening round for all the wrong reasons.

It started when he ripped a 323-yard drive, some 10 yards longer than the 29-year-old Thomas. Walking off the tee, Woods discreetly put something in Thomas' hand, which Thomas tossed to the ground

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when he realized what it was — a tampon, to remind him that Woods hit it farther. Woods laughed and put his arm around Thomas.

Social media came to life when the moment was posted. On Friday, one fan shouted, "Tampon!" at Woods after he made a rare putt.

Woods apologized after his bogey-bogey finish for a 74 in the second round, which left him over the projected cut line. By the end of the day, he moved up enough spots that he was certain to be around for the weekend. He was 11 shots behind Max Homa.

"It was supposed to be all fun and games and obviously it hasn't turned out that way," Woods said. "If I offended anybody in any way, shape or form, I'm sorry. It was not intended to be that way. It was just we play pranks on one another all the time and virally I think this did not come across that way."

Outside of swearing following bad shots, Woods rarely brings this kind of attention to himself inside the ropes.

The golf wasn't much better, either.

He missed birdie chances early and par chances late, and the finish was a polar opposite from his opening round when he closed with three straight birdies for a 69.

Woods came within inches of an ace on the par-3 14th, his fifth hole of the round, but he missed a 5-foot birdie chance two holes later.

"I did not putt well today," Woods said. "I blocked a lot of putts early, and this is probably the highest score I could have shot today. Probably should have shot probably five or six better than this easily. Just didn't make the putts early and the middle part of the round when I had those opportunities. And they weren't very hard putts."

He still was 2 under for the tournament, even for his round, when he came up short of his target on the par-3 sixth hole, the famous green with a bunker in the middle. The ball rolled down the edge to the front of the green, and the pin was cut to the top left.

Arms crossed and a lob wedge in his hands, he studied multiple options. He could have pitched it to the back of the green and up the slope and let it run back toward the hole.

"If I chipped it up on top, there's a chance that it could actually come back to the front part of the green," Woods said, adding that's what happened when he tried it Wednesday during the pro-am.

He changed to the putter to rip up the slope, left of the pin to leave himself about 10 feet away for a chance at par. One problem.

"The hill caught it more than I thought it would," he said.

It took speed off the ball and it turned right, down the edge of the bunker and into the sand. He blasted out to 5 feet and made a fast putt with enough break that he had to start it outside the cup.

That was the start of a bad finish. On the eighth, his tee shot found a bunker and he caught it heavy, hit his third over the green and did well to putt from the first cut of turf to tap-in range for bogey.

On his final hole at No. 9, he came up short and plugged into the bunker. All he could do with a front pin was blasted out through the green, and his par putt caught the lip. Another bogey left him at 1-over 143, outside the top 65 when he signed his card.

"I had two bad calls on the wind on 6 and 9 and end up costing me two shots there," Woods said.

The tournament host is playing for the first time since 2020 because of injuries to his right leg from a car crash a year later.

Brazil's glitzy Carnival is back in full form after pandemic

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazil's Carnival is back.

Glittery and outrageous costumes were prepared again. Samba songs were ringing out 'til dawn at Rio de Janeiro's sold-out parade grounds. Hundreds of raucous, roaming parties were flooding the streets. And working-class communities were buoyed, emotionally and economically, by the renewed revelry.

The COVID-19 pandemic last year prompted Rio to delay Carnival by two months, and watered down

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some of the fun, which was attended mostly by locals. Brazil's federal government expects 46 million people to join the festivities that officially began Friday and run through Feb. 22. That includes visitors to cities that make Carnival a world-famous bash, especially Rio but also Salvador, Recife and metropolitan Sao Paulo, which has recently emerged as a hotspot.

These cities have already begun letting loose.

Many Brazilian mayors, including Rio's, were marking the start of the celebrations on Friday by symbolically handing the keys to their cities to their Carnival Kings. And the first street parties of the Carnival weekend kicked off, with revelers' costumes ranging from Pope Francis to the devil himself.

"We've waited for so long, we deserve this catharsis," Thiago Varela, a 38-year-old engineer wearing a Hawaiian shirt drenched by the rain, said at a bash in Sao Paulo.

Most tourists were eager to go to the street parties, known as blocos. Rio has permitted more than 600 of them, and there are more unsanctioned blocos. The biggest blocos lure millions to the streets, including one bloco that plays Beatles songs with a Carnival rhythm for a crowd of hundreds of thousands. Such major blocos were called off last year.

"We want to see the partying, the colors, the people and ourselves enjoying Carnival," Chilean tourist Sofia Umaña, 28, said near Copacabana beach.

The premier spectacle is at the Sambadrome. Top samba schools, which are based in Rio's more working-class neighborhoods, spend millions on hour-long parades with elaborate floats and costumes, said Jorge Perlingeiro, president of Rio's league of samba schools.

"What's good and beautiful costs a lot; Carnival materials are expensive," Perlingeiro said in an interview in his office beside the samba schools' warehouses. "It's such an important party ... It's a party of culture, happiness, entertainment, leisure and, primarily, its commercial and social side."

He added that this year's Carnival will smash records at the Sambadrome, where some 100,000 staff and spectators are expected each day in the sold-out venue, plus 18,000 paraders. While President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is not expected to be among them, his wife Rosângela da Silva has said she will be at the parade.

The first lady's attendance signals a shift from the administration of former President Jair Bolsonaro, who kept his distance from the nation's marquee cultural event.

Nearly 700,000 Brazilians died in the pandemic, the world's second-highest national total, after the U.S., and many blamed Bolsonaro's response, weakening the bid for reelection that he ultimately lost. Many at this year's street parties are celebrating not just the return of Carnival, but also Bolsonaro's defeat.

That was the case at the Heaven on Earth street party in Rio's bohemian Santa Teresa neighborhood on Feb. 11. Musicians pounded their drums as some revelers climbed fences to watch the scene from above the pulsing throng. Anilson Costa, a stilt-walker, already had a prime view from his elevated perch. Covered in flowers and brightly colored pom-poms, he poured a watering can labeled "LOVE" over people dancing below him.

"Seeing this crowd today is a dream, it's very magical," said Costa. "This is the post-pandemic Carnival, the Carnival of democracy, the Carnival of rebirth."

This year shares some of the spirit of the 1919 edition, which took place right after Spanish influenza killed tens of thousands of Brazilians, but was no longer a significant threat. WWI had just ended, too, and people were eager to unburden themselves, said David Butter, the author of a book about that year's celebration.

"There were so many people in Rio's city center for Carnival that the whole region ran out of water within hours," said Butter.

Carnival's cancelation in 2021 and its lower-key version last year pummeled an industry that is a nearly year-long source of jobs for carpenters, welders, sculptors, electricians, dancers, choreographers and everyone else involved in bringing parades to the public. As such, Carnival's full-fledged return is a shot in the arm for local economies.

"Yesterday, I went to sleep at 3 in the morning. Today, I'll leave earlier, because I've lost my voice," said

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seamstress Luciene Moreira, 60, as she sewed a yellow costume in samba school Salgueiro's warehouse. "You have to sleep later one day, earlier the next; otherwise, the body can't handle it. But it is very enjoyable!"

Rio expects some 5 billion reais (about \$1 billion) in revenue at its bars, hotels and restaurants, the president of the city's tourism agency, Ronnie Costa, told the AP. Rio's hotels are at 85% capacity, according to Brazil's hotel association, which expects last-minute deals to bring that figure near to its max. Small businesses are benefiting, too.

"Carnival is beautiful, people are buying, thank God all my employees are paid up to date," said Jorge Francisco, who sells sequined and sparkled Carnival accoutrements at his shop in downtown Rio. "For me, this is an immense joy, everyone smiling and wanting. That's how Carnival is."

With 'Air,' Affleck tells lesser-known Michael Jordan story

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Ben Affleck was 12 years old in 1984 and growing up in the Boston area. The Celtics were NBA champions. The Red Sox and Patriots were respectable. The Bruins got swept in the first round of the playoffs.

And that also was when Nike was betting much of its future on Michael Jordan.

Part of that tale will be told in the upcoming film "Air," which Affleck directed and stars in alongside Matt Damon, Viola Davis, Jason Bateman and more. Affleck plays Nike co-founder Phil Knight, and Damon plays then-Nike executive Sonny Vaccaro — who was tasked with finding a way of saving what was then the company's fledgling basketball division.

Affleck did it with one key character absent: Jordan is not shown in the movie.

"What I wanted to try to accomplish was to have Michael Jordan have the effect in the story that he has in the world, which is that obviously the vast majority of people don't know and have never met Michael Jordan — and yet they know about him, and they know what he means and they might talk about him," Affleck said. "So, in a way, he's like a presence that's felt and discussed and everybody else around him is there. But you never see his face."

Nike wound up signing Jordan — who had yet to play an NBA game — to a \$2.5 million, five-year deal. It was a huge gamble.

Spoiler alert, with apologies to the movie that gets released April 5: It worked out.

Jordan Brand generated \$4.7 billion in revenue in 2021, the Jumpman logo is iconic, Nike has become one of the world's most powerful and recognizable companies, and Jordan won six NBA championships, became a billionaire, and now owns the Charlotte Hornets.

And since most viewers will already know all those things, Affleck took on the challenge of telling lesser-known parts of the story.

"The movie has to do realistic, it has to do authentic, and it has to surprise the audience," Affleck said. "Because if what happens is something that the audience can predict, even if they like it, they go along with it, it's ordinary, it's boring. It's just not what I want to do."

The trailer, released last week, is up to 6 million views. Affleck was at All-Star weekend to help promote Friday's celebrity game, and ads for the film were shown on the jumbo scoreboards over the court.

Affleck said he has met with Jordan about the movie.

"Somebody asked me what you're doing from Boston and making a movie about the Chicago guy," Affleck said in an interview with a number of media outlets. "Michael Jordan sort of transcends, I think, rivalry."

Wrongfully convicted man, now free: 'I was finally heard'

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — As he languished in a Missouri prison for nearly three decades, Lamar Johnson never stopped fighting to prove his innocence, even when it meant doing much of the legal work himself.

This week a St. Louis judge overturned Johnson's murder conviction and ordered him freed. Johnson

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closed his eyes and shook his head, overcome with emotion. Shouts of joy rang out from the packed courtroom, and several people — relatives, civil rights activists and others — stood to cheer. Johnson's lawyers hugged each other and him.

"I can't say I knew it would happen, but I would never give up fighting for what I knew to be the right thing, that freedom was wrongfully taken from me," Johnson said.

Thanks to a team of lawyers, a Missouri law that changed largely because of his case, and his own dogged determination, he can start to put his life back together. "It's persistence," the 49-year-old said Friday in an interview with The Associated Press.

"You have to distinguish yourself. I think the best way to get (the court's) attention, or anyone's attention, is to do much of the work yourself," Johnson said. "That means making discovery requests from law enforcement agencies and the courts, and that's what I did. I wrote everybody."

He said that he was able to contact people "who were willing to come forward and tell the truth."

