

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Community Calendar

Groton Area School is 2 hours late today. Monday, March 6

Senior Menu: Spanish rice with hamburger, green beans, Mandarin oranges, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Mini waffles.

School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.

The Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

United Methodist: Lent Bible Study with Pastor Brandon, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 7

Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, buttermilk biscuit, glazed carrots, apricots, cookie.

School Breakfast: Egg and cheese wrap.

School Lunch: Lasagna hot dish, corn.

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

The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Boys Basketball SoDak16 - Groton vs. Sioux Valley at Watertown Civic Center, 7 p.m.

ACT Practice Test at GHS, 8:30 a.m. (Grades 11 and 12 (optional))

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



St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML, 1 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Lay leader night via zoom, 7 p.m.

Wednesday, March 8

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, creamy noodles, California blend vegetables, carrot bars, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Eggs and breakfast potatoes.

School Lunch: Sloppy joes, sweet potatoes fries.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

ACT Practice Test at GHS, 8:30 a.m. (Grades 11 and 12 (optional))

St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (Sarah Circle 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.

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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Groton Robotics Independent

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Gearheads make it into the State Quarterfinals, finish 7th

Groton Robotics traveled to Rapid City for the State Vex Robotics Tournament held at Douglas High School in Box Elder competing against 30 teams from 12 towns: Mitchell (4), Harrisburg (4), Groton (4), Menno (2), Sioux Falls (2), Jefferson (1), Canton (2) Brandon (1), Box Elder (5), Vermillion (1), Britton (2), Spearfish (2), Groton Teams included: G-Force 9050A (6th grade- Grant Cleveland & Conner Kroll) Gear Heads 9050B (Seniors-Jack Dinger & Ethan Clark) Gladiators 9050F (Garrett Schultz, De Eh Tha Say, Bradyn Wienk) Galaxy 9050E (Corbin Weismantel, Logan Clocksene, Kianna Sanders, Axel Warrington).

The competition started off with 41 qualifying matches, each team competing 6 times. At the end of the 41 qualifying matches Gear Heads-9050B ranked 7th, Galaxy-9050E 19th, Gladiators-9050F 21st, G-Force-9050A 22nd .

The top 16 teams were chosen for the quarterfinals. Gear Heads ended their season in the quarterfinals with a score of 115 to 68. A tough day for the teams, but all in all the kids always make the best of it, lots of laughs and memories are made at every tournament! Congratulations to all the Groton teams! We look forward to another year and the new game release in April!

Tournament champions were from Harrisburg and Jefferson.

Congratulations to all the teams who participated!

Groton Robotic seniors Jack and Ethan, along with invited guest builder, Garrett Schultz, will be headed down to Council Bluffs, Iowa, Thursday, March 30th to Saturday, April 1st to compete in the CREATE US Open. This was the same tournament the teams competed in last year. Rules and scoring are different, and they can use non-vex parts. For more information check out the vex VRC robotics website, download the VEX via app and follow Groton Tiger Robotics on facebook. Thanks to all who support Groton Robotics!

Submitted by Groton Robotics



Groton Robotics participating at state

Back(l-r) Corbin Weismantel, Logan Clocksene, Garrett Schultz, Axel Warrington, Ethan Clark front(l-r) De EhThay Say, Kiana Sanders, Grant Cleveland, Bradyn Wienk, Connor Kroll, Jack Dinger.

Photos Courtesy of Groton Robotics

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Galaxy 9050E (Logan Clocksene, Corbin Weismantel, Axel Warrington, Kianna Sanders).



Galaxy team members taking a break.



Gear Heads Ethan Clark and Jackson Dinger.

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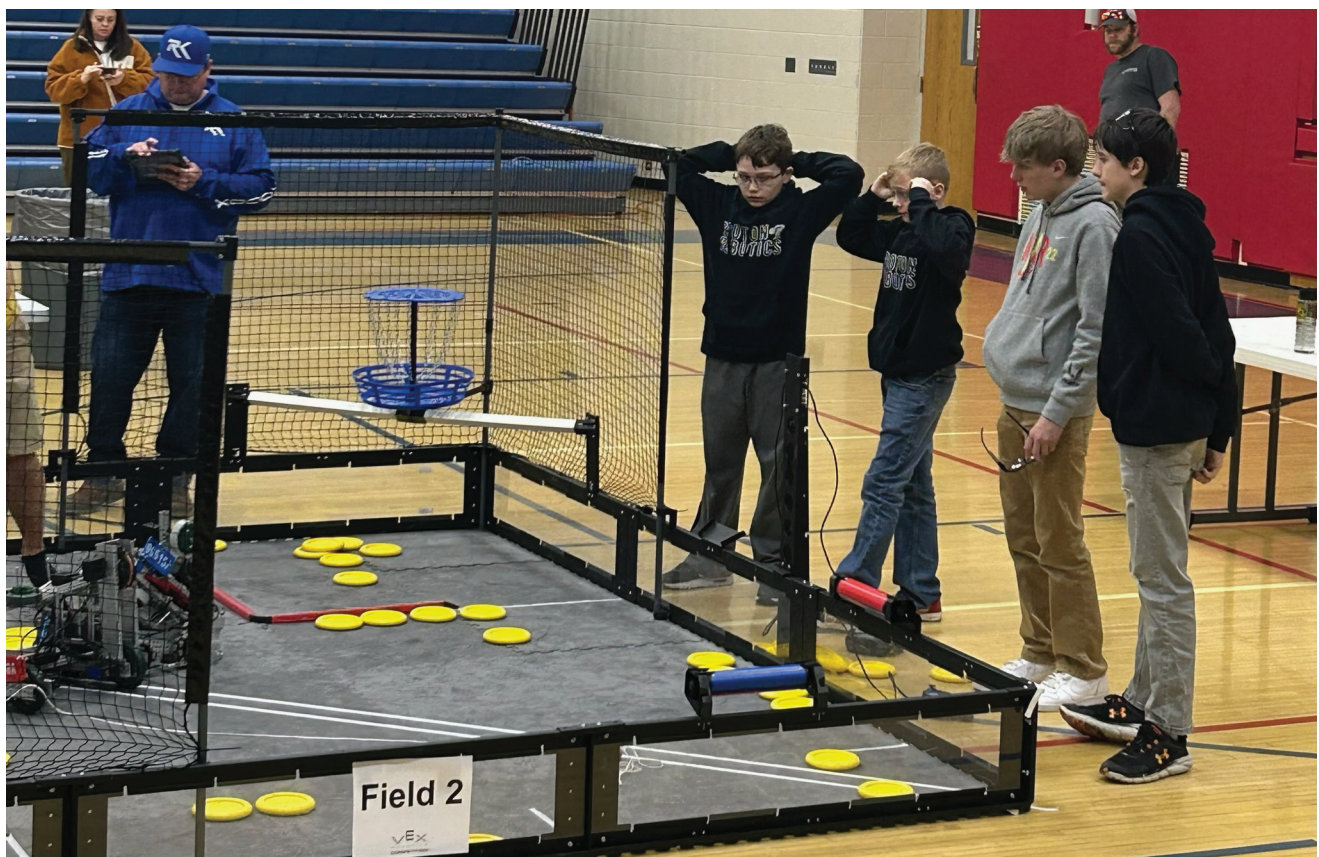
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Gear Heads- Ethan Clark and Jack Dinger



Gear Head Seniors-Ethan Clark and Jack Dinger.



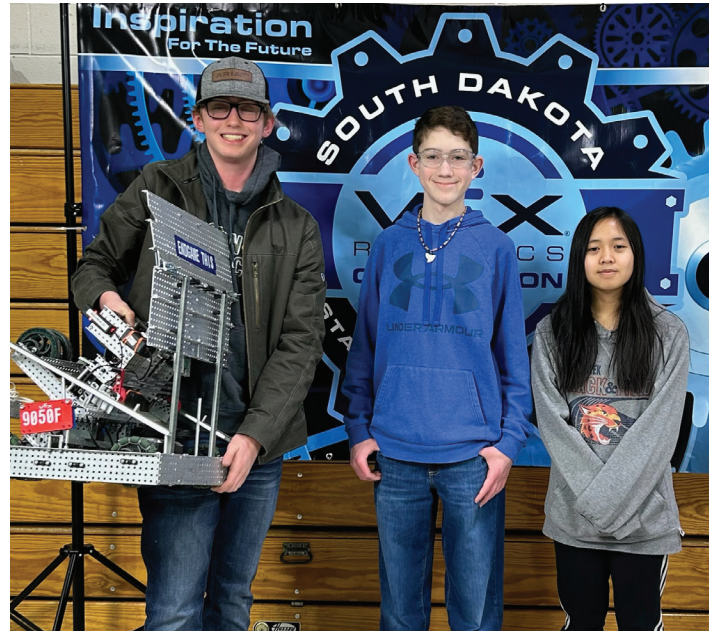
G-Force after a match (Grant Cleveland and Connor Kroll).

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G-Force-Connor Kroll and Grant Cleveland.



Gladiators-(Garrett Schultz, Bradyn Wienk and De Eh Thay Say.



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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week

#17 Results

Team Standings: Coyotes – 8, Shihtzus – 8, Chipmunks – 6, Foxes – 6, Jackelopes – 4, Cheetahs – 4

Men's High Games: Brad Waage – 187, Lance Frohling – 181, Randy Stanley – 175

Women's High Games: Vicki Walter – 188, Darci Spanier – 187, Dar Larson – 175

Men's High Series: Brad Waage – 521, Tony Madsen – 487, Roger Spanier – 474

Women's High Series: Vicki Walter – 492, Sue Stanley – 462, Lori Giedt – 453

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- Heavy-duty cast aluminum gear box backed by 5-year limited warranty**

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3X 26" TRAC

Clear it all with the strength of the 3X 26" Trac featuring a powerful 357cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

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- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
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- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

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Tak on winter with the commercial-grade durability of the 357cc Cub Cadet 2X 30" MAX snow blower

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- 23" intake height
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- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty

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EXCEPTIONAL FINANCING OFFERS AVAILABLE!



GDILIVE.COM

SoDak16 at the Watertown Civic Center
Groton Area vs. Sioux Valley
Tuesday, March 7th, 2023, 7 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 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

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Weekly Vikings Recap

Minnesota Vikings' Situation at Quarterback

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

News came out from the NFL Combine this week that the Minnesota Vikings might be looking to do one of two options with Kirk Cousins and his current contract. The first option would be to let Kirk Cousins play out the final year of his current contract, which currently has a cap hit of \$36.2 million. That number as of now would account for 16% of the Vikings' 2023 salary cap and make it more likely that the Vikings move on from several other veteran players who they will be unable to afford.

The second option that the Vikings are reportedly considering with Cousins is to give him a long-term extension. This would be Cousins' third extension with the Vikings since signing with them in 2018 and likely the last. An extension would lessen Cousins' 2023 cap hit and give the Vikings the cap space they need to re-sign certain players or perhaps go out and get a player in free agency.

What this news tells us is that the Vikings appear to not be interested in doing another one-year extension like they did last year. They either want to fully commit to Cousins as their quarterback for the next couple of years or they are ready to move on to a new, younger quarterback.

In my opinion, I would let Cousins play out the final year of his contract. For starters, Cousins will be 35 years old by the time the 2023 season begins. Outside of Tom Brady, history shows that a quarterback's arm talent will "fall off a cliff" before you see it coming. Peyton Manning and Dan Marino both did it in their final seasons, and it appears that Russell Wilson might have done it last year. Because the quarterback position lacks the constant collisions like other positions in football, quarterbacks have been able to mask their decline in talent easier than other players. However, once that decline reaches the point of no return, it becomes too hard to ignore. The arm velocity drastically decreases, and the pinpoint accuracy is no longer there.

Although, I am not saying the 2023 season will be Cousins' "fall off a cliff" season, what I am saying is that you just never know when it is going to happen with a quarterback in his mid-30s. The best thing the Vikings could do is let Cousins show that he still has it from an arm talent standpoint in 2023. If he does, then you re-sign him to a contract. Cousins' has made it pretty clear that he wants to remain in Minnesota so I do not see him leaving if he were to become a free agent after the 2023 season. However, if Cousins does hit the fall-off point in 2023, then the Vikings will at least not be tied to him for more seasons after that.

What makes the Cousins' news even more interesting is the fact that the Vikings conducted interviews with quarterback prospects, Anthony Richardson and Will Levis, at the NFL Combine this week. Could the Vikings just simply be doing their due diligence? Perhaps. However, this also could mean that the Vikings are ready to do what so many Vikings fans have been asking them to do for the last 3 years: draft a quarterback in the first round.

The problem is that both Richardson and Levis are likely to be taken in the top ten of the draft. The Vikings, who are picking 23rd overall and only have 5 picks in this year's draft, would have to give up a ton of future draft capital to go get one of these quarterbacks. However, if the Vikings truly think one of these quarterbacks will be a franchise-changing player, there is no limit on what they will do to go get their guy.

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"I can't believe they'd do that to people"

Writer's note: This is the 50th anniversary of the AIM takeover at Wounded Knee. At the time, as a teenager, I didn't understand the genesis of the protest. Now, I know more. This column from 2019 reflects that.

India and Gus the Wonder Pug waited in my old Mustang convertible while I surveyed my hat rack, trying to decide which one I would take on our pilgrimage. I finally grabbed my Baltimore Orioles cap.

The sun was high when we stopped at the Sitting Bull and Sakakawea monuments near Mobridge. We stood awhile at an obelisk marking Sakakawea's time on this earth, a legend at 19, dead in 1812 at 25 of a fever during childbirth, about 25 miles from that spot.

A breeze rustled the tall grass, but beyond that, silence. There was a cluster of bee hives in an adjacent field. India and Gus trotted out ahead of me to the great chief's grave on a bluff, overlooking the Missouri far below.

Sitting Bull was 59 when he died on Dec. 15, 1890, shot down along the Grand River during an arrest attempt by authorities who feared that he might further encourage the apocalyptic Ghost Dance movement that was building among the Sioux. Two weeks later, the 7th Cavalry, which had suffered defeat at Little Big Horn in 1876 by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, massacred hundreds of men, women and children at Wounded Knee.

There was charred sage at the base of Sitting Bull's statue, dried wildflowers, a broken, slightly weathered cigarette, two plantains, and a handmade redwood cross inscribed with one word: "Faith." Sitting Bull's stone visage gazed east as if waiting for the next sunrise.

We continued south through deep green valleys, inhaling the perfume of cut hay. There was road construction a few miles from Wounded Knee and the smell of hot tar. It was late afternoon when we arrived and lumbered up a washed-out, dusty clay hill best suited for a four wheel drive.

Dozens of faded prayer cloths adorned the wire fence surrounding the gray monument. Outside the fence were more recent graves, the dirt held in place by weeds and wildflowers. Some plots had military markers decorated with American flags. At one grave, chips of blue paint were all that remained of a name once painted on a large wooden cross. There was something atop the cross, and I moved closer to see. It was a sun-faded Baltimore Orioles cap.

Standing there, my mind recalled the photographs of the killing field, the frozen bodies, one old man's icy hands clawing at the sky.

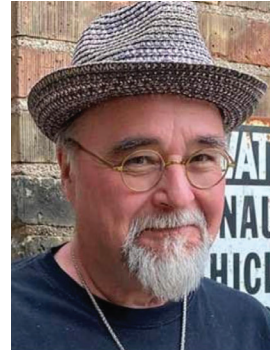
There was one survivor. Four days after the slaughter, an infant was discovered, protected by her mother's frozen corpse. The baby girl, who was adopted by an army general, became known as Lost Bird. There's no happy ending to her story. Caught between cultures, possibly abused, then abandoned by her adoptive father, she became a curiosity relegated to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and later, Vaudeville. She died penniless of influenza at 30 in California on Valentines Day, 1920. In 1991, her people brought her home.

Small irises struggled in the unforgiving soil covering the grave. Someone had placed two small teddy bears alongside prayer bundles and painted stones. I left a penny on her headstone.

A day later, as we drove homeward into an inky night, I thought about the day Dylan and I went to Standing Rock during the pipeline protests. Thousands of Water Protectors were blocking an oil pipeline poised to cross the Missouri just a mile north of the Standing Rock Reservation.

When we arrived, a march began, so we followed, but no one seemed to know the purpose. We later learned that bulldozers were scraping away what Lakota archeologists deemed a sacred site. A helicopter hovered overhead menacingly in the unmerciful heat.

I fell behind, but Dylan, who'd borrowed a camera from his college communications class, filmed from the front lines as black-shirted security forces turned attack dogs on men, women and children in a scene



That's Life

by Tony Bender

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reminiscent of Birmingham in 1964. Young bareback horsemen whirled protectively back and forth between their people and the security forces, helping drive them into retreat.

I hitched a ride back to my pickup and was waiting when Dylan finally emerged from the milling crowd, older than when he went in. He didn't see me at first—looked right through me before I got his attention. He climbed in wearily and sighed. Staring straight ahead through a bug-spattered windshield, he said, "Dad, I can't believe they'd do that to people."

We drove a long while in silence.

© Tony Bender, 2019

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"Fearing Death Can Cause Suffering"

When in life does one come to confront the tough truth that each of us will eventually die? In my years as an internist caring for young and old alike, some people understand this early, and some people never get it. In denying death, we intensify our fear of it. Usually, however, it is sometime during their 50s that people first look into the eyes of death. Put it off as we may, the hard certainty is that we are all aging and one day an end will come. Shakespeare described advanced age in his play *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII (All the world's a stage):

". . . Last scene of all, That ends this strange eventful history, Is second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans (without) teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

Shakespeare's description of advanced age during the 1600s is rather bleak and scary. I think, with modern medicine and the support of a loving family, we could do better. I clearly believe that advanced age and facing our own death should not fill us with dread. The following is a more hopeful version to end Shakespeare's excerpt:

". . . He did not have to end his life alone; If over time he'd shared his caring, raised the worth of others, fed the love he'd sown. His death would find him kindly prized and praised, While kin sang festive songs of joy, amazed."

Fear comes from the oldest reptilian part of our brain. Fear helps us run from attackers but can also make us run from making important choices about our health. Fear can even bring us to push forward with treatment that may cause significant suffering, even when we are very old and even when treatment is futile and it's time to quit.

Fear of dying can prevent us from making plans about end-of-life care and, most importantly, prevent us from talking to our families about those wishes. How do we want to be cared for if we should lose mental capacity from a stroke or dementia? Do we wish to have a feeding tube, resuscitation, antibiotics when there is no quality of life left, when one doesn't recognize family and when the only option will be residing in a bed somewhere "sans everything."

I would rather die and be:

". . . kindly prized and praised, While kin sing festive songs of joy, amazed."

Richard P. Holm, MD, passed away in March of 2020 after a battle with pancreatic cancer. He was founder of The Prairie Doc® and author of "Life's Final Season, A Guide for Aging and Dying with Grace" available on Amazon. Dr. Holm's legacy lives on through his Prairie Doc® organization. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook, featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. Central.



Based on Science, Built on Trust



the late Richard P. Holm, MD

We the People

The South Dakota Humanities Council is making available a weekly column -- "We the People" -- that focuses on the U.S. Constitution. It is written by David Adler, who is president of The Alturas Institute, a non-profit organization created to promote the Constitution, gender equality, and civic education.



By David Adler

Supreme Court in *Nebbia*: "An Ominous Fork in the Road"

The immense pressures inflicted on the United States by the Great Depression of the 1930s forced the Supreme Court on several occasions to confront the scope of a state's police power to regulate economic activity in the name of the general welfare.

In the landmark case of *Nebbia v. New York* (1934), the Court, in a sharply divided 5-4 decision, saved the American dairy industry when it upheld the state's milk-control law that created a board to establish minimum retail prices.

The dairy industry, like the rest of the agricultural sector, was in crisis. In Wisconsin, dairy farmers had dumped milk in the streets rather than selling it for less than the cost of production. The New York assembly, fearing a similar reaction, which would lead to the collapse of the dairy market and widespread chaos, empowered a board to set reasonable prices--nine cents a quart, as it happened.

The state fined a Rochester grocer, Leon *Nebbia*, five dollars for undercutting the market when he sold two quarts of milk and a loaf of bread for eighteen cents. The state courts upheld his conviction under the milk-control act, and *Nebbia*, who said he had intentionally violated the statute as a test of his "liberty" under the 14th Amendment Due Process Clause, appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Court faced what Arthur Krock, the legendary columnist for the *New York Times*, called an "ominous fork in the road." The Justices might strike down the law as a violation of *Nebbia's* property rights under the 14th Amendment and thus promote the principle of *laissez-faire*, but such a decision would likely destroy the dairy industry as desperate farmers either dumped their milk or sold it for mere pennies. Or the Court could uphold the milk-control statute as a reasonable exercise of the state's police power, perhaps following the precedent in *Munn v. Illinois* (1873), that empowered a state to regulate a business "affected with a public interest," with the aim of saving the industry.

Justice Owen Roberts who had previously embraced the "public interest" test, wrote the opinion for the Court in *Nebbia* and proceeded to obliterate it. Roberts, it has been said, agonized over the prospect of abandoning the "public interest" standard so soon after upholding it, and paced the floor late into the night, before deciding that it was too restrictive. Roberts's opinion broadened the police power to make it equal to the needs of the general welfare. Roberts stated, "Neither property rights nor contract rights are absolute." The Constitution, moreover, "does not secure to any one liberty to conduct his business in such fashion as to inflict injury upon the public at large."

