

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Groton Community Calendar

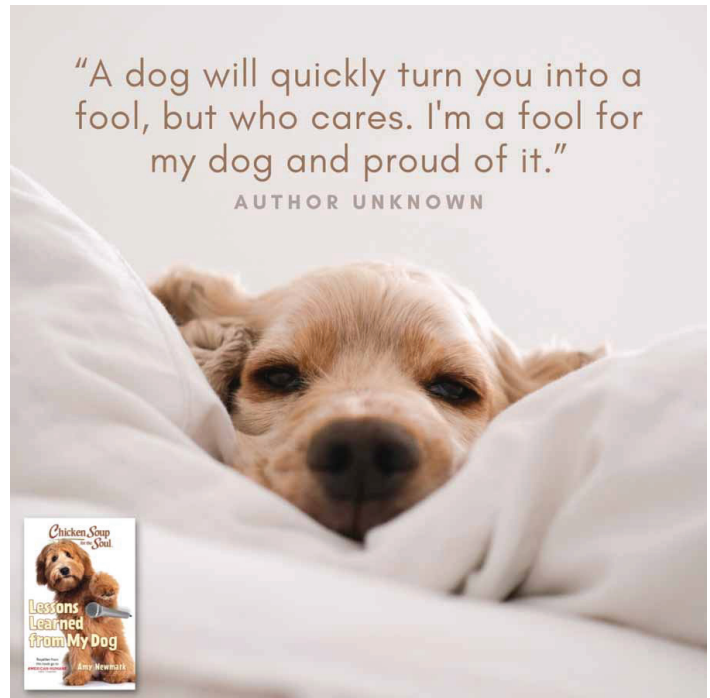
### Thursday, March 23

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, mixed vegetables, garlic toast, Mandarin orange salad.  
School Breakfast: Muffins.  
School Lunch: Hot dogs, baked beans.  
All State Band in Sioux Falls

### Friday, March 24

END OF THIRD QUARTER  
Senior Menu: Tuna noodle casserole, peas and carrots, fruit, breadstick.  
School Breakfast: Eggs and sausage.  
School Lunch: Mac and cheese, cooked carrots.  
All State Band in Sioux Falls

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



### Saturday, March 25

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.  
All State Band in Sioux Falls  
Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center

### Sunday, March 26

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.; Zion Lutheran worship, 11 a.m.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Milestone 4 yr olds and juniors; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.  
United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday school after children's sermon in worship.

## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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## The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

### World in Brief

- The Federal Reserve raised interest rates by a quarter percentage point to just under 5%, but the Fed's tone shifted away from "ongoing increases" toward "some additional firming" after the banking crisis.
- A potential tornado damaged several buildings in Montebello, a few miles outside of Downtown Los Angeles. Across southern and central California, thousands were under evacuation orders and without power due to flooding and landslides.
- Workers at over 100 Starbucks branches walked out on Wednesday, demanding the company's shareholders approve a resolution for a third-party assessment of the company's commitment to workers' rights.
- Jamaica is set to hold a referendum on King Charles III being removed as the country's head of state, despite the monarch gearing up for his coronation in May.
- An asteroid labeled by NASA as "potentially dangerous" is set to pass between Earth and the moon this weekend, with a 1 in 430 chance its orbit will put it on a collision course with Earth in early 2026.
- A Romanian court has extended the detention of controversial social media influencer Andrew Tate by 30 days for a fourth time.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia has been hemorrhaging armored vehicles in Ukraine and Moscow would risk increased casualties if it pulls Soviet-era tanks from storage, the Institute for the Study of War said.

- Denver police have found a body near the car of the suspect involved in the shooting of two faculty members at a high school on Wednesday. Authorities have identified the suspect as Austin Lyle, but the body is not confirmed to be his.

- Donald Trump blasted Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis after he said he has "what it takes to be president. Trump said DeSantis is "an average Governor" who earned "1.2 million less Votes in Florida than me." Read more on Trump's legal woes below.

