

Groton Daily Independent

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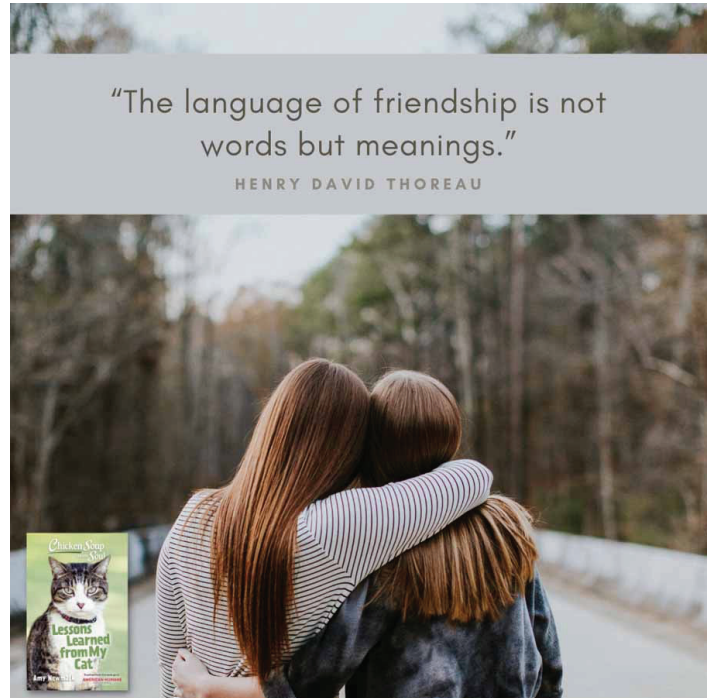
Due to weather there is a schedule change for today's Region 1A Boys Basketball games. Milbank will play Redfield at 5 PM and Groton will play Webster at 6:30.

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Groton Community Calendar Tuesday, Feb. 28

Senior Menu: Roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy, beets, chocolate cake, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: French toast.
School Lunch: Tacos.
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
Region 1A Boys Basketball at Groton.
United Methodist Church: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

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



Wednesday, March 1

Senior Menu: Vegetable soup, ham salad sandwich, fruit, cookie.
School Breakfast: Egg omelets.
School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, carrots.
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm
Groton Chamber Board Meeting, noon, at City Hall
St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m.; League, 6:15 p.m. (Sunday school serves), Worship, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Groton Ash Wednesday Service, 6:30 p.m.; UMYF attend Ash Wednesday Service, 6:30 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

the Northern Ireland trade protocol.

- Authorities are investigating the sudden death of former swimming champion Jamie Cail, who was found unresponsive at her home in St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands.

Some Alaskans are going hungry as they wait months for food stamps that haven't come since the fall despite mailing recertification paperwork for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

- More severe winter weather is headed toward the Oregon and Washington coasts, the National Weather Service said. Large parts of the Greater Lake Tahoe Area and Mono County in California are also under "life-threatening blizzard" through Wednesday.

- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia has temporarily closed airspace over St. Petersburg amid unconfirmed reports that an unidentified object or a drone was spotted. Hungarian low-cost carrier Wizz Air announced that it would suspend all flights to and from Moldova's main airport starting March 14, linked to rising tensions with Russia. President Vladimir Putin's spokesperson claimed that NATO is "de facto" at war with Moscow, citing the alliance's deepening support for Ukraine.

- Donald Trump announced plans to double down on his administration's trade policies under an agenda of "patriotic protectionism" that includes universal tariffs and a "sweeping" overhaul of tax policy if re-elected in 2024.

- Fox Corp. executive chairman Rupert Murdoch revealed that Lou Dobbs, Maria Bartiromo, Jeanine Pirro, and Sean Hannity were among hosts who endorsed the "false notion" that the 2020 election was stolen.

- U.K. Prime Minister is in Belfast today to promote the new post-Brexit deal struck with the European Union over

GDILIVE.COM

REGION 1A BOYS' BASKETBALL AT GROTON

Groton Area vs. Webster Area

Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2023, 6:30 p.m.

Game sponsored by

Bahr Spray Foam
Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Ag Partners
Groton American Legion
Groton Dairy Queen
Groton Chiropractic Clinic
Groton Ford
Harry Implement
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Lori's Pharmacy
Love to Travel
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Weber Landscaping
Weismantel Insurance Agency



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

GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GHS Girls Basketball - Region 1A

Milbank edges Groton Area in overtime

It was a defensive and intense game from start to finish for the second round of the Region 1A Girls Basketball Tournament. Milbank got the upper hand in overtime for the 40-37 win.

Groton Area started out with a 7-0 lead, but free throws would bring the Bulldogs back into the game and it was 10-6 after the first quarter. The second quarter was a drought for both teams with only one field goal being made by each team. Both teams were one of 10 shooting in the second quarter and Groton Area had a 12-8 lead at half time.

Milbank would have a seven point run in the third quarter to take an 18-15 lead, but the Tigers rallied and tied the game at 18 going into the fourth quarter.

The Bulldogs would maintain the lead throughout the fourth quarter, leading at one point by six, 30-24, with 1:25 left. Groton Area would rally and Brooke Gengerke made a shot under the basket with 2.2 seconds left to tie the game at 30. Milbank would inbound the ball the distance of the court and got off a three-point shot that failed to go in at the buzzer.

The lead changed hand twice in the overtime and the game was tied three times, the last at 37 with 36 seconds left. Milbank had a 38-37 lead with 36 seconds left. Ella Sandvig missed two free throws for Milbank with 14 seconds left, but Maurina Street would get the rebound from the second missed free throw to put it back up and in to give Milbank a three-point edge. Groton Area would turn the ball over in the closing seconds and Milbank would secure the win.

Jaedyn Penning, who fouled out with 3:26 left in overtime, led the Tigers with 10 points, four rebounds, one assist and one steal. Sydney Leicht had nine points, one assist and one steal. Brooke Gengerke had six points, six rebounds and two assists. Jerica Locke had six points two rebounds, four assists and five steals. Kennedy Hansen had four points, one rebound, one assist and one steal. Brooklyn Hansen had one point and one steal. Faith Traphagen had one point, four rebounds and one steal. Aspen Johnson had seven rebounds and three steals.

Groton Area made nine of 31 two-pointers for 29 percent, three of 19 three-pointers for 16 percent, 10 of 14 free throws for 31 percent, had 24 rebounds, 13 turnovers, nine assists, 13 steals and 21 fouls.

Maurina Street led Milbank with 12 points followed by Tyra Berry with 10, Isabella Anderson eight, Ella Sandvig four and adding two points each were Siera Wenzl and Claire Snaza.

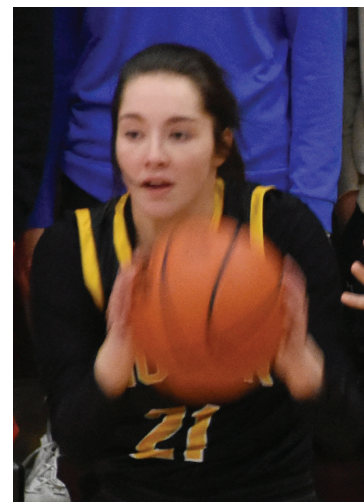
Milbank made nine of 33 field goals for 27 percent, 15 of 21 free throws for 71 percent, had 18 turnovers and 16 team fouls.

Groton Area finishes its season with a 13-9 record. Milbank advances to the SoDak16 with a 14-7 record.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bahr



Seniors Brooke Gengerke and Gracie Traphagen. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Senior Aspen Johnson. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Jaedyn Penning. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Faith Traphagen. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Spray Foam, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton American Legion, Groton Ford, Harry Implement, John Sieh Agency, Locke Electric, Lori's Pharmacy, Love to Travel, Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc., S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank, Spanier Harvesting & Trucking, Weber Landscaping, Weismantel Insurance Agency. Thanks to Shane Clark for doing the play-by-play and for Laura Clark for running the camera.

- Paul Kosel



Jerica Locke. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Sydney Leicht. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Death Notice: Jackie Wagner

Jacqueline "Jackie" Wagner, 89, of Groton passed away February 27, 2023 at Avantara Groton. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Noem signed the following 12 bills into law:

SB 31 creates an off-road vehicle decal for non-residents visiting the state;
SB 34 authorizes the sale of real property in Lake County by the Board of Regents;
SB 61 revises driver's license suspensions for restricted permit holders over the age of sixteen;
SB 77 reinstates the restricted real estate broker's license for auctioneers and revises real estate licensing;
SB 83 revises provisions regarding water development districts;
SB 84 authorizes compensation for water project district directors;
SB 88 amends a provision allowing municipalities to jointly license and regulate intercity services;
SB 92 requires that certain operations obtain their own general or individual water pollution permits;
SB 93 provides an increased appropriation for the construction costs of an athletics event center at Dakota State University;
SB 95, amends provisions regarding trusts;
SB 162 revises public meeting requirements; and,
HB 1054 provides a stipend for the erection of a private headstone for a deceased veteran.

Governor Noem has signed 67 bills into law this legislative session.

Flags at Half-Staff in Honor of Former U.S. Senator James Abourezk

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem ordered that flags be flown at half-staff at statewide from sunrise until sunset on Friday, March 3rd, 2023, in honor of former U.S. Senator James Abourezk. He served in the United States Senate from 1973-1979 and was the first Arab American Senator in American history.

Senator Abourezk was born in Wood, South Dakota and grew up on the Rosebud Indian Reservation. He went on to serve in the U.S. Navy before and during the Korean War. Following his military service, Senator Abourezk earned a degree in civil engineering from the South Dakota School of Mines and a J.D. from the University of South Dakota School of Law. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1971-1973 before he was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he served as the first chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

"Senator Abourezk was a trailblazer in South Dakota and for our nation. His passion for the state showed through his hard work throughout his life. He will be greatly missed, and we are praying for peace and comfort for his family and those who loved him," said Governor Noem.

A private family service will take place, and Senator Abourezk will be buried at Black Hills National Cemetery on Friday.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Panel backs task force to study foster care for Native American children

Two-year investigation meant to address stark racial disparities

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 27, 2023 5:55 PM

PIERRE – A House panel on Monday endorsed a two-year task force to study Native American overrepresentation in South Dakota’s foster care system.

Senate Bill 191 cleared the full Senate last week. It’s the only bill related to Native children in foster care to have survived past a committee hearing so far this session.

The Indian Child Welfare Task Force created through SB 191 would be a 17-member group of stakeholders. It would include lawmakers and representatives from the state’s nine tribes and officials with the state Department of Social Services. Its work would last more than twice as long as typical legislative interim committees, which are composed of lawmakers, meet after the session’s end in March and submit final reports and recommended legislation before December.

The bill’s sponsor, Sen. Red Dawn Foster, D-Pine Ridge, said understanding the complexities of the state’s foster care system and the interplay of state agencies and tribal governments will require input from more people and take more time than a typical summer study.

It’s been nearly two decades since the state took a comprehensive look at the foster care system and its impact on Native children, and Foster said the problems persist.

More than 60% of children removed from their homes by the DSS are Native American, Foster told the committee. Native Americans are about 10% of the state population.

Some of those children grow up to be overrepresented in the state’s prison system. Others remain scarred by removal from their homes and struggle with mental illness, drug and gambling addiction, and other problems at higher rates than other children.

“Something is not working,” Foster told the House Judiciary Committee on Monday. “This task force will work to figure out what that is.”

Foster’s bill fared better than two other legislative attempts to address the disparity more directly.

The two failed bills, respectively, would have prioritized Native families in the foster care placement of Indian children in the state and increased the threshold for the removal of children from a home by the DSS.

Those bills were sponsored by Rep. Peri Pourier, D-Rapid City. Like Foster, Pourier is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. Pourier, Foster and their supporters have pointed out that South Dakota’s reservations are in some of the nation’s poorest counties.

“All too often, in the past and recently, we’ve seen where poverty is the basis for a case to remove children,” Peter Lengkeek, the chairman of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, told the Judiciary Committee on Monday.

The bill to create the task force earned unanimous but somewhat tepid support from the panel.

Committee members questioned the scope of the study, what some saw as unfair assumptions about DSS decision-making and the length of time involved. Rep. Tyler Tordsen, R-Sioux Falls, voted in favor, but had pointed questions about the task force’s focus.

Housing, career opportunities, drug addiction and other factors play into troubles on the reservation, he said. Those topics were all mentioned in testimony from supporters.

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"It seems like this is broader than the foster care system," said Tordsen, an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe. "Can you help us understand the scope of this?"

Rep. Rebecca Reimer, R-Chamberlain, voiced similar concerns about the scope of work, as well as the notion that the DSS targets the poor.

"I can't believe we would remove children just for poverty," Reimer said.

The bill has six areas of study, including to review the results of the 2004 task force, how to boost the recruitment of Native American foster families and how to overcome barriers to family reunification. Reimer suggested narrowing the list to improve the task force's chances at success.

Rep. Tamara St. John, R-Sisseton, said the tribes need to be ready to address issues on their own land as they work with the state.

"The lack of Native American foster families is a big issue," said St. John, an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Tribe who serves as tribal archivist.

Foster told lawmakers that the group would zero in on the foster care system, only addressing any root causes on the reservations as they emerge in discussion. The task force would collaborate with the DSS, she said, as well as child protection agencies from the state's tribal governments.

The purpose is not to lay blame at the state's feet, she said, but to address the needs of and impacts to the approximately 1,400 children removed from Native American homes every year.

"When you're looking at thousands of children, that's a crisis," Foster said.

Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, voted in favor after peppering Foster with questions on the DSS's motivations and the task force's focus on factors both internal and external to reservations.

The support of multiple tribal governments and letters from the Great Plains Tribal Chairmen's Association urging lawmakers to take up the issue of foster care helped push Odenbach to a "yes" vote on Foster's bill.

Odenbach voted against Pourier's bills.

"We have to give some weight to them when they keep coming back to us with their concerns," Odenbach said.

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

Volunteer fire departments could get millions in state aid

\$5 million in grants meant to plug COVID-related budget hole

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 27, 2023 5:40 PM

PIERRE — Most of South Dakota's land area is protected by firefighters who don't get paid for their work. Most of the fire departments they work for aren't government entities.

That means the fundraising reality of the state's largely volunteer fire force is one of charity drives, fill-the-boot dances, chili feeds and direct mail solicitation.

Many of those efforts were stymied for about two years because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A bill meant to help fill that funding gap with \$5 million in state grant funding for jackets, boots, helmets and other gear is one step away from Gov. Kristi Noem's desk.

House Bill 1127 would allocate the money to the South Dakota Firefighters Association, which represents 279 of the 334 fire departments in the state and would decide how to divvy up the money. Only five departments – in Sioux Falls, Rapid City, Aberdeen, Watertown and Huron – employ paid professionals. The remainder are volunteer.

Rep. Kevin Jensen, R-Canton, brought HB 1127 in part because of his son's experience as a volunteer firefighter in Wyoming. The department didn't have enough gear for him to get started with.

"His mom and I actually had to buy him boots because he didn't have boots that fit him," Jensen told the Senate Appropriations Committee on Monday.

In ensuing conversations with volunteer fire leaders in South Dakota, Jensen learned about the fundraising troubles wrought by COVID. It costs between \$8,000 and \$13,000 to outfit a firefighter, Jensen said,

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and the donors in the small towns and counties served by volunteers were stretched thin.

"You can only hold so many pancake feeds," Jensen said.

Steve Willard is the director of Joint Fire Council, which represents volunteer and professional firefighters across the state. Willard told the committee that around 30% of volunteer funding comes from public events.

"For '20 and '21, they didn't have many of those," Willard said.

Jensen and Willard said as many as half of the state's departments are now working with personal protective equipment that's past its useful life, and that one-time grant funding, disbursed over four years, would help alleviate the financial pressure.

Brandy Miesner of the Bureau of Finance and Management opposed the measure. She told lawmakers that the state Department of Public Safety already has \$330,000 in annual grant funding for volunteer departments and that handing the money to the fire association without more specific guidance on where to send it could be a concern for auditors.

"There's no guarantee that the departments that have the greatest needs would be the ones that get the funding," Miesner said.

Committee members each spoke to the importance of the volunteer fire service, but they also had questions. Sen. David Johnson, R-Rapid City, is the chair of a volunteer fire board. He ultimately voted for the grant funding, but his concerns echoed those of Miesner.

"I'm leery of this," Johnson said. "What I'm afraid of is that the grant money is going to be handed out based on who was at the bowling alley last night."

Sen. Jim Bolin, R-Canton, wondered aloud if fire departments might return to the Legislature to ask for more money every five or 10 years.

Sen. John Wiik, R-Big Stone City, announced early in committee discussion that he wouldn't support the idea. Volunteer departments have managed for decades without state government aid, he said, citing his father's work for the Big Stone department.

"I think that there are better uses of general fund dollars than this, because firefighters have figured it out," Wiik said.

Jensen and Willard both stressed that the funding is only meant to address COVID-related funding shortfalls. Willard said the four-year time frame for rulemaking and grant disbursement would serve to ensure that the funding goes where it's most needed.

Another volunteer firefighter on the committee, Dean Wink, R-Howes, said the bill speaks to an important issue for the state's first responders.

"At the very least, we should equip them to protect themselves when they get into a sticky situation so they have what they need," Wink said.

The bill passed 5-3. The full House signed off on the bill unanimously on Feb. 22. It now moves to the full Senate.

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.

\$104 million tax cut plan amended to end in two years

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 27, 2023 2:25 PM

The last major tax cut bill still alive in the Legislature would now only last two years, based on an amendment that the Senate Taxation Committee passed Monday morning.

House Bill 1137 plans to reduce South Dakota's state sales and use tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%, about a \$104 million tax break. The cut would also partially fulfill plans from 2016 when legislators raised the state tax rate by a half-percentage point in hopes of boosting teacher pay, with an intent to reduce the tax rate as collections from online sellers increased.

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The new amendment adds a sunset date of June 30, 2025, for the tax cut, which would return the tax rate to 4.5% at that time unless legislators act to extend it.

The amendment serves as a precaution in case of a recession or if South Dakota voters pass an initiated measure that would eliminate the state sales tax on groceries. The amendment would also force future legislators to re-evaluate if the tax cut is feasible, said Sen. Jim Stalzer, R-Sioux Falls and Senate Taxation chair. Stalzer introduced the amendment.

Gov. Kristi Noem testified to the House Committee on Appropriations last week in support of her own grocery tax repeal bill, which died in the committee. She warned legislators that they could be in a bind two years down the road if they pass a general tax reduction bill and then voters repeal sales taxes on food.

"If you pick a different tax cut to do this year, you'll be back here in two years to figure out how to do another \$102 million tax cut," Noem said last week.

Stalzer said adding a sunset amendment addresses some legislators' concerns about "not being able to afford both" tax cuts down the road.

"This would give some people a little more confidence going forward," Stalzer said. "That's why I was asked to entertain this by leadership."

The bill now goes to the full 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.

Brand Board power struggle tabled as work group arises

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 27, 2023 1:37 PM

Proponents and opponents of legislation to change the way South Dakota Brand Board members are selected have agreed to table the bill and instead put together a work group to address the problems the bill aimed to resolve.

Brands are the symbols on hot irons used for marking livestock and identifying ownership. The board is responsible for registering and regulating livestock brands in South Dakota, and ensuring new brands do not conflict with existing registered brands in the state.

The bill would have shifted the power of appointing South Dakota Brand Board members from the governor to a direct election by brand owners.

The bill comes as some ranchers say they're waiting more than six months to get a livestock brand registered with the state board, while the wait is about a week in neighboring North Dakota and Nebraska. And multiple South Dakota ranchers testified in an earlier hearing about being mistreated by the current Brand Board, often during the brand inspection process.

The bill's prime sponsor, Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, said if the board and work group don't have solutions before the next legislative session in January 2024, she'll bring more legislation. This year's session ends March 9, except for a day to consider vetoes on March 27.

"I will bring a bill, and I will prevail," May said during public testimony at the Capitol in Pierre.

The work group's membership will potentially include some legislators and representatives of the South Dakota Brand Board, the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association, and the South Dakota Livestock Marketing Association.

"We believe these four entities are particularly well-suited to work through these issues," said Jeremiah Murphy, a lobbyist for the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association. "Let us go off and see what good we can do for the Brand Board."

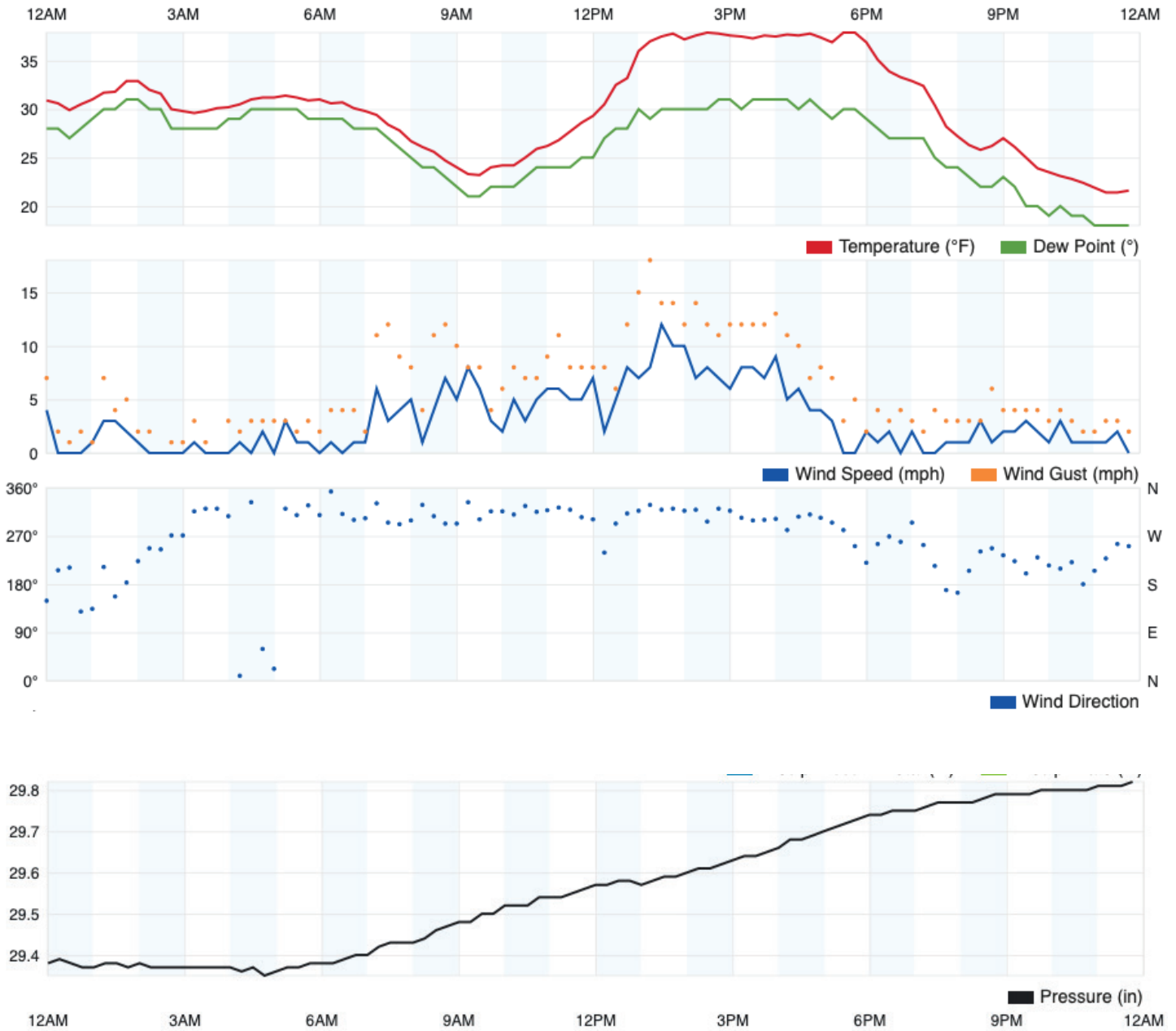
Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources Secretary Hunter Roberts testified in favor of the motion to table the bill and said the department "looks forward to working through this process this summer" with the work group.

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.

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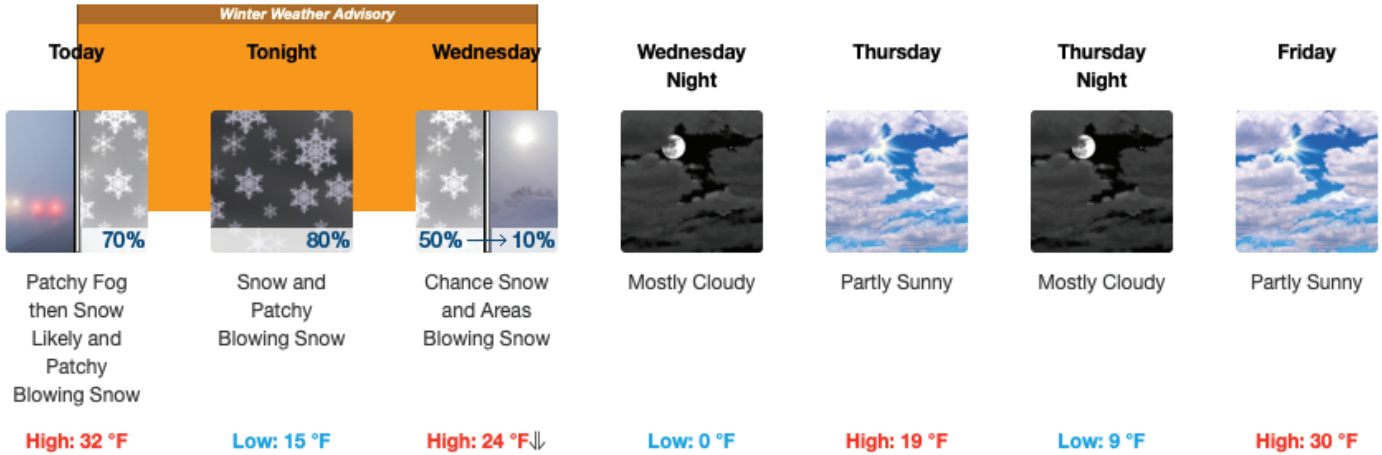
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Compact System Today-Wednesday

February 28, 2023
3:38 AM

Key Points

- Compact system crosses west to east
- Potential moderate to heavy band of snowfall along the North and South Dakota border
- Portions of central and north central SD may see snow mixed with rain today into early this evening

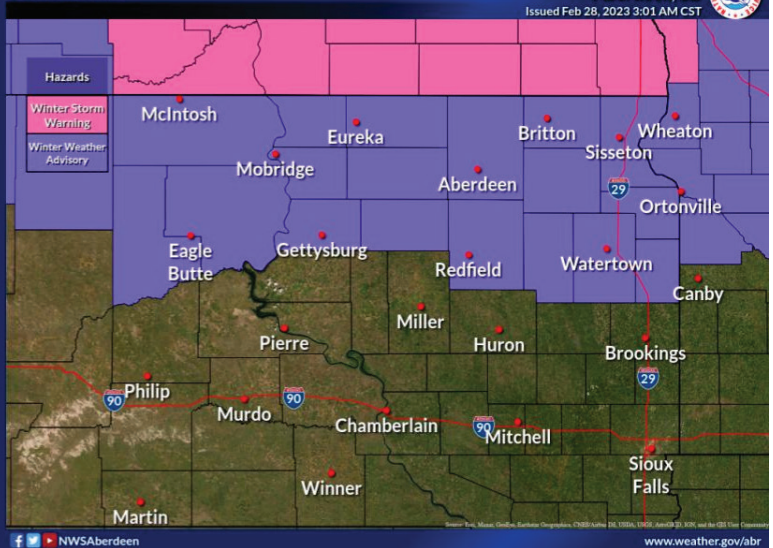
Uncertainty

- Minor shifts north/south of track = major changes to snowfall location

Potential Impacts

- Locally impactful storm system - plowable snow & hazardous travel potential

Headlines



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A storm system will bring the potential for moderate to heavy snowfall across the North Dakota/South Dakota border this evening into Wednesday morning.

