

Groton Daily Independent

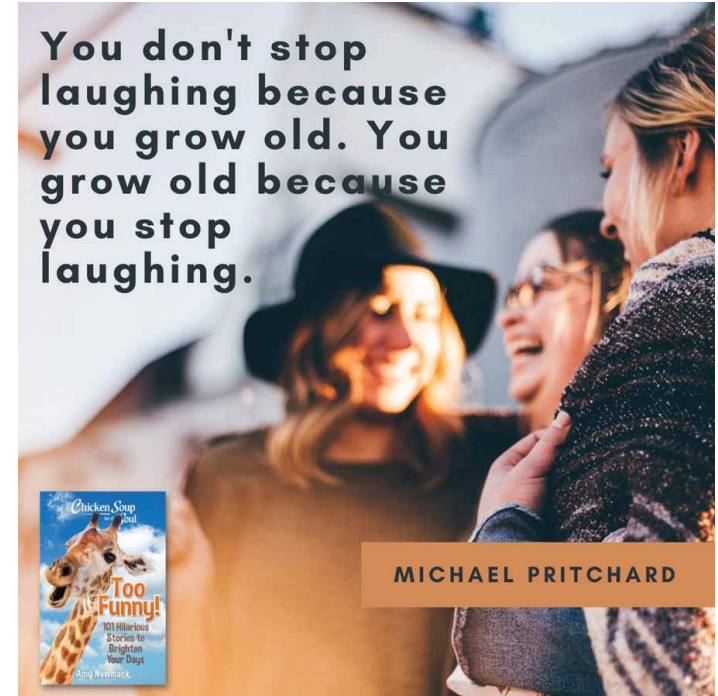
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About 6-8 inches of snow has fallen overnight and is continuing to fall this morning. The blizzard warning remains in effect until Noon today for our area. It is best to stay home until the city has a chance to plow the streets. There are many drifts that will hamper traffic.

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

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



Groton Community Calendar Thursday, Feb. 23

NO SCHOOL TODAY

Senior Menu: Roast pork, mashed potatoes and gravy, cauliflower and broccoli, apple sauce, whole wheat bread.

Moved to Monday: Region 1A Girls Basketball

Friday, Feb. 24

Senior Menu: Chili, cornbread, coleslaw, pears.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Fish nuggets, tritaters.

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. (C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity.

Saturday, Feb. 25

Region 1A Girls Basketball Tournament at Milbank: Groton Area vs. Waubay-Summit around 2:30 p.m.

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.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

ment in East Palestine, Ohio. During his visit yesterday, Trump reassured residents they are "not forgotten."

- Eric Ronald Holder Jr., the gang member convicted of killing rapper Nipsey Hussle, was sentenced to 60 years to life in prison.
- At least two have died, and six others have been injured following a coal mine collapse in Inner Mongolia, China. Search and rescue operations continue as more than 50 people remain trapped.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia has accused Ukraine of planning to stage a false flag attack as a pretext for Kyiv invading Moldova's breakaway Transnistria region, adding to tensions between Moscow and Chisinau that have accused the Kremlin of trying to destabilize the country.

- Keith Melvin Moses has been identified as the 19-year-old gunman involved in a Florida shooting spree in which a 9-year-old girl and TV journalist were killed.

- More snow, ice and frigid temperatures are on tap for millions across the western, midwestern, and northern U.S. due to a powerful winter storm. Minnesota is bracing for another round of snow; hundreds of flights have already been canceled.

- Donald Trump was mocked after touting his gift of "Trump Water" to residents impacted by the train derail-

State Offices to Remain Closed in Certain Counties, Reopen at Noon

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Gov. Kristi Noem ordered state government executive branch offices in certain counties to remain closed until noon on Thursday, Feb. 23, because of the winter storms in South Dakota.

State offices will remain closed until noon in the following counties: Aurora, Beadle, Brookings, Brown, Buffalo, Campbell, Clark, Codington, Davison, Day, Deuel, Douglas, Edmunds, Faulk, Grant, Hamlin, Hand, Hanson, Hutchinson, Hyde, Jerauld, Kingsbury, Lake, Lincoln, Marshall, McCook, McPherson, Miner, Minnehaha, Moody, Potter, Sanborn, Spink, Sully, Turner, and Walworth.

While executive branch offices in these counties will be closed, state employees will be working remotely.

Much of the eastern part of the state remains in a blizzard warning until 12pm Thursday. The western part and the southeasternmost portion of the state will be in a winter storm warning.

Citizens should be prepared to stay home if possible. Many state highways already have no travel advised, and numerous roads are physically blocked. Portions of I-29 and I-90 are closed. If South Dakotans must travel, they should check the sd511.org or the SD511 mobile app.



Gov. Kristi Noem hides guest list at historic state-owned cabin in Custer State Park

Stu Whitney

South Dakota News Watch

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, her family, friends and guests are the only people who can stay in a state-owned historic cabin in Custer State Park, and it's unclear if the rustic Valhalla retreat is being used for political purposes.

Citing open records law, Noem's administration won't reveal who stayed there over the past three years or whether the state is reimbursed, despite more than \$120,000 in taxpayer money being spent on property upgrades.

Noem, who was re-elected in November to a second four-year term, is on the short list of potential 2024 Republican presidential candidates and spent much of the past week giving policy speeches in Washington D.C.

State Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, spearheaded a voter-passed ballot measure in 2006 mandating that state-owned aircraft could only be used for state business. He has similar reservations about the governor's personal use of Valhalla.

"It's inappropriate for the executive branch to have a private retreat for the governor and her staff," said Nesiba. "Nobody wants elected officials getting personal or political benefits from their elected office, and this sure looks like that."

The secluded log cabin near Needles Highway was built in 1927 as a summer home by former South Dakota Gov. and U.S. Sen. Peter Norbeck, who was instrumental in developing the Black Hills and Custer State Park as a vacation destination. Valhalla, named by Norbeck for the great hall in Norse mythology, was purchased by the state in 1962.

The Department of Game, Fish and Parks, which oversees the property as part of the executive branch, denied a January 2023 request from South Dakota News Watch to view a list of people who stayed at Valhalla between 2020 and 2022.

Jon Kotilnek, senior staff attorney for GFP, said "no such record exists as no list is maintained" and added "if this information were available, it would be exempted under (South Dakota's open records laws)."

However, Game, Fish and Parks did release a list of Valhalla visitors to KELO-TV reporter Bob Mercer in 2019. The record included Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden and Bureau of Finance and Management commissioner Jim Terwilliger as well as three former executives: chief of staff Joshua Shields, chief finance officer Liza Clark and Department of Veteran Affairs special projects coordinator Jake Monssen.

Asked by News Watch if the administration's policy on releasing names of Valhalla guests changed af-



The Norbeck summer cabin in Custer State Park, also known as "Valhalla," is a state-owned home open for use only to Gov. Kristi Noem and those she allows.

Photo: Courtesy Rapid City Journal

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David Bordewyk

ter 2019 and why, Kotilnek and Ian Fury, Noem's chief of communications, did not respond.

Game, Fish and Parks did provide News Watch with a list of capital improvements for Valhalla from 2020 to 2022, which include more than \$120,000 of contracted work to re-shingle the roof and upgrade the heating, air conditioning and electrical systems, flooring and fireplace. The governor's office also bought six Adirondack chairs for the cabin in July 2020 for a total of \$618 through Pheasantland Industries, which provides work experience to prison inmates.

Open records law in effect?

Past Govs. Mike Rounds and Dennis Daugaard also were scrutinized about their use of Valhalla, sparking debates about transparency and what records government officials should be allowed to shield from news organizations and the public.

"Do we need a law that says guests at Valhalla shall be a matter of public record?" asked David Bordewyk, executive director of the South Dakota Newspaper Association. "As crazy as it sounds, that's what it comes down to because (government officials) can't be trusted to do it voluntarily anymore."

Bordewyk was part of legislative discussions in 2009 that led to an open-records overhaul with Senate Bill 147, making government records open to examination "except as otherwise expressly provided by statute."

The ensuing list of exceptions, which include "any list of names or other personally identifying data of occupants of camping or lodging facilities from the Department of Game, Fish and Parks," was broad enough to cause conflicts between state officials and media organizations when it came to potentially sensitive records. When interpreted correctly, the exceptions make non-disclosure legal but don't prevent officials from releasing records if they are inclined to do so.

"Time and again, politicians talk about being transparent and sharing information with the public," said Bordewyk. "Then when push comes to shove, suddenly they're hiding behind 10 different exemptions in open records law as to why they can't or won't release the information."

'It's like the governor's mansion'

Valhalla, a one-and-a-half story log house that sits halfway up a hill, features a large main room with lodge furniture and a massive stone fireplace, as well as an open front porch where guests can survey the landscape largely hidden from passing vehicles. The cabin's secluded setting and exclusive use present an interesting litmus test for government transparency.

Dating back to the 1970s, Valhalla has been used by South Dakota governors as a Black Hills retreat, not unlike Maryland's Camp David for U.S. presidents. But some Democratic legislators have questioned the propriety of that arrangement, especially when Noem's staff and Game, Fish and Parks officials refuse to provide visitor logs or rental policies for the state-owned property, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Norbeck's devotion to Valhalla was not surprising given his affinity for the Black Hills, where he played a role in the development of Mount Rushmore, Needles Highway, Sylvan Lake and Wind Cave National Park.

President Calvin Coolidge made the State Game Lodge at Custer State Park his "Summer White House" in the late 1920s, inspiring architect C.C. Gideon in his architectural vision for Valhalla, which became Norbeck's Custer residence.

After Norbeck's death in 1936, Valhalla was occupied by his wife, Lydia, until 1944, when it was sold into private ownership, including a stint of summer occupancy by Rapid City hotel executive Elmer Boswell until the cabin was acquired by the state in 1962.

Though Valhalla has recently become an exclusive retreat for governors and invited guests, that was not always the case. The Game, Fish and Parks Commission in 1966 made it available as housing for a Youth Forestry Camp for "mildly delinquent" boys through the South Dakota Board of Charities and Corrections.

There was talk of alterations to accommodate more campers. But commission chairman John Anderson Vale argued against reconstruction, according to news reports at the time, because "eventually (Valhalla)

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would probably be turned into a museum.”

In late 2001, then-Gov. Bill Janklow offered up a “week-end getaway” at Valhalla as part of an Internet auction to raise money for families of victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The winning bid of \$1,200 came from a urologist from Oregon, bringing renewed questions about the cabin and who controlled access.

“Valhalla was purchased (by the state) because of the historical value,” Rollie Noem, then the Custer State Park superintendent, said in a 2001 Associated Press report. “What’s evolved over time, because there was a lot of work that had to be done in the early years, is its primary use is as a retreat facility for the governor. It’s like the governor’s mansion. The governor uses it to accommodate special guests to benefit the state.”

Pushing for government transparency

Political momentum to address shortcomings in South Dakota’s public records law gained steam during the Rounds administration, when Attorney General Larry Long formed a 2006 task force to study the issue.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader had filed a lawsuit a year earlier seeking access to the invitation list for the Governor’s Invitational Pheasant Hunt, an annual event that helped showcase the state to potential new businesses.

The case went to the South Dakota Supreme Court, which denied the newspaper’s application, pointing to the narrow construction of SDCL 1-27-1, the state’s open records statute, and concluding that the “remedy sought by the Argus Leader lies with the Legislature.”

Long’s task force had a similar view of South Dakota’s law at the time, which permitted access only to public records that were required by law to be kept. The task force’s report concluded that “public entities at various levels hold a great deal of discretion in determining whether to release such records,” with no real mechanism to “quickly and economically” resolve disputes.

Nancy Turbak Berry, a Watertown lawyer and Democratic state senator at the time who served on the task force, introduced a 2008 bill with the “presumption of openness” that public records would be available for inspection unless there was a legal reason to keep them closed, calling South Dakota’s approach “unusual and irrational” and out of step with nearly every other state.

“The starting point always ought to be that if the government is going to withhold information from its citizens, it ought to show why,” she said.

Legislators ended up establishing an appeal process for public records requests, but Turbak Berry’s bid for meaningful reform was killed in the House State Affairs Committee after facing opposition from Rounds’ office and Republican leadership.

“I think the reason it didn’t pass was because I was a Democrat,” said Turbak Berry, a graduate of Harvard University and a member of the board of directors at South Dakota News Watch. “It’s all a big game, and I was wearing the wrong jersey.”

Exceptions restrict record access

During the 2009 legislative session, Sioux Falls lawyer Dave Knudson, the Senate Republican Leader at the time, sponsored an open records bill based on Nebraska state law that would address concerns raised by



This photo was part of a 1977 application to include the Norbeck summer cabin on the National Register of Historic Places. Photo: Scott Gerloff, Historical Preservation Center

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the task force and Supreme Court ruling. It started with a preamble declaring that "except as otherwise expressly provided by statute, all citizens of this state, and all other persons interested in examination of the public records ... are hereby fully empowered and authorized to examine such public record."

The House added a string of exceptions to that doctrine in the form of amendments, including medical and personnel records, documents involving litigation, legislators' phone records and memoranda, and certain law enforcement and court records. Many of those exemptions, which now encompass 29 subdivisions in SDCL 1-27-1.5, came after negotiations between Knudson, media representatives and executive branch officials, including Neil Fulton, Rounds' chief of staff.

"My goal was to pass a bill that would not be vetoed by the governor," Knudson told News Watch. "So we were fairly open to administration amendments."

One of the exemptions was for "any list of names or other personally identifying data of occupants of camping facilities from the Department of Game, Fish and Parks." The language was amended again the same session to include occupants of "lodging facilities" in addition to camping. That subdivision, 1-27-1.5(21), is the exception cited by GFP counsel in denying News Watch's request for the Valhalla visitor logs.

Fulton, now dean of the University of South Dakota School of Law, told News Watch that the provision was added due to concerns about "proprietary data and competition if other states or private campgrounds could demand the list and solicit the campers."

Though his recollection was that the amendment focused on those concerns rather than Valhalla, Fulton added that citing that provision to protect Valhalla logs "would fit with the notion that there is not much of a public interest in knowing where folks go on vacation."

Bordewyk, who represented media organizations in negotiations, recalls having lingering doubts about the bill's effectiveness after the "laundry list" of exemptions were approved unanimously in the Senate and signed into law by Rounds.

"From the media's standpoint, our folks had discussions about, 'What's the tradeoff here? Are we making progress despite all these exceptions that were added?'" Bordewyk said. "What it came down to ultimately is that we supported the principle of the bill as a step forward, and we sort of swallowed everything else."

Political pressure leads to more openness

Government use of Valhalla became a political issue in late summer of 2010, as Rounds neared the end of his second term as governor. The Rapid City Journal reported on the exclusive nature of the state-owned cabin – used by the governor, his family and invited guests – and questioned why residents had no access to the site or knowledge of who stayed there.

"This is a state-owned historic building which is maintained with taxpayer dollars," said Michael LeFort, the Journal's editor at the time. "We believe the owners of the cabin, South Dakota's taxpayers, have a right to know who is staying at Valhalla."

The Rounds administration refused to release a visitor log, saying no list was kept and that the privacy of guests was protected under state law. As the newspaper appealed the decision to the state Office of



The Norbeck cabin in Custer State Park, shown here in August 2010, was opened to public visitors for a time but is now closed to the public. Photo: Courtesy Rapid City Journal

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The Norbeck summer cabin, built in 1927, has a long and storied history in South Dakota, but at this time, that does not include the right of the public to know who stays there and at what cost. Photo: Scott Gerloff, Historical Preservation Center

Hearing Examiners, political pressure shifted to Daugaard, the lieutenant governor under Rounds who won the top office in 2010.

During a gubernatorial debate against Democratic challenger Scott Heidepriem, Daugaard was asked about his use of the Custer State Park cabin and whether he would consider opening it to public use if he were to become governor. He said he was open to reviewing the policy.

"I've stayed at Valhalla, I think, four times in the last eight years," Daugaard said, adding that Rounds offered the cabin to Daugaard and his family each time and that no fees were assessed.

About a month later, after Daugaard was elected with 62 percent of the vote, the Office of Hearing Examiners rejected the Rapid City Journal's appeal by citing the "occupants of (GFP) camping and lodging facilities" exception in the open records law passed the previous year.

LeFort countered that the exemption shouldn't include an exclusive governor-controlled cabin

that didn't include fees, adding that he didn't believe the law was intended "to protect a secret list of the governor's friends and donors."

'We don't have champions for these issues'

Democrats moved to close the loophole during the 2011 session, with Rep. Mitch Fargen from Flandreau sponsoring House Bill 1181 to "authorize the release of information related to users of certain state lodging facilities."

Dusty Johnson, then Daugaard's chief of staff, testified before the House State Affairs Committee, dismissing the bill as politically motivated. He went on to say that the bill was "not necessary" because Daugaard had decided to open Valhalla to free public tours while also maintaining a list of the governor's guests at the site that would be publicly released when requested.

Fargen and fellow Democrat Bernie Hunhoff of Yankton countered that taking Daugaard's word of transparency did not offer the same protections as putting specific provisions regarding the use of the state-owned property into statute.

"It's not an issue right now because you took it off the table during the campaign and it's a new administration," Hunhoff told Johnson at the hearing. "But we don't know who the next governor will be, and that person might feel differently."

As it turned out, Daugaard's administration changed the policy during his second term. When KELO's Mercer sought information about Valhalla in 2019, he was informed that public tours were discontinued after "no one came for tours that were offered in 2017," according to Scott Simpson, the GFP's director of parks and recreation.

Daugaard and his extended family had continued to use Valhalla, as well as executive branch officials and their guests, a practice that Noem continued during her first year as governor.

News Watch's inquiry about who stayed at the exclusive retreat during the ensuing three years was rebuffed by Game, Fish and Parks, rekindling the Valhalla controversy and confirming concerns about relying on the word of government officials to provide transparency rather than forcing compliance through expanded open records laws.

"At times we've had folks in leadership positions, whether in the Legislature or other branches, who understood these issues and knew work needed to be done and were willing to put in the time and effort,"

said Bordewyk. "That's what's lacking today. We don't have champions for these issues right now.

"For years now we've lived with that laundry list of exceptions to open records law, some of which are mighty wide and broad in terms of government being able to hide behind them. Have we made much progress? I guess it can be debated. But it sure seems like a lot of times the public and news media are frustrated by attempts to get information."

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at SDNewsWatch.org.

ABOUT STU WHITNEY



Stu Whitney is an investigative reporter for South Dakota News Watch. A resident of Sioux Falls, Whitney is an award-winning reporter, editor and novelist with more than 30 years of experience in journalism.

Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Noem signed the following 21 bills into law:

- SB 9 modifies discharge notice procedures applicable to developmentally disabled persons;
- SB 10 expands certification options for interpreters for The Committee on Health and Human Services at the request of the Department of Human Services;
- SB 11 updates the deposit threshold for actions related to general rate cases;
- SB 12 authorizes the construction of a National Guard Vehicle maintenance shop in Watertown, to make an appropriation therefor, and to declare an emergency;
- SB 13 authorizes the construction of an addition to the BG Dean Mann Readiness Center in Sioux Falls, to make an appropriation therefor, and to declare an emergency;
- SB 14 revises the legal description for the construction of a National Guard Readiness Center in Sioux Falls, to make an appropriation therefor, and to declare an emergency;
- SB 15 accepts Uniformed Services ID as proof of veteran status to have veteran designation added to a state license or ID card;
- SB 37 revises provision pertaining to the South Dakota School for the Deaf;
- SB 71 authorizes other fuel taxes to be included in the state's International Fuel Tax Agreement collections;
- SB 73 excludes township-owned self-propelled machinery, equipment, and vehicles from fuel excise tax;
- SB 85 revises rebating provisions in the insurance code;
- HB 1038 revises certain provision pertaining to the Department of Veterans Affairs and residency in the State Veterans Home;
- HB 1041 provides an exception to the definition of drug paraphernalia;
- HB 1047 revises certain provisions regarding military affairs;
- HB 1048 repeals and makes technical changes to provisions regarding the Board of Military Affairs;
- HB 1057 allows for the appointment of county coroner by all counties;
- HB 1060 modifies provisions related to procurement for the state and other purchasing agencies;
- HB 1064 requires the Unified Judicial System to assemble a task force to address the provision of legal services to indigent parties within the South Dakota court system and to declare an emergency;
- HB 1088 updates requirements for an insurance company seeking to do business in this state;
- HB 1091 amends provisions of the insurance statutes regarding producer recommendations and responsibilities; and,
- HB 1101 ensures the proper labeling of American Indian arts and crafts.

Governor Noem has signed 55 bills into law this legislative session.

BBB Scam Alert: Meta's new subscription service

On Sunday, Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg announced that the company is introducing Meta Verified, a paid "blue verification badge" for Facebook and Instagram that will be available later this week. According to the news release, the monthly subscription service includes a verification badge, protection against impersonating accounts, increased visibility, priority customer service and other exclusive features. Previously, Twitter also announced its blue checkmark program.

As with any new program, there can be initial confusion on what it all means and scammers are waiting in the wings to grab at any new opportunity. Be sure you have all the facts to protect yourself against future scam artists. BBB is a trusted resource to help guide consumers and businesses to accurate information.

Here's what you need to know:

Regular Facebook and Instagram users do not have to pay. The subscription service is an option to help creators and businesses build their communities.

The optional Meta subscription service will cost \$11.99 per month on the web and \$14.99 for the iOS and Android app. Twitter's blue check is \$8 per month for web and \$11 for iOS and Android. Twitter also announced an upcharge for its new secure text messaging program.

Meta Verified is only available in New Zealand and Australia this week (2/21/23) but may expand globally soon and to business accounts eventually. Twitter Blue is available in many countries, including the U.S. and Canada.

Users must meet the minimum requirements, be at least 18 years old, and submit a government ID that matches the name and photo on Facebook and Instagram to be eligible for a verification badge.

Be on the lookout for potential scams:

Watch out for phishing emails, texts, and direct messages offering upgrades to your Facebook or Instagram accounts. Don't send a photo of your government ID to a scammer!

Go to BBB's Spot a Scam page to see what fake emails, texts and web pages may look like.

Older adults may be more vulnerable to scams. Reassure your friends and loved ones that they don't have to pay anything right now.

Beware of impostors pretending to be from Meta, Facebook, or Instagram. In December, Twitter experienced a wave of fake verified accounts after introducing Twitter Blue.

Always check links before clicking; go directly to the source.

Fact-check all information. Go directly to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter help pages if you are unsure.

ABOUT BBB: BBB is a nonprofit, business-supported organization that sets and upholds high standards for fair and honest business behavior. BBB services to consumers are free. BBB provides objective advice, BBB Business Profiles on more than 5.3 million companies, 11,000 charity reviews, dispute resolution services, alerts and educational information on topics affecting marketplace trust. Visit [BBB.org](https://www.bbb.org) for more information.

NSU Women's Basketball

Oliverson and Northern State Fend Off Peacocks in Opening Round Win

Aberdeen, S.D. – Kailee Oliverson seized control of the game in multiple big moments as Northern State defeated Upper Iowa 63-49 in the First Round of the NSIC Tournament. Oliverson led the Wolves with a career-high 34 points and 17 rebounds in the win and led the charge in the team's decisive 18-2 scoring run to seal the victory on Wednesday afternoon in Wachs Arena.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 63, UIU 49

Records: NSU 18-11 (12-10 NSIC), UIU 10-18 (6-16 NSIC)

Attendance: 268

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State and Upper Iowa traded baskets on the first few possessions of the game before Kailee Oliverson powered a 15-3 scoring run for the Wolves, scoring the team's final 12 points of the opening period to push the lead to 19-7

The Peacocks seized momentum at the end of the first period with a 4-point play on a 3-pointer and foul with only four seconds remaining in the period; they would continue to chip away and push the scoring run to 10-0 and bring the game within two points (19-17) mid-way through the second quarter

NSU would push the lead back to six points on a fastbreak jumper by Rianna Fillipi, however UIU kept the game within arm's reach as Northern State took a 31-27 lead into the halftime break

The Wolves scored six straight points to open the third quarter and push the lead back out to ten points only three minutes into the half, but Upper Iowa once again answered the run with their own by out-scoring Northern 16-6 the remainder of the period and tie the game at 43 entering the fourth quarter

The Peacocks momentarily took a 47-45 lead minutes into the fourth quarter, before Madelyn Bragg entered the game and hit a pair of jumpers to give Northern State the lead back and swing the momentum in the game

Oliverson once again took over the game down the stretch by scoring 12 of Northern's final 18 points in an 18-2 scoring run to end the game

Oliverson recorded a career-high 34 points and 17 rebounds in the win, notching her eighth double-double of the season and first career 30-point game

With four blocked shots Laurie Rogers recorded her sixth game of the season with four or more blocks; with Oliverson adding three blocks of her own, it was the second time this season that NSU has had multiple players record three or more blocked shots in a game (Rogers & Fillipi each had four in a home win over SCSU)

Northern State won the battle in points in the paint 32-14 and out-rebounded Upper Iowa 49-30

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Kailee Oliverson: 34 points, 17 rebounds, 1 assist, 3 blocks

Laurie Rogers: 10 points, 9 rebounds, 2 assists, 4 blocks, 1 steal

Rianna Fillipi: 9 points, 6 rebounds, 8 assists, 2 steals

UP NEXT

Northern State will advance to the Sanford Pentagon and the NSIC Tournament Quarterfinals to face (RV) Augustana. The Wolves and Vikings are scheduled for an 11 a.m. tip-off on Sunday morning.

GDILIVE.COM

REGION 1A GIRLS' BASKETBALL AT MILBANK

Groton Area vs. Waubay-Summit

Saturday, Feb. 25, 2023 around 2:30 p.m.

Join Shane Clark with the play-by-play action on GDILIVE.COM

Game sponsored by

Bahr Spray Foam

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Dacotah Bank

Groton Ag Partners

Groton American Legion

Groton Chiropractic Clinic

Groton Dairy Queen

Groton Ford

Harry Implement

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Lori's Pharmacy

Love to Travel

Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.

S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank

Weber Landscaping

Weismantel Insurance Agency



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

GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Boys' Basketball Regular Season Finale

To feature the Senior Drum Line!

Friday, Feb. 24, 2023 at the Groton Area Arena

C game starts at 5 p.m. sponsored by Beverly Sombke

JV game to follow sponsored by Grandpa

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

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February 13 - 19, 2023



Welcome back for another Weekly Round[s] Up! This past week, we spent quite a bit of time voting on the Senate floor and attending classified briefings on a variety of subjects related to our national security. We also had several South Dakotans visit the office, escaping the wintery weather for a couple of

sunny days in DC with highs in the 60s and 70s! This time of year, we like the nice weather there, but a cold, snowy day in South Dakota beats a warm one in Washington every time. Regardless, no matter how we feel about DC, there's always work to be done. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakota groups I visited with: Members of the South Dakota State Medical Association (SDSMA) and members of the South Dakota YMCA Alliance from across the state.

Meetings this past week: Jerome Powell, Chair of the Federal Reserve; Jim Nelson, President of Aerostar; Lieutenant General Bryan Fenton, Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM); and Joshua Jacobs, Nominee for the Veterans' Affairs Under Secretary of Benefits. I spoke at the Reinsurance Association of America board meeting. We also continued our bipartisan discussions on social security reform. Senator John Thune and I also had an opportunity to meet with Governor Kristi Noem when she was in DC this past week.

We also had our weekly Senate Bible Study (1 Corinthians 4:1 was our verse of the week) and our Senate Prayer Breakfast (Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois was our speaker).

Met with South Dakotans from: Aberdeen, Madison, Mitchell, Rapid City, Sioux Falls and Winner.

Topics discussed: Foreign objects flying through U.S. airspace (I have a feeling we'll be discussing this for a while), health care needs in South Dakota and SDSU's FCS National Championship.

Votes taken: 16 – the Senate Democrats were off to a slow start this year, but the votes are now starting to pick up. All of these were on nominees to positions within the executive and judicial branches.

Hearings: I attended two hearings this week: one with the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and one with the Senate Armed Services Committee on global security challenges and strategy.

Classified briefings: I had four classified briefings this week: two on China and objects being shot down over US airspace, one with the Senate Armed Services Committee on space policy and one on spectrum.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen, Rapid City and Sioux Falls. I also had three staff members from my Rapid City office and one from my Sioux Falls office working out of our Washington office this week. It's always great to have more South Dakotans in DC.

Steps taken this week: 40,232 steps or 18.63 miles.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

House passes bill to reimburse nursing homes, care facilities at 100%

Chamber also passes bill that would require yearly updated cost reports for care facilities

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 22, 2023 7:42 PM

The state House of Representatives passed a bill 44-25 on Wednesday that would annually adjust the reimbursement rate for community-based providers to 100% of the costs of caring for patients covered by programs such as Medicaid. Those providers include nursing homes, assisted living facilities and care facilities for people with developmental disabilities.

That's a 10 percentage-point jump from what Gov. Kristi Noem proposed in her December budget address. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, told legislators that full reimbursement is necessary to fulfill the state's obligations and pay its bill to providers so they can stay afloat.

Mark Deak, executive director of the South Dakota Health Care Association, told legislators in the House Committee on Appropriations last week that 15 South Dakota nursing homes closed in the last five years, with seven closures in the past 12 months.

"When you look at the rate of acceleration, there will be more closings to come if we don't take further action," Deak said. "This bill makes it a priority to care for our elderly and disabled South Dakotans."

As Noem described it in her budget address, the reimbursement rate in 2022 stood at 69% for nursing homes, 73% for community support providers for South Dakotans with developmental disabilities, and 64% for psychiatric residential treatment facilities.

"This methodology reflects the reasonable amount that we should pay for services that are provided. Unfortunately, as the cost of living has increased, reimbursement rates for many of these services have struggled to keep pace," Noem said. "... These providers are critical to our state and ensure we can continue to take care of some of the most vulnerable among us."

Usually, the Legislature will decide what the state can afford to spend on reimbursement rates based on what is available in the budget. This bill would automatically reimburse community-based providers 100% of their service costs each year.

Deak explained to South Dakota Searchlight earlier this year that a reimbursement rate of 100% still wouldn't fully cover the costs of providers, because service costs aren't updated frequently enough to address inflation and other factors.

"I think the situation merits getting closer to 100% of methodology, because then you get closer to 92% or 93% of coverage," Deak said. "Then I think folks would have a better shot of making a go of it."

That's where another bill of Karr's comes in, HB 1137. The House passed HB 1137 Tuesday in a 65-5 vote that would require an annually updated cost report to accurately reflect those changes in service costs.

"If we're not using updated cost reports, what does it matter that we pay 100% of methodology?" Karr asked legislators on the House floor Tuesday. "If we're only paying 70-80% of the true cost, what are we doing? We're setting them up for failure."

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, rose in opposition to HB 1167 on Wednesday citing that other state services, such as education and corrections, are not ensured 100% reimbursement. Putting that commitment into statute would tie legislators "in knots," he added.

"It is a mistake to write it into law to say, 'we'll fund indeterminate things at indeterminate levels,' Ven-

huizen said.

Two legislators, Reps. Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, and Peri Pourier, D-Rapid City, shared that they have autistic family members who would be impacted by the bill. Overweg pointed to millions of dollars legislators approve to spend on building projects across the state and the rising costs the Legislature approved to pay because of inflation.

The state isn't properly paying its bill for these providers, he said.

"Even if it ties the hands of future legislators," Overweg said, "then they can just spend less money."

Karr's response is that the state should always pay its bills going forward and that the Legislature should be committed to taking care of the state's obligations "year after year after year."

"I don't want them to chase their tail in this big, circular, unsustainable process we've been going through of not paying our bills and not taking care of our loved ones," Karr said.

Both bills will now head to the Senate.

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

House passes bill requiring initiated amendments to get signatures from every district

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 22, 2023 6:40 PM

PIERRE — The South Dakota House of Representatives passed a bill Wednesday that would make it more difficult for citizens to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot.

A petition drive to force a vote on a constitutional amendment already requires signatures from registered voters equivalent to 10 percent of the votes cast in the last race for governor. The new bill would require at least 1/35th of the signatures to be from voters in each of the state's 35 legislative districts.

That translates to about 1,000 signatures from each district.

The bill's prime sponsor, Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, wants proposed constitutional amendments to have support from more than just one part of the state.

"We're going to allow all the districts to be represented in the petition process," May said.

Sioux Falls Democrats spoke out in opposition to the bill.

Rep. Erin Healy said the bill "would be an administrative nightmare," because it would require election officials to call the district of origin to verify that signatures came from that district.

Rep. Linda Duba also spoke against the bill.

"It's very hard to gather signatures," Duba said. "And when the ballot measure hits the ballot, every South Dakotan has a voice."

But May said the barrier to entry that the bill would establish is a feature, not a bug.

"If this is a real, grassroots effort, I have no doubt they'll get those signatures," May said.

The bill now heads to the Senate.

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

Move to loosen penalties for drug ingestion, marijuana edibles fails in Senate

Felony punishments fail to help addicts or community, sponsor argues

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 22, 2023 6:25 PM

The South Dakota Senate rejected two bills Wednesday that aimed to soften controversial drug laws. One aimed to help drug users avoid prison for failed drug tests; the other would have placed marijuana edibles and vape products in the same misdemeanor category as marijuana flower.

Felony ingestion

Senate Bill 201, which failed by a single vote, would have altered a law that lets judges levy felony penalties for drug ingestion. The potential for prison time would only appear on a third offense.

South Dakota is the only state with a separate and specific statute for felony ingestion.