Johnson was just 20 in 1994 when his friend, Marcus Boyd, was shot to death on Boyd's front porch by two masked men. Police and prosecutors arrested Johnson days later, blaming the killing on a dispute over drug money; both men were drug dealers.

From the outset, Johnson said he was innocent. His girlfriend backed his alibi that they were together when the killings occurred. The case against him was built largely on the account of an eyewitness who picked Johnson out of a police lineup, and a jailhouse informant who told a police detective that he overheard Johnson discussing the crime.

Decades of studies show that eyewitness testimony is right only about half the time — and since Johnson's conviction, across the country there has been a reexamination of eyewitness identification procedures, which have been shown to often reproduce racial biases.

At a December hearing on Johnson's innocence claim, eyewitness James Gregory Elking testified that the detective had "bullied" him into naming Johnson as a shooter, allegedly telling Elking, "I know you know who it is," and urging him to "help get these guys off the street."

St. Louis Circuit Judge David Mason also heard testimony calling into question the informant's integrity. Even more, an inmate at South Central Correctional Center in Licking, Missouri — James Howard — came forward to tell the judge that he and another man were the shooters — and that Johnson wasn't involved. Howard is currently serving a life term for an unrelated murder.

After two months of review, Mason announced his ruling Tuesday.

"It felt like a weight had been lifted off me," Johnson said. "I think that came out in how emotional I got afterward. I was finally heard."

It was a moment that he wasn't sure would ever come.

A connection to another wrongfully convicted man also played a pivotal role in Johnson's eventual freedom.

Ricky Kidd was convicted of killing two men in Kansas City in 1996. He was sent to the Potosi Correctional Center, where he and Johnson became friends. One day, in the prison yard, Johnson turned to Kidd.

"He said, 'You might not believe me, but I'm innocent,'" Kidd recalled. "I said, 'Oh yeah? You might not believe me but I'm innocent, too!'"

The two became cellmates. Eventually, the Midwest Innocence Project agreed to take on Kidd's case. Meanwhile, Johnson's effort was going nowhere. Kidd recalled a night when he was awakened by Johnson's quiet sobs and the sound of his feet pacing the floor.

"He said, 'Man, I don't think I'm going to make it out. I keep getting these doors shut,'" Kidd said. "I said, 'You got to hang in there.'"

Johnson tried to stay busy. That included working in the prison hospice unit. It gave him a new perspective.

"Growing up where I grew up, death, shootings, all those kinds of things are kind of normal," he said. Working in hospice, "You develop a greater appreciation of life, as you see someone go through that death process."

Meanwhile, Kidd talked to an investigator with the Innocence Project and made the case that since Johnson had already done so much background work himself that the process would have a head start. The organization took on his case.

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Lindsay Runnels, a Kansas City attorney who partners with the Innocence Project, said Johnson's work was vital. For example, she said his Freedom of Information Act requests uncovered the extensive criminal background of the jailhouse informant, which called into question the man's integrity.

"He just did all of that groundwork on his own from his jail cell, with nothing but paper and stamp," Runnels said.

St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner believed Johnson was innocent. But her efforts to help him were blocked when the Missouri Supreme Court, in March 2021, ruled that Gardner lacked the authority to seek a new trial 28 years after the conviction.

Missouri lawmakers, disturbed that an innocent person could remain in prison on the technicality that too much time had passed since his conviction, passed a law enacted in August 2021 that allows prosecutors to request a hearing before a judge in cases of potential wrongful conviction. That law freed another long-time inmate, Kevin Strickland, in 2021. He had served more than 40 years for a Kansas City triple-killing.

Some states, including California and Hawaii, are also wrestling with how to handle wrongful convictions cases. In California, Attorney General Rob Bonta is setting up a commission to review criminal cases for possible wrongful convictions. The Innocence Project's website says that across the U.S., it has helped free or exonerate more than 240 people, 58% of whom are Black.

The vast majority of their clients were exonerated by DNA evidence.

Now, Kidd is a public speaker who also works with prosecutors to help them avoid convicting innocent people. He hopes Johnson will join him in his effort. What Johnson chooses to do next as a free man is unclear.

"I think we can move the needle, prevent wrongful convictions in the first place and help extricate more individuals on the back end," Kidd said.

Johnson said he's thankful to be free, even if he's unsure what the future holds.

"It's exciting and a little intimidating," he said. "I have to go out there and learn, and survive, and get my life back in order."

5 Memphis officers plead not guilty in death of Tyre Nichols

By ADRIAN SAINZ and JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Five former Memphis police officers pleaded not guilty Friday to second-degree murder and other charges in the violent arrest and death of Tyre Nichols, with his mother saying afterward that none of them would look her in the eye in court.

Tadarrius Bean, Demetrius Haley, Desmond Mills Jr., Emmitt Martin III and Justin Smith made their first court appearances with their lawyers before a judge in Shelby County Criminal Court. The officers were fired after an internal police investigation into the Jan. 7 arrest of Nichols, who died in a hospital three days later. His beating was caught on video.

At a news conference after the hearing, Nichols' mother, RowVaughn Wells, said the officers didn't have the courage to look her in the eye, but "they're going to see me at every court date — every one — until we get justice for my son."

"I feel very numb right now," Wells said. "And I'm waiting for this nightmare basically that I'm going through right now, I'm waiting for somebody to wake me up. I know that's not going to happen."

The officers pleaded not guilty to second-degree murder, aggravated assault, aggravated kidnapping, official misconduct and official oppression. They are all out on bond. Their next hearing is scheduled for May 1.

The Nichols case is the latest to prompt nationwide protests and renew an intense public discussion about police brutality. Nichols, 29, was Black. All five officers charged in his death also are Black.

Addressing the courtroom, Judge James Jones Jr. asked for patience and civility, stressing that "this case can take some time."

"Everyone involved wants this case to be concluded as quickly as possible," Jones said. "But it's important for you all to understand that the state of Tennessee, as well as each one of these defendants, have an

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absolute right to a fair trial.”

Bean’s attorney, John Keith Perry, spoke with reporters afterward, saying Bean was doing his job and asserting multiple times that the officer “never struck” Nichols.

“Tadarrius Bean never touched him (Nichols) in any way, striking him. Period,” Perry said.

That claim is contradicted by video footage and Bean’s own words.

Bean admitted to police investigators he punched Nichols two or three times in the face because officers weren’t able to handcuff Nichols. The admission was noted in a filing by the Memphis Police Department seeking to prohibit Bean from working in law enforcement again. The filing notes Bean’s actions were captured on video.

Bean admitted to throwing the punches during a type of internal investigation that, for legal reasons, will likely never be seen by a jury.

Bean also held Nichols by one of his arms while Nichols was pepper-sprayed, kicked, punched and beaten with a baton.

As Bean’s attorney spoke with reporters, protester Casio Montez spoke over him, saying Nichols’ death was murder: “You represent a murderer, bro.”

Blake Ballin, the attorney for Mills, said the process must be “based on the facts and the law, and not the raw emotions that our country is experiencing.”

The nation’s grief over Nichols’ death “absolutely should be channeled into demanding change in the way that we police our communities,” he added.

“Let’s not forget that my client is a Black man in a courtroom in America,” Ballin said.

Lawyers for Martin and Smith did not immediately respond to attempts for comment. Haley’s lawyer declined to comment in an email.

Assistant District Attorney Paul Hagerman told reporters that “Memphis and the whole world needs to see that what’s right is done in this case, and it needs to happen sooner rather than later.”

Nichols’ stepfather, Rodney Wells, was in court alongside Nichols’ mother and their lawyer, civil rights attorney Ben Crump.

“This is a glorious day,” Rodney Wells said at the post-hearing news conference. “This is the beginning of the process.”

Nichols was stopped by police for an alleged traffic violation and was pulled out of his car by officers who used profanity, with at least one brandishing a gun. An officer hit Nichols with a stun gun, but Nichols ran away toward his nearby home, according to video footage released by the city.

The officers, part of a crime-suppression team known as Scorpion, caught up with Nichols and punched him, kicked him and slugged him with a baton as he yelled for his mother.

After the beating, officers stood by and talked with one another as Nichols struggled with his injuries on the ground, video showed. One officer took photos of Nichols as he was propped up against an unmarked police car, video and records showed.

Erica Williams, the district attorney’s office spokesperson, told The Associated Press in a text message Friday that “investigators are aware of photos sent from Haley’s phone and have identified the recipients of the photos.”

Nichols was taken to a hospital in an ambulance that left the site of the beating 27 minutes after emergency medical technicians arrived, authorities said.

Police said Nichols had been suspected of reckless driving, but no verified evidence of a traffic violation has emerged in public documents or in video footage. Memphis Police Director Cerelyn “CJ” Davis has said she has seen no evidence justifying the stop or the officers’ response. She disbanded the Scorpion unit, which she created in November 2021, after Nichols’ death.

One other white officer who was involved in the initial traffic stop has been fired. An additional officer who has not been identified has been suspended.

Three Memphis Fire Department employees who were present at the site of the arrest have been fired. Two Shelby County sheriff’s deputies who also were there have been suspended without pay.

Nichols' family, their lawyers, community leaders and activists have called for changes within the Memphis Police Department on issues related to traffic stops, use of force, transparency and other policies.

Some of the relatives and lawyers have praised Davis and the department for the swiftness of their response and said it should be the standard for other investigations into police brutality.

Gasol, Nowitzki, Parker, Popovich among Hoop Hall finalists

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Pau Gasol, Dirk Nowitzki, Tony Parker and Gregg Popovich are all one step closer to basketball immortality.

The three international greats — Gasol, Nowitzki and Parker — were among the list of Class of 2023 finalists unveiled Friday by the Basketball Hall of Fame, putting them on the doorstep of enshrinement this summer. Also on that list: Popovich, the winningest coach in NBA history with the San Antonio Spurs, and Dwyane Wade, part of three championship teams with the Miami Heat.

"It's really about the journey," Gasol said. "These type of recognitions, which are an amazing honor, they come along when you do things very, very well for a long time and when you love what you do. I'm just privileged to have played the game for so long, at a high level, with amazing people who taught me so much."

Also making the finalist cut were four selections from the Women's Committee — 1990 national player of the year, Olympic champion and world champion Jennifer Azzi; six-time WNBA All-Star and WNBA championship-winning coach Becky Hammon; and longtime coaches Gary Blair and Marian Washington.

The other finalists from the North American Committee include Gene Bess, believed to be the all-time collegiate coaching wins leader with 1,300 to his credit; two-time Division III national champion David Hixon; and seven-time Big Ten coach of the year Gene Keady.

"I love the class. I think this is a loaded class," Hall of Fame Chairman Jerry Colangelo said.

Colangelo said it's unusual for finalists to get this far in their first year on the ballot. Wade, Popovich, Gasol, Parker, Nowitzki and more got this far in their first opportunity.

"The Class of 2023 will be remembered as one of the most distinguished classes the Hall of Fame will ever see, and we are extremely excited for this unparalleled collection of talent and achievement to be one step closer to Springfield," Colangelo said.