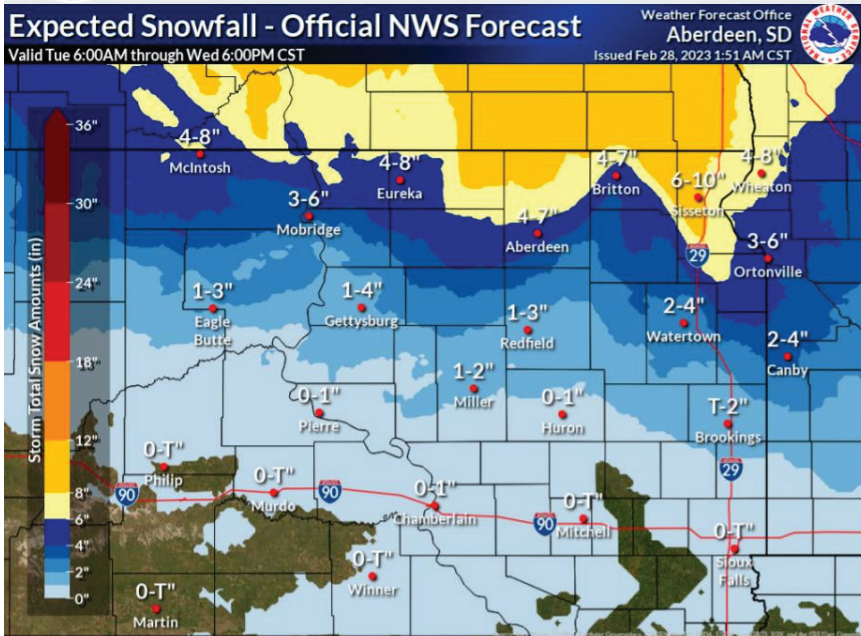
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Total Snow Amounts & Snow Timing

February 28, 2023
3:38 AM



	Tue			Wed		
	Tue 6AM	Tue 12PM	Tue 6PM	Wed 12AM	Wed 6AM	Wed 12PM
Aberdeen	1-2"	2-3"	1-2"	<1"		
Watertown	<1"	1-2"	<1"	T		
Britton	1-2"	1-2"	1-2"	<1"		
Milbank	<1"	2-3"	1-2"	1-2"	T	
Redfield	<1"	<1"	T	<1"		
Pierre	T			T		
Eagle Butte	<1"	T	T	<1"		
Kennebec	T					
Gettysburg	<1"	T	<1"	<1"		
Sisseton	<1"	3-4"	2-3"	1-2"	T	
Mobridge	T	<1"	1-2"	1-2"	T	
Wheaton	T	2-3"	2-3"	<1"	T	

Last updated: 02/28/23 at 02:10 AM CST



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Highest snowfall amounts will lie along the ND/SD boarder with most of the snow occurring this evening into Wednesday morning



Gusty Winds - Tonight into Wednesday

February 28, 2023
3:38 AM

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	2/28 Tue						3/1 Wed						3/2 Thu			
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	Maximum
Aberdeen	6	12	22	25	32	32	31	37	41	41	35	26	21	16	14	41
Britton	6	7	18	26	41	41	41	41	43	43	33	26	20	16	10	43
Eagle Butte	30	31	30	29	31	28	31	30	28	24	20	16	14	14	14	31
Eureka	12	21	31	33	39	40	43	41	33	32	28	18	13	12	9	43
Gettysburg	23	31	33	36	35	31	25	28	29	25	23	18	15	14	14	36
Kennebec	22	29	32	31	32	41	46	45	40	29	21	17	16	16	14	46
McIntosh	15	23	28	28	31	33	33	29	26	25	21	14	12	10	9	33
Milbank	8	9	14	17	24	29	28	22	26	29	29	25	22	20	15	29
Miller	10	26	30	29	31	30	33	37	32	29	23	17	17	14	14	37
Mobridge	16	25	28	31	33	33	33	26	28	25	22	17	14	10	9	33
Murdo	25	32	33	26	40	49	49	44	37	22	17	15	15	15	14	49
Pierre	21	25	31	30	32	38	40	35	28	21	16	15	14	14	10	40
Redfield	8	21	29	29	32	35	24	29	33	35	30	22	20	15	14	35
Sisseton	8	8	12	16	25	28	29	30	30	32	29	25	21	18	14	32
Watertown	5	12	22	25	30	31	28	22	28	30	29	25	21	14	14	31
Webster	9	14	24	31	39	39	38	33	38	39	35	28	21	16	13	39
Wheaton	8	7	12	14	24	29	32	31	30	30	26	23	20	16	13	32

*Table values in mph

Don't see your city? Check out weather.gov/forecastpoints



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

- The combination of falling snow and breezy winds will result in blowing and drifting snow this evening into Wednesday morning
- Visibility may dip to one quarter mile at times, especially in open, rural areas.

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Winter Weather Advisory

URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE

National Weather Service Aberdeen SD

225 AM CST Tue Feb 28 2023

Traverse-Brown-Marshall-Roberts-
Including the cities of Wheaton, Aberdeen, Britton, and Sisseton
225 AM CST Tue Feb 28 2023

...WINTER WEATHER ADVISORY REMAINS IN EFFECT FROM NOON TODAY TO 3 PM CST WEDNESDAY...

* WHAT...Snow and blowing snow expected. Total snow accumulations of 4 to 7 inches with locally higher amounts up to 9 inches possible. Winds gusting as high as 45 mph.

* WHERE...In Minnesota, Traverse County. In South Dakota, Brown, Marshall and Roberts Counties.

* WHEN...From noon today to 3 PM CST Wednesday.

* IMPACTS...Travel could be very difficult. Blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute.

* ADDITIONAL DETAILS...Heaviest snow will occur Tuesday evening through early Wednesday morning north of Hwy 12, especially right along the border of North and South Dakota where banding is most likely.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Slow down and use caution while traveling.

In Minnesota, the latest road conditions can be obtained at 511mn.org, or by calling 5 1 1. In South Dakota, the latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.

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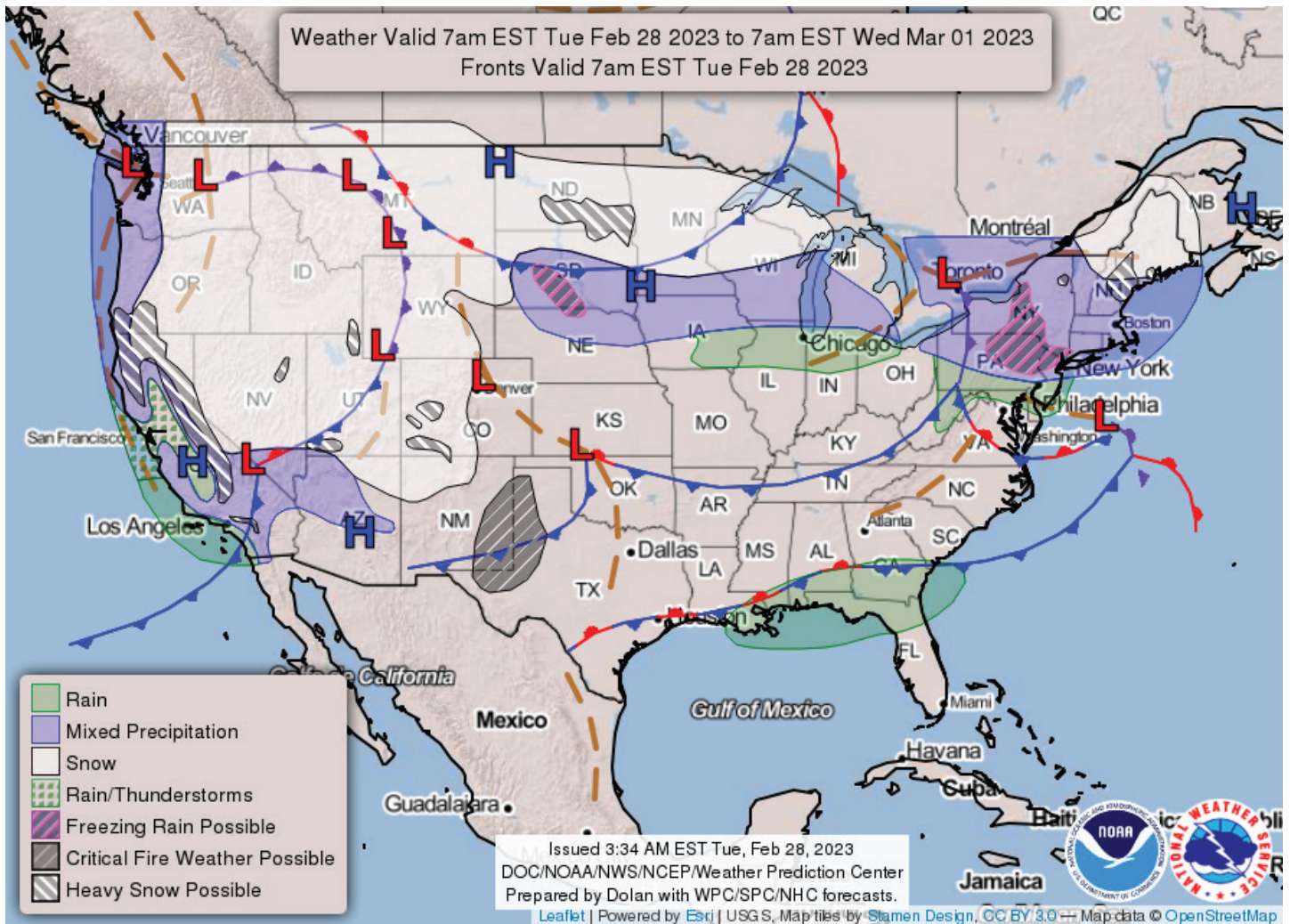
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 37.9 °F at 5:30 PM
Low Temp: 21.4 °F at 11:30 PM
Wind: 18 mph at 1:15 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 08 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1934
Record Low: -27 in 1962
Average High: 33
Average Low: 12
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.62
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.17
Precip Year to Date: 1.58
Sunset Tonight: 6:19:05 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:08:56 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 28, 2007: Another late February low-pressure system crossed the central plains and spread heavy snow 6 to 11 inches across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. As a result, many schools and college classes were, canceled, and many events were postponed. In addition, road conditions became deplorable, with some accidents occurring along with ditched vehicles. The snow continued into the first day of March and ended in the morning. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Aberdeen, 7 inches at Wilmot and Artichoke Lake, 8 inches at Conde, Watertown, Milbank, 9 inches at Browns Valley and Wheaton, and 11 inches at Clark. This heavy snow event was followed by more snowfall and blizzard conditions that developed across the area during the afternoon and evening of March 01.

1846: William S. Forrest, in "Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity" in 1853, recorded the Great Gust of 1846. The Great Gust was a severe coastal storm that produced 5 feet waves in Norfolk.

1900: A massive storm produced record snow from Kansas to northwest Ohio and southern Michigan from February 27 to March 01. The observation at the University of Kansas in Lawrence reported 15 inches of snow on the 27th was "phenomenal; only one heavier snowfall has been recorded for any month, a depth of 16 inches on February 11th and 12th, 1894." (CD). The Coop near Wamego, KS, in the northeast part of Kansas, a record-breaking 24 inches fell in just 12 hours! Other snowfall amounts in Kansas include 19.0" in Abilene, 18.7" in Topeka, 18.0" in McPherson, and 18.0" in Ellinwood. Topeka saw 17.3" on February 27, the most recorded in 24 hours.

In Missouri, heavy snow fell over a considerable portion of the state on the 27th and 28th. From Bates, Cass, Jackson, and Platte counties in the west, to St. Charles, Lincoln, Pike, Ralls, Marion, Lewis, and Clark counties to the east, snowfall ranged from 10 to over 20 inches. The snow drifted severely in many places, and where the fall of snow exceeded 10 inches, railroads were blocked, and county roads rendered impassable for several days. A Coop in Darksville, in northern Randolph County, reported drifts from 6 to 8 feet deep in many places. Houstonia Pettis County's drifts were the worst for more than 30 years. Snowfall amounts in Missouri include 22" in Miami, 20" in Richmond, 13.9" in Columbia, and 13" in Kansas City and Jefferson City.

The storm probably gave central and northern parts of Illinois some of the highest snowfall totals since 1830-1831. (CD) The Coop in Astoria measured an astonishing 37.8 inches with this storm! Coatsburg saw 26 inches. Other snowfall amounts include 21" near Normal, 17.5" in Springfield, and 13" near Jacksonville.

Heavy snow, freezing rain, and sleet occurred in Indiana from February 28 to March 01. In South Bend, 16" of snow fell, prompting street-car employees to work all night to keep the tracks open. As a result, railroad traffic was delayed on all lines. Fairmount and Greensburg reported ice and sleet covered the ground on the 28th. Marion, in Grant County, observed the heaviest sleet storm in many years. Some snowfall amounts include 21" at Valparaiso Waterworks, 18" in Syracuse, Angola, and Fort Wayne, and 16" in South Bend and Huntington.

Northwestern Ohio and southern Michigan saw heavy snowfall from February 27 to March 01. The Coop in Wauseon Water Plant recorded 20.5" of snow. Toledo received 20.2 inches. Grape, Michigan, west-northwest of Monroe, said the heavy snow made all roads impassable. Mail could not be delivered from Grape to Monroe due to badly drifted snow. Some snowfall amounts from southern Michigan include 18" in Hillsdale, Grape, and Somerset, 14" in Detroit, 13" in Lansing, and 12" in Kalamazoo.

1952: A powerful Nor'easter hit Cape Cod with winds of 70-80 mph and snowfall amounts of 12-20 inches. These conditions created 12 feet drifts.

1959: In early December 1958, temperatures fell below freezing and remained there until late February. Over 49 inches of snow fell in that time, with very little in the way of melting. The snow absorbed some rain in February and added to the weight on the roof of the Listowel Arena in Ontario, Canada. As a result, the roof collapsed on February 28, 1959, during a hockey game. Seven young players, a referee, and a recreation director (Reginald Kenneth McLeod) were killed in the tragic collapse.

2018: A waterspout was seen off the coast of Brixham, in southwestern England.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

GREED

Years ago there was a pretzel stand in front of a building in New York. A generous businessman wanted to help the owner grow his business and eventually become successful. Each day he would put a quarter on the counter and walk away without taking a pretzel.

One day as he was leaving his quarter, the owner said, "Sir "

Stopping quickly, he said, "I presume that you are going to ask me why I never take the pretzels?"

"No," she said rather haughtily. "I just wanted to tell you that the price of the pretzels is now fifty cents."

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he warned them to "Put to death evil desires and greed which leads to idolatry and most other sins." He then made an astonishing suggestion to accomplish this: "consider yourselves as though you are dead." He suggests that we make a conscious effort every day to identify and banish any greedy desire as soon as we sense it growing in our minds, extinguish it and not allow it to grow which will lead to our destruction.

Everyday our minds are stimulated by ideas, thoughts, and suggestions that imply, "If only you had this, you would be satisfied or if you achieve this goal you will be successful and therefore happy." Not so! "Things" cannot fill the empty space in our hearts because it has been reserved for God Himself. Only Christ, Who stands at the door to our hearts, gently knocking and patiently waiting to come in, can remove the loneliness we feel without His presence.

Prayer: Lord, give us a clear vision of the peace and satisfaction that can be ours with You in our hearts. Convict us of any desire to put "things" in Your "space." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5



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:
02.24.23

2 22 49 65 67 7

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$145,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 24 Mins 36
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.23

12 17 41 43 51 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$38,510,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 24
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.23

2 3 17 38 40 8

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 54 Mins 36
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.23

11 14 19 25 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$68,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 24
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.23

8 27 33 34 44 5

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 23
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.23

16 28 49 51 55 23

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$143,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 23
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Oelrichs 48, Edgemont 45

Pierre 84, Sioux Falls Jefferson 73

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 61, Aberdeen Central 57

Sturgis Brown 61, Douglas 35

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A Region 2=

Elkton-Lake Benton 59, Flandreau 54

Class A Region 5=

Bon Homme 71, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 59

Class B Region 1=

Britton-Hecla 44, Wilmot 32

Class B Region 2=

Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 54, Arlington 33

Class B Region 3=

Mitchell Christian 79, Sioux Falls Lutheran 51

Class B Region 4=

Gayville-Volin High School 56, Menno 53

Class B Region 5=

Avon 54, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 48, OT

Class B Region 6=

Potter County 60, Sunshine Bible Academy 32

Class B Region 8=

Bison 74, McIntosh 38

Newell 56, Takini 45

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Pierre 65, Sioux Falls Jefferson 58

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 53, Aberdeen Central 46

Sturgis Brown 55, Douglas 44

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A Region 1=

Milbank 40, Groton Area 37

Sisseton 67, Aberdeen Roncalli 56

Class A Region 2=

Flandreau 36, Florence 25

Hamlin 58, Sioux Valley 32

Class B Region 1=

Leola/Frederick 46, Northwestern 33

Warner 76, Hitchcock-Tulare 44

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

China says TikTok ban reflects US insecurities

BEIJING (AP) — U.S. government bans on Chinese-owned video sharing app TikTok reveal Washington's own insecurities and are an abuse of state power, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said Tuesday.

The U.S. government "has been overstretching the concept of national security and abusing state power to suppress other countries' companies," Mao Ning said at a daily briefing. "How unsure of itself can the U.S., the world's top superpower, be to fear a favorite young person's favorite app to such a degree?"

The White House is giving all federal agencies, in guidance issued Monday, 30 days to wipe TikTok off all government devices. The White House already did not allow TikTok on its devices.

TikTok is used by two-thirds of American teens, but there's concern in Washington that China could use its legal and regulatory powers to obtain private user data or to try to push misinformation or narratives favoring China.

Congress and more than half of U.S. states have so-far banned TikTok from government-issued mobile devices.

Some have also moved to apply the ban to any app or website owned by ByteDance Ltd., the private Chinese company owning TikTok that moved its headquarters to Singapore in 2020.

China has long blocked a long list of foreign social media platforms and messaging apps, including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Washington and Beijing are at odds over myriad issues including trade, computer chips and other technology, national security and Taiwan, along with the discovery of a suspected Chinese spy balloon over the U.S. and its shooting down earlier this month.

On Monday, Canada announced it was joining the U.S. in banning TikTok from all government-issued mobile devices.

"I suspect that as government takes the significant step of telling all federal employees that they can no longer use TikTok on their work phones many Canadians from business to private individuals will reflect on the security of their own data and perhaps make choices," Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters after the announcement.

Canadian Treasury Board President Mona Fortier said the Chief Information Officer of Canada had determined that TikTok "presents an unacceptable level of risk to privacy and security."

"On a mobile device, TikTok's data collection methods provide considerable access to the contents of the phone," Fortier said.

The app will be removed from Canadian government issued phones on Tuesday.

The European Union's executive branch said last week it has temporarily banned TikTok from phones used by employees as a cybersecurity measure.

TikTok has questioned the bans, saying it has not been given an opportunity to answer questions and governments were cutting themselves off from a platform beloved by millions.

Police look for evidence in slain Hong Kong model's case

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong police began searching a landfill Tuesday for evidence related to the grisly killing of model Abby Choi, whose dismembered body parts were found in a refrigerator and pots.

Ex-husband Alex Kwong, his father Kwong Kau and his brother Anthony Kwong were charged with murder after police found her remains in a house rented by Kwong Kau in a suburban part of Hong Kong near the border with mainland China. Alex Kwong's mother, Jenny Li, faces one count of perverting the course of justice. All four were detained without bail.

They have not yet entered their pleas, and it does not appear that their lawyers have commented on the case to the media. The hearing was adjourned until May.

On Tuesday morning, more than 100 officers wearing protective gear went to North East New Territories Landfill in Ta Kwu Ling, about a 15-minute drive from mainland China, to search for the missing body parts with excavators and shovels. Police had said earlier they were still looking for her hands and torso.

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"The suspects threw away several bags of important evidence in the morning of Feb. 22. They may be some human body parts or they could be the clothes and the phone of the victim, or even the weapons," Superintendent Alan Chung told reporters.

Chung said they could not find anything substantial yet, other than bones, which police could not ascertain if they belonged to a human or animals.

Choi's family, dressed in black, gathered near the house where her body parts were found to pay respects. They earlier visited a mortuary to identify her. Some mourners were emotional but the family did not appear to have responded to reporters' questions.

Alex Kwong appeared in another court Tuesday for a previous theft case, where he jumped bail.

Another woman who had been arrested for allegedly assisting other suspects in the case was released on bail pending further investigation, police said. She was believed to have been in an affair with the ex-husband's father, the force said earlier.

Choi, who had more than 100,000 followers on Instagram, disappeared Feb. 21, according to a report filed later with the Hong Kong Police. Her last post was Feb. 19, featuring a photo shoot she had done with fashion magazine L'Officiel Monaco.

Choi had financial disputes involving tens of millions of Hong Kong dollars (millions of dollars) with her ex-husband and his family, police said, adding that "some people" were unhappy with how Choi handled her finances.

The gruesome killing has transfixed many in Hong Kong and across the border in mainland China, since the semiautonomous southern Chinese city has a very low level of violent crime.

Choi's friend Bernard Cheng earlier said he initially thought she had been kidnapped.

"I haven't imagined a person who's so good, so full of love, so innocent, a person who doesn't do anything bad will be killed like this," he said. "My heart is still heavy. I can't sleep well."

Cheng said Choi had four children, aged between 3 and 10. Alex Kwong, 28, was the father of the older two, who are being taken care of by Choi's mother. Choi had remarried to Chris Tam, father of the younger children, who are staying with his family.

Choi had good relationships with her family, including her in-laws, Cheng said, and would travel with the families of her current and former husbands together.

While violent crime is rare in Hong Kong, the case recalls a handful of other shocking killings. In 2013, a man killed his parents and their heads were later found in refrigerators. In another infamous 1999 case, a woman was kidnapped and tortured by three members of an organized crime group before her death. Her skull was later found stuffed in a Hello Kitty doll.

Supreme Court weighs Biden student loan plan worth billions

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is taking up a partisan legal fight over President Joe Biden's plan to wipe away or reduce student loans held by millions of Americans.

The high court, with its 6-3 conservative majority, is hearing arguments Tuesday in two challenges to the plan, which has so far been blocked by Republican-appointed judges on lower courts.

Arguments are scheduled to last two hours, but likely will go much longer. The public can listen in on the court's website.

Twenty-six million people have applied and 16 million have been approved to have up to \$20,000 in federal student loans forgiven, the Biden administration says. The program is estimated to cost \$400 billion over 30 years.

"I'm confident the legal authority to carry that plan is there," Biden said Monday, at an event to mark Black History Month.

The president, who once doubted his own authority to broadly cancel student debt, first announced the program in August. Legal challenges quickly followed.

Republican-led states and lawmakers in Congress, as well as conservative legal interests, are lined up

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against the plan as a clear violation of Biden's executive authority. Democratic-led states and liberal interest groups are backing the Democratic administration in urging the court to allow the plan to take effect.

Without it, loan defaults would dramatically increase when the pause on loan payments ends no later than this summer, the administration says. Payments were halted in 2020 as part of the response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The administration says a 2003 law, commonly known as the HEROES Act, allows the secretary of education to waive or modify the terms of federal student loans in connection with a national emergency. The law was primarily intended to keep service members from being worse off financially while they fought in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Nebraska and other states that sued say the plan is not necessary to keep the rate of defaults roughly where it was before the pandemic. The 20 million borrowers who have their entire loans erased would get a "windfall" that will leave them better off than they were before the pandemic, the states say.

Dozens of borrowers came from across the country to camp out near the court on a soggy Monday evening in hopes of getting a seat for the arguments. Among them was Sinyetta Hill, who said that Biden's plan would erase all but about \$500 of the \$20,000 or so she has in student loans.

"I was 18 when I signed up for college. I didn't know it was going to be this big of a burden. No student should have to deal with this. No person should have to deal with this," said Hill, 22, who plans to study law after she graduates from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in May.

Biden's plan could meet a frosty reception in the courtroom. The court's conservatives have been skeptical of other Biden initiatives related to the pandemic, including vaccine requirements and pauses on evictions. Those were billed largely as public health measures intended to slow the spread of COVID-19.

The loan forgiveness plan, by contrast, is aimed at countering the economic effects of the pandemic.

The national emergency is expected to end May 11, but the administration says the economic consequences will persist, despite historically low unemployment and other signs of economic strength.

In addition to the debate over the authority to forgive student debt, the court also will confront whether the states and two individuals whose challenge also is before the justices have the legal right, or standing, to sue.

Parties generally have to show that they would suffer financial harm and benefit from a court ruling in their favor. A federal judge initially found that the states would not be harmed and dismissed their lawsuit before an appellate panel said the case could proceed.

Of the two individuals who sued in Texas, one has student loans that are commercially held and the other is eligible for \$10,000 in debt relief, not the \$20,000 maximum. They would get nothing if they win their case.

A decision is expected by late June.

Elephants in US zoos? Without breeding, future is uncertain

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Mabu saunters across a grassy field and raises his long, gray trunk to wrangle food from a hole carved inside a large boulder, captivating the attention of a girl propped up on her father's shoulders.

At this zoo in a central California farming community, the 32-year-old African elephant is key not only to drawing visitors but also to ensuring there are elephants for zoogoers to see in the years to come — a future some animal lovers want to avoid.

Over the past year, the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has been pulled into a growing global debate over the future of elephants in zoos. In recent years, some zoos have phased out elephant exhibits due to the complexity of the animals and their needs. Still, others, like Fresno's zoo, say they are committed to keeping elephants and are turning to breeding, arguing that a sustainable population of zoo elephants will help spur a commitment to wildlife conservation among future generations of visitors.

The zoo in Fresno, while beloved by local residents, has been targeted by animal activists in a report

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criticizing living conditions for the elephants and in legal actions trying to free them. Broadly, some elephant experts say urban zoos simply don't have the space that African elephants, who roam extensive distances in the wild to forage for hundreds of pounds of vegetation each day, need for a normal life.

The zoo opened a revamped and expanded multi-species African Adventure exhibit in 2015 to better accommodate elephants, lions and gazelles by giving them more space to roam. It's also been working with other zoos around the country on breeding more of the animals, which are endangered in the wild, in the United States.

Mabu came to the zoo from one in Arizona last year after Vus'Musi, another male elephant, showed little interest in breeding. Mabu has sired offspring at other zoos and there's hope he can do so again to grow the Fresno zoo's population.

"Lions, tigers and bears. People are coming to see charismatic megafauna — that's the term we use," said Jon Forrest Dohlin, chief executive officer of the Fresno Chaffee Zoo, comparing an elephant to a larger-than-life figure like pop star Justin Bieber. He said visitors who see animals in real life — instead of in a photo or on a screen — are more likely to support conservation efforts. "We're telling large stories, so it is something that is important for conservation writ large," he said.

In recent years, some larger zoos such as the Toronto Zoo and San Francisco Zoo have phased out their elephant programs, sending their aging animals to sanctuaries in the United States that have far more space. The Los Angeles Zoo is also discussing sending its Asian elephant, Billy, to a sanctuary.

In some cases, animal rights activists have started legal efforts aimed at removing elephants from zoos.

In New York, the Nonhuman Rights Project filed legal papers to try to free the Asian elephant Happy from the Bronx Zoo but lost in court. The group then filed similar papers to try to free Fresno's three African elephants — a mother-daughter pair and Vus'Musi — but a judge ruled against the group.

This month, the group filed a case in an appeals court and swapped in Mabu. Jake Davis, an attorney for the Nonhuman Rights Project, said the case isn't over — especially since the zoo sent Vus'Musi to a zoo in San Diego so it could bring in Mabu in a bid to boost breeding.

"He really is their golden ticket," Davis said. "Hopefully we can get him out."

Some elephant experts argue the more humans learn about elephants' intelligence and social networks the more compelling the argument to release them — or at the very least to stop breeding them in zoos. They also note that poaching of elephants and habitat destruction in Africa continue despite conservation efforts by zoos and question the difference they're making in hosting visitors who are largely seeking recreation.

"It's wrong to be bringing more elephants into living 60 years, or whatever they live to, in a captive situation," said Joyce Poole, co-founder of the advocacy group Elephant Voices, adding that in the wild elephants make decisions about where to find food and water and meet with relatives, something they simply can't do in zoos. "It's like seeing a person in prison."

Elephants were brought to U.S. zoos for decades, but transfers of African elephants have become rare in recent years amid rising international concern over the numerous threats they face in the wild — which also prompted the International Union for Conservation of Nature to change the species from vulnerable to endangered in 2021. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is also drafting new rules for elephant imports aimed at protecting African elephants, which have dwindled from 26 million in the 18th century to 415,000.

At a meeting last year, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora put the trade of African elephants on hold to hash out conditions for transfers to take place.