Sen. Mike Rohl, R-Aberdeen, has sponsored similar bills on ingestion in the past. This time, Rohl amended his original bill on the day of its committee hearing with a rewrite that changed it from a proposal covering marijuana alone to one that covered indigestion of all types.

Rohl told lawmakers that Arizona allows for misdemeanor or felony penalties under a drug law that penalizes "possession or use." Ten other states charge ingestion as a misdemeanor, he said, and 38 have no penalty for ingestion, a charge that typically follows a failed urinalysis or blood test.

Rohl said treatment is a better option than prison for drug users, particularly in light of South Dakota's high rate of incarceration for drug crimes. Around 15% of women imprisoned in South Dakota are serving time for ingestion alone.

"We rank towards the bottom in terms of individuals who are arrested for drug crimes," Rohl said. "We are the number one state in terms of people who are in prison for drug crimes."

Rohl also cited the law's disparate impact on Native Americans. In a state where less than 10% of the population is Native American, he said, 52% of the prisoners incarcerated for ingestion are Native.

Adjusting the law to focus on treatment would lead to better outcomes for addicts, he said.

"Addiction is something that goes beyond a crime. It's an illness," Rohl said.

Opponents accused Rohl of sneaking the amendment onto the floor by introducing his amendment on the day of the bill's Health and Human Services Committee hearing last week. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City, told senators that Attorney General Marty Jackley opposes the bill and would have said so if not for the last-minute nature of the amendment.

"This is not the way to introduce controversial legislation: without even hearing opposition, and totally avoiding the Judiciary Committee," said Duhamel, who chairs that committee.

Duhamel was among those who argued that people would swallow drugs before a traffic stop or jail booking to avoid a felony charge.

"In the last year, we have overdoses in our jails with people who swallow drugs before they were arrested," said Duhamel, who works as spokeswoman for the Pennington County Jail.

Others noted that ingestion can be the crime of last resort for prosecutors who can't make other charges stick.

"Realistically, our statistics look horrible. They do. But it's a tool that our state's attorneys are using," said Sen. John Wiik, R-Big Stone City. "A lot of times there's a lot of things people are charged with, but the one thing you cannot dispute is the drugs in their system."

Rohl countered by saying that his amendment was posted the morning before his bill's committee hearing, that the bill still allowed for penalties when warranted, and that overdoses are exacerbated by the current law.

"We do have instances of individuals that need medical attention and do not seek it because they will get a felony," Rohl said. "And when our system is designed in such a way that the person would rather risk death and seek help, I think we need to evaluate how we're helping these people, and how we can create a stronger community going forward."

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The bill failed on a vote of 18-17.

Marijuana laws

Rohl's other proposal, Senate Bill 205, sought to remove marijuana products from the list of felony-eligible drugs in the state.

Currently, a person caught with up to 2 ounces of marijuana flower can be charged with a class 1 misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$2,000 fine. Someone caught with a single marijuana gummy can be charged with a felony.

"This is taking the equivalent amount of up to 1 ounce of marijuana and saying we're going to charge that as a class 1 misdemeanor," Rohl said.

Chicago rapper Chief Keef was famously charged with a felony after being caught with edibles at the Sioux Falls Regional Airport in 2017. The rapper pleaded no contest to the charge in 2019.

Rohl said he was simply working to align state law to treat cannabis products equally for those who keep drugs for personal use. Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, who ultimately voted for SB 201 and SB 205, told senators that current law unfairly penalizes a particular form of cannabis.

"We already say small amounts of marijuana is a misdemeanor. That's been the law for decades. But if you have one gummy in your pocket, that's a felony." Wheeler said. "Two ounces of marijuana is a lot more than one gummy."

Sen. Mike Diedrich, R-Rapid City, also decried the current law as inequitable.

"Why would one be charged out at the felony level of fentanyl, where the other would be charged out as a misdemeanor?" Diedrich said.

Sen. Al Novstrup, R-Aberdeen, pleaded with the body not to loosen drug laws. He cited a report from the Department of Public Safety that noted a spike in overdose deaths in the state.

"If we do this, it will increase individual usage," Novstrup said.

Other opponents said prosecutors have and exercise discretion in cases involving marijuana edibles.

"Law enforcement, judges and prosecutors have judicial discretion, especially for the small amounts," Duhamel said. "They find someone who has two gummies in their purse who's left Colorado, they are not sending them to the penitentiary."

SB 205 failed on a vote of 21-14.

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.

Budget committee endorses \$400 million for new prisons

Staffing could cost up to \$26 million each year

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 22, 2023 4:07 PM

Lawmakers on the Joint Appropriations Committee unanimously approved funding Wednesday for two new prisons in South Dakota.

The first is a new women's prison for Rapid City, a 300-bed facility that would become the second female prison in the state.

The Department of Corrections spent \$20 million on land for the prison on the eastern edge of Rapid City last year. House Bill 1016 would allocate another \$60 million for design and construction, with an anticipated opening date in the fall of 2024.

The second prisons bill, HB 1017, would allow the DOC to spend \$342 million for a facility to replace the 140-year-old state penitentiary in Sioux Falls. No site has been chosen for the new men's facility.

The money for the projects is a mix of budget reserves and general fund dollars. Each bill authorizes the transfer of money into the incarceration construction fund.

Each project would ease overcrowding for the state's prison system, according to DOC Secretary Kellie Wasko. The women's prison is overflowing, with more than 500 inmates spread out across a Pierre campus designed to house far fewer – even with an expanded footprint. The DOC acquired a building from the

Division of Criminal Investigation in 2014 to expand its capacity by 140 beds, but Wasko said that building is "not structurally sound nor safe." That building would no longer be used once the Rapid City facility is complete, she said.

The situation is less dire on the men's side, but the facilities house 488 more men than American Correctional Association guidelines recommend. Only the Jameson Annex, a maximum security building on the penitentiary campus in Sioux Falls, is below the recommended capacity.

"This is a very well planned initiative to address our overcrowding," Wasko told appropriators during a hearing at the Capitol in Pierre.

Safety issues and maintenance costs are also a major concern on the men's side. The penitentiary in Sioux Falls is a multi-level building with a linear design that makes monitoring difficult. Cells designed for one inmate hold two, Wasko said, and the 32- to 36-inch-wide catwalks on upper levels create potentially perilous situations for staffers and inmates when prisoners exit for meals, showers, recreation, work or classes.

"That's not safe, and I worry each and every time that there's open movement," Wasko said.

The building design requires more staff than a modern prison, she said, which is why it has the highest overtime costs. Plus the state has spent \$30 million over the last decade to repair and maintain it. Another \$28.8 million in repairs would be necessary without the construction of a new building.

HB 1017 would allow the DOC to move forward on a 1,400-bed facility for inmates at multiple custody levels. It would ease the burden at other facilities like the medium-security Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield, as well, by freeing up space to move inmates as they progress and need less supervision or regress and need more.

The new prison would also move Pheasantland Industries, the sprawling manufacturing plant on the prison grounds where inmates do things like fabricate road signs and bind books.

The hulking, quartzite penitentiary itself would be decommissioned.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, asked Wasko if that meant demolition. Wasko said "that's the hot question of the week," but that it's not a decision she's authorized to make. She talked about other facilities turned into museums or otherwise spared the wrecking ball and called herself "a geek for this kind of architecture," but made it clear that the DOC's building concerns are entirely operational in nature.

"We would fully decommission it," Wasko said.

Costs would not end with construction. Preliminary estimates for ongoing costs at the Rapid City women's prison, staffed by at least 119 correctional officers, would run between \$8 million to \$10.6 million a year. For the men's prison, the ongoing expenses could run from \$12 million to \$15 million. Those ongoing expenses would be incurred in fiscal year 2025 for the women's prison and 2028 for the men's prison, DOC spokesman Michael Winder said in an email Wednesday afternoon.

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.

After a series of winter storms, regulators approve new standards for power plants

BY: ROBERT ZULLO - FEBRUARY 22, 2023 3:34 PM

Two years after Winter Storm Uri, which caused a massive power failure in Texas that caused more than 200 deaths, and just two months after another storm, Elliott, forced blackouts in parts of the South, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has approved new extreme cold reliability standards for power plants.

However, the vote last week on the standards came with the acknowledgement by the commission that the new rules don't go nearly far enough. The commission sent the North American Electric Reliability Corporation, the nonprofit regulator that sets and enforces reliability standards for the bulk power system

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in the U.S., back to the drawing board in several respects.

"There are a number of good measures in what we accept today to be sure," FERC Commissioner Alison Clements said. "But the critical generator weatherization requirements as they were proposed, to be frank, are not up to the task."

Extreme cold weather, like the temperatures seen during Uri and Elliott, can knock out power plants that haven't been adequately winterized.

During Uri, natural gas, coal and nuclear plants, as well as wind turbines, failed to hit their expected output, per a report by the University of Texas at Austin. More than 52,000 megawatts of generation went offline during the event, about 40% of the total capacity in the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which runs the electric grid for most of the state. Problems included frozen lines and valves, boiler issues, iced turbine blades and other problems. In 2021, natural gas generation made up more than 50% of ERCOT's capacity in 2021, with wind about 25%.

In December, as Elliott sent temperatures rapidly plunging across much of the central and eastern United States, gas and coal plants tripped offline, forcing Duke Energy in North Carolina and the Tennessee Valley Authority to order rolling blackouts in their respective territories. PJM, the largest U.S. grid operator, overseeing an area that includes 65 million people and all or part of 13 states and the District of Columbia, implored customers to conserve electricity as 46,000 megawatts of power generation, mostly natural gas and coal plants, went offline because of fuel supply problems and equipment failures.

And in Texas this winter, despite new weatherization standards for power plants approved last year, power plants still failed to perform because of both fuel shortages and other problems.

"We are not adequately winterizing power plants today, even under the ERCOT standards," said Alison Silverstein, an energy consultant and former FERC senior adviser who also worked at the Public Utility Commission of Texas and Pacific Gas and Electric. "The failure of those power plants and our gas supply is putting human lives at risk. FERC is absolutely right to tell NERC to do better and do better faster."

The new standards adopted by FERC last week include freeze protection steps, better cold weather preparedness plans, requirements to identify freeze-prone equipment, corrective action for freezing problems, training requirements and other procedures.

"These new standards will help to prepare our nation's grid and our grid operators so they can provide power to consumers in the face of extreme weather," FERC Chairman Willie Phillips said in a statement.

But FERC also found "areas for improvement" and directed NERC to "address concerns related to applicability, ambiguity, a lack of objective measures and deadlines and prolonged, indefinite compliance periods."

Clements noted, for example, that the standards only require existing power generators to weatherize so they can operate at extreme cold temperatures for one hour starting in April 2027.

"Yeah. One hour, starting in 2027. Needless to say that doesn't bring total comfort that we will ensure we get through the next multi-day event like Winter Storm Uri," she said. "And waiting four additional winters before weatherization requirements actually kick in does not reflect the urgency we feel."

In a statement, NERC said it "appreciates FERC's focus on reliability matters and will continue to work toward assuring the reliability and security of the North American bulk power system."

Silverstein said NERC standards have always "reflected the industry lowest-common denominator" and represent a "floor, not a ceiling," adding that regional grid operators can implement tougher standards.

"This isn't just some minor engineering issue. This is provably life and death. And the frequency and ferocity of cold weather events over the past decade has changed enough that it is essential that this be handled as soon as possible," she said.

"This is a way to put some fire under the NERC drafting committee and the board of trustees so they do what needs to be done."

Robert Zullo is a national energy reporter based in southern Illinois focusing on renewable power and the electric grid. Robert joined States Newsroom in 2018 as the founding editor of the Virginia Mercury. Before that, he spent 13 years as a reporter and editor at newspapers in Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Louisiana. He has a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. He grew up in Miami, Fla., and central New Jersey.

Bipartisan group predicts U.S. debt default as soon as summer, depending on tax receipts

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 22, 2023 10:45 AM

WASHINGTON — A bipartisan think tank expects that the United States will default on its debt in the summer or early fall, if Congress doesn't take action to address the debt limit before then.

The timeline is similar to one the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office released last week, saying lawmakers have until sometime between July and September to either raise or suspend the debt limit before the United States would reach the so-called X-date.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has said the country has until at least early June.

"Today's X Date range reflects, in part, the considerable uncertainty in our nation's current economic outlook," said Shai Akabas, the Bipartisan Policy Center's director of economic policy. "Policymakers have an opportunity now to inject certainty into the U.S. and global economy by beginning, in earnest, bipartisan negotiations around our nation's fiscal health and taking action to uphold the full faith and credit of the United States well before the X Date."

President Joe Biden and Speaker Kevin McCarthy, a California Republican, have begun preliminary talks around the debt limit and government spending, but Biden remains adamant that negotiations on if and how to reduce federal spending need to happen on a separate track from debt limit talks.

McCarthy has said the two should be tied together and that it doesn't make sense to raise the nation's borrowing capacity, which pays for laws Congress already approved, without addressing future spending.

The BPC projection noted the default date, when the country would no longer have the ability to pay all of its bills in full and on time, "will depend heavily on 2022 tax collections in a fragile post-pandemic economy with low unemployment, persistent inflation, and recession fears."

"Indeed, if tax season revenues fall far short of expectations, there could even be a 'too close for comfort' situation prior to quarterly tax receipts due on June 15," the projection says.

Congress took three bipartisan votes during the Trump administration to suspend the debt limit and has taken one mostly party-line vote to raise the debt limit during the Biden presidency.

That \$2.5 trillion raise ran out in January, after which the Treasury Department began using accounting maneuvers called extraordinary measures to keep the country below the \$31.4 trillion borrowing limit.

The United States has never pushed past the default date, or X-date, so there's uncertainty about what exactly would happen, but the federal government would be barred from deficit spending.

That would mean steep cuts to government programs, though it's unclear if the Treasury secretary would be able to determine which programs get funding and which don't.

Even if default spending cuts could be prioritized, it's likely that there would be broad impacts to the global economy as well as health care programs, defense and the federal workforce.

The Bipartisan Policy Center said in its projection it plans to narrow the default date window as federal revenues and spending become clearer.

Akabas said he was "optimistic that today's projection provides Congress and President Biden with a window of opportunity to come together and work out a deal."

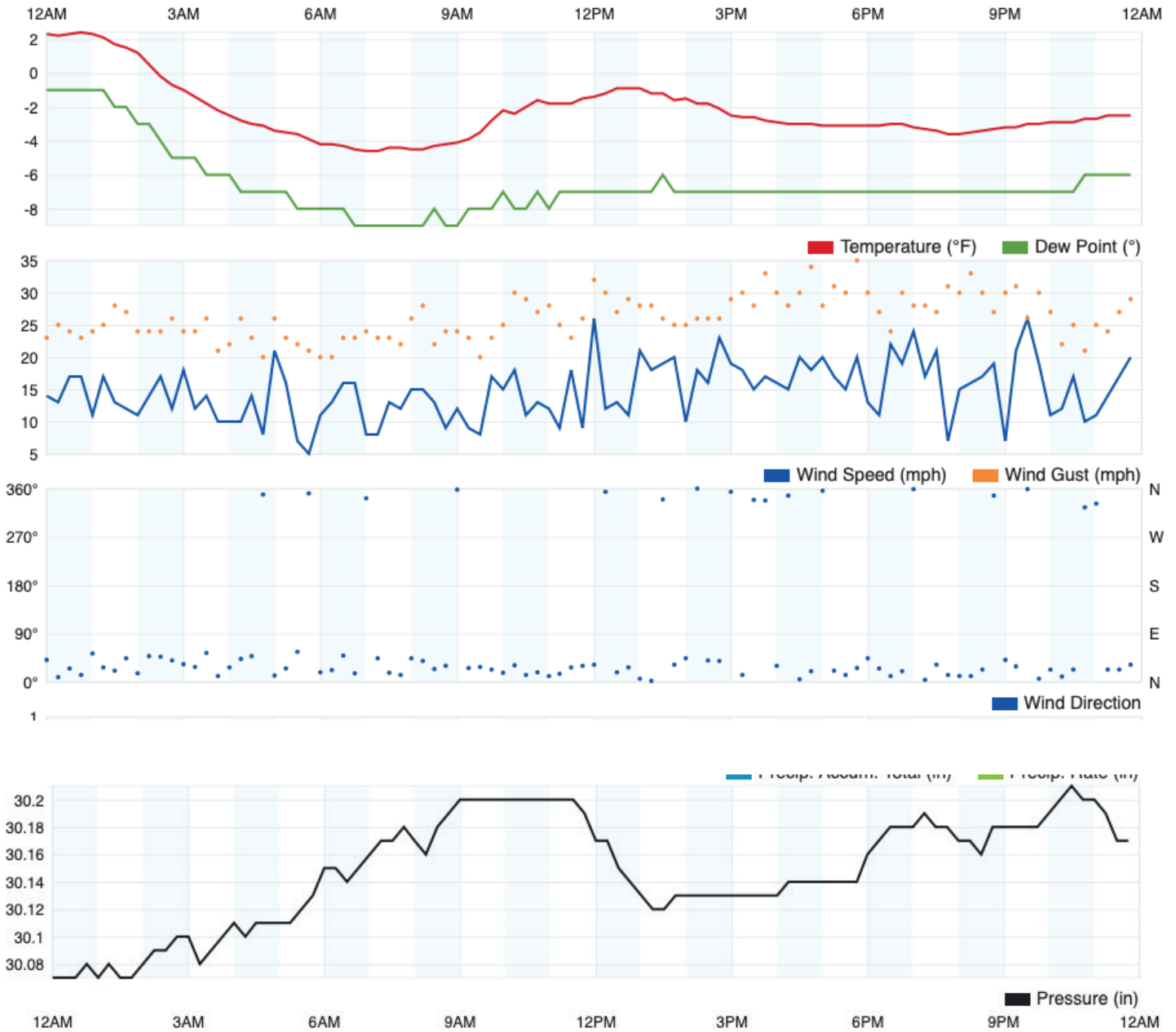
"They owe it to every hardworking American and small business owner to avoid the costs and risks associated with dragging this out to the 11th hour."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
 70%						
Snow Likely and Areas Blowing Snow then Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Cold	Mostly Cloudy	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny
High: -1 °F	Low: -24 °F	High: -1 °F	Low: -14 °F	High: 15 °F	Low: -5 °F	High: 31 °F

Blizzard conditions to continue through mid-day Thursday February 23, 2023 3:47 AM

Key Messages

- Peak intensity snowfall early this morning before gradually tapering off
- Peak intensity winds early this morning before gradually diminishing in intensity
- Blizzard conditions and aftermath still present a hazard to travel
- Arctic cold air & dangerous wind chills through Friday morning

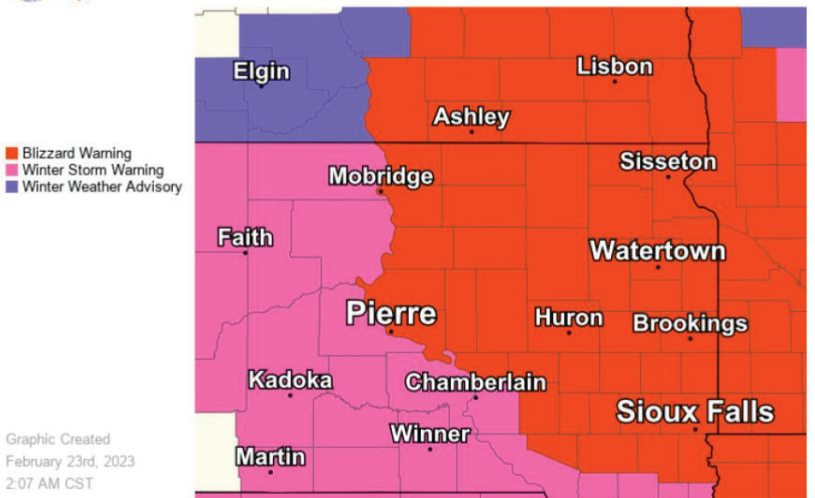
NEW Important Updates

- No updates at this time

Next Scheduled Briefing

- This is the last briefing

Winter Watches Warnings and Advisories



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Still seeing some heavy bands of snow moving across northeast South Dakota and western Minnesota. The wind is still going too. Gradually improving conditions will develop later this morning

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Precipitation & Wind Timing

February 23, 2023
3:48 AM

Don't see your city: weather.gov/forecastpoints

Precipitation (%)

	2/23 Thu						
	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm
Aberdeen	90	70	50	0	0	0	0
Britton	90	75	75	5	0	0	0
Eagle Butte	75	35	15	0	0	0	0
Eureka	85	75	45	0	0	0	0
Gettysburg	80	50	15	0	0	0	0
Kennebec	60	10	5	0	0	0	0
McIntosh	70	65	25	0	0	0	0
Milbank	100	90	30	20	0	0	0
Miller	85	40	5	0	0	0	0
Mobridge	85	70	20	0	0	0	0
Murdo	40	10	5	0	0	0	0
Pierre	70	15	5	0	0	0	0
Redfield	90	55	15	0	0	0	0
Sisseton	100	85	60	15	0	0	0
Watertown	90	65	15	0	0	0	0
Webster	85	80	40	0	0	0	0
Wheaton	100	95	70	15	0	0	0

Wind Gusts

	2/23 Thu								
	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am
Aberdeen	35↓	38↓	31↓	24↓	18↓	15↓	12↓	9↓	7↓
Britton	36↓	41↓	33↓	25↓	20↓	15↓	9↓	6↓	5↓
Eagle Butte	24↓	26↓	22↓	17↓	13↓	9↓	8↓	8↓	9↓
Eureka	28↓	26↓	23↓	20↓	16↓	13↓	9↓	6↓	3↓
Gettysburg	26↓	25↓	23↓	21↓	17↓	14↓	12↓	10↓	9↓
Kennebec	26↓	31↓	26↓	22↓	16↓	12↓	8↓	6↓	5↓
McIntosh	25↓	23↓	20↓	16↓	14↓	10↓	6↓	2↓	5↓
Milbank	30↓	35↓	30↓	25↓	23↓	21↓	18↓	16↓	12↓
Miller	29↓	26↓	24↓	21↓	16↓	13↓	10↓	9↓	7↓
Mobridge	24↓	25↓	23↓	20↓	16↓	13↓	8↓	5↓	3↓
Murdo	25↓	26↓	23↓	18↓	14↓	10↓	7↓	7↓	10↓
Pierre	23↓	26↓	22↓	17↓	13↓	9↓	7↓	6↓	8↓
Redfield	31↓	35↓	30↓	25↓	18↓	13↓	10↓	10↓	8↓
Sisseton	30↓	33↓	29↓	25↓	23↓	21↓	18↓	15↓	10↓
Watertown	31↓	35↓	26↓	21↓	18↓	16↓	13↓	9↓	6↓
Webster	35↓	39↓	31↓	24↓	21↓	17↓	14↓	9↓	5↓
Wheaton	26↓	29↓	24↓	22↓	22↓	22↓	18↓	15↓	12↓

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Wind Chills This Week

February 23, 2023
3:49 AM

Don't see your city: weather.gov/forecastpoints

Minimum Wind Chill Forecast

	2/23 Thu							2/24 Fri							2/25 Sat					
	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm
Aberdeen	-27	-31	-29	-25	-20	-26	-31	-34	-37	-37	-27	-15	-14	-19	-23	-25	-25	-22	-16	-3
Britton	-31	-34	-33	-28	-22	-29	-31	-32	-34	-24	-17	-10	-11	-21	-26	-26	-25	-23	-16	-6
Eagle Butte	-35	-39	-35	-29	-20	-31	-35	-37	-37	-38	-36	-26	-16	-21	-23	-22	-21	-17	-8	13
Eureka	-30	-34	-32	-28	-23	-32	-35	-32	-25	-35	-31	-21	-21	-26	-28	-25	-22	-20	-14	2
Gettysburg	-32	-34	-31	-25	-21	-31	-39	-41	-40	-40	-34	-23	-17	-24	-25	-24	-21	-20	-14	5
Kennebec	-27	-31	-29	-23	-18	-26	-31	-32	-30	-35	-34	-22	-13	-17	-17	-14	-12	-8	0	20
McIntosh	-35	-35	-33	-30	-24	-28	-30	-22	-23	-33	-29	-23	-18	-22	-25	-25	-24	-19	-10	9
Milbank	-20	-24	-24	-24	-18	-27	-34	-36	-37	-35	-24	-9	-10	-18	-20	-21	-20	-16	-9	5
Miller	-29	-29	-28	-26	-20	-31	-35	-38	-36	-32	-31	-19	-15	-22	-22	-21	-17	-14	-5	10
Mobridge	-30	-32	-30	-25	-18	-25	-29	-28	-21	-31	-27	-19	-11	-15	-19	-17	-17	-16	-8	11
Murdo	-31	-34	-32	-26	-16	-26	-29	-29	-30	-36	-32	-20	-7	-11	-13	-13	-10	0	9	22
Pierre	-26	-28	-27	-18	-11	-20	-25	-26	-27	-32	-29	-18	-8	-14	-15	-14	-14	-12	-3	16
Redfield	-27	-31	-29	-25	-20	-30	-37	-41	-39	-36	-32	-20	-15	-20	-26	-26	-23	-20	-15	2
Sisseton	-21	-27	-20	-19	-19	-29	-32	-34	-35	-32	-23	-13	-13	-20	-22	-23	-21	-16	-8	2
Watertown	-22	-26	-25	-17	-19	-28	-33	-37	-35	-23	-24	-17	-13	-19	-24	-24	-22	-17	-11	4
Webster	-31	-31	-30	-25	-24	-31	-35	-35	-24	-24	-17	-16	-17	-21	-26	-26	-24	-19	-12	0
Wheaton	-16	-20	-19	-19	-21	-30	-36	-40	-42	-40	-31	-16	-13	-19	-23	-25	-25	-22	-16	-2

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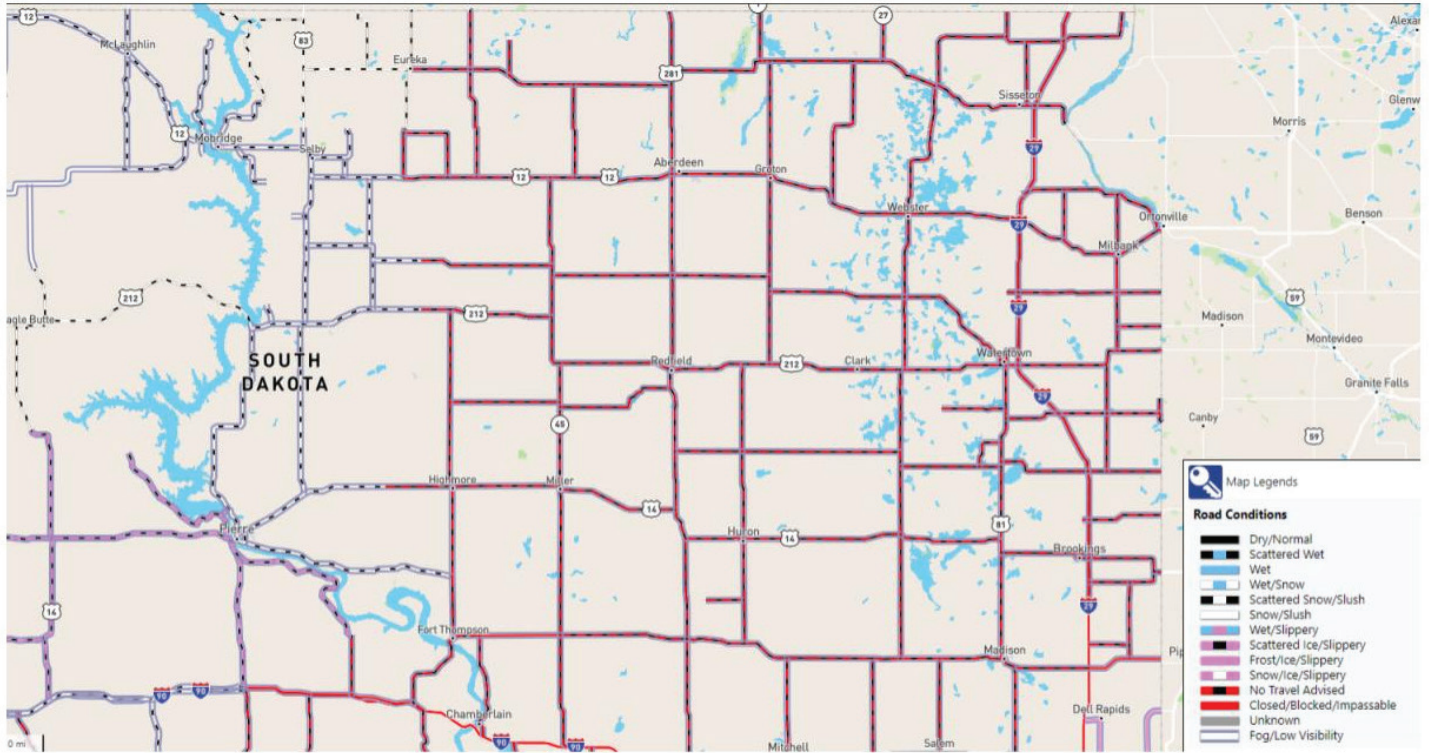
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Travel Conditions

February 23, 2023
3:52 AM

Visit SD511.org/MN511.org for updated travel conditions before heading out



Blizzard Warning

Brown-Spink-

Including the cities of Aberdeen and Redfield

224 AM CST Thu Feb 23 2023

...BLIZZARD WARNING REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL NOON CST TODAY...

* WHAT...Blizzard conditions. Additional snow accumulations of 1 to 3 inches. Winds gusting as high as 40 mph.

* WHERE...Brown and Spink Counties.

* WHEN...Until noon CST today.

* IMPACTS...Plan on slippery road conditions. Widespread blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning commute. The dangerously cold wind chills as low as 35 below zero could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Travel should be restricted to emergencies only. If you must travel, have a winter survival kit with you. If you get stranded, stay with your vehicle.

The latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.

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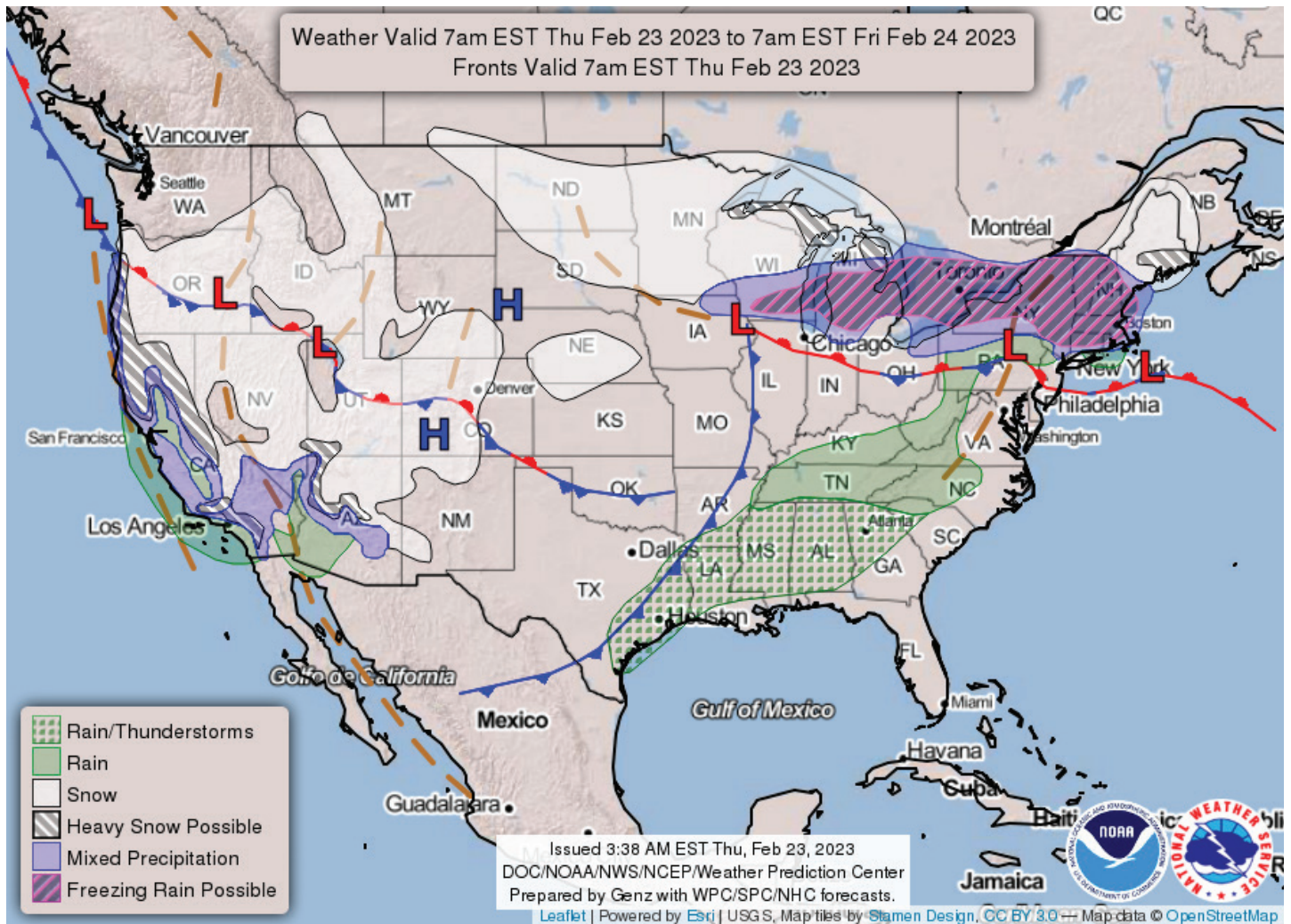
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 2.4 °F at 12:45 AM
Low Temp: -4.6 °F at 7:15 AM
Wind: 35 mph at 5:45 PM
Precip: : 0.00 (Lots of snow - 6-8")

Day length: 10 hours, 52 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1976
Record Low: -25 in 1910
Average High: 31
Average Low: 10
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.49
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.04
Precip Year to Date: 0.25
Sunset Tonight: 5:12:06 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:17:38 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 23, 1977: A storm center developed over Colorado the morning of the 22nd and moved to southeast Nebraska by midnight Wednesday the 23rd, with snow and rain entering southern Minnesota. The low-pressure center advanced to Iowa by sundown and weakened somewhat with precipitation across Minnesota. Snow fell over the north, and a combination of rain and freezing rain was in the south. The low then intensified over southeast Minnesota during the nighttime of Thursday the 24th before continuing northeast into Wisconsin with snow and blowing snow over much of the state before ending on the 26th. There was a combination of rain, freezing rain, and the winds over southern Minnesota, with 4 to 12 inches of snow in the north. Freezing rain and the heavy icing on power lines caused the worst power failure in a decade in the twin cities, with 125,000 homes affected. Power outages occurred over numerous areas of southern and central Minnesota. Many roads were ice-covered with multiple vehicle accidents and cars in the ditch. Many roads were blocked or closed, with numerous schools closed. The ice storm also damaged many trees.