Nebbia exposed a deep chasm within the Court. The five-man majority, led by Justice Roberts, did not believe the Justices should consider the wisdom of the milk-control act. "With the wisdom of the policy adopted," Roberts wrote, "with the adequacy or the practicability of the law enacted to forward it, the courts are both incompetent and unauthorized to deal." This position reflected the Court's historical tradition, one greatly influenced by Chief Justice John Marshall who, in *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819), wrote that "the relative wisdom of a measure" is beyond the Court's inquiry.

Justice James McReynolds, who wrote for the four dissenters, disagreed. "I think," he observed, "this Court must have regard to the wisdom of the enactment." That is, the Court, under the 14th Amendment, must act as a super-legislature. In McReynolds' view, *Nebbia* enjoyed a fundamental right to set his own price, a right that could not be curbed by the state's police power. "Facile disregard of the Constitution," he wrote, "will inevitably lead to its destruction."

Justice Roberts transformed the Court's attitude toward the legality of price regulation by eliminating the category of a "business affected with a public interest," upon which price-fixing had been grounded. As Justice Felix Frankfurter observed, "Roberts had written the epitaph on the misconception, which had gained respect through repetition, that legislative price-fixing as such was at least presumptively unconstitutional." In the days since *Nebbia*, price-regulation would be upheld when the Court finds a reasonable relationship between it and the social interests that may be vindicated by the exercise of the police power.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

COMMENTARY

Journalism changing and thriving while Noem avoids press conferences

Dana Hess ~ MARCH 5, 2023 7:00 AM

One of the features of the 2023 legislative session has been something of a head scratcher: Gov. Kristi Noem has quit making herself available to South Dakota media for weekly press conferences. She has chosen to give Capitol reporters the silent treatment at a time when journalism in this state has more outlets than ever before.

The vitality of journalism in South Dakota can be seen in the legislation offered that would make it easier for start-up news operations to become legal newspapers. Legal newspapers are allowed to print public notices from local governments. Three bills offered during the current session would have changed the rules governing legal newspapers.

Readers in three communities — Sioux Falls, Aberdeen and Watertown — believe that the quality of their local newspapers has taken a nosedive since Gannett was purchased by Gatehouse Media. While the company is still called Gannett, the South Dakota newspapers in that chain bear little resemblance to the publications that have served those communities for years. Due to the company's overwhelming debt, staffs have been drastically cut and news gathering has lost its breadth and aggressiveness.

In two communities, new online publications have sprung up to fill the journalism void. The Dakota Scout of Sioux Falls and Aberdeen Insider, both less than a year old, have had no trouble attracting online subscribers to their news websites. Dakota Scout also publishes a free weekly printed newspaper and Aberdeen Insider has plans for a print edition this spring.

Dakota Scout and its community backers were behind two bills in the Legislature that would have allowed its online subscriptions and free print editions to qualify it to print legal notices. Newspaper lobbyists twice



Gov. Kristi Noem testifies in support of a bill that would have eliminated the state sales tax on groceries in front of the House Committee on Appropriations on Feb. 21, 2023, at the Capitol in Pierre. (Joshua Haiar/

South Dakota Searchlight)

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argued, successfully, that while they welcome more journalism in South Dakota, there was no mechanism in the bills to allow for an audit of the online subscribers.

In South Dakota, newspapers are allowed to print city and school district notices from the county where they hold their Second Class mailing permit. The second bill was written so hastily that it would have allowed what the legislation fondly referred to as a "21st Century Newspaper" to qualify to print legal notices for any city or school district in the state.

Another bill would have done away with the requirement that a newspaper publish for a year before it becomes eligible to print legal notices.

While all three bills failed in committee, lobbyists for the South Dakota Newspaper Association aren't blind to what's going on. They know that when the next session starts there had better be some legislation ready that figures out a way to make publications like Dakota Scout and Aberdeen Insider eligible to publish public notices. It's best for newspapers, in cooperation with these start-ups, to make that plan rather than having the Legislature do it for them.

It's also obvious that people in Sioux Falls and Aberdeen are hungry for news about their communities. So hungry that they want to reward these new publications by investing their public notice funds with them, even if they have to change the law to do it.

And these two start-ups aren't the only changes in South Dakota journalism. Since 2017, South Dakota News Watch, a nonprofit news organization that specializes in long form investigative journalism, has been sharing its stories with readers and media outlets throughout the state. You're reading this commentary through the auspices of South Dakota Searchlight, a nonprofit newsroom started in 2022 that provides news and commentary on issues of statewide interest.

Back in January, the newspaper association hosted Newspaper Day at the Capitol, an event that always includes a news conference with Republican and Democratic leaders. Both sets of leaders, independent of each other, praised the current session's press coverage and the growth of the Capitol news corps.

One traditional component was missing from Newspaper Day. Usually there is also a news conference with the governor. Noem didn't show up this year, just as she's been a no-show so far for the news conferences traditionally held each week of the session by party leaders and the governor.

Recently elected to four more years, and often mentioned as a possible candidate for national office, Noem acts as if she just doesn't need the South Dakota press anymore. Her performance in the current session, however, shows that if the legislation she proposes is really important to her, she needs to get her message out to South Dakotans by cultivating the state press corps rather than spending her time on Fox News.

If the governor had taken advantage of the increase in the size of the Capitol press corps to get the public on her side, maybe her signature bills wouldn't have died this session. Her plan to cut the state sales tax on food? Dead. Her push to add more family leave for state employees? Dead. Her call for a board to vet the sales of agricultural land so it won't be purchased by "countries that hate us?" Dead.

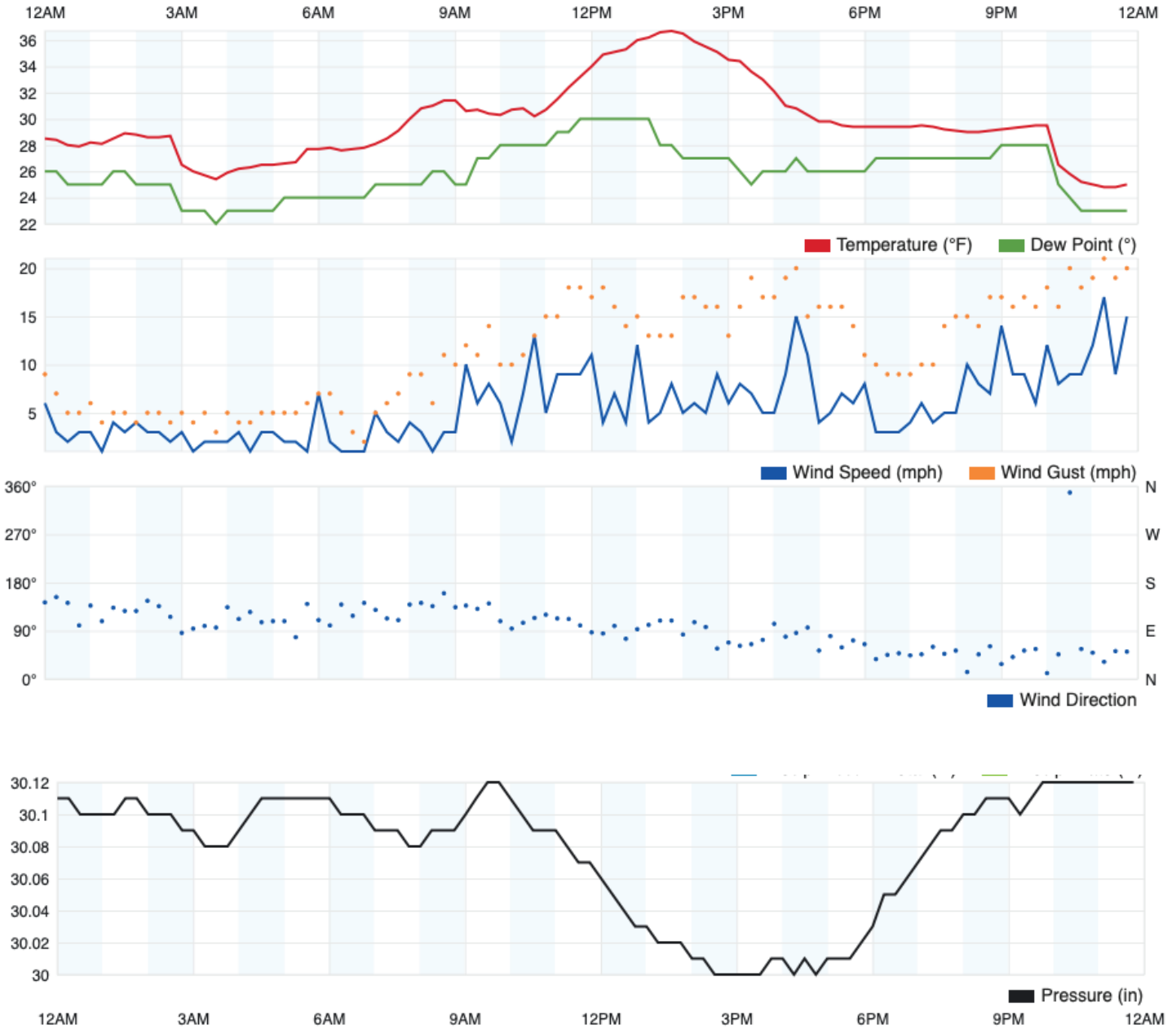
At a time when journalism is booming in South Dakota, the governor is choosing to stand by silently. Perhaps if she had taken advantage of this boom, rather than remaining mute, some of her legislative agenda might still be alive today.

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

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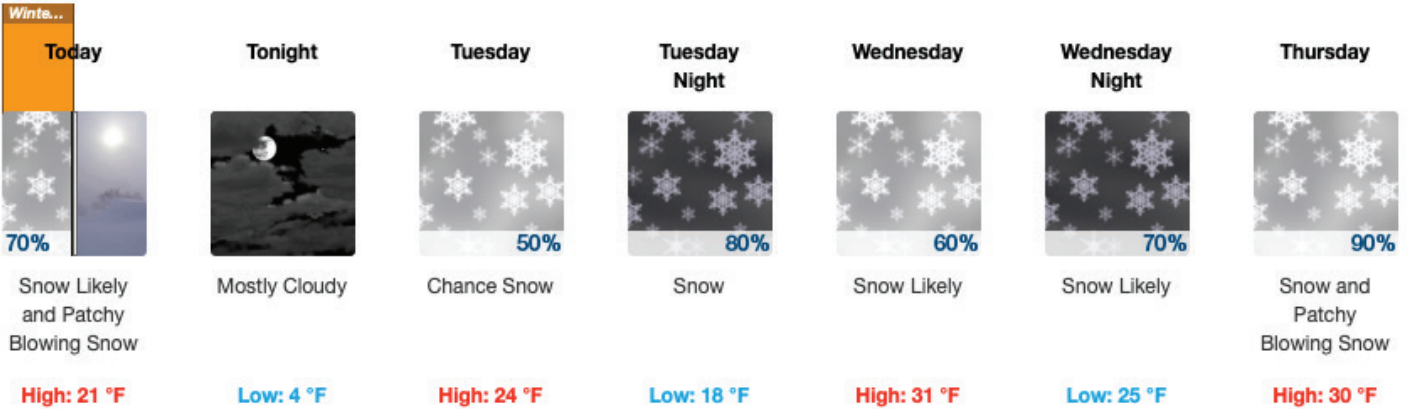
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Ongoing Winter Weather Through The Week

March 6, 2023
5:08 AM

Key Messages

- Snow continuing to push east across northeastern SD into western MN this morning
 - ◆ Additional amounts of a trace to one inch
- Another round of snow expected early Tuesday morning through Wednesday with additional accumulations
- More snow chances for the end of the week
 - ◆ Additional accumulations possible

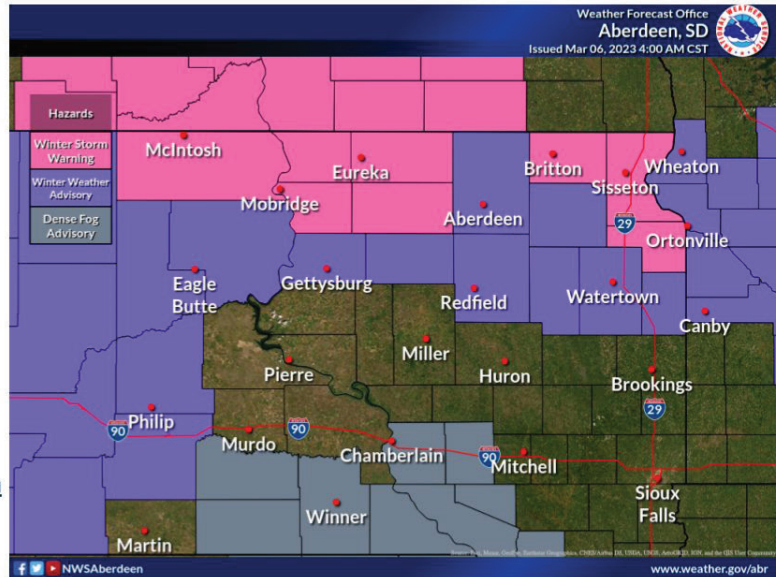


Important Updates

Expect additional winter headlines through the week

Next Scheduled Briefing

- Monday evening



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Groton Daily Independent

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Winter Weather Advisory

URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE

National Weather Service Aberdeen SD

601 AM CST Mon Mar 6 2023

Traverse-Big Stone-Brown-Day-Spink-Clark-Codington-Hamlin-Deuel-
Including the cities of Wheaton, Ortonville, Aberdeen, Webster, Redfield, Clark, Watertown, Hayti, and
Clear Lake

...WINTER WEATHER ADVISORY REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL NOON CST TODAY...

* WHAT...Snow. Additional snow accumulations of up to one inch. Winds gusting as high as 35 mph.

* WHERE...Portions of west central Minnesota and northeast South Dakota.

* WHEN...Until noon CST today.

* IMPACTS...Plan on slippery road conditions. Patchy blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility.
The hazardous conditions could impact the morning commute.

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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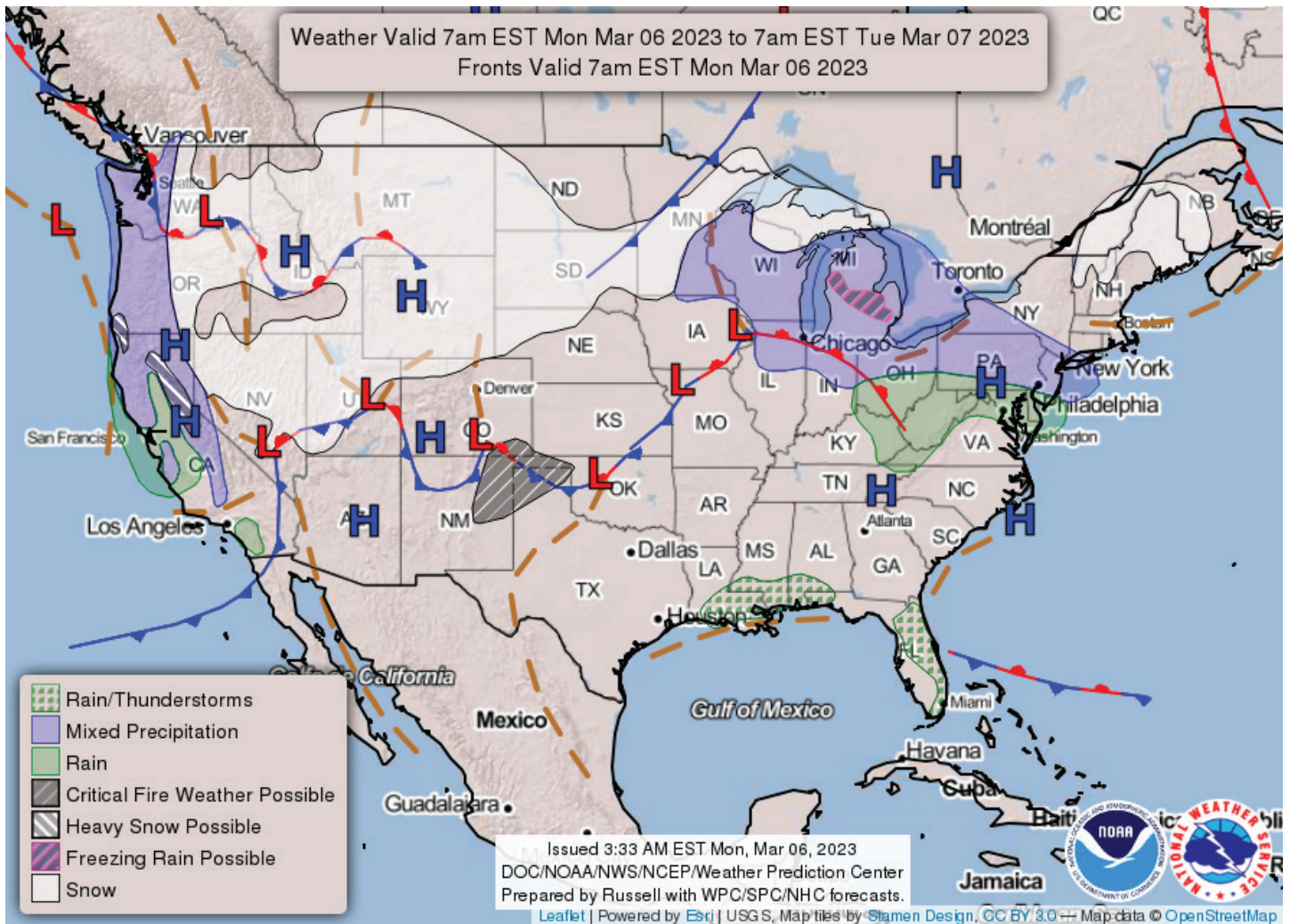
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 37 °F at 1:51 PM
Low Temp: 25 °F at 11:16 PM
Wind: 22 mph at 10:51 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 27 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 69 in 2000
Record Low: -16 in 1899
Average High: 36
Average Low: 15
Average Precip in March.: 0.14
Precip to date in March.: 0.20
Average Precip to date: 1.31
Precip Year to Date: 1.78
Sunset Tonight: 6:27:18 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:58:07 AM



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Today in Weather History

March 6, 1987: Twenty-eight cities in the north-central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Pickstown, South Dakota, was the hot spot in the nation with a reading of 83 degrees. The high of 71 at Saint Cloud, Minnesota, smashed their previous record by 21 degrees.

March 6, 2000: A grass fire of unknown origin was exacerbated by dry conditions and strong winds, burning 1500 acres of grassland northwest and north of Brandon in Minnehaha County. The fire threatened several homes, but no homes were damaged, although farmland and equipment burned. In a separate event the same day, a controlled burn went out of control, exacerbated by the conditions and strong winds. The fire caused one fatality and one injury. The damage was confined to grassland.

1875: Heavy snow fell in much of Arkansas, with the highest amounts in the central and west. Twelve inches of snow fell at Little Rock, which remains the highest calendar day snowfall on record in the capital city. 30 inches fell near Mena.

1908: A tropical storm developed about 500 miles northeast of San Juan, Puerto Rico, on March 6. The storm intensified to Category 2 strength near the Leeward Islands of Saint-Barthélemy and Saint Kitts. Since 1842, this was the only hurricane to develop in the Atlantic Ocean in March.

1962: The strongest nor'easter of this century struck the Mid-Atlantic Region on March 5-9, 1962. It is known as the "Ash Wednesday Storm" and caused over \$200 million (1962 dollars) in property damage and significant coastal erosion from North Carolina to Long Island, New York. It was estimated to have destroyed or significantly damaged 45,000 homes in New Jersey alone. The Red Cross recorded that the storm killed 40 people. It hit during "Spring Tide." When the sun and moon are in phase, they produce a higher-than-average astronomical tide. Water reached nine feet at Norfolk (flooding begins around five feet). Houses were toppled into the ocean, and boardwalks were broken and twisted. The islands of Chincoteague and Assateague, Maryland, were completely underwater. Ocean City, Maryland, sustained significant damage, mainly to the island's south end. Winds up to 70 mph built 40-foot waves at sea. Heavy snow fell in the Appalachian Mountains. Big Meadows, southeast of Luray, recorded Virginia's greatest 24-hour snowfall with 33 inches and the most significant single storm snowfall with 42 inches. (Luray, Virginia reported 33.5 inches on March 2-3, 1994, making this later snow their maximum 24-hour snowfall total.) Roads were blocked, and electrical service was out for several days. Washington and Baltimore fell into the mixed precipitation zone. The Ash Wednesday storm is noteworthy for producing devastating tidal flooding along the Atlantic Coast and record snows and the interior of Virginia. The extremely high tides and massive waves caused tremendous damage -worse than many hurricanes that have hit the region. Along the Atlantic Coast, tide ran for 2 to 6 ft above average with 20 to 40 ft waves crashing ashore. National Airport received only 4 inches of snow with a liquid equivalent of 1.33 inches. However, close-in suburbs, such as Silver Spring, Maryland, and Falls Church, Virginia, received 11 inches of snow. Outlying areas such as Rockville, Maryland, received 19 inches of snow, and Leesburg, Virginia, received 20 inches of snow. Other snow totals included 15 inches at Richmond; 23 inches at Culpeper; 26 inches at Charlottesville; 32 inches at Winchester; and 35 inches at Fort Royal, Virginia, and Big Meadows on the Skyline Drive top the list with 42 inches of snow.