As a result, the future of elephants — which have relatively few offspring and a 22-month gestation period — in zoos hinges largely on breeding. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which has a program aimed at sustaining the zoo population, said about 160 African elephants currently live in U.S. zoos.

Breeding plans are underway at various zoos through the association's species survival plan to ensure elephants have a sustainable future, said David Hagan, the plan's coordinator and chief zoological officer at Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens.

"From a population model standpoint, I think there is hope," he said.

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In Fresno, the 12,000-pound Mabu delights visitors as he pulls food from puzzle-like devices wedged inside the boulder to keep him intellectually stimulated. Joe Foster, a 42-year-old nurse, leans on the fence outside the exhibit, entranced by his movements, while on a date.

"My heart grew three sizes just sitting and watching him eat today," he said.

Meanwhile, the zoo's female elephants — Nolwazi, 28, and her daughter Amahle, 13 — greet each other by crossing trunks and tapping each other's mouths before getting training and health checks inside a cavernous building. A zookeeper, standing behind a barrier, gives directions to Amahle, and she follows, turning to each side and allowing her ears and feet to be checked in exchange for chunks of apple and zucchini.

Some zoos have sent aging elephants to wildlife sanctuaries, including a sprawling habitat about 130 miles (209 kilometers) north of Fresno in San Andreas, California. Started by advocates disheartened by the treatment of elephants in the entertainment industry, the Performing Animal Welfare Society has 80 acres (32 hectares) of grassy hillsides where elephants can roam — more than 20 times the roaming space of the Fresno exhibit.

Ed Stewart, the society's co-founder, relishes being able to provide elephants with more space than an urban zoo but said that it's still not enough and ideally the sanctuary wouldn't exist.

"At some point, we're going to look back and think, we used to keep wild animals in cages — big cages, small cages, an enclosure, a habitat, whatever you want to call it," he said. "I think for the public, a light bulb is going to go on and they're going to say, 'What in the world are we doing it for?'" —

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From California to NY, storms ravage US from coast-to-coast

By JOHN ANTCZAK and SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Parts of the Northeast are gearing up for what could be very heavy snow early Tuesday, after tornadoes and other powerful winds swept through parts of the Southern Plains, killing at least one person in Oklahoma, and some Michigan residents faced a sixth consecutive day without power following last week's ice storm.

In California, the National Weather Service said winter storms will continue moving into the state through Wednesday after residents got a brief break from severe weather Sunday.

A look at the weather threats around the country:

TORNADO FORECAST, CLEANUP

A storm system produced at least four tornadoes as it moved across central and northeastern Illinois on Monday, including two that formed in suburbs west of Chicago, authorities said. Initial reports suggested damage there was limited to fallen trees or shingles torn from buildings, said Rafal Ogorek, a meteorologist in the Chicago office of the National Weather Service.

At least one person was killed and three others injured after a tornado touched down Sunday night in far western Oklahoma near the town of Cheyenne, where 20 homes were damaged and four others destroyed, Roger Mills County Emergency Manager Levi Blackketter reported.

Statewide, Oklahoma officials received reports of 55 people who suffered weather-related injuries from area hospitals.

Officials in Norman, Oklahoma, confirmed 12 weather-related injuries after tornadoes and wind gusts as high as 90 mph (145 kph) were reported in the state Sunday night. The winds toppled trees and power lines, closed roads and damaged homes and businesses around Norman and Shawnee.

Classes were canceled Monday at two damaged elementary schools, said Norman Police Chief Kevin Foster.

Frances Tabler, of Norman, told KOCO-TV that she suffered a small cut on her head when a storm hit her home, tearing off much of its roof and sending debris flying. She said it was a miracle her children weren't hurt, although her daughter was trapped for awhile in a bedroom.

"It was just like a blizzard in the house with all the debris flying," Tabler told KOCO. "I was screaming

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for my kids.”

The line of quick-moving thunderstorms that produced a swath of damaging wind gusts likely qualified as a derecho, although that’s not an official designation, said Nolan Meister, a National Weather Service meteorologist.

Meister said a wind gust of 114 mph (183 kph) was recorded in Texas, with gusts between 70 mph (113 kph) and 90 mph (145 kph) in central Oklahoma.

More than 76,000 customers lost power in Oklahoma, but most had it restored by Monday morning, Oklahoma’s Office of Emergency Management reported.

There were reports of nine tornadoes in Kansas, Oklahoma and northwestern Texas, weather officials said. One tornado near Liberal, Kansas, damaged more than a dozen homes and caused minor injuries to one person, KSNW-TV reported.

BLIZZARD CONDITIONS IN WESTERN U.S.

Blizzard warnings went into effect Monday in the Sierra Nevada range as more rounds of rain and snow moved into California and Nevada.

An avalanche warning was issued for the backcountry around Lake Tahoe, where up to 6 feet (1.8 meters) of snow was expected over the next two days in the upper elevations and gale-force winds could create waves up to 5 feet (1.5 meters) high on the lake, the National Weather Service in Reno said Monday. State offices across northern Nevada and the Nevada Legislature in Carson City were shut down because of the severe weather.

The new series of storms arrived even as parts of California were still digging out from last week’s powerful storm, which added to a massive snowpack left by a siege of “atmospheric rivers” in December and January.

A 90-mile (145-km) stretch of U.S. 395 in California’s eastern Sierra was shut down Monday evening due to whiteout conditions, state transportation officials said. Yosemite National Park announced it would be closed until midweek, and numerous roads were closed in Sequoia National Park. Trans-Sierra highways were subject to closures and chain requirements.

Los Angeles County declared a cold weather alert for valley and mountain areas north of LA as overnight temperatures were expected to plunge below freezing for much of the week. Shelters were opened for residents who don’t have access to warm spaces.

East of Los Angeles, roads to San Bernardino Mountain resort communities around Big Bear Lake were closed after snow began falling again. The storm stranded more than 600 students at science camps in the Big Bear area over the weekend. The students from Irvine in Orange County were expected home Friday but officials decided it was safer to keep them in the mountains until the roads could be cleared. The California Highway Patrol began escorting out buses carrying the kids on Monday, the Irvine Unified School District said.

The northbound side of Interstate 5, the West Coast’s major north-south highway, was shut down by wintry conditions and disabled vehicles about 90 miles (145 km) south of the Oregon line. Interstate 80, the major route between San Francisco and Lake Tahoe and Reno was closed due to blizzard conditions.

STORMS IN MICHIGAN AND NORTHEAST

A winter storm warning covered parts of the Northeast, including Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Rhode Island, with heavy snow forecast through Tuesday afternoon.

Boston could get 5 inches (13 cm) and a messy Tuesday morning commute, according to the weather service. As much as 10 inches (25 cm) could fall in western Massachusetts, northwest Connecticut and southern Vermont.

In Michigan, still reeling from last week’s ice storm and high winds, about 150,000 customers were without power Monday night, according to PowerOutage.us. That was down from more than 800,000 at one point last week. Crews continued their work to restore all electricity.

Leah Thomas, whose home north of Detroit lost power Wednesday night, finally got her power back Sunday afternoon — only to have it go out again at midday Monday.

"It's very frustrating, very frustrating," she said. "I'm just going to hope and cross my fingers that it comes back on here soon."

While not expecting a blockbuster storm by regional standards, southern New England braced for what could be the most significant snowfall of what has so far been a mild winter.

Suspected schoolgirl poisoning attacks rattle a shaken Iran

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Over the past three months, hundreds of young girls attending different schools in Iran have become overpowered by what are believed to be noxious fumes wafting into their classrooms, with some ending up weakened on hospital beds.

Officials in Iran's theocracy initially dismissed these incidents, but now describe them as intentional attacks involving some 30 schools identified in local media reports, with some speculating they could be aimed at trying to close schools for girls in this country of over 80 million people.

The reported attacks come at a sensitive time for Iran, which already has faced months of protests after the September death of Mahsa Amini following her arrest by the country's morality police.

The authorities have not named suspects, but the attacks have raised fears that other girls could be poisoned apparently just for seeking an education — something that's never been challenged before in the over 40 years since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran itself also has been calling on the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan to have girls and women return to school.

The first cases emerged in late November in Qom, some 125 kilometers (80 miles) southwest of Iran's capital, Tehran. There, in a heartland of Shiite theologians and pilgrims, students at the Noor Yazdanshahr Conservatory fell ill in November. They then fell ill again in December.

Other cases followed, with children complaining about headaches, heart palpitations, feeling lethargic or otherwise unable to move. Some described smelling tangerines, chlorine or cleaning agents.

At first, authorities didn't link the cases. It's winter in Iran, where temperatures often drop below freezing at night. Many schools are heated by natural gas, leading to speculation it could be carbon monoxide poisoning affecting the girls. The country's education minister initially dismissed the reports as "rumors."

But the schools affected at first only taught young women, fueling suspicion it wasn't accidental. At least one case followed in Tehran, with others in Qom and Boroujerd. At least one boys' school has been targeted as well.

Slowly, officials began taking the claims seriously. Iran's prosecutor-general ordered an investigation, saying "there are possibilities of deliberate criminal acts." Iran's Intelligence Ministry reportedly investigated as well.

On Sunday, Iran's state-run IRNA news agency filed multiple stories with officials acknowledging the scope of the crisis.

"After several poisonings of students in Qom schools, it was found that some people wanted all schools, especially girls' schools, to be closed," IRNA quoted Younes Panahi, a deputy health minister, as saying.

A Health Ministry spokesman, Pedram Pakaeen, said the poisoning didn't come from a virus or a microbe. Neither elaborated further.

Ali Reza Monadi, a national parliament member who sits on its education committee, described the poisonings as "intentional."

The "existence of the devil's will to prevent girls from education is a serious danger and it is considered a very bad news," he said, according to IRNA. "We have to try to find roots" of this.

Already, parents have pulled their students from classes, in effect shuttering some schools in Qom in recent weeks, according to a report by Shargh, a reformist news website based in Tehran.

The poisonings come as getting verifiable information out of Iran remains difficult given the crackdown on all dissent stemming from the protests and internet slowdowns put in place by the government. At least 95 journalists have been arrested by authorities since the start of the protests, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

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Overall, the security force crackdown has killed at least 530 people and seen 19,700 others detained, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran.

Attacks on women have happened in the past in Iran, most recently with a wave of acid attacks in 2014 around Isfahan, at the time believed to have been carried out by hard-liners targeting women for how they dressed. But even in the chaos surrounding the Islamic Revolution, no one targeted schoolgirls for attending classes.

Jamileh Kadivar, a prominent former reformist lawmaker and journalist, wrote in Tehran's Ettelaat newspaper that as many as 400 students have fallen ill in the poisonings.

She warned "subversive opposition" groups could be behind the attacks. However, she also raised the possibility of "domestic extremists" who "aim to replace the Islamic Republic with a caliphate or a Taliban-type Islamic emirate."

She cited a supposed communique from a group calling itself Fidayeen Velayat that purportedly said, "the study of girls is considered haram" and threatened to "spread the poisoning of girls throughout Iran" if girls' schools remain open.

Iranian officials have not acknowledged any group called Fidayeen Velayat, which roughly translates to English as "Devotees of the Guardianship." However, Kadivar's mention of the threat in print comes as she remains influential within Iranian politics and has ties to its theocratic ruling class. The head of Ettelaat newspaper also is appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Another prominent reformist politician, Azar Mansouri, also linked the suspected poisoning attacks to hard-line groups, referencing the Isfahan acid attacks.

"We said the acid attacks were organized. You said: 'You are disturbing public opinion!'" Mansouri wrote online. "If operatives of the attacks were identified and punished then, today a group of reactionaries would not have ganged up on our innocent girls in the schools."

Activists also worry this could be a disturbing new trend in the country.

"This is a very fundamentalist thinking surfacing in society," said Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran. "We have no idea how widespread this group is but the fact they have been able to carry it out with such impunity is so troubling."

Ukraine's northeastern front could decide new battle lines

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KUPIANSK, Ukraine (AP) — A tank carrying Ukrainian infantry speeds toward a target position marked with a metal sheet. The soldiers climb down, hurl grenades and unleash a crackle of machine-gun fire. Then they repeat the moves, getting faster with every iteration.

It's only a drill. But with the sounds of the real war rumbling just seven kilometers (four miles) away, this daily training underscores the high stakes on Ukraine's northeastern front, where military officials say a much-anticipated Russian offensive has already started, with fighting that could determine the next phase of the conflict.

Time is of the essence here, so speed and cohesion is the goal of the exercises that combine reserve tank and the infantry assault units.

"Synchronization will be important to halt Russian offensives toward Ukrainian defensive lines," said Col. Petro Skyba, commander of the 3rd Separate Tank Iron Brigade.

Grueling artillery battles have stepped up in recent weeks in the vicinity of Kupiansk, a strategic town on the eastern edge of Kharkiv province by the banks of the Oskil River. The Russian attacks are part of an intensifying push to capture the entire industrial heartland known as the Donbas, which includes the Donetsk and the Luhansk provinces. It would be a badly needed victory for the Kremlin as the war enters its second year.

Triumph in Kupiansk could decide future lines of attack for both sides: If Russia succeeds in pushing Ukrainian forces west of the river, it would clear the path for a significant offensive farther south where

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the administrative borders of Luhansk and Donetsk meet. If the Ukrainian defense holds up, it could reveal Russian vulnerabilities and enable a counteroffensive.

The Associated Press spoke about the fighting with generals, commanders and soldiers from three brigades in the Kupiansk area, as well as civilians in the town affected by the grinding battles.

"The enemy is constantly increasing its efforts, but our troops are also increasing their efforts there, making timely replacements and holding the defense," said Brig. Gen. Dmytro Krasynkov, head of the Kharkiv military administration.

Across the towns and villages in the path of the fighting, homes have been razed by constant Russian bombardment, with some residences hit repeatedly. Civilians wait in the cold for food and line up to receive rations of milk and materials to cover shattered windows.

"We don't have anything to do with this war, so why do we pay the price?" asked Oleksandr Luzhan, whose mother's house was struck twice.

On the battlefield, Ukrainian soldiers put a rocket launcher in the fighting position, aiming the weapons in line with coordinates sent by their commanders. They wait for the final order.

Seconds turn to minutes. Snow falls silently in thick wet clumps by a shriveled sunflower field.

"Fire!" — a salvo of rockets blasts into the sky toward Russian targets, often armored personnel carriers or tanks. To escape any counterattack, the servicemen of the Ukraine army's 14th Brigade pack up and leave, trundling away in the Soviet-era BM-21 "Grad."

Along the northeast front, there are no quick wins, said Vitaly, the operation's gunner, who gave only his first name in line with Ukrainian military protocols. "It's war — someone retreats, someone advances. Every day there is a change of position."

Russia ramped up attacks earlier in February after deploying three major divisions to the area. Fighting is focused northeast of Kupiansk, where Kremlin troops have gone on the offensive with marginal territorial gains. Ukrainian fortifications have so far deterred major advances, Ukrainian senior military officials said.

For Russia, the Kupiansk operation serves two aims: Dislodging Ukrainian forces from settlements along the provincial borders would enable the capture of Luhansk province. Pushing back Ukrainian troops west of the Oskil River and locking them there would create a new defensive line and prevent deployments to the critical Svatove-Kreminna line further south, where a separate Russian offensive is underway to capture the Donetsk region by reclaiming abandoned posts in Lyman. Svatove, which was occupied by Moscow last spring, is 60 kilometers (37 miles) southeast of Kupianske.

Ukrainian forces are counting on improving coordination between infantry and tank units to deprive Russia of the opportunity to breach Ukrainian lines. Ukrainian forces still control settlements inside Luhansk near the border with Kharkiv.

Artillery and ammunition shortages are a real concern on this front where the landscape is heavily forested, small villages are separated by vast farmland and Ukrainian soldiers come under nine hours of shelling some days. Long-range weapons would contribute to quicker wins in such an environment, Krasynkov said.

Serhii, an infantry soldier with the 92nd Brigade who also used only his first name, said ammunition shortages were derailing his unit's ability to advance and occupy enemy positions.

"They can make 40 shots in our direction, and we can fire back twice on target," he said. "They have quantity, but we are more efficient."

The months to come will be critical, he predicted. The Russians clearly "want to cut us off from the Oskil River. They want to make it so that we push back our troops ... and they can occupy the entire territory along the river from Kupiansk to Kreminna."

"But we won't allow this," he said.

In the debris of a destroyed home where a group of servicemen had been resting was the severed hand of a Ukrainian soldier. Russian reconnaissance drones spotted the soldiers, and on Feb. 17 an S-300 missile split the house in two.

Olena Klymko lives next door. The strike shattered her windows and damaged her roof.

Russian bombardment of Kupiansk, a town with a prewar population of 27,000, has become so frequent that "every time we go to sleep we pray to God we will wake up in the morning," she said. At times the

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strikes appear to have clear targets where soldiers pass through. Other times, they are indiscriminate.

The shelling is even more intense in the suburbs of Kupiansk, closer to Russian lines where access to supplies is also limited.

Residents from the border village of Vovchansk drive three hours to a makeshift bridge on the Pechenizhske Reservoir leading to Kharkiv. It is the only way they can retrieve supplies, residents said. They rarely leave their homes, fearful of the intense shelling.

But like many Ukrainians living in similar danger zones along the 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line, most are unwilling to leave their hometowns for good.

In the village of Zelena, dozens of older residents waited under a bus shelter amid heavy snows for a food truck to arrive.

"Today is a quiet day, thank god," said Victoria Bromska, wheeling her food parcel back home.

Luzhan picked up wooden boards and other items supplied by a Swiss aid group called Heks/Eper to seal his mother's house. About a quarter of those who seek the group's shelter kits in Kupiansk are coming for a second time. The kits increase indoor temperatures in battered homes,

The home targeted in the Feb. 17 attack had belonged to an older woman whose children evacuated her to Kharkiv. Offering Ukrainian servicemen a place to rest is common, Klymko said, despite the risks.

"How can we say no? she asked. "They are out there fighting for us."

Jimmy Carter: Family affair to the White House and beyond

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

PLAINS, Georgia (AP) — When Jimmy Carter stepped onto the national stage, he brought along those closest to him, introducing Americans to a colorful Georgia family that helped shape the 39th president's public life and now, generations later, is rallying around him for the private final chapter of his 98 years.

"Family has always been important to Uncle Jimmy," said Kim Fuller, whose father, Billy Carter, was the former president's youngest brother and a favorite subject of national political reporters drawn to this family of Washington outsiders.

Carter has long outlived his nuclear family, including his mother, Lillian, and Billy, both of whom featured prominently in his political life — bringing charm, occasional scandal and even a forgotten brand of cheap brew: "Billy Beer." The former president's most constant political partner, wife Rosalynn, remains by his side as he receives end-of-life care at their home in Plains, Georgia, the tiny town where both were born.

Married since 1946 — longer than any other first couple — the Carters have four children and more than 20 grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Along with nieces, nephews and inlaws, it's a sprawling extended family that has given Jimmy Carter a near-constant stream of visitors since he announced Feb. 18 that he would forgo further medical interventions and shift to hospice care at home.

"This is what I've known my entire life, what most of us have known," said Fuller, who was school-aged when Carter was elected governor in 1970, then president in 1976. "I remember taking the train up to Atlanta to see them at the Governor's Mansion."

The Carters are not an establishment dynasty like the Republican Bushes or the Democratic Kennedys — whose scion Ted Kennedy was a Carter rival. But the family is critical to understanding the former president, from his methodical style to his outspoken Baptist faith.

When he launched his national campaign in 1974, it consisted mostly of the "Georgia mafia" — the name Washington would give his home-state advisers who came to the capital as outsiders — and his relatives. The peanut farmer-turned-politician added other Georgia supporters who traveled across the country campaigning.

Together they were "the Peanut Brigade," and they set a new standard in presidential politics for retail campaigning in early primary states.

"Family members would disperse to different states and then they would all come back on Friday, go back through the questions they had gotten," Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar explained to the Associated Press in 2020, after she visited Carter as she sought the Democratic nomination.

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As the candidate, Carter "would talk about how he would answer" voters so his stand-ins would be prepared for their next trips, Klobuchar said.

The Carters' older sons were part of the crew. Their daughter, Amy, was seven when the campaign began; she remained mostly shielded other than being visible at public events with her parents. It was Carter's mother and "baby brother," 13 years his junior, who garnered headlines.

Lillian was a widow – Carter's father, "Mr. Earl," died in 1953 – who had turned over management of the family farm and peanut warehouse to Jimmy and Rosalynn. In her late 60s, Lillian applied for the Peace Corps and spent several years in India as her son made his climb to the Governor's Mansion. After her return, Carter told her he planned to run for president.

"President of what?" she replied.

"She ran the family," Fuller said. "Daddy and Uncle Jimmy may have acted like they did, but we all knew."

That didn't necessarily extend to Carter's campaigns, of course. Whether candidate or executive, Carter was a famed micro-manager. Fuller mused, though, that he got it from his parents, exacting figures who had demanded much of Carter on the family farm.

Unlike Earl Carter, Lillian was a relative progressive even when Carter was a child. She "was impervious to criticism because of her independent spirit," Carter wrote around his 90th birthday.

Tabbed "the most liberal woman in Georgia" by some journalists, she preferred topics other than politics. She declared White House life "boring" and flouted images of Baptist teetotaling.

"I know folks have a tizzy about it, but I like a little bourbon," she said. "I'm a Christian, but that doesn't mean I'm a long-faced square."

Billy Carter never seemed to find a comfortable place in his brother's political operation.

"Daddy was perfectly happy at the gas station," Kim Fuller said, gesturing across the street from her "Friends of Jimmy Carter" office festooned with 1976 posters and memorabilia.

Initially, that meant flaunting his "redneck power pick-up" to out-of-town reporters.

Amber Roessner, a University of Tennessee professor and expert on Carter's campaigns, said some national media looked down on the Carters as rural Americans unworthy of the White House. Some reporters indulged their snobbery by covering Billy Carter while avoiding direct attacks on his brother, a Naval Academy graduate and engineer by training.

The younger Carter capitalized on his image with a deal for "Billy Beer." News sources at the time reported that he got a \$50,000 annual licensing fee from one brewer. That would be about \$240,000 today, measured by consumer price index inflation. The president's annual salary at the time was \$200,000.

A beer deal, though, was mostly an eccentricity, like Lillian Carter's quips.

More serious was the presidential sibling getting a \$220,000 loan from the Libyan government, prompting one of several IRS and government inquiries of Carter's activities as an apparent intermediary between American and Libyan oil interests. A Senate committee found that Billy Carter never influenced any American policy, effectively absolving the president of any wrongdoing. But the drama was another damaging blow ahead of Carter's 1980 defeat.

After their return to Georgia, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter built The Carter Center in Atlanta, staffed not by "the Peanut Brigade" but policy experts who advanced their international diplomatic and public health missions. In Plains, they became the marquee members of Maranatha Baptist Church, teaching Sunday School to overflow crowds until recent health problems and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lillian Carter died in 1983, less than three years after her son left the presidency. Billy Carter died in 1988.

While they've avoided dynastic trends, Jimmy Carter has passed down some of the family business. Eldest son Jack ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in Nevada in 2006. Grandson Jason served in the Georgia state Senate, as his grandfather did, and lost the 2014 governor's race.

Jason Carter now chairs The Carter Center board – but only after his grandparents finally retired well into their 90s.

"He wanted to be able to see and experience the transition for The Carter Center to go on without him," the younger Carter said in September, adding that he "would be shocked if I ever ran for office again."

Billy's daughter, meanwhile, inherited the church rostrum. She taught again Sunday, at one point emphasizing her uncle's individual faith journey.

"Every breath he takes, he's supposed to. Every step he takes, he's supposed to," she said. "And one day . . . he's going to meet Christ, and he knows it. He knows it. And our hearts are heavy. But his isn't. His heart's not heavy."

New China committee debuts with eye on major policy shifts

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A special House committee dedicated to countering China will make its debut on Tuesday, the opening act in what lawmakers hope will be a robust effort to overcome partisan divisions and address a "generational challenge" to America's national security.

The committee's chairman, Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis., says he's looking to bridge differences rather than exploit them. One of the former Marine's first efforts in that regard will be a hearing focused on informing Americans about what he says is the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party.

Gallagher has grand visions for the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party. He hopes it can shepherd competing bills over the finish line during the next two years and issue a set of recommendations on long-term policies. But as the committee holds its first hearing Tuesday evening in prime time, his first mission will be to communicate to Americans what is at stake.

"We're doing some level-setting here: Why should someone care about the threat posed by the CCP?" Gallagher said. "Or to put it differently, what did we get wrong about the Chinese Communist Party and what do we need to get right about it so as to have a more successful and enduring strategy going forward?"

So far, Gallagher appears to have Democratic buy-in and support. The vote to create the committee was bipartisan, 365-65. Opponents on the Democratic side largely voiced the concern that the committee could stir an even greater rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. Gallagher said he is committed to ensuring the focus is on the Chinese Communist Party, not on the people of China.

"We want to lead with that sort of human rights focused, values-focused agenda," Gallagher said. "And that's an area of unity, too, for a lot of Democrats and Republicans."

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, D-Ill., the ranking Democrat on the committee, said the CCP is counting on lawmakers to be "fractious, divided, partisan and we have to do the opposite."

"We have no choice but to rise to the challenge at this point. It's that serious," Krishnamoorthi said.

Rep. Ro Khanna of California, another Democrat on the committee, said he expects Gallagher will set a sobering tone.

"The hope is that Congress can still rise to a generational challenge, and that is getting our China policy correct," Khanna said. "And there are areas that can be bipartisan, from bringing good jobs back to making sure we're deterring any invasion in the Taiwan Strait."

The witnesses for Tuesday's hearing includes two former advisers to President Donald Trump: Matthew Pottinger, the deputy national security adviser who resigned immediately after the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol; and H.R. McMaster, who was national security adviser from February 2017 to April 2018.

McMaster is no stranger to testifying about the threats he sees from China. He has warned Congress that the U.S. clung too long to the idea that China would liberalize its economy and form of governance as it was welcomed into international systems like the World Trade Organization.

He has recommend the U.S. not engage in trade or investment that transfers sensitive technology the CCP can use to gain military and economic advantages. He also has testified the U.S. should not do business in China in a way that helps the CCP stifle freedom and perfect its technology-enabled police state.

Tong Yi, a Chinese human rights advocate, will amplify those concerns at the hearing. She was arrested in the 1990s after serving as an interpreter to a leading dissident who had urged the U.S. to condition trade on China's human rights performance. She spent nine months in detention before being handed a two-and-half year sentence for "disturbing social order" and sent to a labor camp, where she said authorities organized other inmates to beat her up.

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"In the U.S., we need to face the fact that we have helped feed the baby dragon of the CCP until it has grown into what it now is," she said in prepared remarks provided to The Associated Press. "Since the 1990s, U.S. companies have enriched themselves by exploiting cheap labor in China and have, in the process, also enriched the CCP."

Scott Paul, president of an alliance formed by some manufacturing companies and the United Steelworkers labor union, will testify that "51 years of wishful thinking by American leaders" has failed to alter the dynamic that the CCP represents a "clear and present danger to the American worker, our innovation base, and our national security."

The reaction to a suspected Chinese spy balloon in the U.S. earlier this month demonstrates the political tightrope that lawmakers will walk to prevent the committee from becoming a dividing force rather than a uniting one. Republicans were highly critical of the Biden administration for not shooting down the balloon days earlier than it did, while Democrats defended Biden and stressed that he followed the military's recommendation on when to take it down.

Gallagher said he suspects there are at least 10 pieces of legislation that the committee can endorse in a bipartisan fashion. Still, he said the members will be looking for support from House Speaker Kevin McCarthy before it backs any legislation. One of the biggest challenges is that jurisdiction over the issues involving China is spread across numerous committees and members of those committees will want a say.

"I think we can play a constructive coordinating function between the committees to ensure that good ideas don't die just because of some committee's cracks or they get referred to multiple committees," Gallagher said.

An example of such an issue is a proposed ban on the purchase of farmland by entities affiliated with the CCP. He said about 10 bills have already been filed to enact that sort of ban.

"That's a perfect example of why this committee exists, because without it, you just have 10 individual members working in isolation and not necessarily cooperating, and thereby increasing the likelihood that this issue never gets addressed," Gallagher said.

"So, we can, on behalf of the speaker, weigh all these various proposals and see if we can get the members who have the bills to agree on one approach and then work it through the committee process and get it passed on the floor," he said.