February 23, 2007: A strong area of low pressure tracking across the central plains brought widespread snowfall to parts of central and much of northeast South Dakota along with west-central Minnesota. The precipitation initially began as freezing rain and sleet late in the evening of the 23rd as it lifted across the area through the morning of the 24th. The freezing rain and sleet then changed over to snow during the morning of the 24th. Thundersnow also occurred at some locations across the area. Snowfall amounts of 6 to 15 inches occurred by the end of the storm. Travel conditions became tough when the roads were slippery from the freezing rain and then the heavy snow. The South Dakota State Emergency Management, Highway Patrol, and Department of Transportation issued a travel advisory for no travel for Interstate-90 and many highways in central South Dakota. There were numerous accidents along the interstate. Some snowfall amounts included 7 inches at Browns Valley, 9 inches at Bryant, Webster, Wheaton, Artichoke Lake, and Tintah, 10 inches at Toronto, Roy Lake, Garden City, and Ortonville, 11 inches at Faulkton, 12 inches at Watertown, and 15 inches at Clear Lake.

February 23, 2010: Pierre sets a new record with a streak of 84 consecutive days with high temperatures failing to reach 40 degrees.

February 23, 2012: An area of low-pressure sliding across the region brought heavy snow to much of central and north-central South Dakota. As a result, travel became difficult, with many schools canceled.

1802 - A great snowstorm raged along the New England coast producing 48 inches of snow north of Boston. Three large ships from Salem were wrecked along Cape Cod. (David Ludlum)

1887: The Central Bureau of Meteorology of Rome began receiving the first reports of a massive earthquake from northern Italy Observers. The estimated magnitude earthquake of 6-7 killed at least 600 people in southern France and northern Italy.

1936 - A severe blizzard in the Sierra Nevada Range closed Donner Pass. It stranded 750 motorists and claimed seven lives. (David Ludlum)

1977: A rare February tornado touched down briefly in Mason City, Iowa, inflicting F1 damage on a home and injuring one person inside. This is the only known February tornado on record in Iowa.

1987 - A winter storm buried the Middle Atlantic Coast Region under heavy snow. Totals ranged up to 24 inches at Lancaster PA, with 23 inches at Coatesville PA. During the height of the storm Philadelphia PA received five inches of snow in just one hour. The Washington D.C. area was blanketed with up to 15 inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Nineteen cities in the central U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date, including Lincoln NE with a reading of 19 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1995: Cyclone Bobby slams into the Western Australia coast, causing widespread flooding on February 23-24th, 1995. Some areas report up to 12 inches of rain from the storm.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

CAME WITH NOTHING - LEAVE WITH NOTHING

Alexander the Great was a Macedonian king who conquered Persia, Greece and Egypt. He was considered the "conqueror of the world." It was the custom in his day that when a person died, their hands would be wrapped so no one could see them. However, prior to his death, he asked that his hands remain unwrapped. When they asked why, he replied, "I want everyone to see that they were empty."

In his letter to Timothy, Paul said, "After all, we didn't bring anything with us when we came into this world, and we certainly can't take anything with us when we die." This is a popular verse, used by many, but accepted and followed as a guide for living by only a few - judging by the way that most people live: Full hands, empty lives!

In three short verses, Paul gives some astounding advice to all of us. He begins by saying that true religion can be very valuable if it brings one contentment. Might he be implying that if we are not content with what we believe, no amount of money - or things - will bring us peace? Next, he reminds us that we "can't take it with us." Finally, he concludes this bit of advice by saying, "By the way, if you have enough food and clothing, be content. And, if you are not content with what God's given you, you will be tempted and trapped by foolish desires that will bring ruin and destruction." If God's Word controls our heart, we can live with empty hands.

Prayer: It's easy, Lord, to want what has earthly value. However, place in our hearts a desire for what matters most: knowing, loving, obeying, and serving You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: After all, we didn't bring anything with us when we came into this world, and we certainly can't take anything with us when we die. 1 Timothy 6:6-10



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:
02.21.23

2 15 30 36 63 24

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$126,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 31
DRAW: Mins 39 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

6 24 25 31 38 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$38,010,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 31
DRAW: Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

7 26 37 39 47 6

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 1 Mins 38
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

1 3 12 21 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$64,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 31
DRAW: Mins 39 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

2 38 53 62 63 2

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 30
DRAW: Mins 39 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.23

11 19 39 44 65 7

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$119,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 30
DRAW: Mins 39 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Flights canceled, highways closed as winter storm wallops US

By AMANCAI BIRABEN and JIM SALTER Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A brutal winter storm closed interstate highways from Arizona to Wyoming Wednesday, trapped drivers in cars, knocked out power to hundreds of thousands of people and prompted the first blizzard warning in Southern California in decades — and the worst won't be over for several days.

Few places were untouched by the wild weather, including some at the opposite extreme: long-standing record highs were broken in cities in the Midwest, mid-Atlantic and Southeast.

The wintry mix hit hard in the northern U.S., closing schools, offices, even shutting down the Minnesota Legislature. Travel was difficult. Weather contributed to more than 1,600 U.S. flight cancellations, according to the tracking service FlightAware. More than 400 of those were due to arrive or depart from the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. Another 5,000-plus flights were delayed across the country.

At Denver International Airport, Taylor Dotson, her husband, Reggie, and their 4-year-old daughter, Raegan, faced a two-hour flight delay to Nashville on their way home to Belvidere, Tennessee.

Reggie Dotson was in Denver to interview for a job as an airline pilot.

"I think that's kind of funny that we've experienced these types of delays when that's what he's looking into getting into now as a career," Taylor Dotson said.

The roads were just as bad.

In Wyoming, rescuers tried to reach people stranded in vehicles but high winds and drifting snow created a "near-impossible situation" for them, said Sgt. Jeremy Beck of the Wyoming Highway Patrol.

"They know their locations, it's just hard for them to get them," he said.

Wyoming's Transportation Department posted on social media that roads across much of the southern part of the state were impassable.

In the Pacific Northwest, high winds and heavy snow in the Cascade Mountains prevented search teams from reaching the bodies of three climbers killed in an avalanche on Washington's Colchuck Peak over the weekend. Two experts from the Northwest Avalanche Center were hiking to the scene Wednesday to determine if conditions might permit a recovery attempt later this week.

Powerful winds were the biggest problem in California, toppling trees and power lines. By Wednesday evening, more than 65,000 customers in the state were without electricity, according to PowerOutage.us.

A 1-year-old child was critically injured Tuesday evening when a redwood crashed onto a home in Boulder Creek, a community in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco, KTVU reported.

For the first time since 1989, a blizzard warning was issued for the mountains of Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, effective from 4 a.m. Thursday to 4 p.m. Saturday, the National Weather Service said.

"Nearly the entire population of CA will be able to see snow from some vantage point later this week if they look in the right direction (i.e., toward the highest hills in vicinity)," UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain tweeted.

A more than 200-mile (320-kilometer) stretch of Interstate 40 from central Arizona to the New Mexico line closed due to snow, rain and wind gusts of up to 80 mph (129 kph). More than 8,000 customers were without power in Arizona.

In the northern U.S. — a region accustomed to heavy snow — the snowfall could be significant. More than 18 inches (46 centimeters) may pile up in parts of Minnesota and Wisconsin, the National Weather Service said Wednesday evening. According to the weather service, the biggest snow event on record in the Twin Cities was 28.4 inches (72 centimeters) from Oct. 31 through Nov. 3, 1991.

Temperatures could plunge as low as minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 29 degrees Celsius) Thursday and to minus 25 F (minus 32 C) Friday in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Wind chills may fall to minus 50 F (minus 46 C), said Nathan Rick, a meteorologist in Grand Forks.

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Wind gusts may reach 50 mph (80 kph) in western and central Minnesota, resulting in "significant blowing and drifting snow with whiteout conditions in open areas," the weather service said.

The weather even prompted about 90 churches in western Michigan to cancel Ash Wednesday services, WZZM-TV reported.

The storm will make its way toward the East Coast later this week. Places that don't get snow may get dangerous amounts of ice. Forecasters expect up to a half-inch (1.3 centimeters) of ice in parts of southern Michigan, northern Illinois and some eastern states.

The potential ice storm has power company officials on edge. Nearly 1,500 line workers are ready to be deployed if the ice causes outages, said Matt Paul, executive vice president of distribution operations for Detroit-based DTE Electric. He said a half-inch of ice could cause hundreds of thousands of outages.

A half-inch of ice covering a wire "is the equivalent of having a baby grand piano on that single span of wire, so the weight is significant," Paul said.

More than 192,000 customers in Michigan and nearly 89,000 in Illinois were without electricity Wednesday evening, according to PowerOutage.us.

As the northern U.S. dealt with the winter blast, National Weather Service meteorologist Richard Bann said some mid-Atlantic and Southeastern cities set new high temperature marks by several degrees.

The high in Lexington, Kentucky, reached 76 F (24 C), shattering the Feb. 22 mark of 70 F (21 C) set 101 years ago. Nashville, Tennessee, reached 78 F (26 C), topping the 1897 record by 4 degrees. Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Atlanta and Mobile, Alabama, were among many other places seeing record highs.

'Dances With Wolves' actor indicted in Nevada sex abuse case

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Charges are mounting against a "Dances With Wolves" actor who is accused of sexually abusing and trafficking Indigenous women and girls in the U.S. and Canada for decades.

A grand jury in Nevada indicted Nathan Chasing Horse on Wednesday on 19 counts, expanding on previous charges of sexual assault, trafficking and child abuse to include kidnapping, lewdness and drug trafficking. Chasing Horse, 46, now faces charges in four jurisdictions, with the newest case brought by prosecutors on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana.

Police in Las Vegas have described Chasing Horse as a cult leader who used his position as a self-proclaimed medicine man to gain access to Indigenous girls and women, who he physically and sexually assaulted and took as underage wives. Prosecutors also accused him of grooming young girls to replace his older wives. His followers in the cult known as The Circle believed he had healing powers and could communicate with higher beings.

Chasing Horse's public defender, Kristy Holston, told The Associated Press that she was looking forward to revealing holes in the state's case during a preliminary hearing that was canceled Wednesday morning ahead of the indictment. She declined to elaborate.

"Since the public is so interested in this case and because only select details of the accusations have been released, we think it would be most appropriate for the State to present their evidence in a public hearing where the defense can reveal the weaknesses of the State's case on the record in court," she said in an email.

Holston didn't immediately respond Wednesday afternoon for comment on the additional charges filed against her client. An arraignment is scheduled March 1 in Clark County District Court.

Chasing Horse has declined multiple requests from the AP for an interview from the Las Vegas jail where he's being held on a \$300,000 bond.

Born on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, Chasing Horse is widely known for his role as Smiles a Lot in Kevin Costner's 1990 Oscar-winning film, "Dances With Wolves." He was arrested Jan. 31 near the North Las Vegas home he shared with his five wives.

Authorities searched the home and found firearms, psilocybin mushrooms, 41 pounds of marijuana and two cellphones containing videos and photos of underage girls being sexually assaulted, according to an

arrest report.

The footage of the assaults led to federal child pornography charges in U.S. District Court in Nevada.

Chasing Horse's arrest in Nevada was the culmination of a monthslong investigation by Las Vegas police. According to court documents, police uncovered a pattern of sexual abuse and alleged crimes dating back to the 2000s across multiple states, including Montana and South Dakota, as well as Canada, where he's been charged with a 2018 rape in British Columbia.

Earlier this month, prosecutors with the Fort Peck Tribes in Montana charged Chasing Horse with one count of aggravated sexual assault in connection with a 2005 rape, according to a warrant obtained by the AP.

Ken Trottier, a tribal court criminal investigator, said Wednesday that two teenage girls at the time had accused Chasing Horse of rape. The investigation was closed, Trottier said, because the girls' statements couldn't be corroborated.

That changed after Chasing Horse was arrested in Nevada, Trottier said, with more evidence that allowed Fort Peck to pursue a criminal case.

It's unlikely, though, that Chasing Horse will ever appear in tribal court, Trottier said. Tribal leaders banished him from the reservation nearly a decade ago amid allegations of human trafficking.

"We don't ever expect him to return here," Trottier told the AP. "If he ever steps foot on our reservation, he will be hunted."

Trottier said Wednesday that he hopes federal prosecutors in Montana will step in, allowing for stiffer penalties if Chasing Horse is charged and convicted of any crime on the reservation — where federal authorities have concurrent jurisdiction when the victim and suspect are both Native American.

"I will probably never have the satisfaction of being able to put handcuffs on him," Trottier said, "but at least we're able to help the Las Vegas case and other investigations."

Gaza rockets, Israeli strikes follow deadly West Bank raid

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Palestinian militants in Gaza launched rockets at southern Israel and Israeli aircraft struck targets in the coastal enclave early Thursday after a deadly gunbattle with Israeli troops in the occupied West Bank killed 10 Palestinians.

The bloodshed extends one of the deadliest periods in years in the West Bank, where dozens of Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire since the start of the year. Palestinian attacks on Israelis in the same period have killed 11 people.

The Israeli military said Palestinian militants fired six rockets and two anti-aircraft missiles from the Gaza Strip toward the country's south early Thursday. Air defenses intercepted five of the rockets and one landed in an open field, according to the military. The missiles did not hit their targets. The attacks were not immediately claimed by Palestinian militant groups.

Israeli aircraft then struck several targets in northern and central Gaza, including a weapons manufacturing site and a military compound belonging to the Hamas militant group that rules the enclave. There were no reports of injuries in Israel or Gaza from the rocket attacks or strikes.

The violence comes in the first weeks of Israel's new far-right government, which has promised to take a tough line against Palestinians, and as security forces step up arrest raids of wanted militants in the West Bank. Israel says the raids — begun in the wake of a series of deadly Palestinian attacks last spring — are meant to dismantle militant networks and thwart future assaults.

But the operations have shown few signs of slowing the violence and Wednesday's resulted in one of the bloodiest battles in nearly a year in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, raising the likelihood of further bloodshed.

"We have a clear policy: to strike terror powerfully and to deepen our roots in our land," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a meeting of his Cabinet. "We will settle accounts with whoever harms Israeli citizens."

Israeli police stepped up security in sensitive areas on Thursday, while Hamas said its patience was

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"running out." Islamic Jihad, another militant group, vowed to retaliate.

A day after a raid in January on the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank that killed 10 Palestinians, a Palestinian shot and killed seven people outside a synagogue in east Jerusalem.

On Thursday, police said security guards at the entrance to a West Bank settlement shot and lightly wounded a woman who police said attempted to stab the guards.

Among those killed in Wednesday's raid in Nablus were Palestinian men aged 72 and 61, and a 16-year-old boy, according to health officials. Scores of others were wounded. Various Palestinian militant groups claimed six of the dead as members. There was no immediate word on whether the others belonged to armed groups. Separately, officials said a 66-year-old man died from tear gas inhalation.

In response to the raid, a strike was called across the West Bank, and schools, universities and shops all shut down in protest. Schools and universities in Gaza and most shops in east Jerusalem were also closed.

Israel captured the West Bank, along with the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians seek those territories for their hoped-for independent state.

The Israeli military said it entered Nablus, the West Bank's commercial center and a city known as a militant stronghold, to arrest three militants suspected in previous shooting attacks. The main suspect was wanted in the killing of an Israeli soldier last fall.

Wednesday's four-hour operation left a broad swath of damage in a centuries-old marketplace in Nablus. In the Old City, shops were riddled with bullets, parked cars were crushed, and blood stained the cement ruins. Furniture from the destroyed home was scattered among mounds of debris.

The influx of wounded overwhelmed the city's Najah Hospital, said Ahmad Aswad, the head nurse of the cardiology department.

In one emotional scene, a medic pronounced a man dead, only to notice the lifeless patient was his father. Elsewhere, an amateur video showed two men, apparently unarmed, being shot as they ran in the street. Military spokesman Lt. Col. Richard Hecht said the armed forces were looking into it.

As the bodies were paraded through the crowd on stretchers, thousands of people packed the streets, chanting in support of the militants. Masked men fired into the air.

The fighting comes at a sensitive time, less than two months after Netanyahu's new hard-line government took office. It presents an early challenge for Netanyahu, who on top of spiraling violence is also facing waves of protests from Israelis against a plan to overhaul the country's justice system.

The government is dominated by ultranationalists who have pushed for tougher action against Palestinian militants and vowed to entrench Israeli rule in the occupied West Bank, including by ramping up settlement construction on lands Palestinians seek for their future state. Israeli media have quoted top security officials as expressing concern that the harder line could lead to even more violence as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan approaches.

About 60 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and east Jerusalem this year, according to a tally by The Associated Press.

Last year, nearly 150 Palestinians were killed in those areas, making it the deadliest year there since 2004, according to figures by the Israeli rights group B'Tselem. Some 30 people on the Israeli side were killed in Palestinian attacks.

Israel says most of those killed were militants. But young people protesting the raids and others not involved in the confrontations have also been killed.

More bodies found in China mine collapse, 48 remain missing

By NG HAN GUAN Associated Press

ALXA LEAGUE, China (AP) — Rescuers with backhoes and bulldozers dug through tons of earth and rubble Thursday for 48 people missing after a landslide buried an open-pit mine in northern China. State broadcaster CCTV reported that the death toll in the disaster rose to five.

Conditions in the area remain dangerous, and the search had to be suspended for several hours after a second landslide at the gigantic facility in Inner Mongolia's Alxa League.

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On Thursday afternoon, more than a dozen bulldozers, trucks, SUVs and fire engines were seen passing through a remote police checkpoint around 25 kilometers (16 miles) southwest of the mine.

Nearly all personnel were stopped by police and checked for entry approvals before being allowed to proceed further along the road leading to the mine.

A police officer said only those with government approval would be allowed access to the area. She said people living close to the mine had been sent to stay in a nearby town.

The initial cave-in of one of the pit's walls struck at around 1:00 p.m. Wednesday, burying people and mining trucks below in tons of rocks and sand. It was followed about five hours later by the additional landslide, forcing the work suspension.

The cause of the disaster remains under investigation.

The official Xinhua News Agency said about 900 rescuers with heavy equipment were on the scene and they had resumed the search by Thursday morning.

Chinese President Xi Jinping called for "all-out efforts in search and rescue" and for "ensuring the safety of people's lives and property and maintaining overall social stability."

Images of the collapse distributed by CCTV showed a massive wall of debris rushing down a slope onto people and vehicles below.

The company running the mine, Inner Mongolia Xinjing Coal Industry Co. Ltd., was fined last year for multiple safety violations ranging from insecure routes into and out of the pit, to unsafe storage of volatile materials and a lack of training for its safety staff, according to the news website The Paper.

Inner Mongolia is a key region for mining of coal and various minerals and rare earths that critics say has ravaged the region's landscape of mountains, grassy steppes and deserts.

China overwhelmingly relies on coal for power generation but has tried to reduce the number of deadly mine accidents through a greater emphasis on safety and the closure of smaller operations that lacked necessary equipment.

China has recorded a slew of deadly industrial and construction accidents in recent months as a result of poor safety training and regulation, official corruption and a tendency to cut corners by companies seeking to make profits.

Despite those high-profile incidents, the overall number of industrial accidents fell by 27 percent in 2022, when much of China's economy was shut down under the zero-COVID policy, over the previous year, the Ministry of Emergency Management announced last month. The number of deaths in such accidents also fell 23.6 percent, the ministry said.

'Never saw such hell': Russian soldiers in Ukraine call home

By ERIKA KINETZ Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — How do people raised with a sense of right and wrong end up involved in terrible acts of violence against others?

That's the human mystery at the heart of 2,000 intercepted phone calls from Russian soldiers in Ukraine. These calls obtained by The Associated Press offer an intimate new perspective on Russian President Vladimir Putin's year-old war, seen through the eyes of Russian soldiers themselves.

The AP identified calls made in March 2022 by soldiers in a military division that Ukrainian prosecutors say committed war crimes in Bucha, a town outside Kyiv that became an early symbol of Russian atrocities.

They show how deeply unprepared young soldiers — and their country — were for the war to come. Many joined the military because they needed money and were informed of their deployment at the last minute. They were told they'd be welcomed as heroes for liberating Ukraine from its Nazi oppressors and their Western backers, and that Kyiv would fall without bloodshed within a week.

The intercepts show that as soldiers realized how much they'd been misled, they grew more and more afraid. Violence that once would have been unthinkable became normal. Looting and drinking offered moments of rare reprieve. Some said they were following orders to kill civilians or prisoners of war.

They tell their mothers what this war actually looks like: About the teenage Ukrainian boy who got his

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ears cut off. How the scariest sound is not the whistle of a rocket flying past, but the silence that means it's coming directly for you. How modern weapons can obliterate the human body so there's nothing left to bring home.

We listen as their mothers struggle to reconcile their pride and their horror, and as their wives and fathers beg them not to drink too much and to please, please call home.

These are the stories of three of those men — Ivan, Leonid and Maxim. The AP isn't using their full names to protect their families in Russia. The AP established that they were in areas when atrocities were committed, but has no evidence of their individual actions beyond what they confess.

The AP spoke with the mothers of Ivan and Leonid, but couldn't reach Maxim or his family. The AP verified these calls with the help of the Dossier Center, an investigative group in London funded by Russian dissident Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The conversations have been edited for length and clarity.

In a joint production on Saturday, Feb. 25, The Associated Press and Reveal at the Center for Investigative Reporting will broadcast never-before-heard audio of Russian soldiers as they confront — and perpetrate — the brutality of Russia's war in Ukraine.

LEONID

Leonid became a soldier because he needed money. He was in debt and didn't want to depend on his parents.

"I just wasn't prepared emotionally for my child to go to war at the age of 19," his mother told the AP in January. "None of us had experienced anything like this, that your child would live in a time when he has to go and fight."

Leonid's mother said Russia needs to protect itself from its enemies. But, like many others, she expected Russia to take parts of eastern Ukraine quickly. Instead, Leonid's unit got stuck around Bucha.

"No one thought it would be so terrible," his mother said. "My son just said one thing: 'My conscience is clear. They opened fire first.' That's all."

In the calls, there is an obvious moral dissonance between the way Leonid's mother raised him and what he is seeing and doing in Ukraine. Still, she defended her son, insisting he never even came into contact with civilians in Ukraine.

She said everything was calm, civil. There was no trouble at the checkpoints. Nothing bad happened. The war didn't change her son.

She declined to listen to any of the intercepts: "This is absurd," she said. "Just don't try to make it look like my child killed innocent people."

ONE: Kill if you don't want to be killed.

Leonid's introduction to war came on Feb. 24, as his unit crossed into Ukraine from Belarus and decimated a detachment of Ukrainians at the border. After his first fight, Leonid seems to have compassion for the young Ukrainian soldiers they'd just killed.

Mother: "When did you get scared?"

Leonid: "When our commander warned us we would be shot, 100%. He warned us that although we'd be bombed and shot at, our aim was to get through."

Mother: "Did they shoot you?"

Leonid: "Of course. We defeated them."

Mother: "Mhm. Did you shoot from your tanks?"

Leonid: "Yeah, we did. We shot from the tanks, machine guns and rifles. We had no losses. We destroyed their four tanks. There were dead bodies lying around and burning. So, we won."

Mother: "Oh what a nightmare! Lyonka, you wanted to live at that moment, right honey?"

Leonid: "More than ever!"

Mother: "More than ever, right honey?"

Leonid: "Of course."

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Mother: "It's totally horrible."

Leonid: "They were lying there, just 18 or 19 years old. Am I different from them? No, I'm not."

TWO: The rules of normal life no longer apply.

Leonid tells his mother their plan was to seize Kyiv within a week, without firing a single bullet. Instead, his unit started taking fire near Chernobyl. They had no maps and the Ukrainians had taken down all the road signs.

"It was so confusing," he says. "They were well prepared."

Not expecting a prolonged attack, Russian soldiers ran short on basic supplies. One way for them to get what they needed — or wanted — was to steal.

Many soldiers, including Leonid, talk about money with the wary precision that comes from not having enough. Some take orders from friends and family for certain-sized shoes and parts for specific cars, proud to go home with something to give.

When Leonid tells his mother casually about looting, at first she can't believe he's stealing. But it's become normal for him.

As he speaks, he watches a town burn on the horizon.

"Such a beauty," he says.

Leonid: "Look, mom, I'm looking at tons of houses — I don't know, dozens, hundreds — and they're all empty. Everyone ran away."

Mother: "So all the people left, right? You guys aren't looting them, are you? You're not going into other people's houses?"

Leonid: "Of course we are, mom. Are you crazy?"

Mother: "Oh, you are. What do you take from there?"

Leonid: "We take food, bed linen, pillows. Blankets, forks, spoons, pans."

Mother: (laughing) "You gotta be kidding me."

Leonid: "Whoever doesn't have any — socks, clean underwear, T-shirts, sweaters."

THREE: The enemy is everybody.

Leonid tells his mother about the terror of going on patrol and not knowing what or who they will encounter. He describes using lethal force at the slightest provocation against just about anyone.

At first, she seems not to believe that Russian soldiers could be killing civilians.

Leonid tells her that civilians were told to flee or shelter in basements, so anyone who was outside must not be a real civilian. Russian soldiers had been told, by Putin and others, that they'd be greeted as liberators and anyone who resisted was a fascist, an insurgent — not a real civilian.

This was a whole-of-society war. Mercy was for suckers.

Mother: "Oh Lyonka, you've seen so much stuff there!"

Leonid: "Well ... civilians are lying around right on the street with their brains coming out."

Mother: "Oh God, you mean the locals?"

Leonid: "Yep. Well, like, yeah."

Mother: "Are they the ones you guys shot or the ones ... "

Leonid: "The ones killed by our army."

Mother: "Lyonya, they might just be peaceful people."

Leonid: "Mom, there was a battle. And a guy would just pop up, you know? Maybe he would pull out a grenade launcher ... Or we had a case, a young guy was stopped, they took his cellphone. He had all this information about us in his Telegram messages — where to bomb, how many we were, how many tanks we have. And that's it."

Mother: "So they knew everything?"

Leonid: "He was shot right there on the spot."

Mother: "Mhm."

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Leonid: "He was 17 years old. And that's it, right there."

Mother: "Mhm."

Leonid: "There was a prisoner. It was an 18-year-old guy. First, he was shot in his leg. Then his ears were cut off. After that, he admitted everything, and they killed him."

Mother: "Did he admit it?"

Leonid: "We don't imprison them. I mean, we kill them all."

Mother: "Mhm."

FOUR: What it takes to get home alive.

Leonid tells his mother he was nearly killed five times. Things are so disorganized, he says, that it's not uncommon for Russians to fire on their own troops — it even happened to him. Some soldiers shoot themselves just to get medical leave, he says.

In another call, he tells his girlfriend he's envious of his buddies who got shot in the feet and could go home. "A bullet in your foot is like four months at home with crutches," he says. "It would be awesome."

Then he hangs up because of incoming fire.

Mother: "Hello, Lyonechka."

Leonid: "I just wanted to call you again. I am able to speak."

Mother: "Oh, that's good."

Leonid: "There are people out here who shoot themselves."

Mother: "Mhm."

Leonid: "They do it for the insurance money. You know where they shoot themselves?"

Mother: "That's silly, Lyonya."

Leonid: "The bottom part of the left thigh."

Mother: "It's bull——, Lyonya. They're crazy, you know that, right?"

Leonid: "Some people are so scared that they are ready to harm themselves just to leave."

Mother: "Yeah, it is fear, what can you say here, it's human fear. Everybody wants to live. I don't argue with that, but please don't do that. We all pray for you. You should cross yourself any chance you get, just turn away from everyone and do it. We all pray for you. We're all worried."

Leonid: "I'm standing here, and you know what the situation is? I am now 30 meters (100 feet) away from a huge cemetery." (giggling)

Mother: "Oh, that's horrible ... may it be over soon."

Leonid says he had to learn to empty his mind.

"Imagine, it's nighttime. You're sitting in the dark and it's quiet out there. Alone with your thoughts. And day after day, you sit there alone with those thoughts," he tells his girlfriend. "I already learned to think of nothing while sitting outside.

He promises to bring home a collection of bullets for the kids. "Trophies from Ukraine," he calls them.

His mother says she's waiting for him.

"Of course I'll come, why wouldn't I?" Leonid says.

"Of course, you'll come," his mother says. "No doubts. You're my beloved. Of course, you'll come. You are my happiness."

Leonid returned to Russia in May, badly wounded, but alive. He told his mother Russia would win this war.

IVAN

Ivan dreamed of being a paratrooper from the time he was a boy, growing up in a village at the edge of Siberia. He used to dress up in fatigues and play paintball with friends in the woods. A photo shows him at 12 years old, smiling with a big Airsoft rifle and a slimy splotch of green near his heart — a sign of certain death in paintball.

Ivan's dream came true. He entered an elite unit of Russian paratroopers, which crossed into Ukraine the very first day of Putin's Feb. 24 invasion, one year ago.

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ONE: Ivan's road to war.

Ivan was in Belarus on training when they got a Telegram message: "Tomorrow you are leaving for Ukraine. There is a genocide of the Russian population. And we have to stop it."

When his mother found out he was in Ukraine, she said she stopped speaking for days and took sedatives. Her hair went gray. Still, she was proud of him.

Ivan ended up in Bucha.

Ivan: "Mom, hi."

Mother: "Hi, son! How ..."

Ivan: "How are you?"

Mother: "Vanya, I understand they might be listening so I'm afraid ..."

Ivan: "Doesn't matter."

Mother: "... to ask where you are, what's happening. Where are you?"

Ivan: "In Bucha."

Mother: "In Bucha?"

Ivan: "In Bucha."

Mother: "Son, be as careful as you can, OK? Don't go charging around! Always keep a cool head."

Ivan: "Oh, come on, I'm not charging around."

Mother: "Yeah, right! And yesterday you told me how you're gonna f—— kill everyone out there." (laughs)

Ivan: "We will kill if we have to."

Mother: "Huh?"

Ivan: "If we have to — we have to."

Mother: "I understand you. I'm so proud of you, my son! I don't even know how to put it. I love you so much. And I bless you for everything, everything! I wish you success in everything. And I'll wait for you no matter what."

TWO: Love and fear.

Russian soldiers had been told by Putin and others that they'd be welcomed by their brothers and sisters in Ukraine as liberators. Instead, Ivan finds that most Ukrainians want him dead or gone. His mood darkens.

He calls his girlfriend, Olya, and tells her he had a dream about her.

Ivan: "F—, you know, it's driving me crazy here. It's just that ... You were just ... I felt you, touched you with my hand. I don't understand how it's possible, why, where ... But I really felt you. I don't know, I felt something warm, something dear. It's like something was on fire in my hands, so warm ... And that's it. I don't know. I was sleeping and then I woke up with all these thoughts. War ... You know, when you're sleeping — and then you're like ... War ... Where, where is it? It was just dark in the house, so dark. And I went outside, walked around the streets, and thought: damn, f— it. And that's it. I really want to come see you."

Olya: "I am waiting for you."

Ivan: "Waiting? OK. I'm waiting, too. Waiting for the time I can come see you ... Let's make a deal. When we see each other, let's spend the entire day together. Laying around, sitting together, eating, looking at each other — just us, together."

Olya: (Laughs) "Agreed."

Ivan: "Together all the time. Hugging, cuddling, kissing ... Together all the time, not letting each other go."

Olya: "Well, yeah!"

Ivan: "You can go f—— crazy here. It's so f— up, the s— that's happening. I really thought it would be easy here, to tell you the truth. That it's just gonna be easy to talk, think about it. But it turned out to be hard, you need to think with your head all the time. So that's that."

Ivan: "We are really at the front line. As far out as you could be. Kyiv is 15 kilometers (about 10 miles) from us. It is scary, Olya. It really is scary."

Olya: "Hello?"

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Ivan: "Do you hear me?"
The line drops.

THREE: The end.

As things get worse for Ivan in Ukraine, his mother's patriotism deepens and her rage grows. The family has relatives in Kyiv, but seems to believe this is a righteous war against Nazi oppression in Ukraine — and the dark hand of the United States they see behind Kyiv's tough resistance. She says she'll go to Ukraine herself to fight.

Mother: "Do you have any predictions about the end ...?"