### Groton Senior Citizens

Groton Seniors met February 13 with 11 members present. President had the flag pledge and minutes and treasures report were read and accepted. Beverly Sombke took pictures of each member for the Aberdeen Senior Center and meeting was adjourned. Cards were played and the winners of each game was as followed: Pinochle- Sarge Likness, Whist-Dick Donovan, Canasta- Pat Larson. Door prizes- Darlene Fischer, Eunice McColister and Elda Stange. Lunch was served by Eunice McColister.

Seniors met February 20th with 12 members attended. President led flag pledge. A short meeting was held for the players. Cards were played and the winners were Pinochle- Beverly Sombke, Whist- Dick Donovan, Canasta- Marilyn Thorson and Eunice McColister. Door prizes were Tony Goldade, Dick Donovan and Darlene Fischer. Lunch was served by Beverly Sombke .

Groton Seniors met February 27th for their potluck dinner and 12 members were present. President led the flag pledge and table prayer. The group received \$20 from Lee Raines books. Bingo was played after dinner. David Kliensassor won black out. Cards were played after Bingo. Door prizes went to David Kleinsassor, Ruby Donovan and Elda Stange. Lunch was celebrated with cake and ice cream for Tony Goldade's birthday. Cake was made by Beverly Sombke.

- Elda Stange

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## City to apply for grant for new baseball concession building

by Elizabeth Varin

Options for the baseball complex's concession stand, street resurfacing and an upcoming economic development meeting took the stage at the Groton City Council meeting Wednesday evening.

The council approved going to bid to resurface 62,000 square yards of roadway in the city.

The city will send the bid proposal request to six or seven construction companies, said Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich. Usually the city only gets two or three bids back.

Last year the city had about 82,000 square yards resurfaced, Heinrich said. It was not clear at Wednesday's meeting which streets will be resurfaced.

The council also discussed what to do with the old concession stand at the baseball fields.

The Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation hopes to replace the building with a slightly larger but more usable building after the last baseball game this summer. Funding for the project could come from a grant the city plans to apply for at the end of April.

At its March 7 meeting, the council asked for an idea on what it would cost to move the old concession stand to a new location. Milbank House Movers, Inc. sent an estimate to the city that includes \$9,000 to pick up, move and set down the building on blocks near the baseball fields, and \$5,500 for a return trip if the building needs to be moved to another location.

Council members discussed uses for the old building, including possible repurposing it for the Common Cents Community Thrift Store or as a building in the park.

"Some people don't think it would be good at the park," Mayor Scott Hanlon said. "We need to discuss this."

Councilwoman Shirley Wells asked if it would be large enough for the thrift store in town.

Hanlon said he had visited with the non-profit organization that runs the thrift store to see if it would work, and they said they didn't need more room.

Councilwoman Karyn Babcock added there isn't enough room on the lot the current thrift store, located at 209 North Main Street, sits on. And if the city moved the concession stand to a different location, the thrift store would have to pay rent, which isn't feasible right now.

Topper Tastad with Enrich Groton SoDak Inc. also told Babcock that the concession stand area of the building is close to what the thrift store currently has, she said.

"It sounds like it would take more to do the work and make it nice than to just build new," Babcock said.

Councilman Kevin Nehls said he has heard the Groton Clay Target League has been looking for land, and the building may make a good addition.

"It would be perfect," he said. "It would be a nice building for them, but I don't know if it's something they see in their future."

Mayor Hanlon added it would be nice for the trap team to have a range located within a few miles of town and around the highway. He asked, though, that the council keep their eyes open for options.

"I guess just keep talking you guys," he told the council.

The Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation plans to have project designs and projected costs for the con-



**Ben Smith was sworn in as the new Groton Police Officer by Mayor Scott Hanlon at the city council meeting held Wednesday.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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cession stand building available to the council before the next meeting.