Latino Republicans push back on party's immigration agenda

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — More than half of the residents in the slice of Miami that includes Little Havana were born abroad. And when Republican U.S. Rep. Maria Elvira Salazar ran for reelection last year, she won by 15 percentage points.

The GOP's dominance of Florida's 27th congressional district is emblematic of the party's inroads with Latino voters in recent years in much of the U.S. and especially in Florida. Those gains helped Gov. Ron DeSantis decisively win reelection last year and contributed to the GOP taking back control of the U.S. House.

That strong showing, however, is leading to some tension as the newly emboldened Republicans in Washington aim to launch an aggressive agenda, particularly around immigration policy. Salazar is among a handful of Republicans pushing back against a sweeping proposal being considered in the House that would restrict asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border.

"We understand that immigrants want to come and live in the promised land," Salazar said in a recent interview. "Orderly legal immigration is good for the country and good for District 27."

Rep. Tony Gonzales of Texas, a Mexican American Republican whose district covers a long portion of the U.S.-Mexico border from El Paso to San Antonio, has been even bolder, calling the legislation "anti-immigrant."

The dissent highlights a challenge for the GOP. The party's future may well depend on broadening its appeal beyond an aging, predominantly white base of support. And while some conservative Latinos support hard-line immigration policies, there's a risk that the GOP could repel other persuadable Latinos by

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moving too far to the right on the issue.

Democrats also face political challenges on this front. The Biden administration recently proposed a measure that would impose severe limitations on asylum, arguing that surging numbers of migrants left them little choice. The push will almost certainly be challenged in court and has prompted criticism from progressives.

Republicans have long earned support from roughly a third of Latino voters, many of whom share the party's conservative attitudes on immigration and other issues. In November's elections, 39% of Latinos voted for Republicans, according to AP VoteCast. That was an uptick from 32% supporting Republicans in 2018's midterm elections.

Overall, about a third of Latino voters were in favor of increasing law enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border, while two-thirds were opposed. About half said they disapproved of the way President Joe Biden was handling border security.

Majorities of Latino voters who supported Republicans disapproved of Biden on border security and were in favor of increased enforcement at the border.

For Republicans, Donald Trump, the former president who is again seeking the White House, may have given the party something of a path on how to navigate the politics of immigration. During his previous campaigns and while he was in office, Trump embraced a crackdown on asylum rules. But he also spoke of toughening border security and building a wall. None of his actions cost him Latino support during his two elections.

"Many conservatives felt emboldened by Trump's performance, by the idea that a Republican could be both anti-immigrant and win Latino voters," said Geraldo Cadava, a professor of history and Latino studies at Northwestern University and author of "The Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of an American Political Identity, from Nixon to Trump."

The immigration bill introduced by U.S. Rep. Chip Roy, a Texas Republican, would require U.S. officials to automatically ban or detain asylum seekers while their claims are being considered. Right now, asylum seekers can be released with notices to appear in court and fight for asylum. The bill would also allow U.S. immigration officials to ban all migrants from entering if there is no "operational control" at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Roy sent a letter to his GOP colleagues last week asking them to back the bill. In an interview, he said he found it "absurd" for Gonzales and Salazar to question the bill.

"A few of my Republican colleagues prefer to be fiddling while America burns," Roy said. "Republicans are going to have to put their money where their mouth is."

Salazar, who was backed by Trump and DeSantis, has been vocal about both the need to secure the border and the need to push for an immigration overhaul that gives some status to those who are already in the country illegally. She said she and colleagues are simply working together to make sure the proposal does not violate any laws governing asylum.

"The formula hasn't changed," Salazar said. "We want the Albert Einsteins of the world to come and work for us and continue to make this economy strong."

This issue is of particular importance in her district, she said. Massive protests that erupted in Cuba in July 2021 and the government's response to them have played a role in a more recent exodus of Cubans. Cubans are fleeing their homes in the largest numbers in six decades to escape economic and political turmoil. Most fly to Nicaragua as tourists and slowly make their way to the U.S. via Mexico.

"I do know that my district appreciates what I am saying," Salazar said.

Some Democrats have pointed to Salazar's comments to support their opposition to Roy's legislation. U.S. Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Calif., recently showed a poster board at a border security hearing featuring a quote from Salazar: "Are we stupid? Come on. This country was based on good minds. Look at Albert Einstein. We gave him a piece of paper to come in."

Einstein arrived in the U.S. in 1933 as a refugee of Nazi Germany.

"Listen to your own colleagues, who know better about this than you," Swalwell told fellow lawmakers.

Belarus leader and Putin ally Lukashenko on China visit

BEIJING (AP) — Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, a close ally of Russian leader Vladimir Putin, is due in Beijing to begin a three-day state visit Tuesday as geopolitical tensions rise over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

China says the visit is an "opportunity to promote the further development of all-around cooperation between the two countries," but there have been growing concerns that China is considering providing military assistance to Russia, something United States officials say would bring serious consequences.

China has called the U.S. allegations a smear campaign, saying it is committed to promoting peace talks and accusing Washington and its allies of fueling the conflict by providing Ukraine with defensive weapons.

"The U.S. has no right to point fingers at China-Russia relations. We will by no means accept the U.S. pressure and coercion," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said Monday at a daily briefing.

Beijing claims to maintain a neutral stance in the year-old war, but has also said it has a "no-limits friendship" with Russia and has refused to criticize Moscow's invasion, or even call it that. It has accused the U.S. and NATO of provoking the conflict and condemned sanctions leveled against Russia and entities seen as aiding its military effort.

Last week, those sanctions were expanded to include a Chinese company known as Spacety China, which has supplied satellite imagery of Ukraine to affiliates of Wagner Group, a private Russian military contractor owned by a close associate of President Vladimir Putin. A Luxembourg-based subsidiary of Spacety China was also targeted.

Belarus has strongly backed Moscow and allowed its territory to be used as a staging ground for the initial invasion of Ukraine a year ago. Belarus continues to host Russian troops, warplanes and other weapons.

China has long retained close ties with Lukashenko, Belarus' only president since the position was created in 1994. Lukashenko crushed 2020 protests over his disputed reelection in a vote that the opposition and Western countries regard as fraudulent.

Despite its brutality, Lukashenko's suppression does not appear to have ended all opposition activity.

On Sunday, Belarusian guerrillas attacked a military air base that hosts Russian warplanes outside Belarusia's capital, Minsk, according to activists.

Belarusian opposition organization BYPOL, in an online messaging app channel run by the activists, said an A-50 early warning and control aircraft was seriously damaged in the attack at the Machulishchy base near Minsk. The activists provided no evidence to support the claims, which couldn't be independently verified. Belarusian and Russian officials made no comment, but Lukashenko urged top military and security officials Monday to tighten discipline.

Also Monday, prosecutors demanded 19-year prison sentences for exiled opposition leaders Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka, as well as fines of \$15,000 and \$10,000 respectively, amid a continued crackdown on dissent in the ex-Soviet republic.

Tsikhanouskaya, Latushka and three other opposition figures are being tried in absentia in Minsk on charges of conspiring to overthrow the government, creating and leading an extremist group, inciting hatred and harming national security. The prosecution also sought 12-year sentences for Maryya Maroz, Volha Kavalkova and Siarhei Dylevski. All five left Belarus following the unprecedented mass protests in 2020.

Chicago Mayor Lightfoot taking on 8 rivals in reelection bid

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot is fighting for reelection Tuesday after a history-making but tumultuous four years in office and a bruising campaign threaten to make her the city's first one-term mayor in decades.

Lightfoot in 2019 became the first Black woman and first openly gay mayor of the third-largest U.S. city, and only the second woman to hold the office. But Lightfoot, a former prosecutor and head of a city police

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review board, now faces serious challenges from multiple candidates, who have hammered her over crime that spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic and a leadership style they say is unnecessarily combative.

With none of the nine candidates likely to receive over 50% of the vote, the race is expected to move to an April runoff between the top two vote-getters. Lightfoot may not be among them.

Lightfoot has touted her record of investing in neighborhoods and supporting workers, such as by increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. She also notes that the city has navigated unprecedented challenges such as the pandemic and its economic and public safety fallout to protests over policing.

"The world is very different than it was four years ago. I believe that I'm still the right person and I think the voters will validate that, but we've been through a lot," Lightfoot said after a rally on the city's west side during the final days before the election. "We can't go back."

Lightfoot's top rivals include Paul Vallas, who has run as the law-and-order candidate with support from the city's police union and promises to put hundreds more officers on the streets, and U.S. Rep. Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, who forced then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel to a runoff in 2015. Brandon Johnson is endorsed by the Chicago Teachers Union, a group that has tangled with Lightfoot, including during an 11-day teachers strike in her first year in office.

If Lightfoot loses on Tuesday, she would be one of the few big-city mayors in recent history to lose their reelection bid. That's particularly true in the first round of voting, when incumbents generally enjoy an advantage.

But this election is very different, said Constance Mixon, a lifelong Chicago resident and political science professor at Elmhurst University. Of the 10 largest U.S. cities, Chicago is the only place without mayoral term limits, which may make voters in other cities more willing to give an incumbent one more term, Mixon said.

Lightfoot also is the first mayor of a major U.S. city to face reelection following the pandemic, recession and the crime wave that's occurred in many places, she said.

"I suspect that other mayors — and we've got a handful of them that are up this year, but after Lightfoot — are going to face many of the same challenges as Lightfoot," she said.

Race also is a factor as candidates court votes in the highly segregated city, which is closely divided in population among Black, Hispanic and white residents. Lightfoot, Johnson and five other candidates are Black, though Lightfoot — who is hoping strong support from Black voters will help propel her to victory — has argued that she is the only Black candidate who can win. Garcia, the only Latino in the race, would be Chicago's first Hispanic mayor, while Vallas is the only white candidate in the field.

Lightfoot has accused Vallas of using "the ultimate dog whistle" by saying his campaign is about "taking back our city," and of cozying up to the president of the Fraternal Order of Police, whom she calls a racist. A recent Chicago Tribune story also found Vallas' Twitter account had liked racist tweets and tweets that mocked Lightfoot's appearance and referred to her as masculine.

Vallas denied his comments were related to race and says his police union endorsement is from rank-and-file officers. He also said he wasn't responsible for the liked tweets, which he called "abhorrent," and suggested someone had improperly accessed his account.

But Lightfoot and some of her supporters see some of the criticism of her leadership as motivated by racism, sexism and anti-gay sentiment.

"No other mayor has been asked to change this city within four years," said city Treasurer Melissa Conyears-Ervin, who is Black, and noted that white mayors like Emanuel and Richard Daley served multiple terms. "When we get in the game, the rules change."

At a weekend campaign stop, Vallas said he is focused on things like public safety, Chicago's "demoralized" police department and the number of residents "fleeing" the city's school district.

"It's all a product of bad leadership," Vallas said.

A former city budget director who also led school systems in Chicago, New Orleans and Philadelphia, Vallas lost a 2019 bid for mayor. This time, he has been laser-focused on public safety, saying police officers who left the force under Lightfoot's administration will return if he's elected.

It seems to have resonated with voters, such as Antwain Jackson, who are concerned about an uptick in crime. Jackson said he supported Lightfoot four years ago but cast his ballot for Vallas in Tuesday's

election because he said Lightfoot “did not hold control over the violence in the communities.” Jackson said he feels particularly unsafe when riding public transit.

Johnson, who lives in one of Chicago’s most violent neighborhoods, says more needs to be done to provide affordable housing and social services such as mental health care.

Garcia, a former City Council member, state lawmaker and county commissioner, has called Lightfoot too combative and says he has a record of bringing people together.

The other candidates are businessman Willie Wilson, Chicago City Council members Sophia King and Roderick Sawyer, activist Ja’Mal Green and state Rep. Kambium “Kam” Buckner.

For man behind gene-edited babies, a rocky return to science

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Five years ago, scientist He Jiankui shocked his peers and the world with claims that he created the first genetically edited babies. Now, after serving three years in a Chinese prison for practicing medicine without a license, he faces obstacles and critics as he tries to re-enter science.

For months he’s been touting plans to develop affordable gene therapies for rare diseases, starting with the muscle-wasting condition Duchenne muscular dystrophy. He announced on social media last fall that he had opened a lab in Beijing. He spoke remotely about this new endeavor at an event in early February hosted by the University of Kent in the United Kingdom.

And last week, he announced to the press that he’d received a Hong Kong visa and might want to work in the financial hub. But Hong Kong officials revoked that visa hours later, saying false statements had been made and a criminal investigation would be launched.

The Associated Press has reached out to He several times by phone and email, but he has not agreed to an interview. He said on Twitter over the weekend that he will pause posting there to focus on his research. Others in the scientific world, meanwhile, are divided about his efforts at a comeback — with some expressing serious doubts.

“We have to be clear: He has no expertise in gene editing” and his previous experiment was “a total, total disaster,” said Kiran Musunuru, a University of Pennsylvania gene editing expert who wrote a book on the case. “I understand maybe some of this is a play to rehabilitate his reputation ... But how can anyone think this is a good idea?”

Some scientists worry he may return to the sort of work he did before, which involved using a tool called CRISPR-Cas9 to genetically edit embryos, disabling a gene that allows HIV to enter cells. The idea was to try to make the children resistant to AIDS.

The gene editing tool is a powerful one that may lead to treatments for many diseases. The scientists who discovered it were awarded the Nobel Prize in 2020. But He’s work was criticized across the globe because, by making edits to embryos, he was attempting changes that could be passed to future generations — potentially altering the course of human evolution. The work was also medically unnecessary and carried the risks of changing other genes.

It’s unclear how the three children who grew from the embryos — twins known as Lulu and Nana and a third child known as Amy — are doing.

Given He’s ambition, “I wouldn’t be surprised that a few years down the line if the opportunity arises, that he would go back” to that sort of work, said Dr. Samira Kiani, a genetic engineer and researcher at the University of Pittsburgh who produced a documentary on He’s story called “Make People Better.”

But Benjamin Hurlbut, an expert in bioethics and biomedicine at Arizona State University who is in touch with He off and on, said “there’s absolutely no reason” to believe he will do anything similar, and that He has the know-how and connections to build respectable projects in biotech.

“He’s done his time and he’s trying to start over,” Hurlbut said.

A REVEALING TALK

Kent sociologist Joy Zhang, an organizer of the U.K. event where He spoke, said most participants were scientists and academics based in China, and many arrived with open minds about him and his latest project.

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"It was really shocking how shameless he was boasting about his gene therapy when he had very little substance to show, either scientifically or ethically," Zhang said. "He proved that he's not a misunderstood genius. He's just a very egotistic opportunist."

During his 25-minute presentation, He spent most of the time explaining basic science, discussing his Duchenne research for less than two minutes, according to a scathing report published by event organizers. That included sharing his goal to raise 50 million Chinese yuan through charity (about \$7.3 million) and start clinical trials by March 2025.

"We've exposed that there is little substance" behind He's ambitious Duchenne gene therapy plans, the report said. "We were concerned that he might endanger another vulnerable population if his new venture remains unchecked."

Organizers said they invited He because China hadn't had an open discussion about CRISPR technology and ethics since his stunning announcement in 2018. They were disappointed He wouldn't talk about his recent past. A day earlier, he had pulled out of a planned talk at Oxford University, saying on Twitter he wasn't ready to do that.

Kiani said inviting He to speak at such events is a good idea because the scientific community can communicate what's right and wrong – and hear about his plans. "It would be very naive of us to think that if we don't engage him in any conversation, he will just go away," she said.

After He's presentation, a fellow scientist pressed him about whether he thought so-called "heritable human genome editing" should be banned. The question has become especially timely, experts say, as the U.K. fertility watchdog agency pushes for an overhaul of fertility laws that some worry could eventually lead to the legalization of the practice.

He wouldn't answer.

SCIENCE'S COMPETITIVE CULTURE

Cultural anthropologist Eben Kirksey, a fellow of St. Cross College at the University of Oxford, who wrote the book "The Mutant Project," said he's concerned about what He's past actions might portend about the future. For example, Kirksey said He misled the public about the health of the twin girls in the gene-editing experiment; Kirksey revealed in his book that they were born at 31 weeks gestation by emergency C-section.

Kirksey said, He's pursuit of fame and potentially-profitable breakthroughs again threaten to get in the way of "good, stable, well-thought-out science."

Besides the Duchenne research, He said last year on the social media platform Weibo that he was seeking funds from the Chinese government to develop an advanced type of machine that creates synthetic DNA that could be used for information storage. A tiny piece of synthetic DNA can store vast amounts of data.

His proposal for that project listed J. William Efcavitch, a scientific officer at a life sciences company in California, as a scientific adviser. Efcavitch, who did not respond to requests for comment, previously served on the scientific advisory board of Direct Genomics, a sequencing company He co-founded before the gene editing scandal.

Hurlbut said those plans wouldn't attract much attention if not for the scandal.

"There's something off about the singular preoccupation about the one individual – the sort of 'mad scientist' narrative – when what he did was embedded in a much larger network," Hurlbut said soon after the Weibo posting.

Something similar is bound to happen again, experts said, unless the global scientific community changes the competitive culture that pushes many into a race to be first, and unless people ask: Should we rush forward just because we can?

Saying He went rogue points the finger elsewhere, Hurlbut said, "rather than asking: What did this grow out of? Do we have anything to do with this?"

Coronavirus origins still a mystery 3 years into pandemic

By LAURA UNGAR and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A crucial question has eluded governments and health agencies around the world since the COVID-19 pandemic began: Did the virus originate in animals or leak from a Chinese lab?

Now, the U.S. Department of Energy has assessed with “low confidence” in that it began with a lab leak, according to a person familiar with the report who wasn’t authorized to discuss it. The report has not been made public.

But others in the U.S. intelligence community disagree.

“There is not a consensus right now in the U.S. government about exactly how COVID started,” John Kirby, the spokesman for the National Security Council, said Monday. “There is just not an intelligence community consensus.”

The DOE’s conclusion was first reported over the weekend in the Wall Street Journal, which said the classified report was based on new intelligence and noted in an update to a 2021 document. The DOE oversees a national network of labs.

White House officials on Monday declined to confirm press reports about the assessment.

In 2021, officials released an intelligence report summary that said four members of the U.S. intelligence community believed with low confidence that the virus was first transmitted from an animal to a human, and a fifth believed with moderate confidence that the first human infection was linked to a lab.

While some scientists are open to the lab-leak theory, others continue to believe the virus came from animals, mutated, and jumped into people — as has happened in the past with viruses. Experts say the true origin of the pandemic may not be known for many years — if ever.

CALLS FOR MORE INVESTIGATION

The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence declined to comment on the report. All 18 offices of the U.S. intelligence community had access to the information the DOE used in reaching its assessment.

Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard, said she isn’t sure what new intelligence the agencies had, but “it’s reasonable to infer” it relates to activities at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China. She said a 2018 research proposal co-authored by scientists there and their U.S. collaborators “essentially described a blueprint for COVID-like viruses.”

“Less than two years later, such a virus was causing an outbreak in the city,” she said.

The Wuhan institute had been studying coronaviruses for years, in part because of widespread concerns — tracing back to SARS — that coronaviruses could be the source of the next pandemic.

No intelligence agency has said they believe the coronavirus that caused COVID-19 was released intentionally. The unclassified 2021 summary was clear on this point, saying: “We judge the virus was not developed as a biological weapon.”

“Lab accidents happen at a surprising frequency. A lot of people don’t really hear about lab accidents because they’re not talked about publicly,” said Chan, who co-authored a book about the search for COVID-19 origins. Such accidents “underscore a need to make work with highly dangerous pathogens more transparent and more accountable.”

Last year, the World Health Organization recommended a deeper probe into a possible lab accident. Chan said she hopes the latest report sparks more investigation in the United States.

China has called the suggestion that COVID-19 came from a Chinese laboratory “baseless.”

SUPPORT FOR ANIMAL THEORY

Many scientists believe the animal-to-human theory of the coronavirus remains much more plausible. They theorize it emerged in the wild and jumped from bats to humans, either directly or through another animal.

In a 2021 research paper in the journal Cell, scientists said the COVID-19 virus is the ninth documented coronavirus to infect humans — and all the previous ones originated in animals.

Two studies, published last year by the journal Science, bolstered the animal origin theory. That research found that the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan was likely the early epicenter. Scientists con-

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cluded that the virus likely spilled from animals into people two separate times.

"The scientific literature contains essentially nothing but original research articles that support a natural origin of this virus pandemic," said Michael Worobey, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona who has extensively studied COVID-19's origins.

He said the fact that others in the intelligence community looked at the same information as the DOE and "it apparently didn't move the needle speaks volumes." He said he takes such intelligence assessments with a grain of salt because he doesn't think the people making them "have the scientific expertise ... to really understand the most important evidence that they need to understand."

The U.S. should be more transparent and release the new intelligence that apparently swayed the DOE, Worobey said.

REACTION TO THE REPORT

The DOE conclusion comes to light as House Republicans have been using their new majority power to investigate all aspects of the pandemic, including the origin, as well as what they contend were officials' efforts to conceal the fact that it leaked from a lab in Wuhan. Earlier this month, Republicans sent letters to Dr. Anthony Fauci, National Intelligence Director Avril Haines, Health Secretary Xavier Becerra and others as part of their investigative efforts.

The now retired Fauci, who served as the country's top infectious disease expert under both Republican and Democratic presidents, has called the GOP criticism nonsense.

Rep. Mike McCaul, R-Texas, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has asked the Biden administration to provide Congress with "a full and thorough" briefing on the report and the evidence behind it.

Kirby, the National Security Council spokesman, emphasized that President Joe Biden believes it's important to know what happened "so we can better prevent future pandemics" but that such research "must be done in a safe and secure manner and as transparent as possible to the rest of the world."

Arizona Republicans disavow wide-ranging bribery allegation

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona's Republican-controlled Legislature has for years entertained a host of unsupported theories about fraudsters manipulating election results since Donald Trump's loss in 2020.

But lawmakers reached a limit for what they will tolerate last week, when a daylong hearing about elections ended with a presentation accusing a wide range of politicians, judges and public officials of taking bribes from a Mexican drug cartel.

Republican leaders raced Monday to distance themselves from the claims after they caught fire over the weekend on social media, where accounts that routinely share unsubstantiated claims of election fraud covered them widely. It was an embarrassment for an election fraud movement that has mostly found a sympathetic, or at least tolerant, ear among Arizona legislative Republicans.

House Speaker Ben Toma and Senate President Warren Petersen, both Republicans, pinned blame for the presentation on Rep. Liz Harris, a newly elected Republican who led a door-to-door canvassing effort searching for proof of fraud following the 2020 election. Her effort drew scrutiny from the U.S. Department of Justice's civil rights division, who warned about potential voter intimidation.

"What should have been a joint hearing to examine commonsense election reforms devolved into disgraceful fringe theater," Toma said in a statement Monday. "I'm not alone in believing that it was irresponsible and bad judgment for Ms. Harris to invite a person to present unsubstantiated and defamatory allegations in a legislative forum."

Harris did not respond to a request for comment.

Arizona Republican lawmakers have given wide leeway for people claiming to be election experts to share unsubstantiated or disproven claims in hearings at the Capitol. They're widely shared among right wing media figures and carry the imprimatur of an official legislative proceeding.

Last week's hearing was just the latest in a series of similar events since the start of the year, though it was the first to catch such widespread backlash.

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The focus on election conspiracies has persisted despite the drubbing that Republicans took in last year's election. The GOP was shut out of the state's top offices after voters rejected Republicans who promoted election lies.

Still, the ranks of election deniers in the Legislature grew as moderate Republicans declined to run for re-election or lost GOP primaries.

Petersen, the Senate president, said he agreed to allow last week's controversial hearing at the request of Harris and Toma, adding that Majority Leader Sonny Borrelli asked to review materials before they were presented but was not shown the bribery allegations.

"I assure you, had he known about the report, he would not have allowed it to be included," Petersen said in a statement. "This was definitely not the proper venue to make such allegations, nor to assess the credibility of such statements."

Even Sen. Wendy Rogers, who is deeply enmeshed in the national "stop the steal" movement of Trump supporters who claim the election was rigged and refused to back down when she was censured by the Senate last year, backtracked this time.

"To our knowledge, none of the people named had charges filed, have prosecutions pending, nor had any convictions made against them," Rogers said in a statement Sunday night. Rogers is chair of the Senate Elections Committee.

The allegations came at the end of a daylong hearing of the elections committees in the state House and Senate, which Democrats boycotted. They were offered in a 40-minute presentation by Jacqueline Breger, an insurance agent from Scottsdale, who attributed them to a report written by John Thaler, who she said was an attorney with a background in fraud investigations.

Thaler alleged, without reliable evidence, that two women working on behalf of the Sinaloa cartel used fraudulent mortgage documents to launder money to a wide range of officials, both Republicans and Democrats. Online sleuths discovered the women Thaler accused of facilitating the fraud were his ex-wife and her mother.

Thaler has a history of filing lawsuits accusing them of carrying out wide-ranging conspiracies. A federal judge last year dismissed one of his lawsuits, calling it "a delusional and fantastical narrative."

Thaler responded to a request for comment with an email questioning Toma's ethics.

"Speaker Toma is in no position to make any comment concerning (sic) findings related to election integrity or in what forum they should be presented," Thaler wrote.

Murdoch says some Fox hosts 'endorsed' false election claims

By RANDALL CHASE Associated Press

DOVER, Del. (AP) — Fox Corp. chairman Rupert Murdoch acknowledged that some Fox News commentators endorsed the false allegations by former President Donald Trump and his allies that the 2020 presidential election was stolen and that he didn't step in to stop them from promoting the claims, according to excerpts of a deposition unsealed Monday.

The claims and the company's handling of them are at the heart of a defamation lawsuit against the cable news giant by Dominion Voting Systems.

The recently unsealed documents include excerpts from a deposition in which Murdoch was asked about whether he was aware that some of the network's commentators — Lou Dobbs, Maria Bartiromo, Jeanine Pirro and Sean Hannity — at times endorsed the false election claims. Murdoch replied, "Yes. They endorsed."

The Murdoch deposition is the latest filing in the defamation case to reveal concerns at the top-rated network over how it was handling Trump's claims as its ratings plummeted after the network called Arizona for Joe Biden, angering Trump and his supporters.

An earlier filing showed a gulf between the stolen election narrative the network was airing in primetime and doubts about the claims raised by its stars behind the scenes. In one text, from Nov. 16, 2020, Fox News host Tucker Carlson said "Sidney Powell is lying" about having evidence for election fraud, referring

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to one of Trump's lawyers.

The Dominion case is the latest example showing that those who were spreading false information about the 2020 election knew there was no evidence to support it. The now-disbanded House committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol disclosed that many of Trump's top advisers repeatedly warned him that the allegations he was making about fraud were false — and yet the president continued making the claims.

Murdoch urged in September 2020, weeks before the election, that Dobbs be fired because he was "an extremist," according to Dominion's court filing. Murdoch also said he thought it was "really bad" for former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani to be advising Trump because Giuliani's "judgment was bad" and he was "an extreme partisan," according to a deposition excerpt.

Murdoch was asked whether he could have requested that Powell and Giuliani not be put on the air: "I could have. But I didn't," he replied.

Denver-based Dominion Voting Systems, which sells electronic voting hardware and software, is suing both Fox News Network and parent company Fox Corp. for defamation. Dominion contends that some Fox News employees deliberately amplified false claims by supporters of Trump that Dominion machines had changed votes in the 2020 election, and that Fox provided a platform for guests to make false and defamatory statements about the company.

Dominion attorneys contend that executives in the "chain of command" at both Fox News and Fox Corp. knew the network was broadcasting "known lies, had the power to stop it, but chose to let it continue. That was wrong, and for that, FC and FNN are both liable."

Attorneys for Fox Corp. note in their filing that Murdoch also testified that he never discussed Dominion or voter fraud with any of the accused Fox News hosts. They say Dominion has produced "zero evidentiary support" for the claim that high-level executives at Fox Corp. had any role in creating or publishing the statements at issue.

Dominion's contention that the company should be held liable because Murdoch might have had the power to step in and prevent the challenged statements from being aired, they said, "has no basis in defamation law, would obliterate the distinction between corporate parents and subsidiaries, and finds no support in the evidence."

The "handful of selective quotes" cited by Dominion have nothing to do with the statements that Dominion has challenged as defamatory, according to Fox Corp. attorneys. "Dominion repeatedly asked Fox News executives, hosts, and staff whether Fox Corporation employees played a role in the publication of the statements it challenges," they wrote. "The answer — every single time, for every single witness — was no."