Popovich has coached San Antonio to five NBA titles, four of them with Parker as the team's point guard, and led the U.S. to the gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics. The other two legs of the Spurs' Big 3 from that championship era — Tim Duncan and Manu Ginobili — are already Hall of Famers.

Nowitzki is sixth on the NBA's all-time scoring list and led Dallas to the 2011 NBA title as the top moment in his 21-year career, all of it spent with the Mavericks. Gasol won NBA titles and led Spain to a FIBA world championship, and Wade was a 13-time All-Star, Olympic champion and earned membership on the NBA's 75th anniversary team.

Hall of Famers get an orange jacket to commemorate their enshrinement. Wade said he's dreamed of wearing one, noting that he's now "one step closer."

"A young Dwyane Wade never would have thought this moment would be here," Wade said. "Sometimes when you're young and you have a dream, a lot of people don't believe in your dream. It seems so far-fetched. But I've always been a dreamer."

The Hall also announced Friday that longtime high school scout Tom Konchalski will receive the John W. Bunn Lifetime Achievement Award, the highest honor the Hall bestows short of enshrinement. CBS Sports will receive one of the Curt Gowdy media awards handed out this year, with ESPN's Holly Rowe and Marc Spears also now Gowdy recipients.

The Hall class will be announced April 1 at the NCAA men's Final Four in Houston. Enshrinement weekend is August 11 and 12 at Uncasville, Connecticut, and Springfield, Massachusetts.

Stella Stevens, star of 'The Nutty Professor,' is dead at 84

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By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Stella Stevens, a prominent leading lady in 1960s and 70s comedies perhaps best known for playing the object of Jerry Lewis's affection in "The Nutty Professor," has died. She was 84.

Stevens' estate said she died Friday in Los Angeles after a long illness.

Born Estelle Caro Eggleston in Yazoo City, Mississippi in 1938, she married at 16 and gave birth to her first and only child, actor/producer Andrew Stevens in 1955 when she was 17, and divorced two years later. She started acting and modeling during her time at Memphis State University and made her film debut in a minor role in the Bing Crosby musical "Say One for Me" in 1959, but she considered "Li'l Abner" her big break.

"The head of publicity at Paramount basically made me a worldwide sex symbol," Stevens told FilmTalk in 2017. "He had me doing a lot of layouts with photographers — indoors, outdoors, here and there — being seen in different places, going to the best restaurants, meeting with wonderful actors and directors ... those were the golden years of Hollywood. It was a very exciting time."

Soon after, she won the New Star Golden Globe, was named Playboy's Playmate of the Month and got a contract with Paramount Pictures, leading to film work and "Girls! Girls! Girls!" with Elvis Presley, which she only agreed to do because she was promised to a Montgomery Clift movie if she did it. It was a miserable six days of filming, she said, due to the temper of director Norman Taurog, though she said Presley was nice. The Clift picture didn't pan out either, at least with her promised co-star. It turned into John Cassavetes' "Too Late Blues," with Bobby Darrin.

"Bobby was a very fine actor, but as you can imagine, he was no Montgomery Clift," she said.

Next came "The Nutty Professor" as Lewis' student, Stella Purdy, who he is infatuated with.

"Jerry Lewis had told the bosses at Paramount he wanted to cast the most beautiful ingénue working at the studio — or something like that — and so I got the gig," she said. "We all tried to make the characters he had created in the script special, wonderful, unique — and if you ask me, I do believe that's why the film still holds up after all those years."

At Columbia Pictures, she'd appear in "The Secret of My Success," "The Silencers," with Dean Martin, and "Where Angels Go Trouble Follows," as a nun opposite Rosalind Russell. Other notable roles include "Slaughter," with Jim Brown, the Sam Peckinpah television film "The Ballad of Cable Hogue" and "The Poseidon Adventure" in which she played Linda Rogo, Ernest Borgnine's character's wife.

Stevens worked steadily in television in the 1970s and 80s, appearing in the pilots for "Wonder Woman," "Hart to Hart" and "The Love Boat" and in series like "Night Court," "Murder She Wrote" and "Magnum, P.I."

In 2017, she'd say that her favorite director that she worked with was Vincente Minnelli on "The Courtship of Eddie's Father," from 1963. She also directed several films, the documentary "An American Heroine," which never got distribution, and "The Ranch." She retired in 2010.

In an interview in 1994, Stevens said that she worried that she didn't succeed in bringing out the best in her directors and that her ambitions changed.

"I wanted to be like my favorite actresses: Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. I wanted to be like a burst of youth and then when I got a little crow's feet or age, I'd be off the screen," she said. "But I also had the plan of being a director ... I saw (Bob Hope) at 83 cracking jokes and having fun. I said then that I never wanted to quit. I want to be like this man. I want to go on forever. I want to die on a movie set."

Clinic to open near Ohio derailment as health worries linger

By PATRICK ORSAGOS and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

EAST PALESTINE, Ohio (AP) — A plume of chemicals that spilled into the Ohio River after a fiery train derailment has broken up and is no longer a concern, Ohio's governor said Friday. But worries remain near the disaster site among residents who have complained about lingering headaches and irritated eyes.

Despite repeated assurances that air and water testing has shown no signs of contaminants, some around East Palestine, along the Pennsylvania state line, are still skeptical and afraid to return to their homes.

Early next week, the state plans to open a medical clinic in the village to evaluate those who are worried

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and analyze their symptoms, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine announced. The clinic will include a team of experts in chemical exposures that is being deployed to eastern Ohio.

"These are very legitimate questions, and residents deserve an answer," DeWine said while also emphasizing that testing inside and outside of homes in the village have no found no signs of toxins that were on the train.

"We're doing absolutely everything we can to assure residents to what the situation is," he said. "I understand people have been traumatized. I understand skepticism."

Nick Patrone, who lives four miles outside the village, said there is definitely an irritant in the air.

"You feel it," he said. "A lot of my friends have children who have rashes that are unexplained all over their bodies. They have sore throats, they have congestion, they have ear irritation."

Earlier this week, hundreds of people showed up at a public meeting to voice concerns and get answers from not only state and local leaders but also railroad operator Norfolk Southern. But representatives of the railroad were absent, saying they were worried about physical threats.

DeWine was upset by the no-show and said Norfolk Southern President and CEO Alan Shaw needs to go to East Palestine and answer questions.

At least five lawsuits have been filed against the railroad, and lawyers have been showing up in the area to offer advice and legal options.

Two weeks have now passed since the freight train carrying a variety of hazardous chemicals derailed, but the stench of what spilled hasn't left. In the aftermath, residents have complained about finding their cars covered in soot, their homes filled with overpowering odors and their pets getting sick or dying.

The chemicals also spilled into nearby creeks, killing thousands of fish, and a smaller amount eventually made their way into the Ohio River.

While environmental officials said the contaminant amounts in the river were low enough that they did not pose a threat, cities in Ohio and West Virginia that get their drinking water from the river had been monitoring a slow-moving plume and a few temporarily switched to alternative water sources.

Water samples on Friday showed the plume is now completely gone, DeWine said.

The governor also said that air testing inside 500 homes hasn't detected dangerous levels in the village since residents were allowed to return after the controlled release and burn of five tanker cars filled with vinyl chloride, which is associated with an increased risk of certain cancers.

DeWine said the derailment has been traumatic for the village of just under 5,000 people. But he said "no one is trying to downplay anything."

Ohio Health Department Director Bruce Vanderhoff said the extensive testing of air and water that has been in place the past two weeks should be reassuring.

"We have been guided from the beginning by people who are national experts on what to test for," he said.

Former Theranos exec seeks to avoid lengthy prison sentence

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Former Theranos executive Ramesh "Sunny" Balwani returned to federal court Friday in a last-ditch attempt to stay out of prison while appealing a jury's verdict convicting him of orchestrating a blood-testing hoax with his former boss and lover, Elizabeth Holmes.

Besides overseeing arguments about Balwani's attempt to delay the start of his nearly 13-year prison sentence, U.S. District Judge Edward Davila also heard a vigorous debate about how much money Balwani should pay investors and patients duped by the Theranos blood tests that never worked as promised. The deceit resulted in Balwani's conviction on 12 counts of fraud and conspiracy.

Davila didn't issue any rulings at the end of the 90-minute hearing. His decision on whether Balwani can remain free on bail while he appeals his conviction, however, is likely to come soon. That's because Balwani, 57, is scheduled to report to prison in Lompoc, California, on March 15.

The judge said he doesn't expect to decide on the question of how much Balwani should pay in restitu-

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tion until another hearing on the same issues is held for Holmes, Theranos' disgraced CEO, on March 17.

Holmes, 38, also is seeking to remain free on bail while she appeals her conviction on four counts of fraud and conspiracy. She is scheduled to report to a prison in Bryon, Texas, on April 27 to begin a sentence of more than 11 years.

In Friday's hearing, one of Balwani's lawyers sought to deflect the blame for Theranos' eventual collapse to Holmes. In her presentation, Amy Walsh asserted Theranos still had \$350 million in cash and intellectual property worth about \$100 million in May 2016 when Holmes fired Balwani as the company's chief operating officer and ended their romantic relationship.

"When he walked out the door, the company was extremely valuable," Walsh said in Balwani's defense.

Davila seemed skeptical of that rationale, asking Walsh: "Are you saying his conduct was completely divorced from Theranos' demise?"

Federal prosecutors are seeking a court order that would saddle Balwani with a restitution bill of nearly \$900 million — a figure that would likely be largely symbolic. It would also be far larger than the \$120 million loss estimate that Davila used in calculating Balwani's prison sentence.

Prosecutor Robert Leach openly scoffed at Walsh's contention that Balwani should owe nothing, calling it a "remarkable position."

The two sides also painted radically different pictures in their arguments about whether Balwani should be allowed to remain free during his appeal.

Balwani attorney Mark Davies alleged that government misconduct in the presentation of evidence during Balwani's trial makes it likely he will prevail in the appeal of his convictions. But federal prosecutor Kelly Volkar repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

Davies also stressed Balwani's compliance with all bail requirements since he was indicted in 2018 as evidence that he isn't a flight risk. The lawyer also pointed to Balwani's non-violent history and past charity work in India as evidence he poses no danger to the community.

Volkar suggested Balwani may have more incentive to flee with his lengthy prison sentence now less than a month away and argued he remains a potential menace.

"Damage can come in the form of economic harms as much as it can come in the form of violent harm," Volkar said.

Bodies of 18 migrants found in abandoned truck in Bulgaria

SOFIA, Bulgaria (AP) — Police in Bulgaria on Friday discovered an abandoned truck containing the bodies of 18 migrants, who appeared to have suffocated to death.

The Interior Ministry said that according to initial information, the truck was carrying about 40 migrants and the survivors were taken to nearby hospitals for emergency treatment.

Bulgarian Health Minister Assen Medzhidiev said most of the survivors were in very bad condition.

"They have suffered from lack of oxygen, their clothes are wet, they are freezing, and obviously haven't eaten for days," Medzhidiev said.