2004: More snow fell on March 6, 2004, than ever recorded for a single day in March since the Korea Meteorological Administration began keeping records in 1904. According to news reports, the city of Daejeon (Taejon) in central South Korea received 19 inches of snow on Friday, with an additional 6 inches (15 centimeters) forecast for Saturday. As the storm moved away from the peninsula on March 7.

2010: At least seven funnel clouds were observed along the Orange County coast in southern California. Two were spotted near John Wayne Airport.

2017: A line of storms brought widespread wind damage and tornadoes to Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and northern Missouri.

2017: Early data from the GOES-East satellite warned forecasters from the NWS office in Dodge City, Kansas, about a wildfire before any 911 calls were made. As a result, they were able to start planning evacuations sooner and saving lives.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

MAKE A WISH

A college freshman, small in stature, wanted to be a member of the football team. He reported for the first practice, went to the coach and asked to try out for the team. Not wanting to discourage him, the coach agreed. He gave him the football and said, "I want you to run toward the goal while these two linemen chase you."

Tucking the ball under his arm, he ran as fast as he could. Soon, one of the linemen grabbed his right leg, and he began to fall. Then the other one grabbed his left leg, and he fell to the ground. As he lay there panting and praying, one of them said, "This may be your last wish. Make it count and be careful not to waste it."

"I wish you'd let me go so I can tell the coach, - I quit."

There were many times in the life of the Apostle Paul that he faced overwhelming odds; times when it appeared that he would be "torn apart." But he never gave up or quit.

When he was enduring his final imprisonment in Rome and awaiting his trial, he did not know if he would be released or executed. Rather than being filled with fear, he demonstrated his faith in God. So, he prayed. And what did he pray? He prayed that when he stood trial he would speak courageously for Christ and not be ashamed: "For I live in eager expectation and hope that I will never do anything that causes me shame, but that I will always be bold for Christ." What faith! What trust! What courage! What is your prayer when you need God?

Prayer: Father, may we, like Paul, have confidence and courage, to face adversity with faith and trust, knowing that You are in us, with us, and working through us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:20-21



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:
03.03.23

8 25 36 39 67 11

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$188,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 48
DRAW: Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.04.23

2 5 24 32 52 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$39,130,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 48 Mins 27
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.05.23

1 7 10 25 43 11

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 18 Mins 27
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.04.23

1 2 9 19 21

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$79,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 48
DRAW: Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.04.23

17 18 24 36 56 25

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 47 Mins 27
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.04.23

10 16 18 40 66 15

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 47 Mins 27
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

N. Dakota St. best S. Dakota 70-68 in Summit League quarters

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Grant Nelson led North Dakota State with 23 points and Tajavis Miller sealed the victory with a layup with 15 seconds left as the Bison knocked off South Dakota 70-68 on Sunday in the quarterfinals of the Summit League Tournament.

Nelson added 11 rebounds for the Bison (15-16 Summit League). Boden Skunberg scored 17 points and added five rebounds. Miller shot 4 for 8, including 3 for 6 from beyond the arc to finish with 12 points.

A.J. Plitzuweit led the way for the Coyotes (12-19) with 17 points. Kruz Perrott-Hunt added 16 points and six assists for South Dakota. In addition, Tasos Kamateros finished with 11 points and 12 rebounds. The loss was the Coyotes' sixth in a row.

Nelson scored 13 points in the first half for North Dakota State, who led 33-25 at halftime. Miller put up 12 points in the second half for North Dakota State, including their game-winning shot in the final minute.

Iran's top leader says suspected poisonings 'unforgivable'

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran's supreme leader said Monday that if a series of suspected poisonings at girls' schools are proven to be deliberate the culprits should be sentenced to death for committing an "unforgivable crime."

It was the first time Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say on all matters of state, has spoken publicly about the suspected poisonings, which began late last year and have sickened hundreds of children.

Iranian officials only acknowledged them in recent weeks and have provided no details on who may be behind the attacks or what chemicals — if any — have been used. Unlike neighboring Afghanistan, Iran has no history of religious extremists targeting women's education.

"If the poisoning of students is proven, those behind this crime should be sentenced to capital punishment and there will be no amnesty for them," Khamenei said, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

Authorities have acknowledged suspected attacks at more than 50 schools across 21 of Iran's 30 provinces since November.

Iran's Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said over the weekend that "suspicious samples" had been gathered by investigators, without elaborating. He called on the public to remain calm and accused unnamed enemies of inciting fear to undermine the Islamic Republic.

Vahidi said at least 52 schools had been affected by suspected poisonings, while Iranian media reports have put the number of schools at over 60. At least one boy's school reportedly has been affected.

Videos of upset parents and schoolgirls in emergency rooms with IVs in their arms have flooded social media.

Iran has imposed stringent restrictions on independent media since the outbreak of nationwide protests in September, making it difficult to determine the nature and scope of the suspected poisonings.

On Monday, Iranian media reported that authorities arrested a Qom-based journalist, Ali Pourtabatabaei, who had been regularly reporting on the suspected poisonings. The hard-line Kayhan newspaper in an editorial had called for the arrests of newspaper publishers who printed articles on the crisis critical of Iran's theocracy.

The protests were sparked by the death of a young woman who had been detained by morality police for allegedly violating the country's strict dress code. Religious hard-liners in Iran have been known to attack women they perceive as dressing immodestly in public. But even at the height of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, women and girls continued attending schools and universities.

The children affected in the poisonings have reportedly complained of headaches, heart palpitations, feeling lethargic or otherwise unable to move. Some described smelling tangerines, chlorine or cleaning

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agents.

Reports suggest at least 400 schoolchildren have fallen ill since November. Vahidi, the interior minister, said in his statement that two girls remain in hospital because of underlying chronic conditions. There have been no reported fatalities.

As more attacks were reported Sunday, videos were posted on social media showing children complaining about pain in the legs, abdomen and dizziness. State media have mainly referred to these as "hysterical reactions."

The World Health Organization documented a similar phenomenon in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2012, when hundreds of girls across the country complained of strange smells and poisoning. No evidence was found to support the suspicions, and the WHO said it appeared to be "mass psychogenic illnesses."

South Korean plan aims to heal forced labor feud with Japan

By KIM TONG-HYUNG and HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea took a step toward improving ties with its traditional rival Japan on Monday, announcing a plan to compensate Koreans who performed forced labor during Tokyo's colonial rule that doesn't require Japanese companies to contribute to the reparations.

The plan reflects conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol's push to mend frayed ties with Japan and solidify security cooperation among Seoul, Tokyo and Washington to better cope with North Korea's nuclear threats. President Joe Biden quickly hailed it as "a groundbreaking new chapter" of cooperation between two of the United States' closest allies.

The South Korean plan, which relies on money raised in South Korea, drew immediate, domestic backlash from former forced laborers and their supporters. They've demanded direct compensation from the Japanese companies and a fresh apology from the Japanese government.

Ties between Seoul and Tokyo have long been complicated by grievances related to Japan's brutal rule of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, when hundreds of thousands of Koreans were mobilized as forced laborers for Japanese companies, or sex slaves at Tokyo's military-run brothels during World War II.

Many forced laborers are already dead and survivors are in their 90s. Among the 15 victims involved in 2018 South Korean court rulings that ordered two Japanese companies — Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries — to compensate them, only three are still alive and they are all in their 90s.

South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin told a televised news conference the victims would be compensated through a local state-run foundation that would be funded by civilian donations. He said South Korea hopes that Japanese companies would also make voluntary contributions to the foundation.

"If we compare it to a glass of water, I think that the glass is more than half full with water. We expect that the glass will be further filled moving forward based on Japan's sincere response," Park said.

Later Monday, Yoon called the South Korean step "a determination to move toward future-oriented Korea-Japan ties." He said both governments must strive to help their relations enter a new era, according to Yoon's office.

South Korean officials didn't elaborate on which companies would finance the foundation. But in January, Shim Kyu-sun, chairperson of the Foundation for Victims of Forced Mobilization by Imperial Japan, which would be handling the reparations, said the funds would come from South Korean companies that benefited from a 1965 Seoul-Tokyo treaty that normalized their relations.

The 1965 accord was accompanied by hundreds of millions of dollars in economic aid and loans from Tokyo to Seoul that were used in development projects carried out by major South Korean companies, including POSCO, now a global steel giant. POSCO said Monday that it will actively consider a contribution to the foundation if it receives an official request.

Japan insists all wartime compensation issues were settled under the 1965 treaty, and retaliated for the South Korean court-ordered compensation from the Japanese companies by slapping export controls on chemicals vital to South Korea's semiconductor industry in 2019.

South Korea, then governed by Yoon's liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in, accused Japan of weaponizing

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trade and subsequently threatened to terminate a military intelligence-sharing agreement with Tokyo, a major symbol of their three-way security cooperation with Washington.

Their feuding complicated U.S. efforts to reinforce cooperation with its two key Asian allies in the face of confrontations with China and North Korea. In his statement, Biden said that he looks forward to continuing to enhance the trilateral ties, adding, "Our countries are stronger — and the world is safer and more prosperous — when we stand together."

Worries about strained Seoul-Tokyo ties have grown in both countries, especially after North Korea last year adopted an escalatory nuclear doctrine and test-launched a barrage of missiles, some of them nuclear-capable that place both countries within striking distance.

On Monday, the U.S. flew a nuclear-capable B-52 bomber to the Korean Peninsula for a joint drill with South Korean warplanes. South Korea's Defense Ministry said in a statement the B-52's deployment demonstrated the allies' "decisive, overwhelming capacities" to deter North Korean aggressions.

During a parliamentary session on Monday, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said he stands by Japan's previous expression of regrets and apologies over its colonial wrongdoing but said that the restoration of trade ties is a separate issue.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters that Japan "appreciates" the South Korean announcement as a step to restore good ties, but noted that it doesn't require contributions from the Japanese companies.

When asked about South Korea's failure to ensure that the Japanese companies participate in the compensation of forced laborers, Park, the foreign minister, said he doesn't expect Japan's government to block "voluntary donations" by its civil sector.

Later Monday, the South Korean and Japanese trade ministries simultaneously announced plans for talks to restore their trade relations. South Korea's Trade Ministry said it decided to suspend its dispute proceedings with the World Trade Organization over the Japanese trade curbs.

Former forced laborers, their supporters and liberal opposition lawmakers berated the government plan, calling it a diplomatic surrender. About 20-30 activists rallied near Seoul's Foreign Ministry, blowing horns and shouting slogans, "We condemn (the Yoon government)" and "Withdraw (the announcement)."

Lim Jae-sung, a lawyer for some of the plaintiffs, called the South Korean plan an "absolute win by Japan, which insists it cannot spend 1 yen" on forced laborers. He said lawyers will press ahead with steps aimed at liquidating the Japanese companies' assets in South Korea to secure the reparations.

The main liberal opposition Democratic Party called on Yoon to immediately stop what it called "a humiliating diplomacy" toward Japan and withdraw its plan.

The opposition to the government's announcement cast doubts on the prospects to end the disputes. When the Democratic Party led by Moon was in power, it took steps to dissolve a foundation funded by Japan to compensate Korean women forced to work as sex slaves during World War II because it didn't have the victims' consent.

Despite the backlash, Yoon has likely decided to press ahead with steps to ease the disputes with Japan to bolster the alliance with the United States because "there is no magic solution that can satisfy everyone," said Bong Young-shik, an expert at Seoul's Yonsei Institute for North Korean Studies. He said Yoon likely felt pressure to boost defense against North Korea's advancing missile threats.

Choi Eun-mi, a Japan expert at South Korea's Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said it has been obvious that a third-party reimbursement of forced laborers was the only realistic solution for South Korea because there are "fundamental" disagreements with Japan over the 2018 court rulings.

"One might say that the government hurried toward a solution, but the negotiations have been going on for nearly a year and the plaintiffs would have had most to lose if the issue isn't resolved now," Choi said.

Latest Ohio derailment poses no public risk, officials say

SPRINGFIELD, Ohio (AP) — Authorities in Ohio say there is no indication of any risk to public health from the derailment of a Norfolk Southern cargo train between Dayton and Columbus, the second derailment

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of a company train in the state in a month.

Norfolk Southern and Clark County officials say 28 of the southbound train's 212 cars, including four empty tankers, derailed at about 4:45 p.m. Saturday in Springfield Township near a business park and the county fairgrounds. Springfield is about 46 miles (74 kilometers) west of the state capital of Columbus.

As a precaution, residents living within 1,000 feet (305 meters) were asked to shelter in place and responding firefighters deployed the county hazmat team as a precaution, but officials early Sunday said there was "no indication of any injuries or risk to public health at this time."

A crew from Norfolk Southern, the hazmat team and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency "each independently examined the crash site and verified there was no evidence of spillage at the site," officials said.

Officials confirmed Sunday afternoon that no hazardous materials were involved in the derailment.

Norfolk Southern general manager Kraig Barner said, however, that a couple of other cars on the train heading from Bellevue, Ohio, to Birmingham, Alabama, were carrying liquid propane, and a couple more were carrying ethanol. The rest of the train was made up of mixed freight, such as steel and finished automobiles, he said.

"A lot of the cars that were actually derailed were empty boxcars," Barner said.

Officials said two of the four empty tanker cars that derailed had previously carried diesel exhaust fluid and the other two had residual amounts of polyacrylamide water solution, which Barner said is an additive commonly used in wastewater treatment.

County officials say environmental officials have confirmed that the derailment is not near a protected water source, meaning there is no risk to public water systems or private wells. The shelter-in-place order affected only four or five homes, officials said.

No injuries to the public or to the train's two-person crew were reported, he said. The cause of the derailment is under investigation and the findings will be turned over to the Federal Railroad Administration, Barner said.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine said late Saturday night that President Biden and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg had called him "to offer help from the federal government."

On Feb. 3, 38 cars of a Norfolk Southern freight train in East Palestine, in northeast Ohio near Pennsylvania, derailed and several of the train's cars carrying hazardous materials burned.

Though no one was injured, nearby neighborhoods in both states were imperiled. The crash prompted an evacuation of about half the town's roughly 5,000 residents, an ongoing multigovernmental emergency response and lingering worries among villagers of long-term health impacts.

Wreckage cleared, days after deadly Greek rail disaster

Associated Press undefined

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Recovery crews in northern Greece cleared the final sections of wreckage from a deadly train collision from the tracks on Monday, as protests and political fallout from the country's worst ever rail disaster continued.

Heavy construction machinery was used to move remaining parts of shattered rail cars at Tempe, 375 kilometers (235 miles) north of Athens, where 57 people were killed in the Feb. 28 crash. Twelve people remain hospitalized with injuries, five of them in serious condition.

A 59-year-old station manager in central Greece has been charged with negligent homicide and was jailed late Sunday pending trial.

National rail services remain halted by strikes while protests were set to continue in several towns in Greece, mostly led by student groups, following days of often-violent demonstrations.

The country's center-right government has come under fire for blaming human error for the disaster, a conclusion later walked back by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who faces a general election before the summer.

In a letter sent Monday to a senior prosecutor heading the disaster investigation, Mitsotakis requested

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that the apparent lack of safety infrastructure be given priority in the probe.

Snow has been a no-show for some traditionally wintry cities

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Growing up in New England, Leah Ofsevit's most cherished childhood memories were blanketed in snow. She remembers running barefoot outside with her brother at the first sign of it, building snowmen and ice castles most winters, strapping on skis as a toddler.

Ofsevit and her husband, Jeremy Garczynski, want to pass those traditions onto their children, 3-year-old Lewis and 8-month-old Asher. They were hoping this would be the year: Tiny skis were purchased for Lewis, and they planned to ski their favorite Massachusetts ski trails while dragging Asher behind them in a sled.

But three months into winter, with March arriving, their skis and sleds are mostly gathering dust. She doesn't like it one bit.

"It's not what I envisioned for my kids," says Ofsevit, who was on her high school cross-country ski team and lives in Melrose, just outside Boston. "It's such a big part of being a kid in New England."

For much of the eastern United States, from Massachusetts all the way down to parts of West Virginia and into Ohio, winter has been a bust. While parts of the Midwest have been hit with repeated snow storms, much of California including Los Angeles got blanketed of late and even parts of the Southwest saw near-blizzard conditions, many East Coast cities have missed out.

Boston, known for nasty nor'easters and a blizzard last year that dumped nearly two feet of snow on the city, had seen just over 11 inches as of last week compared to an average of 38.6, according to data from the National Weather Service. Philadelphia has gotten only 0.3 inches compared to an average of 19.2. New York, which typically gets over two feet by now, has seen only 2.2 inches. Similar shortfalls have been seen in Providence, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C. and parts of West Virginia.

There have been exceptions like Buffalo, which in November got walloped thanks to lake-effect storm, caused by cold air picking up moisture from warmer lakes. Yet, says David Robinson, a Rutgers University geography professor and the New Jersey state climatologist: "For the most part, it's been a winterless winter."

THE WHYS

A big reason for the lack of snow has been the warmer conditions, Robinson says — conditions driven in part by human-induced climate change. The northeast is among the fastest warming regions in the country.

The region has seen plenty of precipitation, but often it has been too warm to snow. Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Vermont all had their warmest January on record, while Indiana, New York and Pennsylvania their second warmest, according to the the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

But other factors are at play.

La Niña, which involves a large-scale cooling of ocean surface temperatures, has led to unusual cool conditions in the eastern Pacific Ocean. As a result, the jet stream, which would bring colder conditions to the region, has kept that air closer to the Canadian border rather than dropping down into the northeast.

The polar vortex, which spins like a whirling top above the North Pole, also remained strong through mid-January, which kept the colder air bottled up in Canada, according to Judah Cohen, who studies the relationship between the polar vortex and the weather and is the director of seasonal forecasting for Verisk AER.

This could become the new normal. The weather service analyzed snowfall totals back to 2019 in the contiguous United States and found the states whose totals are furthest off their average as of mid-February were on the East Coast.

For many who pride themselves on thriving in New England winters, the unusually warm conditions have been disorienting and downright depressing. Gone are the four seasons and the scenes many have long associated with winter — snow blanketing backyards, covering trees and piling up in mounds on street corners and in parking lots.

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Instead, the landscape offers brown grass, muddy backyards and spring flowers blooming early.

"When I retired, I thought winter would be my joyful time because I will be able to ski when I want, be outdoors enjoy everything having to do with winter," Leah Ofsevit's mother, Nancy Mazonson. "It's not beautiful outside ... It's not mysterious. It's just the same old same old without the magic of snow."

Caroline Nagy moved from New York City to Troy in upstate New York with her husband in hopes of catching colder and snowier winters. It hasn't turned out as she expected. "A warm month is one thing," says Nagy, "but a warm winter is scary."

UNDERMINING ACTIVITIES

The warmer conditions have been especially hard on traditional winter sports.

Cross-country ski trails have not opened in many locations. Ice skaters have abandoned backyard ponds. Some ski resorts, especially those that rely on natural snow, have struggled to remain open. In Pennsylvania, Whitetail Resort has already closed for the season; in Cherry Creek, New York, Cockaigne Resort announced on its webpage that it was closing due to the warm temperatures and rain. And a popular 216-mile sled dog race in Michigan's Upper Peninsula was cancelled due to unfavorable weather for the first time in its 33-year-history.

"Wherever it was already thin, now it was turning to ice," says Darlene Walch, president of the Upper Peninsula Sled Dog Association. "When the snow pack gets saturated, it will turn to concrete when it freezes. It's not good for the dogs, and it's hard for the mushers to control their sleds."

Many lakes and ponds have not frozen over, including the Great Lakes, where less than 12% of the surface area was covered with ice as of early March, according to NOAA's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The historical average for this time of year is closer to 40%.

As a result, ice fishing tournaments from Maine to Pennsylvania have been scrapped. Several people have fallen through the ice, including three fishermen who died in a week on Lake Champlain in Vermont.

The lack of winter's symptoms has not been all bad. Spring-like conditions have been a boon to bicycle commuters. Golfers have been spotted on courses that, this time of year, typically host skiers. Tennis courts are bustling on warm days, and playgrounds are filled with children.

Cities like Boston, Philadelphia and New York are expected to save millions of dollars budgeted for snow removal. Connecticut's 169 cities and towns traditionally use their entire snow budgets by the end of winter, but Kevin Maloney, spokesperson for the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, says that this year, "the budgets have been virtually untouched."

Robinson, the New Jersey climatologist, says snow isn't going away anytime soon. "There's no sign of any decline in the large events," he says. "There's beginning to be some evidence that we're having fewer of the smaller events."

Yet for the small businesses that plow parking lots and salt roads, it has been tough.

"I have never personally been through a winter like this," says Jordan Kenyon, who is the co-owner of two snow management businesses in Mystic, Connecticut. Typically, they plan for 10 storms along the southeastern Connecticut shoreline and 15 inland events. This year, he says, his crews have been out only a handful of times to spread salt and plowed just once.

Despite this year's snow-challenged winter, Kenyon says he's not counting out the snow-removal part of his business.

"There's always going to be snow at some point. And so, we don't see changing the business model," he says. "But we may have to make operational adjustments if we see this pattern continuing."

Kansas plan keeping low wages for disabled angers advocates

By JOHN HANNA AP Political Writer

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Kansas legislators are considering a proposal that many disability rights advocates say would encourage employers to keep paying disabled workers less than the minimum wage, bucking a national trend.

A Kansas House bill would expand a state income tax credit for goods and services purchased from

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vendors employing disabled workers, doubling the total allowed to \$10 million annually.

Vendors qualify now by paying all of their disabled workers at least the minimum wage, but the measure would allow vendors to pay some workers less if those workers aren't involved in purchases of goods and services to earn the tax credit. Supporters argue the bill would enable more vendors to participate, boosting job and vocational training opportunities for disabled people.