Meanwhile, Fox News attorneys note that when voting-technology companies denied the allegations being made by Trump and his surrogates, Fox News aired those denials, while some Fox News hosts offered protected opinion commentary about Trump's allegations.

Winds shred Southern Plains; California set to get more snow

By JOHN ANTCZAK and SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Parts of the Southern Plains counted the injured and surveyed the damage Monday after tornadoes and other powerful winds swept through, killing at least one person in Oklahoma, while some Michigan residents faced a fifth consecutive day without power following last week's ice storm.

In California, the National Weather Service said winter storms will continue moving into the state through Wednesday after residents got a brief break from severe weather Sunday.

Parts of the Northeast that have seen little snow this winter were under a winter storm warning. And forecasters warned of continued high winds in parts of the Plains and of thunderstorms and possible tornadoes in the Ohio Valley.

A look at the weather threats around the country:

TORNADO FORECAST, CLEANUP

A storm system produced at least four tornadoes as it moved across central and northeastern Illinois on

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Monday, including two that formed in suburbs west of Chicago, authorities said. Initial reports suggested damage there was limited to fallen trees or shingles torn from buildings, said Rafal Ogorek, a meteorologist in the Chicago office of the National Weather Service.

At least one person was killed and three others injured after a tornado touched down Sunday night in far western Oklahoma near the town of Cheyenne, where 20 homes were damaged and four others destroyed, Roger Mills County Emergency Manager Levi Blacketter reported.

Statewide, Oklahoma officials received reports of 55 people who suffered weather-related injuries from area hospitals.

Officials in Norman, Oklahoma, confirmed 12 weather-related injuries after tornadoes and wind gusts as high as 90 mph (145 kph) were reported in the state Sunday night. The winds toppled trees and power lines, closed roads and damaged homes and businesses around Norman and Shawnee.

Classes were canceled Monday at two damaged elementary schools, said Norman Police Chief Kevin Foster.

Frances Tabler, of Norman, told KOCO-TV that she suffered a small cut on her head when a storm hit her home, tearing off much of its roof and sending debris flying. She said it was a miracle her children weren't hurt, although her daughter was trapped for awhile in a bedroom.

"It was just like a blizzard in the house with all the debris flying," Tabler told KOCO. "I was screaming for my kids."

The line of quick-moving thunderstorms that produced a swath of damaging wind gusts across likely qualified as a derecho, although that's not an official designation, said Nolan Meister, a National Weather Service meteorologist.

Meister said a wind gust of 114 mph (183 kph) was recorded in Texas, with gusts between 70 mph (113 kph) and 90 mph (145 kph) in central Oklahoma.

More than 76,000 customers lost power in Oklahoma, but most had it restored by Monday morning, Oklahoma's Office of Emergency Management reported.

There were reports of nine tornadoes in Kansas, Oklahoma and northwestern Texas, weather officials said. One tornado near Liberal, Kansas, damaged more than a dozen homes and caused minor injuries to one person, KSNW-TV reported.

BLIZZARD CONDITIONS IN WESTERN U.S.

Blizzard warnings went into effect Monday in the Sierra Nevada range as more rounds of rain and snow moved into California and Nevada.

An avalanche warning was issued for the backcountry around Lake Tahoe, where up to 6 feet (1.8 meters) of snow was expected over the next two days in the upper elevations and gale-force winds could create waves up to 5 feet (1.5 meters) high on the lake, the National Weather Service in Reno said. State offices across northern Nevada and the Nevada Legislature in Carson City were shut down because of the severe weather.

The new series of storms arrived even as parts of California were still digging out from last week's powerful storm, which added to a massive snowpack left by a siege of "atmospheric rivers" in December and January.

A 90-mile (145-km) stretch of U.S. 395 in California's eastern Sierra was shut down Monday evening due to whiteout conditions, state transportation officials said. Yosemite National Park announced it would be closed until midweek, and numerous roads were closed in Sequoia National Park. Trans-Sierra highways were subject to closures and chain requirements.

Los Angeles County declared a cold weather alert for valley and mountain areas north of LA as overnight temperatures were expected to plunge below freezing for much of the week. Shelters were opened for residents who don't have access to warm spaces.

East of Los Angeles, roads to San Bernardino Mountain resort communities around Big Bear Lake were closed after snow began falling again. The storm stranded more than 600 students at science camps in the Big Bear area over the weekend. The students from Irvine in Orange County were expected home Friday but officials decided it was safer to keep them in the mountains until the roads could be cleared. The California Highway Patrol began escorting out buses carrying the kids on Monday, the Irvine Unified

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School District said.

The northbound side of Interstate 5, the West Coast's major north-south highway, was shut down by wintry conditions and disabled vehicles about 90 miles (145 km) south of the Oregon line. Interstate 80, the major route between San Francisco and Lake Tahoe and Reno was closed due to blizzard conditions.

STORMS IN MICHIGAN AND NORTHEAST

In Michigan, still reeling from last week's ice storm and high winds, more than 180,000 customers were without power Monday, according to PowerOutage.us. That was down from more than 800,000 at one point last week. Crews continued their work to restore all electricity.

Leah Thomas, whose home north of Detroit lost power Wednesday night, finally got her power back Sunday afternoon — only to have it go out again at midday Monday.

"It's very frustrating, very frustrating," she said. "I'm just going to hope and cross my fingers that it comes back on here soon."

While not expecting a blockbuster storm by regional standards, southern New England braced for what could be the most significant snowfall of what has so far been a mild winter.

A winter storm warning covered parts of the Northeast, including Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Rhode Island, with heavy snow forecast for Monday evening through Tuesday afternoon.

Boston could get 5 inches and a messy Tuesday morning commute, according to the weather service. As much as 10 inches could fall in western Massachusetts, northwest Connecticut and southern Vermont.

White House: No more TikTok on gov't devices within 30 days

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House is giving all federal agencies 30 days to wipe TikTok off all government devices, as the Chinese-owned social media app comes under increasing scrutiny in Washington over security concerns.

The Office of Management and Budget calls the guidance, issued Monday, a "critical step forward in addressing the risks presented by the app to sensitive government data." Some agencies, including the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security and State, already have restrictions in place; the guidance calls on the rest of the federal government to follow suit within 30 days.

The White House already does not allow TikTok on its devices.

"The Biden-Harris Administration has invested heavily in defending our nation's digital infrastructure and curbing foreign adversaries' access to Americans' data," said Chris DeRusha, the federal chief information security officer. "This guidance is part of the Administration's ongoing commitment to securing our digital infrastructure and protecting the American people's security and privacy."

The guidance was first reported by Reuters.

Congress passed the "No TikTok on Government Devices Act" in December as part of a sweeping government funding package. The legislation does allow for TikTok use in certain cases, including for national security, law enforcement and research purposes.

TikTok spokesperson Brooke Oberwetter said Monday: "The ban of TikTok on federal devices passed in December without any deliberation, and unfortunately that approach has served as a blueprint for other world governments. These bans are little more than political theater."

House Republicans are expected to move forward Tuesday with a bill that would give Biden the power to ban TikTok nationwide. The legislation, proposed by Rep. Mike McCaul, looks to circumvent the challenges the administration would face in court if it moved forward with sanctions against the social media company.

If passed, the proposal would allow the administration to ban not only TikTok but any software applications that threaten national security. McCaul, the chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, has been a vocal critic of the app, saying it is being used by the Chinese Communist Party to "manipulate and monitor its users while it gobbles up Americans' data to be used for their malign activities."

"Anyone with TikTok downloaded on their device has given the CCP a backdoor to all their personal information. It's a spy balloon into your phone," the Texas Republican said in a statement Monday.

Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., his counterpart in the Senate, did not shut down the idea of the chamber

taking up a proposal that would empower Biden to take action against TikTok, saying it was “certainly something to consider.”

Oberwetter said: “We hope that when it comes to addressing national security concerns about TikTok beyond government devices, Congress will explore solutions that won’t have the effect of censoring the voices of millions of Americans.”

TikTok, owned by ByteDance Ltd., remains extremely popular and is used by two-thirds of teens in the U.S. But there is increasing concern that Beijing could obtain control of American user data that the app has obtained.

The company has been dismissive of the ban for federal devices and has noted that it is developing security and data privacy plans as part of the Biden administration’s ongoing national security review.

Canada also announced Monday that it is banning TikTok from all government-issued mobile devices. The European Union’s executive branch said last week it has temporarily banned TikTok from phones used by employees as a cybersecurity measure.

India revives civil militia after Hindu killings in Kashmir

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN Associated Press

DHANGRI, India (AP) — After seven Hindus were killed in early January in two back-to-back attacks in Dhangri village in disputed Kashmir, former Indian army soldier Satish Kumar described his sleepy mountainous village as an “abode of fear.”

Days after the deadly violence in the village in frontier Rajouri district, where homes are separated by maize and mustard fields, hundreds of residents staged angry protests across the Hindu-dominated Jammu region. In response, Indian authorities revived a government-sponsored militia and began rearming and training thousands of villagers, including some teenagers.

Kumar was among the first people to join the militia under the new drive and authorities armed him with a semiautomatic rifle and 100 bullets.

“I feel like a soldier again,” said the 40-year-old Kumar, who runs a grocery store since his retirement from the Indian military in 2018.

The militia, officially called the “Village Defense Group,” was initially formed in the 1990s as the first line of defense against anti-India insurgents in remote Himalayan villages that government forces could not reach quickly.

As the insurgency waned in their operational areas and as some militia members gained notoriety for brutality and rights violations, drawing severe criticism from human rights groups, the militia was largely disbanded.

But the January violence stirred unpleasant memories of past attacks in Rajouri, which is near the highly militarized Line of Control that divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan and where combat between Indian soldiers and rebels is not uncommon.

Brandishing his weapon inside his single-story concrete home on an overcast February day, Kumar justified his decision to join the militia as the “only way to combat fear and protect (my) family from terrorists.”

“I am a trained person and have fought against terrorists. But what is the use of (military) training if you do not have a weapon,” Kumar said. “Believe me, I felt almost incapacitated due to fear.”

On January 1, two gunmen killed four villagers, including a father and his son, and wounded at least five others. The next day, a blast outside one of the houses killed two children and injured at least 10 others. It is still unclear whether the explosive was left behind by the attackers. A week later, one of the injured died at a hospital, raising the overall death toll to seven.

“There was carnage in our village and Hindus were under attack,” Kumar said.

The police blamed militants fighting against Indian rule for decades in Kashmir, the Himalayan territory claimed by India and Pakistan in its entirety. But two months later, they are yet to announce a breakthrough or name any suspects, exacerbating fear and anger among residents in the village of about 5,000 where Hindus represent about 70% and the rest are Muslims.

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The policy to rearm civilians comes after India stripped Kashmir of its semiautonomy and took direct control of the territory amid a months-long security and communications lockdown in 2019. Kashmir has since remained on edge as authorities also put in place a slew of new laws that critics and many Kashmiris fear could change the region's demographics.

In New Delhi's effort to shape what it calls "Naya Kashmir," or a "new Kashmir," the territory's people have been largely silenced, with their civil liberties curbed, as India has shown no tolerance for any form of dissent.

So when the Dhangri violence occurred, the Indian government was swift to rearm the civilian militia even though it had announced its reconstitution in August last year.

Officials said they have since armed and provided weapons training to over 100 other Hindu men in Dhangri, while also lifting the ban on gun licenses in the already militarized Rajouri. The village already had over 70 former militiamen, some of whom still possess the colonial British-era Lee-Enfield rifles allotted to them over a decade ago.

For the first time, the militia has also been financially incentivized by the government, which said each member would be paid 4,000 Indian rupees (\$48) a month.

Still, the decision to revitalize the Village Defense Group is not without controversy.

Some security and political experts argue that the policy could weaponize divisions in Jammu's volatile hinterland where communal strife has historically existed.

In the past, more than 200 police cases, including charges of rape, murder and rioting, were registered against some of the tens of thousands of militiamen in Jammu region, according to government data.

"Small arms proliferation is dangerous for any society and when a state does it, it's a tacit admission of failure to secure a society," said Zafar Choudhary, a political analyst.

India has a long history of arming civilians in its counterinsurgency efforts and civilian militiamen were first used to fight separatists in India's northeastern states. In 2005, India's federal government founded a local militia, the Salwa Judum, to combat Maoist rebels in the central Chhattisgarh state. It was accused by rights groups of committing widespread atrocities and was disbanded in 2011.

In Kashmir, the civil defense groups were armed almost six years after the deadly insurgency against Indian rule began.

S.P. Vaid was a young officer in 1995 when he supervised the creation of the militia's first unit after two Hindu men were killed in a militant attack in a remote hilly village in Jammu region. Vaid, who recently retired as Indian-controlled Kashmir's top police officer, said hours after his team reached the village the locals demanded arms for their protection.

"I had no government brief on that, but I immediately sought permission from headquarters to provide the villagers with 10 guns," he said. "That's how it started."

The Indian government formally rolled out a policy to arm villagers a few months later.

Security officials argue that arming civilians deterred militant activity and helped stop the out-migration of Hindus from remote areas, unlike in the Kashmir valley where a year after armed rebellion broke out most local Hindus fled to Jammu amid militant threats and the killings of local community leaders.

Kuldeep Khoda, another former top police officer in the region credited for implementing the policy, said the results "surprised us."

"It was an experiment but it worked," Khoda said at his home in Jammu city.

For its work on civil defense groups, the region's police were given an award by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, an influential U.S.-based police group, Khoda said.

The militia, he said, "played a pivotal role in defeating Pakistani designs to instigate communal tensions."

But Choudhary, the political analyst, said "civilians are not armed in a functional democracy."

The sharpening divisions already appear stark in Dhangri.

Muslim residents in the village say fear and grief bind them together with their Hindu neighbors, yet their request to join the militia has been refused.

Mohammed Mushtaq is a former paramilitary soldier who lives near the house where gunmen first fired

on January 1.

"We have lived together for generations and have a similar social system. But fingers have been pointed at us," he said. Mushtaq and two other Muslim neighbors, also former soldiers, asked the authorities for weapons under the policy but were refused, he said.

As Mushtaq spoke sitting outside his home, the sounds of religious hymns and devotional songs floated from the loudspeakers of a Hindu temple on top of a hill. The chants were interspersed with the chirping of birds and occasional whistles from pressure cookers in some village kitchens.

Moments later, a muezzin called Muslims to early afternoon prayers.

Kumar, the former soldier and militia member, said the decision not to induct his Muslim neighbors in the militia was "arbitrary" as "we still do not know who carried out the massacre" in Dhangri.

Meanwhile, hundreds of old militia members in Rajouri's remote hamlets are oiling their weapons again. "We had locked up our guns and thought we would never need them," said 38-year-old Usha Raina, who has been a militia member since 2015 along with over two dozen other villagers in the neighboring hamlet of Kalal Khas.

"The incident (in Dhangri) has scared us all and the guns are back in our living rooms," she said.

UK, EU hail 'new chapter' with deal to fix Brexit trade spat

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The U.K. and the European Union sealed a deal on Monday to resolve their thorny post-Brexit trade dispute over Northern Ireland, hailing the agreement as the start of a "new chapter" in their often fractious relationship.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the grandly titled "Windsor Framework" after agreeing to the final details in Windsor, near London.

Von der Leyen told a news conference it was "historic what we have achieved today." Sunak said there had been a "decisive breakthrough."

The agreement, which will allow goods to flow freely to Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K., ends a dispute that has soured U.K.-EU relations, sparked the collapse of the Belfast-based regional government and shaken Northern Ireland's decades-old peace process.

Fixing it ends a long-running irritant for von der Leyen and is a big victory for Sunak — but not the end of his troubles. Selling the deal to his own Conservative Party and its Northern Irish allies may be a tougher struggle. Now Sunak awaits the judgment of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, which is boycotting the region's power-sharing government until the trade arrangements are changed to its satisfaction.

Sunak is due to make a statement to the House of Commons later setting out details of the deal.

Northern Ireland is the only part of the U.K. that shares a border with an EU member, the Republic of Ireland. When the U.K. left the bloc in 2020, the two sides agreed to keep the Irish border free of customs posts and other checks because an open border is a key pillar of Northern Ireland's peace process.

Instead, there are checks on some goods entering Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K. That angered British unionist politicians in Belfast, who say the new trade border in the Irish Sea undermines Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom.

The Democratic Unionist Party collapsed Northern Ireland's Protestant-Catholic power-sharing government a year ago in protest and has refused to return until the rules are scrapped or substantially rewritten.

The party's leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, said there had been "significant progress" but "key issues of concern" remained. He said the party would study the details before responding.

The devil, as ever, will be in those details, and the two sides emphasized different elements of the deal.

Sunak said the new rules "removed any sense of a border in the Irish Sea" by eliminating checks and paperwork for the vast majority of goods entering Northern Ireland. Only those destined to travel onward to EU member Ireland will be checked.

He said Northern Ireland's lawmakers would be able to block any changes to EU goods laws that applied to them by using an emergency mechanism labeled the "Stormont Brake" after the home of the Northern

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Ireland Assembly.

"Today's agreement delivers smooth-flowing trade within the whole United Kingdom, protects Northern Ireland's place in our union and safeguards sovereignty for the people of Northern Ireland," Sunak said.

Von der Leyen stressed that the EU's borderless single market would be protected by safeguards including "IT access, labels and enforcement procedures" and said the European Court of Justice would remain "the sole and ultimate arbiter of EU law."

The role of the European court in resolving any disputes that arise over the rules has been the thorniest issue in the talks. The U.K. and the EU agreed in their Brexit divorce deal to give the European court that authority. But the DUP and Conservative Party euroskeptics insist the court must have no jurisdiction in U.K. matters.

The British pound rose against the dollar after the deal was announced, and business groups welcomed the agreement. Tony Danker, who heads the Confederation of British Industry, said it would "allow businesses and politicians to turn their attention to economic growth and delivering greater prosperity."

Sunak will have to face down his Conservative critics — including former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who as leader at the time signed off on the trade rules that he now derides. Johnson was ousted by the Conservatives last year over ethics scandals, but is widely believed to hope for a comeback.

In a boost for Sunak's chances of winning Conservative support, lawmaker Steve Baker — a self-styled "Brexit hardman" who helped topple Prime Minister Theresa May by opposing her Brexit deal in 2019 — said he was "delighted" with the agreement.

Sunak said lawmakers in Parliament would get a vote on the deal "at the appropriate time," but not right away.

Even if Sunak faces a rocky road at home, the deal likely marks a dramatic improvement in relations with the EU. They were severely tested during the long Brexit divorce and chilled still further amid disputes over the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Under Johnson, the U.K. government introduced a bill that would let it unilaterally rip up parts of the Brexit agreement, a move the EU called illegal. Sunak's government said the bill would now be dropped.

Von der Leyen said the deal was "good news for scientists and researchers" because it would allow the U.K. to be readmitted to the bloc's Horizon science program. The EU had been blocking that until the trade dispute was fixed, to the chagrin of British scientists.

After sealing the deal, Von der Leyen had tea with King Charles III at Windsor Castle, 20 miles (32 kilometers) west of London. Buckingham Palace said the meeting was taking place on the government's advice, leading critics to accuse Sunak of dragging the monarch, who is supposed to remain neutral, into a political row.

Sunak's spokesman, Max Blain, said the government "would never" embroil the king in politics.

"His Majesty has met with a number of foreign leaders recently," he said, including Polish President Andrzej Duda and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy. "This is no different."

Fetterman 'on path to recovery,' will be out for more weeks

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A spokesman for Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman says the Democrat is "on a path to recovery" after checking himself into a hospital for clinical depression earlier this month, and he is still expected to be away from the Senate for several weeks.

"We understand the intense interest in John's status and especially appreciate the flood of well-wishes," Fetterman's communications director, Joe Calvello, said in a statement Monday afternoon. "However, as we have said this will be a weeks-long process and while we will be sure to keep folks updated as it progresses, this is all there is to give by way of an update."

Fetterman is being treated at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where he checked in Feb. 15 as he was still struggling with the aftereffects of a stroke. His office said at the time that he had experienced depression "off and on throughout his life," but it had only become severe in recent weeks. Capitol

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Physician Brian P. Monahan recommended his hospitalization after an evaluation, his office said then.

Fetterman, 53, suffered the stroke last May as he was campaigning in a tough Senate race against GOP nominee Dr. Mehmet Oz. He won the election in November and was sworn in Jan. 3, giving Democrats an extra seat in the Senate and a 51-49 majority.

One of Fetterman's main aftereffects from the stroke is auditory processing disorder, which can render someone unable to speak fluidly and quickly process spoken conversation into meaning. To manage it, Fetterman uses devices in conversations, meetings and congressional hearings that transcribe spoken words in real time.

Post-stroke depression is common, with one in three stroke patients suffering from it, and is treatable through antidepressant medication and counseling, doctors say.

Pennsylvania's other senator, Democrat Bob Casey, returned to the Senate on Monday. He had also been away in recent weeks after he underwent surgery for prostate cancer.

'A time bomb': India's sinking holy town faces grim future

By KRUTIKA PATHI and SHONAL GANGULY Associated Press

JOSHIMATH, India (AP) — Inside a shrine overlooking snow-capped mountains, Hindu priests heaped spoonfuls of puffed rice and ghee into a crackling fire. They closed their eyes and chanted in Sanskrit, hoping their prayers would somehow turn back time and save their holy — and sinking — town.

For months, the roughly 20,000 residents in Joshimath, burrowed in the Himalayas and revered by Hindu and Sikh pilgrims, have watched the earth slowly swallow their community. They pleaded for help that never arrived, and in January their desperate plight made it into the international spotlight.

But by then, Joshimath was already a disaster zone. Multistoried hotels slumped to one side; cracked roads gaped open. More than 860 homes were uninhabitable, splayed by deep fissures that snaked through ceilings, floors and walls. And instead of saviors they got bulldozers that razed whole lopsided swaths of the town.

The holy town was built on piles of debris left behind by years of landslides and earthquakes. Scientists have warned for decades, including in a 1976 report, that Joshimath could not withstand the level of heavy construction that has recently been taking place.

"Cracks are widening every day and people are in fear. We have been saying for years this is not just a disaster, but a disaster in the making... it's a time bomb," said Atul Sati, an activist with the Save Joshimath Committee.

Joshimath's future is at risk, experts and activists say, due in part to a push backed by the prime minister's political party to grow religious tourism in Uttarakhand, the holy town's home state. On top of climate change, extensive new construction to accommodate more tourists and accelerate hydropower projects in the region is exacerbating subsidence — the sinking of land.

Located 1,890 meters (6,200 feet) above sea level, Joshimath is said to have special spiritual powers and believed to be where Hindu guru Adi Shankaracharya found enlightenment in the 8th century before going on to establish four monasteries across India, including one in Joshimath.

Visitors pass through the town on their way to the famous Sikh shrine, Hemkund Sahib, and the Hindu temple, Badrinath.

"It must be protected," said Brahmachari Mukundanand, a local priest who called Joshimath the "brain of North India" and explained that "Our body can still function if some limbs are cut off. But if anything happens to our brain, we can't function. ... Its survival is extremely important."

The town's loose topsoil and soft rocks can only support so much and that limit, according to environmentalist Vimlendu Jha, may have already been breached.

"You can't just construct anything anywhere just because it is allowed," he said. "In the short term, you might think it's development. But in the long term, it is actually devastation."

At least 240 families have been forced to relocate without knowing if they would be able to return.

Prabha Sati, who fled Joshimath in a panic last month when her home began to crack and tilt, came back

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to grab the television, idols of Hindu gods and some shoes before state officials demolished her home. "We built this house with so much difficulty. Now I will have to leave everything behind. Every small piece of it will be destroyed," she said, blinking back tears.

Authorities, ignoring expert warnings, have continued to move forward with costly projects in the region, including a slew of hydropower stations and a lengthy highway. The latter is aimed at further boosting religious tourism, a key plank of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

In 2021, Modi promised a prosperous decade ahead for Uttarakhand. It is dotted with several holy shrines and improving the state's infrastructure has already led to a steady rise in pilgrims over the decades. Nearly 500,000 passed through Joshimath in 2019, state data shows.

"In the next 10 years, the state will receive more tourists than it did in the last 100 years," Modi said.

A big Uttarakhand tourism draw is the Char Dham pilgrimage, one of the toughest in India.

The route takes people to four, high-altitude Hindu temples. Pilgrims traverse challenging terrain, dropping oxygen levels and harsh weather between Badrinath, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Yamunotri temples. In 2022, over 200 out of the 250,000 pilgrims died while making the journey. Authorities said the rise in visitors was straining existing infrastructure.

Already underway, the Char Dham infrastructure project, aims to make the journey more accessible via a 10-meter (32-foot) wide and 889-kilometer (552 miles) long all-weather highway as well as a 327-kilometer (203-mile) railway line that would crisscross through the mountains.

It is a controversial project with some experts saying it will exacerbate the fragile situation in the upper Himalayas where several towns are built atop landslide debris.

Veteran environmentalist Ravi Chopra called the project a desecration when he resigned from a court-ordered committee studying its impact. To create such wide roads, engineers would need to smash boulders, cut trees and strip shrubbery, which he said will weaken slopes and make them "more susceptible to natural disasters."

Urban planning expert Kiran Shinde suggested a pedestrian corridor instead, noting these places were never meant for cars nor crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

"The highway is the most disastrous thing to happen to the Char Dham," said Shinde, a professor at Australia's La Trobe University who has written on religious tourism. "Let people walk."

Cracks continue to form. Located near a rail line construction site, Sangeeta Krishali's home in Lachmoli, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Joshimath, has them. She fears for her safety: "It happened there, it can happen here, too."

In Joshimath's foothills, construction was paused on a road for the Char Dham project that would ferry tourists faster to the Badrinath temple after cracks emerged in people's homes.

Locals feared it was too late. A long, jagged crack running across one of the front walls in the famed Adi Shankaracharya monastery had deepened worryingly in recent weeks, said Vishnu Priyanand, one of the priests.

"Let places of worship remain as places of worship. Don't make them tourist spots," he pleaded.

It's not just the highways. For the past 17 years, Atul Sati, the Save Joshimath Committee member, has been convinced that a hydropower station located near his town could one day ruin it. He isn't alone. In late January, hundreds of residents protested against the National Thermal Power Corporation's Tapovan project. Posters reading 'Go back NTPC' are plastered across the town's main market.

"Our town is on the verge of destruction because of this project," Sati said.

Locals say construction blasts for a 12-kilometer (7-mile) tunnel for the station are causing their homes to crumble. Work has been suspended but NTPC officials deny any link to Joshimath's subsidence. An expert committee is still investigating the cause, but state officials earlier blamed faulty drainage systems.

The state government announced interim relief packages, including compensation worth 150,000 rupees (\$1,813) to each affected family, said Himanshu Khurana, the officer in charge of Chamoli district where Joshimath is located. Various government agencies were conducting surveys to determine what caused the damage, he added.

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The crisis in Joshimath has reignited questions over whether India's quest for more hydropower in the mountains to cut its reliance on coal can be achieved sustainably. Uttarakhand, home to more than 30 rivers and surrounded by melting glaciers, has around 100 hydropower projects in varying stages.

In 2021, 200 people died after the Tapovan plant near Joshimath was submerged by severe floods caused in part by fast shrinking glaciers, and over 6,000 were killed in the state after a devastating cloudburst in 2013.

The heavy construction required for hydropower, like blasting boulders, diverting river flows and cutting through forests, in a region already vulnerable to climate change, could do irreparable damage, experts warn.

It could also displace entire villages, as residents of a hamlet near Joshimath found out.

Haat, a village along the Alaknanda River, was once a sacred hamlet that traced its origins to the guru Adi Shankaracharya, who is said to have established another temple here in the 8th Century.

Today, it is a dumping site for waste and a storage pit for construction materials after the village was acquired in 2009 by an energy enterprise to build a hydropower project.

The Laxmi Narayan temple, encircled by grey stacks of cement, is the only part of the village still standing. All of its residents left over the years as authorities began razing down their homes, said Rajendra Hatwal, once the village chief who now lives in another town nearby.

The project, he fumed, had killed Haat.

"What sort of development requires destroying these priceless places? We don't want any part of it."

A court last year directed authorities to stop dumping waste near the historic temple, which was once the last rest stop for devotees on their pilgrimage to Badrinath.

Hatwal and a few others still check in on the temple often. A caretaker, who refused to leave, lives in a makeshift room next to it. He sweeps the grounds, cleans the idols and prepares tea for the odd guest who comes through.