The truck was found abandoned on a highway near the capital, Sofia. The driver was not there, but police discovered the passengers in a secret compartment below a load of timber.

Authorities did not immediately give the nationalities of the migrants. Bulgarian media reported they all were from Afghanistan.

Bulgaria, a Balkan country of 7 million and the poorest member of the European Union, is located on a major route for migrants from the Middle East and Afghanistan seeking to enter Europe from Turkey. Very few plan to stay, with most using Bulgaria as a transit corridor on their way westward.

Bulgaria has erected a barbed-wire fence along its 259-kilometer (161-mile) border with Turkey, but with the help of local human traffickers many migrants still manage to enter.

In Britain in October 2019, police found the bodies of 39 people inside a refrigerated container that had been hauled to England. British police said all the victims, who ranged in age from 15 to 44, came from impoverished villages in Vietnam and were believed to have paid smugglers to take them on a risky

journey to better lives abroad.

Police said they died of a combination of a lack of oxygen and overheating in an enclosed space. The truck discovered in the town of Grays, east of London, had arrived in England on a ferry from Zeebrugge in Belgium.

1st class of Ukraine fighters finishes advanced US training

By TARA COPP Associated Press

ABOARD A US MILITARY AIRCRAFT (AP) — The first class of 635 Ukrainian fighters has finished a five-week advanced U.S. training course in Germany on sophisticated combat skills and armored vehicles that will be critical in the coming spring offensive against the Russians, the Pentagon said Friday.

Pentagon press secretary Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said that additional training is already underway at the Grafenwoehr training area, and will involve about 1,600 more Ukrainian troops. The completion of the first class coincided with a visit to the base by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, giving him his first chance to see Ukrainian soldiers training there.

The first group of Ukrainian forces arrived at the base on Jan. 15 and was put through an intense course that prepared them to take Bradley fighting vehicles and M109 Paladins into battle. The Bradleys and Paladins are two of the many armored vehicles and tanks that the U.S. and allies have pledged to the Ukrainians to help them punch through entrenched Russian troop lines. The Paladin is a self-propelled howitzer that runs on tracks rather than wheels.

Ryder said another battalion of Ukrainian troops began training on the Bradley fighting vehicle two weeks ago, and a field artillery battalion started instruction on the Paladin. Those two units total about 710 troops. Another field artillery unit and a Stryker battalion will start training next week, involving about 890 troops. That will be the first Ukrainian battalion to get training on the Stryker, an armored personnel carrier.

Defense leaders have called the latest training program key to expanding Ukraine's ability to launch a coordinated offensive, teaching its military to effectively move and coordinate its company- and battalion-size units in battle, using combined artillery, armor and ground forces.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has continually pressed Western allies to hasten their military support. Speaking at a major international security conference in Munich on Friday, Zelenskyy said delays would play into Russia's hand as the war approaches its first anniversary.

During a visit to the Grafenwoehr training base last month, U.S. Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the new skills will better prepare Ukrainian troops to counter any surge in Russian attacks.

"This is not a run of the mill rotation," he said when meeting with U.S. commanders there. "This is one of those moments in time where if you want to make a difference, this is it."

The training, which is being done by the 7th Army Training Command, includes classroom instruction, field work and larger combat exercises.

Oregon, a hotbed of extremism, seeks to curb paramilitaries

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — An armed takeover of a federal wildlife refuge. Over 100 straight days of racial justice protests that turned downtown Portland into a battleground. A violent breach of the state Capitol. Clashes between gun-toting right-wingers and leftist militants.

Over the past decade, Oregon experienced the sixth-highest number of extremist incidents in the nation, despite being 27th in population, according to an Oregon Secretary of State report. Now, the state Legislature is considering a bill that, experts say, would create the nation's most comprehensive law against paramilitary activity.

It would provide citizens and the state attorney general with civil remedies in court if armed members of a private paramilitary group interfere with, or intimidate, another person who is engaging in an activity they have a legal right to do, such as voting. A court could block paramilitary members from pursuing an

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activity if the state attorney general believed it would be illegal conduct.

All 50 states prohibit private paramilitary organizations and/or paramilitary activity, but no other law creates civil remedies, said Mary McCord, an expert on terrorism and domestic extremism who helped craft the bill. The Oregon bill is also unique because it would allow people injured by private, unauthorized paramilitary activity to sue, she said.

Opponents say the law would infringe on rights to freely associate and to bear arms.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Dacia Grayber, a Democrat from suburban Portland, said the proposed reforms "would make it harder for private paramilitaries to operate with impunity throughout Oregon, regardless of their ideology."

But dozens of conservative Oregonians, in written testimony, have expressed suspicion that the Democrat-controlled Legislature aims to pass a bill restricting the right to assemble and that the legislation would target right-wing armed groups like the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer, but not black-clad anarchists who have vandalized downtown Portland and battled police.

"This bill would clearly put restrictions on who could gather in a group and for what reasons they chose to," wrote Matthew Holman, a resident of Coos Bay, a town on Oregon's southwest coast.

The pioneering measure raises a host of issues, which lawmakers tried to parse in a House Judiciary Committee hearing last week:

If residents are afraid to go to a park with their children while an armed militia group is present, could they later sue the group? What constitutes a paramilitary group? What is defined as being armed?

Oregon Department of Justice attorney Carson Whitehead said the proposed law would not sanction a person for openly carrying firearms, which is constitutionally permissible. But if a paramilitary group went to a park knowing their presence would be intimidating, anyone afraid of also going to the park could sue for damages, Whitehead said.

"This particular bill is not directed at individuals open-carrying. This is directed at armed, coordinated paramilitary activity," added McCord, who is the executive director of Georgetown University Law Center's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection.

On the other side of the country in Vermont, a bill making it a crime to operate a paramilitary training camp got final approval from the state Senate on Friday. The measure, which senators earlier approved by a 29-1 vote, also allows state prosecutors to seek an injunction to close such a facility.

"This bill gives the state the authority it needs to protect Vermonters from fringe actors looking to create civil disorder," said state Sen. Philip Baruth, a Democrat and Progressive from Burlington.

Baruth introduced the measure in response to a firearms training facility built without permits in the town of Pawlet. Neighbors frequently complained about gunfire coming from the Slate Ridge facility, calling it a menace. Baruth's bill now goes to the Vermont House.

Under the proposed Oregon law, a paramilitary group could range from ones that wear uniforms and insignia, like the Three Percenters, to a handful of people who act in a coordinated way with a command structure to engage in violence, McCord said.

Rep. Rick Lewis, a Republican from Silverton, asked pointedly during the committee hearing whether rocks and frozen water bottles, which Portland police said had been thrown at them during demonstrations in 2021, would fall under the proposed law.

A frozen water bottle and rocks could cause serious injury or death, so they would be considered dangerous weapons under Oregon law, responded Kimberly McCullough, Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum's legislative director.

Multnomah County District Attorney Mike Schmidt, whose jurisdiction encompasses Portland, testified in favor of the bill, expressing frustration that police often can't single out violent actors lurking among peaceful protesters.

"Our current inability to get upstream of this violence before it starts leaves us vulnerable to organized criminal elements who enter into a protest environment with the express intention of escalating the situation into an assault or arson or a riot," Schmidt said.

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McCord, the terrorism expert, said the measure would mark a milestone in the U.S., where the FBI has warned of a rapidly growing threat of homegrown violent extremism.

"This bill as amended would be the most comprehensive statute to address unauthorized paramilitary activity that threatens civil rights," she said.

The tactic of enabling private residents to file lawsuits against paramilitary groups may be a novel one, but it has been used in other arenas.

Environmental groups, for example, can sue businesses accused of violating federal pollution permits. In Texas, a 2021 law authorizes lawsuits against anyone who performs or aids in an abortion. In Missouri, a law allows citizens to sue local law enforcement officers who enforce federal gun laws.

But the Oregon bill differs from these laws because only people who are injured by unlawful paramilitary activity could sue, McCord said. The Oregon bill also opens a path for a government enforcement mechanism, since it allows the state attorney general to seek a court injunction to prevent a planned paramilitary activity, she said.

Whether the bill will pass is unclear. It needs a simple majority in both the House and Senate to go to Democratic Gov. Tina Kotek for her approval or veto. Kotek's spokesperson, Elisabeth Shepard, said the governor generally doesn't comment on pending legislation.

Barstool Sports is acquired by Penn Entertainment

Barstool Sports has been sold to Penn Entertainment Inc.

Penn paid about \$388 million for the remaining stake in Barstool Sports that it doesn't already own, the sports and entertainment company said Friday.

Penn and Barstool Sports first announced an exclusive sports betting and iCasino partnership in early 2020. Penn took a 36% stake of Barstool Sports in February 2020 for approximately \$163 million, comprised of about \$135 million in cash and \$28 million in non-voting convertible preferred stock.

The initial deal included a path for Penn to gain full ownership of Barstool Sports.

Barstool was founded in 2003 by Dave Portnoy as a free sports and gambling newspaper. It is now a digital platform that covers sports, lifestyle, and entertainment with more than 200 million followers.

"Barstool is a proven, powerful media brand with an authentic voice and vast, loyal audience that provides us with a strong top of funnel for new customer acquisition and organic cross-selling opportunities across our growing interactive division," Penn Entertainment Inc. CEO Jay Snowden said in a statement on Friday.

Off camera, Fox hosts doubted 2020 election fraud claims

By RANDALL CHASE Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — To millions of viewers, Fox News hosts gave allies of former President Donald Trump a platform to champion false claims that he lost the 2020 election because of voter fraud. To one another, they expressed doubts about the claims and mocked the people making them.

Private exchanges between Fox News hosts Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham, and other network bigwigs — including the chairman of Fox Corporation, Rupert Murdoch — show a wide chasm between what the network promoted in primetime and the doubts that its stars held behind the camera, according to new court filings in a defamation lawsuit being waged by a company whose voting systems were regularly maligned on air.

"Sidney Powell is lying" about having evidence for election fraud, Carlson said via text on Nov. 16, 2020 to a Fox News producer, referring to one of Trump's lawyers.

Ingraham texted Carlson that Powell is "a complete nut. No one will work with her. Ditto with Rudy," referring to the former New York mayor and Trump supporter Rudy Giuliani.

These and other internal communications were included in a redacted brief filed Thursday by attorneys for Dominion Voting Systems, which is suing Fox News and its parent company, Fox Corporation, for \$1.6 billion.

In a deposition, host Sean Hannity said "that whole narrative that Sidney was pushing, I did not believe

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it for one second," according to Dominion's filing.

Murdoch, meanwhile, in a Nov. 19 email, described what he saw in a press conference that day featuring Giuliani and Powell as "Really crazy stuff. And damaging."

Dominion's legal case rests on its belief that Fox News employees deliberately amplified false claims that the company had changed votes in the 2020 election, and that Fox provided a platform for guests to make false and defamatory statements.

Attorneys for Fox argued in a counterclaim unsealed Thursday that the lawsuit is an assault on the First Amendment. They said Dominion has advanced "novel defamation theories" and is seeking a "staggering" damage figure aimed at generating headlines, chilling protected speech and enriching Dominion's private equity owner, Staple Street Capital Partners.