The Kansas debate comes as employers nationally have moved toward paying at least the federal hourly minimum wage of \$7.25. About 122,000 disabled workers received less in 2019, compared to about 295,000 in 2010, according to a U.S. Government Accountability Office report to Congress in January.

Critics argue that below-minimum-wage jobs exploit workers such as Trey Lockwood, a 30-year-old Kansas City-area resident with autism, who holds down three part-time jobs paying more than the minimum wage. At one of them, The Golden Scoop ice cream shop, he greets customers and makes ice cream with a "spinner," a machine he said is like a washing machine. He has money to buy clothes and other things.

"I feel good about that," he said.

His mother, Michele Lockwood, said employers who pay less than the minimum wage aren't fostering independence.

Neil Romano, a member of the National Council on Disability, agreed, adding, "It is very much against the flow of history."

But other advocates and operators of programs questioned about their wages said the severity of some physical, intellectual and mental disabilities mean such programs can't be eliminated without depriving people of valuable opportunities.

Cottonwood Inc., in Lawrence in northeastern Kansas, handles packaging for some companies. Its wages are based on the prevailing industry standard in the area of more than \$15 an hour, adjusted for a worker's productivity. As workers get more productive, they earn higher pay.

CEO Colleen Himmelberg said Cottonwood helps workers who need one-on-one support that other employers won't provide.

"They're likely not going to help someone toilet or clean up an accident. There's the reality," Himmelberg said. "But that person can work here and still earn a paycheck."

Pat Jonas, president and CEO of the Cerebral Palsy Research Foundation in Wichita, Kansas, said the goal is a more "user friendly" tax credit program shorn of a big burden for some vendors. If employers currently want to participate, while also maintaining below-minimum-wage jobs as vocational training, they must set up a new, separate company or nonprofit paying workers at or above the minimum wage.

"It's just sad that everyone can't be pulling in the same direction," Jonas said, adding that the foundation has always paid at or above the minimum wage.

Thirteen states bar below-minimum-wage jobs for disabled workers, including California, Colorado and Tennessee, according to the Association of People Supporting Employment First, which promotes inclusive job policies. Virginia lawmakers sent a bill last month to Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin, and there's a bipartisan proposal for a national ban in Congress.

Andy Traub, a Kansas City-area human resources consultant who works with The Golden Scoop and much larger businesses, said there might be a limited place for sheltered workshops, but "not as a default setting." Groups serving the disabled ought to be required to help them try "competitive" jobs first, he said.

The federal law allowing an exemption from paying the minimum wage dates to the 1930s. It is based on the premise that a lower wage offsets an assumed lower productivity among disabled workers and exempted employers must regularly study how quickly employees do their work. The January report to Congress said 51% of exempted employers' disabled workers make less than \$3.50 per hour and close to 2% earn less than 25 cents hourly.

Some advocates argue they're still battling traces of attitudes from decades ago, when many disabled people were put in institutions and not educated.

They cite the mid-February meeting of a Kansas legislative committee that highlighted the tax credit proposal's provisions. The chair of the committee handling the bill, state Rep. Sean Tarwater, a Kansas

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City-area Republican, defended programs paying below the minimum wage.

"They are people that really can't do anything," Tarwater told his committee. "If you do away with programs like that, they will rot at home."

Days later, Tarwater said he was referring to severely disabled people. But his comments appalled national and state disability rights groups.

Connecticut state Rep. Jane Garibay, a Hartford-area Democrat, said being paid fairly is "part of being valued as a human being." She lives with an adult niece with Down syndrome and is sponsoring a bill that would require Connecticut employers to pay workers with intellectual disabilities the state minimum wage, \$15 an hour, if they can do a job.

"It's as if, as a woman, I would get paid less than a man for doing the same job. We've been there, right?" Garibay said. "If you're doing the same job, it should be the same wage."

In the Kansas City area, the nonprofit Golden Scoop ice cream shop opened in April 2021 paying its workers \$8, plus tips — higher than the state's \$7.25 minimum wage. Amber Schreiber, its president and CEO, praises disabled workers as loyal and enthusiastic. Golden Scoop hopes to open another shop and a plant making ice cream to sell wholesale.

In the Washington D.C. area, a nonprofit, Melwood, phased out below-minimum-wage jobs starting in 2016. President and CEO Larysa Kautz said Melwood had to shut down a print shop with disabled workers doing menial tasks, but it started a recycling sorting service. The organization does government landscaping jobs across the area, and between 900 and 1,000 of its 1,300 workers have significant disabilities, she said.

The report to Congress in January said the number of employers with exemptions allowing them to pay below the minimum wage dropped to fewer than 1,600 in 2019 from more than 3,100 in 2010. Romano said it should fall to 1,300 this year.

"It requires innovative thinking," Kautz said. "But there are so many of us that have done it."

In liberated Ukraine city, civilians still pay price of war

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

IZIUM, Ukraine (AP) — In this war-scarred city in Ukraine's northeast, residents scrutinize every step for land mines. Behind closed doors, survivors wait in agony for the bodies of loved ones to be identified. The hunt for collaborators of the not-so-long ago Russian occupation poisons tightly-knit communities.

This is life in Iziium, a city on the Donets River in the Kharkiv region that was retaken by Ukrainian forces in September, but still suffers the legacy of six months of Russian occupation.

The brutality of the Russian invasion in this one-time strategic supply hub for Russian troops counts among the most horrific of the war, which entered its second year last month.

Ukrainian civilians were tortured, disappeared and were arbitrarily detained. Mass graves with hundreds of bodies have been discovered and entire neighborhoods were destroyed in the fighting.

Iziium is a gruesome reminder of the human cost of the war. Six months after it was liberated, residents say they continue to pay the price.

Large red signs warning "MINES" rest against a tree between a church and the city's main hospital, which is still functioning despite heavy Russian bombardment.

In this city, everyone has a mine story: Either they stepped on one and lost a limb or know someone who did. The mines are discovered daily, concealed along riverbanks, on roads, in fields, on the tops of roofs, in trees.

Of particular concern are anti-infantry high-explosive mines, known as petal mines. Small and inconspicuous, they are widespread in the city. Human Rights Watch has documented that Moscow has used at least eight types of anti-personnel mines, prohibited by the Geneva Conventions, throughout eastern Ukraine.

In a January report, the rights monitor also called on Kyiv to investigate the Ukrainian military's apparent use of thousands of banned petal mines in Iziium.

"No one can say now the total percentage of territory in Kharkiv that is mined," said Oleksandr Filchakov, the region's chief prosecutor. "We are finding them everywhere."

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Most residents are careful, keeping to known paths. But even then, they are not safe.

"We have an average of one person a week with wounds" from mines, Dr. Yuri Kuzentsov said. "I don't know when I will ever go to the river or the forest again, even if our lives are restored, because, as a medical professional, I have seen the consequences."

One patient stepped on mines twice: First in June when he lost part of his heel and the second time in October when he lost the entire foot.

Most of Kuzentsov's patients said they had been cautious.

"They were sure this would never happen to them," he said.

Oleksandr Rabenko, 66, stepped on a petal mine 200 meters from his house while walking down a familiar path to the river to fetch water.

His son, Eduard, had de-mined a narrow path with a shovel. Rabenko had walked down it several times, up until Dec. 4, when he lost his right foot while clearing some sticks.

"I still don't know how it got there, maybe it was the snow melting, or the river carried it," he said. "I thought it was safe."

Rabenko still feels excruciating pain from the foot that is no longer there.

"The doctor said it will take months for my brain to grasp what happened," he said.

Halyna Zhyharova, 71, knows exactly what happened to her family of eight.

A bomb struck her son Oleksandr's home last March, killing 52 people sheltering inside the basement. They included eight of Zhyharova's relatives — her son and his entire family, including two daughters.

Seven relatives' bodies were exhumed in September in a severe state of decay. It took months to identify them, she said. Now she is waiting for just one more identification — of her granddaughter.

Of the 451 bodies exhumed in Iziium, including nearly 440 found in mass graves, 125 have still not been identified, said Serhii Bolvinov, the head of the Investigations Department of Kharkiv's National Police.

Some are so decomposed it's difficult to extract a DNA sample, he said. Other times, authorities are unable to find a DNA match among relatives. The painstaking work can take months.

Zhyharova hopes her granddaughter's remains will be identified soon so she can finally lay her family to rest.

"I'll bury them, put gravestones," she said. "After that, what to do? Live on."

The scale of destruction in Iziium, with a prewar population of 50,000, is breathtaking. Ukrainian officials estimate 70% to 80% of residential buildings were destroyed. Many bear black scorch marks, punctured roofs and have boarded-up windows.

Slowly, residents are returning, horrified to discover their homes uninhabitable or their possessions stolen. They seethe with anger, knowing the Russian advance into Iziium was made possible by the help of local collaborators who supported Moscow.

"There were cases in the beginning of the war when collaborators led Russian armed forces units through secret routes and led them to the flanks and rears of our units," said Brig. Gen. Dmytro Krasylnykov, commander of the joint forces in the Kharkiv region. "This happened in Iziium."

"Many of our soldiers died because of this, and we were forced to leave Iziium for a while, and now we see what the city has turned into," he said.

In the village of Kamyanka near Iziium, every house bears the scars of war. Twenty families have returned and many have directed their venom at Vasily Hrushka, the one who remained. He has become the village pariah.

"They say I was a collaborator, a traitor," the 65-year-old said. "I did nothing wrong."

Hrushka says he stayed in the village while Russians overtook it, because he didn't want to abandon his cows and three calves, fearing they would die in his absence. He sent his family away and took refuge in the cellar.

Russian soldiers knocked on the door, asked him if any Ukrainian servicemen lived in the house. When he replied no, they sprayed the place with bullets just to make sure.

Later, they came by with an offering of canned food. He gave them milk. Once they asked him if he

had any alcohol.

Residents saw this as a sign of treason. They asked why he didn't do more to help Ukrainian forces by finding a way to give away Russian positions. But Hrushka said there was no way to do that — the Russian soldiers destroyed his phone lines.

"I was living in madness," he said, "I did what I did to survive."

He was called in for questioning by the SBU, Ukraine's security service. They said they heard rumors he was living the life of a chief in Kamyanka.

"I was the chief only of my own home," he told them. They let him go.

In November, his fortunes took another turn.

Foraging for firewood as temperatures dropped, he stepped on a petal mine and lost his left foot.

Lebanon adopts 'dollarization' as currency, economy crumble

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — When Moheidein Bazazo opened his Beirut mini-market in 1986, during some of the fiercest fighting in Lebanon's civil war, he didn't expect it to thrive. But several years later, he had shelves full of food and needed 12 employees to help him manage a bustling business.

Those days are over. Bazazo now mostly works alone, often in the dark to reduce his electric bill. Regular customers are struggling to make ends meet, and as they buy less so does he, leaving some shelves and refrigerators bare.

With the Lebanese economy in shambles and its currency in free fall, Bazazo spends much of his time trying to keep up with a fluctuating exchange rate. Businesses like his are increasingly leaning on one of the world's most reliable assets — the U.S. dollar — as a way to cope with the worst financial crisis in its modern history.

"I once lived a comfortable life, and now I'm left with just about \$100 after covering the shop's expenses" at the end of the month, Bazazo said, crunching numbers into a calculator. "Sometimes it feels like you're working for free."

The Lebanese pound has lost 95% in value since late 2019, and now most restaurants and many stores are demanding to be paid in dollars. The government recently began allowing grocery stores like Bazazo's to start doing the same.

While this "dollarization" aims to ease inflation and stabilize the economy, it also threatens to push more people into poverty and deepen the crisis.

That's because few in Lebanon have access to dollars to pay for food and other essentials priced that way. But endemic corruption means political and financial leaders are resisting the alternative to dollarization: long-term reforms to banks and government agencies that would end wasteful spending and jump-start the economy.

Other countries like Zimbabwe and Ecuador have turned to the dollar to beat back hyperinflation and other economic woes, with mixed success. Pakistan and Egypt also are struggling with crashing currencies but their economic crises are largely tied to an outside event — Russia's war in Ukraine, which has caused food and energy prices to soar.

Lebanon's woes are much of its own making.

As the country felt the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, a deadly Beirut port explosion in 2020 and Russia's invasion Ukraine, its central bank simply printed more currency, eroding its value and causing inflation to soar.

Three-quarters of Lebanon's 6 million people have fallen into poverty since the 2019 crisis began. Crippling power cuts and medicine shortages have paralyzed much of public life.

Currency shortages prompted banks to limit withdrawals, trapping millions of people's savings. It's led some in desperation to hold up banks to forcibly take back their money.

The damage of the last few years was magnified by decades of economic mismanagement that allowed the government to spend well beyond its means. The head of the country's Central Bank was recently

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charged with embezzling public funds and other crimes.

The pulverized Lebanese pound fluctuates almost hourly. Though officially pegged to the dollar since 1997, the pound's value is dictated now by an opaque black market rate that has become standard for most goods and services.

Last month, its value fell from about 64,000 pounds to the dollar to 88,000 on the black market, while the official rate is 15,000. Making things worse for a country reliant on imported food, fuel and other products priced in dollars, the government recently tripled the amount of tax — in Lebanese pounds — that importers must pay on those goods.

This will likely lead to more price hikes. For small businesses, it could mean selling products at a loss just minutes after stacking them on the shelves.

Dollarization could give the impression of greater financial stability, but it also will widen already vast economic inequalities, said Sami Zoughaib, an economist and research manager at Beirut-based think tank the Policy Initiative.

"We have a class that has access to dollars ... (and) you have another portion of the population that earns in Lebanese pounds that have now seen their income completely decimated," Zoughaib said.

The shift to a more dollar-dominated economy happened not by government decree, but by companies and individuals refusing to accept payment in a currency that relentlessly loses value.

First, luxury goods and services were priced in dollars for the wealthy, tourists and owners of private generators, who have to pay for imported diesel. Then it was most restaurants. And now grocery stores.

Caretaker Economy Minister Amin Salam said the Lebanese pound was "used and abused" over the past three years and that dollarizing grocery stores will bring some stability to fluctuating exchange rates.

As more people and businesses reject the local currency, the dollar gradually becomes the de facto currency. The lack of trust in the Lebanese pound has become irreversible, said Loyal Mansour, an economist specializing in financial crises in dollarized countries.

"People are fed up with the fluctuation of the dollar rate, and having to spend lots of time changing it, so practically, on a societal level, it's better to use dollars," Mansour said. "This is the end of the Lebanese pound as we know it."

Without a strategy to address the economy's underlying problems, the government "is allowing this to happen," said Lawrence White, an economics professor at George Mason University.

Dollarization means the Central Bank can't keep printing currency that fuels inflation, and having a more reliable currency might create more confidence for businesses. But many people could be further squeezed if Beirut officially adopts the greenback as its currency.

Millions in Lebanon who tolerated the dollarization of luxury items may not respond similarly to groceries, whose prices were already surging at some of the highest rates globally.

Over 90% of the population earns their income in Lebanese pounds, according to a 2022 survey by the International Labor Organization and the Lebanese government's statistics agency. Families that receive money from relatives abroad spend much of it keeping the lights on and covering medical expenses.

They would have to be paid in dollars to adequately adjust, which most businesses and employers, especially the Lebanese state, are short on.

Public school teachers have been on strike for three months because their salaries barely cover the cost of gasoline to commute. Telecom workers are threatening walkouts because their wages have not been adjusted to the Lebanese pound's falling value.

Lebanon is nowhere near implementing the kinds of reforms needed for an International Monetary Fund bailout, such as restructuring banks and inefficient government agencies, reducing corruption, and establishing a credible and transparent exchange-rate system.

Zoughaib, the Beirut economist, said he fears the absence of sound policy and economic reforms means that dollarization will likely only deepen poverty, making it even more difficult for families to pay for health care, education and food.

Bazazo, the market owner, acknowledges that pricing in dollars will help him manage his finances and

cut a small portion of his losses but worries it will drive away some customers.

"Let's see what happens," Bazazo said, sighing. "They're already complaining."

Biden reelection bid faces resistance from some Democrats

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

LACONIA, N.H. (AP) — Steve Shurtleff was at Joe Biden's side in 2019 when he filed papers in the New Hampshire State House to run for president.

He repeatedly trekked across the state with Biden to court primary voters. And when Biden ultimately won the presidency, it was Shurtleff, then the Democratic state House speaker, who proudly sealed the envelope that carried New Hampshire's four electoral votes — including his own name — to the U.S. Senate.

But on the eve of a new election season, Shurtleff, like a majority of Democrats across the country, feels that one term is enough.

"In my heart of hearts, no," Shurtleff said when asked if he wants Biden to run again. "I think a lot of people just don't want to say it."

Democrats across New Hampshire are upset with the Democratic president for trying to end the state's status as home to the first-in-the-nation presidential primary. But their concerns about Biden run much deeper, in line with a majority of Democratic voters nationwide, who question the 80-year-old president's plans to soon launch his reelection campaign.

Just 37% of Democrats nationwide want the president to seek a second term, according to a poll released last month by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That was down from 52% in the weeks before last year's midterm elections.

Many worry about Biden's age. Others, like Shurtleff, are upset about the administration's messy withdrawal from Afghanistan. And the party's progressive wing has never been enthusiastic about Biden, who is perceived as a moderate, despite his lengthy list of achievements.

The White House cast Biden's perceived weakness within his own party as an exaggerated narrative that he has repeatedly proven wrong.

"We're aware pundits' attitude toward President Biden is unchanged from before he earned the nomination faster than anyone since 2004, won the most votes in American history, built the strongest legislative record in generations and led the best midterm outcome for a new Democratic president in 60 years," Biden spokesman Andrew Bates said. "Based on comparing the accuracy of our predictions versus theirs, we are happy for this dynamic to continue."

Still, there's a risk of a disconnect between rank-and-file Democrats and the party's establishment. While voters are signaling unease about the prospect of another Biden campaign, Democratic governors, senators and congressional representatives are virtually unanimous in supporting Biden's reelection.

One exception may be New Hampshire, a small swing state whose electoral votes could be critical in a tight general election. The state has challenged Biden before.

Voters here served Biden an embarrassing fifth-place finish in the 2020 Democratic primary. New Hampshire polls were still open when he decamped to South Carolina, where his presidential ambitions were revived by a decisive win. That state is now Biden's pick to lead the 2024 presidential primary calendar.

Interviews with angry New Hampshire Democrats across state government and local Democratic committees suggest there is some appetite for a serious primary challenger in 2024. But top-tier prospects don't seem to be interested.

So far, only Democratic activist and author Marianne Williamson has entered the 2024 primary field. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the son of the late New York senator and known for railing against vaccines, met with New Hampshire voters on Friday. He's also leaning toward a bid.

But the likes of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, Biden's fiercest primary challenger in 2020, has vowed to back the president in 2024. So has Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker, whose appearance at last year's New Hampshire's Democratic convention still comes up in conversation. California Rep. Ro Khanna, a progressive favorite, has also said he would not challenge Biden, although he has been a vocal advocate for New

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Hampshire's place atop the primary calendar.

In an interview, Khanna said it was "political malpractice" for the Democratic National Committee, under Biden's direction, to threaten New Hampshire's status.

"New Hampshire is a state where retail politics still matter and where voters have an independence that can't be controlled by the party establishment in DC," Khanna said. The primary shakeup "could cost us four electoral votes and hurt our chances to win in the 2024 election."

Meanwhile, Biden's allies privately believe the primary dispute will be long forgotten by the time voters cast ballots in November 2024, especially with former President Donald Trump or one of his Republican acolytes on the ballot.

Biden supporters also note that some of the nation's most popular two-term presidents confronted opposition from within their own parties ahead of their reelection.

President Ronald Reagan faced grumbling from dissatisfied Republicans leading up to the 1984 contest, which turned out to be the most lopsided general election victory in U.S. history. Democrats openly encouraged a primary challenge against President Bill Clinton after the disastrous 1994 midterms. He went on to a commanding reelection win in 1996. And President Barack Obama's campaign worried about losing support from his political base — especially Black voters — before he cruised to victory in 2012.

"We had a lot of work to do, but the fundamentals were there," said Stephanie Cutter, who helped managed Obama's 2012 reelection.

Obama's outlook changed as his team worked to remind voters what they liked best about him compared to a Republican opponent.

"Elections are about two people," Cutter said. "Once Republicans start hitting the campaign trail and that craziness begins, the contrast between that crazy train and Joe Biden's steady leadership and even hand fixing some of the nation's biggest problems become clear as day."

Biden has presided over significant accomplishments that could boost a reelection campaign.

He signed into law a sweeping pandemic relief bill, a massive infrastructure package, the first new federal gun safety law in decades and a comprehensive health and environmental plan that allowed Medicare to lower prescription drug prices and dedicated billions of dollars to combating climate change. Job growth and unemployment have also improved during his administration.

But he is grappling with acute challenges related to inflation, illegal immigration, crime and foreign affairs.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, attributed Biden's political challenges to Democratic leaders who haven't done enough to promote his accomplishments.

"The real disconnect right now is communication," Cooper said in an interview. "President Biden has accomplished in two years what many presidents would only hope to do in eight. His success has meant real wins for working families. People are going to begin to see real improvement in their lives. It's our job to make sure that they know it was President Biden who got it done."

"Democrats came together once before in 2020 to ask him to do a job, and he accomplished it — he beat President Trump," Cooper added. "And now he's gonna do it again."