They feared its days, like their homes, were also numbered.

"We are fighting to protect the temple. We want to preserve our ancient culture to pass on to a new generation," said Hatwal. "They have not only destroyed a village - they have finished a 1,200 year old culture."

Messi and Putellas voted best players at FIFA awards again

PARIS (AP) — World Cup champion Lionel Messi edged Kylian Mbappé again, this time to take FIFA's best men's player award on Monday.

The best women's player was Spain's Alexia Putellas for a second straight year.

After steering Argentina to World Cup glory in an epic final against Mbappé's France last year in Qatar, Messi won the best player vote against Mbappé and Karim Benzema and secured the FIFA prize for the seventh time in 14 years.

He won the World Cup at his record-equaling fifth attempt.

"It was a crazy year for me," Messi said. "I could fulfil my (World Cup) dream after fighting for it for so long. And in the end it happened, and it was the most beautiful thing of my career. It's the dream of every player, but very few can achieve it, so I'm thankful to God for being able to do it."

The three players made the final shortlist in voting by a global panel of national team captains and coaches, selected journalists in each of FIFA's 211 member countries, plus fans online.

The 35-year-old Messi also beat Mbappé — who was seeking his first best player award from FIFA — to the Golden Ball trophy awarded by FIFA for the World Cup's best player. Mbappé earned the Golden Boot as top scorer.

In the FIFA Awards vote, Messi had 52 points, Mbappé 44, and Benzema 34.

Mbappé, 11 years younger than Messi at 24 and considered Messi's heir apparent on the world stage, made the three-man shortlist for the first time. He was fourth in voting for the 2018 award, the year he led France to the World Cup title.

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Real Madrid star Benzema won the more prestigious Ballon d'Or in October ahead of the World Cup. The France forward missed the tournament because of injury. Messi was not on the long list of Ballon d'Or candidates announced in August.

Robert Lewandowski won the FIFA award the last two years, and Cristiano Ronaldo was left off the 14-player shortlist for the award this year for the first time.

Messi broke a record he shared with Ronaldo by making the men's world best XI for the 16th time. The team included Belgium's Thibaut Courtois, Morocco's Achraf Hakimi, Portugal's João Cancelo, Dutchman Virgil van Dijk, Belgium's Kevin de Bruyne, Croatia's Luka Modric, Brazil's Casemiro, Norway's Erling Haaland and France's Mbappé and Benzema.

Earlier Monday, French prosecutors opened a preliminary investigation into a rape accusation against Hakimi, a defender at Paris Saint-Germain.

Messi voted for former Barcelona teammate Neymar as his choice for best player. Only Brazil captain Thiago Silva also voted on Neymar.

Russia's coach and captain were not banned from voting in the award.

Putellas won her award from Alex Morgan of the United States and Beth Mead, who led England to the European Championship title in 2022.

Barcelona playmaker Putellas made the top three again despite being injured days before the Euro and missing the tournament. She scored 34 goals across all competitions last season.

Mead was the joint top scorer at the Euro, and was named the tournament's best player. She sustained a serious knee injury in November while playing for Arsenal and could miss the Women's World Cup in July in Australia and New Zealand.

Morgan, who was second in the 2019 vote to teammate Megan Rapinoe, was player of the tournament when the U.S. won the CONCACAF W Championship last year. She was also the joint top scorer.

Earlier, Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni was voted FIFA men's coach of the year after leading his team to the World Cup title in December.

The women's coach award went to Sarina Wiegman, who led the England to the title at the Women's European Championship.

Scaloni took over Argentina at the end of 2018 on an interim basis, and was widely criticized for lacking experience as he had never coached a professional team. Earlier Monday, his contract as the national team coach was extended to the end of the 2026 World Cup.

The other coaches on the shortlist were Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti and Manchester City's Pep Guardiola.

The women's goalkeeper award was given to Euro winner Mary Earps of England, and the best men's goalkeeper was Argentina's World Cup winner Emiliano Martínez.

The event in Paris was marked by tributes to Pelé, who died late last year at age 82 following a battle with colon cancer. Pelé's wife, Marcia Aoki, received a trophy honoring the soccer great from the hands of former Brazil striker Ronaldo.

"I have three words to say to God, who gave us Edson; to Edson, who gave us Pelé; and to the world, who received them so well: Grateful, grateful and grateful," she said.

Rapid demise of 'Dilbert' is no surprise to those watching

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The comic strip "Dilbert" disappeared with lightning speed following racist remarks by creator Scott Adams, but it shouldn't come as a shock to anyone who has followed them both.

Adams, who is white, was an outspoken presence on social media long before describing Black people as a "hate group" on YouTube and, to some, "Dilbert" had strayed from its roots as a chronicler of office culture.

The editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, which dumped "Dilbert" last year, said the comic strip "went from being hilarious to being hurtful and mean." The Los Angeles Times, which joined dozens of other newspapers in dropping the comic following last week's remarks, had quietly replaced four of Adams'

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strips last year.

"He kind of ran out of office jokes and started integrating all this other stuff so after a while, it became hard to distinguish between Scott Adams and 'Dilbert,'" said Mike Peterson, columnist for the industry blog The Daily Cartoonist.

As individual newspapers told readers they were dropping "Dilbert," the company that distributed the strip, Andrews McMeel Universal, said it was severing ties with Adams. By Monday, "Dilbert" was gone from the GoComics site, which also features many top comics such as "Peanuts" and "Calvin and Hobbes."

Adams said Monday that the strip, which first appeared in 1989, will only be available on his subscription service on the Locals platform.

"Dilbert" is effectively dead, Peterson said.

Adams said Monday on YouTube that his distributor didn't really have a choice because clients and other cartoonists were mad. "They were just forced into it," he said.

On Twitter, he said his book publisher and book agent had "canceled" him. The Penguin Random House imprint Portfolio said it wouldn't publish Adams' book "Reframe Your Brain" in September, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Adams has long been active on Twitter, whose CEO, Elon Musk, was among the few to publicly back him. He also blogs regularly and puts out a regular podcast on YouTube.

He's attracted attention for comments he's made in the past, including saying in 2011 that women are treated differently by society for the same reason as children and the mentally disabled — "it's just easier this way for everyone." He said 2016 GOP presidential candidate Carly Fiorina had an "angry wife face."

Adams became a vocal supporter of former President Donald Trump, saying Trump had a hypnotist's skill in attracting followers. He said that stance cost him money in lost speaker's fees.

He said he lost the prime-time animated "Dilbert" series that ran on UPN for two seasons for "being white" when the network decided to target a Black audience, and that he lost two other corporate jobs because of his race.

During the Feb. 22 episode of his YouTube podcast "Real Coffee with Scott Adams," he referenced a Rasmussen Reports survey that had asked whether people agreed with the statement "It's OK to be white." Most agreed, but Adams noted that 26% of Black respondents disagreed and others weren't sure.

The Anti-Defamation League said the phrase at the center of the question was popularized as a trolling campaign by members of 4chan — a notorious anonymous message board — and was adopted by some white supremacists. Rasmussen Reports is a conservative polling firm that has used its Twitter account to endorse false and misleading claims about COVID-19 vaccines, elections and the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Adams repeatedly referred to people who are Black as members of a "hate group" or a "racist hate group" and said he would no longer "help Black Americans." On his podcast Monday, he called his "hate group" remark "hyperbole," but continued to defend his advice that white people "get the hell away" from Blacks.

In announcing that "Dilbert" would be cut from the Kansas City Star, the newspaper's community engagement editor, Derek Donovan, said Adams' "antagonistic, childishly macho persona" has been a constant for years.

"It's not cancel culture," editor Richard Green of the Santa Rosa Press Democrat in California said. "It's doing the right thing."

The Sun Chronicle in Attleboro, Massachusetts, left a blank space Monday where "Dilbert" would normally run and said it would keep it that way through March "as a reminder of the racism that pervades our society."

The San Francisco Chronicle stopped publishing "Dilbert" last October — a move that drew only a handful of complaints. Editor-in-Chief Emilio Garcia-Ruiz said in the newspaper that he had objected to a strip that said in an effort to diversify workplaces, straight men should pretend to be gay.

In a Sept. 2 "Dilbert" strip, a boss said that traditional performance reviews would be replaced by a "wokeness" score. When an employee complained that could be subjective, the boss said, "That'll cost you two points off your wokeness score, bigot."

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In an August strip, the boss said the company was getting into the “pandemic prevention market” and creating demand by unleashing a deadly virus.

A Black employee featured in an Oct. 20 strip noted that his boss ignored his actual accomplishments to recommend him for a job for which he was not qualified. The employee backed down when told it would be a big jump in pay.

Peterson said there are other examples of how Adams’ attitudes had replaced the biting humor that Peterson and a legion of middle managers loved. Adams seemed to run out of jokes.

“The strip jumped the shark,” he said.

Review: Michael B. Jordan delivers a brawler in ‘Creed III’

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

It must be a daunting prospect to pick up a franchise on the third movie. Add in the pressure of following filmmakers like Ryan Coogler and Steven Caple Jr. in your directorial debut that you’re also starring in and it’s enough to make you wonder what on earth Michael B. Jordan was thinking.

But “Creed III,” in theaters nationwide Friday, is a new start for Adonis Creed. He’s finally out of the shadow of his father Apollo and Rocky Balboa, whose legacy loomed large over the first two films (Sylvester Stallone decided “Creed II” would be his last). With Rocky out of the way, and the younger Creed solidly in place as the best in the world, the franchise can breathe a little and grow.

Enter the Dame (not that kind of dame).

This one is in the form of Jonathan Majors, an old buddy from their teenage years in a group home in the early 2000s. Dame, or Damian Anderson, is a bit older than Creed. He’s the one who’s boxing in the underground matches at night. The young Creed (Thaddeus J. Mixon), a little awkward, a little too eager to please and a little too ready for trouble, is the one carrying water (and bags and gloves) and helping him strategize. There is a palpable menace established early on with these two — an unequal power and age dynamic, sure, but also the implication that Dame (Spence Moore II) is more than willing to play dirty. He carries a gun. He fixes games. And he has a hold on young Adonis. The flashback ends with a violent altercation outside a convenience store. Dame goes away. Creed becomes Creed.

This flashback is important but does get the film off to a bit of a slow start, jumping forward chronologically to Creed’s last fight and then to his present-day retirement life — a luxurious and tranquil existence in the Hollywood Hills in a modernist mansion with his daughter Amara (Mila Davis Kent) and wife Bianca (Tessa Thompson), who has given up singing mostly to produce hit records. Life is nice for the obscenely rich in LA: The clothes are expensive, the cars are price upon request, the house always spotless and the staff unseen (save for a chef in one scene). At the gym run by Duke (Wood Harris), he’s trying to mentor the next generation of champions.

Then Dame re-appears and the movie gets its urgency back. His old pal was locked up for 18 years after that incident and is freshly out of prison, wanting to pick up his life and his boxing aspirations where he left off. Creed is pleasant but guarded — for much of the film he acts like an aloof celebrity, hyper-conscious of not letting anyone in too close and compartmentalizing the uglier aspects of his past. Still, he takes him out to lunch and offers to help him in any way he can. This is both the right thing to do and also a huge mistake.

“Creed III” is, among other things, about what happens when men don’t talk about their feelings (and ignore Duke’s advice).

At times, it also feels more like a thriller than a sports film as you watch Dame infiltrate Creed’s world. It’s always Creed’s idea, there’s always an invitation, but Dame’s sudden omnipresence starts to feel unavoidable and ominous. Dame has a bit of Eve Harrington in him, but also a very real, very relatable chip on his shoulder for the time he lost. In another movie, he could very well be the underdog we’re rooting for — some of the audience may be rooting for him even so.

Lurking behind everything is the madness that comes from not being able to do what you were born to do. It’s something athletes grapple with earlier than most other professionals. An injury at 23 could

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take you out when you're just getting started and in this film Creed, Dame and Bianca are having similar existential crises — though Dame's desperation is the driving force behind everything that happens.

Jordan and his filmmaking team craft two particularly stunning matches full of suspense, drama and slow motion sweat beads flying through the air. These are only lessened by the cheesy, unhelpful announcers spouting cliches and no actually helpful exposition or explanation outside the ring. And ultimately, it's a promising debut for the 36-year-old, who shows here that he'll never let his own star ego get in the way of a film: Majors steals the show, and Jordan is there to capture it.

There's a comforting but predictable rhythm to a boxing franchise like Rocky and now Creed. The movies must keep justifying themselves, inventing new challenges that make them all feel different enough. But most essentially boil down to the same framework: You have to knock the champion down to a believable underdog again. While there is a case to be made for the final fight to, let's just say, go a different way than it does, "Creed III" is still a knockout.

"Creed III," an MGM release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for, "Violence, some strong language and intense sports action." Running Time: 116 minutes. Three stars out of four. — MPA Definition of PG-13: Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. — Follow AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr on Twitter: www.twitter.com/lbahr.

Broadway's 'Parade' fights hatred both onstage and off

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — There's so much darkness awaiting Ben Platt in his new Broadway role these days that he's countered with a dash of brightness.

"I painted my dressing room pink so that it's a very bright and warm and joyful place to be, so that I can leave what happens on the stage on the stage," he says.

Platt deserves all the joy he can grab while playing the doomed lead anti-hero in the musical "Parade," adapted from a true story that took place in Atlanta just before World War I.

He plays Leo Frank, a Brooklyn-born Jewish factory manager falsely accused of murdering a young girl. He is tried and convicted, has his death sentence commuted but then is lynched by a Southern mob who dislikes his religion and Northern values.

"It's really a human story about how people — because of the traumas of their past — can't escape the prejudice of their present," says the show's director, Michael Arden.

The musical is being revived on Broadway just as the nation endures another wave of anti-Semitism, which has brought darkness even to the theater's front door. The show's first preview was marred by a few neo-Nazi protesters outside.

That has only proven to Platt and the rest of the "Parade" team that bringing this musical back in front of an audience is the right thing to do in the face of bigotry and bullying.

"I think both in terms of specifically anti-Semitism and in terms of just the horrors of social media and online mob mentality, it feels all too contemporary," Platt says. "I think everybody could feel very palpably that this was the piece for right in this very moment and that there was really a reason to be doing it."

This is Platt's first return to Broadway since his star-making turn in "Dear Evan Hansen," which earned him a Tony and a Grammy and propelled his career to TV shows like "The Politician" and a record deal with Atlantic Records. The new musical opens March 16 at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre.

Platt calls "Parade" a "hidden gem" in musical theater and grew up listening to its songs. It was mostly well-received by critics in 1998 when it first arrived — and later won Tonys for best book and score — but closed within a few months, despite a story by "Driving Miss Daisy" writer Alfred Uhry and music and lyrics by multiple Tony-winner Jason Robert Brown. Platt says it was ahead of its time.

"I think maybe people just weren't ready to hear it at that point," he says. "There's a lot of gray in the show, and it's also a piece that holds racism and anti-Semitism in the same conversation and highlights that they are both products, particularly in America, of the same system of white supremacy."

Behind the legal drama, there is a second — the story of two people, Frank and his wife, Lucille, whose

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relationship gets stronger as their lives get more difficult. Micaela Diamond stars here as Lucille, and it is the first time Jewish actors have led a professional production of "Parade" of this scale.

"I'm hopeful that this will be an opportunity for those who didn't already appreciate it, to find it and for it to get some of the due that it maybe should have gotten in the first place," Platt says.

What viewers will find is a complex portrayal of Frank, a fussy, often unpleasant man who dislikes the South and who complains about the food when he is first thrown in jail. That challenge attracted Platt.

"There's some moral challenge and ambiguity," says Platt. "I think it's an important message when you're representing anyone who's been oppressed or victimized, let alone a real person, to say that just because somebody isn't perfect and entirely virtuous, it doesn't mean that they aren't deserving of justice and truth."

Arden grew up in Midland, Texas, listening to Broadway cast albums and was "just transported by the score" of "Parade." He watched a video capture of the original show and saw a version mounted by the Donmar Warehouse in 2007.

"It is rare when we get an opportunity to go to the theater and truly be challenged to reflect on our own shortcomings in this way and kind of stir up the darkness of our past," he says. "We must reexamine our past or else we repeat it."

Arden hopes his direction has focuses on the intimacy of the marriage, and he has stripped the musical down, without a lot of set design and without a heavy hand.

"We're sort of presenting this play as evidence for an audience to make up their own minds about something, as opposed to trying to necessarily fully paint the picture in a way that a film could or perhaps the original production attempted to," he says.

It is a challenging, often wrenching show and Platt gets into character each night in his pink dressing room with some key items: A framed photo of Leo and Lucille Frank taken at their happiest.

"I think it helps me to remember that the main purpose here is to honor them and to show the love between them and the humanity between them as much, if not more, than the tragedy that befell them," he says.

There's also a photo of him and his fiance, Noah Galvin, and of his family, including one from his brother's bar mitzvah. He calls them "reminders of where I come from and what I get to go home to, that Leo didn't get to go home to."

"As traumatic and and dark as this particular story is, my greatest joy in life is to be in the theater," he adds. "Even going through something like this and emotionally finding my way through it, I do go home with such a fulfillment and satisfaction because this is really my dream."

Mexican president disparages pro-democracy demonstrators

By FABIOLA SANCHEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico's president lashed out Monday against demonstrators opposed to his plan to cut election funding, belittling their concerns about threats to democracy and dashing any hopes that he would try to ease rising political tensions.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador seemed to revel in the conflict, hurling insults at the tens of thousands of people who demonstrated over the weekend in Mexico City's main plaza, calling them thieves and allies of drug traffickers.

"There was an increase in the number of pick pockets stealing wallets here in the Zocalo, but what do you want, with so many white-collar criminals in one place?" López Obrador said at his daily morning press briefing.

At the root of the conflict are plans by López Obrador, which were approved last week by Mexico's Senate, to cut salaries and funding for local election offices, and scale back training for citizens who operate and oversee polling stations. The changes would also reduce sanctions for candidates who fail to report campaign spending.

López Obrador denies the reforms are a threat to democracy and says criticism is elitist. He argues that the funds should be redirected to helping the poor.

Riffing on the protesters' slogan "Don't touch the INE (National Electoral Institute)," López Obrador said

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their slogans were "Don't touch corruption," "Don't touch privileges," "Don't touch the Narco Government."

"They don't care about democracy, what they want is to continue with the oligarchy, the rule of the rich," the president said.

Demonstrators say the electoral law changes approved last week threaten democracy and could mark a return to past practices of vote manipulation. Few at Sunday's demonstration had any kind words for López Obrador, either.

"The path he is taking is toward socialism, communism," said Fernando Gutierrez, 55, a small businessman. "That's obvious, from the aid going to Cuba," Gutierrez said. López Obrador has imported coronavirus vaccines, medical workers and stone railway ballast from Cuba, but has shown little taste for socialist policies at home.

Sunday's demonstrators were clad mostly in white and pink — the color of the National Electoral Institute — and shouted slogans like "Don't Touch my Vote!" Like a similar but somewhat larger protest on Nov. 13, the demonstrators appeared somewhat more affluent than those at the average demonstration.

The heated nature of the debate drew attention from the U.S. government.

"Today, in Mexico, we see a great debate on electoral reforms that are testing the independence of electoral and judicial institutions," Brian A. Nichols, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Western hemisphere affairs, wrote in his Twitter account. "The United States supports independent, well-resourced electoral institutions that strengthen democratic processes and the rule of law."

López Obrador said last Thursday that he'll sign the changes into law, even though he expects court challenges. Many at Sunday's protest expressed hope that Mexico's Supreme Court would overturn some of the changes.

Lorenzo Cordova, the head of the National Electoral Institute, has said the reforms "seek to cut thousands of people who work every day to guarantee trustworthy elections, something that will of course pose a risk for future elections."

The president has pushed back against the judiciary, as well as regulatory and oversight agencies, raising fears among some that he is seeking to reinstitute the practices of the old PRI party, which bent the rules to retain Mexico's presidency for 70 years until its defeat in the 2000 elections.

Tyler Mattiace, who researches the Americas for Human Rights Watch, said it was "disappointing" that López Obrador decided to make major changes at the one part of Mexican democracy that is clearly working.

Vote counts have become much more reliable since the national electoral institute was founded in the 1990s, and the agency certified López Obrador's own victory in 2018 elections.

"It is worrisome that all this comes just before the 2024 elections, in a context in which the president has shown very little tolerance for those who don't agree with him," said Mattiace.

Elections in Mexico are expensive by international standards, in part because almost all legal campaign financing is, by law, supplied by the government. The electoral institute also issues the secure voter ID cards that are the most commonly accepted form of identification in Mexico, and oversees balloting in the remote and often dangerous corners of the country.

López Obrador remains highly popular in Mexico, with approval ratings of around 60%. While he cannot run for reelection, his Morena party is favored in next year's national elections and the opposition is in disarray.

Part of his popular appeal comes from railing against high-paid government bureaucrats, and he has been angered by the fact that some top electoral officials are paid more than the president. But López Obrador has also openly criticized oversight and regulatory agencies, the courts and congress.

The opposition, tarnished by corruption scandals, has struggled to compete with the president's popular spending and handout programs.

Rubén Salazar, the director of the Etellekt Consultores firm, said there is "a lack of leadership in the opposition to mount a defense of all these institutions like the INE and the Supreme Court."

Ex-Cardinal McCarrick asks court to dismiss sex assault case

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Lawyers for former Roman Catholic Cardinal Theodore McCarrick filed a motion Monday to dismiss a case charging him with sexually assaulting a boy decades ago, saying the 92-year-old once-powerful American prelate has dementia and is not competent to stand trial.

McCarrick pleaded not guilty in September 2021 in the Massachusetts case that alleges the priest sexually abused the boy at a wedding reception at Wellesley College in June 1974. He is the only U.S. Catholic cardinal, current or former, ever to be criminally charged with child sex crimes.

His attorneys said in their motion to dismiss that McCarrick was examined by a professor of psychiatry and behavioral science at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, who concluded the former cardinal suffers from dementia, likely due to Alzheimer's disease.

"While he has a limited understanding of the criminal proceedings against him, his progressive and irreparable cognitive deficits render him unable to meaningfully consult with counsel or to effectively assist in his own defense," McCarrick's lawyers wrote. They say McCarrick maintains his innocence of all charges.

A prosecutor told the judge during a hearing earlier Monday at the Dedham District Court that the Norfolk District Attorney's Office would be hiring its own expert to conduct a second opinion on competency, according to David Traub, a spokesperson for that office. The prosecutors' office declined further comment on the defense motion.

McCarrick, who lives in Dittmer, Missouri, faces three counts of indecent assault and battery on a person over 14. He can still face charges because he wasn't a Massachusetts resident and had left the state, stopping the clock on the statute of limitations.

Mitchell Garabedian, a well-known lawyer for church sexual abuse victims who is representing the man accusing McCarrick, said Monday that his client has "shown a lot of courage in coming forward to report the crimes and he intends to see this matter through to the end."

"Experience has taught me that the closer in time to trial the more an accused priest becomes incompetent," Garabedian said in an email.

No trial date has been set in McCarrick's case.

The man told authorities during a 2021 interview that McCarrick, who was close to the man's family when he was growing up, began abusing him as a young boy. Prosecutors say McCarrick would attend family gatherings and travel on vacations with them and that the victim referred to the priest as "Uncle Ted."

Prosecutors say the abuse continued throughout the years and happened again when the boy, who was then 16, was at his brother's wedding reception at Wellesley College.

Prosecutors say McCarrick told the boy his dad wanted him to have a talk with the priest because the boy was "being mischievous at home and not attending church." The man told investigators that they took a walk around campus, and McCarrick groped him before they went back to the party. The man said McCarrick also sexually assaulted him in a coat room after they returned to the reception, authorities wrote in the documents.

Prosecutors say McCarrick told the boy to say the "Hail Mary" and "Our Father" prayers before leaving the room.

The Associated Press generally doesn't identify people who report sexual assault unless they agree to be named publicly, which the victim in this case has not done.

Ordained as a priest in New York City in 1958, McCarrick ascended the church ranks despite apparently common knowledge in the U.S. and Vatican leadership that "Uncle Ted," as he was known, slept with seminarians.

McCarrick became one of the most visible Catholic Church officials in the U.S. and even served as the spokesman for fellow U.S. bishops when they enacted a "zero tolerance" policy against sexually abusive priests in 2002.

His fall began in 2017, when a former altar boy came forward to report the priest had groped him in New York when he was a teenager.

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The next year, the Archdiocese of New York announced McCarrick had been removed from ministry after finding the allegation to be “credible and substantiated,” and two New Jersey dioceses revealed they had settled claims against him in the past of sexual misconduct involving adults.

Pope Francis defrocked McCarrick in 2019 after a Vatican investigation determined he sexually abused minors, as well as adults.

A two-year internal investigation found that three decades of bishops, cardinals and popes downplayed or dismissed reports of sexual misconduct. Correspondence showed they repeatedly rejected the information as rumor and excused it as an “imprudence.”

The findings released in 2020 pinned much of the blame on Pope John Paul II, who appointed McCarrick archbishop of Washington, D.C., despite having commissioned an inquiry that confirmed McCarrick slept with seminarians.

DeSantis takes over Disney district, punishing company

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on Monday signed a bill that gives him control of Walt Disney World’s self-governing district, punishing the company over its opposition to the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” law.

The bill requires DeSantis, a Republican, to appoint a five-member board to oversee the government services that the Disney district provides in its sprawling theme park properties in Florida.

“Today the corporate kingdom finally comes to an end,” he said at a bill signing ceremony in Lake Buena Vista. “There’s a new sheriff in town, and accountability will be the order of the day.”

The signing came as DeSantis gears up for an expected presidential run and marks a high-profile legislative victory for a governor whose leveraging of cultural and political divides has pushed him to the fore of national Republican politics.

The takeover of the Disney district began last year when the entertainment giant, facing intense pressure, publicly opposed “Don’t Say Gay,” which bars instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade and lessons deemed not age-appropriate.

DeSantis moved quickly to penalize the company, directing lawmakers in the GOP-dominated Legislature to dissolve Disney’s self-governing district during a special legislative session, beginning a closely watched restructuring process. DeSantis and other Republican critics of Disney slammed the company for coming out against the education law, calling it a purveyor of “woke” ideology that inject inappropriate subjects into children’s entertainment.

This month, the governor called on lawmakers to return to the Capitol for another special session to finalize state control of the district, as well as approve legislation around some of his other key legislative priorities on immigration and voter fraud.

In taking on Disney, DeSantis furthered his reputation as a culture warrior willing to battle perceived political enemies and wield the power of state government to accomplish political goals, a strategy that is expected to continue ahead of his potential White House run.

The feud also reinforced the governor’s brash, go-it-alone leadership style, penalizing a massive employer, tourism driver and political donor in the state over the company’s stance on a piece of legislative policy.

DeSantis, whose book, “The Courage to be Free,” is coming out Tuesday, has moved in recent weeks to expand his political network through fundraisers and meetings with donors, elected officials and conservative influencers, adding to the speculation around his larger political aspirations.

The coming months will be critical to DeSantis as he builds his profile out beyond Florida. He is expected to utilize the coming regular legislative session, which begins next week, to bolster his conservative agenda before he announces his candidacy for president.

The new law changes the district’s name from the Reedy Creek Improvement District to the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District and subjects it to various layers of state oversight. Board members were previously named through entities controlled by Disney.

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It leaves the district and its financial abilities and debt obligations intact, addressing a chief concern of surrounding governments. It also prevents people who have worked with or contracted with a theme park in the past three years from serving on the district's new governing board.

At his news conference, DeSantis said he would appoint Tampa attorney Martin Garcia as the chairman of the district's new governing board, along with new board members Bridget Ziegler, a conservative school board member and wife of the Florida Republican party chairman Christian Ziegler; Brian Aungst Jr., an attorney and son of a former two-term Republican mayor of Clearwater; Mike Sasso, an attorney; and Ron Peri, head of The Gathering USA ministry.

Having a separate government allows the district to issue bonds and provide zoning, fire protection, utilities and infrastructure services on its land. Republican critics of the district argue it gives Disney a commercial advantage unavailable to others.

Disney did not immediately return an emailed request for comment.

The creation of the self-governing district was instrumental in Disney's decision to build near Orlando in the 1960s. The company had told the state it planned to build a futuristic city that would include a transit system and urban planning innovations, so the company needed autonomy in building and deciding how to use the land. The futuristic city never materialized and instead morphed into a second theme park that opened in 1982.