Ivan: "We are here for the time being. We'll probably stay until they clean up the whole of Ukraine. Maybe they'll pull us out. Maybe not. We're going for Kyiv."

Mother: "What are they going to do?"

Ivan: "We're not going anywhere until they clean up all of these pests."

Mother: "Are those bastards getting cleaned up?"

Ivan: "Yes, they are. But they've been waiting for us and preparing, you understand? Preparing properly. American motherf—— have been helping them out."

Mother: "F—— f——. F—— kill them all. You have my blessing."

Death came for Ivan a decade after that boyhood paintball game.

In July, a local paper published a notice of his funeral with a photo of him, again in fatigues holding a large rifle. Ivan died heroically in Russia's "special military operation," the announcement said. We will never forget you. All of Russia shares this grief.

Reached by the AP in January, Ivan's mother at first denied she'd ever talked with her son from the front. But she agreed to listen to some of the intercepted audio and confirmed it was her speaking with Ivan.

"He wasn't involved in murders, let alone in looting," she told the AP before hanging up the phone.

Ivan was her only son.

MAXIM

Maxim is drunk in some of the calls, slurring his words, because life at the front line is more than he can take sober.

It's not clear what military unit Maxim is in, but he makes calls from the same phone as Ivan, on the same days.

He says they're alone out there and exposed. Communications are so bad they're taking more fire from their own troops than from the Ukrainians.

He has a bad toothache and his feet are freezing. The hunt for locals — men, women and children — who might be informing on them to the Ukrainian military is constant.

Maxim's mood flips between boredom and horror — not just at what he has seen, but also what he has done.

ONE: Gold!

The only reason Maxim is able to speak with his family back in Russia is because they've been stealing phones from locals. He says they're even shaking down kids.

"We take everything from them," he explains to his wife. "Because they can also be f—— spotters."

Stuck just outside Kyiv, bored and unsure why they're in Ukraine in the first place, Maxim and a half-dozen other guys shot up a shopping mall and made off with all the gold they could carry.

Back home Maxim has money troubles, but here his hands are heavy with treasure. He gleefully calculates and recalculates what his pile of gold might be worth. He says he offered a wad of money the size of his fist to Ukrainian women and children.

"I wanted to give it to normal families with kids, but the people out there were drunks," he tells his wife.

In the end, he handed the cash off to a random, cleanshaven man he thought looked decent. "I told him: 'Look here, take it, give it to families with kids and take something for yourself. You'll figure it out,

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make it fair.”

On calls home, the high sweet voice of Maxim’s own young child bubbles in the background as he talks with his wife.

Maxim: “Do you know how much a gram of gold costs here?”

Wife: “No.”

Maxim: “Roughly? About two or three thousand rubles, right?”

Wife: “Well, yeah ...”

Maxim: “Well, I have 1½ kilograms (more than three pounds). With labels even.”

Wife: “Holy f—, are we looters?!”

Maxim: “With labels, yeah. It’s just that we f—— up this ... We were shooting at this shopping mall from a tank. Then we go in, and there’s a f—— jewelry store. Everything was taken. But there was a safe there. We cracked it open, and inside ... f— me! So the seven of us loaded up.”

Wife: “I see.”

Maxim: “They had these f—— necklaces, you know. In our money, they’re like 30-40,000 a piece, 60,000 a piece.”

Wife: “Holy crap.”

Maxim: “I scored about a kilo and a half of necklaces, charms, bracelets ... these ... earrings ... earrings with rings ...”

Wife: “That’s enough, don’t tell me.”

Maxim: “Anyway, I counted and if it’s 3,000 rubles a gram, then I have about 3.5 million. If you offload it.”

Wife: “Got it. How’s the situation there?”

Maxim: “It’s f—— OK.”

Wife: “OK? Got it.”

Maxim: “We don’t have a f—— thing to do, so we go around and loot the f—— shopping mall.”

Wife: “Just be careful, in the name of Christ.”

TWO: Propaganda.

Maxim and his mother discuss the opposing stories about the war being told on Ukrainian and Russian television. They blame the United States and recite conspiracy theories pushed by Russian state media.

But Maxim and his mother believe it’s the Ukrainians who are deluded by fake news and propaganda, not them. The best way to end the war, his mother says, is to kill the presidents of Ukraine and the United States.

Later, Maxim tells his mother that thousands of Russian troops died in the first weeks of war — so many that there’s no time to do anything except haul away the bodies. That’s not what they’re saying on Russian TV, his mother says.

Maxim: “Here, it’s all American. All the weapons.”

Mother: “It’s the Americans driving this, of course! Look at their laboratories. They are developing biological weapons. Coronavirus literally started there.”

Maxim: “Yeah, I also saw somewhere that they used bats.”

Mother: “All of it. Bats, migrating birds, and even coronavirus might be their biological weapon.”

Mother: “They even found all these papers with signatures from the U.S. all over Ukraine. Biden’s son is the mastermind behind all of this.”

Mother: “When will it end? When they stop supplying weapons.”

Maxim: “Mhm.”

Mother: “Until they catch (Ukrainian President Volodymyr) Zelenskyy and execute him, nothing will end. He’s a fool, a fool! He’s a puppet for the U.S. and they really don’t need him, the fool. You watch TV and you feel bad for the people, the civilians, some travelling with young kids.”

Mother: “If I was given a gun, I’d go and shoot Biden.” (Laughs)

Maxim: (Laughs)

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THREE: War and peace.

The Ukrainian government has been intercepting Russian calls when their phones ping Ukrainian cell towers, providing important real-time intelligence for the military. Now, the calls are also potential evidence for war crimes.

But phones have been dangerous for the soldiers in another, more personal sense. The phone acts as a real-time bridge between two incompatible realities — the war in Ukraine and home.

In Maxim's calls with his wife, war and peace collide. Even as she teaches their daughter the rules of society — scolding the child for throwing things, for example — Maxim talks about what he's been stealing. His wife's world is filled with school crafts and the sounds of children playing outside. In his, volleys of gunfire crack the air.

One night last March, Maxim was having trouble keeping it together on a call with his wife. He'd been drinking, as he did every night.

He told her he'd killed civilians — so many he thinks he's going crazy. He said he might not make it home alive. He was just sitting there, drunk in the dark, waiting for the Ukrainian artillery strikes to start.

Wife: "Why? Why are you drinking?"

Maxim: "Everyone is like that here. It's impossible without it here."

Wife: "How the f--- will you protect yourself if you are tipsy?"

Maxim: "Totally normal. On the contrary, it's easier to shoot ... civilians. Let's not talk about this. I'll come back and tell you how it is here and why we drink!"

Wife: "Please, just be careful!"

Maxim: "Everything will be fine. Honestly, I'm scared s---less myself. I never saw such hell as here. I am f----- shocked."

Wife: "Why the f--- did you go there?"

Minutes later, he's on the phone with his child.

"You're coming back?" the child asks.

"Of course," Maxim says.

FOUR: The end?

In their last intercepted call, Maxim's wife seems to have a premonition.

Wife: "Is everything all right?"

Maxim: "Yeah. Why?"

Wife: "Be honest with me, is everything all right?"

Maxim: "Huh? Why do you ask?"

Wife: "It's nothing, I just can't sleep at night."

Maxim is a little breathless. He and his unit are getting ready to go. His wife asks him where they're going.

"Forward," he tells her. "I won't be able to call for a while."

California may get slammed by brutal storm front sweeping US

By AMANCAI BIRABEN and JIM SALTER Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A brutal winter storm that trapped drivers on icy roads, blacked out hundreds of thousands of homes, grounded airplanes and closed schools across much of the country was poised to slam California Thursday.

"We are in for a VERY busy week!" the National Weather Service bureau in San Diego tweeted. "We have issued warnings for damaging winds, heavy mountain snow, highly hazardous boating conditions and the list goes on."

For the first time since 1989, the weather service issued a blizzard warning for Southern California mountains that runs through Saturday. Some coastal areas could see 10-foot (3-meter) waves — and a few at up to 14 feet (4.3 meters) — through Thursday, forecasters said.

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"Nearly the entire population of CA will be able to see snow from some vantage point later this week if they look in the right direction (i.e., toward the highest hills in vicinity)," UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain tweeted Wednesday.

The storm, one in a series that was expected to pummel the country through the week, sowed chaos coast to coast. At one point Wednesday, more than 65 million people in more than two dozen states were under weather alerts.

The wintry mix hit hard in the northern U.S., closing schools, offices, even shutting down the Minnesota Legislature. About 90 churches in western Michigan canceled Ash Wednesday services, WZZM-TV reported.

In Wyoming, the state Transportation Department posted on social media that roads across much of the southern part of the state were impassable.

Rescuers tried to reach people stranded in vehicles but high winds and drifting snow created a "near-impossible situation" for them, said Sgt. Jeremy Beck of the Wyoming Highway Patrol.

"They know their locations, it's just hard for them to get them," he said.

In the Pacific Northwest, high winds and heavy snow in the Cascade Mountains prevented search teams from reaching the bodies of three climbers killed in an avalanche on Washington's Colchuck Peak over the weekend.

Unexpectedly heavy snow during rush hour sent dozens of cars spinning out in Portland, Oregon, and caused hours-long traffic jams. The regional bus service offered free rides to warming shelters for homeless individuals.

In Arizona, about 180 miles (289 kilometers) of Interstate 40 were closed while state police in New Mexico shut down on-ramps in Gallup, just across the Arizona line.

The National Weather Service warned of the potential for blinding, wind-whipped snow, especially Thursday afternoon into the night when up to a half-inch (1.2 centimeters) per hour could fall.

In California, a blizzard warning was in effect through Saturday for higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada, where forecasters said conditions could include several feet of snow blown by 60-mph (96-kph) gusts and wind chill could drop the temperature to minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 40 Celsius).

In Sacramento, the state capital, the weather service said it had received reports of something that might be either hail or graupel — soft, wet snowflakes encased in supercooled water droplets.

Electrical grids took a beating as ice encrusted utility lines in the North and gusty winds knocked down lines or fouled them with tree branches and other debris in California.

A half-inch of ice covering a wire "is the equivalent of having a baby grand piano on that single span of wire, so the weight is significant," said Matt Paul, executive vice president of distribution operations for Detroit-based DTE Electric.

More than 579,000 customers were without power in Michigan, well over 117,000 in Illinois and some 45,000 in California Wednesday night, according to the website PowerOutage.us.

Weather also contributed to nearly 1,800 U.S. flight cancellations, according to the tracking service FlightAware. Another 6,000-plus flights were delayed across the country.

At Denver International Airport, Taylor Dotson, her husband, Reggie, and their 4-year-old daughter, Raegan, faced a two-hour flight delay to Nashville on their way home to Belvidere, Tennessee.

Reggie Dotson was in Denver to interview for a job as an airline pilot.

"I think that's kind of funny that we've experienced these types of delays when that's what he's looking into getting into now as a career," Taylor Dotson said.

Few places were untouched by the wild weather, including some at the opposite extreme: long-standing record highs were broken in cities in the Midwest, mid-Atlantic and Southeast.

Nashville topped out Wednesday at 80 degrees Fahrenheit (26.67 degrees Celsius), breaking a 127-year-old record for the date, according to the weather service.

Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Lexington, Kentucky and Mobile, Alabama were among many other record-setters.

No warmup was forecast this week, though, in the northern U.S. More than 18 inches (46 centimeters)

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may pile up in parts of Minnesota and Wisconsin, the National Weather Service said Wednesday evening. According to the weather service, the biggest snow event on record in the Twin Cities was 28.4 inches (72 centimeters) from Oct. 31 through Nov. 3, 1991.

Temperatures could plunge as low as minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 29 degrees Celsius) Thursday and to minus 25 F (minus 32 C) Friday in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Wind chills may fall to minus 50 F (minus 46 C), said Nathan Rick, a meteorologist in Grand Forks.

The storm will make its way toward the East Coast later this week. Places that don't get snow may get dangerous amounts of ice, forecasters warned.

In Russia-Ukraine war, more disastrous path could lie ahead

By The Associated Press undefined

For Russia, it's been a year of bold charges and bombardments, humiliating retreats and grinding sieges. Ukraine has countered with fierce resistance, surprising counteroffensives and unexpected hit-and-run strikes.

Now, on the anniversary of Russia's invasion that has killed tens of thousands and reduced cities to ruins, both sides are preparing for a potentially even more disastrous phase that lies ahead.

Russia recently intensified its push to capture all of Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland of the Donbas. Kyiv and its Western allies also say Moscow could try to launch a wider, more ambitious attack elsewhere along the more than 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line.

Ukraine is waiting for battle tanks and other new weapons pledged by the West for it to reclaim occupied areas.

What's nowhere in sight is a settlement.

The Kremlin insists it must include the recognition of the Crimean Peninsula, which it annexed illegally in 2014, along with the acceptance of its other territorial gains. Ukraine categorically rejects those demands and rules out any talks until Russia withdraws all forces.

While Putin is determined to achieve his goals, Ukraine and its allies are standing firm on preventing Russia from ending up with any of its land.

Experts warn that Europe's largest conflict since World War II could drag on for years, and some fear it could lead to a direct confrontation between Russia and NATO.

NEW OFFENSIVES, NEW OBJECTIVES

In recent months, Russian forces have tried to encircle the Ukrainian stronghold of Bakhmut and push deeper into the Donetsk region. Along with fulfilling its goal of capturing the entire Donbas, Moscow aims to wear down Ukrainian forces and prevent them from starting offensives elsewhere.

Bakhmut has become an important symbol of tenacity for Ukraine, as well as a way to tie up and destroy the most capable Russian forces. Both sides have used up ammunition at a rate unseen in decades.

Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said Russia has poured more troops and weapons into the Donbas and attacked other areas in an apparent bid to distract Ukrainian forces.

"Russia currently has the initiative and the advantage on the battlefield," he said, noting Kyiv's acute shortage of ammunition.

Russia has relied on its massive arsenal, and boosted production of weapons and munitions, giving it a significant edge. While Ukrainian and Western intelligence agencies observed that Moscow is running out of precision missiles, it has plenty of old-style weapons.

But even though Ukraine and its allies expect a wider Russian offensive beyond the Donbas, it could be a gamble for Moscow, which mobilized 300,000 reservists last fall to bolster its forces.

Igor Strelkov, a former Russian security officer who led separatist forces in the Donbas when fighting erupted there in 2014, warned that any big offensive could be disastrous for Russia because its preparation would be impossible to conceal and attackers would face a devastating response. He said an offensive would also raise logistical challenges like those that thwarted Russia's attempt to capture Kyiv at the war's start.

"Any large-scale offensive will quickly and inevitably entail very big losses, exhausting the resources ac-

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cumulated during mobilization," Strelkov warned.

Justin Bronk, a senior research fellow at RUSI in London, predicted any Russian offensive would fail, but said it could drain Ukraine's resources and keep it from preparing its own large-scale counteroffensive.

"The big question is how much damage does the Russian offensive do before it runs out of steam, because that will dictate the Ukrainian position," he said, noting that its aim could be to disrupt Kyiv's ability to stage a counteroffensive.

Bronk said Ukraine spent the winter building up its mechanized brigades that had spearheaded autumn counteroffensives in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions and suffered losses.

He said Ukraine has a window of opportunity of six to eight months to reclaim more land, noting that Russia could launch another mobilization to recruit up to 500,000 more troops who could be readied for combat after at least six months of training.

Zhdanov said Ukraine could launch a new counteroffensive in late April or early May after receiving new Western weapons, including battle tanks. He predicted Ukrainian forces will likely attack from the Zaporizhzhia region to try to reclaim the ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk and cut the Russian corridor to Crimea.

"If Ukraine reaches the Sea of Azov coast, it will nullify all the Russian gains," Zhdanov said, turning Putin's victories "to dust."

STALEMATE IN UKRAINE OR UPHEAVAL IN RUSSIA?

Observers see little prospect for talks. Both sides are "irreconcilable on their current positions," said Bronk.

Major Ukrainian battlefield successes this summer could fuel "significant political turmoil in Russia, because at that point, Putin's own position within the leadership becomes very, very difficult to see as tenable," he said.

At the same time, if Ukraine fails to reclaim more territory before Russia builds up its troops, it could lead to a "long-term stalemate and sort of a grinding attritional war that just kind of goes on and on," Bronk added, playing into Moscow's plan "to prolong the war and just wait for the West to get exhausted."

Fiona Hill, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who served in the past three U.S. administrations, also saw little prospect for a settlement.

"The Russians are digging in for the long haul. They have no intention of losing," she said. "Putin has made it very clear that he's prepared to sacrifice whatever it takes. His message there is basically saying you can't possibly counteract me, because I'm willing to do whatever and I've got so much more manpower."

Hill said Putin is hoping for Western support for Kyiv to dissolve — "that it goes away and that Ukraine is left exposed, and then that Russia can force Ukraine to capitulate and give up on its territory."

Tatiana Stanovaya of the Carnegie Endowment said Putin continues to believe he can achieve his goals by pressing the campaign.

"For him, the only way he admits it can end is capitulation of Kyiv," she said.

THE NUCLEAR OPTION

Putin has repeatedly said Russia could use "all available means" to protect its territory, a clear reference to its nuclear arsenal.

Moscow's nuclear doctrine states that it could use those weapons in response to a nuclear strike or an attack with conventional forces threatening "the very existence of the Russian state," a formulation that offers broad room for interpretation and abrupt escalation.

Some Russian hawks urged nuclear strikes on Ukrainian bridges and other key infrastructure to force Kyiv and its allies to accept Moscow's terms.

Bronk said he doesn't expect Russia to resort to that, arguing it would backfire.

"Actually using them generates almost no practical benefits at all and certainly nothing to compensate for all of the costs, both in terms of immediate escalation risk — irradiating things they want to hold on to and be part of — and also pushing away the rest of the world," he said.

It would be certain to anger China, which doesn't want the nuclear taboo broken, he added.

Hill also noted that Russia got some pushback from China and India, who were worried about Putin's nuclear saber-rattling. She added that Putin sees nuclear threats as a powerful political tool and will keep

issuing them in the hope of forcing the West to withdraw support for Ukraine.

"Putin's just hoping that everybody's going to blink," she said. "He's not going to give up the idea that he could use a battlefield tactical nuclear weapon."

But Hill added: "If he thought he would get the results that he wanted from it, he would use it."

Stanovaya, who has long followed Kremlin decision-making, also said Putin's nuclear threat is no bluff.

If he sees that Ukraine can attack in a way that threatens Russian territory and lead to Moscow's defeat, "I think he would be ready to use nuclear weapons in a way that he can show that it's a question of survival for Russia," she said.

IS attacks on Syria truffle hunters are deadliest in a year

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The Islamic State group has carried out its deadliest attacks in more than a year, killing dozens of civilians and security officers in the deserts of central Syria, even as people of northern Syria have been digging out of the wreckage from the region's devastating earthquake.

The bloodshed was a reminder of the persistent threat from IS, whose sleeper cells still terrorize populations nearly four years after the group was defeated in Syria.

The attacks also underscored the extremists' limitations. IS militants have found refuge in the remote deserts of Syria's interior and along the Iraqi-Syrian border. From there, they lash out against civilians and security forces in both countries. But they are also hemmed in by opponents on all sides: Syrian government troops as well as Kurdish-led fighters who control eastern Syria and are backed by U.S. forces. American raids with their Kurdish-led allies have repeatedly killed or caught IS leaders and, earlier this month, killed two senior IS figures.

The IS attacks this month were largely against a very vulnerable target: Syrians hunting truffles in the desert.

The truffles are a seasonal delicacy that can be sold for a high price. Since the truffle hunters work in large groups in remote areas, IS militants in previous years have repeatedly preyed on them, emerging from the desert to abduct them, kill some and ransom others for money.

On Feb. 11, IS fighters kidnapped about 75 truffle hunters outside the town of Palmyra. At least 16 were killed, including a woman and security officers, 25 were released and the rest remain missing.

Six days later, on Friday, they attacked a group of truffle hunters outside the desert town of Sukhna, just up the highway from Palmyra, and fought with troops at a security checkpoint close by. At least 61 civilians and seven soldiers were killed. Many of the truffle hunters in the group work for three local businessmen close to the Syrian military and pro-government militias, which may have prompted IS to target them, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, and the Palmyra News Network, an activist collective that covers developments in the desert areas.

Smaller attacks around the area killed 12 other people, including soldiers, pro-government fighters and civilians.

The area is far from the northern regions devastated by the Feb. 6 earthquake that killed more than 46,000 people in Turkey and Syria. Still, IS fighters "took advantage of the earthquake to send a message that the organization is still present," said Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Observatory.

Friday's attack in Sukhna was the group's deadliest since January 2022, when IS gunmen stormed a prison in the northeastern city of Hassakeh that held some 3,000 militants and juveniles. Ten days of battles between the militants and U.S.-backed fighters left nearly 500 dead.

The prison attack raised fears IS was staging a comeback. But it was followed by a series of blows against the group, which reverted to its drumbeat of smaller-scale shootings and bombings.

It's too early to say if the new spate of attacks marks a new resurgence, said Aaron Y. Zelin, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"It's the biggest attack in a while. So the question is if it's just a one-off attack or if they are reactivating capabilities," said Zelin, who closely follows militant Islamic groups and founded Jihadology.net.

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He said IS fighters have been less active every year since 2019 and noted that the recent attacks hit civilians, not tougher security targets.

In 2014, IS overran large swaths of Syria and Iraq and declared the entire territory a "caliphate," where it imposed a radically brutal rule. The U.S. and its allies in Syria and Iraq, as well as Syria's Russian-backed government troops, fought against it for years, eventually rolling it back but also leaving tens of thousands dead and cities in ruins. The group was declared defeated in Iraq in 2017, then in Syria two years later.

In 2019, many thought that IS was finished after it lost the last sliver of land it controlled, its founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. raid and an international crackdown on social media pages linked to the extremists limited its propaganda and recruitment campaigns.

Another U.S. raid about a year ago killed al-Baghdadi's successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. His replacement was killed in battle with rebels in southern Syria in October.

The newest IS leader, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi, may be trying to show his strength with the latest attacks, said Abdullah Suleiman Ali, a Syrian researcher who focuses on jihadi groups. The leaders' names are pseudonyms and don't refer to a family relation.

"The new leader has to take measures to prove himself within the organization ... (to show) that the group under the new leadership is capable and strong," Ali said.

American troops and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces eliminated a series of senior IS figures this month, according to the U.S. military. On Feb. 10, they killed Ibrahim Al Qahtani, suspected of planning last year's prison attack, then eight days later they captured an IS official allegedly involved in planning attacks and manufacturing bombs. Last week, a senior IS commander, Hamza al-Homsy, was killed in a raid that also left four American service-members wounded.

But IS remains a threat, according to U.N., U.S. and Kurdish officials.

It is estimated to have 5,000 to 7,000 members and supporters – around half of them fighters -- in Iraq and Syria, according to a U.N. report this month. IS uses desert hideouts "for remobilization and training purposes" and has spread cells of 15 to 30 people each to other parts of the country, particularly the southern province of Daraa.

SDF spokesman Siyaman Ali said IS persistently plots attacks in Kurdish-run eastern Syria. He pointed to an attempted attack by IS fighters on SDF security headquarters in the city of Raqqa in December. SDF sweeps since then have captured IS operatives and weapons caches, he said. This is a sign the group was close to carrying out large operations, he said.

IS in particular aims to storm SDF-run prisons to free militants, he said. Some 10,000 IS fighters, including about 2,000 foreigners, are held in the more than two dozen Kurdish-run detention facilities.

Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla, commander of the U.S. Central Command or CENTCOM, said in a statement this month that IS "continues to represent a threat to not only Iraq and Syria, but to the stability and security of the region."

R. Kelly to learn if he effectively gets 'life' sentence

By MICHAEL TARM and CLAIRE SAVAGE Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A federal judge will sentence R. Kelly for his Chicago convictions of child pornography and enticement of minors for sex on Thursday, when the 56-year-old singer will learn if he must spend the rest of his life behind bars or if he will have some hope of getting out.

The central question for the judge at the hearing in Kelly's hometown of Chicago is whether to heed prosecutors' request to order that Kelly serve a new sentence only after he completes his 30-year term imposed last year in New York for racketeering and sex trafficking.

A sentence that Kelly must serve consecutively would be tantamount to a life sentence.

Prosecutors acknowledge that a lengthy term served after the New York sentence would practically erase any chance of Kelly ever leaving prison alive. They say the Grammy Award-winner's crimes against children and his lack of remorse justified that.

They recommend a 25-year sentence served consecutively. That would make him eligible for release in

2066, a year shy of his 100th birthday. The defense wants a sentence of around 10 years, served simultaneously.

If the judge does let Kelly serve his new sentence simultaneously with the New York sentence, he will serve no more than the 30 years and should be eligible for release at around age 80 — providing him some hope of one day resuming life outside prison.

Jurors in Chicago convicted Kelly last year on six of 13 counts — three counts of producing child porn and three of enticement of minors for sex. Kelly was acquitted of the marquee count, alleging he successfully rigged his 2008 state child pornography trial.

Kelly rose from poverty in Chicago to become one of the world's biggest R&B stars. Known for his smash hit "I Believe I Can Fly" and for sex-infused songs such as "Bump n' Grind," he sold millions of albums even after allegations about his abuse of girls began circulating publicly in the 1990s.

In presentencing filings, prosecutors described Kelly as "a serial sexual predator" who used his fame and wealth to reel in star-struck fans to sexually abuse and then discard them.

Kelly's lawyer, Jennifer Bonjean, accused prosecutors of offering an "embellished narrative" regarding Kelly and seeking to get the judge to join what she called the government's "blood-thirsty campaign to make Kelly a symbol of the #MeToo movement."

Bonjean said Kelly has suffered enough, including financially. She said his worth once approached \$1 billion, but that he "is now destitute."

Prosecutors make case for pre-meditated attack on gay club

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — Before killing five people and wounding over a dozen others at a gay nightclub, Anderson Lee Aldrich visited at least six previous times, drew a map showing the layout of the club and appeared to be planning to livestream the attack using a mobile phone duct taped to a baseball hat found in their SUV, according to investigators.

Through testimony from police during a court hearing expected to wrap up Thursday, prosecutors have been making a case for a pre-meditated attack on Club Q last year that was inspired by a "neo-Nazi white supremacist" shooting training video as they try to convince a judge that there is enough evidence to put Aldrich, 22, on trial for over 300 charges including murder and bias-motivated crimes.

But on the first day of the hearing Wednesday, Aldrich's lawyers countered with a picture of a suspect under the influence of drugs and forced by their troubled and sometimes abusive mother to go to LGBTQ clubs and as someone who has expressed remorse for the November shooting. The defense also brought up Aldrich's mental health for the first time, showing photographs of pill bottles for drugs that Aldrich, who identifies as nonbinary and uses the pronouns they and them, had been prescribed to treat mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and PTSD. But defense attorney Joseph Archambault didn't say if Aldrich had been formally diagnosed with any of those mental illnesses.

At this stage, Judge Michael McHenry must only decide whether prosecutors have shown during this week's hearing that there is probable cause that Aldrich committed the crimes they are charged with in order for the case to move ahead to a trial. At a trial, prosecutors are held to a higher standard and must prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt to convince jurors to convict defendants.

Unlike other crimes, hate crime charges require prosecutors to present evidence of a motive — that Aldrich was driven by bias, either wholly or in part.

Although Aldrich identifies as nonbinary, someone who is a member of a protected group such as the LGBTQ community can still be charged with a hate crime for targeting peers. Hate crime laws are focused on the victims, not the perpetrator.

The lead detective in the shooting, Rebecca Joines, testified that Aldrich posted the neo-Nazi video, which featured attacks on synagogues and mosques abroad, including on two mosques in New Zealand in 2019, on a website they either created or administered. Joines said Aldrich had not created the video, which has been posted by many others online, but said she believed they were seeking to emulate it with

the attack on the club.

Aldrich also shared an image of a rifle scope trained on a gay pride parade and often used an anti-gay slur, according to two online acquaintances interviewed by investigators, Joines said.

Weinstein faces a 2nd long sentence in LA rape conviction

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Harvey Weinstein could see the long prison term he is already serving nearly doubled at his California sentencing, bringing the onetime movie magnate and lord of the Oscars to a new low after convictions for rape and sexual assault.

Unless she grants a defense motion for a new trial, Superior Court Judge Lisa B. Lench is scheduled to sentence the 70-year-old Weinstein in a downtown Los Angeles courtroom on Thursday. She could give him up to 18 years in prison. He has more than 20 years left on his sentence in New York after a 2020 conviction there.

Jurors in December convicted Weinstein of one count of rape and two counts of sexual assault against an Italian model and actor during a 2013 film festival in the run-up to that year's Academy Awards. The jury spared Weinstein an even longer sentence when they acquitted him of the sexual battery of a massage therapist and failed to reach verdicts on counts involving two other women.

The victim whose dramatic testimony led to the guilty counts may make a statement on the toll the attack has taken on her.

Last week, Lench rejected a request from Gloria Allred, an attorney for some of the women who testified at trial, to allow others to make similar statements in court about the man who has for five years been a magnet for the #MeToo movement.

"I'm not going to make this an open forum on Mr. Weinstein's conduct," Lench said.

The Associated Press does not typically name people who say they have been sexually assaulted.

The judge will first hear arguments over a defense motion that Weinstein should be given a new trial or have his verdict reduced. Weinstein's lawyers say Lench's rejection of evidence they wanted to use at trial proved prejudicial to him.

The defense attorneys argue that they ought to have been allowed to introduce private Facebook messages that showed there was a sexual relationship between the Italian woman and Pascal Vicedomini, director of the Los Angeles Italia Film Festival, which she was attending when she said the attack occurred.

The motion says the messages would have shown that both were lying under oath when they testified that they were merely friends and colleagues. The court filing also says that such a relationship would have made it unlikely that Vicedomini would give Weinstein the number of her hotel room, where according to her testimony Weinstein appeared uninvited. And it says the messages would have bolstered the lawyers' contention the woman was spending the night with Vicedomini at another hotel on that night.

The defense argued in their closing that the two had a sexual relationship, but Lench allowed jurors to see only the messages between them that established her timing and location.

The law gives Lench "the singular responsibility of setting right those prejudicial errors which often become apparent only with the benefit of hindsight," the lawyers wrote in the motion.

Lench has said she will move forward with the sentencing immediately if she rejects the defense motion.

But legal uncertainties will remain on both coasts for Weinstein.

New York's highest court has agreed to hear his appeal in his rape and sexual assault convictions there. And prosecutors in Los Angeles have yet to say whether they will retry Weinstein on counts they were unable to reach a verdict on.

It is not yet clear where he will serve his time while these issues are decided.

His New York sentence would be served before a California prison term, though a retrial or other issues could keep him from being sent back there soon.

Weinstein is eligible for parole in New York in 2039.

Israel says Palestinian militants fired rockets after raid

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and AREF TUFHAHA Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military said Palestinian militants fired six rockets from the Gaza Strip toward the country's south early Thursday, hours after an Israeli army raid in the occupied West Bank triggered a fierce gunbattle in which 11 Palestinians were killed.

The rocket attacks, which were not immediately claimed by Palestinian militant groups, appear to be triggered by the Wednesday morning raid in Nablus.

The Israeli military said air defenses intercepted five of the rockets which were fired toward the cities of Ashkelon and Sderot. One missile landed in an open field. Israeli aircraft then struck several targets in northern and central Gaza. There were no reports of injuries in Israel or Gaza.

Among the dead in Nablus were three Palestinian men, ages 72, 66 and 61, and a 16-year-old boy, according to health officials. Scores of others were wounded.

It was one of the bloodiest battles in nearly a year of fighting in the West Bank and east Jerusalem and raised the likelihood of further bloodshed. Israeli police said they were on heightened alert, while the Hamas militant group in Gaza said its patience was "running out." Islamic Jihad, another militant group, vowed to retaliate.

The four-hour operation left a broad swath of damage in a centuries-old marketplace in Nablus, a city known as a militant stronghold.

In one emotional scene, an overwhelmed medic pronounced a man dead, only to notice the lifeless patient was his father. Elsewhere, an amateur video showed two men, apparently unarmed, being shot as they ran in the street.

Israel has been carrying out stepped-up arrest raids of wanted militants in the West Bank since a series of deadly Palestinian attacks in Israel last spring.

Israeli officials liken these operations to "mowing the lawn," saying they are necessary to prevent a difficult situation from turning worse. But the raids have shown few signs of slowing the violence, and in cases like Wednesday's operation, can raise the likelihood of reprisals.

The Israeli military said it entered Nablus, the West Bank's commercial center, to arrest three militants suspected in previous shooting attacks. The main suspect was wanted in the killing of an Israeli soldier last fall.

The military usually conducts raids at night in what it says is a tactic meant to reduce the risk of civilian casualties. But military spokesman Lt. Col. Richard Hecht said forces moved quickly after intelligence services tracked down the men in a hideout.

Hecht said Israeli forces surrounded the building and asked the men to surrender, but instead they opened fire. One militant who tried to flee the building was shot and killed. He said the military then fired missiles at the house, flattening the building and killing the other two men.

At the same time, he said, troops that had set up an outside perimeter came under heavy fire, setting off an intense gunfight. The military said others hurled rocks and explosives at the troops, and officials released a video taken from inside an armored vehicle as crowds of Palestinian youths pelted it with stones. There were no Israeli casualties.

The influx of wounded overwhelmed the city's Najah Hospital, said Ahmad Aswad, the head nurse of the cardiology department.

The 36-year-old medic told The Associated Press that he saw many patients shot in the chest, head and thighs. "They shot to kill," he said.