"Dominion brought this lawsuit to punish FNN for reporting on one of the biggest stories of the day — allegations by the sitting President of the United States and his surrogates that the 2020 election was affected by fraud," the counterclaim states. "The very fact of those allegations was newsworthy."

Fox attorneys have noted that Carlson repeatedly questioned Powell's claims in his broadcasts. "When we kept pressing, she got angry and told us to stop contacting her," Carlson told viewers on Nov. 19, 2020.

Fox attorneys say Dominion's own public relations firm expressed skepticism in December 2020 as to whether the network's coverage was defamatory. They also point to an email from Oct. 30, 2020, just days before the election, in which Dominion's director of product strategy and security complained that the company's products were "just riddled with bugs."

In their counterclaim, Fox attorneys wrote that when voting-technology companies denied the allegations being made by Trump and his surrogates, Fox News aired those denials, while some Fox News hosts offered protected opinion commentary about Trump's allegations.

"Freedom of speech and freedom of the press would be illusory if the prevailing side in a public controversy could sue the press for giving a forum to the losing side," Fox attorneys wrote.

Fox attorneys warn that threatening the company with a \$1.6 billion judgment will cause other media outlets to think twice about what they report.

Responses by both sides to the briefs made public on Thursday remain under seal. Fox has said Dominion's filing includes "cherry-picked quotes stripped of key context," and that it has refused to allow Fox to make its response to Dominion's brief public. Attorneys for Fox and Dominion told The Associated Press on Friday that responses to the briefs will remain under seal until Feb. 27.

Dominion on Friday filed its own challenge to the redactions in the briefs, including its own. "Dominion's position is that nothing in these three briefs warrants confidential treatment," attorneys for the company wrote, adding that all redactions were done at Fox's request.

If either side can persuade Superior Court Judge Eric Davis to grant summary judgment in its favor, the case will end without a jury trial. If not, the trial is scheduled to begin in mid-April.

In its 192-page brief, Dominion said the judge should rule in its favor because "no reasonable juror could find in Fox's favor on each element of Dominion's defamation claim." Dominion attorneys also assert that no reasonable juror could find in favor of Fox's "neutral reportage" and "fair report" defenses.

"Recounts and audits conducted by election officials across the U.S. repeatedly confirmed the election's outcome, including specifically that Dominion's machines accurately counted votes," Dominion's filing states.

Fox News attorneys argue the network's coverage and commentary are not defamatory and that there is no evidence the hosts had any malicious intent behind what they said about Dominion — an important legal standard in First Amendment cases.

Davis ruled last month that, for the purposes of the defamation claims, he will consider Dominion to be a public figure. That means Dominion must prove by a preponderance of the evidence that the Fox defendants acted with actual malice or reckless disregard for the truth.

Fetterman case highlights common stroke, depression link

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

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Pennsylvania Democratic Sen. John Fetterman is seeking treatment for severe depression months after having a stroke.

Here's what's known about the conditions.

WHAT IS A STROKE?

Strokes are a leading cause of death worldwide and affect almost 800,000 Americans each year. The World Health Organization estimates that about 1 in 4 people will have a stroke at some point in their lives.

Fetterman had the most common kind of stroke, caused by clots that block a blood vessel to the brain. The less common kind is due to a burst or bleeding blood vessel.

Brain cells can begin to die within minutes. There can be one-sided paralysis and problems with speech and cognition, but quick treatment with clot-busting medication can lead to a full or partial recovery.

Fetterman, 53, had a serious stroke last May, and went on to win a highly publicized Senate race against GOP challenger Mehmet Oz. The aftereffects include difficulty processing spoken conversation, but his doctor has said his thinking ability is intact.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is a mood disorder that can cause intense feelings of persistent sadness, anxiety and hopelessness. It is thought to impair the function of chemicals that carry messages between brain cells.

Depression affects about 16 million Americans every year, or about 1 in 6 adults globally.

Fetterman had bouts of depression before his stroke and his office announced Thursday that he had checked himself into Walter Reed National Military Medical Center to treat his depression, which worsened recently.

Depression is typically treated with medication and psychotherapy. Studies have shown both can help post-stroke depression, but more research is needed to determine which antidepressants are most effective after strokes, according to guidance from the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association.

IS THERE A LINK BETWEEN STROKES AND DEPRESSION?

Depression occurs after a stroke in about 1 in 3 patients, said Dr. Will Cronenwett, psychiatry chief at Northwestern University's Feinberg medical school.

There may be a biological reason, with some evidence suggesting that strokes might cause brain changes that lead to thinking difficulties affecting how people perceive the world, and that in turn could lead to depression, Cronenwett said.

Strokes can also have a psychological impact, making it hard for some people to accept that they may have new limitations. In some people, that adjustment can lead to depression.

"Depression doesn't have to happen immediately after a stroke; it can happen years later. But living as a stroke survivor does raise your risk for having depressive episodes," Cronenwett said.

U-Haul rampage victim died striving for 'American dream'

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Three years ago, YiJie Ye was on a routine delivery run in Brooklyn on his motorized scooter when he was in a crash with another vehicle. The collision left the father of three injured and unable to work, but soon he was back on the road supporting his children.

On Monday, he was hit again, though this time it was no accident. Ye was one of nine people struck by a U-Haul driven by a man who authorities said went on a nearly hourlong rampage, barreling into bicyclists, moped riders, a police car and one pedestrian before he was captured.

Eight people survived the attack. Ye did not.

By his relatives' account, Ye was a devoted single father who worked day and night to support his twin sons and a daughter, all teenagers. He died doing a dangerous job, one of the legions of takeout food workers zipping 24-hours a day through New York City's sometimes inhospitable streets.

"He's a first generation immigrant who was pursuing the American Dream for his kids," said Mike Chen, whose wife, Jessy, is Ye's cousin.

Ye arrived from China 18 years ago and made a living scooting from place to place to deliver food. When

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business was slow, he'd collect recyclables from city streets to supplement his income, said Chen, who owns the Brooklyn apartment building where Ye lived with his children, 2 miles (3 kilometers) from where he was run down.

It was just weeks ago when Ye and his relatives had gathered for a meal to celebrate the Lunar New Year. "He had a lot of big plans for his kids, like going to college and be able to support themselves and make great contributions to society. But right now, everything just shattered," said Chen, whose wife set up a gofundme fundraiser to help Ye's family.

Mayor Eric Adams called the incident a "horrific story."

"A father was raising his children, young children, and he was the one that died in this incident," the mayor said earlier this week.

Authorities arrested Weng Sor, 62, and charged him with murder in Ye's death.

Police said Sor was suffering from an apparent mental health crisis when he mowed down bicyclists, moped riders and at least one pedestrian over 48 minutes. After his arrest, Sor told police he believed it was "judgment day" and that he had driven the truck at "the people that disturbed him the most," a prosecutor said during Sor's initial court appearance.

That many of the U-Haul's victims were on bikes or scooters was not lost on those who make a living delivering food and groceries.

Dachuan Nie, the president of the International Alliance of Delivery Workers, expressed sympathy for Ye's family.

Everyday, he said, delivery workers face danger from cars, trucks and buses.

"They will face accidents everyday, every time they are working," Nie said.

Ye was injured on Feb. 18, 2020, in a collision with a car less than 2 miles (3 kilometers) from home, according to a police report. He sued the motorist, claiming the driver ran a red light. The case was still pending when he was killed Monday. His attorney did not respond to requests for an interview.

After he was struck by the U-Haul, Ye wasn't able to speak and authorities had trouble tracking his next of kin.

"I was reading the news about the U-Haul rampage in the morning and I never associated anything with my cousin until I received a phone call from a police officer," Chen said.

He was told that Ye had been critically injured. By the time relatives and Ye's children arrived at the hospital, he was dead.

"We missed the chance to have a last word," Chen said.

Fed's Barkin: 'Slow progress' on inflation, sees more hikes

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A top Federal Reserve official downplayed recent signs that the economy is strengthening, but also said he is prepared to keep raising interest rates in smaller increments as often as needed to quell inflation.

Richmond Federal Reserve President Thomas Barkin said Friday that recent data showing an unusually robust job gain and a spike in retail sales last month reflected in part the impact of warm weather and the government's seasonal adjustment process, rather than an acceleration of growth that could push inflation higher.

"I'm not taking as much signal from the data that we've gotten recently," Barkin said in a roundtable with reporters. Though he added that could change "if you start to see it for multiple months." Barkin is a member of the Fed's 19-person interest rate setting committee.

The strong jobs and retail sales reports, along with hotter-than-expected inflation figures, have prompted several Wall Street economists to pencil in more interest rate hikes by the Fed this year. Those increases will likely raise borrowing costs for mortgages, auto loans, credit cards and for business loans.

Economists from Bank of America and Goldman Sachs both now expect the Fed will lift rates to a range of 5.25% to 5.5%, a quarter-point higher than the Fed itself projected at its December meeting. Its rate is currently 4.5% to 4.75%, the highest in 15 years.

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Barkin's comments follow tougher talk from other Fed officials earlier this week, such as Cleveland Fed president Loretta Mester, which has pushed stock and bond prices lower as investors increasingly expect more rate hikes.

In his remarks, Barkin also cautioned that measures of underlying inflation remain high and may require additional rate increases. He said he was comfortable with raising rates a quarter-point at a time, rather than moving back to the larger increases of a half-point or more that the Fed implemented last year.

"I like the (quarter-point) path because I believe it gives us the flexibility to respond to the economy as it comes in," he said. "And that means that I'm comfortable raising rates potentially more often to a higher level."

On Thursday, Mester said that she had seen a "compelling" case to raise the Fed's benchmark rate by a half-point at its Feb. 1 meeting, the same increase it implemented in December. Instead, the Fed put in place a quarter-point hike.

Inflation accelerated from December to January, and core prices excluding food and energy also rose more quickly than economists expected. Overall, prices were 6.4% higher last month compared with a year ago, barely below December's 6.5% reading.

"It is welcome news to see some moderation in inflation readings since last summer, but the level of inflation matters and it is still too high," Mester said. Last month's report showed "no improvement in underlying inflation."

St. Louis Fed President James Bullard also said Thursday he would have preferred a half-point hike Feb. 1, according to news reports. He said he wanted to move the Fed's rate to a range of 5.25% to 5.5% as fast as possible.

Barkin, however, said he did not support quickly pushing rates to a specific point and then pausing. He said there is too much uncertainty about the economy's future path and what impact the Fed's rate increases will have and when to take that approach. Instead, he prefers quarter-point hikes as needed to bring down inflation.

Tank plant in small Ohio city plays big role in Ukraine war

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

LIMA, Ohio (AP) — Thousands of miles from the front lines, a sprawling manufacturing plant in the small midwestern city of Lima, Ohio, is playing a critical role in the effort to arm Ukraine as it fends off the Russian invasion.