Romanian court: Influencer Tate to be held for 3rd month

By STEPHEN McGRATH and ANDREEA ALEXANDRU Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania (AP) — A Romanian court on Monday upheld a third 30-day detention for the divisive influencer and former professional kickboxer Andrew Tate, who is held on suspicion of organized crime and human trafficking, an official said.

Tate lost his appeal against a judge's Feb. 21 decision to extend his arrest a third time for 30 days, according to Ramona Bolla, a spokesperson for Romania's anti-organized crime agency DIICOT.

Tate, 36, a British-U.S. citizen known for misogynistic views who has 5.2 million Twitter followers, arrived at the Bucharest Court of Appeal handcuffed to his brother Tristan, who is held in the same case.

Bolla said prosecutors also won an appeal Monday against a court's decision last week to place two women held in the case under house arrest, instead of in full detention. None of the four has yet been formally charged.

It is the third separate appeal the brothers have lost against decisions to extend their detention while investigations continue. All four will now remain in jail until at least Mar. 29, Bolla said.

A document explaining an earlier decision to keep them in jail said the judge took into account the "particular dangerousness of the defendants" and their capacity to identify victims "with an increased vulnerability, in search of better life opportunities."

Tate, who has lived in Romania since 2017, was previously banned from various social media platforms for expressing misogynistic views and hate speech. He has repeatedly claimed Romanian prosecutors have no evidence and alleged their case is a "political" conspiracy designed to silence him.

After the court ruled on Monday, a post appeared on Andrew Tate's Twitter account, which read: "They weaponize lies to keep me in here. But you cannot hide the sun forever."

DIICOT said in a statement after the December arrests that it had identified six victims in the human trafficking case who were allegedly subjected to "acts of physical violence and mental coercion" and sexually exploited by members of the alleged crime group.

The agency said victims were lured with pretenses of love and later intimidated, placed under surveillance and subjected to other control tactics while being coerced into engaging in pornographic acts for the financial gain of the crime group.

In January, Romanian authorities descended on a compound near Bucharest linked with the Tate brothers and towed away a fleet of luxury cars that included a Rolls-Royce, a Ferrari and a Porsche. They reported seizing assets worth an estimated \$3.9 million.

Prosecutors have said that if they can prove the cars' owners gained money through illicit activities such as human trafficking, the assets would be used to cover the expenses of the investigation and to compensate victims. Tate also unsuccessfully appealed the asset seizure.

Supreme Court student loan case: The arguments explained

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is about to hear arguments over President Joe Biden's student debt relief plan, which impacts millions of borrowers who could see their loans wiped away or reduced.

So far, Republican-appointed judges have kept the Democratic president's plan from going into effect, and it remains to be seen how the court, dominated 6-3 by conservatives, will respond. The justices have scheduled two hours of arguments in the case Tuesday, though it will probably go longer. The public can listen in on the court's website beginning at 10 a.m. EST.

Where things stand ahead of the hearing as well as what to expect:

HOW DOES THE FORGIVENESS PLAN WORK?

The debt forgiveness plan announced in August would cancel \$10,000 in federal student loan debt for those making less than \$125,000 or households with less than \$250,000 in income per year. Pell Grant recipients, who typically demonstrate more financial need, would get an additional \$10,000 in debt forgiven.

College students qualify if their loans were disbursed before July 1. The plan makes 43 million borrowers eligible for some debt forgiveness, with 20 million who could have their debt erased entirely, according to the Biden administration.

The White House says 26 million people have applied for debt relief, and 16 million people had already had their relief approved. The Congressional Budget Office has said the program will cost about \$400 billion over the next three decades.

HOW DID THE ISSUE WIND UP AT THE SUPREME COURT?

The Supreme Court is hearing two challenges to the plan. One involves six Republican-led states that sued. The other involves a lawsuit filed by two students.

A lower court dismissed the lawsuit involving the following states: Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and South Carolina. The court said the states could not challenge the program because they weren't harmed by it. But a panel of three federal appeals court judges on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 8th Circuit — all of them appointed by Republican presidents — put the program on hold during an appeal. The Supreme Court then agreed to weigh in.

The students' case involves Myra Brown, who is ineligible for debt relief because her loans are commercially held, and Alexander Taylor, who is eligible for just \$10,000 and not the full \$20,000 because he didn't receive a Pell grant. They say that the Biden administration didn't go through the proper process in enacting the plan, among other things.

Texas-based U.S. District Judge Mark Pittman, an appointee of President Donald Trump, sided with the students and ruled to block the program. Pittman ruled that the Biden administration did not have clear authorization from Congress to implement the program. A federal appeals court left Pittman's ruling in place, and the Supreme Court agreed to take up the case along with the states' challenge.

HOW DID BIDEN GET TO CANCEL THE DEBT?

To cancel student loan debt, the Biden administration relied on the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students Act, commonly known as the HEROES Act. Originally enacted after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attack, the law was initially intended to keep service members from being worse off financially while they fought in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now extended, it allows the secretary of education to waive or modify the terms of federal student loans as necessary in connection with a national emergency.

Trump, a Republican, declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national emergency in March 2020, but Biden recently announced that designation will end May 11. The Biden administration has said that the end to the national emergency doesn't change the legal argument for student loan debt cancellation because the pandemic affected millions of student borrowers who might have fallen behind on their loans during

the emergency.

WHAT ARE THE JUSTICES LIKELY TO ASK ABOUT?

Expect the justices to be focused on several big issues. The first one is whether the states and the two borrowers have the right to sue over the plan in the first place, a legal concept called "standing." If they don't, that clears the way for the Biden administration to go ahead with it. To prove they have standing, the states and borrowers will have to show in part that they're financially harmed by the plan.

Beyond standing, the justices will also be asking whether the HEROES Act gives the Biden administration the power to enact the plan and how it went about doing so.

WHEN WILL BORROWERS KNOW THE OUTCOME?

It will likely be months before borrowers learn the outcome of the case, but there's a deadline of sorts. The court generally issues all of its decisions by the end of June before going on a summer break.

Whether or not the debt gets cancelled, the case's resolution will bring changes. While federal student loan payments are currently paused, that will end 60 days after the case is resolved. And if the case hasn't been resolved by June 30, payments will start 60 days after that.

'Take It Down:' a tool for teens to remove explicit images

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

"Once you send that photo, you can't take it back," goes the warning to teenagers, often ignoring the reality that many teens send explicit images of themselves under duress, or without understanding the consequences.

A new online tool aims to give some control back to teens, or people who were once teens, and take down explicit images and videos of themselves from the internet.

Called Take It Down, the tool is operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and funded in part by Meta Platforms, the owner of Facebook and Instagram.

The site lets anyone anonymously — and without uploading any actual images — create what is essentially a digital fingerprint of the image. This fingerprint (a unique set of numbers called a "hash") then goes into a database and the tech companies that have agreed to participate in the project remove the images from their services.

Now, the caveats. The participating platforms are, as of Monday, Meta's Facebook and Instagram, Yubo, OnlyFans and Pornhub, owned by Mindgeek. If the image is on another site, or if it is sent in an encrypted platform such as WhatsApp, it will not be taken down.

In addition, if someone alters the original image — for instance, cropping it, adding an emoji or turning it into a meme — it becomes a new image and thus need a new hash. Images that are visually similar — such as the same photo with and without an Instagram filter, will have similar hashes, differing in just one character.

"Take It Down is made specifically for people who have an image that they have reason to believe is already out on the Web somewhere, or that it could be," said Gavin Portnoy, a spokesman for the NCMEC. "You're a teen and you're dating someone and you share the image. Or somebody extorted you and they said, 'if you don't give me an image, or another image of you, I'm going to do X, Y, Z.'"

Portnoy said teens may feel more comfortable going to a site than to involve law enforcement, which wouldn't be anonymous, for one.

"To a teen who doesn't want that level of involvement, they just want to know that it's taken down, this is a big deal for them," he said. NCMEC is seeing an increase in reports of online exploitation of children. The nonprofit's CyberTipline received 29.3 million reports in 2021, up 35% from 2020.

Meta, back when it was still Facebook, attempted to create a similar tool, although for adults, back in 2017. It didn't go over well because the site asked people to, basically, send their (encrypted) nudes to Facebook — not the most trusted company even in 2017. The company tested out the service in Australia for a brief period, but didn't expand it to other countries. In 2021, it helped launch tool for adults called StopNCII — or nonconsensual intimate images, aka "revenge porn." That site is run by a U.K. nonprofit,

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the UK Revenge Porn Helpline, but anyone around the globe can use it.

But in that time, online sexual extortion and exploitation has only gotten worse, for children and teens as well as for adults. Many tech companies already use this hash system to share, take down and report to law enforcement images of child sexual abuse. Portnoy said the goal is to have more companies sign up.

"We never had anyone say no," he said.

Twitter and TikTok so far have not committed to the project. Neither company immediately respond to a message for comment Sunday.

Antigone Davis, Meta's global head of safety, said Take It Down is one of many tools the company uses to address child abuse and exploitation on its platforms.

"In addition to supporting the development of this tool and having, reporting and blocking systems on our on our platform, we also do a number of different things to try to prevent these kinds of situations from happening in the first place. So, for example, we don't allow unconnected adults to message minors," she said.

The site works with real as well as artificial intelligence-generated images and "deepfakes," Davis said. Deepfakes are created to look like real, actual people saying or doing things they didn't actually do.

Novak Djokovic breaks record for most weeks ranked No. 1

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

Novak Djokovic broke the record for the most time spent at No. 1 in the professional tennis rankings by a man or woman, beginning his 378th week in the ATP's top spot on Monday to surpass Steffi Graf's 377 leading the WTA.

He already held the men's mark, eclipsing Roger Federer's old ATP standard of 310 weeks in March 2021.

"I'm flattered, obviously. Extremely, extremely proud and happy for this achievement," Djokovic said in a video posted on social media, in which he referred to Graf as "one of the greatest, most legendary, tennis players."

After Djokovic and Graf on the all-time No. 1 weeks list are Martina Navratilova, with 332, and Serena Williams, with 319, followed by Federer. The computerized rankings began in the 1970s.

Djokovic has finished seven years atop the ATP, another men's record.

The 35-year-old from Serbia returned to No. 1 this time by winning the Australian Open in January, jumping up from No. 5 to overtake Carlos Alcaraz. That title was Djokovic's 22nd at a Grand Slam tournament, equaling Rafael Nadal for the most by a man in tennis history.

Djokovic is 12-0 so far in 2023, heading into this week's tournament in Dubai.

He managed to get back to the top of the rankings despite not being able to enter a handful of big tournaments in 2022, including the Australian Open and U.S. Open, because is not vaccinated against COVID-19. Djokovic was able to compete at Melbourne Park this year after Australia relaxed its pandemic-era rules; his status for two key events in the United States that begin in March — at Indian Wells and Miami — is still in doubt, and he's asked for permission to be allowed to travel to the country.

Djokovic also did not get any boost from his championship at Wimbledon in 2022, because no rankings points were awarded there. The ATP and WTA both withheld points in response to the All England Club's decision to bar players from Russia and Belarus from competing as a result of the invasion of Ukraine. It is still not known whether those athletes will be allowed to play at Wimbledon this year.

Alcaraz, the 19-year-old from Spain who won last year's U.S. Open, remained at No. 2 on Monday, followed by Australian Open runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas and two-time major finalist Casper Ruud. Taylor Fritz rose two places to a career-best No. 5, making him the first American man in the ATP's top five since Andy Roddick in 2009.

Nadal, who hasn't competed since injuring his left hip flexor during a loss at the Australian Open, slid two spots to No. 8 on Monday.

There were no changes Monday in the WTA's top 10, where Iga Swiatek still holds a substantial lead at No. 1, with Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka at No. 1. Barbora Krejcikova, the 2021 French

Open champion who beat Swiatek in the final at Dubai on Saturday, soared from No. 30 to No. 16.

Yellen visits Ukraine, underscores US economic support

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Monday her first visit to Ukraine underscored Washington's commitment to continuing its economic support for the country, as the din of air raid sirens echoed across the Ukrainian capital.

Yellen said following talks with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal that the US has provided nearly \$50 billion in security, economic and humanitarian assistance and announced another multibillion dollar package to boost the country's economy.

Shmyhal offered thanks to the U.S. for its support and hailed Yellen as a "friend of Ukraine." He said Ukraine's budget deficit now stands at \$38 billion and that the U.S. will provide another \$10 billion in assistance by September.

Shmyhal and Yellen also discussed sanctions aimed at weakening Russia's economy as well as the possibility of using Russian frozen assets to help in Ukraine's economic recovery.

Yellen repeated U.S. President Joe Biden's message that Washington will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. She underscored the importance of fighting corruption, praising Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for enacting measures to ensure transparency in how the assistance is spent.

The U.S. official also visited a renovated school that had its windows blown out by the blast wave from a Russian missile that landed nearby in March. She also announced an additional transfer of \$1.2 billion, the first tranche of the \$10 billion assistance package.

"Maintaining an effective government is indispensable to Ukraine's capacity to respond to Russian attacks and other emergencies," said Yellen. "Our economic support is keeping essential public services running. These services maintain economic and social stability in Ukraine".

Addressing the school's students and teachers, Yeller said they are helping to "write history" in a country that is "a central force in the history of the free world."

"America stands with you in this fight for freedom, and we will be by your side and help you rebuild".

Yellen also met with Zelenskyy and other top officials, including the head of Ukraine's National Bank.

Zelenskyy posted on Telegram after the meeting with Yellen that it is "necessary to strengthen further sanctions to deprive Russia of the ability to finance the war."

Yellen also laid the flowers at the Wall of Remembrance dedicated to fallen soldiers and met Ukrainian landmine removal experts whose equipment was financed with US funds.

Democrat Elissa Slotkin to seek Michigan's open Senate seat

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Democratic Rep. Elissa Slotkin of Michigan will seek the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Democrat Debbie Stabenow in 2024, becoming the first high-profile candidate to jump into the battleground state race.

In a video announcing her campaign, Slotkin says that the nation seems "to be living crisis to crisis" but that there "are certain things that should be really simple, like living a middle-class life in the state that invented the middle class."

"This is why I'm running for the United States Senate," Slotkin says in the video released Monday morning. "We need a new generation of leaders that thinks differently, works harder and never forgets that we are public servants."

Slotkin, a 46-year-old former CIA intelligence officer and third-term representative, is coming off an impressive victory in last year's midterms, winning reelection despite having been considered vulnerable. Her contest against Republican state Sen. Tom Barrett was the third-most expensive House race in 2022.

She is the first Democrat to announce her intentions to run for a seat that will be crucial to the party's efforts to maintain control of the Senate, where it holds a 51-49 majority. The only other candidate in the

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race so far is Republican Nikki Snyder, a State Board of Education member.

Slotkin, first elected to Congress in 2018 when she flipped a traditionally Republican district, has consistently won close races in the battleground state and has proved herself to be an effective fundraiser.

After narrowly winning reelection in 2020, she was targeted by Republicans in last year's midterms after new congressional maps divided her home district. She was forced to run in Michigan's new 7th Congressional District, where she was a new face for about a third of the district's voters, many in rural GOP-leaning counties north of Lansing.

Throughout the campaign, Slotkin touted herself as a Democrat representing a Trump-voting district, emphasizing to voters her pragmatism and highlighting her role on the House's bipartisan Problem-Solvers Caucus.

She has represented two congressional districts that experienced mass shootings, and she has called for stronger gun laws. Now a congresswoman for the Lansing area, she represents an area that includes Michigan State University, where a gunman killed three people and injured five others this month. She previously represented Oxford, where a school shooter killed four students and injured seven others at Oxford High School in 2021.

The dean of Michigan Democrats, the 72-year-old Stabenow shocked many in the party when she announced last month that she would not be seeking a fifth term, saying she had "decided to pass the torch" to a new generation of leaders.

Slotkin was immediately named as a favorite to replace the outgoing senator and began forming a national campaign team, telling the AP in January that she was putting her "ducks in a row" before an announcement.

With Michigan having one of the deepest Democratic benches in the country, many expected the primary to be highly competitive. But in the days leading up to Slotkin's announcement, multiple high-profile candidates withdrew their names from consideration.

"Serving our state in Washington, DC would be a great opportunity, but instead I will keep standing tall for Michigan, right here at home," Democratic Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist II said on social media on Sunday.

Also on the Democratic side, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson has been discussed as a potential candidate. State Sen. Mallory McMorrow, a rising star in the party, said last week that she would not run for the Senate.

Former Rep. Peter Meijer, who lost his Republican primary last year after voting to impeach President Donald Trump in 2021, is still considering a GOP run for the seat. Freshman Rep. John James, one of Republicans' top choices to run for the Senate in 2024 after two previous unsuccessful bids, filed last week to instead run for reelection in his Detroit-area House district next year.

Republicans have taken just one of Michigan's last 15 Senate races, winning an open seat in 1994.

Slotkin's Senate run creates an open House race in the 7th Congressional District in 2024. Barrett, who lost to Slotkin by 5 percentage points in their House contest last year, plans to run in the district again in 2024, with an announcement expected in the coming weeks, spokesman Jason Cabel Roe confirmed on Monday.

AI learns to outsmart humans in video games - and real life

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Speed around a French village in the video game Gran Turismo and you might spot a Corvette behind you trying to catch your slipstream.

The technique of using the draft of an opponent's racecar to speed up and overtake them is one favored by skilled players of PlayStation's realistic racing game.

But this Corvette driver is not being controlled by a human — it's GT Sophy, a powerful artificial intelligence agent built by PlayStation-maker Sony.

Gran Turismo players have been competing against computer-generated racecars since the franchise launched in the 1990s, but the new AI driver that was unleashed last week on Gran Turismo 7 is smarter

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and faster because it's been trained using the latest AI methods.

"Gran Turismo had a built-in AI existing from the beginning of the game, but it has a very narrow band of performance and it isn't very good," said Michael Spranger, chief operating officer of Sony AI. "It's very predictable. Once you get past a certain level, it doesn't really entice you anymore."

But now, he said, "this AI is going to put up a fight."

Visit an artificial intelligence laboratory at universities and companies like Sony, Google, Meta, Microsoft and ChatGPT-maker OpenAI and it's not unusual to find AI agents like Sophy racing cars, slinging angry birds at pigs, fighting epic interstellar battles or helping human gamers build new Minecraft worlds -- all part of the job description for computer systems trying to learn how to get smarter in games.

But in some instances, they are also trying to learn how to get smarter in the real world. In a January paper, a University of Cambridge researcher who built an AI agent to control Pokémon characters argued it could "inspire all sorts of applications that require team management under conditions of extreme uncertainty, including managing a team of doctors, robots or employees in an ever-changing environment, like a pandemic-stricken region or a war zone."

And while that might sound like a kid making a case for playing three more hours of Pokémon Violet, the study of games has been used to advance AI research — and train computers to solve complex problems — since the mid-20th century.

Initially, AI was used on games like checkers and chess to test at winning strategy games. Now a new branch of research is more focused on performing open-ended tasks in complex worlds and interacting with humans, not just for the purpose of beating them.

"Reality is like a super-complicated game," said Nicholas Sarantinos, who authored the Pokémon paper and recently turned down a doctoral offer at Oxford University to start an AI company aiming to help corporate workplaces set up more collaborative teams.

In the web-based Pokémon Showdown battle simulator, Sarantinos developed an algorithm to analyze a team of six Pokémon — predicting how they would perform based on all the possible battle scenarios ahead of them and their comparative strengths and weaknesses.

Microsoft, which owns the popular Minecraft game franchise as well as the Xbox game system, has tasked AI agents with a variety of activities — from steering clear of lava to chopping trees and making furnaces. Researchers hope some of their learnings could eventually play a role in real-world technology, such as how to get a home robot to take on certain chores without having to program it to do so.

While it "goes without stating" that real humans behave quite differently from fictional video game creatures, "the core ideas can still be used," Sarantinos said. "If you use psychology tests, you can take this information to conclude how well they can work together."

Amy Hoover, an assistant professor of informatics at the New Jersey Institute of Technology who's built algorithms for the digital card game Hearthstone, said "there really is a reason for studying games" but it is not always easy to explain.

"People aren't always understanding that the point is about the optimization method rather than the game," she said.

Games also offer a useful testbed for AI — including for some real-world applications in robotics or health care — that's safer to try in a virtual world, said Vanessa Volz, an AI researcher at the Danish startup Modl.ai, which builds AI systems for game development.

But, she adds, "it can get overhyped."

"It's probably not going to be one big breakthrough and that everything is going to be shifted to the real world," Volz said.

Japanese electronics giant Sony launched its own AI research division in 2020 with entertainment in mind, but it's nonetheless attracted broader academic attention. Its research paper introducing Sophy last year made it on the cover of the prestigious science journal Nature, which said it could potentially have effects on other applications such as drones and self-driving vehicles.

The technology behind Sophy is based on an algorithmic method known as reinforcement learning, which trains the system by rewarding it when it gets something right as it runs virtual races thousands of times.

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"The reward is going to tell you that, 'You're making progress. This is good,' or, 'You're off the track. Well, that's not good,'" Spranger said.

The world's best Gran Turismo players are still finishing ahead of Sophy at tournaments, but average players will find it hard to beat — and can adjust difficulty settings depending on how much they want to be challenged.

PlayStation players will only get to try racing against Sophy until March 31, on a limited number of circuits, so it can get some feedback and go back into testing. Peter Wurman, director of Sony AI America and project lead on GT Sophy, said it takes about two weeks for AI agents to train on 20 PlayStations.

"To get it spread throughout the whole game, it takes some more breakthroughs and some more time before we're ready for that," he said.

And to get it onto real streets or Formula One tracks? That could take a lot longer.

Self-driving car companies adopt similar machine-learning techniques, but "they don't hand over complete control of the car the way we are able to," Wurman said. "In a simulated world, there's nobody's life at risk. You know exactly the kinds of things you're going to see in the environment. There's no people crossing the road or anything like that."

AP Interview: Stenmark says Shiffrin 'better than I was'

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

To Ingemar Stenmark, all this fuss over Mikaela Shiffrin as she approaches his record of 86 World Cup skiing victories is beside the point.

Because the 66-year-old Swede believes the American is already on another level.

"She's much better than I was. You cannot compare," Stenmark said in an interview with The Associated Press. "She has everything. She has good physical strength, she has a good technique, strong head. I think it's the combination of everything makes her so good. And I'm also impressed that she can ski good both in slalom and in super-G and downhill also.

"I could never have been so good in all disciplines."

While all 86 of Stenmark's wins in the 1970s and 80s came in the technical disciplines of slalom (40) and giant slalom (46), Shiffrin's 85 wins have come, yes, predominantly in slalom (52) giant slalom (19) or parallel (5), but also in super-G (5), downhill (3) and combined (1).

One of Shiffrin's three medals at the world championships this month came in super-G with a silver.

Stenmark knows the numbers well, because he enjoys following Shiffrin's races.

"I watch most of them," he said via phone last week from his home just outside Stockholm. "To become such a good skier you have to love skiing, and she has good touch with the snow, good feeling. She can adapt to all kind of different snow conditions."

After winning three medals in her four races at worlds, Shiffrin returns to action this weekend in Kvitfjell, Norway, where she plans to compete in a super-G, a downhill and then another super-G on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, respectively.

Then Shiffrin has a giant slalom and a slalom in Are, Sweden, on March 10-11.

Might Stenmark attend the races in Are if there's still a chance for Shiffrin to match or break his record?

"No, I'm not going. I'm sorry for that. But I will, of course, watch on TV," Stenmark said, explaining that he doesn't want to devote too much attention to Shiffrin when there are also top-notch Swedish skiers competing, like Olympic giant slalom champion Sara Hector.

"That's why it would be a little bit strange for me to go to Are to celebrate Shiffrin when we have the Swedish girls also," Stenmark said. "If it would have been another place, it would be easier."

Shiffrin won her first World Cup race in Are in December 2012, claimed two gold medals at the Swedish resort at the 2019 worlds and has six victories there in all.

"I heard she likes Sweden, but maybe she likes Norway more now, because she has a Norwegian boyfriend," Stenmark said, referring to Aleksander Aamodt Kilde, the circuit's leading downhill skier, who Shiffrin has had a relationship with for several years.

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While Stenmark hasn't attended a race since Lindsey Vonn invited him to her career finale in Are in 2019, he's drawn to Shiffrin's methodical approach to skiing and — as someone known for his reservedness — appreciates her introverted personality.

"I don't know her personally, but she seems to be a very (nice) person," Stenmark said.

Shiffrin shows just as much reverence for Stenmark as he does for her.

"I would say the name means more than the number," the 27-year-old Shiffrin said of Stenmark. "He's an absolute legend in skiing. And no matter what I achieve, this kind of term, 'the greatest of all time' or the numbers — all that for me, it's something that's debatable.

"The thing for me about sports is that it gives people a reason to be inspired by whoever they choose to be inspired (by)," Shiffrin added. "So whatever I do, it's a little bit of a moot point. And that's how I feel about Ingemar. His name is in history as a legend of the sport that people will remember forever."

Stenmark, who won his final race in February 1989 in Aspen, Colorado, has a long history with American skiers, having been rivals of the Mahre brothers — Phil and Steve — during his racing days. Then Vonn approached his record before injuries cut her career short and left her with 82 wins.

"It's not a very big sport in the U.S. if you compare it to American football and baseball and the other (sports). But there are lots of good skiers," Stenmark said.

Stenmark and Shiffrin competed in vastly different eras, with many more races — plus more disciplines — available to Shiffrin now.

There have also been huge advancements in skiing equipment since Stenmark stopped racing.

"It's all completely different, but I liked the way it was when I was racing. The only thing I miss is the carving skis," he said, referring to the newer, hour-glass shaped skis that make turning less challenging. "I think skiing nowadays is easier than when we were racing, but winning is maybe harder now, because there are so many (top) skiers. If you make one small mistake, it's hard to win."

While Shiffrin has had her fair share of mistakes — see her performance at last year's Beijing Olympics when she didn't finish three of her five individual races and didn't win a medal despite enormous expectations — she still wins a whopping 35% of her races.

"And I think she can win more than 100," Stenmark said. "It depends on how many years she continues. But for sure 100."

New quake hits Turkey, toppling more buildings: 1 killed

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — A magnitude 5.6 earthquake shook southern Turkey on Monday, three weeks after a catastrophic temblor devastated the region, causing some already damaged buildings to collapse and killing at least one person, authorities said.

More than 100 people were injured as a result of Monday's quake which was centered in the town of Yesilyurt in Malatya province, Yunus Sezer, the chief of the country's disaster management agency, AFAD, told reporters. More than two dozen buildings collapsed.

A father and daughter who were trapped beneath the ruins of a four-story building in Yesilyurt were rescued with injuries. They had entered the damaged building to collect belongings.

Elsewhere in Malatya, search-and-rescue teams were sifting through the rubble of two damaged buildings that toppled on some parked cars, HaberTurk reported. It was not clear if anyone was trapped under the debris.

Malatya was among 11 Turkish provinces hit by the magnitude 7.8 earthquake that devastated parts of southern Turkey and northern Syria on Feb. 6.

That quake led to more than 48,000 deaths in both countries as well as the collapse or serious damage of 185,000 buildings in Turkey.

AFAD's chief urged people not to enter damaged buildings, saying strong aftershocks continue to pose a risk. More than 10,000 aftershocks have hit the region since Feb. 6.

The World Bank said Monday it estimates that the massive earthquake caused \$34.2 billion in "direct damages" — an equivalent of 4% of the country's GDP in 2021.

The recovery and reconstruction cost could be potentially twice as large, the World Bank said, adding that GDP losses would also add to the earthquake's cost.

The World Bank also estimated that 1.25 million people had been left temporarily homeless.

Meanwhile, fans of Turkish soccer team Besiktas threw stuffed toys on the field during a match on Sunday to support children affected by the earthquake. Toys and winter clothing were thrown on the stadium's grounds to be donated to children in the earthquake-hit regions.

UN chief points to 'massive' rights violations in Ukraine

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered "the most massive violations of human rights" in the world today, the head of the United Nations said Monday, as the war pushed into its second year with no end in sight and tens of thousands dead.

The Russian invasion "has unleashed widespread death, destruction and displacement," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said in a speech to the U.N.-backed Human Rights Council in Geneva.

After failing to capture Kyiv in the opening weeks of the invasion on Feb. 24 last year and suffering a series of humiliating setbacks during the fall, Russia has stabilized the front and is concentrating its efforts on capturing four provinces that Moscow illegally annexed in September — Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia. Ukraine, meanwhile, hopes to use battle tanks and other new weapons pledged by the West to launch new counteroffensives and reclaim more of the occupied territory.