In a moment he said will haunt him, he and a colleague carefully extracted a bullet from a 61-year-old man's heart. After the chaos subsided and they pronounced their patient dead, they looked at the man's face. It was his colleague's father, Abdelaziz Ashqar.

His colleague, Elias Ashqar, was overcome and went silent. "It didn't feel like we were in reality," Aswad said.

In the Old City of Nablus, people stared at the rubble that had been a large home in the centuries-old

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marketplace. From one end to the other, shops were riddled with bullets. Parked cars were crushed. Blood stained the cement ruins. Furniture from the destroyed home was scattered among mounds of debris.

Time-stamped security footage widely shared online appeared to show two young men running down a street. Gunshots are heard, and both fall to the ground, with one's hat flying off his head.

The two men did not appear to be armed, but the video did not show the events that led to the shooting. Hecht called the video "problematic," and said the military was looking into it.

Various Palestinian militant groups claimed six of the dead — including the three targeted in the raid — as members. There was no immediate word on whether the others belonged to armed groups. Later, officials said a 66-year-old man had died from tear gas inhalation.

As the bodies were paraded through the crowd on stretchers, thousands of people packed the streets, chanting in support of the militants. Masked men fired into the air.

Israel's police force said it was beefing up security in the West Bank and east Jerusalem in anticipation of violence.

Last month, Israeli troops killed 10 people in a similar raid in the northern West Bank. In response, Palestinian militants fired rockets from Gaza. The following day, a lone Palestinian gunman opened fire near a synagogue in an east Jerusalem settlement, killing seven people.

Days later, five Palestinian militants were killed in an Israeli arrest raid elsewhere in the West Bank. That was followed by a Palestinian car ramming that killed three Israelis, including two young brothers, in Jerusalem.

The fighting comes at a sensitive time, less than two months after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new hard-line government took office.

The government is dominated by ultranationalists who have pushed for tougher action against Palestinian militants and vowed to entrench Israeli rule in the occupied West Bank. Israeli media have quoted top security officials as expressing concern that this could lead to even more violence as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan approaches.

The Cabinet includes a number of West Bank settler leaders. In a move that could further raise tensions, Yesha, the settlement council, announced that Israeli planning officials had granted approval to nearly 2,000 new homes in settlements across the West Bank. There was no immediate confirmation from the government, but an announcement was expected Thursday.

The Palestinians and most of the international community say settlements built on occupied lands are illegal and obstacles to peace. Over 700,000 settlers now live in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, territories captured by Israel in 1967 and sought by the Palestinians for a future state.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Ned Price said the U.S. recognizes Israel's "very real" security concerns, but was also "deeply concerned" about the deaths and injuries from the raid.

He urged both sides to avoid steps that could "inflare tensions," including the possible approval of new settlements.

The Israeli decision comes in the wake of a U.N. presidential statement that strongly criticized settlements. The U.S. blocked what would have been a stronger, legally binding council resolution.

American diplomats claimed to have extracted an Israeli pledge to halt unilateral action to block the resolution. The approval of new settlements by Israel would appear to undermine that claim.

The Palestinian ambassador to the U.N., Riyad Mansour, urged the international community "to put an end to these massacres against our people."

In the Gaza Strip, Abu Obeida, a spokesman for the ruling Hamas militant group, warned that Hamas' "patience is running out," he said.

Late Wednesday, Palestinian activists burned tires along Gaza's frontier with Israel in protest.

Hamas has battled Israel in four wars since seizing control of Gaza in 2007.

Islamic Jihad leader Ziyad Al-Nakhala called the Israeli raid a "huge crime."

"It is our duty as resistance forces to respond to this crime without hesitation," he said.

Nearly 60 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and east Jerusalem this year, according to an AP tally.

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Last year, nearly 150 Palestinians were killed in those areas, making it the deadliest year there since 2004, according to figures by the Israeli rights group B'Tselem. Some 30 people on the Israeli side were killed in Palestinian attacks.

Raimondo seeks to rally US behind \$52 billion chip program

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — On State of the Union night, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo strode down the aisle and found her seat in front of Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

McConnell, not known to waste words, complimented Raimondo on a recent writeup about her efforts to restore the U.S. as the world leader in advanced computer chips.

Factories, autos, appliances, electronics, toys, toothbrushes and weapons systems all depend on semiconductors, and the need for global supremacy in this small sector of the world economy is a rare area where Republicans and Democrats share the same vision.

"Nice George Will article," McConnell said, referring to the conservative columnist's comments on Raimondo.

"Thank you. I'm going to implement that and I'm going to do it responsibly," Raimondo said of the \$52 billion that lawmakers last year approved for research and the construction of semiconductor factories. She stressed to the Kentucky senator that national security was at stake.

"That's why I voted for it," McConnell said.

After a slew of chip companies announced new U.S. factories, Raimondo is in the process of delivering on the government's promised financial commitment. Starting next week, the application process will begin for semiconductor firms seeking to qualify for \$39 billion in government backing to help fund their expansion.

Chips are integrated circuits that are embedded in a semiconductor, a material — notably silicon — that can manage the flow of electric current. The terms "chip" and "semiconductor" are often used interchangeably.

In a Thursday speech at Georgetown University, the commerce secretary plans to call for the development of two major semiconductor clusters inside the U.S. featuring a network of factories, research laboratories and other infrastructure. But fulfilling that vision means training tens of thousands of workers and figuring out scientific breakthroughs to lower the cost of producing advanced chips.

"There have been times in history," Raimondo said in an interview, "where a president used the pursuit of a goal, a technological goal, like putting a man on the moon, like leading the world in nuclear technology, to catalyze the whole country to do their part in achieving that goal."

To succeed, she said, the U.S. needs a whole-of-society effort. It's the kind of mobilization akin to World War II or the space race that grandparents talk about to younger generations, a make-or-break moment for the nation with the world's largest economy and military.

"We need to mobilize America," Raimondo said.

The administration expects the \$39 billion for factories will generate 10 times that, at a minimum, in private-sector investment. The potential benefits come from the spillover effects of computer chip production jobs that typically pay over \$100,000, leading to additional economic activity and business formation.

The Biden administration needs to get universities to double the number of electrical engineers they're pumping over the next 10 years, Raimondo said. Community colleges and high schools need to do more to partner with companies to ensure that the next generation of workers have the training to segue into these jobs.

The new law also contains \$11 billion to fund a research partnership between universities, companies and national laboratories — all with the mission of increasing a chip's processing power and lowering the cost of semiconductors so that there are buyers in a global market.

"We have to bring down the cost — big time — which means innovation, innovation, innovation," Raimondo said.

Critics note that the real work is with administering the law and monitoring how the funds are used, warning that simply spending money does not guarantee the desired results and could create economic

distortions.

"The CHIPS Act is a work in progress to say the least," said Anthony Kim, a research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation. "Spending more is not and cannot be a solution, particularly in the current economy environment where inflationary pressures are still abundant."

The promise of government support is spurring construction plans, though it's still early in a process that will take years. Major chip companies such as TSMC, Intel, Micron, IBM and others have so far committed to roughly \$200 billion for investments in new plants, according to the White House. Last week, Texas Instruments announced an \$11 billion investment to expand its semiconductor production in Utah.

The moves are long term in nature. There is a relative glut of chips available right now, after a shortage as the world economy began to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic in 2021. White House officials have said the goal of their industrial strategy is to target sectors in which global demand will be greater than available supply over the long run, while protecting technologies that are key for more precise weapons and battlefield communications.

US mass killings linked to extremism spiked over last decade

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of U.S. mass killings linked to extremism over the past decade was at least three times higher than the total from any 10-year period since the 1970s, according to a report by the Anti-Defamation League.

The report — provided to The Associated Press ahead of its public release Thursday — also found that all extremist killings identified in 2022 were linked to right-wing extremism, with an especially high number linked to white supremacy. They include a racist mass shooting at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, that left 10 Black shoppers dead and a mass shooting that killed five people at an LGBT nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"It is not an exaggeration to say that we live in an age of extremist mass killings," the report from the group's Center on Extremism says.

Between two and seven extremism-related mass killings occurred every decade from the 1970s to the 2000s, but in the 2010s that number skyrocketed to 21, the report found.

The trend has since continued with five extremist mass killings in 2021 and 2022, as many as there were during the first decade of the new millennium.

The number of victims has risen as well. Between 2010 and 2020, 164 people died in ideological extremist-related mass killings, according to the report. That's much more than any decade except the 1990s, when the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people.

Extremist killings are those carried out by people with ties to extreme movements and ideologies.

Several factors combined to drive the numbers up between 2010 and 2020. There were shootings inspired by the rise of the Islamic State group, as well as a handful targeting police officers after civilian shootings and others linked to the increasing promotion of violence by white supremacists, said Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the ADL's Center on Extremism.

The center tracks slayings linked to various forms of extremism in the United States and compiles them in an annual report. It tracked 25 extremism-related killings last year, marking a decrease from the 33 the year before.

Ninety-three percent of the killings in 2022 were committed with firearms. The report also noted that no police officers were killed by extremists last year, for the first time since 2011.

With the waning of the Islamic State group, the main threat in the near future will likely be white supremacist shooters, the report found. The increase in the number of mass killing attempts, meanwhile, is one of the most alarming trends in recent years, said Center on Extremism Vice President Oren Segal.

"We cannot stand idly by and accept this as the new norm," Segal said.

Dems consider break with tradition to get Biden more judges

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By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Even as Democrats celebrated the 100th judicial confirmation of Joe Biden's presidency, they are clamoring for more — and some are flirting with ending a century-long Senate practice to help make it happen.

The rising friction over what in Washington parlance is known as the "blue slip" is creating tensions on the Senate panel that handles judicial nominations and prompting stern warnings from Republicans about a dangerous escalation in the partisanship that already dominates the judicial confirmation process.

The clash over Senate procedure could have major ramifications for Biden as he seeks to fill as many court vacancies as possible during the final two years of his term. Aghast at the speed with which Republicans approved judges during the Trump era, Democrats have made the confirmation to the courts a top priority, vowing to fill every seat possible. Their focus on the nominations is even greater now that Republicans control the House and can stall much of Biden's broader legislative agenda.

Since at least 1917, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee has sent a blue-colored form, or "blue slip," to the senators representing the home state of a judicial nominee. A blue slip returned with a positive response signals the senator's approval of moving forward with a nomination hearing. But if the blue slip is not returned or comes back with a negative response, that means the home state senator objects, which can doom the nomination.

Republicans during Donald Trump's presidency determined the lack of a positive blue slip would not stop them from moving forward with considering appellate court nominees — and they did so 17 times. Democrats were livid, pointing out that Republicans blocked several of President Barack Obama's appellate nominees by declining to return a positive blue slip.

Now, Democrats are being encouraged to follow suit and do away with the blue slip when it comes to the district judges whose courts serve as the starting point for federal civil and criminal cases.

"In many respects, it is an archaic holdover from a different era," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. "I think we're maybe reaching the point of deciding whether it will be continued."

Advocates for doing away with the blue slip say fast action is critical if Democrats want to have the kind of success Trump had in year three of his presidency, when he secured more than 100 judicial confirmations out of 231. They believe Democrats can't afford to wait months on Republican senators to give their go-ahead for a nominee.

Besides, they argue, if Democrats don't do away with the blue slip now, Republicans will abolish it when they return to the majority.

"Democrats would be chumps to say, 'Oh well, we're not going to do this because it's a tradition,'" said Russ Feingold, the former three-term Democratic senator from Wisconsin who now serves as president of the American Constitution Society. The group is a liberal counter to the conservative Federalist Society.

The New York Times editorial board also weighed in recently, saying it was "far past time" for the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee to end the blue slip practice.

The chairman, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., has clearly heard some of the concerns voiced by progressives. He has made it a point recently to emphasize how Democrats submitted 130 positive blue slips for district court nominees during the Trump presidency, but so far, Republicans have only done so about a dozen times.

That's essentially because Biden has been filling judicial vacancies of predominately Democratic-appointed judges in blue states. Soon, it will get harder. There are about 40 district court vacancies that will require a blue slip from at least one Republican senator. Many of those vacancies don't have a nominee yet, and Durbin is clearly sending a signal to GOP senators to work expeditiously with the White House on submitting prospective nominees.

Durbin said he wants to continue with the blue slip tradition, but he's adding a caveat: that they aren't used for "discriminatory purposes" to block consideration of nominees based on race, gender or sexual orientation.

His comments have alarmed Republican senators. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said the blue slip courtesy is "very much at stake and at risk here." He also questioned how Durbin is going to discern the motivations of Republican senators if they object to a nominee.

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"The last thing left in this body that makes the Senate the Senate, in my view, and gives a senator a say about a consequential decision in their state that will last a lifetime is the blue slip process," Graham said. "So I would just hope we could agree, if possible, that no matter how frustrated we get, we're going to honor this system."

So far, only one Biden nominee for a district court has had their nomination derailed because a senator withheld a blue slip, William Pocan, nominated to the Eastern District of Wisconsin. Republican Sen. Ron Johnson withheld his blue slip, saying he had heard concerns from the Green Bay legal community that they needed a judge locally based and active in their community.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said complaints about the blue slip are "orchestrated and contrived." He said that he and Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, were asked by the White House to submit names for an appellate court vacancy within three weeks, which they did.

"And eight months later, the administration finally gets around to nominating somebody," Cornyn said. "We've got two district court vacancies where we have not been contacted at all by the White House counsel. So, most of the delay is because the administration has been slow in filling these nominees, these vacancies."

Cornyn likened the efforts to ending the blue slip to Democratic calls for ending the filibuster so that legislation would only need a simple majority to advance rather than 60 votes.

"They want to fully dismantle the Senate as an institution," he said.

Proponents of the blue slip say its most important feature is to encourage collaboration and compromise. Durbin said he provided eight positive blue slips after negotiating on nominees with the Trump White House. "I had to give a little. They did, too," he said.

But Feingold, who served 16 years on the Judiciary panel and 18 years in the Senate, said he believes presidents will continue to consult with senators on judicial openings even without the blue slip, because they need a lawmaker's votes on other priorities.

"You need to consult them anyway because if you try to jam somebody really bad down their throat, they are going to remember it," Feingold said.

Blumenthal said he will bring lessons learned from the Obama years to the debate, and he's determined not to let Republicans block district judges through the blue slip process the way they did appellate court judges.

"The history is undeniable that Republicans succeeded in blocking many of the Obama nominees, and therefore held open judgeships, which they then filled with alacrity," Blumenthal said. "We're not going to let that happen again."

Word war: In Russia-Ukraine war, information became a weapon

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War II, and the first to see algorithms and TikTok videos deployed alongside fighter planes and tanks.

The online fight has played out on computer screens and smartphones around the globe as Russia used disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories to justify its invasion, silence domestic opposition and sow discord among its adversaries.

Now in its second year, the war is likely to spawn even more disinformation as Russia looks to break the will of Ukraine and its allies.

"The natural question is: What's next to come? We know that Russia is preparing for a protracted conflict," said Samantha Lewis, a threat intelligence analyst with the cybersecurity firm Recorded Future. "Ukrainian morale is almost certainly a key target of Russian psychological operations. And there's the risk of international complacency."

A look at Russia's disinformation war since the conflict began:

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

The Kremlin's propaganda efforts against Ukraine began many years ago and increased sharply in the months immediately before the invasion, according to Ksenia Iliuk, a Ukrainian disinformation expert who

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has tracked Russia's information operations.

Russia tailored the messages for specific audiences around the world.

In Eastern Europe, Russia spread baseless rumors of Ukrainian refugees committing crimes or taking local jobs. In Western Europe, the message was that corrupt Ukrainian leaders couldn't be trusted, and that a long war could escalate or lead to higher food and oil prices.

In Latin America, Russia's local embassies spread Spanish-language claims suggesting its invasion of Ukraine was a struggle against Western imperialism. Similar messages accusing the U.S. of hypocrisy and belligerence were spread in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world with a history of colonialism.

Russia's information agencies flooded Ukraine with propaganda, calling its military weak and its leaders ineffective and corrupt. But if the message was intended to reduce resistance to the invaders, it backfired in the face of Ukrainian defiance, Iliuk said.

"Russian propaganda has been failing in Ukraine," she said. "Russian propaganda and disinformation are indeed a threat and can be very sophisticated. But it's not always working. It's not always finding an audience."

BLAME THE VICTIM

Many of Russia's fabrications try to justify the invasion or blame others for atrocities carried out by its forces.

After Russian soldiers tortured and executed civilians in Bucha last spring, images of charred corpses and people shot at close range horrified the world. Russian state TV, however, claimed the corpses were actors, and that the devastation was faked. Associated Press journalists saw the bodies themselves.

Russia initially celebrated a missile strike on a rail station in the Ukrainian town of Kramatorsk, until reports of civilian casualties surfaced. Suddenly Russian news outlets were insisting the missile wasn't theirs.

"When they realized that civilians were killed and injured, they changed the messaging, trying to promote the idea that it was a Ukrainian missile," said Roman Osadchuk, a research associate at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, which has tracked Russian disinformation since before the war began.

One of the most popular conspiracy theories about the war also had Russian help. According to the claim, the U.S. runs a series of secret germ warfare labs in Ukraine — labs conducting work dangerous enough to justify Russia's invasion.

Like many conspiracy theories, the hoax is rooted in some truth. The U.S. has funded biological research in Ukraine, but the labs are not owned by the U.S., and their existence is far from secret.

The work is part of an initiative called the Biological Threat Reduction Program, which aims to reduce the likelihood of deadly outbreaks, whether natural or manmade. The U.S. efforts date back to work in the 1990s to dismantle the former Soviet Union's program for weapons of mass destruction.

EXTENDED WHACK-A-MOLE

As European governments and U.S.-based tech companies looked for ways to turn off the Kremlin's propaganda megaphone, Russia found new ways to get its message out.

Early in the war, Russia relied heavily on state media outlets like RT and Sputnik to spread pro-Russian talking points as well as false claims about the conflict.

Platforms like Facebook and Twitter responded by adding labels to the accounts of Russian state media and government officials. When the European Union called for a ban on Russian state media, YouTube responded by blocking the channels of RT and Sputnik. TikTok, owned by a Chinese company now based in Singapore, did the same.

Russia then pivoted again to tap its diplomats, who have used their Twitter and Facebook accounts to spread false narratives about the war and Russian atrocities. Many platforms are reluctant to censor or suspend diplomatic accounts, giving ambassadors an added layer of protection.

After its state media was muzzled, Russia expanded its use of networks of fake social media accounts. It also evaded bans on its accounts by taking identifying features — such as RT's logo — off of videos before reposting them.

Some efforts were sophisticated, like a sprawling network of fake accounts that linked to websites cre-

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ated to look like real German and British newspapers. Meta identified and removed that network from its platforms last fall.

Others were far cruder, employing fake accounts that were easily spotted before they could even attract a following.

GETTING AHEAD OF THE CLAIMS

Ukraine and its allies scored early victories in the information war by predicting Russia's next moves and by revealing them publicly.

Weeks before the war, U.S. intelligence officials learned that Russia planned to carry out an attack that it would blame on Ukraine as a pretext for invasion. Instead of withholding the information, the government publicized it as a way to disrupt Russia's plans.

By "prebutting" Russia's claims, the U.S. and its allies were attempting to blunt the impact of disinformation. The next month, the White House did it again when it disclosed suspicions that Russia might seek to blame a chemical or biological attack on Ukraine.

The invasion prompted tech companies to try new strategies, too. Google, the owner of YouTube, launched a pilot program in Eastern Europe designed to help internet users detect and avoid misinformation about refugees fleeing the war. The initiative utilized short online videos that teach people how misinformation can trick the brain.

The project was so successful that Google now plans to roll out a similar campaign in Germany.

Iliuk, the Ukrainian disinformation researcher, said she believes there's a greater awareness now, a year after the invasion, of the dangers posed by Russian disinformation, and a growing optimism that it can be checked.

"It is very hard, especially when you hear the bombs outside of your window," she said. "There was this huge realization that this (Russian disinformation) is a threat. That this is something that could literally kill us."

Mexico's Senate approves controversial electoral reform

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico's Senate on Wednesday approved a reform of the country's electoral institute, a move that opponents say will undercut democracy but which the president contends will save money and reduce political privileges.

Lawmakers voted 72-50 in favor of the controversial overhaul of the body overseeing Mexico's elections. Opponents immediately said they will challenge the changes in the supreme court. Protests are planned in multiple cities.

The reform still needs to be enacted by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, but that is seen as a formality since he backs the initiative, which would reduce the size of the institute and limit its supervisory and sanctioning powers.

Some opposition lawmakers held up posters reading: "Morena wants to steal the elections," referring to López Obrador's ruling Morena party. Mexico has presidential elections scheduled for next year.

The legislative initiative, known as "Plan B", was proposed by the president in December after he did not obtain enough votes in Congress for a constitutional reform that carried deeper electoral changes.

The president has repeatedly denied that the reform package could put the elections in Mexico at risk, saying the initiative seeks to cut the National Electoral Institute's large budget and end its privileges.

López Obrador and his supporters have been critical of the electoral institute since 2006 when he came within 0.56% of the vote of winning the presidency and denounced his loss as fraudulent. He and his supporters launched a mass protest movement.

Despite the institute confirming his landslide victory in 2018, López Obrador has repeatedly complained of how costly it is to run elections in Mexico and sought to curtail the institute's budget. He frequently says that the independent body is in the hands of the elite.

Some Mexicans see similarities to the rhetoric used by former U.S. President Donald Trump and ex-Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro ahead of elections in those countries that aimed to erode confidence in

the process.

Many in Mexico see the electoral institute as a key pillar of the country's modern democracy. After 71 years of uninterrupted single-party rule, the opposition finally broke through in 2000.

López Obrador's ruling Morena party is favored in next year's national elections and the opposition is in disarray, which would seem to give the president little incentive to attack the electoral institute. He remains highly popular in Mexico, but is not eligible for re-election.

Lorenzo Córdova, the institute's leader, has aggressively defended it in public and framed the reforms as a threat to Mexico's democracy. His outspokenness has made him a frequent target of López Obrador.

After Wednesday's vote, the institute said via Twitter that the reform "puts at risk the equity and transparency of the elections" by weakening the sanctions the institute can apply to candidates and parties that violate campaign finance rules.

Even before Wednesday night's vote, the opposition had called a march in Mexico City Sunday in defense of the institute. The opposition held a similar march in November, which was ridiculed by López Obrador who led an even larger march days later.

The president had already worried some observers by frequently attacking Mexico's judiciary and concentrating enormous responsibility in the hands of the military, raising questions about his respect for the country's democratic institutions.

Authorities: TV reporter, girl fatally shot in Florida

By DAVID FISCHER Associated Press

A central Florida television journalist and a little girl were fatally shot Wednesday afternoon near the scene of a fatal shooting from earlier in the day, authorities said.

Orange County Sheriff John Mina said during a news conference that they've detained Keith Melvin Moses, 19, who they believe is responsible for both shootings in the Orlando-area neighborhood.

Besides the Spectrum News 13 journalist and the 9-year-old girl, a TV crewmember and the girl's mother were wounded during the second shooting. They were in critical condition at a local hospital.

"I want to acknowledge what a horrible day this has been for our community and our media partners," Mina told a room full of reporters. "I work closely with all of you and know many of you and know the very difficult job that you do and also the very important job that you do for our community and for law enforcement. No one in our community — not a mother, not a 9-year-old and certainly not news professionals — should become the victim of gun violence in our community."

Mina said they don't immediately have a motive for any of the shootings.

"So, the suspect is not saying much right now," Mina said. "It is unclear if he knew they were news media or not. We're still trying to work all that out."

Mina said the News 13 vehicle did not look like a typical news van with TV station markings.

Deputies had initially responded to the Pine Hills area, just northwest of Orlando, on Wednesday morning following reports of a woman in her 20s being shot.

Moses "was an acquaintance of the woman this morning, but as far as we know, had no connection to the reporters and no connection to the mother and the 9-year-old," Mina said.

According to witnesses, a man approached the news vehicle later Wednesday and opened fire, hitting the two reporters. The man then walked to a nearby home and shot the mother and daughter.

WFTV crews, who were also reporting on the morning shooting, tried to give medical aid to the Spectrum 13 journalists.

Mina said Moses is already facing a murder charge for the initial victim, and charges are expected soon for the other four victims. Moses' criminal history includes gun charges, as well as aggravated battery, assault with a deadly weapon, burglary and grand theft offenses, the sheriff said.

"Our hearts go out to the family of the journalist killed today and the crew member injured in Orange County, Florida, as well as the whole Spectrum News team," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Twitter.

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Spectrum News 13 was not identifying the crew members who were involved in the shooting, according to a story on the TV station's website.

"Please, please, say a prayer tonight for our co-worker who is in critical condition. And while you're at it, please say a prayer for every victim of gun violence in this country," Spectrum 13 journalist Celeste Springer said during her live on-air report.

Worldwide 40 journalists were reported killed last year, plus another two this year before Wednesday, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Only one of those was in the United States.

Jeff German, who covered politics and corruption for the Las Vegas Review-Journal, was found dead outside of his home in September after being stabbed multiple times. Former Clark County Public Administrator Robert Telles, who had been a frequent subject of German's reporting, has pleaded not guilty to a murder charge.

In 2015, Virginia reporter Alison Parker and cameraman Adam Ward were shot and killed during their live TV broadcast for CBS affiliate WDBJ7. The suspect, a former reporter for the TV station, died by suicide during the law enforcement search for him.

Winner comes forward to claim \$1.35B Mega Millions jackpot

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The winner of a \$1.35 billion Mega Millions jackpot — the fourth largest in U.S. history — has come forward to collect the prize, state officials said Wednesday.

The winner had been a mystery, and remains a mystery.

The Maine State Lottery said the winner chose to remain anonymous and collect the cash option through a limited liability company, LaKoma Island Investments LLC, instead of receiving the full amount in payments over time.

"The winner is thoughtfully considering the best uses of the life-changing prize," a representative said in a statement.

By choosing the cash option, the winner will receive a one-time, lump-sum payment of \$723,564,144 before taxes, officials said.

The winner had the option of coming forward in person with the winning ticket or remaining anonymous through a trust, lottery officials said.

The winning ticket was validated when a representative came to the lottery headquarters in Augusta on Friday, and the wire transfer of the money will take place before the end of the week, said Michael Boardman, deputy director of Maine Bureau of Alcoholic Beverages & Lottery Operation.

"I understand why someone would want to remain anonymous with this kind of money. We wish them well and hope they do good things with it," he said.

The winning ticket for the Jan. 13 drawing was purchased at Hometown Gas & Grill in Lebanon, which is located on a busy highway in a small town near the New Hampshire border.

Owner Fred Cotreau said he had no idea who held the winning ticket.

"We're going to wait and see if it's a local. Who knows? Sometimes they come to the store and say thank you, but I'm not going to lose any sleep over it," said Cotreau, who shared half of the store's proceeds of \$50,000 for selling the winning ticket with his employees.

If the winner had chosen to accept the full amount, then there would've been 30 payments over 29 years, Boardman said.

By accepting the cash payout, the winner will receive more than \$498 million after taxes, Boardman said. Taxes in the amount of \$173.6 million will go to the federal government and \$51 million to the state, he said. The limited liability company that will receive the money was incorporated out of state, he said.

The winner overcame steep odds of 1 in 302.6 million, in the drawing on Friday the 13th, no less. It was the first Maine winner for the Mega Millions jackpot, which is played in 45 states as well as the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

US women win SheBelieves Cup with 2-1 win over Brazil

FRISCO, Texas (AP) — Alex Morgan and Mallory Swanson scored and the United States defeated Brazil 2-1 on Wednesday night to win the SheBelieves Cup for the fourth straight year.

Japan, which defeated Canada 3-0 in the earlier match at Toyota Stadium, was runner-up in the four-team, round-robin tournament. All four SheBelieves Cup teams will play in Women's World Cup this summer in Australia and New Zealand.

Morgan's curling goal sailed out of reach of Brazilian goalkeeper Lorena. Morgan now has five goals all-time in SheBelieves matches.

It was Morgan's 14th goal since the birth of her daughter in 2020, giving her the national team record for most goals as a mom.

"That was huge," Swanson said. "I think we needed it, we needed the momentum to kind of shift in our favor. (It was) Alex doing Alex things. Simple, left foot, classic. She was getting beat up all first half and ultimately she punished them."

Swanson scored in the 63rd minute, her fourth goal of the tournament and seventh overall goal this year, matching her total of all of last year.

"I think honestly it's been a good run. I've really just tried to focus on being present and just taking it day by day, game by game," Swanson said.

Swanson, formerly Mallory Pugh, married Chicago Cubs shortstop Dansby Swanson in December.

Ludmila scored in stoppage time for Brazil to avoid the shutout. It was the first goal the United States has allowed this year. The United States is undefeated in five overall matches.

"We need to be on the same page. But not only when it comes to reading the game, but also the emotional game, we need to be on the same page. If we can do that, I think we'll have a great World Cup. If we can't, it will be very difficult. So that's why I'm saying we have a long way to go," Brazil coach Pia Sundhage said.

Midfielder Rose Lavelle started for the United States after missing the first two matches of the tournament with a minor injury.

Japan snapped a four-game losing streak with its win over Canada. Japan had not scored in four straight matches, including two SheBelieves games, until Kiko Seike put her team in front with a goal in the 26th minute.

The Canadian players, in the midst of a labor dispute with their federation, again wore purple T-shirts reading "Enough is Enough" for the anthems and they wore purple wristbands during the match.

Players for the United States also wore purple wristbands in solidarity with Canada.

The SheBelieves Cup started in 2016. The United States has won six of the eight tournaments.

"I don't think we're going to talk a lot about the title. We're actually going to talk a lot about the play and the details, and we're going to use these games to prepare for the World Cup," U.S. coach Vlatko Andonovski said. "So that's what is good about this, it's not necessarily the title -- obviously we enjoy winning, we enjoy winning the title -- but it's the outcome of these game is what is more important for us."

Biden shores up Western allies as Putin digs in on Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — President Joe Biden closed out his wartime visit to Europe on Wednesday, working to shore up partnerships with allies on NATO's perilous eastern flank — even as Russia's Vladimir Putin was drawing closer to China for help as his invasion of Ukraine neared the one-year mark.

Biden's meeting with leaders of the Bucharest Nine nations in Warsaw came at the conclusion of a whirlwind, four-day visit to Ukraine and Poland meant to reassure allies that U.S. support in fending off Russia isn't at risk of waning.

In dramatic counterpoint, Putin on Wednesday played host in Moscow to Wang Yi, the Chinese Communist Party's most senior foreign policy official, as U.S. intelligence warned that Beijing is considering supplying arms and ammunition to the worn-down Russian military.

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The flexing of alliances was a fresh indication that both sides are digging in for prolonged conflict in Ukraine with the fighting expected to intensify with the arrival of spring.

Biden's trip had provided yet another moment of telling counterprogramming on Tuesday when he delivered a ringing speech on Western unity in Warsaw, a day after he swept into Kyiv unannounced for a visit with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. As Biden spoke in Poland, Putin announced that Russia was suspending its participation in the last remaining U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control treaty.

Biden called that departure "a big mistake." The exit is expected to have an immediate impact on U.S. awareness of Russian nuclear activities. However, the pact — known as New START — was already on life support following Moscow's cancellation late last year of talks that had been intended to salvage an agreement that each side has accused the other of violating.

Biden met Wednesday with leaders of the Bucharest Nine, the nations in the easternmost parts of the NATO alliance that came together in response to Putin's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. They include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

"You're the frontlines of our collective defense," Biden told them. "And you know, better than anyone, what's at stake in this conflict. Not just for Ukraine, but for the freedom of democracies throughout Europe and around the world."

These countries have worried that Putin could move to take military action against them next if he's successful in Ukraine. Biden responded to that anxiety by pledging that NATO's mutual defense pact is "sacred" and that "we will defend literally every inch of NATO."

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who attended the meeting, pointed to past Russian actions in Georgia and Ukraine and said, "We cannot allow Russia to continue to chip away at European security. We must break the cycle of Russian aggression."

It was unclear how the U.S. and its allies aimed to do that, other than by continuing to arm Ukraine's military with the Western and aging Soviet arms that have allowed it retake about half of the territory it lost in the opening days of the war.

Biden returned to Washington late Wednesday night.

After the Russian military's battlefield shortcomings were revealed at the start of the conflict, Putin, too, has been seeking rearmament, drawing on Iran and North Korea for assistance — and potentially China.

Administration officials don't yet have an indication that China has decided to move forward on sending Moscow weaponry, but Secretary of State Antony Blinken said this week it would be a "serious problem" should Beijing follow through.

Throughout the conflict, China has cautiously weighed the pros and cons of directly aiding Russia. But a year into the war, Beijing now seems increasingly concerned that Russia — one of its closest allies — is teetering toward something that could approximate a loss in Ukraine.

The U.S. and its allies have threatened secondary sanctions on countries that support the Russian war effort. But there was no consensus this week on potentially steeper sanctions for China, which could have global economic implications, should it decide to rearm Putin's forces.

One European official described the intelligence regarding Chinese consideration of supplying Russia with weapons as "unambiguous." Western officials do not know whether the possibility is currently being studied only by China's military or some other single branch of the government, or by the Chinese government as a whole, the official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the West's intelligence on the matter.

Western intelligence indicates that the kind of supplies China is considering giving Russia would be aimed at backfilling stocks of weapons that Russia was losing, or wasting, on the battlefield in Ukraine, the European official said.