Despite such optimism, Democrats across New Hampshire believe it will be difficult for Biden to match his 2020 victory of 7 percentage points in the state in 2024. Former Gov. John Lynch, a Democrat, declined to say whether he wanted Biden to seek reelection when asked directly.

Biden's push to change the primary calendar, Lynch said, has created such anti-Biden furor that it puts New Hampshire's four electoral votes at risk in the 2024 general election. He was quick to note that four electoral votes would have tipped the 2000 presidential election in Al Gore's favor.

"It could cost Democrats the presidency," Lynch said. "Republicans won't let voters forget. They'll hammer the Democrats on this."

Indeed, New Hampshire's current governor, Republican Chris Sununu, called the primary calendar shift "a horrible miscalculation" for Biden that exposes him to a legitimate primary challenge.

"He's made it harder to win in November '24 — if he's the nominee," Sununu said in an interview. "But because of what he did here, he very well may not be the nominee."

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The Democratic concerns were easy to see inside the monthly meeting of Laconia Democrats on the shores of Lake Winnepesaukee late last week, where just a half-dozen people gathered to discuss party business. Most of the participants, especially older ones, said they favored Biden's reelection, even if they weren't passionate about it.

Lois Kessin, a 73-year-old Laconia resident, has been volunteering for Biden in New Hampshire since Obama first tapped him as his running mate. She has a picture of herself and Biden hanging in her hallway.

"I am very happy with Joe Biden," she said, acknowledging that some Democrats are worried about his age — a concern she said was offensive. "Perhaps there's somebody as brilliant as he and as compassionate and as knowledgeable out there. But until that person shows up, I'm happy with Joe Biden."

The Laconia committee chairman, 43-year-old Eric Hoffman, was less enthusiastic.

"The party kind of lined up because he was the nominee, but he obviously wasn't our first four choices," Hoffman said, referring to Biden's finish in the 2020 primary. "People would prefer to see a change."

But like many Democrats, he said he would vote for Biden in the 2024 general election to ensure Republicans don't retake the White House.

Just don't expect him to be excited about it.

"I wasn't a big fan of his, but I've been pretty impressed with his abilities and the things he's gotten accomplished," Hoffman said. "So, it's not the worst thing in the world."

Fox libel defense at odds with top GOP presidential foes

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Fox News is on an unlikely collision course with two leading contenders for the Republican presidential nomination over the rights of journalists.

In defending itself against a massive defamation lawsuit over how it covered false claims surrounding the 2020 presidential election, the network is relying on a nearly 60-year-old Supreme Court ruling that makes it difficult to successfully sue media organizations for libel.

Former President Donald Trump and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, two favorites of many Fox News viewers, have advocated for the court to revisit the standard, which is considered the foundational case in American defamation law.

"It is ironic that Fox is relying on a landmark case that was designed to help the news media play the watchdog role in a democracy and is under attack by Gov. DeSantis, Donald Trump and other figures who have been untethered in their attacks on journalists as enemies of the people," said Jane Hall, a communication professor at American University.

Eye-catching evidence has emerged from court filings in recent weeks revealing a split screen between what Fox was portraying to its viewers about the false claims of election fraud and what hosts and executives were saying about them behind the scenes. "Sydney Powell is lying," Fox News host Tucker Carlson said in a text to a producer, referencing one of the attorneys pushing the claims for Trump.

In an email a few weeks after the 2020 election, Fox Corp. Chairman Rupert Murdoch described a news conference featuring Powell and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, another attorney who pushed the election lies: "Really crazy stuff. And damaging."

Aside from the revelations about Fox's inner workings, the outcome could have broad implications for media organizations because of how they and the courts have come to rely on the libel law Fox is using as a shield.

In its \$1.6 billion lawsuit, voting machine maker Dominion Voting Systems argues that Fox repeatedly aired allegations that the company helped rig the general election against Trump despite many at the news organization privately believing the claims were false.

Fox says the law allows it to air such claims if they are newsworthy.

In a 1964 decision in a case involving The New York Times, the U.S. Supreme Court greatly limited the ability of public officials to sue for defamation. It ruled that news outlets are protected against a libel judgment unless it can be proven that they published with "actual malice" — knowing that something was

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false or acting with a “reckless disregard” to whether it was true or not.

In one example of how the law was applied, editors at the Times acknowledged last year that an editorial mistakenly linked former Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin’s rhetoric to an Arizona mass shooting. Palin lost her libel suit because she couldn’t prove the newspaper erred without concern for the truth.

Some advocates for free speech worry that the Dominion-Fox lawsuit ultimately could give a conservative Supreme Court a chance to revisit the standard set in the case, known as *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*. While the case has been among the court’s most durable precedents, the newly empowered conservative majority has indicated a willingness to challenge what had been considered settled law — as it did last year in overturning abortion rights.

Two Supreme Court justices, Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch, have publicly expressed interest in giving the precedent another look.

In dissenting from a 2021 decision not to take up a libel case, Gorsuch wrote that what began in 1964 as a decision to tolerate occasional errors to allow robust reporting “has evolved into an ironclad subsidy for the publication of falsehoods by any means and on a scale previously unimaginable.” He said the modern media landscape is much different today, and suggested it was less careful.

“My wish is that the parties would settle and this case would go away,” said Jane Kirtley, director of the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and the Law at the University of Minnesota. “I don’t see any good coming out of it.”

A perceived strength in Dominion’s case also worries some supporters of the press.

Dominion says Fox was, in effect, torn between the truth that Joe Biden legitimately won the race and pleasing viewers who wanted to believe Trump’s lies. In depositions released last week, Murdoch argued that Fox as a network did not endorse the claims, but that some of its commentators — Maria Bartiromo, Lou Dobbs, Jeanine Pirro and Sean Hannity — at times did.

Murdoch was among several at Fox to say privately they didn’t believe the claims made by Trump and his allies that widespread fraud cost him reelection. In his deposition, Murdoch said he could have prevented guests who were spouting conspiracies from going on the air, but didn’t.

“One of the defenses is that even false speech about public figures is protected so long as it is believed by the speaker,” First Amendment attorney Floyd Abrams said. “But no one at Fox appears ready to say that he or she did believe the assertions ... and there now appears to be substantial evidence that no one there at Fox did so. It’s a major blow.”

Fox’s entire prime-time lineup privately disparaged Trump lawyer Sidney Powell, according to court papers. Laura Ingraham, in a text to Carlson, called her a “nut.” In a deposition, Hannity said he did not believe her theories “for one second.” Nevertheless, Powell was interviewed on Fox 11 times between Nov. 8 and Dec. 10, 2020, according to court papers.

Dominion’s lawyers say Fox is arguing that it has no legal responsibility for broadcasting even the most horrible allegations, knowing they are false, as long as they are deemed newsworthy.

Fox said Dominion is presenting an extreme view of defamation, one in which the network had a duty not to report the allegations but to suppress them or denounce them as false.

“Under Dominion’s approach, if the president falsely accused the vice president of plotting to assassinate him, the press would be liable for reporting the newsworthy allegations so long as someone in the newsroom thought it was ludicrous,” Fox lawyers said in court papers.

“Such a rule would stop the media in its tracks,” Fox said.

There’s a high bar for proving libel — and that’s deliberate, First Amendment attorney Lee Levine said. Dominion has to show that a reasonable audience could conclude that someone at Fox was making these allegations, not just the interview subjects, he said.

Still, Levine said, Dominion has the strongest defamation case he’s seen in 40 years of being involved in the topic.

George Freeman, executive director of the Media Law Resource Center, said Fox should cite a lesser-

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known "neutral reportage" standard that dates back to a court case from the 1970s. It holds that news organizations should not be discouraged from reporting something newsworthy even if there are serious doubts about the truth, as long as that information comes from responsible and prominent sources.

But the U.S. Supreme Court has not weighed in on that argument, and a number of lower courts have rejected it. It's also not clear that the defense would be legally applicable in the Dominion case against Fox.

There is sentiment in Republican circles that the Sullivan standard goes too far in protecting news organizations.

DeSantis last month urged the Supreme Court to revisit libel laws, saying they are used to smear politicians and discourage people from running for office. A bill being considered in the Florida Legislature would significantly weaken standards in the state. Trump said last year that the court should consider his own defamation lawsuit against CNN a "perfect vehicle" for revisiting precedents.

Some media law advocates that the University of Minnesota's Kirtley has talked to privately, people who are usually eager to support the press in libel cases, are queasy about publicly backing Fox in the voting machine lawsuit.

Many see the case as a surrogate to hold Fox and Trump supporters accountable for what happened after the 2020 election, she said.

"I don't think a libel suit is the vehicle to deal with this, and you have to think about what damage could be done to libel law if Dominion wins," she said.

Lynyrd Skynyrd founding member Gary Rossington dead at 71

Gary Rossington, Lynyrd Skynyrd's last surviving original member who also helped to found the group, died Sunday at the age of 71. No cause of death was given.

"It is with our deepest sympathy and sadness that we have to advise, that we lost our brother, friend, family member, songwriter and guitarist, Gary Rossington, today," the band wrote on Facebook. "Gary is now with his Skynyrd brothers and family in heaven and playing it pretty, like he always does. Please keep Dale, Mary, Annie and the entire Rossington family in your prayers and respect the family's privacy at this difficult time."

Rossington cheated death more than once, Rolling Stone reported. He survived a car accident in 1976 in which he drove his Ford Torino into a tree, inspiring the band's cautionary song "That Smell." A year later, he emerged from the 1977 plane crash that killed singer Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines, and backing vocalist Cassie Gaines, with two broken arms, a broken leg, and a punctured stomach and liver.

"It was a devastating thing," he told Rolling Stone in 2006. "You can't just talk about it real casual and not have feelings about it."

In later years, Rossington underwent quintuple bypass surgery in 2003, suffered a heart attack in 2015, and had numerous subsequent heart surgeries, most recently leaving Lynyrd Skynyrd in July 2021 to recover from another procedure. At recent shows, Rossington would perform portions of the concert and sometimes sat out full gigs.

Rossington was born Dec. 4, 1951, in Jacksonville, Florida, and raised by his mother after his father died. Upon meeting drummer Bob Burns and bassist Larry Junstrom, Rossington and his new friends formed a band, which they tried to juggle amid their love of baseball.

According to Rolling Stone, it was during a fateful Little League game, Ronnie Van Zant hit a line drive into the shoulder blades of opposing player Bob Burns and met his future bandmates. Rossington, Burns, Van Zant, and guitarist Allen Collins gathered that afternoon at Burns' Jacksonville home to jam the Rolling Stone's "Time Is on My Side."

Adopting Lynyrd Skynyrd as the group's name — both a reference to a similarly named sports coach at Rossington's high school and to a character in the 1963 novelty hit "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh" — the band released their debut album (Pronounced 'Lěh-'nérd 'Skin-'nérd) in 1973. A collection of country-tinged blues-rock and Southern soul, the album included now-classics like "Tuesday's Gone," "Simple Man" and "Gimme Three Steps," but it was the closing track, the nearly 10-minute "Free Bird," that became the

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group's calling card, due in no small part to Rossington's evocative slide playing on his Gibson SG.

Rossington told Rolling Stone that he never considered Skynyrd to be a tragic band, despite all the band's drama and death. "I don't think of it as tragedy — I think of it as life," he said upon the group's Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction in 2006. "I think the good outweighs the bad."

In Selma, Biden says right to vote remains under assault

By AAMER MADHANI and KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

SELMA, Ala. (AP) — President Joe Biden used the searing memories of Selma's "Bloody Sunday" to recommit to a cornerstone of democracy, lionizing a seminal moment from the civil rights movement at a time when he has been unable to push enhanced voting protections through Congress and a conservative Supreme Court has undermined a landmark voting law.

"Selma is a reckoning. The right to vote ... to have your vote counted is the threshold of democracy and liberty. With it anything's possible," Biden told a crowd of several thousand people seated on one side of the historic Edmund Pettus Bridge, named for a reputed Ku Klux Klan leader.

"This fundamental right remains under assault. The conservative Supreme Court has gutted the Voting Rights Act over the years. Since the 2020 election, a wave of states and dozens and dozens of anti-voting laws fueled by the 'Big Lie' and the election deniers now elected to office," he said.

As a candidate in 2020, Biden promised to pursue sweeping legislation to bolster protection of voting rights. Two years ago, his 2021 legislation, named after civil right leader John Lewis, the late Georgia congressman, included provisions to restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, strike down hurdles to voting and bring transparency to a campaign finance system that allows wealthy donors to bankroll political causes anonymously.

It passed the then-Democratic-controlled House, but it failed to draw the 60 votes needed to advance in a Senate under control by Biden's party. With Republicans now running of the House, passage of such legislation is highly unlikely.

"We know we must get the votes in Congress," Biden said, but there seems no viable path right now.

The visit to Selma was a chance for Biden to speak directly to the current generation of civil rights activists. Many feel let down because of the lack of progress on voting rights and they are eager to see his administration keep the issue in the spotlight.

Few moments have had as lasting importance to the civil rights movement as what happened on March 7, 1965, in Selma and in the weeks that followed.

Some 600 peaceful demonstrators led by Lewis and fellow activist Hosea Williams had gathered that day, just weeks after the fatal shooting of a young Black man, Jimmie Lee Jackson, by an Alabama trooper.

Lewis and the others were brutally beaten by Alabama troopers and sheriff's deputies as they tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge at the start of what was supposed to be a 54-mile walk to the state Capitol in Montgomery as part of a larger effort to register Black voters in the South.

"On this bridge, blood was given to help redeem the soul of America," Biden said.

The images of the police violence sparked outrage across the country. Days later, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. led what became known as the "Turnaround Tuesday" march, in which marchers approached a wall of police at the bridge and prayed before turning back.

President Lyndon B. Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act of 1965 eight days after "Bloody Sunday," calling Selma one those rare moments in American history where "history and fate meet at a single time." On March 21, King began a third march, under federal protection, that grew by thousands by the time they arrived at the state Capitol. Five months later, Johnson signed the bill into law.

This year's commemoration came as the historic city of roughly 18,000 was still digging out from the aftermath of a January EF-2 tornado that destroyed or damaged thousands of properties in and around Selma. The scars of that storm were still evident Sunday. Blocks from the stage where Biden spoke, houses sat crumbled or without roofs. Orange spray paint marked buildings beyond salvage with instructions to "tear down."

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"We remain Selma strong," Mayor James Perkins said, adding that "we will build back better." He thanked Biden for approving a disaster declaration that helped the small city with the cost of debris cleanup and removal.

Before Biden's visit, the Rev. William Barber II, a co-chair of Poor People's Campaign, and six other activists wrote Biden and members of Congress to express their frustration with the lack of progress on voting rights legislation. They urged Washington politicians visiting Selma not to sully the memories of Lewis and Williams and other civil rights activists with empty platitudes.

"We're saying to President Biden, let's frame this to America as a moral issue, and let's show how it affects everybody," Barber said in an interview.

Among those sharing the stage with Biden before the march across the bridge were Barber, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King III and the Rev. Al Sharpton. On the bridge crossing, marchers sang "This Little Light of Mine" and "We Shall Overcome" and, following tradition, once they reached the point where Lewis and others were told in 1958 that they were on an unlawful march, they stopped and prayed.

Water bottles were passed out to some who had gathered to hear Biden and at least one person was taken away on a stretcher because of the upper-70s heat. Some had waited hours in the sun before relief came from shadows cast from nearby building.

Delores Gresham, 65, a retired health care worker from Birmingham, arrived four hours early, grabbing a front-row spot so her grandchildren could hear the president and see the commemoration.

"I want them to know what happened here," she said.

In his remarks, Biden said, "Everyone should know the truth of Selma." And the president took a veiled dig at a high-profile Republican, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, when he said: "We should learn everything. The good, the bad, the truth, who we are as a nation."

DeSantis' administration has blocked a new Advanced Placement course on African American studies from being taught in high schools, saying it violates state law and is historically inaccurate. Last year, he signed legislation that restricts certain race-based conversations and analysis in schools and businesses. More recently, his budget office called on state colleges to submit spending information on programs related to diversity, equity and inclusion and critical race theory.

Two years ago on the anniversary, Biden issued an executive order directing federal agencies to expand access to voter registration, called on the heads of agencies to come up with plans to give federal employees time off to vote or volunteer as nonpartisan poll workers, and more.

But many federal agencies are lagging in meeting the voting registration provision of Biden's order, according to a report published Thursday by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

Netflix making live-action 'One Piece' from popular manga

By YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Hit Japanese manga "One Piece" is coming to Netflix as a live-action series — a development that's both exciting and worrisome for fans who have seen mixed success in a growing list of Hollywood adaptations.

Chronicling the coming-of-age adventures of Monkey D. Luffy, a young pirate with a heart of gold, the world's bestselling manga series has already been adapted into an anime TV series with over 900 episodes. There are also 13 animated movies, "One Piece" video games and merchandise galore.

Ready to give her verdict is Nina Oiki, a gender and politics researcher at Tokyo's Waseda University who has been a "One Piece" fan since she was in elementary school. She read the manga created by Eiichiro Oda when it first came out in Shonen Jump magazine in 1997, and watched the animated show that followed shortly after.

"I know some people are worried about what might happen with the Hollywood remake," she said, noting how past American attempts at depicting Japanese comics and animated works have at times proved disappointing.

The 2017 Netflix movie adaptation of "Death Note," a manga and anime about a book that can kill people,

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was widely critiqued as a flop. In December 2021, Netflix canceled "Cowboy Bebop," its live-action adaptation of the space Western manga and anime of the same name, after just one season.

The cross-pollination of Hollywood and Japan goes back for decades. References to Japan, such as the image of a geisha on a screen, are plentiful in the 1982 sci-fi movie "Blade Runner," directed by Ridley Scott.

The film, in turn, influenced anime, including the "Blade Runner: Black Lotus" anime that first aired in 2021. Japanese pop culture expert Roland Kelts says it's a "stunning moment for anime," in part due to streaming on platforms like Netflix, which has helped make entertainment borderless.

Live-action "One Piece," expected later this year, comes on the heels of the global success of "Demon Slayer," another manga that got its start in Shonen Jump and was adapted into a movie and an anime series that was picked up by Netflix.

In February, The Pokémon Company announced "Pokémon Concierge," a stop-motion anime collaboration with Netflix. Pokémon is the world's most valuable media franchise with estimated all-time sales of \$100 billion, according to a 2021 Statista report. Followed by Hello Kitty, the two Japanese products outrank Western offerings like Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh and Star Wars. Hollywood live-action adaptations of other popular Japanese products — from Makoto Shinkai's 2016 body-swap anime "Your Name" to the "Gundam" franchise of giant robots that started in 1979 — are also in progress.

Anime has a low production cost compared to live-action films, and computer-generated heroes don't get sick or injured or make offensive remarks offscreen like real-life actors sometimes do, making it a marketable medium, said Kelts, author of "Japanamerica," which documents Japanese pop culture's influence in the United States.

"They are stylized and stateless characters. What I mean by that is that anime characters travel globally very, very well," Kelts said. "The human celebrities don't always travel so well."

Established bestsellers offer the advantage of a built-in fanbase, but they also come with strict scrutiny. Some, like "Ghost in the Shell," have been criticized for "whitewashing" the Asian original. The 1995 animated movie was made into a Hollywood live-action in 2017 amid complaints about casting white American actor Scarlett Johansson as the main character — though Asia largely stayed out of the debate.

Live-action "One Piece" will star Mexican actor Iñaki Godoy ("The Imperfects") as Luffy — whose nationality is canonically a mystery — alongside American actor Emily Rudd ("The Romanoffs") as Nami and Japanese-American actor Mackenyu ("Fullmetal Alchemist: Revenge of Scar," "Fullmetal Alchemist: Final Transmutation") as Roronoa Zoro.

The main character's inclusive persona, drawing more and more companions to join his quest throughout the story, highlights the kind of school, office or workplace environment people crave in modern-day society, fan Oiki said.

"Luffy is that leader we all want," she said. "Luffy is a hero but not an extraordinary hero. He is one of us. He wants to be king of the pirates, but not so he can rule, but so everyone can be free."

China Premier Li Keqiang bows out as Xi loyalists take reins

BEIJING (AP) — After a decade in Chinese President Xi Jinping's shadow, Li Keqiang is taking his final bow as the country's premier, marking a shift away from the skilled technocrats who have helped steer the world's second-biggest economy in favor of officials known mainly for their unquestioned loyalty to China's most powerful leader in recent history.

After exiting the ruling Communist Party's all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee in October — despite being below retirement age — Li's last major task was delivering the state of the nation address to the rubber-stamp parliament on Monday. The report sought to reassure citizens of the resiliency of the Chinese economy, but contained little that was new.

Once seen as a potential top leader, Li was increasingly sidelined as Xi accumulated ever-greater powers and elevated the military and security services in aid of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Li's lack of visibility sometimes made it difficult to remember he was technically ranked No. 2 in party.

Li "was a premier largely kept out of the limelight by order of the boss," said Steve Tsang, director of the

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China Institute at the London University School of Oriental and African Studies and a longtime observer of Chinese politics.

In an era where personal loyalty trumps all, the fact that Li wasn't seen purely as a Xi loyalist may end up being "the main reason why he will be remembered fondly," Tsang said.

For most of his career, Li was known as a cautious, capable, and highly intelligent bureaucrat who rose through, and was bound by, a consensus-oriented Communist Party that reflexively stifles dissent.

As governor and then party secretary of the densely populated agricultural province of Henan in the 1990s, Li squelched reporting on an AIDS outbreak tied to illegal blood-buying rings that pooled plasma and reinjected it into donors after removing the blood products, allegedly with the collusion of local officials.