A special council meeting will be scheduled for 9 a.m. Friday as representatives from the Governor's Office of Economic Development will be visiting Groton City Hall. Some council members are planning to visit with the state representatives, and it is not yet clear how many members will be there. If there are four council members, there would be a quorum and the city would have to hold a special meeting or ask some city council members to leave.

Some council members were not sure if they could make it, so a special meeting agenda will be posted just in case.

"If we don't have enough people as a quorum, we won't have a meeting," Hanlon said.

Councilwoman Babcock told the council they could pass along questions or concerns to Finance Officer Heinrich or herself.

Hanlon added the biggest issues he sees are housing and day care.

Members of the business community were also invited to speak with the Governor's Office of Economic Development official.

The council held both the twice-a-month council meeting and the annual equalization meeting Wednesday evening.

The equalization board reviewed 2023 property assessments, including one appeal submitted by Bruce Babcock.

Babcock's property at 311 North Third Street was set to increase from \$44,810 to \$57,100.

Babcock appealed as he wrote replacing the west exterior door and south sliding glass door does not justify a 27.43% increase in total assessed value. He countered with an almost 12% increase to \$50,000.

Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich said he received a call from the county's Equalization Office, and they agree with Bruce's recommendation.

"I guess if the county agrees with it, I'm OK with it," said Councilman Brian Bahr.

- New Groton police officer Ben Smith took his oath of office, which was given by Mayor Scott Hanlon.
- The council met a day later than usual because some council members needed to attend the South Dakota Municipal League District 6 Annual Meeting in Hecla, which was scheduled for Tuesday (and then was postponed due to the weather)
  - A quote for gravel was opened. The bid from Krueger Brothers Construction of Groton was for \$19.85 per yard. The council approved the bid.
  - The council approved hiring three more lifeguards: Hannah Sandness, Carly Gilbert and Mia Crank. Rebecca Padfield was also hired as a concessions stand employee. The four hires are in addition to 23 other swimming pool, ten baseball and two public works seasonal employees hired at the March 7 meeting.

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## 2023 National Honor Society Inductees

Back - left to right: Lane Tietz, Lexi Osterman, Colby Dunker, Logan Ringgenberg, Ethan Clark, Holden Sippel and Jackson Dinger.

Middle- left to right: Faith Flihs, Emma Schinkel, Anna Fjeldheim, Hannah Monson, Emily Clark and Lydia Meier.

Front- left to right: Cadence Feist, Camryn Kurtz, Claire Heinrich, Ashlyn Sperry and Ava Wienk. (Courtesy Photo)



## 2022 National Honor Society Members that performed the ceremony

Left to right: Andrew Marzahn, Ellie Weismantel, Cadance Tullis, Brooke Gengerke, Jacob Lewandowski, Aspen Johnson and Caleb Hanten. (Courtesy Photo)



Aspen Johnson leading the pledge welcoming the new members. (Courtesy Photo)



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Noem signs ban on 'evil foreign government' contracts, takes questions on ag land and trusts

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 22, 2023 3:28 PM

SIOUX FALLS — With a fighter jet in the background, Governor Kristi Noem conducted a bill-signing ceremony Wednesday in a military hangar where she celebrated efforts to mitigate the influence of what she called "evil foreign governments."

"I'll do everything in my power that I can to ensure that our people stay as free as possible," Noem said. "We have threats to that freedom on the horizon."

Later, under questioning from reporters, Noem acknowledged ways in which the state's approach to adversarial foreign powers is lacking or still under evaluation.

The ceremony was at the South Dakota Air National Guard's 114th Fighter Wing at Joe Foss Field. Noem signed a bill into law that prohibits purchasing agents for the state and local governments from contracting with companies owned or controlled by Russia, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba and China. The bill puts into law an executive order that Noem issued previously.

The governor said the new law is part of a broader effort. She referenced her executive order banning the Chinese TikTok app on state devices, a new law requiring foreign companies with agricultural land in South Dakota to disclose information to the state, and her failed legislation to create a board to vet foreign purchases of agricultural land.