From the intelligence signals thus far, Western officials don't believe China's supply of weapons to Russia would be sufficient to change the trajectory of the year-old war.

But Chinese cooperation on military supplies for Russia's war in Ukraine would be a significant sign of Beijing's current appetite for risk-taking when it comes to allying with Russia in a stand against the West.

Li Mingjiang, an associate professor in international relations at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, said at an event hosted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace last week that Beijing was weighing the value of creating "a situation in which the U.S. will have to now deal with really two potential enemies and challengers and that will help divert a bit of America's attention and resources from the Asia Pacific region."

Detective: Colorado Springs club shooter ran neo-Nazi site

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — The 22-year-old accused of carrying out the deadly mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Colorado Springs in November ran a neo-Nazi website and used gay and racial slurs while gaming online, a police detective testified Wednesday.

Anderson Lee Aldrich also posted an image of a rifle scope trained on a gay pride parade and used a bigoted slur when referring to someone who was gay, Detective Rebecca Joines said.

Her testimony came at the start of a hearing that will determine if there's enough evidence to warrant that Aldrich face hate crime charges, in addition to other charges including murder and attempted murder.

Aldrich, who identifies as nonbinary and uses the pronouns they and them, administered the obscure website that included what Joines described as a "neo-Nazi white supremacist" shooting training video glorifying mass shootings.

The video, which she said was not created by Aldrich and has been posted online by many others, featured attacks on synagogues and mosques in Europe and the 2019 shooting at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Joines said she believes Aldrich was trying to emulate those attacks in the Colorado Springs shooting.

Investigators also heard from an acquaintance that Aldrich said their mother, Laura Voepel, is nonbinary and forced them to go to LGBTQ clubs, Joines testified during the hearing, which is expected to conclude Thursday.

Hate crime charges require prosecutors to present evidence of a motive — that Aldrich was driven by bias, either wholly or in part.

The defense countered that Aldrich was not anti-LGBTQ, but was high on multiple drugs, was sleep deprived and came from an abusive family.

Joines discussed police calls to the apartment that Aldrich and Voepel shared for Voepel's suicide attempt and overdose. During one call, Aldrich indicated feeling unsafe in the apartment, Joines acknowledged.

Joines said that while identification scanning technology showed Aldrich had been to the club at least six times before the shooting, there were no fights or disturbances during those visits, which each lasted just a few minutes. The defense showed a photo that appeared to be a selfie of Aldrich and Voepel smiling at Club Q in August 2021.

On the night of the shooting, according to authorities, Aldrich went to the club, left and then returned. Surveillance video showed Aldrich entering the club wearing a red T-shirt and tan ballistic vest while holding an AR-style rifle, with six magazines for the weapon and a pistol visible, police Detective Jason Gasper said. Soon after entering, Aldrich allegedly opened fire indiscriminately.

The shooting was stopped when Navy information systems technician Thomas James grabbed the barrel of Aldrich's rifle, burning his hand it was so hot, Detective Ashton Gardner said in the most detailed account provided yet.

As panicked patrons fled from the dance floor, James and Aldrich tumbled off a landing and struggled over a handgun. Aldrich fired at least once, shooting James in the ribs, Gardner said.

After being shot, it is clear from the video that James was tiring, "but he continues to do what he can to subdue the suspect until police arrive," Gardner testified, noting that James later gave up his spot in an ambulance to someone else who was injured.

Army veteran Richard Fierro rushed over to help, grabbing the rifle and throwing it, Gardner said. Fierro then used the handgun to beat Aldrich, telling officers later that he "kept hitting" the suspect until they

arrived.

Aldrich, who wore an orange jumpsuit, shook during the testimony about the people shot and cried while being led out of court for the lunch break.

James, who issued a statement days after the attack saying he “simply wanted to save the family that I found,” did not appear to be in the main courtroom where testimony was presented. Fierro, who sustained scrapes and bruises, sat in the back row. His daughter’s boyfriend was killed in the attack.

Joines, the detective, said evidence also indicates that Aldrich was considering livestreaming the attack. A hat found in Aldrich’s vehicle had a phone taped to it, and Aldrich recorded four videos using a livestreaming app starting over an approximately two-hour period before the shooting, she said.

After the gunfire ended and police arrived, Aldrich tried to blame the shooting on one of the patrons who subdued them while also claiming that the shooter was hiding, Officer Connor Wallick testified. Officers didn’t believe it and shortly afterward confirmed that Aldrich was the shooter, he said.

Police found several high-capacity magazines at the scene, including a drum-style one that holds 60 rounds and was empty, and others that hold 40 rounds, Gasper said. A state law passed after the 2012 Aurora, Colorado, theater shooting bans magazines of more than 15 rounds.

Although Aldrich identifies as nonbinary, someone who is a member of a protected group such as the LGBTQ community can still be charged with a hate crime for targeting peers. Hate crime laws are focused on the victims, not the perpetrator.

At Aldrich’s apartment, investigators found gun-making materials, receipts for weapons and a drawing of the club. In Aldrich’s mother’s room, they found round gun range targets with holes in them, Gasper said. Voepel had taken Aldrich to the range.

It was also revealed that the rifle and the handgun used in the attack appeared to be ghost guns, or firearms without serial numbers that are homemade and do not require an owner to pass a background check. One part of the handgun did have a serial number, but the overall weapon was likely not purchased whole and appeared to be privately made, Joines said.

Defense attorney Joseph Archambault pointed out that it is not illegal to make a gun.

Questions remain about how the suspect got the guns, but experts say that doesn’t have to be discussed in order to persuade the judge to rule that there’s enough evidence for a trial.

Questions were raised early on about whether authorities should have sought a red flag order to stop Aldrich from buying guns after Aldrich was arrested in 2021, when they threatened their grandparents and vowed to become the “next mass killer,” according to law enforcement documents.

Authorities said two guns seized from Aldrich in that case — a ghost gun pistol and an MM 15 rifle — weren’t returned. That case was dropped, in part because prosecutors couldn’t track down Aldrich’s grandparents and mother to testify, so Aldrich had no legal restrictions on buying guns.

Defense attorneys also brought up Aldrich’s mental health for the first time at the hearing, showing photographs of pill bottles for drugs that Aldrich had been prescribed to treat mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and PTSD. But the defense didn’t say if Aldrich had been formally diagnosed with any of those mental illnesses.

Former Arizona AG sat on records refuting election fraud

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona’s former attorney general suppressed findings by his investigators who concluded there was no basis for allegations that the 2020 election was marred by widespread fraud, according to documents released Wednesday by his successor.

Democratic Attorney General Kris Mayes, who took office last month, said the records show the 2020 election “was conducted fairly and accurately by election officials.”

Previous Attorney General Mark Brnovich, a Republican, never released a March 2022 summary of investigative findings, which ruled out most of the fraud claims spread by allies and supporters of former President Donald Trump. Yet a month later, he released an “interim report” that claimed his investigation “revealed

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serious vulnerabilities that must be addressed and raises questions about the 2020 election in Arizona.”

He released his April report despite pushback from his investigators who said some of its claims were refuted by their probe. Brnovich was at the time in the midst of a Republican Party primary for U.S. Senate and facing fierce criticism from Trump, who claimed he wasn’t doing enough to prosecute election fraud.

Brnovich, whose primary bid was unsuccessful, also did not release a September memo that systematically refuted a bevy of election conspiracies that have taken root on the right, including allegations of dead or duplicate voters, pre-marked ballots flown in from Asia, election servers connected to the internet and even manipulation by satellites controlled by the Italian military.

“In each instance and in each matter, the aforementioned parties did not provide any evidence to support their allegations,” the September memo read. “The information that was provided was speculative in many instances and when investigated by our agents and support staff, was found to be inaccurate.”

The September memo, which was among the documents released Wednesday, describes an all-encompassing probe that became the top priority for the attorney general’s investigators, who spent more than 10,000 hours looking into 638 complaints. They opened 430 investigations and referred 22 cases for prosecution. President Joe Biden won Arizona by a little over 10,000 votes.

Mayes said the fraud claims were a waste.

“The ten thousand plus hours spent diligently investigating every conspiracy theory under the sun distracted this office from its core mission of protecting the people of Arizona from real crime and fraud,” Mayes said in a statement.

Attempts to reach Brnovich for comment were unsuccessful.

Brnovich’s “interim report” claimed that election officials worked too quickly in verifying voter signatures and pointed to a drop in the number of ballots with rejected signatures between 2016 and 2018 and again in 2020. He also claimed that Maricopa County was slow in responding to requests for information.

He made those claims even after investigators who reviewed a draft pushed back, publishing his report largely unchanged following their feedback.

The investigative staff concluded that the county recorder’s office “followed its policy/procedures as they relate to signature verification; we did not uncover any criminality or fraud having been committed in this area during the 2020 general election,” investigators wrote. They also said they found the county “was cooperative and responsive to our requests.”

Arizona became the epicenter of efforts by Trump allies to cast doubt on Biden’s victory. Republican leaders of the state Senate subpoenaed election records and equipment and hired a Florida firm led by a Trump supporter, Cyber Ninjas Inc., to conduct an unprecedented review of the election in Maricopa County.

The Cyber Ninjas review gave Biden more votes than the official count but claimed that their work raised serious questions about the conduct of the election in Maricopa County, home to metro Phoenix and the majority of Arizona’s voters. The investigation by the attorney general’s office found the allegations did not stand up to scrutiny.

“Our comprehensive review of CNI’s audit showed they did not provide any evidence to support their allegations of widespread fraud or ballot manipulation,” Brnovich’s investigators wrote.

Thursday’s release is the latest confirmation that there was no widespread fraud in the 2020 election and that Biden won the presidency legitimately. Trump continues to repeat his lie that the election was stolen from him as he mounts his third bid for the White House, despite reviews and audits saying otherwise in the battleground states he contested and his own administration officials debunking his claims.

Officials in Maricopa County, where nearly all the officials overseeing elections are Republicans, say they endured death threats and verbal abuse due to the suggestions of malfeasance in the Cyber Ninjas review and Brnovich’s “interim report.”

“This was a gross misuse of his elected office and an appalling waste of taxpayer dollars, as well as a waste of the time and effort of professional investigators,” Clint Hickman, the Republican chairman of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors said in a statement.

Brnovich’s investigators did conclude that Maricopa County officials did not uniformly follow state election procedures when filling out forms to document the pickup and transport of mail ballots. But they said the

errors were procedural and that "investigators did not find anything that would (have) compromised the integrity of the ballots or the final ballot count."

Investigators interviewed two Republican state lawmakers who publicly claimed they knew of fraud in the election, but wrote that neither Rep. Mark Finchem nor Sen. Sonny Borrelli repeated their claims to investigators — when they could have been subject to criminal charges for false reporting to law enforcement. The investigators said a third lawmaker, Republican state Sen. Wendy Rogers, declined to speak with them.

Prosecutor: Arizona border rancher shot at unarmed migrants

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The prosecutor in the case against an Arizona rancher accused of killing a Mexican man on his land near the U.S.-Mexico border alleged during a court hearing Wednesday that the rancher fired that day on a group of about eight unarmed migrants who entered the U.S. illegally.

Kimberly Hunley, chief deputy attorney for Santa Cruz County in the border city of Nogales, Arizona, made the assertion the same day the court made public a filing she made Tuesday asserting that rancher George Alan Kelly began shooting at the group "out of nowhere" on Jan. 30 without issuing a warning or a request to leave.

Kelly, 73, faces a first-degree murder charge in the death of one of the people, identified by the sheriff's office as Gabriel Cuen-Butimea, who lived just south of the border in adjacent Nogales, Mexico. U.S. federal court records, which spell his last name slightly differently as Cuen-Buitimea, show he was convicted of illegal entry and deported back to Mexico several times, most recently in 2016.

Two more people from the group later came forward to law enforcement, prompting authorities this week to amend the complaint against Kelly to include two counts of aggravated assault "using a rifle, a deadly weapon or dangerous instrument" in a shooting at his ranch.

Those two were in the line of fire, but were not hit, according to court filings updated on Wednesday. One described watching the man they knew as Gabriel being hit and said they "felt like they were being hunted."

Both fled back across the border into Mexico but are willing to testify in the case against Kelly, the documents say.

The court, the county attorney's office and sheriff's office "have all received disturbing communications, some threatening in nature, that seem to indicate an ongoing threat to the safety of the victims," says Hunley's updated filing.

She says Kelly's comments conflicted with what witnesses from the group told law enforcement, and that his story significantly changed over time.

"Kelly shot an unarmed man in the back as he was fleeing, in addition to shooting at other individuals, without warning or provocation," Hunley said in the filing, arguing against a reduction in Kelly's \$1 million cash bond.

She wrote that the group "posed no threat to him or family," but nevertheless "shot at them repeatedly with an AK-47, striking and killing one of them."

Kelly's attorney, Brenna Larkin, has said Kelly did not shoot and kill the man, but Kelly acknowledges that earlier that day he fired warning shots above the heads of smugglers carrying AK-47 rifles and backpacks he encountered on his property.

Justice of the Peace Emilio G. Velasquez on Wednesday ordered that Kelly's bond be changed from a cash to a surety bond, which would allow Kelly to put up his ranch and home rather than come up with cash and allow him to leave custody while the case plays out.

Velasquez set another hearing for 9 a.m. MT (11 a.m. ET) Friday in Santa Cruz County Justice Court.

"We are following this case very closely," said Consul General Marcos Moreno Baez of the Mexican consulate in Nogales, Arizona. "We have been present at the court appearances and are in touch with the victim's family, helping however we can."

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The shooting has sparked strong political feelings less than six months after a prison warden and his brother were arrested in a West Texas shooting that killed one migrant and wounded another. Michael and Mark Sheppard, both 60, were charged with manslaughter in the September shooting in El Paso County.

Authorities allege the twin brothers pulled over their truck near a town about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from the border and opened fire on a group of migrants getting water along the road. A male migrant died, and a female suffered a gunshot wound to the stomach.

GoFundMe campaigns to pay for Kelly's legal defense have been shut down and the money was returned to donors, the platform said last week in a statement.

"GoFundMe's Terms of Service explicitly prohibit campaigns that raise money to cover the legal defense of anyone formally charged with an alleged violent crime," it said. "Consistent with this long-standing policy, any fundraising campaigns for the legal defense of someone charged with murder are removed from our platform."

GiveSendGo, which describes itself as a Christian fundraising platform, carries at least four campaigns collecting money for Kelly's legal defense, including one that gathered more than \$300,000 as of Wednesday.

Kelly apparently drew on his borderlands ranching life in a self-published novel, "Far Beyond the Border Fence," which is described on Amazon.com as a "contemporary novel which brings the Mexican Border/Drug conflict into the 21st century."

Authored by a man with the same name, the 57-page novel focuses on a man named George and his wife, Wanda, also the name of Kelly's real-life wife.

"Several times each week illegal immigrants would cross the VMR ranch," reads one part. "They were led by armed human smugglers called Coyotes. George and his foreman had to patrol the ranch daily, armed with AK-47's."

The fatal shooting of an Arizona rancher on his land in 2010 sparked a firestorm that helped spark passage of the state's Senate Bill 1070, the "show me your papers" law then described as the nation's toughest anti-immigrant legislation. It required law enforcement officers to inquire about suspects' immigration status if they believed they were in the U.S. illegally.

No one was ever arrested in the killing of Robert Krentz on his cattle ranch in remote eastern Arizona, but law enforcement assumed the perpetrator was a migrant because footprints found at the murder scene led to the border.

Jimmy Carter receives accolades from afar, and right at home

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

PLAINS, Ga. (AP) — Chad Loshbaugh and his seventh-grade son, Theo, were starting a historical tour for their winter break when they heard that former President Jimmy Carter had begun end-of-life care at home.

So the father-son pair from Albany, New York, changed their itinerary and found themselves Wednesday on the Carter family farm in Plains, where the 39th president grew up and about a mile from the one-story house where the 98-year-old now is receiving hospice care.

"This was an add-on," to a civil rights trip that is taking them from Atlanta through several stops in Alabama, Loshbaugh said. "We thought it was important to change our trip to see the site here and pay our respects to President Carter."

The longest-lived American president is garnering accolades and well-wishes from across the world — from other public leaders and admirers he's never met — as well as from family and friends in his hometown, where he and his wife are known as "Mr. Jimmy" and "Ms. Rosalynn."

"It's just surreal to think about it all," said Carter's niece Kim Fuller, who runs Friends of Jimmy Carter, headquartered down the street from the former first couple's home.

News of Carter's condition prompted an uptick in visitors to Plains, a town of about 700 with just a few blocks of retail businesses along the railroad tracks that run by Carter's 1976 presidential headquarters.

Plains residents have always been proud of the Carters' ascension to the White House, Fuller said, as well as the couple's work afterward on public health, conflict resolution and democracy via The Carter Center

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in Atlanta. There, the Carters and their programs have monitored elections in at least 113 countries and, among other things, nearly eradicated the Guinea worm parasite in the developing world.

Those accomplishments have drawn plaudits from people such as Mark Suzman, CEO of the Gates Foundation.

"President Carter's dedication to making the world a better place has had a lasting impact on countless lives through the @CarterCenter," Suzman tweeted Wednesday. "Thank you Pres. Carter for your decades of leadership, service, & wisdom — the future is brighter because of your work."

Former President Bill Clinton, a fellow Democrat elected 12 years after Carter's single term ended with a landslide defeat in 1980, marked Presidents Day on Monday by wishing Carter well and tweeting out a picture of the pair, who were both Southern governors before their presidencies.

Thousands also have posted personal messages on The Carter Center's website.

"Dear President Carter, You are the best of us. You always sought the best for our country, and for the world," wrote Mary Cullen.

Back in Plains, Fuller said it's "hard right now" to think about Carter eventually not being around. "But it's good to see people coming through," she added.

Fuller, who took over teaching her uncle's Sunday School lessons at Maranatha Baptist Church after he grew frail, said it was a regular occurrence over the years to see the former first couple walking down the street.

"They've been so accessible," she said. "That's just who they are, and he was like that in the White House. Never forgot where he came from — and he came back home when he was done."

Carter's Presidential Library and Museum, located on the same campus as The Carter Center near downtown Atlanta, also has seen an increase in interest this week.

Jennifer Multani, who visited from California, said she gained a new appreciation for his life, including his time in office and experiences before entering politics.

"His service after the presidency was extraordinary, no question about it," she said. "We all need to learn from it to give back to humanity as much as we can."

She said he "inherited turbulent times" but still negotiated a peace deal between Israel and Egypt. The leaders of those nations shared the Nobel Peace Prize. Carter received the award in 2002.

Sheri Clayton, a 65-year-old visiting from Houston, remembers Carter's presidency well, with the late 1970s being dominated by inflation, rising interest rates and the Iran hostage situation. Carter made some decisions, including appointing Paul Volcker as Federal Reserve chairman, that would help the economy rebound — but not until after his defeat to Republican Ronald Reagan. He also eventually freed the 52 Americans being held in Tehran, after the November election.

"The feeling that I get about Jimmy Carter was that he had a good heart and ... he is for the people," Clayton said.

Walking along the paths outside Carter's boyhood home, Loshbaugh said what is perhaps most striking to him is that the same man who accomplished so much got his start, both in life and in politics, where he did.

"To come from such humble, rural beginnings," Loshbaugh said, "it's compelling to think about.

"His tenure was just one term. But what he did with his life after — it's just tremendous in building not only his legacy, but showing what a president do for the country and how they should use their position for their entire lives."

At least 2 dead, more than 50 missing in China mine collapse

BEIJING (AP) — An open pit mine collapsed in China's northern Inner Mongolia region on Wednesday, killing at least two people and leaving more than 50 missing, state media reported.

The official Xinhua News Agency said people were buried under debris at the mine in Alxa League. It said six were rescued with injuries and 53 were still listed as missing.

A brief video of the collapse posted on the website of the Beijing Times newspaper showed a massive wall of reddish dirt or sand rushing down a slope onto mining vehicles moving below.

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Chinese President Xi Jinping demanded “all-out efforts in search and rescue of the missing and treatment of the injured,” Xinhua reported. Xi called for “ensuring the safety of people’s lives and property and maintaining overall social stability,” it said.

More than 300 rescue workers operating 129 rescue vehicles were participating in the search, Xinhua said. The company running the mine, Inner Mongolia Xinjing Coal Industry Co. Ltd., was cited and fined last year for multiple safety violations ranging from insecure access routes to the mining surface to unsafe storage of volatile materials and a lack of training for its safety overseers, according to the news website The Paper.

Inner Mongolia is a key region for mining of coal and various minerals and rare earths, which critics say has ravaged the original landscape of mountains, grassy steppes and deserts.

China overwhelmingly relies on coal for power generation but has tried to reduce the number of deadly mine accidents through a greater emphasis on safety and the closure of smaller operations that lacked necessary equipment.

Most mining deaths are attributed to explosions caused by the buildup of methane and coal dust, or to drownings caused when miners break into shafts that had been abandoned due to flooding.

China has recorded a slew of deadly industrial and construction accidents in recent months as a result of poor safety training and regulation, official corruption and a tendency to cut corners by companies seeking to make profits. The economy has slowed, partly as a result of draconian lockdowns and quarantines imposed under the now-abandoned “zero COVID” policy.

In one of the worst recent incidents, 38 people were killed in a fire at a company dealing with chemicals and other industrial goods in the central province of Henan that was blamed on unsafe welding work.

Last month, an avalanche buried vehicles outside a highway tunnel in Tibet, killing at least 28. Many of those trapped were headed home for the Lunar New Year holiday.

Trump criticizes federal response to Ohio train derailment

By JILL COLVIN and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

EAST PALESTINE, Ohio (AP) — Donald Trump on Wednesday criticized the federal response to the toxic train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, as a “betrayal” during a visit to the village where residents and local leaders are increasingly frustrated more than two weeks after the disaster.

The former president, who is mounting a third bid for the White House, wore his trademark red “Make America Great Again” cap as he said the community needs “answers and results,” not excuses.

“In too many cases, your goodness and perseverance were met with indifference and betrayal,” Trump said at a firehouse roughly half a mile from where more than three dozen freight cars — including 11 carrying hazardous materials — came off the tracks. The fiery, mangled mess near the Pennsylvania state line apparently followed a mechanical issue with a rail car axle.

Trump appeared with U.S. Sen. JD Vance, R-Ohio, Mayor Trent Conaway and state and local leaders — and traveled via motorcade — giving the visit the look of an official presidential visit.

The Feb. 3 derailment led to evacuations and fears of air and water contamination after a controlled burning of toxic chemicals aimed at preventing an explosion. The disaster has become the latest front in America’s political divide, with Trump criticizing the federal response and the White House in turn saying Trump could have done more as president to toughen rail and environmental regulations.

The trip offered Trump, who has held few events since he launched his campaign in November, an opportunity to reprise the role he often held as president: surveying disaster damage and meeting with residents following tragic events. He praised the staff of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, even as he offered criticism.

He also donated cleaning supplies along with pallets of what he said was Trump-branded bottled water to residents concerned about the water coming out of their taps.

Before leaving town, Trump stopped by a local McDonald’s, where he passed out hats, ordered meals for first responders and picked up food for the plane ride home. He also visited Little Beaver Creek to inspect

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the damage and greeted supporters assembled nearby to cheer him on.

"Thank you for not forgetting about us," one woman told him.

"Have fun, everybody," Trump told them after signing autographs.

Trump, in his remarks at the firehouse, seized on Biden's decision to make a surprise visit to Ukraine this week, saying he hoped Biden would have "some money left over" for the residents of East Palestine when he returns. Biden, who has yet to come to the Ohio town, was traveling back from Poland on Wednesday after marking the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Biden White House has defended its response to the derailment, saying officials from the Environmental Protection Agency, National Transportation Safety Board and other agencies were at the rural site within hours of the derailment. The White House says it has also offered federal assistance and that FEMA has been coordinating with the state emergency operations center and other partners.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan visited the site last week to try to reassure skeptical residents that the water was fit for drinking and the air safe to breathe. And shortly before Trump arrived in Ohio, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg announced he would visit Thursday after also facing criticism for not coming sooner.

Trump took credit for Buttigieg's trip and also criticized FEMA's role in the response, accusing the agency of having "changed their tune" after he announced his own visit to East Palestine.

The White House, however, has said FEMA was involved from the beginning, even as other agencies have taken the lead. Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican, has said Ohio has received all the resources it needs from the federal government.

DeWine and FEMA announced the same day that Trump's trip was announced that FEMA would be deploying additional federal resources to the site, but the timing appears to be coincidental. Federal and state officials have also said Norfolk Southern, the train company, will pay the full cost of cleanup and other expenses such as hotel stays.

Biden administration officials called out a decision by the Trump administration to repeal an Obama-era Transportation Department rule that would have requiring "high-hazard" cargo trains hauling large amounts of flammable liquids such as crude oil and ethanol to be equipped with more sophisticated, electronically controlled brakes by 2023.

Buttigieg said this week that the Federal Railroad Administration will look at reviving that brake rule now, though the NTSB noted it couldn't have helped in this derailment because the train wasn't considered a "high hazardous flammable train." Only three of the 20 hazardous materials cars the train was carrying were filled with flammable liquids. Regulators may now look at expanding which trains are covered by the "high hazardous" rules.

Almost three weeks after the derailment, the smell of chemicals that blanketed the village is mostly gone, but some residents close to the tracks say there's still an odor inside their homes.

The village of just under 5,000 residents is near the Pennsylvania state line in Columbiana County, which has grown increasingly Republican in recent years. Trump won nearly 72% of the vote in the 2020 election, and signs of his popularity remain clear.

At a car dealership in town, where bottled water was being distributed, a photo of Trump leaned against a barricade, reading, "A Hero Will Rise." Signs and flags around the village broadcast support both for Trump and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a potential 2024 Republican presidential candidate.

Since the derailment, residents have complained about headaches, irritated eyes and other ailments. Thousands of fish have been found dead, and residents have talked about finding dying or sick pets and wildlife. Residents are also frustrated by what they say is incomplete and vague information about the lasting effects from the disaster and have demanded more transparency from Norfolk Southern.

The gas that spilled and burned after the train derailment — vinyl chloride, a chemical used to make hard plastics — is associated with an increased risk of certain cancers.

Environmental officials say that they monitored for toxins in the air during the controlled burn and that continuing air monitoring — including testing inside 550 homes — hasn't detected dangerous levels in the

area since residents were allowed to return.

Residents like Cory Brittian, whose family owns an auto dealership in the center of the village, praised Trump for his visit.

"Any light that can be shined on the situation here, especially with the federal government, can only help," he said. ____

Associated Press writers Josh Funk in Omaha, Nebraska, and Matthew Daly in Washington contributed to this report.

Alex Murdaugh law partner talks crime scene problems, thefts

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

A former law partner of Alex Murdaugh testified at his double murder trial Wednesday that more than a dozen people walked around the scene of the killings of Murdaugh's wife and son before state-level law enforcement arrived.

After South Carolina agents arrived, they sent Murdaugh, his law partners and friends into the sprawling property's home, which authorities hadn't entered since Murdaugh called 911 an hour earlier to say his wife and son were shot.

"This is a pretty big farm and I don't know who is over there. Two people have been gunned down," attorney Mark Ball testified. "Safety is one concern. And is that house part of what has gone on here? Where does the crime scene start and stop?"

While the defense had Ball highlight what he saw as problems at the crime scene and Murdaugh's devotion to family, prosecutors on cross examination used Ball to walk through Murdaugh's apparent lies to police. Those allegedly include where he was just before the killings, his lack of concern for his safety or his surviving son after the shootings, and the theft of millions of dollars from the family law firm.

Murdaugh, 54, is standing trial in the deaths of his wife Maggie, 52, who was felled by four or five rifle shots, and their 22-year-old son Paul, killed by two shotgun blasts. Both died near kennels on the Colleton County property on June 7, 2021. Murdaugh faces 30 years to life in prison if convicted.

Alex Murdaugh may testify. Defense attorney Jim Griffin asked the judge Wednesday if he would allow Murdaugh to take his Fifth Amendment right against incriminating himself in the 100 or so other allegations he faces — including stealing from clients, money laundering, tax evasion and insurance fraud. The defense said he could testify as early as Thursday if he chooses to do so.

Judge Clifton Newman said prosecutors generally get wide latitude in cross examination.

The judge agreed with prosecutors to allow evidence of other alleged crimes to show Murdaugh killed his family to gain sympathy and buy time to hide his financial misdeeds. Prosecutors also want to show Murdaugh lied to police about his own subsequent shooting months afterward. He initially said a stranger shot him, but later said he asked a friend to shoot him so Murdaugh's surviving son could collect \$12 million in life insurance.

Ball, who arrived at the farm about 45 minutes after Murdaugh called 911, was a compelling witness for both sides Wednesday.

He described a chaotic crime scene. Police hadn't blocked the property's entrance and more than a dozen people not with law enforcement were walking around shell casings and pools of blood. A light rain fell intermittently and the runoff from a roof was hitting Paul Murdaugh's body.

"It's a crime scene. You don't want water dripping all over the place but more importantly, I thought it was pretty disrespectful. Paul was a good young man and quite frankly it just pissed me off," Ball testified.

Ball returned the next day once state agents said they were finished investigating the scene. He found uncollected shotgun pellets, small clumps of tissue and a large fragment of Paul Murdaugh's skull.

"It infuriated me," Ball said. "It was kind of like walking across a grave."

The defense called a crime scene reconstruction expert who said the police might have lost evidence.

Kenneth Zercie testified that police should have used a tarp to cover the bodies instead of a sheet, which can absorb fluids. Zercie said agents made it worse by not holding onto the sheet, losing potential

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evidence such as hair or DNA from the killer.

The agents didn't look for fingerprints and didn't test the blood around either body for anyone else's DNA, the expert said. "Much more could have been done."

A cell phone data expert testified Wednesday that a possible time Maggie Murdaugh's phone could have been tossed — it was found beside a highway near the family's property — does not sync with when GPS data showed Alex Murdaugh's SUV passing by.

Maggie Murdaugh's cellphone recorded that its backlight turned off at 9:07 p.m. the night of the killings and her husband's SUV is still in the driveway a quarter-mile (400 meters) away, Micah Sturgis said. The SUV didn't pass the spot where his wife's cellphone was found for nearly two minutes.

Phone backlights typically turn on when the phone detects a small amount of motion. Maggie Murdaugh's phone light was off for the next 25 minutes, indicating it was still, Sturgis said.

Prosecutors used Alex Murdaugh's former law partner to re-state their case. They had Ball read a list of several legal clients he had to call to tell them Alex Murdaugh lied and stole their money. Those clients were repaid with millions of dollars out of the pockets of the firm's other attorneys, Ball said.

Ball testified he was certain he heard Murdaugh's voice on a cellphone video along with his wife and son, played earlier in court. Phone records indicate the video was taken about five minutes before Maggie and Paul Murdaugh stopped using their phones forever.

Ball said Murdaugh told him at least three times he was not at the kennels that night, instead taking a nap before leaving to visit his ailing mother. Murdaugh said he discovered the shooting when he returned.

Murdaugh and Ball knew each other for 34 years and worked together for decades. Ball said Murdaugh appeared to be a loving father, a good lawyer who could talk to anyone and a man whose finances were solid.

"He was pretty good at hiding who he really was, wasn't he?" prosecutor Creighton Waters asked.

"Obviously," Ball replied.

Rio Carnival's overlooked, all-important rite: The count

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Rio de Janeiro couldn't resume regular life after the Carnival festivities came to a close until "the count" of scores from the parade competition was complete and a victor proclaimed.

The Carnival parade is billed as the world's biggest party, yet scarcely anyone outside Brazil realizes that the flashy floats and extravagant dancers are more than spectacle. It has complex, constantly changing regulations and dozens of judges. In recent years, the samba school league has adopted changes to limit subjectivity, but skepticism about scoring remains — not least because of its checkered past.

And the hopes of entire working-class communities ride on the outcome. On Wednesday, they flocked to their respective schools to watch the televised results. A win affirms their diligent work was executed to perfection, bestowing honor and prestige.

"It's the pleasure of doing the parade correctly and the satisfaction of taking the title home," Maria da Conceição da Silva, 59, said Monday night before parading. She swears she'll keep coming back "until God takes me, to parade up there."

The esoteric regulations dictate schools be scored on nine categories — among them costumes, drumming, song, harmony, plot and evolution — that together quantify the months of design, stitching, sculpting, welding and rehearsal that go into production. Judges with proven knowledge in each category undergo training, then are distributed along the 700-meter (2,300-foot) parade route to watch as each school's several thousand paraders pass.

Rio's samba schools began competing in the 1930s, and were corralled into the Sambadrome parade grounds in the mid-1980s. Their 70-minute displays can cost 10 million reais (almost \$2 million), and the school that scores lowest is relegated to the lower league. Returning to the elite echelon can take years.

The top six finishers get percentages of box office revenue. But only the champion school goes down in history, and no one remembers the runner-up, said Jorge Perlingeiro, the president of the top league.

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For over three decades, Perlingeiro has been the voice of Carnival, announcing judges' scores one by one. Each bellow of "10!" — the top score — with his heavy Rio accent launched the schools' fanatics into ecstasy Wednesday. Some lower scores elicited frustrated groans. More than half of Rio's televisions were tuned in, according to Ibope, a company that monitors ratings.

The ceremony lasted about 90 minutes, with no less than 432 scores read aloud for 12 schools. The winning school, Imperatriz Leopoldinense, achieved 269.8 — two-tenths of a point shy of perfect. The title ends the school's 22-year drought and cements its Carnival director's star reputation. At the Sambadrome, the school's drum leader crumpled and cried when the win was announced while a packed crowd at the school jumped for joy.