While Li was not in office when the scandal broke, his administration worked to quiet it up, prevented victims from seeking redress and harassed private citizens working on behalf of orphans and others affected.

But Li also cut a modestly different profile, an English speaker from a generation of politicians schooled during a time of greater openness to liberal Western ideas. Introduced to politics during the chaotic 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, he made it into prestigious Peking University, where he studied law and economics, on his own merits rather than through political connections.

After graduation, Li went to work at the Communist Youth League, an organization that grooms university students for party roles, then headed by future president and party leader Hu Jintao. Higher office soon followed.

Among the largely faceless ranks of Chinese bureaucrats, Li managed to show an unusually candid streak. In a U.S. State Department cable released by WikiLeaks, Li is quoted telling diplomats that Chinese economic growth statistics were "man-made," and saying he looked instead to electricity demand, rail cargo traffic, and lending as more accurate indicators.

Though no populist, in his speeches and public appearances, Li was practically typhonic compared to the typically languorous Xi.

Yet, he largely failed to make effective use of the platforms he was given, unlike his immediate predecessors. At his sole annual news conference on the closing day of each congressional annual session, Li used up most of his time repeating talks points and reciting statistics. Throughout the upheavals of China's three-year battle against COVID-19, Li was practically invisible.

Li, who hailed from humble backgrounds, had been seen as Hu's preferred successor as president. But the need to balance party factions prompted the leadership to choose Xi, the son of a former vice premier and party elder, as the consensus candidate.

The two never formed anything like the partnership that characterized Hu's relationship with his premier, Wen Jiabao — or Mao Zedong's with the redoubtable Zhou Enlai — although Li and Xi never openly disagreed over fundamentals.

"Xi is not the first among equals, but rather is way above equal," said Cheng Li, an expert on the Chinese leadership at the Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C. Ultimately, Li was a "team player" who put party unity foremost, he said.

Meanwhile, Li's authority was being gradually shrunk, beginning with a reorganization of offices in 2018. While some may have wished Li had been more "influential or decisive," the ground was crumbling under his feet as Xi shifted more of the powers of the State Council, China's Cabinet, to party institutions, Cheng Li said. That shift to expanded party control is expected to continue at the current congress meeting on an even greater scale.

At the same time, Xi appeared to favor trusted long-time brothers-in-arms such as economic adviser Liu He and head of the legislature Li Zhanshu, over Li, leaving him with little visibility or influence.

His departure leaves major questions about the future of the private sector that Xi has been reining in, along with wider economic reforms championed by Li and his cohort. His expected replacement, Li Qiang, is a crony of Xi's from his days in provincial government, best known for his ruthless implementation of last spring's monthslong COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai.

"Li Keqiang has been associated with a more economics-focused take on governance, which contrasts

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strongly with the ideological tone that Xi has brought to politics," said Rana Mitter of Oxford University.

"Li may be the last premier of his type, at least for a while," Mitter said.

Li may be remembered less for what he achieved than for the fact that he was the last of the technocrats to serve at the top of the Chinese Communist Party, said Carl Minzner, an expert on Chinese law and governance at New York's Fordham University and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Politically, Xi's authoritarian tendencies risk a return to Mao-era practices where elite politics become "yet more byzantine, vicious, and unstable," Minzner said.

Li's departure "marks the end of an era in which expertise and performance, rather than political loyalty to Xi himself, was the primary career criterion for ambitious officials seeking to rise up to higher office," he said.

'Creature from the Black Lagoon' actor Ricou Browning dies

Ricou Browning, a skilled swimmer best known for his underwater role as the Gill Man in the quintessential 3D black-and-white 1950s monster movie "Creature from the Black Lagoon," has died, his family told various media outlets. He was 93.

Browning died Feb. 27 at his home in Southwest Ranches, Florida.

In addition to acting roles, Browning also collaborated as a writer on the 1963 movie "Flipper," and the popular TV series of the same name that followed.

He told the Ocala Star Banner newspaper in 2013 that he came up with the idea after a trip to South America to capture fresh-water dolphins in the Amazon.

"One day, when I came home, the kids were watching 'Lassie' on TV, and it just dawned on me, 'Why not do a film about a boy and a dolphin?'" he told the newspaper.

Browning directed the 1973 comedy "Salty," about a sea lion, and the 1978 drama "Mr. No Legs," about a mob enforcer who is a double amputee. He also did stunt work in various films, including serving as Jerry Lewis's underwater double in the 1959 comedy "Don't Give Up the Ship," according to The New York Times.

But nothing would mark Browning's Hollywood career like swimming underwater in an elaborately grotesque suit as the Gill Man, a character that would hold its own in horror movie lore along side monsters like King Kong and Godzilla. Browning did the swimming scenes in two sequels, "Revenge of the Creature" (1955) and "The Creature Walks Among Us" (1956). Other actors played the Gill Man on land.

Browning told the Ocala Star Banner, he could hold his breath for minutes underwater, making him especially adept for the swimming part.

He was discovered when the film's director visited Silver Springs, where Newt Perry, who performed as a stand-in for "Tarzan" actor Johnny Weissmuller, was promoting one of Florida's first tourist attractions where Browning got a job as a teen swimming in water shows.

Perry asked Browning to take the Hollywood visitors to Wakulla Springs, one of the largest and deepest freshwater springs in the world. They later recruited Browning to appear in the movie, which was partly filmed at the springs.

Ricou Ren Browning was born on Feb. 16, 1930, in Fort Pierce, Florida. He swam on the U.S. Air Force swim team.

Survivors include his four children, Ricou Browning Jr., Renee, Kelly and Kim; 10 grandchildren; and 11 great-grandchildren. His wife, Fran, died in March 2020. His son Ricou Jr. is a marine coordinator, actor and stuntman like his father, according to The Hollywood Reporter.

Scholz warns of 'consequences' if China sends arms to Russia

BERLIN (AP) — German Chancellor Olaf Scholz says there would be "consequences" if China sent weapons to Russia for Moscow's war in Ukraine, but he's fairly optimistic that Beijing will refrain from doing so.

Scholz's comments came in an interview with CNN that aired Sunday, two days after he met U.S. President Joe Biden in Washington.

U.S. officials have warned recently that China could step off the sidelines and begin providing arms and

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ammunition to Moscow. Ahead of his trip, Scholz had urged Beijing to refrain from sending weapons and instead use its influence to press Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine.

Asked by CNN if he could imagine sanctioning China if it did aid Russia, Scholz replied: "I think it would have consequences, but we are now in a stage where we are making clear that this should not happen, and I'm relatively optimistic that we will be successful with our request in this case, but we will have to look at (it) and we have to be very, very cautious."

He didn't elaborate on the nature of the consequences. Germany has Europe's biggest economy, and China has been its single biggest trading partner in recent years.

Back in Germany on Sunday, Scholz was asked after his Cabinet met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen whether he had received concrete evidence from the U.S. that China was considering weapons deliveries and whether he would back sanctions against Beijing if it helped arm Russia.

"We all agree that there must be no weapons deliveries, and the Chinese government has stated that it wouldn't deliver any," the chancellor replied. "That is what we are demanding and we are watching it."

He didn't address the sanctions question.

Von der Leyen said that "we have no evidence for this so far, but we must observe it every day."

She said that whether the European Union would sanction China for giving Russia military aid "is a hypothetical question that can only be answered if it were to become reality and fact."

Party of Estonian PM, strong Ukraine backer, gains big win

By JARI TANNER Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Voters in Estonia elected a new parliament Sunday with initial results suggesting the center-right Reform Party of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, one of Europe's most outspoken supporters of Ukraine, had won overwhelmingly with nearly all votes counted.

Kallas faced a challenge from the far-right populist EKRE party, which seeks to limit the Baltic nation's exposure to the Ukraine crisis and blames the current government for Estonia's high inflation rate.

Nine political parties in all fielded candidates for Estonia's 101-seat parliament, or Riigikogu. Over 900,000 people were eligible to vote in the general election, and nearly half voted in advance.

With 99% of votes counted, Reform Party had taken 31.4% of the votes, followed by EKRE with 16.1% percent and the Center Party, traditionally favored by Estonia's sizable ethnic-Russian minority, 15%.

"This result, which is not final yet, will give us a strong mandate to put together a good government," Kallas told her party colleagues and jubilant supporters at a hotel in the capital, Tallinn.

"I think that with such a strong mandate, the (aid to Ukraine) will not change because other parties, except EKRE and maybe Center, have chosen the same line," she said.

Preliminary results suggested six parties passed the 5% threshold of support needed to be in parliament, including newcomer Eesti 200, a liberal centrist party. Voter turnout was 63.7%, according to initial information.

The initial results mean the Reform Party is in a remarkably strong position to take a leading role in forming Estonia's next government; its support translates into 37 seats in the legislature. But it will need junior partners to form a coalition with a comfortable majority to govern.

Kallas has ruled out being in a government with EKRE due to ideological differences, and is likely to turn to former coalition partner the Center Party and outgoing coalition partners - the small conservative Fatherland party and the Social Democrats - for a pact.

Newcomer Eesti 200 is also likely to be included in government talks with Reform.

National security in the wake of neighboring Russia's invasion of Ukraine and socio-economic issues, particularly the rising cost of living, were main campaign themes.

Kallas, 45, became prime minister in 2021 and has emerged as one of Europe's most outspoken supporters of Ukraine during the year-long war. She is seeking a second term, with her standing enhanced by her international appeals to impose sanctions on Moscow.

A Baltic nation of 1.3 million people that borders Russia to the east, Estonia broke away from the Soviet

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Union in 1991 and has taken a clear Western course, joining NATO and the European Union.

Kallas' center-right Reform Party, a key player in Estonian politics since the mid-1990s, continuously held the prime minister's post during 2005-2016 and regained it in 2021.

EKRE party leader Martin Helme, the prime minister's main challenger, faulted Kallas for the country's inflation rate of 18.6%, one of the EU's highest, and accused her of undermining Estonia's defenses by giving weapons to Ukraine.

"We've never questioned support for Ukraine. We've never questioned Estonia's membership in NATO," Helme said in an interview with The Associated Press. "That's just crazy talk. But we have been very critical of the government because they have not assessed the risk to Estonia and to Estonian security and defense."

"We have basically given away all our heavy weaponry to Ukraine, and the replacement comes within two or three years. Basically, that is an invitation of aggression," he said.

The outspoken and polarizing EKRE entered into the mainstream of Estonian politics in the 2019 election, when it emerged as the third-largest party with nearly 18% of the vote. The euroskeptic party was co-founded by Martin Helme's father, Mart Helme, and was part of a Center Party-led government during 2019-21.

Kallas argues it's in her country's interests to help Kyiv. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine sparked fears in Tallinn that a Russian victory could embolden Moscow to switch its attentions to other countries it controlled in Soviet times, including Baltic nations Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

She says that Estonia's defenses remain strong as the United States and other NATO allies have supplied top-notch weapons like the HIMARS rocket system to Ukraine and also to Estonia.

33 Iditarod sled dog race mushers to trek across Alaska

WILLOW, Alaska (AP) — The race to Nome began Sunday for 33 mushers in this year's Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in Alaska.

Jessie Holmes, an Alabama native living in the Alaska community of Brushkana, was the first musher to leave across a frozen lake about 70 miles (112 kilometers) north of Anchorage. Holmes works as a carpenter and appears on the reality television show "Life Below Zero."

Other mushers left in two-minute intervals. They will travel nearly a thousand miles (1,609 kilometers) over the unforgiving Alaska winterscape, climbing over two mountain ranges, mushing on frozen rivers and streams and across the treacherous Bering Sea ice. The winner is expected to drive their sled dog team down Nome's Front Street to the iconic burlled arch finish line in about 10 days.

Leading the charge will be defending champion Brent Sass, a kennel owner and wilderness guide who lives on a homestead about a four-hour drive northwest of Fairbanks.

Also competing is Pete Kaiser, the 2019 champion. The 33 mushers in the race is the smallest field ever. The very first race, held in 1973, had 34 mushers, but the average number of starters in the first 50 races was 63.

Only having two former champions in the race this year is a rarity.

Several veteran mushers have decided to retire or take a break from the Iditarod, including five-time champion Dallas Seavey, four-time winners Martin Buser and Jeff King and three-time champ Mitch Seavey.

Prince Harry contacted about coronation; attendance unclear

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III's office has been in touch with Prince Harry about the new monarch's coronation, raising the possibility the prince will attend the historic ceremony despite tensions within the royal family.

If Harry and his wife, Meghan, were to attend the May 6 coronation at Westminster Abbey in London, it would be the first meeting between Charles and his younger son since Harry deepened the rift within the House of Windsor by revealing family secrets in his bestselling book, "Spare."

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A spokesperson for Harry and Meghan, also known as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, confirmed Sunday that Harry had received "email correspondence" from the king's office about the coronation. Buckingham Palace did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"An immediate decision on whether the Duke and Duchess will attend will not be disclosed by us at this time," the couple's office said in a statement.

Speculation about whether Harry and Meghan would be invited to the coronation has raged since the release of Harry's explosive memoir, which contained damning allegations of intrigue behind the palace walls.

The disclosures, including details of private conversations with his father and brother, Prince William, fanned tensions between Harry and his family that became public when he and his wife moved to North America in 2020.

The book also included allegations that members of the royal family regularly feed the press unflattering information about other members of the House of Windsor in exchange for positive coverage of themselves.

The prince singled out Camilla, the queen consort, accusing her of leaking private conversations to the media as she sought to rehabilitate her image after marrying Charles. Camilla was once reviled for her long-term affair with Charles, which contributed to the breakdown of his marriage to the late Prince Diana, Harry and William's mother.

The acrimony between Harry and his family once again spilled into public view this week when the Sussexes acknowledged they were asked to vacate their home in Britain.

Frogmore Cottage, on the grounds of Windsor Castle west of London, was the couple's main residence before they gave up royal duties and moved to Montecito, a wealthy enclave in Southern California.

The Sun newspaper reported that Charles asked them to relinquish the dwelling on Jan. 11, the day after Harry's memoir was published.

But issues other than the book may have sparked the request.

Charles, who became king after the death of Queen Elizabeth II in September, has said he plans to cut the number of working royals and reduce the cost of the monarchy as he seeks to modernize the 1,000-year-old institution in hopes of ensuring its survival.

With Harry and Meghan now living in California, leaving a royal residence without occupants so they have a place to stay on their occasional visits to the U.K. may have been seen as a bad look.

Harry, meanwhile, continues to share his personal experiences and critique of the royal family as he promotes his book.

While taking part Saturday in a live-streamed conversation with Dr. Gabor Mate, author of "The Myth Of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing In A Toxic Culture," the prince discussed his past drug use and said he had urged other members of the family to have therapy.

He said criticism of "Spare" won't make him be silent because talking about these issues has helped him deal with the trauma in his life.

"The more they criticize, the more they comment, the more I feel the need to share," Harry said. "I found a way to be able to look around, and firstly ignore, the criticisms and the abuse."

Stationmaster charged in Greece train crash that killed 57

By DEMETRIS NELLAS and COSTAS KANTOURIS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — A stationmaster accused of causing Greece's deadliest train disaster was charged with negligent homicide and jailed pending trial Sunday, while Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis apologized for any responsibility Greece's government may bear for the tragedy.

An examining magistrate and a prosecutor agreed that multiple counts of homicide as well as charges of causing bodily harm and endangering transportation safety should be brought against the railway employee.

At least 57 people, many of them in their teens and 20s, were killed when a northbound passenger train and a southbound freight train collided late Tuesday north of the city of Larissa, in central Greece.

The 59-year-old stationmaster allegedly directed the two trains traveling in opposite directions onto the same track. He spent 7 1/2 hours Sunday testifying about the events leading up to the crash before he was charged and ordered held.

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"My client testified truthfully, without fearing if doing so would incriminate him," Stephanos Pantartzidis, the stationmaster's lawyer, told reporters. "The decision (to jail him) was expected, given the importance of the case."

Pantartzidis implied that others besides his client share blame, saying that judges should investigate whether more than one stationmaster should have been working in Larissa at the time of the collision.

"For 20 minutes, he was in charge of (train) safety in all central Greece," the lawyer said of his client.

Greek media have reported that the automated signaling system in the area of the crash was not functioning, making the stationmaster's mistake possible. Stationmasters along that part of Greece's main trunk line communicate with each other and with train drivers via two-way radios, and the switches are operated manually.

The prime minister promised a swift investigation of the collision and said the new Greek transportation minister would release a safety improvement plan. Once a new parliament is in place, a commission also will be named to investigate decades of mismanagement of the country's railway system, Mitsotakis said.

In an initial statement Wednesday, Mitsotakis had said the crash resulted from a "tragic human error." Opposition parties pounced on the remark, accusing the prime minister of trying to cover up the state's role and making the inexperienced stationmaster a scapegoat.

"I owe everyone, and especially the victims' relatives, a big apology, both personal and on behalf of all who governed the country for many years," Mitsotakis wrote Sunday on Facebook. "In 2023, it is inconceivable that two trains move in different directions on the same track and no one notices. We cannot, we do not want to, and we must not hide behind the human error."

Greece's railways long suffered from chronic mismanagement, including lavish spending on projects that were eventually abandoned or significantly delayed, Greek media have reported in several exposes. With state railway company Hellenic Railways billions of euros in debt, maintenance work was put off, according to news reports.

A retired railway union leader, Panayotis Paraskevopoulos, told Greek newspaper Kathimerini that the signaling system in the area monitored by the Larissa stationmaster malfunctioned six years ago and was never repaired.

Police and prosecutors have not identified the stationmaster, in line with Greek law. However, Hellenic Railways, also known as OSE, revealed the stationmaster's name Saturday, in an announcement suspending the company inspector who appointed him. The stationmaster also has been suspended.

Greek media have reported that the stationmaster, a former porter with the railway company, was transferred to a Ministry of Education desk job in 2011, when Greece's creditors demanded reductions in the number of public employees. The 59-year-old was transferred back to the railway company in mid-2022 and started a 5-month course to train as a stationmaster.

Upon completing the course, he was assigned to Larissa on Jan. 23, according to his own Facebook post. However, he spent the next month rotating among other stations before returning to Larissa in late February, days before the Feb. 28 collision, Greek media reported.

On Sunday, railway unions organized a protest rally in central Athens attended by about 12,000 people according to authorities.

Five people were arrested and seven police officers were injured when a group of more than 200 masked, black-clad individuals started throwing pieces of marble, rocks, bottles and firebombs at officers, who gave chase along a central avenue in the city while using tear gas and stun grenades.

In Thessaloniki, about 3,000 people attended two protest rallies. Several of the crash victims were students at the city's Aristotle University, Greece's largest, with over 50,000 students.

The larger protest, organized by left-wing activists, marched to a government building. No incidents were reported at that event.

In the other, staged by Communist Party members at the White Tower, the city's signature monument, there was a brief scuffle with police when the protesters tried to place a banner on the monument.

"The Communist Party organized a symbolic protest today in front of the White Tower to denounce the crime in Tempe, because it is a premeditated crime, a crime committed by the company and the bourgeois

state that supports these companies," Giannis Delis, a communist lawmaker, told The Associated Press.

Nations reach accord to protect marine life on high seas

By CHRISTINA LARSON and PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the first time, United Nations members have agreed on a unified treaty to protect biodiversity in the high seas - representing a turning point for vast stretches of the planet where conservation has previously been hampered by a confusing patchwork of laws.

The U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea came into force in 1994, before marine biodiversity was a well-established concept. The treaty agreement concluded two weeks of talks in New York.

An updated framework to protect marine life in the regions outside national boundary waters, known as the high seas, had been in discussions for more than 20 years, but previous efforts to reach an agreement had repeatedly stalled. The unified agreement treaty, which applies to nearly half the planet's surface, was reached late Saturday.

"We only really have two major global commons — the atmosphere and the oceans," said Georgetown marine biologist Rebecca Helm. While the oceans may draw less attention, "protecting this half of earth's surface is absolutely critical to the health of our planet."

Nichola Clark, an oceans expert at the Pew Charitable Trusts who observed the talks in New York, called the long-awaited treaty text "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to protect the oceans — a major win for biodiversity."

The treaty will create a new body to manage conservation of ocean life and establish marine protected areas in the high seas. And Clark said that's critical to achieve the U.N. Biodiversity Conference's recent pledge to protect 30% of the planet's waters, as well as its land, for conservation.

Treaty negotiations initially were anticipated to conclude Friday, but stretched through the night and deep into Saturday. The crafting of the treaty, which at times looked in jeopardy, represents "a historic and overwhelming success for international marine protection," said Steffi Lemke, Germany's environment minister.

"For the first time, we are getting a binding agreement for the high seas, which until now have hardly been protected," Lemke said. "Comprehensive protection of endangered species and habitats is now finally possible on more than 40% of the Earth's surface."

The treaty also establishes ground rules for conducting environmental impact assessments for commercial activities in the oceans.

"It means all activities planned for the high seas need to be looked at, though not all will go through a full assessment," said Jessica Battle, an oceans governance expert at the Worldwide Fund for Nature.

Several marine species — including dolphins, whales, sea turtles and many fish — make long annual migrations, crossing national borders and the high seas. Efforts to protect them, along with human communities that rely on fishing or tourism related to marine life, have long proven difficult for international governing bodies.

"This treaty will help to knit together the different regional treaties to be able to address threats and concerns across species' ranges," Battle said.