In response to a South Dakota Searchlight question about her push for a vetting board, Noem said Wednesday, "The problem with the current state statute in regards to foreign-owned ag land is there is no reporting requirement and there is no enforcement mechanism, which is what we were trying to address with legislation."

Foreign-owned ag land

Actually, there is a reporting requirement in federal law and an enforcement mechanism in state law — details that have seemingly been overlooked in South Dakota's debate over foreign-owned ag land.

State laws passed in 1979 prohibit foreign people and governments from owning more than 160 acres of agricultural land, with exceptions for land that's inherited, land covered by treaties, and land held by foreigners who have residency in the United States.



**Governor Kristi Noem conducts a bill-signing ceremony in a military hangar at the South Dakota Air National Guard's 114th Fighter Wing at Joe Foss Field on Mar. 22, 2023.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

Those laws say the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources must monitor the reports of foreign ownership of ag land in South Dakota. The reports are produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as required by the federal Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act of 1978.

The state laws further require the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources to gather any indications of illegality revealed by the reports, and then to refer that information to the state attorney general for an investigation and potential legal action to force the forfeiture of any illegally owned land.

South Dakota Searchlight asked state officials on Feb. 23 whether they monitor the reports from the USDA, whether state officials refer any instances of non-compliance with the 160-acre rule to the attorney general, and whether the attorney general investigates and takes action against illegal land holdings. Representatives of the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Attorney General's Office acknowledged the questions and said they were seeking answers, but have not provided answers.

#### Foreign trusts

Another area of foreign influence in South Dakota is the state's trust industry.

The Pandora Papers, a leak of financial documents that made headlines beginning in 2021, revealed that South Dakota is a hub for wealthy individuals and families who want to establish trusts.

The documents showed that South Dakota's trust industry, which allows individuals to shield their wealth and avoid taxes, has attracted clients from around the world, including a Colombian money launderer, a sugar cane magnate from the Dominican Republic accused of human rights abuses, and Ecuadorian brothers guilty of embezzlement.

South Dakota Searchlight asked Noem what her administration and the Legislature are doing to ensure the state is not aiding criminal or corrupt foreigners in offshoring their assets into a South Dakota trust.

"A lot of the discussion around the release of those papers had to do with people's personal, financial information," Noem said. "We're continuing to always evaluate if there is something the state needs to do to take action, and that's something that I'll continue to make a priority as well."

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

## State Supreme Court hears Kevin Costner dispute, pandemic relief case

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 22, 2023 2:35 PM

The state Supreme Court examined disputes over sculptures commissioned by the actor Kevin Costner and pandemic benefits paid to a business owner as justices heard arguments in several cases Wednesday.

The court held its first of two days of oral arguments for its spring term on the South Dakota State University campus in Brookings.

The court will hear arguments in four more cases Thursday, and will release rulings later.

### Decades-long dispute between Costner & local artist

This is the second time Costner and South Dakota artist Peggy Detmers' dispute has appeared before the state Supreme Court — and this second appearance hinges on the Supreme Court's 2012 ruling.

Their argument dates back to the 1990s, when the "Dances with Wolves" actor bought property in Deadwood and planned to open The Dunbar casino, named after his character in the movie, which was filmed in South Dakota. He commissioned Detmers to sculpt a massive piece of work for The Dunbar. Detmers spent several years working solely on the sculptures without taking on other commissions.

The sculptures include life-size Lakota hunters on horseback chasing down over a dozen buffalo — some of which appear to freefall over a cliff at the site. The work is now displayed outdoors at the Black Hills tour-



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ist attraction Tatanka, because The Dunbar was never built. Tatanka: Story of the Bison is a 35-acre property featuring the sculptures and a visitor center filled with a museum of the history of Lakota people and bison.

In the first Supreme Court ruling, the court determined that Costner did not break his agreement with Detmers when he placed the sculptures at Tatanka, since they were being publicly displayed in the same location that The Dunbar had been planned, and determined that Costner was not required to sell the sculptures.