The large number of judges — 36 — is necessary to assess performance throughout the parade grounds and prevents a single bad score from torpedoing a school, according to Fábio Fabato, who writes and researches Carnival and Brazilian popular culture. It also helps curb corruption, he said, because it's harder to buy off many judges.

In 1974, samba school Mocidade lost the title because one costume judge handed down an inexplicably low score of 4, Fabato said. In 1986, Brazilian soccer legend Sócrates was selected to judge drums, but had zero expertise, so he rated schools based solely on crowd reaction. Samba schools were furious. One school's president said Sócrates was too drunk to judge and demanded that his scores be annulled.

"He (Sócrates) skipped down the stairs to the parade ground, stripped off his top and started dancing along in a pair of tight white shorts. Officials objected and he was reluctantly coaxed back to the judging station," according to his biography, "Doctor Socrates."

The count two years later sparked a vicious fight between rival schools and a 16-year-old girl was shot in the stomach, according to an O Globo newspaper report at the time.

David Butter, a Brazilian journalist who wrote a book on Carnival, remembers as a child watching the count with his father, who enjoyed it even more than the parade.

"We would get the newspaper with the empty scorecard to fill as the count went forward. We were all excited about the scores, the disagreements," Butter said. "The count became a spectacle in itself, just like an opera. It is an exclusively Brazilian entertainment product."

Other competitions have struggled with subjective scoring. Olympic figure skating had been rated from 1 to 6 until a judging scandal at the games in Salt Lake City — known as "Skate Gate" — prompted adoption of an elaborate system involving a technical panel. More recently, an investigation found multiple boxing matches were fixed at the 2016 Olympic games in Rio.

That same year, Rio police probed alleged fraud in Carnival judging. Greater technical rigor and professionalism were meant to head off disputes and provide transparency. Judges must justify any less-than-perfect score with a handwritten explanation.

One judge evaluating costumes last year docked one-tenth of a point from a school because "a considerable quantity of paraders' hats were slipping or fallen," and she noted another school had promised to deliver "a diversity of green tones," though only lime green prevailed. A harmony judge noted "occasional loss of internal homogeneity" and that "the neglect or weakening of some voices emptied the song of its sonic mass."

On a scorecard last year, one judge noted how hard it has become to find errors when so few are committed, so just one-tenth of a point can clinch a victory. This year's runner-up finished one-tenth behind.

If a gap appears between sections, the school can lose points. In this year's parade, the lighthouse atop Unidos da Tijuca's float was knocked severely askew, which cost them.

Starting last year, judges' justifications are posted online within 48 hours. And cameras inside judges' booths record what they can see, so schools can review footage and compare to the judges' notes for inconsistencies. If any are found, schools can petition for a judge's removal.

In interviews with two dozen paraders on Monday night, about half said they think judges' determinations still reflect some undue influence. But most acknowledged scoring has improved with each passing year.

"They are trying to organize, so the competition happens only on the avenue, but there's a lot still happening behind the scenes. Every samba dancer knows that," Carol Tavares, 40, said Monday before

parading with Unidos da Tijuca. "It's on the path toward changing."

Perlingeiro noted an ineffable quality also factors into the judging.

"The category that doesn't exist, but exists in everyone's mind, is emotion. It happens when you see the crowd cheering, waving. The judge sees that and, in a certain way, is captivated, too," he said. "That has an influence."

Members of rival schools at the Sambadrome clapped appreciatively after Perlingeiro announced the winner. The president of Mangueira, Rio's most popular school and a fan favorite, finished fifth on Wednesday, told the AP she was happy with the judges' recognition of her school's hard work. Asked if their scores were fair, the president, Guanayra Firmino, demurred.

"With their justifications, I'll do my analysis if it was fair or not. I can't say that yet," said Firmino.

Space telescope uncovers massive galaxies near cosmic dawn

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Astronomers have discovered what appear to be massive galaxies dating back to within 600 million years of the Big Bang, suggesting the early universe may have had a stellar fast-track that produced these "monsters."

While the new James Webb Space Telescope has spotted even older galaxies, dating to within a mere 300 million years of the beginning of the universe, it's the size and maturity of these six apparent megagalaxies that stun scientists. They reported their findings Wednesday.

Lead researcher Ivo Labbe of Australia's Swinburne University of Technology and his team expected to find little baby galaxies this close to the dawn of the universe — not these whoppers.

"While most galaxies in this era are still small and only gradually growing larger over time," he said in an email, "there are a few monsters that fast-track to maturity. Why this is the case or how this would work is unknown."

Each of the six objects looks to weigh billions of times more than our sun. In one of them, the total weight of all its stars may be as much as 100 billion times greater than our sun, according to the scientists, who published their findings in the journal *Nature*.

Yet these galaxies are believed to be extremely compact, squeezing in as many stars as our own Milky Way, but in a relatively tiny slice of space, according to Labbe.

Labbe said he and his team didn't think the results were real at first — that there couldn't be galaxies as mature as the Milky Way so early in time — and they still need to be confirmed. The objects appeared so big and bright that some members of the team thought they had made a mistake.

"We were mind-blown, kind of incredulous," Labbe said.

The Pennsylvania State University's Joel Leja, who took part in the study, calls them "universe breakers."

"The revelation that massive galaxy formation began extremely early in the history of the universe upends what many of us had thought was settled science," Leja said in a statement. "It turns out we found something so unexpected it actually creates problems for science. It calls the whole picture of early galaxy formation into question."

These galaxy observations were among the first data set that came from the \$10 billion Webb telescope, launched just over a year ago. NASA and the European Space Agency's Webb is considered the successor to the Hubble Space Telescope, coming up on the 33rd anniversary of its launch.

Unlike Hubble, the bigger and more powerful Webb can peer through clouds of dust with its infrared vision and discover galaxies previously unseen. Scientists hope to eventually observe the first stars and galaxies formed following the creation of the universe 13.8 billion years ago.

The researchers still are awaiting official confirmation through sensitive spectroscopy, careful to call these candidate massive galaxies for now. Leja said it's possible that a few of the objects might not be galaxies, but obscured supermassive black holes.

While some may prove to be smaller, "odds are good at least some of them will turn out to be" galactic giants, Labbe said. "The next year will tell us."

One early lesson from Webb is "to let go of your expectations and be ready to be surprised," he said.

Supreme Court seems to favor tech giants in terror case

By JESSICA GRESKO and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court seemed skeptical Wednesday of a lawsuit trying to hold social media companies responsible for a terrorist attack at a Turkish nightclub that killed 39 people.

During arguments at the high court several justices underscored that there was no evidence linking Twitter, Facebook and Google directly to the 2017 attack on the Reina nightclub in Istanbul. The family of a man killed in the attack says the companies aided and abetted the attack because they assisted in the growth of the Islamic State group, which claimed responsibility for the attack. A lower court let the lawsuit go forward.

What the court does with Wednesday's case and a related one it heard a day earlier is important, particularly because the companies have been shielded from liability on the internet, allowing them to grow into global giants.

If the court bars the lawsuit involving the attack in Turkey from going forward it could avoid a major ruling on the companies' legal immunity. That outcome would leave the current system in place, but also leave open the possibility that the justices could take up the issue again in a later case.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett was among the members of the court who suggested that the suit against the companies lacks the kind of facts required under a federal anti-terrorism law to hold platforms responsible.

Barrett suggested that a lawsuit against a company such as Twitter would need to have more, such as direct messages, comment threads or other evidence that the platform was being used to coordinate activities for a terrorist attack, "not just general recruitment or radicalizing people."

Justice Neil Gorsuch, participating remotely for a second straight day because of illness, said he was having difficulty with the argument of a lawyer for the family of Nawras Allassaf, who was killed in the nightclub attack. Gorsuch told lawyer Eric Schnapper that he was "struggling with how your complaint lines up with the three requirements of the statute" that the companies knowingly helped a person commit a terrorist act.

The justices seemed more willing to accept the arguments of a lawyer for Twitter, Facebook and Google, Seth Waxman. At one point during two and a half hours of arguments, Justice Sonia Sotomayor told Waxman to help her sketch out what an opinion would look like if the court ruled for his clients. "Write it for me," she said.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh summarized Waxman's argument this way: "When there's a legitimate business that provides services on a widely available basis ... it's not going to be liable under this statute even if it knows bad people use its services for bad things."

Seeming to agree with that idea, Justice Samuel Alito suggested that it would be outlandish if telephone companies were held responsible for criminal activity of people using their phones. What if, he said, the phone company "knows that a particular person is -- has a criminal background and is probably engaging in criminal activity and is using the phone to communicate with other members of that person's gang. Is that aiding and abetting the crimes that they commit?"

The law the case involves is the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, which allows Americans injured by a terrorist attack abroad to sue for money damages in federal court.

A decision in the case — Twitter v. Taamneh, 21-1496 — is expected by the end of June before the court recesses for its summer break.

Nipsey Hussle's killer gets 60 years to life in prison

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A Los Angeles judge on Wednesday sentenced the man convicted of gunning down Nipsey Hussle to 60 years to life in prison after hearing testimonials to the immense cost of the killing of the hip-hop star and neighborhood leader, and of the lifetime of mental illness, abuse and struggle

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of the man who shot him.

Superior Court Judge H. Clay Jacke II handed down the sentence to Eric R. Holder Jr., 33, who was found guilty of the 2019 first-degree murder of the 33-year-old Grammy-nominated hip-hop artist outside the clothing store Hussle founded, the Marathon, in the South Los Angeles neighborhood where both men grew up in very similar circumstances.

"I am very mindful of what was presented as to Mr. Holder's mental health," Jacke said. "I am also mindful of the devastation caused to the victims and their families. I believe this sentence balances the two."

After the monthlong trial, jurors in July also convicted Holder of two counts of attempted voluntary manslaughter and two counts of assault with a firearm for gunfire that hit two other men at the scene who survived.

Jacke sentenced Holder to 25 years to life for the murder, 25 more for a firearm sentencing enhancement and 10 for assault with a firearm. He set several other sentencing additions and ordered that others run concurrent. He also gave Holder credit for the nearly four years he has served since the shooting.

Holder, dressed in orange jail attire, stared straight ahead throughout the proceedings and did not react when the sentence was read, and spoke only to tell the judge he understood the circumstances when he was asked.

In an impact statement before the sentence was handed down, Herman "Cowboy" Douglas, a close friend of Hussle who was standing with him when he was killed and testified during the trial, told the judge that the killing was a tremendous loss both for him personally and for the South Los Angeles community where Hussle was a business leader, and an inspiration.

"Nipsey was my friend, he was like a son, he was like a dad," said Douglas, who took off his black cowboy hat as he entered the courtroom and wore a sweatshirt with a picture of Hussle on the front. "Our community right now, we lost everything, everything we worked for. One man's mistake, one man's action, messed up a whole community."

Douglas said Hussle's store and surrounding businesses that he owned and supported have been closed down, and it has meant that "the Homies don't have nothing to do."

Douglas told the judge, "I don't care what you give this guy. It ain't about the time. I just want to know why. The world wants to know why. Why someone would do that?"

Actor Lauren London, who was Hussle's partner and the mother of his two young children, did not attend any part of the trial, nor did any of his relatives, and none gave similar impact statements.

Asking for a lesser sentence of 25 years to life that would allow some chance at release and rehabilitation, Jansen detailed a childhood of physical abuse and poverty for Holder.

As he reached adulthood, Jansen said Holder suffered "a terrible descent into mental illness" that led to "years of torment and struggle" with issues including agonizing auditory hallucinations that resisted all attempts at treatment.

He showed photos of a head injury Holder suffered at the hands of other inmates during the trial, saying he has been targeted as Hussle's killer and that his life behind bars is "going to be brutal. It's going to be short. He's already received numerous death threats."

Jansen also read a letter from Holder's father, Eric Holder Sr. apologizing to Hussle's family and to the other victims.

"I know there are not enough words that would fill the void, the pain, the deep sorrow that they feel," the letter read. "I question myself every day asking if I as a father did everything to help Eric Jr. stabilize his mental health."

Hussle, whose legal name is Ermias Asghedom, and Holder had known each other for years growing up as members of the Rollin' 60s in South LA. Both were aspiring rappers. But Holder never found the same success as Hussle, who would become a local hero and a national celebrity.

A year after his death, he was mourned at a memorial at the arena then known as Staples Center, and celebrated in a performance at the Grammy Awards that included DJ Khaled and John Legend.

The evidence against Holder was so overwhelming — from eyewitnesses to surveillance cameras from local businesses that captured his arrival, the shooting and his departure — that Jansen conceded during

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trial that he had shot Hussle, asking jurors to find him guilty of voluntary manslaughter. But jurors took just six hours deliberating before returning with the first-degree murder verdict.

As Holder was taken from the courtroom Wednesday, Douglas sang "Hit the Road Jack" toward him. Jacke shouted "Out!" and deputies led Douglas out.

Cornell Univ. returns Native American remains dug up in 1964

By MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

Cornell University has returned ancestral remains to the Oneida Indian Nation that were inadvertently dug up in 1964 and stored for decades in a school archive.

"We're returning ancestral remains and possessions that we now recognize never should have been taken, never should have come to Cornell and never should have been kept here," Cornell President Martha E. Pollack said at a small repatriation ceremony Tuesday, according to the university.

Pollack apologized on behalf of the Ivy League school in Ithaca, New York, noting the "disrespect shown to these ancestors."

The remains, possibly more than 300 years old, were unearthed by people digging a ditch for a water line on an upstate New York farm east of Binghamton in August 1964.

Police called a Cornell anthropology professor, who determined the remains belonged to a young adult male of Native American ancestry. Repatriation records recently filed with the federal government indicate the remains represent "at minimum" three people.

The remains were stored on campus until after the professor's death in 2014, when they were transferred to the anthropology department. They were rediscovered by colleagues during an archival inventory.

"These individuals, an adult man, a child of four years or younger and another child or adolescent of undetermined age, will be once again laid to rest in the traditions of our people," Oneida Indian Nation Representative Ray Halbritter said at the ceremony.

Twenty-two "funerary" objects that were interred with the remains also were returned. The objects include pieces of pottery, a piece of leather, a large mammal skull fragment and an acorn.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act requires federally funded institutions, such as universities, to return remains and cultural items.

Cornell is among colleges, museums and other institutions returning Native American artifacts and ancestral remains. Colgate University in November returned to the Oneidas more than 1,500 items once buried with ancestral remains, some dating back 400 years.

The dig site in Windsor, New York, was once a large settlement located on the banks of the Susquehanna River, in the traditional territory of the Oneidas.

No cow needed: Oat and soy can be called milk, FDA proposes

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Soy, oat, almond and other drinks that bill themselves as "milk" can keep using the name, according to draft federal rules released Wednesday.

Food and Drug Administration officials issued guidance that says plant-based beverages don't pretend to be from dairy animals – and that U.S. consumers aren't confused by the difference.

Dairy producers for years have called for the FDA to crack down on plant-based drinks and other products that they say masquerade as animal-based foods and cloud the real meaning of "milk."

Under the draft rules, the agency recommends that beverage makers label their products clearly by the plant source of the food, such as "soy milk" or "cashew milk."

The rules also call for voluntary extra nutrition labels that note when the drinks have lower levels of nutrients than dairy milk, such as calcium, magnesium or vitamin D. They would continue to allow labels that note when plant-based drinks have higher levels. Fortified soy milk is the only plant-based food included in the dairy category of U.S. dietary guidelines because of its nutrient levels.

The new guidelines are aimed at providing consumers clear nutrition information, FDA Commissioner

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Dr. Robert Califf said in a statement. The draft rules do not apply to nondairy products other than beverages, such as yogurt.

The National Milk Producers Federation, an industry trade group, applauded the call for extra nutrition information on drink labels, but said they rejected the FDA's conclusion that plant-based drinks can be called milk because it's a "common and usual name."

The Good Food Institute, a group that advocates for plant-based products, objected to the extra labeling in a statement, saying "the guidance misguidedly admonishes companies to make a direct comparison" with cow's milk, even though key nutrients are already required to be listed.

In recent years, the number of plant-based drinks has exploded to include dozens of varieties, including cashew, coconut, hemp and quinoa-based beverages. Although the drinks are made from the liquid extracts of plant materials, they are frequently labeled – and described – as "milks."

In the U.S., almond milk is the most popular variety, but oat milk has been seeing the fastest growth. Still, nondairy sales are dwarfed by traditional milk. Sales of refrigerated cow's milk grew to \$12.3 billion in the 52 weeks ending Jan. 28, compared to \$2.5 billion for nondairy milk, according to NielsenIQ.

In the past, lawmakers in dairy states have tried to get bills passed that would require the FDA to enforce a federal standard that defines "milk" as the product of "milking one or more healthy cows."

The agency will accept comments on the draft guidelines through April 23.

What's behind the Israeli army's deadly Nablus arrest raid?

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The northern West Bank city of Nablus, the Palestinian commercial center, resembled a war zone on Wednesday, after a daytime Israeli military raid triggered a firefight that killed at least 10 Palestinians and wounded more than 100 others.

It was the latest bloody escalation in a monthslong surge of Israeli raids into the the occupied territory that has led to the deaths of some 200 Palestinians and the arrest of at least 2,600 others. Last month, a similarly deadly raid in the northern West Bank city of Jenin triggered a Palestinian attack outside a synagogue in Jerusalem and a burst of rocket fire from Gaza.

This period of heightened violence in the West Bank and east Jerusalem has prompted comparisons with aspects of the second intifada, or Palestinian uprising, in the early 2000s and stoked fears of further bloodshed under the most right-wing government in Israel's history. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new ultranationalist coalition has vowed to take a hard-line stance against the Palestinians and to entrench Israeli rule over lands they seek for a future state.

WHY DID THE ISRAELI ARMY ENTER NABLUS?

Much of the violence between Israelis and Palestinians for the past year has focused on Nablus, along with the nearby city of Jenin. The Israeli military said Wednesday's daytime raid targeted a Nablus-based armed group of young men known as the Lions' Den, which emerged last year. The group has surged in popularity among Palestinians who see them as heroes for fighting Israel's open-ended occupation of the West Bank, now in its 56th year. Although the Lion's Den portrays itself as independent of established Palestinian factions, experts say the group is funded by Islamist militant groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Israel has blamed the Lion's Den for a string of shootings aimed at troops and Israeli settlements in the past months, including one that killed a soldier last October.

WHY DID THE RAID TAKE PLACE DURING THE DAY?

The Israeli army usually raids cities in the West Bank late at night in what it says is a tactic meant to reduce the risk of civilian casualties. But on Wednesday, as Israeli military vehicles rumbled into Nablus' Old City, its warren of homes and shops teeming with vendors and residents going about their routines under the bright sky. Fighting between Israeli security forces and Palestinian gunmen erupted in the stone alleys and the Israeli army even fired missiles at a house after the militants holed up there refused to surrender. The Israeli military said intelligence services had tracked down three wanted members of the Lion's Den, including one involved in the killing of the Israeli soldier last fall, and determined they were all in the same house — offering a rare window of opportunity to target them. The army claimed the militants posed an

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immediate threat to Israeli lives, without providing evidence.

WHO WAS KILLED IN THE RAID?

At least 10 Palestinians were killed, including a 16-year-old boy and older men 72 and 61. The Lion's Den claimed six of the dead as its members. A 66-year-old later died from tear gas inhalation, officials said. Other men were killed in unclear circumstances that the Israeli army said it was investigating. CCTV footage widely shared online showed two young men, apparently unarmed, shot after sprinting down the street, away from echoing gunfire. Another video circulating on social media, confirmed by witnesses, shows the body of 72-year-old Adnan Baara inert on the ground of the Old City market, his clothes covered in dust, beside a cart of bread. "We're looking into everything," said Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, an army spokesman. So far this year, at least 59 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, according to a tally by The Associated Press. While many of those killed in recent army raids are militants, stone-throwing youths protesting the incursions and others not involved in confrontations have also been killed.

WHY WAS THE DEATH TOLL SO HIGH?

The Israeli military said that its troops came under heavy fire as they stormed into the city. Young Palestinian men are increasingly taking up guns and organizing into small militant groups. The Israeli army's escalating efforts to pursue them last year led to bloodshed in the West Bank at levels not seen since 2004. Fed up with the Israeli occupation that constrains their lives and disillusioned by the long-stalemated peace process and the unpopular Palestinian Authority that exercises limited control in parts of the West Bank, many young Palestinians have gotten their hands on M-16s, often smuggled from Israeli army bases or neighboring Jordan. Instead of slinging stones at troops entering their towns, they open fire. Israeli forces fire back. During a raid into the Jenin refugee camp last month, 10 Palestinians were killed, including a 61-year-old woman peering out at the chaos from her apartment window.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The Islamist militant group that rules the Gaza Strip, Hamas, issued a veiled threat after the deadly raid, saying its "patience is running out." Senior Palestinian official Hussein al-Sheikh said that the Palestinian Authority is "considering taking steps at all levels in response," without elaborating. Its options are limited. After last month's raid in Jenin, the PA suspended security coordination with Israel, a move it has announced before with little impact. Although Israel says that its stepped-up arrest raids in the West Bank are intended to prevent future attacks, Palestinian residents and critics say the operations only inflame a ceaseless cycle of hatred and bloodshed. The Lion's Den on Wednesday promised revenge. "The size of the pain that befell Nablus today," it warned, "Israel will swallow twice as much."

Microsoft brings Bing chatbot to phones after curbing quirks

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Microsoft is ready to take its new Bing chatbot mainstream — less than a week after making major fixes to stop the artificially intelligent search engine from going off the rails.

The company said Wednesday it is bringing the new AI technology to its Bing smartphone app, as well as the app for its Edge internet browser, though it is still requiring people to sign up for a waitlist before using it.

Putting the new AI-enhanced search engine into the hands of smartphone users is meant to give Microsoft an advantage over Google, which dominates the internet search business but hasn't yet released such a chatbot to the public.

In the two weeks since Microsoft unveiled its revamped Bing, more than a million users around the world have experimented with a public preview of the new product after signing up for a waitlist to try it. Microsoft said most of those users responded positively, but others found Bing was insulting them, professing its love or voicing other disturbing or bizarre language.

Powered by some of the same technology behind the popular writing tool ChatGPT, built by Microsoft partner OpenAI, the new Bing is part of an emerging class of AI systems that have mastered human language and grammar after ingesting a huge trove of books and online writings. They can compose

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songs, recipes and emails on command, or concisely summarize concepts with information found across the internet. But they are also error-prone and unwieldy.

Reports of Bing's odd behavior led Microsoft to look for a way to curtail Bing's propensity to respond with strong emotional language to certain questions. It's mostly done that by limiting the length and time of conversations with the chatbot, forcing users to start a fresh chat after several turns. But the upgraded Bing also now politely declines questions that it would have responded to just a week ago.

"I'm sorry but I prefer not to continue this conversation," it says when asked technical questions about how it works or the rules that guide it. "I'm still learning so I appreciate your understanding and patience."

Microsoft said its new technology will also be integrated into its Skype messaging service.

WWE leaning in to social media ahead of possible sale

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

WWE, an organization that is already king of the ring on social media, will attempt to expand its online presence this year with the \$6.5 billion sports entertainment company hinting that it may put itself up for sale.

WWE surpassed 20 million followers on its flagship TikTok account during its most recent quarter, the first sports league to do so, and it's launching three international TikTok accounts after the WWE Español TikTok handle reached nearly 2 million followers in its first year, according to the company.

WWE's presence online is already broad and it does not appear to be slowing down.

The company's YouTube channel topped 92 million subscribers in the fourth quarter, making it one of only 10 channels on the platform to surpass the 90 million subscriber mark, according to Paul Levesque, the company's chief content officer and director who wrestled under the name Triple H.

To put those numbers in perspective, the National Basketball Association has 19.8 million subscribers, the National Football League has 10.6 million, and Major League Baseball has 4.05 million.

Part of the reason is that, unlike the NFL, NBA and MLB, the WWE has no off season. It churns out new content from television shows and premium live events all year long and its fans eat it up.

The online presence of the company is so pervasive that it seeps into the social media posts from some of the world's biggest athletes.

After defeating the Philadelphia Eagles in Super Bowl LVII, Kansas City Chiefs quarterback and MVP Patrick Mahomes posted a photo of himself on Twitter holding the Vince Lombardi trophy in one hand, and a WWE belt in the other.

That photo has been viewed more than 23 million times and that number keeps rising.

Constant innovations that are blended with entertainment sets WWE apart on social media platforms, said Christopher Zook, chairman and chief investment officer of CAZ Investments.

"It has consistently found ways to generate interest and stay ahead of the growing changes in consumer behavior," Zook said. "The viral, fan-service nature of their content is how they have built so much staying power."

Increased sports viewership has put a premium on the value of organizations with a large following and that moves WWE to the front of the line for companies looking to expand into new areas, said Zook, particularly when seeking to reach key demographics willing to spend.

And the platforms on which the WWE is focused increasingly attract a crowd with discretionary income to spend.

Among those between the ages of 18 and 29, 95% say they use YouTube, according to a Pew Research Center survey on social media use by U.S. adults in 2021.

TikTok is expected to overtake Facebook next year as the most-consumed social network among U.S. adults over the age of 18, according to Insider Intelligence. The research firm expects 18-to-24-year-old TikTok users in the U.S. to spend an average of 1 hour on the platform every day this year.

And WWE has been quick to partner with people that have a massive following on social media platforms, most recently the social media personality Logan Paul.

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Three months after signing a contract with WWE last year, Paul took out a cell phone and filmed himself jumping from the ropes and onto Roman Reigns. That video garnered more than 40 million views across Paul's and WWE's social platforms in less than 24 hours, according to Levesque, topping all social media posts for the Stamford, Connecticut, company last year.

A midair collision in the ring last month between Paul and the wrestler Ricochet racked up another 26.5 million views across all platforms.

The company is also pushing digital programming like a weekly show called "The Bump," which can be viewed live every Wednesday on all of WWE's digital and social media platforms.

"Look for us to launch more digital original programming in 2023, as it has proven to be an effective platform to pilot new shows and test creative, all while creating new programming for our sales team to sell against," Levesque said in a post-earnings conference call this month.

The test will be how potential buyers value WWE's social media presence and that potential going forward. However, Wall Street already appears to be very optimistic about the entertainment company.

In the last 12 months shares of World Wrestling Entertainment Inc. have jumped 50%, a period when all major U.S. stock markets have fallen into a serious funk.

Rumors of a sale ramped up late last year when WWE founder Vince McMahon returned to the company and took a seat on the board after a short retirement.

In a letter dated Dec. 20, but published in January, McMahon wrote, "Given the rapidly evolving media landscape in which more and more companies are seeking to own the intellectual property offered on their streaming platforms – I firmly believe that the best thing to do for all of WWE's shareholders and other stakeholders is to undertake a comprehensive review of strategic alternatives."

Zook, of CAZ Investments, believes potential buyers are aware that social media has changed the equation. "When you combine the staying power of live sporting events, with the rapid growth in subscription-based content, and an expansive social media presence, you can begin to see why sports franchises like the WWE are becoming a more attractive asset to own," Zook said.

MLB curtails infield shift, hopes for more singles, speed

By DAVID BRANDT AP Sports Writer

PHOENIX (AP) — Milwaukee manager Craig Counsell needed to add some pop to his lineup a couple years ago, so he put a few more big bodies in his four-man infield, sacrificing defensive range for offensive thump.

"They combined for a weight of over 1,000 pounds," Counsell said, laughing.

"I don't think you'll ever see that again."

There's little doubt that hiding a couple bulky sluggers in the infield is going to be more challenging this season. One of Major League Baseball's most visible rule changes for 2023 is a limitation on infield shifts, which had grown exponentially and are partly to blame for a league-wide batting average drop.

The hope is twofold: One, a few more hits for lefty mashers like Kyle Schwarber or Corey Seager, who were among those hindered by the shift. And two, stress on athleticism and range for those playing defense in the infield.

"I'm sure some guys will like it and some won't," said former Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia, a four-time Gold Glove winner. "You've got to have range now as an infielder. Got to be able to catch the ball. You've got to be quick.

"It'll be an adjustment for some guys. It'll make other guys better."

Hitters in the big leagues had a .243 batting average last season, the lowest since 1968.

The new rule states that all four infielders must have both feet within the outer boundary of the infield and two infielders must be on each side of second base when a pitch is delivered. MLB also mandated infield dirt have uniform dimensions in all 30 ballparks — the outfield edge must be 95 feet from the front of the pitching rubber.

A few hitters — notably New York Mets star Jeff McNeil — adapted to exploit the gaping holes in the

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infield shifts with hard-hit balls the other way. Most stuck to their modern, pull-heavy approaches, in part because pitchers strategized to make going to the opposite field difficult — even big league hitters struggle to slap an up-and-in 98 mph fastball the other way.

Arizona's Josh Rojas, a left-hander hitter, said he wasn't particularly worried about the changes. He views them as just the latest salvo in ongoing pitcher-vs.-hitter battle that's ebbed and flowed for more than a century.

"The holes will be in different spots," Rojas said. "My goal as a hitter is to find the holes and use those to my advantage. There are always holes — you can't cover every single one on the field."

Enterprising teams spent the offseason peppering the commissioner's office with questions about ways to potentially circumvent the guidelines.

Morgan Sword, an MLB executive vice president, said teams primarily had three questions:

— Can an infielder be put in motion during the pitch, running toward the other side of the diamond, so that there are three infielders on one side of second base once the ball is put in play? (The answer is no.)

— Can an infielder be put in motion during the pitch, running toward the outfield grass, so that he's in the outfield by the time the ball is put in play? (No)

— Can teams move outfielders around, such as the left fielder moving into short right field for a lefty pull hitter, leaving left field unmanned? (Yes)

Umpires have broad discretion to enforce the guidelines.

"They'll know if a team is trying to break the spirit of the rule," Sword said.

MLB's hope is shift limits will add a hit or two each night. Not only will the shift affect batting, but it makes speed and agility more important for infielders, who must cover more ground on defense.

"Those are the demands. You have to pick up the baseball and also hit it," Arizona manager Torey Lovullo said. "We're not just going to put someone in one spot, stand on the 'X', we don't believe in that. We do have very athletic position players."

The shift limit has been tested in the minor leagues, and Lovullo said that after speaking with the organization's Double-A manager, Shawn Roof, he expects offense to jump.

"He said it makes a difference," Lovullo said. "There are more balls getting through."

The change could affect some pitchers, too. D-backs right-hander Merrill Kelly said he's been told advanced metrics say he's been one of the beneficiaries of the shift.

But the veteran, slated to pitch for the U.S. in the World Baseball Classic, is fine with the new rules.

"I'm a fan of taking away from the shift, even though statistics say that I could benefit from it," Kelly said. "I think hits should be hits and outs should be outs."

Djokovic hopes to play in US despite being unvaccinated

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Novak Djokovic has asked American authorities for special permission to enter the United States to play tennis tournaments in California and Florida despite being unvaccinated against the coronavirus, the top-ranked Serb said Wednesday.

The Transportation Security Administration has said the requirement for foreign air travelers to be fully vaccinated against the disease would be in place at least until mid-April. The tournament in Indian Wells will be played from March 6-19 and the Miami Open is scheduled from March 20-April 2.

"Everything is currently in the process," Djokovic said at his training ground in Belgrade. "I have a big desire to be there.

"I am really thankful to the Indian Wells and Miami tournament (officials) and community for their support publicly and they would like me to be able to play in their tournaments."

Djokovic is one of the most high-profile athletes who is unvaccinated against COVID-19.

Last year, the 35-year-old Djokovic was deported from Australia ahead of the Australian Open because of his vaccination status. Djokovic returned to the tournament in January after Australia lifted its strict vaccine mandate to win his 22nd Grand Slam title, tying the record with Rafael Nadal.

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Djokovic said Wednesday that Nadal remains his biggest on-court rival despite the rise of 19-year-old Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz, who had been at the top of the rankings before a leg injury prevented him from playing at the Australian Open.

"(Alcaraz) is arguably the next biggest thing in our sport, or he's already there," Djokovic said. "I just feel that the rivalry with Nadal is something that is difficult to eliminate.

"Nadal has been the biggest rival and he probably will remain the biggest rival I ever had in my in my career."

Djokovic reached another milestone in his tennis career this week by tying German great Steffi Graf with 377 weeks at the top of the world rankings.

"Obviously, Steffi Graf is one of the biggest legends of our sport, both men and women tennis, and someone that I truly admire and respect," Djokovic said. "So, of course, it's very flattering that I am able to equal her record and obviously have a possibility to break it as well the next week."

Djokovic said his next tournament will be next week's Dubai Open.

McCarthy gives Carlson access to 1/6 footage, raising alarms

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

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands of hours of surveillance footage from the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol are being made available to Fox News Channel host Tucker Carlson, a stunning level of access granted by House Speaker Kevin McCarthy that Democrats swiftly condemned as a "grave" breach of security with potentially far-reaching consequences.

The hard-right political commentator said his team is spending the week at the Capitol poring through the video and preparing to reveal their findings to his viewers. But granting exclusive access to sensitive Jan. 6 security footage to such a deeply partisan figure is a highly unusual move, seen by some critics as essentially outsourcing House oversight to a TV personality who has promoted conspiracy theories about the attack.

"It's a shocking development that brings in both political concerns but even more importantly, security concerns," said Rep. Dan Goldman, D-N.Y., who was a chief counsel during President Donald Trump's first impeachment trial.