That protection also helps coastal biodiversity and economies, said Gladys Martínez de Lemos, executive director of the nonprofit Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense focusing on environmental issues across Latin America.

"Governments have taken an important step that strengthens the legal protection of two-thirds of the ocean and with it marine biodiversity and the livelihoods of coastal communities," she said.

The question now is how well the ambitious treaty will be implemented.

Formal adoption also remains outstanding, with numerous conservationists and environmental groups vowing to watch closely.

The high seas have long suffered exploitation due to commercial fishing and mining, as well as pollution from chemicals and plastics. The new agreement is about "acknowledging that the ocean is not a limitless

resource, and it requires global cooperation to use the ocean sustainably," Rutgers University biologist Malin Pinsky said.

Restoring rights for felons a rare bipartisan voting change

By GARY FIELDS Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — TJ King had candidates and causes to support, but couldn't vote in Nebraska's last election.

An outreach specialist with the Nebraska AIDS Project, King came off probation in August after serving time for drug and theft convictions. In many states, he could have voted in the November general election, but Nebraska requires a two-year wait after the completion of a felony sentence before someone can register.

King's first chance to vote will be in the 2024 presidential election season -- unless a legislative proposal introduced in January that would remove the two-year requirement passes and becomes law. That likely would change the timeline for the restoration of voting rights for King and thousands of other Nebraskans.

Voting, King said in an interview, gives "a little bit of your strength back and a little bit of your voice back. Being able to vote, being able to have a say in what happens in your society, in your state, is extremely important."

Restoring the voting rights of former felons drew national attention after Florida lawmakers weakened a voter-approved constitutional amendment and after a new election police unit championed by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis arrested 20 former felons. Several of them said they were confused by the arrests because they had been allowed to register to vote.

Attempts like those to discourage ex-felons from voting appear to be an outlier among the states, even as some Republican-led states continue to restrict voting access in other ways.

At least 14 states have introduced proposals this year focused on restoration of voting rights, according to the Brennan Center for Justice. An Oregon proposal would allow felons to vote while incarcerated. A Tennessee bill would automatically restore voting rights once a sentence is completed, except for a small group of crimes. Texas legislation would restore voting rights to those on probation or parole.

In Minnesota, Democratic Gov. Tim Walz on Friday signed a bill restoring voting rights to convicted felons as soon as they get out of prison. A bill moving through the New Mexico Legislature would do the same.

"Restoring voting rights really is an issue where we've seen bipartisan momentum," said Patrick Berry, counsel for the Democracy program at the Brennan Center.

More than 4.6 million people are disenfranchised in the United States because of felony convictions, according to the Sentencing Project, which studies the issue and advocates for restoration of voting rights for former felons.

Laws vary by state, based on pardon requirements, payment of fines, fees and child support, and when a sentence (including probation and parole) is considered complete. The impacts fall disproportionately on people of color, especially Black citizens, who account for one-third of the total disenfranchised population while making up about 12% of the overall population.

In Nebraska, nearly 18,000 people are unable to vote because of felony convictions, said the Sentencing Project's director of advocacy, Nicole Porter. That includes 7,072 who fall under the two-year wait requirement and are currently unable to cast a ballot. The rest have not completed their full sentences.

Steve Smith of Civic Nebraska, part of a large coalition of groups supporting the measure, said the wait creates a group of taxpayers who can't choose their representatives.

"You're civically dead and you can't vote for the people who are levying those taxes," he said.

The bill that would eliminate the wait would alter a 2005 law. Before then, felonies in Nebraska brought a lifetime voting ban in most cases.

At the time Nebraska was in step with other states. Now, while a few states require wait times for specific offenses or define completion of a sentence as including things such as fines and restitution, Nebraska is alone in requiring a general waiting period beyond imprisonment and release from parole or probation,

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said Margaret Love, co-founder and director of the Collateral Consequences Resource Center, which keeps a 50-state database on restoration of rights.

The bill's author, Democratic state Sen. Justin Wayne, said he was going door to door in his first election in 2016 and was told by would-be constituents that they could not vote. Much of the reason was confusion over the law's waiting period, he said.

He has introduced bills multiple times to do away with the wait period, coming close to success in 2017 when a bill passed the Legislature but was vetoed by then-Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts. Wayne, who represents parts of Omaha with strong minority populations, said reconnecting people to the voting process is integral to successful reentry. His bill advanced this past week from a committee to the full Legislature.

"When people get out of our system, they've got to feel engaged in their community, and the number one way for a person to feel engaged in their community is to be able to vote for the leadership of that community," he said.

Kathy Wilcot, a member of the University of Nebraska Board of Regents, was the lone dissenter from among the nearly 20 witnesses who spoke on Wayne's bill. Wilcot stressed she was speaking as an individual and not on behalf of the university.

"I do think that hopefully the waiting period reinforces the fact that voting is something very special, and hopefully that will be part of the things that an individual would consider if they're tempted to break the law again," she said.

Three of the witnesses with criminal records who spoke in favor of the legislation said in later interviews the waiting period is not a deterrent to future crime, but rather a barrier for those who have served their sentences.

King, 51, fought addiction for years and spent five years in prison after being convicted of possessing the party drug Ecstasy and theft by deception, ending probation last August.

King works in the HIV/AIDS field and volunteers at various organizations, but said voting is still the most direct way to be involved and became tearful when talking about being unable to vote.

"I felt so hopeless and helpless not being able to have my voice heard in this last election," King said. "There are a lot of things that were on the ballot here in Nebraska that hit home with a lot of things that I advocate for."

Demetrius Gatson is among the more than 10,000 people in Nebraska who has no right to vote because they haven't completed their sentences. Because of her probation, she will have to wait until 2030 to vote.

Since her 2018 release, she has obtained graduate degrees and served in a variety of volunteer roles. Now 48, Gatson has set up her own nonprofit and is executive director of Q.U.E.E.N.S Butterfly House, a safe house for women trying to reenter society.

For the people she works with, being able to register to vote provides a sense of acceptance, especially when there are so many barriers on where they can live, jobs they can work and who they can associate with, she said.

Gatson said there are critical issues she cares about, including education and criminal justice, but said, "I don't have a say in anything that goes on in my country because I'm a felon."

Steven Scott, 33, was paroled in 2015 after serving more than four years on assault and other charges. After his release, he was rejected repeatedly for apartments, got a job only because his boss knew him and had his pursuit of an advanced degree derailed after his record came to light.

He is now married with two small children and owns his own business, a physical rehabilitation and athletic coaching center. He also has regained voting rights and cast ballots for Republican candidates in his first elections, including 2020. He sees the two-year wait period as one link in a long chain of barriers for those trying to reenter society.

"You can't harm society by voting," he said. "You can only help it."

Russian shelling hits Ukrainian town; Bakhmut battle rages

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian shelling destroyed homes and killed one person in northern Ukraine's

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Kharkiv province, the region's governor said Sunday, while fighting raged in the fiercely contested eastern city of Bakhmut.

The town of Kupiansk is about 30 kilometers (18 miles) from the Russian border; the region has come under frequent attacks even though Russian ground forces withdrew from the area nearly six months ago. Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said at least five homes were razed in the latest attack that left a 65-year-old man dead.

Two civilians were killed over the past day in Bakhmut, Donetsk province Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko said. Russian forces have spent months trying to capture the city as part of their offensive in eastern Ukraine, and the area has seen some of the bloodiest ground fighting of the war.

In recent days, Ukrainian units destroyed two key bridges just outside Bakhmut, including one linking it to the nearby town of Chasiv Yar along the last remaining Ukrainian resupply route, according to U.K. military intelligence officials and other Western analysts.

Associated Press journalists near Bakhmut on Saturday saw a pontoon bridge set up by Ukrainian soldiers to help the few remaining residents reach the nearby village of Khromove. Later, the AP team saw at least five houses on fire as a result of attacks in Khromove, a nearby settlement.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, assessed last week that Kyiv's actions may point to a looming pullout from parts of the city. It said Ukrainian troops may "conduct a limited and controlled withdrawal from particularly difficult sections of eastern Bakhmut," while seeking to inhibit Russian movement there and limit exit routes to the west.

Capturing Bakhmut would not only give Russian fighters a rare battlefield gain after months of setbacks but might rupture Ukraine's supply lines and allow the Kremlin's forces to press on toward other Ukrainian strongholds in Donetsk province.

In southern Ukraine, a woman and two children were killed in a residential building in the Kherson region village of Poniativka, the Ukrainian president's office reported. A Russian artillery shell hit a car in Burdarky, another Kharkiv province village, killing a man and his wife, the regional prosecutor's office said.

Casualties increased from an attack earlier in the week. Ukraine's emergency services reported Sunday that the death toll from a Russian missile strike that hit a five-story apartment building in southern Ukraine on Thursday rose to 13.

One of the few areas where Russia and Ukraine have cooperated during the war is grain shipments. On that front, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Sunday his country is engaged in "intense efforts" to extend an agreement that allowed Ukraine to export grain from its Black Sea ports.

The deal, which the U.N. and Turkey brokered in July 2022 and was extended by four months in November, is set to expire March 18.

In a speech at the opening of the U.N. Conference on Least Developed Countries in Doha, Qatar, Cavusoglu said he had discussed another extension with U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The agreement, which also allows Russia to export food and fertilizers, has helped temper rising global food prices. However, Russian officials have complained that shipments of the country's fertilizer were not being facilitated under the agreement, leaving the deal's renewal in question.

Crisis over suspected Iran schoolgirl poisonings escalates

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A crisis over suspected poisonings targeting Iranian schoolgirls escalated Sunday as authorities acknowledged over 50 schools were struck in a wave of possible cases. The poisonings have spread further fear among parents as Iran has faced months of unrest.

It remains unclear who or what is responsible since the alleged poisonings began in November in the Shiite holy city of Qom. Reports now suggest schools across 21 of Iran's 30 provinces have seen suspected cases, with girls' schools the site of nearly all the incidents.

The attacks have raised fears that other girls could be poisoned, apparently just for going to school. Education for girls has never been challenged in the more than 40 years since the 1979 Islamic Revolu-

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tion. Iran has been calling on the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan to allow girls and women return to school and universities.

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi on Saturday said, without elaborating, that investigators recovered "suspicious samples" in the course of their investigations into the incidents, according to the state-run IRNA news agency. He called for calm among the public, while also accusing the "enemy's media terrorism" of inciting more panic over the alleged poisonings.

However, it wasn't until the poisonings received international media attention that hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi announced an investigation into the incidents on Wednesday.

On Sunday, Raisi told the Cabinet, following a report read by Intelligence Minister Ismail Khatib, that the root of the poisonings must be uncovered and confronted. He described the alleged attacks as a "crime against humanity for creating anxiety among student and parents."

Vahidi said at least 52 schools had been affected by suspected poisonings. Iranian media reports have put the number of schools at over 60. At least one boy's school reportedly has been affected.

Videos of upset parents and schoolgirls in emergency rooms with IVs in their arms have flooded social media. Making sense of the crisis remains challenging, given that nearly 100 journalists have been detained by Iran since the start of protests in September over the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. She had been detained by the country's morality police and later died.

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

The children affected in the poisonings reportedly complained of headaches, heart palpitations, feeling lethargic or otherwise unable to move. Some described smelling tangerines, chlorine or cleaning agents.

Reports suggest at least 400 schoolchildren have fallen ill since November. Vahidi, the interior minister, said in his statement that two girls remain in hospital because of underlying chronic conditions.

As more attacks were reported Sunday, videos were posted on social media showing children complaining about pain in the legs, abdomen and dizziness. State media have mainly referred to these as "hysterical reactions."

Since the outbreak, no one was reported in critical condition and there have been no reports of fatalities.

Attacks on women have happened in the past in Iran, most recently with a wave of acid attacks in 2014 around the city of Isfahan, at the time believed to have been carried out by hard-liners targeting women for how they dressed.

Speculation in Iran's tightly controlled state media has focused on the possibility of exile groups or foreign powers being behind the poisonings. That was also repeatedly alleged during the recent protests without evidence. In recent days, Germany's foreign minister, a White House official and others have called on Iran to do more to protect schoolgirls — a concern Iran's Foreign Ministry has dismissed as "crocodile tears."

However, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom noted that Iran has "continued to tolerate attacks against women and girls for months" amid the recent protests.

"These poisonings are occurring in an environment where Iranian officials have impunity for the harassment, assault, rape, torture and execution of women peacefully asserting their freedom of religion or belief," Sharon Kleinbaum of the commission said in a statement.

Suspicion in Iran has fallen on possible hard-liners for carrying out the suspected poisonings. Iranian journalists, including Jamileh Kadivar, a prominent former reformist lawmaker at Tehran's Ettelaat newspaper, have cited a supposed communique from a group calling itself Fidayeen Velayat that purportedly said that girls' education "is considered forbidden" 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 the Ettelaat newspaper also is appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Kadivar wrote Saturday that another possibility is "mass hysteria." There have been previous cases of

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this over the last decades, most recently in Afghanistan from 2009 through 2012. Then, the World Health Organization wrote about so-called "mass psychogenic illnesses" affecting hundreds of girls in schools across the country.

"Reports of stench smells preceding the appearance of symptoms have given credit to the theory of mass poisoning," WHO wrote at the time. "However, investigations into the causes of these outbreaks have yielded no such evidence so far."

Iran has not acknowledged asking the world health body for assistance in its investigation. WHO did not immediately respond to a request for comment Sunday.

However, Kadivar also noted that hard-liners in Iranian governments in the past carried out so-called "chain murders" of activists and others in the 1990s. She also referenced the killings by Islamic vigilantes in 2002 in the city of Kerman, when one victim was stoned to death and others were tied up and thrown into a swimming pool, where they drowned. She described those vigilantes as being members of the Basij, an all-volunteer force in Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

"The common denominator of all of them is their extreme thinking, intellectual stagnation and rigid religious view that allowed them to have committed such violent actions," Kadivar wrote.

A generation of Venezuelan children know only struggles

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Valerie Torres' mother has tried to shield her from the worst of Venezuela's protracted crisis — the deadly protests, the sick people begging for help, the malnourished children with protruding ribs. At school, her teachers don't even broach the subject.

But just shy of her 10th birthday this month, the girl is perceptive beyond her years. She knows her fourth-grade classmate lied to their teacher saying he forgot a book at home when in fact he was still saving up to buy it; that neighbors, friends and even her grandmother have all fled the country in search of a better life; that her mother is bringing home fewer groceries.

"Inflation is horrible. A candy is 3 bolivars. A candy!" Valerie said in disbelief, recalling when it used to cost half a bolivar, Venezuela's official yet worthless currency, which has effectively been replaced by the U.S. dollar. "And before, a dollar cost about 5 or 7 bolivars. Now it is 23. I can't buy anything anymore."

Valerie is part of a generation of Venezuelan children who know only a country in crisis, whose lives so far have been spent amid hardship and under the government of a single president, Nicolás Maduro, who took the reins a decade ago Sunday when his mentor, Hugo Chávez, died of cancer.

The succession coincided with a steep drop in the price of oil, the resource that fueled the country's economy and funded social programs under Chávez. That, coupled with government mismanagement under both presidents, plunged the South American nation into the ongoing crisis.

Many children have grown up being forced to eat nutrient-deficient food or skip meals, wave goodbye to migrating parents and sit in crumbling classrooms for classes that barely prepare them to add and subtract. The consequences could be long-lasting.

About three-quarters of Venezuelans live on less than \$1.90 a day — the international benchmark of extreme poverty. The minimum wage paid in bolivars is the equivalent of \$5 per month, down from \$30 in April.

Neither of those wages is enough to feed one person, let alone a family. An independent group of economists that tracks price increases and other metrics estimated that a basic basket of goods for a family of four cost \$372 in December.

That harsh reality has spilled over into the classroom, with teachers walking out to protest their paltry salaries, which some complement by moonlighting as tutors, selling baked goods or stripping at clubs. Thousands have quit entirely, and many of those who still teach do so in facilities plagued by pests, mold, filth and standing water that attracts mosquitoes.

Kevin Paredes, a 12-year-old fifth grader, attends one such public school across the street from the home he shares with his parents and six siblings in Caracas, Venezuela's capital. Last year, the school was painted

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orange and bright green, but work to fix caving walls and other structural issues remains unfinished.

Kevin began memorizing multiplication tables in third grade. Teachers should have introduced him to division that same year, but they have not taught it yet.

He recently stayed home for several weeks because his family could not afford notebooks and only just returned to class. Sitting on the sidewalk outside the school, he described with enthusiasm a recent school project he has enjoyed: "I'm planting a bell pepper."

Kevin's parents, both of whom sew for a living, are earning only enough to buy three or four food items at a time, instead of in bulk as they used to a few years ago. Less money is coming in because clients are focused on buying necessities, not new clothes.

His father, 41-year-old Henry Paredes, migrated to Ecuador in 2018 to work harvesting bananas and made enough to help support the family back home. But he returned to Venezuela after only eight months upon noticing Kevin's growing anger and sadness over their separation. His toddler daughters did not recognize him when he came home.

"One endures, but the little children do not," he said of the hunger he feels when he skips meals to feed his children. "They ask for bread, bananas."

Through a countrywide network of ruling-party neighborhood organizers, the government every month distributes packages of dry goods to families for less than half a dollar. Those that are able make another payment of roughly the same amount can get chicken or mortadella from trucks that show up in neighborhoods from time to time.

The United Nations' World Food Programme estimated in 2020 that a third of Venezuelans were not getting enough to eat and needed help. It began offering food assistance to Venezuelans through schools the following year, and in January, it reached 450,000 people in eight states.

Laura Melo, the program's director for Venezuela, said schools where it operates have seen an up to 30% increase in enrollment. The organization is working to refurbish school cafeterias to provide students with hot meals.

Dr. Huniades Urbina, a pediatrician and board member of Venezuela's National Academy of Medicine, said some children underperform academically because they arrive at school weak and hungry after going as much as 12 hours or more without eating. He added that children born during the crisis have had their growth stunted by about 5 to 6 centimeters (2 to 2.4 inches) on average due to poor nutrition.

"We are no longer going to have that 1.80-meter or 1.90-meter-tall (5-foot-9-inch or 6-foot-2-inch) Miss Venezuela," Urbina said, referring to the country's famed enthusiasm for beauty pageants. "In the end, we can have a thin and short generation, but the problem is that this brain ... in the long run will not have the development of a child who consumed adequate protein and calories."

The number of children born into the crisis is unknown since the government stopped publishing birth figures after 2012, a year that saw about 620,000 newborns.

The crisis has driven more than 7 million Venezuelans to leave their home country.

Valerie, the savvy, spunky fourth grader, hopes to join them someday and has her sights set on going to Miami. She dreams of becoming a model, owning a Ferrari and living in a mansion. But she cannot ignore the present and has plenty of questions.

"Sometimes she asks, 'Why do people not like Maduro?'" said Francys Brito, mother to Valerie and another girl, 15. "Well because, thank God, you have everything, but there are many people who don't."

With an eye toward the girls' future, Brito said the family has been paying \$100 a month for each to go to a private school where they can benefit from stricter teachers and a stronger curriculum than are typical of the public system. What's left over from her husband's income from a casino job and side hustles goes to food and other necessities.

"I hope and aspire for my daughters to be independent, to be productive workers and above all happy," Brito said.

Ex-Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan won't challenge Trump in 2024

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By BRIAN WITTE and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) — Larry Hogan, the former Republican governor of Maryland who positioned himself as one of his party's fiercest critics of Donald Trump, said Sunday he will not challenge the ex-president for the GOP's White House nomination in 2024.

"I would never run for president to sell books or position myself for a Cabinet role," the 66-year-old Hogan wrote in *The New York Times*. "I have long said that I care more about ensuring a future for the Republican Party than securing my own future in the Republican Party. And that is why I will not be seeking the Republican nomination for president."

The move is a recognition that while many in the GOP are considering ways to move on from the Trump era, there is little appetite among primary voters for such a vocal critic of the former president. Other prominent Trump adversaries, including former Reps. Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, don't appear to be making moves toward a campaign at the moment.

For now, that leaves Trump as the leading figure in the early field of Republican candidates.

So far, he faces just three formal challengers: his former U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley, entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy and Michigan businessman Perry Johnson.

Others, including former Vice President Mike Pence, ex-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, may join in the coming months. One possible candidate, former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union" that "March is a message month" and that Republicans "need to have all alternatives" to Trump. "We don't need to be led by arrogance and revenge in the future."

Some Trump rivals, such as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, could wait until late summer to officially announce their campaigns.

In an interview with CBS' "Face The Nation," Hogan insisted the prospect of competing against Trump didn't factor into his decision.

"He's very tough," Hogan said. "But, you know, I beat life-threatening cancer. So having Trump call me names on Twitter didn't -- didn't really scare me off."

"It's mostly about the country and about the party," Hogan added. "It was a personal decision. It was like, I didn't need that job. I didn't need to run for another office. It was really I was considering it because I thought it was public service and maybe I can make a difference."

Hogan wrapped up his second term as governor in January, serving for eight years in a state where Democrats outnumber Republicans by a 2-to-1 margin. He was Maryland's second Republican governor ever to be reelected.

Some Republicans had hoped that Hogan, emerging as the new best hope of a small group of "Never Trump Republicans," would challenge Trump in 2020. But a year after Hogan's reelection in 2018, he said that while he appreciated "all of the encouragement" he had received to run for president, he would not. Hogan told *The Associated Press* he had no interest in a "kamikaze mission."