Owned by the Army and operated by General Dynamics, the plant is expected to refurbish Abrams tanks for the U.S. to send to Ukraine, and is already preparing to build an updated version of the vehicle for Poland, U.S. Army officials said Thursday as they toured the facility.

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth, who walked through the plant with a number of other Army leaders and senior officers, said it's highly likely the plant will provide the tanks for Ukraine.

"We're still looking at options for exactly what variant of tanks will be provided to the Ukrainians. I think there's still a little bit to be worked out, but certainly, the tanks being built here in Lima are central," she said.

An Associated Press reporter was allowed to accompany Wormuth on the tour, the first journalist to walk the production lines since the U.S. pledged Abrams tanks to Ukraine.

U.S. officials have declined to provide details about the Abrams that will eventually go to Ukraine, saying they have to decide whether to send refurbished older Army tanks, Marine tanks or some other version. But in most cases, the tanks would need upgrades at the Lima plant before being shipped to Ukraine's battlefield.

"Part of it is figuring out — among the different options — what's the best one that can allow us to get the Ukrainians tanks in as timely a fashion as we can," without disrupting foreign military sales, Wormuth said.

Officials said Thursday that production totals at the plant — which is formally called Joint Systems Manufacturing Center-Lima — vary, based on contract demands. And while the plant is currently building 15-20

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armored vehicles per month — including tanks — it can easily boost that to 33 a month and could add another shift of workers and build even more if needed.

Wormuth said the timeline on sending Abrams to Ukraine depends on whether the U.S. takes tanks from existing American military training stocks or from Army units, which would be less desirable because it could affect their readiness to fight. And the development of tanks for Ukraine would also have to be squeezed in between the current contracts for foreign sales, which include 250 of the newest versions for Poland and about 75 for Australia.

In a dramatic reversal, the Biden administration announced in January that it will send 31 M1A2 Abrams tanks to Ukraine — after insisting for months that the 70-ton battle powerhouses were too complicated and too hard to maintain and repair. The decision was part of a broader political maneuver that opened the door for Germany to announce it would send its Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine and allow Poland and other allies to do the same.

Ukrainian leaders have pressed for the Abrams, which first deployed to war in 1991 and has thick armor, a 120 mm main gun, armor-piercing capabilities and advanced targeting systems. It runs on thick tracked wheels and has a 1,500-horsepower turbine engine with a top speed of about 42 miles per hour (68 kilometers per hour).

As she walked the production lanes in the 25-acre building, Wormuth got to see the newest version of the Abrams as it transformed from an empty steel hull into a shiny, newly painted tank — a process that takes 18 to 24 months. The U.S. doesn't build new tanks from scratch. It has a fleet of about 2,500 Abrams, and takes older tanks, tears them down and uses the empty hull as a starting point to build a new one. Some hulls have been refurbished multiple times.

Across the aisle from one empty hull, sparks flew as a worker welded pieces of the tank together. In another section, a worker showed where they will install a new auxiliary engine in the latest version, which will run on diesel when needed to save on the large amount of jet engine fuel the tank consumes. And, farther down the lane, workers had laid out the two rows of tracks the Abrams runs on, preparing to install them on one of the tank bodies. The tracks stretch out more than 60 feet (18 meters) and weigh two tons on each side.

Roughly 800 people work at the plant, which is spread across 369 acres in northwest Ohio. Its 1.6 million square feet of manufacturing space is the only place where the M1A2 Abrams is made. About 45% of the workers are focused on the tank, but the plant also churns out Stryker armored vehicles, tank support vehicles and some other equipment.

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said in a statement that Wormuth's visit to his state and the plant underscored the administration's commitment to U.S. troops and to Ukraine. "I'll keep working with the Army to ensure that Ukrainians have the assistance they need to fight back against Russia," said Brown, who had a staff member join the plant tour with Wormuth.

As Wormuth wrapped up her visit with a look at some of the finished tanks in another building, a long line of the newest Abrams sat outside on nearby train tracks. And as she was preparing to leave, the train cars began to move, taking the tanks on to Fort Hood, Texas, where they'll get their radios and other equipment before going to their final destination with an Army unit.

Speaking to reporters afterward, Wormuth said the Army will invest about \$558 million into improvements at the plant over the next 15 years. Some of those include expanded use of robotics.

"I think as the war in Ukraine has shown everyone here, there's a real need to level up our defense industrial base," she said. "The plant here in Lima is part of that."

New this week: Pink, J-Hope, 'Woman King,' 'Hello Tomorrow!'

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

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— Just a week after hitting theaters the neo-noir thriller “Sharper,” anchored by Julianne Moore, arrives on Apple TV+ on Friday. No one is quite who they seem in the film, directed by Benjamin Caron, whose credits include “Andor” and “The Crown,” as we delve into myriad cons among New York’s well-heeled set. In his review, AP Film Writer Jake Coyle wrote that the “slinky, slick caper that finds ways to distort expectations while unfolding a puzzle-box narrative. Before its lesser third act, ‘Sharper’ — propelled especially by the performances of newcomer Briana Middleton and the more veteran Sebastian Stan — manages to juggle its plot twists with panache.”

— Gina Prince-Bythewood’s action epic “The Woman King” arrives on Netflix on Thursday, perfect for a rewatch or to finally get those holdouts on board with one of last year’s most exciting mainstream blockbusters. The film starring Viola Davis as an African warrior was widely expected to get some Oscar nominations but was wholly shut out from every category. Prince-Bythewood wrote a moving essay in The Hollywood Reporter recently reflecting on the state of the industry, in which her film was a critical and audience hit, but still missed out on awards recognition. “It’s not a snub,” she wrote. “It’s a reflection of where the Academy stands and the consistent chasm between Black excellence and recognition.”

— If you’ve already made it through last week’s streaming rom-com options, “Somebody I Used to Know” on Prime Video, and “Your Place or Mine” on Netflix, another starry offering is coming to video on demand in time for Valentine’s Day viewing. “Maybe I Do,” available to rent on Tuesday, brings together Diane Keaton, Richard Gere, Susan Sarandon, Emma Roberts, Luke Bracey and William H. Macy for a classic meet-the-parents set up.

— AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr

MUSIC

— You can take away Pink’s dinner, fun, liquor, soul, dog, birthday cake and everything she loves but don’t take away her dancing shoes. That’s the message from “Never Gonna Not Dance Again,” an explosion of pop she wrote with hitmakers Max Martin and Shellback, with a video of Pink roller-dancing through a supermarket. The single is on “Trustfall,” her ninth studio album set for release on Friday, which features appearances from The Lumineers, Chris Stapleton and First Aid Kit. It’s “an exploration of the highs and lows of uncertainty, freedom and letting go.”

— BTS star J-Hope has a documentary dropping Friday that chronicles three milestones: the making of the singer’s first solo album, “Jack In the Box,” his 2022 Lollapalooza performance as the first South Korean artist to headline the festival and the album’s listening party. “J-Hope in the Box” will release globally on Disney+. J-Hope — born Jeong Hoseok — is on hiatus from BTS while the rest of the band — RM, Jin, Suga, Jimin, V, and Jung Kook — fulfill their mandatory military duties in South Korea.

— Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy

TELEVISION

— Billy Crudup stars in a new Apple TV+ series called “Hello Tomorrow!” Set in the future — which looks like a mashup of “The Jetsons” and “Pleasantville,” Crudup plays Jack, a traveling salesman of lunar timeshares. He is a leader among his colleagues (including Hank Azaria) for his unwavering optimism and sales numbers, but beneath the surface, life isn’t so perfect and there’s a darker side to Jack who has secrets he doesn’t want revealed. “Hello Tomorrow!” debuts Friday.

— Roseanne Barr has been relatively quiet since she was fired from ABC in 2018. At the time, the comedian was riding high from the success of a “Roseanne” revival in 2018. Things turned when Barr posted a racist tweet, (which she apologized for), prompting ABC to quickly cut ties and cancel the sitcom. Now, Barr has taped her first comedy special in almost 20 years and has taken it to the streaming service Fox Nation. The one-hour set called “Roseanne Barr: Cancel This” was filmed in front of an audience in Houston. Fox Nation will also debut a documentary about Barr called “Who is Roseanne Barr?” Both debut Monday.

— Alicia Rancilio

VIDEO GAMES

— Hunting games have come a long way since 1984’s Duck Hunt, with the prey getting ever more ferocious while the weaponry gets ever more elaborate. Capcom’s Monster Hunter series has dominated the genre lately, but Electronic Arts is getting in on the action with Wild Hearts, from the Japanese studio

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best known for the hack-and-slash franchise Dynasty Warriors. You start off with a simple katana, but Wild Hearts' "Karakuri" feature lets you build defensive structures, traps and vehicles on the fly. You'll need all the firepower you can muster to take down these magic-fueled behemoths — but, fortunately, you can invite friends to help out. The hunt begins Friday on PlayStation 5, Xbox X/S and PC.

— Then again, maybe you like wild animals. Blanc, from the French studio Casus Ludi, would be more up your alley. It's the tale of a fawn and a wolf cub who get lost in a snowstorm and help each other find their way back to their families. The critters are adorable, and the hand-drawn, black-and-white landscapes are elegantly gorgeous. Blanc is a quiet, nonviolent, cooperative journey — maybe ideal for teaming up with a young child on the couch or online. It will be available Tuesday on Nintendo Switch and PC.

Indian authorities accuse BBC of tax evasion after searches

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India's Finance Ministry accused the BBC of tax evasion on Friday, saying that it had not fully declared its income and profits from its operations in the country.

Indian tax authorities ended three days of searches of the British broadcaster's New Delhi and Mumbai offices on Thursday night. Opposition political parties and other media organizations have criticized the searches as an attempt to intimidate the media.

Critics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have also questioned the timing of the searches, which came weeks after the BBC aired a documentary in the U.K. that was critical of Modi.

"The department gathered several evidences pertaining to the operation of the organization which indicate that tax has not been paid on certain remittances which have not been disclosed as income in India by the foreign entities of the group," the Central Board of Direct Taxes said in a statement.

It said they found "several discrepancies and inconsistencies" and had gathered "crucial evidence" from statements of employees, digital evidence and documents which would be examined more fully later.

The statement also accused the BBC of not paying full taxes on the earnings of employees who came from abroad and worked in India for short durations.

The BBC said in a statement that it would "respond appropriately to any direct formal communication received from the Income Tax Department."

"We are supporting staff — some of whom have faced lengthy questioning or been required to stay overnight — and their welfare is our priority. Our output is back to normal and we remain committed to serving our audiences in India and beyond," it said.

The Press Trust of India news agency cited unidentified officials as saying on Thursday that investigators collected financial data from select BBC staffers and made copies of electronic and paper data from the news organization.

It said the authorities were investigating issues related to international taxation and transfer pricing of BBC subsidiary companies.

The leader of India's main opposition Congress party, Mallikarjun Kharge, described the search of the BBC offices as an assault on freedom of the press under Modi's government.

Reporters Without Borders, an international media watchdog, denounced the government's action as "attempts to clamp down on independent media."