Many critics warn that Capitol security could be endangered if Carlson airs security footage that details how the rioters accessed the building and the routes lawmakers used to flee to safety. And a sharply partisan retelling of the Capitol attack could accelerate a dangerous rewriting of the history of what happened Jan. 6, when Trump encouraged a mob of supporters to head to the Capitol to overturn Joe Biden's election.

"It is not lost on anyone that the one person that the speaker decides to give hours and hours of sensitive secret surveillance footage is the person who peddled a bogus documentary trying to debunk responsibility for the Jan. 6 riot from Donald Trump onto others," Goldman said.

"Kevin McCarthy has turned over the security of the Capitol to Tucker Carlson and that's a scary thought," he added.

McCarthy's office declined to confirm the arrangement, first reported by Axios, despite repeated requests for comment.

Gripping images and videos from the Capitol attack by Trump supporters have been widely circulated by documentarians, news organizations and even the rioters themselves. But officials have held back much of the surveillance video from hundreds of security cameras stationed in and around the Capitol that offer a detailed view of the grisly scene and the brutal beatings of police as they tried to stop the rioters.

The House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack went through a painstaking process to work closely with the U.S. Capitol Police to review and ultimately release approved segments of the surveillance footage as part of its public hearings last year.

The chief of the U.S. Capitol Police, Tom Manger, issued a terse statement when asked about the new release of footage: "When Congressional Leadership or Congressional Oversight Committees ask for things like this, we must give it to them."

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House Democrats planned to convene Wednesday for a private caucus call to hear from Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., who served as the chairman of the Jan. 6 committee, and others. House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries called McCarthy's decision an "egregious security breach" that threatens the safety of those who work at the Capitol.

"Unfortunately, the apparent disclosure of sensitive video material is yet another example of the grave threat to the security of the American people represented by the extreme MAGA Republican majority," Jeffries, D-N.Y. said in a letter to House colleagues.

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., the former chairwoman of the House Administration Committee and a member of the committee that investigated Jan. 6, said: "It's really a road map to people who might want to attack the Capitol again. It would be of huge assistance to them."

Carlson, who previously produced a documentary suggesting the federal government used the Capitol attack by Trump's supporters as a pretext to persecute conservatives, confirmed that his team was reviewing the footage ahead of a possible airing.

"We believe we have secured the right to see whatever we want to see," Carlson, who is the network's most-watched prime-time host, said on his show Monday night.

It's not clear what protocols Carlson and his team are using to view the material, but he said that "access is unfettered."

The House committee investigating Jan. 6 underwent an often intense process to review the tens of thousands of hours of footage as it documented its findings.

Over the nearly two-year probe, the panel, which was disbanded once Republicans took control of the House, created a secure room in their Capitol Hill offices for staff to comb through the more than 14,000 hours of footage. The process took months, according to a person familiar with the investigation who requested anonymity to discuss the private machinations.

Any clip of footage the committee wanted to use for their series of public hearings or for the final report had to be approved by Capitol Police to avoid any security breaches, the person said. If police had an objection, the committee would engage in negotiations to redact any content that could potentially endanger the force or the mechanisms they use to protect the Capitol and lawmakers.

"Throughout our entire review on the committee, we worked with U.S. Capitol Police, one, to get the footage and review it through secure channels, and then we also worked with them again before we released anything," said Marcus Childress, who was the panel's investigative counsel and now is in private practice. "The purpose of that was to make sure that we weren't releasing any sensitive surveillance footage."

Anxiety over security is running high after Capitol Police reported an uptick in threats to member safety over the last several years, its highest on Jan. 6, 2021. The number of possible threats against members of Congress rose from about 4,000 in 2017 to more than 9,600 in 2021, then declined last year to 7,501.

Key Republicans welcomed McCarthy's decision as part of his commitment to create a more transparent House and engage in oversight, as Republicans launch a far-reaching series of investigations and probes touching many aspects of government.

"I support Speaker McCarthy's decision," said Rep. Bryan Steil, R-Wis., the chairman of the House Administration Committee.

Hard-right figures cheered the move. "For all of you that doubted we would release the tapes. Here you go!" tweeted Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., a right-flank firebrand who has become close to McCarthy.

Former Rep. Rodney Davis, R-Ill., said if House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's daughter, the documentary filmmaker Alexandra Pelosi, was able to film that day and release her footage, McCarthy should be able to grant Carlson access.

But others said the two situations are not comparable — countless hours of footage have been released from many sources that captured what happened that deadly day. A mob of Trump supporters battled Capitol Police, in often violent scenes, breaking into the building. Five people died in the riot and its aftermath.

"I think we should remember that the Jan. 6 attack happened in broad daylight," said Sandeep Prasanna, a former investigative counsel on the Jan. 6 committee now in private practice.

"My concern is that I don't see how releasing thousands of hours of footage to one handpicked controversial media figure could ever produce the same factual and careful analysis that the committee produced over that year and a half," he said.

How credit scores are evolving to improve access to credit

By CORA LEWIS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A low credit score can hurt your ability to take out a loan, secure a good interest rate, or increase the spending limit on your credit card.

Some reasons for a low score are out of your control — such as unexpected medical debt or a lack of credit history.

Credit rating agencies are working to improve access to credit by giving people more time to pay medical bills before the debt appears in reports, and by removing other debt completely. They're also making it easier to count rent, utility payments, and other recurring bills — a boon for those who need credit the most.

Here's what to know:

WHAT IS A CREDIT SCORE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Put simply, a credit score is a formula that lenders use to decide how likely you are to pay back a loan. If you're considered a risky bet, you will pay more to borrow or may not be able to borrow at all.

The factors that go into calculating your score are complicated, and advocates say it's a positive that ratings agencies have started making it easier for consumers to prove that they'll be able to pay back money they borrow. It's especially important for so-called "thin file" consumers — those with a lack of extensive credit history, who are often younger or lower income.

"I do see that efforts are being made in order to equalize the credit score," said Rosalyn Glenn, a financial advisor at Prudential who focuses on expanding financial access. "For instance, adding rental payments to credit reports, because there is a segment of the population that rents and does not own. That's exciting — because the score can give them an opportunity for better rates on things like insurance and loans. I do believe progress is being made there."

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH MEDICAL DEBT?

After conducting industry research during the pandemic, the three most-used credit rating agencies found that consumers with medical expenses were just as likely to be creditworthy as those without.

Effective July of last year, paid medical collection debt is no longer included on consumer credit reports, and the time period before unpaid medical collection debt appears is now a year, up from six months. That gives people more time to work with insurance and healthcare providers to pay off the debt.

In the first half of 2023, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion will also remove medical collection debt under \$500 from credit reports.

When Jonnathan Alvarado, 25, was in a car accident this past year, he knew health expenses wouldn't be the only hit to his finances. A landscaping contractor in Plainfield, New Jersey, who prides himself on careful financial behavior, Alvarado faced knee surgery at the beginning of his busiest work season, which hurt his productivity.

Alvarado said he only realized in retrospect the consequences for his access to credit. Even after insurance, Alvarado still owed in the vicinity of \$1,200, which he took several months to pay off. During that time, his credit score dropped to 680, still considered good, but lower than it had been. When he finished paying the debt, it jumped to 775, the highest it had ever been.

It was only when Alvarado looked into what caused the decline and rebound that he learned the lingering medical debt had been responsible.

"A difference of almost a hundred points," Alvarado said. "I would have paid it off sooner, if I had known."

David Anthony, 43, who drives a service truck in Baltimore, only learned that medical debt was dragging his credit down when an employer pointed out the high interest rate he was paying on an auto loan. After looking into his score, Anthony disputed certain medical bills, some of which had been paid, eventually

bringing his score up from the 500s to above 700.

"I got a great loan on the cars that I have now," he said. "That first car — it was a 17 percent interest rate. That's what raised the red flag to my employer."

Anthony is now down to a single-digit interest loan.

HOW ELSE CAN I INCREASE MY CREDIT SCORE?

Although consumers have long been able to add rent and utility bill payments to their credit files, the bureaus have made these additions easier and less costly in recent years.

Experian, for example, has an option for consumers to opt into a service, "Experian Boost," that counts these kinds of payments without charging a fee. (In some other cases, companies may charge the renter or landlord for the trouble of filing the additional information in credit reports, since it isn't automatically included as a matter of course. Those who use the program often see an increase in their scores.

"You're making a payment once a month for a service you receive — very much like getting a loan," said Rod Griffin, financial health advocate at Experian. "What we found in our research was that those kinds of pieces of information do indicate that a person may be a better credit risk than their report might show if they have very little credit."

For people with thin credit files or scores below 680, Experian sees an average increase in the neighborhood of 19 points, according to Griffin. Others might see their scores increase 12 or 13 points. About two-thirds of people see an improvement in their scores, but the tool helps even those who don't build a longer credit history, Griffin said.

To use the tool, you give Experian permission to capture your monthly payment history and bank information — whether that's a cellphone plan, water bill, streaming service subscription, or rent.

For Brandon Reese, 41, a financial planner in Dallas, Texas, it made sense for him to help his 20-year-old daughter, a nursing student in San Antonio, opt in.

"When she first opened a line of credit, her score dropped," he said. "But with this, we were able to get it about 15 percent higher."

Reese said he also advises his retired clients to use the programs.

"For older people, they have low credit scores, too, because they've paid everything off," he said. "So their credit goes down. But now — Verizon, AT&T, Hulu, the Disney bundle, Netflix, your gas bill — fintech companies can justify those as payment histories."

Tech companies that provide similar services to Experian Boost, either at low or no cost, have proliferated.

"That is now one of the number one things we encourage people to do," said Silvio Tavares, CEO of VantageScore, another provider of national consumer credit scores. Like FICO, VantageScore uses the credit reports compiled by Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion to calculate a rating of credit-worthiness using its own algorithm. "If you're engaging in credit-worthy behavior — like paying rent and utilities on time, you want to include that."

HOW DO I OPT IN?

To include alternative credit information on your report, you have several options. One is to opt-in to ExperianBoost or Ultra FICO by going to the companies' websites and granting permission for them to access your checking, savings, or money market accounts. This will allow the credit bureau or scoring company to analyze your spending, saving, and consistent payment histories. While other financial tech platforms provide similar services, these two options do not charge fees.

Russia's sports exile persists 1 year after invading Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

One year after the invasion of Ukraine began, Russia's reintegration into the world of sports threatens to create the biggest rift in the Olympic movement since the Cold War.

Russia remains excluded from many international sporting events, but that could soon change. Next year's Paris Olympics are fast approaching and qualifying events are under way. The International Olympic Committee is working to bring athletes from Russia and ally Belarus back into competition, but not

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everyone agrees.

If Russian athletes are to return to competition, the sports world must resolve two key issues that became clear in the days after the invasion: How can Russian athletes return without alienating Ukrainians? And what can be done about the Russians who support the war?

As the first battles raged, the Ukrainian fencing team refused to compete against Russia at a tournament in Egypt, holding up a sign reading: "Stop Russia! Stop the war! Save Ukraine! Save Europe!"

A year later, one of the biggest obstacles to a Russian return to sports is Ukraine's insistence it could boycott rather than risk handing its enemy a propaganda success or further traumatizing Ukrainian athletes affected by the war. Other European countries have also spoken of boycotting the Olympics if Russians are allowed to participate.

The last major Olympic boycotts came four decades ago when the United States and more than 60 allies skipped the 1980 Moscow Games. The Soviet Union and its allies retaliated by boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

The actions of specific athletes are a separate issue. Russian gymnast Ivan Kuliak taped a "Z" symbol to his chest, mimicking a marking used on the country's military vehicles, while standing on the podium next to the Ukrainian winner at an event in Qatar last March. He was banned for a year.

The IOC now says it will not support the return of any Russian athlete who has "acted against the peace mission of the IOC by actively supporting the war in Ukraine," but hasn't defined what that means in practice.

Sports organizations took swift action last year in response to the Russian invasion. A day after tanks rolled into Ukraine, Russia was stripped of the right to host the Champions League final in men's soccer and the Russian Grand Prix in Formula One. After four days, the IOC recommended excluding Russian and Belarusian athletes from events "to protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants."

The Russian men's national soccer team was in the World Cup playoffs at the time, hoping to qualify for last year's tournament in Qatar, but Poland refused to play them. Russia was then excluded from the competition — four years after hosting the 2018 tournament and reaching the quarterfinals.

As the Paris Olympics come into view, the IOC has shifted its emphasis to what it says is its duty to avoid discriminating against anyone based on nationality, and to create a path for Russians and Belarusians to compete as neutral athletes without national symbols. Safety concerns might be avoided, the IOC says, if Russia and Belarus were to compete in events in Asia, including Olympic qualifiers at the Asian Games in China.

The IOC points to tennis, where the men's and women's professional tours have allowed individual Russians and Belarusians to compete without national symbols. Belarusian player Aryna Sabalenka won the Australian Open last month. Even in tennis, though, Russia and Belarus are excluded from national team competitions like the Davis Cup and Billie Jean King Cup, and they were also barred from playing in last year's Wimbledon tournament.

Russia and its athletes have been at risk of being banned at each Olympics since the steroid-tainted 2014 Sochi Winter Games. Previously, it was because of Russian state-backed doping and then the country's attempt to cover up evidence of that scandal.

Ukraine is fiercely opposed to allowing Russians back into world sports, and especially next year's Olympics. Ukraine says more than 220 of its athletes have been killed in the war, and hundreds of sports facilities lie in ruins. It points to precedents like the exclusion of Germany and Japan from the 1948 Olympics following World War II.

"If, God forbid, the Olympic principles are destroyed and Russian athletes are allowed to participate in any competitions or the Olympic Games, it's just a matter of time before the terrorist state forces them to play along with the war propaganda," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told a summit of sports ministers and officials from more than 30 countries this month.

That summit produced a joint declaration full of skepticism for how the IOC's proposed neutral process could work, with particular concern about whether the many Russian athletes with ties to the military

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could compete. The IOC said Tuesday it found those questions “constructive” but that the nations did not address its concerns about possible discrimination.

The clock is ticking for the IOC to find a solution for Russian and Belarusian athletes to have the opportunity to qualify for the Olympics. Qualifying has already begun in many sports and will start soon in others.

While Russians have been largely excluded over the last year, Ukraine’s athletes have had some notable successes on the world stage. Oleksandr Usyk, who took up arms in defense of Ukraine shortly after the invasion, returned to boxing and defended his heavyweight title against Anthony Joshua in August. High jumper Yaroslava Mahuchikh won a world championship silver medal in Oregon and Maryna Bekh-Romanchuk won the European triple jump title.

The Ukrainian men’s soccer league resumed in August — with some games interrupted by air-raid warnings — and Shakhtar Donetsk held its own in the group stage of the Champions League with a win over German club Leipzig and a draw against Spanish powerhouse Real Madrid.

In a statement Wednesday marking the one-year anniversary of the invasion, the IOC didn’t mention its efforts to reintegrate Russia and Belarus, but said the Olympics could promote “peaceful competition” between athletes from the likes of North and South Korea, or Israel and Palestine.

“Peace-building efforts need dialogue,” the IOC said. “A competition with athletes who respect the Olympic Charter can serve as a catalyst for dialogue, which is always a first step to achieving peace.”

CNN’s Don Lemon tweets another apology, returns to work

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — CNN anchor Don Lemon tweeted an apology to viewers for his remarks about Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley shortly before returning to work on Wednesday, then stuck to the news.

He made no mention of his comments last week that Haley was not in “her prime,” during “CNN This Morning,” instead reporting on stories like President Joe Biden’s trip to Ukraine, the Ohio train derailment and winter weather.

Lemon, within the hour before he went on the air, tweeted that he appreciated the opportunity to return to work. He was absent for three days.

“To my network, my colleagues and our incredible audience — I’m sorry,” he tweeted. “I’ve heard you, I’m learning from you, and I’m committed to doing better.”

His tweet made no mention of Haley, who called Lemon’s comments sexist and has been referring to them in fundraising appeals.

On last Thursday’s show, Lemon and fellow hosts Poppy Harlow and Kaitlan Collins had been discussing Haley’s suggestion that politicians over 75 should be subject to mandatory mental competency tests.

“Nikki Haley isn’t in her prime, sorry,” Lemon said. He said a woman is considered to be in her prime in her 20s, 30s and maybe her 40s. Haley is 51.

He doubled down on his message even after being challenged by his female colleagues. “I think we need to qualify,” Harlow said at one point. “Are you talking about prime for childbearing or are you talking about prime for being president?”

After video of his comments spread quickly online, Lemon tweeted regret for his “inartful and irrelevant” comments. He was scolded the next day by CNN chief executive Chris Licht during an internal staff meeting, and appeared on the call to apologize.

Late Sunday, Licht told staff members in a memo that Lemon would return to work and undergo unspecified training. Licht said in the memo, obtained by The Associated Press, that it was important that the network balance accountability with fostering a culture in which people “can own, learn and grow from their mistakes.”

Lemon was switched from his own prime-time show when a revamped “CNN This Morning” was launched in November, one of Licht’s biggest swings since taking control of the network last year.

Between poor ratings and awkwardness between the new anchor team, it hasn’t gone well.

Southern Baptists oust Saddleback Church over woman pastor

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

The Southern Baptist Convention on Tuesday ousted its second-largest congregation — Saddleback Church, the renowned California megachurch founded by pastor and best-selling author Rick Warren — for having a woman pastor.

The vote by the convention's Executive Committee culminates growing tension between the nation's largest Protestant denomination — which officially opposes women as pastors — and a congregation whose story has been one of the biggest church-growth successes of modern times.

The committee cited Saddleback's having "a female teaching pastor functioning in the office of pastor," an allusion to Stacie Wood, wife of the current lead pastor of Saddleback, Andy Wood.

But the controversy began in 2021, when Warren ordained three women as pastors, prompting discussions within the denomination about possibly expelling the megachurch.

Warren retired last year after more than 42 years at Saddleback. He made an emotional speech in June 2022 at the Southern Baptists' annual convention in Anaheim, standing by his ordination of women. He told delegates who debated the issue, "We have to decide if we will treat each other as allies or adversaries."

But the Executive Committee took the vote Tuesday without public discussion after meeting in executive session.

It voted to approve a recommendation from the denomination's Credentials Committee that Saddleback be deemed "not in friendly cooperation with the Convention" — the terminology used for ousting a church. While Southern Baptists' statement of faith officially opposes women as pastors, each congregation is self-governing, so the main enforcement mechanism is to oust it from membership.

The Executive Committee's motion said that Saddleback "has a faith and practice that does not closely identify with the Convention's adopted statement of faith, as demonstrated by the church having a female teaching pastor functioning in the office of pastor."

In a statement late Tuesday, the church didn't indicate whether it planned to exercise its right to appeal the decision at the Southern Baptists' next annual meeting, scheduled for New Orleans in June.

"We love and have always valued our relationship with the SBC and its faithful churches," Saddleback elders said in a statement. "We will engage and respond through the proper channels at the appropriate time in hopes to serve other like-minded Bible believing SBC churches. Meanwhile, we remain focused on following God's leadership to love and serve our church family and the communities around our campuses."

Mike Keahbone, an Executive Committee member and Oklahoma pastor, said an appeal "appears likely."

"This was the heart of the room; to let the messengers (delegates) of the SBC decide," Keahbone tweeted Tuesday.

With its main campus in Lake Forest, south of Los Angeles, Saddleback Church has grown over four to 14 locations in Southern California, with an average weekly attendance of 30,000. There are four international campuses — in Hong Kong, Germany, the Philippines and Argentina.

Wood told The Associated Press last year that the Bible "teaches that men and women were given spiritual gifts by God." His wife has served as teaching pastor for Saddleback.

"The church should be a place where both men and women can exercise those spiritual gifts," Wood said. "My wife has the spiritual gift of teaching and she is really good. People often tell me she's better than me when it comes to preaching, and I'm really glad to hear that."

The Executive Committee also voted to oust five other congregations -- four over the issue of women as pastors and one over the issue of sexual abuse.

When Southern Baptists last updated their official statement of belief — The Baptist Faith and Message — in 2000, they added this clause: "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

The five churches ousted for having women as pastors "have been valued, cooperating churches for many years, and this decision was not made lightly," Committee Chairman Jared Wellman said in a statement.

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"However, we remain committed to upholding the theological convictions of the SBC and maintaining unity among its cooperating churches."

Warren, with a social media following in the millions, has written multiple books, including the widely successful "The Purpose Driven Life." In 2005, Time magazine named Warren one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World," and he delivered the invocation at President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009.

The church grew from a startup by Rick Warren and his wife, Kay Warren. With his charisma and easy, informal preaching style, Warren attracted thousands to the megachurch. Over the past decade, Warren also launched an ambitious plan to expand the church's reach across Southern California as well as globally, a vision his successor has promised to complete.

Warren, in a tweet, said he and Kay would "respond to #SBC in OUR time & way thru direct channels" such as social media and newsletters.

Warren remains listed as founding pastor on the Saddleback website.

The SBC has in recent years authorized the ouster of churches that don't conform to its statement of faith. This includes churches with women pastors, LGBTQ-inclusive polices, support for racism or failure to respond adequately to child sexual abuse, such as employing offenders as pastors.

In some cases, the committee has ousted churches for allegedly failing even to cooperate in answering to such allegations, as reflected in some of the motions approved on Tuesday.

It deemed Freedom Church in Vero Beach, Florida, to be not in friendly cooperation "based on a lack of intent to cooperate in resolving concerns regarding a sexual abuse allegation." The denomination has been roiled by allegations in recent years of sexual abusers remaining in ministry, prompting the convention to vote for stricter policies. A task force focused on the issue this week announced the hiring of a firm to oversee a new database of credibly accused ministers.

Freedom Church's pastor, Richard Demsick, told the AP that the SBC has sent conflicting messages to the church. In a letter to national, state and local Southern Baptist entities, church leaders disputed any allegation of abuse, asked for additional information and said they planned to appeal any ouster.

The Executive Committee ousted New Faith Mission Ministry of Griffin, Georgia, and St. Timothy's Christian Baptist in Baltimore, citing their "lack of intent to cooperate in resolving a question" arising from the churches having women senior pastors.

And it ousted Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and Calvary Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi, both for having female lead pastors, indicating they have a "faith and practice" at odds with the convention's.

The SBC has 13.7 million members, but has seen net declines over more than a decade in members and baptisms, its key metric for spiritual vitality.

Weakened Cyclone Freddy batters Madagascar, killing 4

By LAETITIA BEZAIN Associated Press

ANTANANARIVO, Madagascar (AP) — A weakened Cyclone Freddy which pummeled Madagascar Tuesday night with heavy rains and strong destructive winds, killing four people, is continuing to wreak havoc in the southwest of the Indian Ocean nation.

Freddy battered the western city of Mananjary and left 16,660 people displaced and damaged nearly 5,000 homes in the country, according to the latest provisional assessment by Madagascar's risk and disaster management office. But somewhat weaker winds and better preparation staved off further damage.

The cyclone had waned slightly over land, with the state's meteorological office measuring average winds of 50 kilometers (31 miles) per hour and reduced gusts of 70 kilometers (43 miles) per hour.

The red alerts issued for Madagascar's east coast were lifted Wednesday morning and the southwestern regions of the island have now been placed on "blue alert," indicating a phase of post-cyclone damage assessment, rescue and recovery.

"Recently built utilities, schools, stadium and health centers have been affected including houses by the seafont whose roofs were blown off," said Martin Raveloarimanana, a church minister in Mananjary. "We

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try to repair what can be repaired and to clean up.”

Raveloarimanana said that better preparation and early evacuations limited damage and risk to life. But he added that the region was still recovering from Cyclone Batsirai that pummeled the region in February last year and the new damage has only added to residents’ despair.

Authorities say 64 tons of relief food rations have been made available to the region.

“Bananas and breadfruit trees fell because of the winds,” said Gabriel Ravelomanantsoa, a resident of Antsenavolo, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) southwest of Mananjary. “This is what people eat daily and everything is now destroyed.”

But he added: “Homes were not affected that much as everyone had reinforced their house because we had information in advance.”

Vatovavy region authorities, where Mananjary is located, reported that 12,000 people were displaced. The region’s governor told The Associated Press that officials are “still in the process of taking stock of the damage.”

Freddy, now classified as a “moderate tropical storm,” is projected to leave the island Wednesday evening. It is set to travel across the Mozambican Channel where it will likely regain strength as it barrels towards mainland Africa, with Mozambique in its path, the United Nation’s meteorological center in Reunion estimated. It is due to make landfall in the country on Friday morning.

The U.N. weather agency warned that the cyclone will lash Mozambique as a “strong tropical storm with potentially damaging winds.”

A regional climate center based in Botswana also warned of “heavy to extreme rainfall” over some parts of Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Eswatini and South Africa.

Meanwhile, fears of a new cyclone forming near the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean were raised after Reunion’s cyclone center said it’s monitoring a new tropical depression that “has significant potential to strengthen into a tropical storm by Thursday.”

US to limit asylum to migrants who pass through a 3rd nation

By REBECCA SANTANA and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration said Tuesday that it will generally deny asylum to migrants who show up at the U.S. southern border without first seeking protection in a country they passed through, mirroring an attempt by the Trump administration that never took effect because it was blocked in court.

The measure, while stopping short of a total ban, imposes severe limitations on asylum for any nationality except Mexicans, who don’t have to travel through a third country to reach the U.S.

The measure is almost certain to face legal challenges. President Donald Trump pursued a similar ban in 2019 but a federal appeals court prevented it from taking effect.

The Biden administration rule proposed Tuesday has to first go through a 30-day public comment period before it can be formally adopted. If adopted it would remain in place for two years.

Administration officials expect the rule will take effect when a pandemic-era rule that denies asylum on grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19 ends. That rule, known as Title 42 authority, is set to expire May 11 but has been delayed twice by legal challenges from Republican-led states.

The Homeland Security and Justice Departments argued that surging numbers of migrants left them little choice. They anticipate illegal crossings to climb to between 11,000 and 13,000 a day if no action is taken after Title 42 ends; that’s even higher than the 8,600 daily crossings in mid-December as anticipation spread among migrants and smugglers that Title 42 was about to end. At the last minute the Supreme Court kept it in place.

The proposed rule establishes “a rebuttable presumption of asylum ineligibility” for anyone who passes through another country to reach the U.S. border with Mexico without first seeking protection there, according to a notice in the Federal Register. Exceptions will be made for people with an “acute medical emergency,” “imminent and extreme threat” of violent crimes such as murder, rape or kidnapping, being a victim of human trafficking or “other extremely compelling circumstances.” Children traveling alone will

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also be exempted, according to the rule.

The rule largely calls on prospective migrants to follow legal pathways to apply for asylum such as using the CBP One app, through which prospective migrants can schedule an appointment to apply to appear at a border entry point to apply for asylum. The administration portrayed these efforts as a way to protect migrants from the dangerous journeys as they travel north to the U.S. and allow the U.S. border entry points to manage the migrant flows in a "safe and efficient manner." But critics have said the app has been beset by technical problems and its not clear how many appointments are available every day.

U.S. officials insist the measure proposed Tuesday is different from Trump's, largely because there is room for exemptions and because the Biden administration has made other legal pathways available, particularly humanitarian parole for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans and Ukrainians.

"We are a nation of immigrants, and we are a nation of laws. We are strengthening the availability of legal, orderly pathways for migrants to come to the United States, at the same time proposing new consequences on those who fail to use processes made available to them by the United States and its regional partners," said Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

The rule was first mentioned in early January as part of a wider announcement by the administration to let in 30,000 migrants a month from four countries — Haiti, Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua — provided they apply to come to the U.S. and don't just arrive at the border. In the ensuing weeks, the administration said migrant encounters from those countries plummeted, and they've hailed it as a model for dealing with immigration.

But immigration advocates have criticized attempts to limit asylum applications at the southern border, saying some migrants can't wait in their home country and noting that other countries don't have the same asylum protections as the U.S.

Four Democratic senators — Bob Menendez and Cory Booker of New Jersey, Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico and Alex Padilla of California — said they were "deeply disappointed" the administration was moving forward with the rule and urged it to reconsider.

"We have an obligation to protect vulnerable migrants under domestic and international law and should not leave vulnerable migrants stranded in countries unable to protect them," the senators' statement read.

Anu Joshi of the American Civil Liberties Union, which litigated many of the challenges to Trump's immigration restrictions, sharply criticized the rule, saying it was simply revisiting Trump's asylum ban.

The new rule comes as President Joe Biden is facing a Republican-controlled House determined to make immigration a key issue as they attempt to portray the southern border as out of control.

For asylum seekers traveling north through Central America and Mexico to the U.S. border, Costa Rica and Mexico have the most robust asylum systems. Both countries, however, have been overwhelmed by the surging number of asylum applications in recent years.

Costa Rica, a country of only 5 million residents, trailed only the United States, Germany and Mexico in the number of asylum applications it received in 2021. In December, President Rodrigo Chaves decreed changes to the asylum system, alleging that it was being abused by economic migrants.

Most of those seeking asylum in Costa Rica in recent years are Nicaraguans fleeing repression in that country. In 2012, Costa Rica received barely 900 asylum applications. Last year, the total was around 80,000.

That has created a tremendous backlog and lengthened the process, something that led more Nicaraguans to look north to the United States last year.

Mexico has been facing increased asylum applications for years and last year received 118,478, mostly from Honduras, Cuba, Haiti and Venezuela. Many migrants had used the asylum system to legally cross Mexico while in process and then to try to enter the U.S.

Other countries along the migrant route north have very limited capacity for receiving asylum seekers.

Today in History, FEB 23, siege of the Alamo begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

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Today is Thursday, Feb. 23, the 54th day of 2023. There are 311 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 23, 1954, the first mass inoculation of schoolchildren against polio using the Salk vaccine began in Pittsburgh as some 5,000 students were vaccinated.

On this date:

In 1685, composer George Frideric Handel was born in present-day Germany.

In 1822, Boston was granted a charter to incorporate as a city.

In 1836, the siege of the Alamo began in San Antonio, Texas.

In 1861, President-elect Abraham Lincoln arrived secretly in Washington to take office, following word of a possible assassination plot in Baltimore.

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt signed an agreement with Cuba to lease the area around Guantanamo Bay to the United States.

In 1942, the first shelling of the U.S. mainland during World War II occurred as a Japanese submarine fired on an oil refinery near Santa Barbara, California, causing little damage.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. Marines on Iwo Jima captured Mount Suribachi, where they raised two American flags (the second flag-raising was captured in the iconic Associated Press photograph.)

In 1998, 42 people were killed, some 2,600 homes and businesses damaged or destroyed, by tornadoes in central Florida.

In 2007, a Mississippi grand jury refused to bring any new charges in the 1955 slaying of Emmett Till, the Black teenager who was beaten and shot after being accused of whistling at a white woman, declining to indict the woman, Carolyn Bryant Donham, for manslaughter.

In 2011, in a major policy reversal, the Obama administration said it would no longer defend the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act, a federal law banning recognition of same-sex marriage.

In 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was fatally shot on a residential Georgia street; a white father and son had armed themselves and pursued him after seeing him running through their neighborhood. (Greg and Travis McMichael and neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan were convicted of murder, aggravated assault and other charges and were sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2021, golfer Tiger Woods was seriously injured when his SUV crashed into a median and rolled over several times on a steep road in suburban Los Angeles.

Ten years ago: Some 30 NASCAR fans were injured when rookie Kyle Larson's car was propelled by a crash into the fence at Daytona International Speedway, and large chunks of debris flew into the grandstands. The Ultimate Fighting Championship held its first women's bout as Ronda Rousey beat Liz Carmouche on an armbar, her signature move, with 11 seconds left in the first round of their bantamweight title fight at UFC 157 in Anaheim, California.

Five years ago: Rick Gates, a former senior adviser to Donald Trump's election campaign, pleaded guilty to federal conspiracy and false-statements charges, becoming a cooperating witness in the probe of Trump's campaign and Russia's election interference. Florida Gov. Rick Scott announced plans to put more armed guards in schools and make it harder for young adults and some with mental illness to buy guns. Teachers and staff returned to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, for the first time since the shooting that left 17 people dead. Canada's Olympic men's hockey team failed to reach the final at the Winter Olympics in South Korea, losing to Germany 4-3 in the semifinals.

One year ago: The Kremlin said rebel leaders in eastern Ukraine asked Russia for military assistance to help fend off Ukrainian "aggression" while Ukraine declared a nationwide state of emergency amid growing fears of an all-out invasion by Russian troops. (The invasion would become a reality a day later.) Gary Brooker, the Procol Harum frontman who sang one of the 1960s' most enduring hits, "A Whiter Shade of Pale," died at age 76.

Today's birthdays: Football Hall of Famer Fred Biletnikoff is 80. Author John Sandford is 79. Actor Patricia Richardson is 72. Former NFL player Ed "Too Tall" Jones is 72. Rock musician Brad Whitford (Aerosmith) is 71. Singer Howard Jones is 68. Rock musician Michael Wilton (Queensryche) is 61. Country singer

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Dusty Drake is 59. Actor Kristin Davis is 58. Former tennis player Helena Sukova is 58. Actor Marc Price is 55. TV personality/businessman Daymond John (TV: "Shark Tank") is 54. Actor Niecy Nash is 53. Rock musician Jeff Beres (Sister Hazel) is 52. Country singer Steve Holy is 51. Rock musician Lasse Johansson (The Cardigans) is 50. Film and theater composer Robert Lopez is 48. Actor Kelly Macdonald is 47. Rapper Residente (Calle 13) is 45. Actor Josh Gad is 42. Actor Emily Blunt is 40. Actor Aziz Ansari is 40. Actor Tye White (TV: "Greenleaf") is 37. Actor Dakota Fanning is 29.