In the past two presidential elections, Hogan said he did not vote for Trump, the party nominee. Hogan said he wrote in the name of his father, former U.S. Rep. Larry Hogan Sr., in 2016 and the late President Ronald Reagan in 2020.

Hogan won his first term as governor in 2014 in an upset, using public campaign financing against a better-funded candidate. Running on fiscal concerns as a moderate Republican businessman, Hogan tapped into frustration from a variety of tax and fee increases over the eight previous years to defeat then-Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown.

Hogan had never held elected office before and in his first year as governor, he focused on pocketbook issues. He lowered tolls, an action he could take without approval from the General Assembly, long controlled by Democrats. But he was also presented with challenges, including unrest in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody in 2015. Hogan sent the National Guard to prevent further rioting.

In June of that year, he was diagnosed with stage 3 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma but continued working while receiving treatment. He has been in remission since November 2015.

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In 2018, he became only the second Republican governor in the history of the state to win reelection, defeating former NAACP President Ben Jealous.

Hogan has long been upfront about his distaste for Trump as president.

In 2020, as chair of the National Governors Association, Hogan criticized Trump for delaying a national coronavirus testing strategy, saying the president was playing down the virus' threat despite grave warnings from top national experts.

"I did not go out of my way to criticize the president," Hogan said. "But unlike a lot of Republicans, I'm not the guy that's just going to sit down and shut up and not stand up and say something if I think something's going wrong."

Describing the riot at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, as "one of the darkest days in American history," Hogan said Trump should have resigned or been removed from office.

"The people that try to whitewash Jan. 6 as if nothing happened are delusional. It was an assault on democracy," Hogan told the AP late last year.

Trump and Hogan were engaged in a proxy battle of sorts in the 2022 election. Hogan's pick to succeed him as governor was Kelly Schulz, who was labor secretary and commerce secretary in his administration. She lost in the Republican primary to Trump-endorsed Dan Cox, a state lawmaker who said President Joe Biden's 2020 victory shouldn't have been certified and who sought to impeach Hogan for his pandemic policies.

Cox went on to lose the November general election by a large margin to Democrat Wes Moore.

Deadly shipwreck: How it happened, and unanswered questions

By RENATA BRITO and PAOLO SANTALUCIA Associated Press

STECCATO DI CUTRO, Italy (AP) — "Italy here we come!" cheered the young men, in Urdu and Pashto, as they filmed themselves standing on a boat sailing in bright blue waters.

They were among around 180 migrants — Afghans, Pakistanis, Syrians, Iranians, Palestinians, Somalis and others — who left Turkey hoping for a better, or simply safer, life in Europe.

Days later, dozens of them were dead. So far, 70 bodies have been recovered from the Feb. 26 shipwreck near the small beach town of Steccato di Cutro, but only 80 survivors have been found, indicating that the death toll was higher. On Sunday, firefighter divers spotted a further body in the Ionian Sea and were working to bring it ashore, state TV said.

The tragedy has highlighted the lesser-known migration route from Turkey to Italy. It also brought into focus hardening Italian and European migration policies, which have since 2015 shifted away from search and rescue, prioritizing instead border surveillance. Questions are also being asked of the Italian government about why the coast guard wasn't deployed until it was too late.

Based on court documents, testimony from survivors and relatives and statements by authorities, the AP has reconstructed what is known of the events that led to the shipwreck and the questions left unanswered.

THE FATEFUL JOURNEY

In the early hours of Wednesday, Feb. 22, the migrants — including dozens of families with small children — boarded a leisure boat on a beach near Izmir following a truck journey from Istanbul and a forest crossing by foot.

They set out from the shore. But just three hours into their voyage, the vessel suffered an engine failure. Still in high seas, an old wooden gulet — a traditional Turkish style of boat — arrived as a replacement.

The smugglers and their assistants told the migrants to hide below deck as they continued on their journey west. Without life vests or seats, they crammed on the floor, going out for air, or to relieve themselves, only briefly. Survivors said the second boat also had engine problems, stopping several times along the way.

Three days later, on Saturday, Feb. 25, at 10:26 p.m. a European Union Border and Coast Guard plane patrolling the Ionian sea spotted a boat heading toward the Italian coast. The agency, known as Frontex, said the vessel "showed no signs of distress" and was navigating at 6 knots, with "good" buoyancy.

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Frontex sent an email to Italian authorities at 11:03 p.m. reporting one person on the upper deck and possibly more people below, detected by thermal cameras. No lifejackets could be seen. The email also mentioned that a satellite phone call had been made from the boat to Turkey.

In response to the Frontex sighting, the case was classified as an "activity of the maritime police". Italy's Guardia di Finanza, or financial police, which also has a border and customs role, dispatched two patrols to "intercept the vessel."

As the Turkish boat approached Italy's Calabrian coast on Saturday evening, some of the migrants on the boat were allowed to message family, to inform them of their imminent arrival and release the 8,000-euro fee that had been agreed upon with the smugglers.

The men navigating the boat told the anxious passengers they needed to wait a few more hours for disembarkation, to avoid getting caught, according to survivors' testimony to investigators.

At 3:48 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 26, the financial police vessels returned to base, without having reached the boat due to bad weather. The police contacted the coast guard to ask if they had any vessels out at sea "in case there was a critical situation" according to communication obtained by the Italian ANSA agency and confirmed by AP. The coast guard replied they did not. "OK, it was just to inform you," a police officer said before hanging up.

Just minutes later, at around 4 a.m., local fishermen on Italy's southern coast spotted lights in the darkness. People were waving their cell phone flashlights desperately from atop a boat stuck on a sand bank.

The suspected smugglers grabbed black tubes, possibly life jackets, and jumped into the water to save themselves, according to survivors. Waves continued smashing into the vessel until it suddenly ripped apart. The sound was similar to that of an explosion, survivors said. People fell into the frigid water, trying to grab onto anything they could. Many could not swim.

Italian police arrived on the scene at 4:30 a.m., the same time that the coast guard says it received the first emergency calls related to the boat. It took the coast guard another hour to get there. By then, bodies were already being pulled out of the water with people screaming for help while others attempted to resuscitate the victims.

THE YOUNG VICTIMS

There were dozens of young children on board the boat. Almost none survived. The body of a 3-year-old was recovered Saturday.

Among those who lived was a Syrian father and his eldest child, but his wife and three other children did not. The body of his youngest, age 5, was still missing four days later.

Shahida Raza, an athlete from Pakistan, died in the tragedy. She had hoped to reach Europe so that she could eventually bring her disabled son for the medical treatment he could not access back home.

One Afghan man drove down from Germany, searching for his 15-year-old nephew who had contacted family saying he was in Italy. But the boy also died before setting foot on land.

The uncle asked that his name, and that of his nephew not be published as he had yet to inform the boy's father.

The baby-faced teenager had shared a video with his family during his sea voyage, with apparently good weather.

His mother had died two years ago, and with the return of the Taliban to power, the family fled to Iran. The boy later continued to Turkey from where he tried multiple times to cross into the EU.

"Europe is the only place where at least you can be respected as a human being," he said. "Everyone knows that it is 100% dangerous, but they gamble with their lives because they know if they make it they might be able to live."

THE AFTERMATH

Prosecutors have launched two investigations — one into the suspected smugglers and another looking at whether there were delays by Italian authorities in responding to the migrant boat.

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A Turkish man and two Pakistani men, among the 80 survivors, have been detained, suspected of being smugglers or their accomplices. A fourth suspect, a Turkish national, is on the run.

Particular attention has been focused on why the coast guard was never sent to check on the boat.

A day after the shipwreck, Frontex told AP it had spotted a "heavily overcrowded" boat and reported it to Italian authorities. In a second statement, though, Frontex clarified that only one person had been visible on deck but that its thermal cameras — "and other signs" — indicated there could be more people below.

In an interview with AP, retired coast guard admiral Vittorio Alessandro said the coast guard's boats are made to withstand rough seas and that they should have gone out. "If not to rescue, at least to check whether the boat needed any assistance."

Alessandro added that the photos released by Frontex showed the water level was high, suggesting the boat was heavy.

The coast guard said Frontex alerted Italian authorities in charge of "law enforcement," copying the Italian Coast Guard "for their awareness" only. Frontex said it is up to national authorities to classify events as search and rescue.

"The issue is simple in its tragic nature: No emergency communication from Frontex reached our authorities. We were not warned that this boat was in danger of sinking," Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni said on Saturday.

"I wonder if there is anyone in this nation who honestly believes that the government deliberately let over 60 people die, including some children," she added.

Alessandro, however, lamented how over the years the coast guard's activities — which previously occurred even far out in international waters — have been progressively curtailed by successive governments.

"Rescue operations at sea should not be replaced by police operations. Rescue must prevail," he said.

In an interview with AP, Eugenio Ambrosi, chief of staff at the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration, stressed the need for a more proactive search and rescue strategy, on a European level.

"We can look and debate whether the (boat) was spotted, not spotted, whether the authorities were called and didn't respond," he said. "But we wouldn't be asking this question if there was a mechanism of search and rescue in the Mediterranean."

Miami faith community strains to help new exiles, migrants

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

HIALEAH, Florida (AP) — A few days after selling all she had to flee Cuba with her three children on a crowded boat, Daneilis Tamayo raised her hand in praise and sang the rousing opening hymn at Sunday worship in this Miami suburb.

"The only thing that gave me strength is the Lord. I'm not going to lose my faith, whatever I might go through," she said. The family has been sleeping in Iglesia Rescate's improvised shelter since the promises of help made by her contact in the United States turned out to be "all lies."

In the past 18 months, an estimated 250,000 migrants and asylum-seekers like Tamayo have arrived in the Miami area after being granted only precarious legal status that often doesn't include permission to work, which is essential to building new lives in the U.S.

This influx is maxing out the migrant social safety net in Miami's faith communities, long accustomed to integrating those escaping political persecution, a lack of freedoms and a dearth of basic necessities. Cubans were the first to arrive during the island's communist revolution 60 years ago, and they're still fleeing here alongside Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans.

"The Lord says to welcome the stranger. It's the saddest thing, the quantity of people who come and we can't help them," said the Rev. David Monduy, Iglesia Rescate's pastor.

Miami's faith leaders and their congregations remain steadfast in their mission to help settle new migrants. But they're sounding the alarm that the need is growing unmanageable.

"We can get a call on a Saturday that 30 migrants were dropped off, and two hours later all have been picked up," said Peter Routsis-Arroyo, the CEO of Catholic Charities in Miami. "But the challenge is at what

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point you reach saturation.”

The number of arrivals, by sea directly to Florida and from those heading here from the US-Mexico border, surged earlier this winter. For most newcomers, the best hope to settle in the U.S. is to win asylum, but immigration courts are so backlogged migrants can be in limbo for years, ineligible to get a job legally.

Advocates say that makes them vulnerable to criminals, puts an impossible financial burden on existing migrant communities that try to help, and slows down integration into U.S. society.

“It’s completely irrational that they’re not giving out work permits,” said Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski, whose Catholic archdiocese has long helped welcome migrants. “Because of that, the government can make a situation that’s not too bad yet, become worse.”

Many migrants are already homeless due to soaring rent and motel rates.

“Every day, people knock on the doors of our parishes, saying they have no place to sleep,” said the Rev. Marcos Somarriba, rector at St. Agatha Catholic Church on Miami’s outskirts.

In addition to providing food, clothes and some housing relief, churches are helping educate migrants about their legal options.

St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church put together a migration forum with Catholic Legal Services in mid-February about a new humanitarian parole program that allows 30,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans into the U.S. each month if they have a sponsor who assumes financial responsibility for them for two years.

Parishioner Dalia Marrero attended to learn about sponsoring an uncle in Nicaragua, where many are fleeing President Daniel Ortega’s crackdown on opponents.

“I don’t want to fail him or U.S. law,” she said, worried about how long she’d be required to support her relative.

Miami’s established diaspora communities know all too well the hardships that migrating entails, and that motivates many to help. But there also is mistrust among some old timers who remain active in opposition to autocratic regimes like Cuba’s and view some new arrivals’ politics with suspicion, said Jorge Duany, director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University.

That underscores the potentially crucial role for faith leaders — to preach forgiveness and build a sense of shared experience.

“That’s it — to unite,” said the Rev. Elvis González, pastor at St. Michael the Archangel, a historically Cuban church that welcomes faithful from across Central America. “They have seen the church as the only institution that can give some hope.”

A few miles south on the seashore stands La Ermita, a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Charity that’s long been a beacon for Cuban exiles.

Migrants from all over Latin America come to bring sunflowers to the Virgin, to cry in gratitude for having made it and to ask for help with food and clothing, said Sister Consuelo Gómez.

“Jesus also was a migrant,” said Gómez, who helps many newcomers find jobs and decent housing, often with the aid of diaspora members. “We try to help so that they can get ahead on their own.”

Among them were two Venezuelan sisters Gómez helped get their own place as well as jobs that allow them to send money back to their ailing mother.

“Here I motivate myself, even though, yes, I miss my family,” said older sister Daniela Valletero, who works two jobs, six days a week. “Here I feel that I’ll make it.”

That’s the kind of faith that motivates Marilyn Rondon, an attorney originally from Venezuela whose weekly prayer group of professionals from Latin America prepares hundreds of sandwiches for the nuns to distribute to migrants and the homeless.

“As a Catholic, you can’t stop at sadness,” Rondon said. “The biggest faith is that of the one who is arriving. He has to depend 100% on providence.”

Outside the Ermita shrine, a couple stood under the palms, their homeland of Cuba some 200 miles across the sea. Roberto Sardiñas came seven years ago, and in December managed to get his wife, Dadiana Figueroa, to immigrate legally through family reunification.

Asked about the influx of new arrivals, Sardiñas said it would be selfish to argue anything but that “all who can come, let them come.”

"The ideal would be that freedom existed in Cuba," Figueroa added.

How common is transgender treatment regret, detransitioning?

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

Many states have enacted or contemplated limits or outright bans on transgender medical treatment, with conservative U.S. lawmakers saying they are worried about young people later regretting irreversible body-altering treatment.

But just how common is regret? And how many youth change their appearances with hormones or surgery only to later change their minds and detransition?

Here's a look at some of the issues involved.

WHAT IS TRANSGENDER MEDICAL TREATMENT?

Guidelines call for thorough psychological assessments to confirm gender dysphoria — distress over gender identity that doesn't match a person's assigned sex — before starting any treatment.

That treatment typically begins with puberty-blocking medication to temporarily pause sexual development. The idea is to give youngsters time to mature enough mentally and emotionally to make informed decisions about whether to pursue permanent treatment. Puberty blockers may be used for years and can increase risks for bone density loss, but that reverses when the drugs are stopped.

Sex hormones — estrogen or testosterone — are offered next. Dutch research suggests that most gender-questioning youth on puberty blockers eventually choose to use these medications, which can produce permanent physical changes. So does transgender surgery, including breast removal or augmentation, which sometimes is offered during the mid-teen years but more typically not until age 18 or later.

Reports from doctors and individual U.S. clinics indicate that the number of youth seeking any kind of transgender medical care has increased in recent years.

HOW OFTEN DO TRANSGENDER PEOPLE REGRET TRANSITIONING?

In updated treatment guidelines issued last year, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health said evidence of later regret is scant, but that patients should be told about the possibility during psychological counseling.

Dutch research from several years ago found no evidence of regret in transgender adults who had comprehensive psychological evaluations in childhood before undergoing puberty blockers and hormone treatment.

Some studies suggest that rates of regret have declined over the years as patient selection and treatment methods have improved. In a review of 27 studies involving almost 8,000 teens and adults who had transgender surgeries, mostly in Europe, the U.S and Canada, 1% on average expressed regret. For some, regret was temporary, but a small number went on to have detransitioning or reversal surgeries, the 2021 review said.

Research suggests that comprehensive psychological counseling before starting treatment, along with family support, can reduce chances for regret and detransitioning.

WHAT IS DETRANSITIONING?

Detransitioning means stopping or reversing gender transition, which can include medical treatment or changes in appearance, or both.

Detransitioning does not always include regret. The updated transgender treatment guidelines note that some teens who detransition "do not regret initiating treatment" because they felt it helped them better understand their gender-related care needs.

Research and reports from individual doctors and clinics suggest that detransitioning is rare. The few studies that exist have too many limitations or weaknesses to draw firm conclusions, said Dr. Michael Irwig, director of transgender medicine at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.

He said it's difficult to quantify because patients who detransition often see new doctors, not the physicians who prescribed the hormones or performed the surgeries. Some patients may simply stop taking hormones.

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"My own personal experience is that it is quite uncommon," Irwig said. "I've taken care of over 350 gender-diverse patients and probably fewer than five have told me that they decided to detransition or changed their minds."

Recent increases in the number of people seeking transgender medical treatment could lead to more people detransitioning, Irwig noted in a commentary last year in the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*. That's partly because of a shortage of mental health specialists, meaning gender-questioning people may not receive adequate counseling, he said.

Dr. Oscar Manrique, a plastic surgeon at the University of Rochester Medical Center, has operated on hundreds of transgender people, most of them adults. He said he's never had a patient return seeking to detransition.

Some may not be satisfied with their new appearance, but that doesn't mean they regret the transition, he said. Most, he said, "are very happy with the outcomes surgically and socially."

Today in History: MARCH 6, Alamo falls after 13-day siege

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, March 6, the 65th day of 2023. There are 300 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 6, 1944, U.S. heavy bombers staged the first full-scale American raid on Berlin during World War II.

On this date:

In 1834, the city of York in Upper Canada was incorporated as Toronto.

In 1836, the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, fell as Mexican forces led by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna stormed the fortress after a 13-day siege; the battle claimed the lives of all the Texan defenders, nearly 200 strong, including William Travis, James Bowie and Davy Crockett.

In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, ruled 7-2 that Scott, a slave, was not an American citizen and therefore could not sue for his freedom in federal court.

In 1912, Oreo sandwich cookies were first introduced by the National Biscuit Co.

In 1933, a national bank holiday declared by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, aimed at calming panicked depositors, went into effect.

In 1964, heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay officially changed his name to Muhammad Ali.

In 1970, a bomb being built inside a Greenwich Village townhouse in New York by the radical Weathermen accidentally went off, destroying the house and killing three group members.

In 1973, Nobel Prize-winning author Pearl S. Buck, 80, died in Danby, Vermont.

In 1981, Walter Cronkite signed off for the last time as principal anchorman of "The CBS Evening News."

In 1998, the Army honored three Americans who'd risked their lives and turned their weapons on fellow soldiers to stop the slaughter of Vietnamese villagers at My Lai (mee ly) in 1968.

In 2002, Independent Counsel Robert Ray issued his final report in which he wrote that former President Bill Clinton could have been indicted and probably would have been convicted in the scandal involving former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

In 2016, former first lady Nancy Reagan died in Los Angeles at age 94.

Ten years ago: Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., a critic of the Obama administration's drone policy, launched an old-style filibuster to block Senate confirmation of John Brennan's nomination to be CIA director; Paul lasted nearly 13 hours before yielding the floor. Syria's accelerating humanitarian crisis hit a grim milestone as the number of U.N.-registered refugees topped 1 million, half of them children.

Five years ago: Top economic adviser Gary Cohn announced that he was leaving the White House after breaking with President Donald Trump on trade policy. Nashville Mayor Megan Barry, a one-time rising star in the Democratic Party, resigned after pleading guilty to cheating the city out of thousands of dollars to carry on an affair with her bodyguard. Schoolteachers in West Virginia announced an end to a nine-day

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walkout after state lawmakers approved a 5 percent pay raise.

One year ago: A second attempt to evacuate Ukrainians from the besieged city of Mariupol collapsed as Russian attacks made it impossible to create a humanitarian corridor, according to a Ukrainian official. In his first public remarks since resigning over multiple sexual harassment allegations, former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo assailed the "cancel culture" he says was behind politically motivated efforts to remove him. A massive brawl broke out among fans of clubs in Mexico's top-division soccer league, leaving 14 hospitalized, two of them in critical condition.

Today's birthdays: Former FBI and CIA director William Webster is 99. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan is 97. Dancer-actor Carmen de Lavallade is 92. Former Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova is 86. Former Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., is 84. Actor-writer Joanna Miles is 83. Actor Ben Murphy is 81. Opera singer Dame Kiri Te Kanawa is 79. Rock musician Hugh Grundy (The Zombies) is 78. Rock singer-musician David Gilmour (Pink Floyd) is 77. Actor Anna Maria Horsford is 76. Actor-director Rob Reiner is 76. Singer Kiki Dee is 76. TV consumer reporter John Stossel is 76. Composer-lyricist Stephen Schwartz is 75. Rock singer-musician Phil Alvin (The Blasters) is 70. Sports correspondent Armen Keteyian is 70. Actor Tom Arnold is 64. Actor D.L. Hughley is 60. Country songwriter Skip Ewing is 59. Actor Shuler Hensley is 56. Actor Connie Britton is 56. Actor Moira Kelly is 55. Actor Amy Pietz is 54. Rock musician Chris Broderick (Megadeth) is 53. Basketball Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal is 51. Country singer Trent Willmon is 50. Rapper Beanie Sigel is 49. Rapper Bubba Sparxxx is 46. Actor Shaun Evans is 43. Rock musician Chris Tomson (Vampire Weekend) is 39. Former MLB pitcher Jake Arrieta is 37. Actor Eli Marienthal is 37. Rapper/producer Tyler, the Creator is 32. Actor Dillon Freasier is 27. Actor Savannah Stehlin is 27. Actor Millicent Simmonds (Film: "Wonderstruck") is 20.