"These raids have all the appearance of a reprisal against the BBC for releasing a documentary critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi three weeks ago. They have come at a time when independent media are being hounded more and more, and when pluralism is shrinking in India due to increased media concentration," the group said in a statement on Thursday.

The documentary, "India: The Modi Question," was broadcast in the U.K. last month, examining the prime minister's role in 2002 anti-Muslim riots in the western state of Gujarat, where he was chief minister at the time. More than 1,000 people were killed in the violence.

Modi has denied allegations that authorities under his watch allowed and even encouraged the bloodshed, and the Supreme Court said it found no evidence to prosecute him. Last year, the court dismissed

a petition filed by a Muslim victim questioning Modi's exoneration.

The program drew an immediate backlash from India's government, which invoked emergency powers under its information technology laws to block it from being shown in the country. Local authorities scrambled to stop screenings organized at Indian universities, and social media platforms including Twitter and YouTube complied with government requests to remove links to the documentary.

The BBC said at the time that the documentary was "rigorously researched" and involved a wide range of voices and opinions.

"We offered the Indian Government a right to reply to the matters raised in the series — it declined to respond," it said.

India's Foreign Ministry called the documentary a "propaganda piece designed to push a particularly discredited narrative" that lacked objectivity.

Bruce Willis has frontotemporal dementia. What is FTD?

By The Associated Press undefined

Bruce Willis' family has announced that he has been diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia.

The announcement Thursday came about a year after his family said that Willis would step away from acting after being diagnosed with aphasia, a brain disorder that leads to speaking, reading and writing problems.

Here's some details on the condition:

WHAT IS FRONTOTEMPORAL DEMENTIA?

There are different types of dementia, and the frontotemporal form affects regions in the front and sides of the brain. Because it causes problems with behavior and language, aphasia can be a symptom.

It's caused by damage to neurons, the brain's information carriers, but the underlying reasons for a particular case are often unclear. People with a family history of the condition are more likely to develop it. It's rare and tends to happen at a younger age than other forms of dementia, between ages 45 and 65.

The terms frontotemporal disorders and frontotemporal dementia are sometimes shortened to FTD.

WHAT ARE OTHER SYMPTOMS OF FTD?

Symptoms can include emotional problems and physical difficulties, such as trouble walking. Symptoms tend to worsen over time, though progression varies by person.

The statement from the actor's family said communication problems "are just one symptom of the disease Bruce faces."

CAN FTD BE TREATED?

There are no treatments to slow or stop the disease, but some interventions can help manage symptoms.

Some patients receive antidepressants or drugs for Parkinson's, which has some overlapping symptoms with frontotemporal dementia. Many also work with speech therapists to manage communication difficulties and physical therapists to try to improve movement.

People with the condition are more likely to have complications from things like falls, injuries or infections. The average life expectancy after symptoms emerge is seven to 13 years, according to researchers.

Battered by Cheneso, Madagascar braces for Cyclone Freddy

WANJOHI KABUKURU Associated Press

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) — Two weeks after Tropical Cyclone Cheneso devastated Madagascar, killing 30 people, the Indian Ocean island nation and its neighbors are bracing for a more powerful Cyclone Freddy.

Meteo France has described Freddy as an "intense tropical cyclone" and a "particularly powerful and compact tropical system, generating extreme winds near its center." The much smaller islands of Mauritius and Reunion are on high alert as Freddy — churning westward on Friday about 2,000 kilometers (about 1,242 miles) east of Mauritius — was expected to cause flooding there Sunday and Monday.

In its latest briefing Friday afternoon, the United Nations regional weather observation center in Reunion said Freddy, which formed two weeks ago near Indonesia, was expected to make landfall early next week

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with the equivalent strength of a formidable Category 5 hurricane.

Another cyclone, Dingani, was weakening.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent in Madagascar said it was mobilizing its teams for the cyclone.

Madagascar's General Directorate of Meteorology has issued alerts for the Analanjirifo and Sava regions warning residents to take preventive measures as they expect a more powerful Freddy to make landfall, between Tuesday and Wednesday next week on the country's east coast.

The mainland African coastal nations of Mozambique and South Africa, alongside Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe, were on high alert for heavy rains and thunderstorms from Freddy in the coming week.

Key moments in a year of war after Russia invaded Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

The war in Ukraine that began a year ago has killed thousands, forced millions to flee their homes, reduced entire cities to rubble and has fueled fears the confrontation could slide into an open conflict between Russia and NATO.

A look at some of the main events in the conflict.

2022

FEBRUARY

On Feb. 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin launches an invasion of Ukraine from the north, east and south. He says the "special military operation" is aimed at "demilitarization" and "denazification" of the country to protect ethnic Russians, prevent Kyiv's NATO membership and to keep it in Russia's "sphere of influence." Ukraine and the West say it's an illegal act of aggression against a country with a democratically elected government and a Jewish president whose relatives were killed in the Holocaust.

Russian troops quickly reach Kyiv's outskirts, but their attempts to capture the capital and other cities in the northeast meet stiff resistance. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy records a video outside his headquarters to show he is staying and remains in charge.

MARCH

On March 2, Russia claims control of the southern city of Kherson. In the opening days of March, Russian forces also seize the rest of the Kherson region and occupy a large part of the neighboring Zaporizhzhia region, including the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Europe's largest.

The Russian army soon gets stuck near Kyiv, and its convoys — stretching along highways leading to the Ukrainian capital — become easy prey for Ukrainian artillery and drones. On March 16, Russia strikes a theater in the strategic port city of Mariupol where civilians had been sheltering, killing hundreds of people in one of the war's deadliest attacks.

Moscow announces the withdrawal of forces from Kyiv and other areas March 29, saying it will focus on the eastern industrial heartland of the Donbas, where Russia-backed separatists have fought Ukrainian forces since 2014 following the illegal annexation of Crimea.

APRIL

The Russian pullback from Kyiv reveals hundreds of bodies of civilians in mass graves or left in the streets of the town of Bucha, many of them bearing signs of torture in scenes that prompt world leaders to say Russia should be held accountable for possible war crimes.

On April 9, a Russian missile strike on a train station in the eastern city of Kramatorsk kills 52 civilians and wounds over 100.

Intense battles rage for Mariupol on the Sea of Azov, and Russian air strikes and artillery bombardment reduce much of it to ruins.

On April 13, the missile cruiser Moskva, the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, is hit by Ukrainian missiles and sinks the next day, damaging national pride.

MAY

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On May 16, Ukrainian defenders of the giant Azovstal steel mill, the last remaining Ukrainian stronghold in Mariupol, agree to surrender to Russian forces after a nearly three-month siege. Mariupol's fall cuts Ukraine off from the Azov coast and secures a land corridor from the Russian border to Crimea.

On May 18, Finland and Sweden submit their applications to join NATO in a major blow to Moscow over the expansion of the military alliance.

JUNE

More Western weapons flow into Ukraine, including U.S.-supplied HIMARS multiple rocket launchers.

On June 30, Russian troops pull back from Snake Island, located off the Black Sea port of Odesa and seized in the opening days of the invasion.

JULY

On July 22, Russia and Ukraine, with mediation by Turkey and the United Nations, agree on a deal to unblock supplies of grain stuck in Ukraine's Black Sea ports, ending a standoff that threatened global food security.

On July 29, a missile strike hits a prison in the Russia-controlled eastern town of Olenivka where Ukrainian soldiers captured in Mariupol were held, killing at least 53. Ukraine and Russia trade blame for the attack.

AUGUST

On Aug. 9, powerful explosions strike an air base in Crimea. More blasts hit a power substation and ammunition depots there a week later, signaling the vulnerability of the Moscow-annexed Black Sea peninsula that Russia has used as a major supply hub for the war. Ukraine's top military officer later acknowledges that the attacks on Crimea were launched by Kyiv's forces.

On Aug. 20, Darya Dugina, the daughter of Russian nationalist ideologist Alexander Dugin, dies in a car bomb explosion outside Moscow that the Russian authorities blame on Ukraine.

SEPTEMBER

On Sept. 6, the Ukrainian forces launch a surprise counteroffensive in the northeastern Kharkiv region, quickly forcing Russia to pull back from broad areas held for months.

On Sept. 21, Putin orders mobilization of 300,000 reservists, an unpopular move that prompts hundreds of thousands of Russian men to flee to neighboring countries to avoid recruitment. At the same time, Russia hastily stages illegal "referendums" in Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions on whether to become part of Russia. The votes are widely dismissed as a sham by Ukraine and the West.

On Sept. 30, Putin signs documents to annex the four regions at a Kremlin ceremony.

OCTOBER

On Oct. 8, a truck laden with explosives blows up on the bridge linking Crimea to Russia's mainland in an attack that Putin blames on Ukraine. Russia responds with missile strikes on Ukraine's power plants and other key infrastructure.

After the first wave of attacks on Oct. 10, the barrage continues on a regular basis in the months that follow, resulting in blackouts and power rationing across the country.

NOVEMBER

On Nov. 9, Russia announces a pullback from the city of Kherson under a Ukrainian counteroffensive, abandoning the only regional center Moscow captured, in a humiliating retreat for the Kremlin.

DECEMBER

On Dec. 5, the Russian military says Ukraine used drones to target two bases for long-range bombers deep inside Russian territory. Another strike takes place later in the month, underlining Ukraine's readiness to up the ante and revealing gaps in Russian defenses.

On Dec. 21, Zelenskyy visits the United States on his first trip abroad since the war began, meeting with President Joe Biden to secure Patriot air defense missile systems and other weapons and addressing Congress.

2023

JANUARY

On Jan. 1, just moments into the New Year, scores of freshly mobilized Russian soldiers are killed by a Ukrainian missile strike on the city of Makiivka. Russia's Defense Ministry says 89 troops were killed, while

Ukrainian officials put the death toll in the hundreds.

After months of ferocious fighting, Russia declares the capture of the salt-mining town of Soledar on Jan. 12, although Kyiv does not acknowledge it until days later. Moscow also presses its offensive to seize the Ukrainian stronghold of Bakhmut.

On Jan. 14, when Russia launches another wave of strikes on Ukraine's energy facilities, a Russian missile hits an apartment building in the city of Dnipro, killing 45.

Ukrainian refugees safe, but not at peace, after year of war

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Months after Russian forces occupied southern Ukraine's Kherson province last year, they started paying visits to the home of a Ukrainian woman and her Russian husband. They smashed their refrigerator and demanded possession of their car. One day, they seized the wife and her teenage daughter, put pillowcases over their heads and led them away.

The woman was locked up for days, her legs beaten with a hammer. The men accused her of revealing Russian soldiers' locations. They subjected her to electric shocks and bore down on her feet with the heels of their military boots until two of her toes broke. She heard screams nearby and feared they came from her daughter.

More than once, with a bag on her head and her hands tied, a weapon was pointed at her head. She'd feel the muzzle at her temple, and a man started counting.

One. Two. Two and a half.

Then, a shot fired to the floor.

"Although at that moment, it seemed to me that it would be better in my head," she told The Associated Press, recounting the torture that lasted five days, counted by the sliver of sunlight from a tiny window in the room. "The only thing that kept me strong was the awareness that my child was somewhere around."