Detmers' lawyer, Andrew Damgaard, on Wednesday argued that since the Tatanka property has been listed for sale since the court's first ruling, Costner has violated the prior agreement between the two to "permanently" display the sculptures at Tatanka. The property is listed for sale at \$7 million.

A circuit court ruled in favor of Costner earlier, saying the issue was already interpreted by the Supreme Court and that Costner "fully performed and owed Detmers no continuing duty because she had no continuing rights regarding the location of the sculptures."

But Damgaard said there are two contracts — including an implied or verbal contract. Selling the property and moving the sculptures from their "permanent" location would be a breach of the implied contract, Damgaard said, citing a phone call from Costner in 2002 saying that the sculptures are intended to remain at Tatanka "for all time."

Detmers is fighting to get her copyright back for the sculptures with royalty rights and the ability to display the sculptures when the property is sold, Damgaard said.

Part of the agreement between Detmers and Costner was that if the sculptures aren't "agreeably displayed," then Costner would sell the sculptures, Damgaard said. Detmers would get her copyright back with the sale and if any profit was made, the two would split the money evenly.

One of Costner's lawyers, Stacy Hegge, pointed out to the court that Costner invested \$6 million into the property. She added that Costner "fully performed" and satisfied the provisions in the first contract and should be free of other obligations.

"She will not agree to any alternative placement," Hegge told the justices.

## State demands small business owner pay back \$14K in pandemic relief

Another case heard by the state Supreme Court on Wednesday involves Black Hills-based White Tail Ridge Bed and Breakfast and the pandemic relief benefits the owners received.

The bed and breakfast, now permanently closed, was owned by Darcy Bracken and her husband. Guests canceled reservations and stopped booking rooms during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and May 2020, her lawyer Eric Schulte told justices.

The bed and breakfast stayed open but the business was devastated, argued Schulte, who said the busi-



**South Dakota Supreme Court Justice Janine Kern speaks during oral arguments March 22, 2023, in Brookings. Also pictured are Justice Scott Myren, left, and Chief Justice Steven Jensen.**

(Dave Bordewyk/South Dakota Newspaper Association)

ness' profits were Bracken's primary source of income.

Bracken applied for federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance benefits, saying she became unemployed in March 2020 because of the pandemic and the halt in business.

The South Dakota Department of Labor awarded over \$14,000 in funds to Bracken from the March 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act.

But a July 2021 review by the department found Bracken was not eligible for the benefits and that she needed to repay them because "she was not considered unemployed."

Bracken appealed to the Supreme Court because an administrative law judge and a circuit court judge determined Bracken was ineligible. Those judges ruled that the business suffered "indirect economic consequences of the pandemic" rather than "direct consequences."

"There is no dispute there was a loss of business," Schulte said. "We believe the CARES Act specifically allows for her to apply and it was properly applied."

Schulte argued that an "incorrect legal standard" was applied in the lower court and that it was "common sense" that the pandemic had a direct impact on Bracken's "dried up" business.

"To come back several months later after the state approved this, saying you have to pay this all back now ... we think is manifestly unfair," Schulte said.

Lawyer Seth Lopour, representing the state, argued that the department correctly applied the CARES Act when it tried to recover the money, and that there is a lack of evidence pertaining to the bed and breakfast's decline in business.

He added that the state reserves the right to "claw back funds" if an error is discovered.

"This is not a stimulus check," Lopour said. "Because she affirmatively applied for benefits, she's required to make an evidentiary showing."

Schulte emphasized in his rebuttal there is evidence in the record showing how the pandemic impacted Bracken's business.

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



**Tatanka: Story of the Bison is located near Deadwood and owned by actor Kevin Costner. Costner originally planned to build a casino and resort at the site.** (Courtesy of South Dakota Department of Tourism)

## Priorities for rail safety bill debated in U.S. Senate hearing with Norfolk Southern CEO

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 22, 2023 5:59 PM

Members of a U.S. Senate committee on Wednesday previewed what they would push for in bipartisan rail safety legislation likely to progress through Congress in the aftermath of the East Palestine, Ohio, derailment.