Guterres said "attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure have caused many casualties and terrible suffering."

The intense fighting for territory in eastern Ukraine was in sharp focus Sunday at a Ukrainian field hospital treating wounded from the intense battle for the city of Bakhmut, which is devastated. A constant flow of battered and exhausted soldiers came in on stretchers.

Anatoliy, the chief of the medical service, said his team treats dozens of soldiers every day and barely has time to eat.

"My medics work practically non-stop. Before the full-scale invasion we had 50-60 wounded in a nine-month rotation, and now sometimes we have more (than that) in one day," he told The Associated Press. He provided only one name for security reasons.

Guterres' remarks came as the Ukrainian military said that Russia launched attacks with exploding drones on several regions of the country from late Sunday until Monday morning, killing two people.

Meanwhile, Belarusian opposition activists claimed a military air base outside Belarusia's capital that hosts Russian warplanes came under attack Sunday by Belarusian guerrillas.

BYPOL, an online messaging app channel run by the activists, and several other online resources operated by the Belarusian opposition, said an A-50 early warning and control aircraft was seriously damaged in the attack at the Machulishchy base near Minsk.

The activists provided no evidence to support the claims, which couldn't be independently verified. Belarusian and Russian officials made no comment, but Belarusia's President Alexander Lukashenko urged top military and security officials on Monday to tighten discipline.

Russia used the territory of its ally Belarus to invade Ukraine a year ago. Belarus continues to host Russian troops, warplanes and other weapons.

Guterres, in his Geneva speech, cited cases of sexual violence, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and violations of the rights of prisoners of war documented by the U.N. human rights office.

He decried how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, now 75 years old, has been "too often misused and abused."

"It is exploited for political gain and it is ignored, often, by the very same people," Guterres said. "Some governments chip away at it. Others use a wrecking ball."

"This is a moment to stand on the right side of history," he told the council, the U.N.'s top human rights body. Russia withdrew from its seat last year amid a surge in international pressure over the war in Ukraine.

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Dozens of high-level envoys at the Geneva meeting — many from Western countries — lashed out at Russia over its conduct of the war. At the simultaneous Conference on Disarmament, another U.N.-backed body, delegates criticized Putin's decision to suspend Russia's participation in the New START agreement with the United States, the last nuclear arms control agreement between Moscow and Washington.

Russia was not represented at the council, and its top envoy to the session wasn't expected to speak until Thursday.

Russian officials have shown little sign they may be reconsidering their attack on their neighbor, however. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday: "We aren't seeing any conditions for a peaceful settlement now."

Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy head of Russia's Security Council that is chaired by President Vladimir Putin, went a step further, once again raising the specter of nuclear war and a nightmare outcome to Europe's biggest and deadliest conflict since World War II.

He chided the U.S. and its allies for providing Ukraine with military and other support to help push back the Kremlin's forces. Their longer-term aim, he claimed, is to break up Russia.

Putin has also framed the war in those terms, saying it's an existential risk to Russia.

In the Sunday-Monday attacks, Ukraine's General Staff said Kyiv's forces shot down 11 out of 14 Iranian-made Shahed drones.

Ukraine's presidential office said Monday that at least two civilians were killed and nine others wounded by Russian attacks over the previous 24 hours.

It said intense fighting has continued around Bakhmut, Avdiivka and Vuhledar in the Donetsk region, which have come under relentless Russian shelling.

Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said the Russian offensive aimed at securing control of eastern Ukraine has effectively become bogged down while losing "huge numbers of weapons and ammunition."

Zhdanov said the Ukrainian military, in turn, is building up forces for a future counteroffensive in the south while pummeling Russian positions and depots there.

"Ukraine has significantly intensified the shelling of Russian positions in the south, destroying roads and depots, which is an important condition for the success of a future counteroffensive," he said.

In other developments, the Russian military claimed its forces struck an electronic intelligence center near Brovary, just east of Kyiv.

Russia's Defense Ministry also said that Russian forces struck a special operations center of the Ukrainian armed forces near the western city of Khmelnytskyi.

The ministry didn't say when the strikes were launched, and its claim couldn't be independently verified.

2023 US recession now expected to start later than predicted

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A majority of the nation's business economists expect a U.S. recession to begin later this year than they had previously forecast, after a series of reports have pointed to a surprisingly resilient economy despite steadily higher interest rates.

Fifty-eight percent of 48 economists who responded to a survey by the National Association for Business Economics envision a recession sometime this year, the same proportion who said so in the NABE's survey in December. But only a quarter think a recession will have begun by the end of March, only half the proportion who had thought so in December.

The findings, reflecting a survey of economists from businesses, trade associations and academia, were released Monday.

A third of the economists who responded to the survey now expect a recession to begin in the April-June quarter. One-fifth think it will start in the July-September quarter.

The delay in the economists' expectations of when a downturn will begin follows a series of government reports that have pointed to a still-robust economy even after the Federal Reserve has raised interest rates eight times in a strenuous effort to slow growth and curb high inflation.

In January, employers added more than a half-million jobs, and the unemployment rate reached 3.4%, the lowest level since 1969.

And sales at retail stores and restaurants jumped 3% in January, the sharpest monthly gain in nearly two years. That suggested that consumers as a whole, who drive most of the economy's growth, still feel financially healthy and willing to spend.

At the same time, several government releases also showed that inflation shot back up in January after weakening for several months, fanning fears that the Fed will raise its benchmark rate even higher than was previously expected. When the Fed lifts its key rate, it typically leads to more expensive mortgages, auto loans and credit card borrowing. Interest rates on business loans also rise.

Tighter credit can then weaken the economy and even cause a recession. Economic research released Friday found that the Fed has never managed to reduce inflation from the high levels it has recently reached without causing a recession.

Trans people face 'horrifying' rhetoric at statehouses

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — It was pharmacist Gwendolyn Herzig's first time testifying before a legislative committee when she spoke to several Arkansas lawmakers in a packed hearing room this month about a bill restricting gender-affirming care for minors.

Herzig, who is transgender, spoke out against the legislation and told the panel that one of the biggest obstacles trans people face is a lack of empathy. Only a few minutes later, a Republican lawmaker asked her an inappropriate question about her genitalia.

"It was horrifying," she said.

The exchange, which was livestreamed on the Legislature's website and has since been widely shared on social media, is an example of the type of demeaning questions and rhetoric that transgender people meet when they show up to statehouses to testify against new bills targeting their rights.

In South Dakota, a lawmaker invoked "furries" — people who dress up as animals — when talking about gender-affirming care. In Montana, a legislator compared parents supporting their children in finding treatment to asking doctors to carry out medically assisted suicide.

Advocates worry that increasingly hostile rhetoric about transgender people could have a chilling effect on those who want to speak out against new restrictions and could do lasting damage to a community of trans youth that is already marginalized.

"I feel like that's what they're trying to do, to keep us from coming and exercising this right that we have," said Rumba Yambu, executive director of Intransitive, an advocacy and support group for transgender people in Arkansas. "Because who wants to go and be asked about their genitalia in front of a bunch of strangers? Especially strangers in power."

So far this year, at least 150 bills targeting transgender people have been introduced, which is the highest in a single year, according to the Human Rights Campaign.

Bans on gender-affirming care for minors have already been enacted this year in South Dakota and Utah, and Republican governors in Tennessee and Mississippi are expected to sign similar bans into law. Arkansas and Alabama have bans that were temporarily blocked by federal judges.

The push has included efforts in some states to restrict gender-affirming care for adults and proposed bans on drag shows that opponents have warned would also discriminate against transgender people.

Herzig came to the state Capitol to testify against a bill attempting to reinstate Arkansas' ban on gender-affirming care for minors by making it easier to file malpractice lawsuits against providers. In her testimony, Herzig talked about working with transgender patients who are on hormone replacement therapy.

"Bills like SB199 are designed to hinder, not help, Arkansans by creating barriers to evidence-driven health care they deserve under the guise of helping the young and innocent," she said, later saying a vote for the bill was "unpatriotic, and casts doubts on our own health and research institutions who have worked through health care fields to improve the lives of Americans."

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During follow-up questions, Republican Sen. Matt McKee asked Herzig if she is transgender.

When she said yes, he asked: "Do you have a penis?"

The question was met with jeers and audible gasps in the packed committee room.

"That's horrible," Herzig responded, telling McKee that asking her such a question was inappropriate and noting she was testifying as a health care professional.

"I had never been so publicly humiliated in my life," Herzig told The Associated Press in an interview days later.

McKee did not respond to an email or phone call, but defended his question in a written statement.

"As a father of 4 daughters, I will do everything in my power to protect my children and the children of Arkansas, especially from the woke mob who intend to push their agenda and beliefs down our throats and destroy our families," McKee's statement said.

The idea of protecting children by withholding medical care is undermined by health experts, who have said minors with gender dysphoria who do not receive appropriate care face dramatically increased risk of suicide and serious depression.

McKee's questions were similar in tone to those posed to Debi Jackson's teen Avery, who is transgender and nonbinary, when they testified before Missouri legislators last year about a proposal to ban trans girls and women from participating on sports teams matching their gender identity.

During the hearing, a lawmaker asked Avery if they were "gonna go through the procedure." Since that exchange, Jackson said Avery hasn't wanted to testify again before the Legislature.

"It's this same idea that in any of these discussions about trans people just being treated with basic dignity and respect, legislators want to reduce them to one body part," Jackson said. "They miss the entirety of the human being sitting in front of them having a conversation."

Advocates say the rhetoric surrounding these proposed bans further exacerbates an already treacherous environment for transgender people, their families and medical providers. Children's hospitals around the country have faced an uptick of harassment and threats of violence for providing gender-confirming care.

Though she said she's received an outcry of support since her testimony, Herzig said she and the pharmacy she owns have also gotten hateful emails and calls.

People opposed to gender-affirming care for minors argue that children are too young to make decisions about their futures, sometimes comparing such treatments to child abuse. That's despite medical experts saying the care is safe when administered properly.

Nearly every major medical group, including the American Medical Association, has opposed the bans on such care for minors.

Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott last year ordered the state's child welfare agency to investigate reports of gender-affirming care for kids as abuse, but a judge has since blocked those investigations.

Amber Briggie, the mother of a transgender teenager in Texas whose family was investigated after Abbott's order, said she gets frustrated when speaking before lawmakers in her state who she thinks already have made up their minds on the issue. But Briggie said she plans on returning to Texas' Capitol this year and that Herzig's encounter motivates her even more to show up and speak out.

"They should not have to fight this alone," Briggie said of transgender people testifying in statehouses. "They should know they have loving, supporting allies in their corner."

Herzig said she probably would not have testified had she known she was going to be asked about her genitalia.

"I felt like I was pretty much prepared for any combative question," she said. "Except that."

New this week: 'True Lies,' Wallen and 'Creed' film fest

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's a collection curated by The Associated Press' entertainment journalists of what's arriving on TV, streaming services and music and video game platforms this week.

MOVIES

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— With “Creed III” coming to theaters on Friday, Prime Video has you covered for all your Creed and Rocky needs. “Creed” and “Creed II,” along with every Rocky film from No. 1 through “Balboa,” will be available to watch on Prime Video starting Wednesday. You could also do a Sofia Coppola double feature of “The Virgin Suicides” and “Lost in Translation” while trying to decide which Coppola-inspired T-shirt to purchase from Uniqlo’s celebration of the filmmaker (also available next week).

— Best picture Oscar nominee and Palme d’Or winner “Triangle of Sadness” comes to Hulu on Friday, giving stragglers plenty of time (well, nine days) to watch the riotous and bodily social satire before the Oscars, where it’s also up for best director and best original screenplay. It’s the English-language debut for Swedish director Ruben Östlund who takes a scalpel to the privileged classes on board a luxury yacht, starring Harris Dickinson, Charlbi Dean, Dolly de Leon and Woody Harrelson as a Marxist ship captain. I wrote in my AP review that “The beauty and pleasure of something like “ Triangle of Sadness “ is in the details, like the well-observed and precisely crafted awkwardness over who should pay the restaurant bill, or the rules about who gets to sit in the front row of a fashion show shifting in real time.”

— AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr

MUSIC

— Morgan Wallen is back with new music — a lot of music. “One Thing at a Time” has a whopping 36 songs, including “Man Made a Bar” with Eric Church. His sister, Ashlyne, joins him on “Outlook.” “This record represents the last few years of my life, the highs and the lows,” Wallen says in his announcement. (Some of the lows include facing rebuke for being caught using a racial slur.) Early singles include “You Proof” and “Thought You Should Know.” The album ends with the tune “Dying Man” and the lyrics: “Codeine, it got Elvis/Whiskey, it got Hank/I always thought somethin’ like that/ Might send me on my way.” The album drops Friday.

— Willie Nelson approaches his 90th birthday later this year with plenty going on — he just won a Grammy for best country album, he’s among the 2023 nominees for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and he has a new album: “I Don’t Know a Thing About Love.” Nelson and his band recorded fresh interpretations of 10 classic compositions penned by the legendary American songwriter Harlan Howard. The songs include “Busted,” the story of a dirt-poor farmer bemoaning his overdue bills, crop failures, and other financial woes while maintaining a sense of hope for the future.

— A huge box set celebrating the musical tie between Burt Bacharach and Elvis Costello now serves as a memorial to Bacharach, the iconic composer who died earlier this month. “The Songs of Bacharach & Costello” is a comprehensive 45-song set that includes live performances of Bacharach and Costello performing several songs from the album “Painted From Memory” and three rare and unreleased live performances from 1998 and 1999, including a stark and gripping “In The Darkest Place.” The collection will be available in a variety of formats, including streaming starting Friday.

— Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy

TELEVISION

— Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jamie Lee Curtis never made a sequel to their 1994 action, comedy movie “True Lies,” directed by James Cameron, but CBS has a new TV series with the same title inspired by the film. Steve Howey and Ginger Gonzaga now co-star as Harry and Helen Tasker. Harry is a secret international spy who pretends to have a career in computers that takes him on the road a lot. On a mission in Paris doubling as a romantic getaway for the couple, Harry’s double life is exposed and she must join the team. “True Lies,” executive produced by Cameron, debuts Wednesday on CBS.

— “Alaska Daily,” the ABC drama created by “Spotlight” director and co-writer Tom McCarthy and starring Hilary Swank, returns from hiatus Thursday. The series follows the staff at a struggling Alaska newspaper whose new star reporter, Eileen Fitzgerald, was hired to join an ongoing investigation about murdered Indigenous women. It’s inspired by the decades-old problem of missing and murdered Alaska Native women.

— Amazon has adapted “Daisy Jones & the Six,” the best-selling novel by Taylor Jenkins Reid into a limited series debuting Friday. Riley Keough and Sam Claflin star as the lead singers of a 1970s rock band who make beautiful music together but behind-the-scenes they’re either at each other’s throats or trying

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to fight their feelings. The story charts the band's early days, fame and abrupt breakup with flash forwards to older versions of the characters looking back on the story. Reese Witherspoon's media company, Hello Sunshine, executive produces.

— Alicia Rancilio

VIDEO GAMES

— Times were tough in China at the end of the 2nd century, with the Late Han Dynasty battling to cling to control as rebels rose up. Throw in some dragons, demons and other mythical monsters and you have the blood-drenched setting of Koei Tecmo's *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty*. Your character is a nameless warrior who's just trying to stay alive amidst all the chaos. You do have some mad martial arts skills and a handful of magic spells, and if things get hairy you can summon a supernatural beast of your own. *Wo Long* comes from Japan's Team Ninja, developers of the brutal hack-and-slash classics *Ninja Gaiden* and *Nioh*. Prepare to unleash havoc Friday on the PlayStation 5/4, Xbox X/S/One and PC.

— Lou Kesten

DeSantis moves toward GOP presidential bid on his own terms

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Republican presidential contenders typically fight for prime speaking slots at the Conservative Political Action Conference. But as conservative activists gather in suburban Washington this week, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis will be courting donors more than a thousand miles away in Texas and California.

The apparent CPAC snub is nothing new for DeSantis, who has emerged in the early phase of the 2024 presidential election as a leading contender for the GOP nomination even as he ignores many conventions of modern politics.

DeSantis is a frequent voice in conservative cultural fights on cable television, but he often avoids gatherings of fellow Republican governors and party leaders, who are quick to complain in private about his go-it-alone approach. He is the only top-tier presidential prospect yet to court voters in Iowa, New Hampshire or South Carolina, the states hosting the GOP's opening presidential primary contests. And he is often at odds with the press, refusing even to notify local media of last week's rare three-state tour with law enforcement.

Indeed, as DeSantis moves toward a White House run, it is becoming increasingly clear that the 44-year-old Republican governor will manage his presidential aspirations in his own way, on his own timeline, with or without allies in national GOP leadership or relationships with the press.

"DeSantis has, in his style and the actions he's taken as governor, shown a willingness to fight the traditional powers that be, the establishment," said David McIntosh, president of the Club for Growth, an influential conservative group based in Washington. McIntosh described DeSantis' style as "refreshing" and suggested the GOP is ready to move on from former President Donald Trump.

For now, DeSantis is perhaps the most potent threat to Trump's effort to win the GOP nomination for the third time. The Club for Growth will host DeSantis among a half-dozen presidential prospects at a closed-door retreat in Florida next weekend with top donors. Trump is not invited.

Meanwhile, DeSantis has quietly begun to expand his political coalition on his terms just as he releases a book, "The Courage to be Free," which comes out Tuesday.

He spent the weekend huddled behind closed doors at a south Florida luxury hotel for a "Freedom Blueprint" retreat with more than 100 donors, elected officials and conservative influencers. The attendees included former Trump chief of staff Mick Mulvaney, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton and Texas-based donor Roy Bailey, a former member of Trump's national finance committee.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt and Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee were also in attendance, along with Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, Utah Sen. Mike Lee, Texas Rep. Chip Roy and Kentucky Rep. Thomas Massie.

Fox News host Laura Ingraham hosted a fireside chat with DeSantis on Sunday before he joined a "fighting back against woke" discussion with Chaya Raichik, who runs the "Libs of TikTok" social media account.

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Details from the gathering were disclosed by participants who requested anonymity to discuss the the private event.

Trump was largely ignored throughout the weekend retreat, although conservative commentator Ann Coulter seized on his failure to build a wall spanning the entire U.S.-Mexico border during a Saturday panel discussion with DeSantis on border security, according to one person in the room. She accused the former president of never actually wanting to build it in the first place.

In the coming days and weeks, DeSantis will use the release of his book to introduce himself to voters beyond Florida, having established his political dominance there last fall by winning reelection by more than 19 percentage points.

He is expected to make his first appearances in key states on the primary calendar such as Iowa and New Hampshire in the coming weeks in addition to general election battlegrounds like Georgia and Pennsylvania. Last week, he made surprise stops in New York City, Philadelphia and Chicago to court law enforcement leaders, although the events were private and he did not notify local media.

The Florida governor is already scheduled to headline two Republican fundraisers in Texas on Saturday. The next day he'll speak at a \$500-a-head reception for the GOP of Orange County, California. He'll serve as the keynote speaker for the Alabama GOP the following week.

While he has begun to expand his profile, DeSantis has done far less than most of the early 2024 class to connect with primary voters and would-be allies in key states.

He has long avoided gatherings of Republican governors or top GOP officials, who privately condemn his approach as arrogant. He's never set foot in Iowa.

Former New Hampshire GOP chair Jennifer Horn noted that Republican primary voters often embrace anti-establishment candidates "who are willing to create their own lane or take their own path."

"But when you're running for president, and in this environment, I think he has to be careful not to be a victim of his own arrogance," she said. "He has this belief that he knows better than everyone about everything, and that's never a good thing."

Meanwhile, DeSantis' team feels no urgency to enter the 2024 contest, which already features three Republican candidates. Trump announced three months ago.

He's also shown no interest in responding to Trump's increasingly personal attacks, which include recent social media posts suggesting that DeSantis behaved inappropriately with underage girls when he briefly taught high school in his early 20s.

Trump refers to the Florida governor as "Ron DeSanctimonious" and "Meatball Ron."

By contrast, DeSantis in his new book actually credits Trump for helping him win the Florida governorship in 2018.

"I knew that a Trump endorsement would provide me with the exposure to GOP primary voters across the State of Florida, and I was confident that many would see me as a good candidate once they learned about my record," DeSantis writes, according to an early copy obtained by the Guardian.

Trump's increasing focus on DeSantis may unintentionally help the Florida governor by defining him as the strongest Republican Trump alternative, according to Sam Nunberg, a former Trump aide turned critic.

"Look, Donald is worried, and if I was working for him, I'd say he needs to update the playbook," Nunberg said.

In the meantime, DeSantis is focused on expanding his conservative agenda in Florida's looming state legislative session, which runs from March through May.

Already, he has pushed to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs from Florida's public universities and colleges. Among his other priorities: allowing people to carry guns in public without a permit; weakening laws protecting journalists from lawsuits; and cracking down on illegal immigration, including a plan to eliminate in-state tuition for college students in the country illegally.

In a nod to his political strength, DeSantis is under attack from a growing group of Republican rivals.

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu publicly condemned DeSantis' decision to use the levers of government to punish private businesses like Disney that push back against his policy priorities. South Dakota

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Gov. Kristi Noem's team has criticized DeSantis' record on abortion as insufficiently conservative.

DeSantis did himself no favors inside the Republican National Committee last month when he publicly sided with RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel's challenger during her bitter reelection fight. McDaniel easily won reelection to her post.

"We are going to move forward. And that's what I'm focused on," McDaniel said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union" when asked about her relationship with DeSantis. "The one thing Republicans can do to make sure we don't win is fight each other all the time."

Slain Hong Kong model's in-laws, ex-husband detained

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — The ex-husband and former in-laws of a slain Hong Kong model were detained Monday on charges in her killing after police found body parts in a refrigerator and a pot. The case has gripped many in a Chinese territory where any violent crime is rare.

Ex-husband Alex Kwong, his father Kwong Kau and his brother Anthony Kwong were charged with murdering model Abby Choi a day earlier. Alex Kwong's mother, Jenny Li, faces one count of perverting the course of justice. None of the four was granted bail.

Choi, a 28-year-old model with more than 100,000 followers on Instagram, disappeared Feb. 21, according to a report filed later with the Hong Kong Police. Her last post was Feb. 19, featuring a photo shoot she had done with fashion magazine L'Officiel Monaco.

On Friday, police found her dismembered body in a refrigerator in a house rented by Kwong Kau in a suburban part of Hong Kong about a 30-minute drive from mainland China.

Authorities later discovered a young woman's skull believed to be Choi's in a cooking pot seized from the house. Officials say there was a hole in the skull.

The defendants have not yet entered their pleas, and it does not appear that their lawyers have commented on the case to the media. The case was adjourned until May.

Choi had financial disputes involving tens of millions of Hong Kong dollars (millions of dollars) with her ex-husband and his family, police said earlier, adding that "some people" were unhappy with how Choi handled her finances.

The gruesome killing has particularly transfixed many in Hong Kong and across the border in mainland China, since the self-governed southern Chinese city has a very low level of violent crime.

Choi's friend Bernard Cheng said he initially thought she had been kidnapped.

"I haven't imagined a person who's so good, so full of love, so innocent, a person who doesn't do anything bad will be killed like this," he said. "My heart is still heavy. I can't sleep well."

Cheng said Choi had four children, aged between 3 and 10. Alex Kwong, 28, was the father of the older two, who are now being taken care of by Choi's mother. Choi had remarried, to Chris Tam, and he was the father of the younger children, who are staying with his family.

Cheng said Choi had good relationships with her family, including her in-laws, and would travel with the families of her current and former husbands together.

While violent crime is rare in Hong Kong, the case recalls a handful of other shocking killings. In 2013, a man killed his parents and their heads were later found in refrigerators. In another infamous 1999 case, a woman was kidnapped and tortured by three members of an organized crime group before her death. Her skull was later found stuffed in a Hello Kitty doll.

Today in History: FEB 28, Pope Benedict XVI resigns

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Feb. 28, the 59th day of 2023. There are 306 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

Groton Daily Independent

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On Feb. 28, 1993, a gun battle erupted at a religious compound near Waco, Texas, when Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents tried to arrest Branch Davidian leader David Koresh on weapons charges; four agents and six Davidians were killed as a 51-day standoff began.

On this date:

In 1844, a 12-inch gun aboard the USS Princeton exploded as the ship was sailing on the Potomac River, killing Secretary of State Abel P. Upshur, Navy Secretary Thomas W. Gilmer and several others.

In 1849, the California gold rush began in earnest as regular steamship service started bringing gold-seekers to San Francisco.

In 1911, President William Howard Taft nominated William H. Lewis to be the first Black Assistant Attorney General of the United States.

In 1953, scientists James D. Watson and Francis H.C. Crick announced they had discovered the double-helix structure of DNA.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai issued the Shanghai Communiqué, which called for normalizing relations between their countries, at the conclusion of Nixon's historic visit to China.

In 1975, 42 people were killed in London's Underground when a train smashed into the end of a tunnel.

In 1996, Britain's Princess Diana agreed to divorce Prince Charles. (Their 15-year marriage officially ended in August 1996; Diana died in a car crash in Paris a year after that.)

In 2009, Paul Harvey, the news commentator and talk-radio pioneer whose staccato style made him one of the nation's most familiar voices, died in Phoenix at age 90.

In 2014, delivering a blunt warning to Moscow, President Barack Obama expressed deep concern over reported military activity inside Ukraine by Russia and warned "there will be costs" for any intervention.

In 2018, Walmart announced that it would no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21 and would remove items resembling assault-style rifles from its website. Dick's Sporting Goods said it would stop selling assault-style rifles and ban the sale of all guns to anyone under 21.

In 2020, the number of countries touched by the coronavirus climbed to nearly 60. The Dow Jones Industrial Average finished the week 12.4% lower in the market's worst weekly performance since the 2008 financial crisis.

Ten years ago: In 2013, Benedict XVI became the first pope in 600 years to resign, ending an eight-year pontificate. (Benedict was succeeded the following month by Pope Francis.) Chelsea Manning, the Army private arrested in the biggest leak of classified information in U.S. history, pleaded guilty at Fort Meade, Maryland, to 10 charges involving illegal possession or distribution of classified material. (Manning was sentenced to up to 35 years in prison after being convicted of additional charges in a court-martial, but had her sentence commuted in 2017 by President Barack Obama.)

Five years ago: Students and teachers returned under police guard to Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School as classes resumed for the first time since a shooting that killed 17 people. President Donald Trump called for substantial changes to the nation's gun laws, criticizing lawmakers for being fearful of the National Rifle Association. Political leaders paid tribute to the Rev. Billy Graham as his casket rested in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda.

One year ago: Russian forces shelled Ukraine's second-largest city, rocking a residential neighborhood, and closed in on the capital, Kyiv, in a 17-mile convoy of hundreds of tanks and other vehicles. Talks aimed at stopping the fighting yielded only an agreement to keep talking. A Texas man charged with storming the U.S. Capitol with a holstered handgun on his waist became the first Jan. 6 defendant to go on trial.

Today's birthdays: Architect Frank Gehry is 94. Singer Sam the Sham is 86. Actor-director-dancer Tommy Tune is 84. Hall of Fame auto racer Mario Andretti is 83. Actor Kelly Bishop is 79. Actor Stephanie Beacham is 76. Writer-director Mike Figgis is 75. Actor Mercedes Ruehl is 75. Actor Bernadette Peters is 75. Former Energy Secretary Steven Chu is 75. Actor Ilene Graff is 74. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman is 70. Basketball Hall of Famer Adrian Dantley is 68. Actor John Turturro is 66. Rock singer Cindy Wilson is 66. Actor Rae Dawn Chong is 62. Actor Maxine Bahns is 54. Actor Robert Sean Leonard is 54. Rock singer Pat Monahan is 54. Author Daniel Handler (aka "Lemony Snicket") is 53. Actor Tasha Smith is 52. Actor

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Rory Cochrane is 51. Actor Ali Larter is 47. Country singer Jason Aldean is 46. Actor Geoffrey Arend is 45. Actor Melanie Chandra (TV: "Code Black") is 39. Actor Michelle Horn is 36. MLB relief pitcher Aroldis Chapman is 35. Actor True O'Brien is 29. Actor Madisen Beaty is 28. Actor Quinn Shephard is 28. Actor Bobb'e J. Thompson is 27.