The Russian officials eventually released the woman and her daughter, she said, and she made her way home. She took a long shower and packed a bag, and the two fled the occupied area — first to Russian-occupied Crimea and then to mainland Russia, from where they crossed by land into Latvia and finally Poland.

Her body was still bruised, and she could barely walk. But in December in Warsaw, she reunited with a son. And she and her daughter joined the refugees who have fled their homes since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Nearly a year has passed since the Feb. 24, 2022, invasion sent millions fleeing across Ukraine's border into neighboring Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova and Romania. Crowds of terrified, exhausted people boarded trains and waited for days at border crossings.

Across Europe, about 8 million refugees have been recorded, according to U.N. estimates based on data from national governments, and nearly 5 million of those have applied for temporary protection. Experts say those numbers are fluid — some people apply in more than one country — but they agree it's the largest movement of refugees in Europe since World War II. Unlike refugees from recent conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, the Ukrainians were largely met with an outpouring of sympathy and help.

Yet while the Ukrainian refugees have found safety, they have not found peace.

They suffer from trauma and loss — uprooted from their lives, separated from relatives, fearing for loved ones stuck in Russian-occupied areas or fighting on the frontline. Children are separated from fathers, grandparents, pets. Others have no family or homes to return to.

The woman from Kherson spoke to the AP this month at a Warsaw counseling center run in partnership with UNICEF. She insisted on anonymity; she fears for the safety of her husband and other relatives in Russian-occupied areas.

She doesn't like to talk about herself. But she has a goal: For the world to see what Russian troops are doing.

"Even now, I am afraid," she said, wiping her eyes with her pastel-color nails and fiddling over a tissue. "Do you understand?"

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She is among the refugees seeking trauma treatment, most often from Ukrainian psychologists who themselves fled home and struggle with their own grief and loss. No agency has definitive numbers on refugees in treatment, but experts say the psychological toll of the conflict is vast, with rates of anxiety and depression skyrocketing.

At the Warsaw center, psychologists describe treating crying children, teenagers separated from everything they know, mothers unknowingly transferring trauma to their kids.

One patient, a boy from Mariupol, was used as a human shield. His hair has already begun to turn gray. The home of the counselor who treats him was destroyed by a Russian bomb.

Refugee mental health is a priority for aid organizations large and small, even as they work to meet needs for housing, work and education.

Anastasiia Gudkova, a Ukrainian providing psychological support to refugees at a Norwegian Refugee Council reception center in Warsaw, said the most traumatized people she meets come from Mariupol, Kherson and other occupied territories. Those who flee bombing in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia also arrive terrified.

But there's pain for those even from relatively safer areas in western Ukraine, she said: "All Ukrainians, regardless of their location, are under a lot of stress."

According to the U.N. refugee agency, 90% of the Ukrainians who have sought refuge abroad are women, children and the elderly.

The psychologists see women struggle to put on a brave face for children, trying to survive in countries where they often don't speak the language. Many women with higher education have taken jobs cleaning other people's homes or working in restaurant kitchens.

The luckiest ones are able to keep doing their old jobs remotely from exile or are beginning to envision new lives.

Last January, Anastasia Lasna was planning to open her own bakery in Mykolaiv after finding success with providing other businesses with her vegan foods and healthy desserts. Today she is running a food pantry of the Jewish Community Center in Krakow, which has helped some 200,000 Ukrainian refugees, and integrating herself into the southern Polish city's growing Jewish community.

She has Israeli citizenship, but doesn't want to live in another conflict-scarred land. Joined now in Krakow by her husband and her 6-year-old daughter, she cannot imagine returning to her former home.

"There is no future there," she said.

But many refugees still dream of returning home. Their belief that Ukraine will eventually prevail helps them cope.

Last Feb. 23, Maryna Ptashnyk was in the Carpathian mountains celebrating her 31st birthday with her husband and daughter. For months, Russian forces had surrounded her country; waves of anxiety came as she pondered whether there would be "a big war." So she switched off her phone for her special day.

It was the last night of peace for Ukraine, the last night of normality for Ptashnyk. The next morning, her husband, Yevhen, woke her and told her Kyiv was being bombed.

Now Yevhen is in the Ukrainian army, serving in an artillery unit near Soledar in eastern Ukraine, an area of brutal fighting. Ptashnyk lives alone with their 3-year-old daughter, Polina, in a small suburban Warsaw apartment.

Though Polina is settling well into a Polish preschool, her mother sees the stress.

"For the last year she often asks me about death, about when we will die," she said.

Polina sees other children out with their fathers, but she's seen hers only three times since the war began. On a recent visit home, she embraced him. "Daddy's mine," she said.

For the woman from Kherson, trying to face the trauma from her torture is just one challenge. She also must find work to afford an apartment in Warsaw, which is now home to more Ukrainian refugees than any other city.

The influx of people has exacerbated a housing shortage and caused rental prices to surge amid high inflation — an issue in many countries welcoming refugees.

The mother finds herself struggling to create a home, a sense of normalcy. The physical pain and scars

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haunt her, but some days the lack of moral support hurts the most.

Her husband's family in Russia supports the invasion. Worst of all, he and other loved ones remain trapped in the Russian-occupied territory.

"I am safe now, but it is very dangerous there," she said. "And I can't know if they will survive."

TikTok plans 2 more European data centers amid privacy fears

LONDON (AP) — TikTok said Friday that it's planning two more European data centers, as the popular Chinese-owned video sharing app seeks to allay growing concerns about data privacy for its users in the West.

TikTok has been under fire from European and American authorities over concerns that it could scoop up masses of user data and send it to China.

The company's general manager for European operations, Rich Waterworth, said in a blog post that it is "at an advanced stage of finalizing a plan" with a third-party provider for a second data center in Ireland. It announced its first center there last year.

TikTok also is in talks to set up a third European data center, without specifying a location.

"Regarding local data storage, in line with the growth of our community, we're looking to expand our European data storage capacity," Waterworth said.

Data for European TikTok users will be migrated to the new centers starting this year, Waterworth said.

TikTok is wildly popular with young people, but its Chinese ownership has raised fears that Beijing could use it to collect data on Western users or push pro-China narratives and misinformation. TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company that moved its headquarters to Singapore in 2020.

A top European Union official warned CEO Shou Zi Chew last month that the company would have to comply with the 27-nation bloc's sweeping new digital rules.

The Digital Services Act mandates that online platforms and tech companies with 45 million or more users take extra steps aimed at cleaning up illegal content and disinformation or face potentially billions in fines.

TikTok reported Friday that it had 125 million monthly active users in the EU, putting it over the threshold for extra scrutiny under the new rules set to take effect later this year.

Including non-EU countries such as Britain and Switzerland, TikTok has 150 million users.

Google, Twitter, Apple and Facebook and Instagram will also face the stricter EU scrutiny, according to monthly user numbers they released in time for a Friday deadline.

Facebook has 255 million monthly active users, while Instagram has 250 million users, parent company Meta said. Twitter said it has 100.9 million users, including both registered users and those who didn't sign in.

Apple said its iOS App Store had more than 45 million users but didn't give a specific number. Google said its Search service has 332 million signed-in users, while YouTube has 401.7 million signed-in users.

Today in History: FEB 18, Michelangelo dies at age 88

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Feb. 18, the 49th day of 2023. There are 316 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 18, 2001, auto racing star Dale Earnhardt Sr. died in a crash at the Daytona 500; he was 49.

On this date:

In 1564, Michelangelo died in Rome at age 88.

In 1885, Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" was published in the U.S. for the first time (after being published in Britain and Canada).

In 1970, the "Chicago Seven" defendants were found not guilty of conspiring to incite riots at the 1968 Democratic national convention; five were convicted of violating the Anti-Riot Act of 1968 (those convictions were later reversed).

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In 1983, 13 people were shot to death at a gambling club in Seattle's Chinatown in what became known as the Wah Mee Massacre. (Two men were convicted of the killings and were sentenced to life in prison; a third was found guilty of robbery and assault.)

In 1984, Italy and the Vatican signed an accord under which Roman Catholicism ceased to be the state religion of Italy.

In 1988, Anthony M. Kennedy was sworn in as an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1994, at the Winter Olympic Games in Norway, U.S. speedskater Dan Jansen finally won a gold medal, breaking the world record in the 1,000 meters.

In 2001, veteran FBI agent Robert Philip Hanssen was arrested, accused of spying for Russia. (Hanssen later pleaded guilty to espionage and attempted espionage and was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.)

In 2003, an arson attack involving two South Korean subway trains in the city of Daegu claimed 198 lives. (The arsonist was sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 2004.)

In 2016, in what was seen as a criticism of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, Pope Francis said that a person who advocated building walls was "not Christian"; Trump quickly retorted it was "disgraceful" to question a person's faith. (A Vatican spokesman said the next day that the pope's comment was not intended as a "personal attack" on Trump.)

In 2020, President Donald Trump commuted the 14-year prison sentence of former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich for political corruption; Blagojevich left prison hours later and returned home to Chicago. (Trump also issued pardons or clemency to former New York City police commissioner Bernard Kerik, financier Michael Milken and a long list of others.)

Ten years ago: The European Union imposed trade and economic sanctions on North Korea while condemning "in the strongest terms" the nation's latest nuclear test. Robbers stole a reported \$50 million worth of diamonds from the hold of a Swiss-bound plane at Brussels' international airport; more than 30 people were later detained and some of the loot recovered. President Hugo Chavez returned to Venezuela after more than two months of treatment in Cuba following cancer surgery.

Five years ago: "Black Panther," the Marvel superhero film from the Walt Disney Co., blew past expectations to take in \$192 million during its debut weekend in U.S. and Canadian theaters. LeBron James scored 29 points and won his third NBA All-Star Game MVP award as his team beat the rival squad headed by Stephen Curry, 148-to-145.

One year ago: Spiking tensions in eastern Ukraine aggravated Western fears of a Russian invasion and a new war in Europe, with a humanitarian convoy hit by shelling and pro-Russian rebels evacuating civilians from the conflict zone. (Russia would invade Ukraine two days later.) Police arrested scores of demonstrators and towed away vehicles in Canada's besieged capital, and a stream of trucks started leaving under the pressure, raising authorities' hopes for an end to the three-week protest against the country's COVID-19 restrictions

Today's birthdays: Today's Birthdays: Singer Yoko Ono is 90. Singer-songwriter Bobby Hart is 84. Singer Irma Thomas is 82. Singer Herman Santiago (Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers) is 82. Actor Jess Walton is 77. Singer Dennis DeYoung is 76. Actor Sinead Cusack is 75. Actor Cybill Shepherd is 73. Singer Randy Crawford is 71. Actor John Travolta is 69. Actor John Pankow is 68. Game show host Vanna White is 66. Actor Jayne Atkinson is 64. Actor Greta Scacchi (SKAH'-kee) is 63. Actor Matt Dillon is 59. Rock musician Tommy Scott (Space) is 59.