Democrats and Republicans on the U.S. Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee hinted they wanted to strengthen requirements about reporting hazardous cargo, communicating in real time with train operators about potential problems and allowing more time for safety inspections.

A few Democrats on the panel also criticized railroads for an overemphasis on profits and stock buybacks, saying money should instead be spent on workers who could improve safety.

Though there is no evidence anyone broke existing regulations to cause the Feb. 3 Norfolk Southern derailment that led to a chemical fire and release of hazardous materials in eastern Ohio, the wreck could have been avoided if certain safeguards had been in place, several senators and experts said Wednesday.

Voluntary standards, like Norfolk Southern's use of an app to internally communicate possible rail faults, have proven insufficient, U.S. Sen. J.D. Vance, an Ohio Republican, said.

"If the app was good enough, then why did it fail in East Palestine?" Vance said. "If the app provided proper notification, then why did firefighters in my state seven weeks ago go fight a chemical fire without knowing what was on it?"

Misti Allison, a resident of East Palestine, told the panel about the lasting effects the wreck has had on the village of 4,700. The derailment left lingering questions about the level of toxic chemicals still in the area, tanking home values and damage to residents' mental health, she said.

"My 7-year-old has asked me if he is going to die from living in his own home," she said. "What do I tell him?"

Allison implored the committee "to support commonsense safety regulation, so this doesn't happen again."

### 'Bipartisan interest' in rail safety overhaul

Vance and Ohio's senior U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, a Democrat, authored a bill to update rail safety standards that could be the template for a bipartisan overhaul this year.

Ranking Republican Ted Cruz of Texas said he supported several elements of the bill, but objected to parts that he said gave too much authority to the U.S. Transportation Department.

Cruz, who sought the Republican nomination for president in 2016, spent part of the hearing again criticizing the response to the derailment by Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who ran for the Democratic nomination in 2020.

Still, Cruz was optimistic about a rail safety bill advancing.

"I think there is bipartisan interest in moving rail safety legislation," he said. "I think we're going to be successful in doing that."

### Agreement on communication, monitoring, inspections

Senators voiced agreement on certain problems in rail safety.

Officials in East Palestine should have been notified in advance that a train carrying hazardous material was headed toward them, senators and hearing witnesses said Wednesday. And first responders should have known they were battling a chemical fire and been better prepared for the task with improved training and equipment, they said.

"People deserve to know what chemicals are moving through their communities and how to stay safe in an emergency," National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy said. "That includes responders, who risk their lives for each of us every single day. They deserve to be prepared."

That means they should have access to real-time information and proper communications and planning tools, she said.

Brown said he was working to create a fund to provide training for firefighters on how to manage hazard-

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ous material fires. Firefighters who responded to the East Palestine blaze were almost entirely volunteers, he said.

That fund would be paid for by the railroads and chemical companies, he said.

Cruz also highlighted problems with the way railroads monitor train temperatures.

The Norfolk Southern equipment caught a more than 60-degree temperature increase over 10 miles in the minutes before the train reached East Palestine, Cruz said, asking Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw why the jump in temperature "did not trigger action."

The higher temperature was still lower than "the alarm threshold," Shaw said. Norfolk Southern practice was to stop trains when they reach 200 degrees above ambient temperature, regardless of the trend, he said.

The train, while it had gone from 38 degrees above ambient temperature to 103 degrees above, did not reach that threshold, Shaw said.

Clyde Whitaker, the Ohio legislative director of the union Sheet Metal Air Rail Transportation – Transportation Division, said more attention should be paid to how fast a train is heating.

"Once it starts trending, we need to go and check that out," Whitaker told the panel.

Committee Chair Maria Cantwell, a Washington Democrat, and Vance criticized a Norfolk Southern policy — listed in a Norfolk Southern document Cantwell said was provided to the committee — to spend about 30 seconds on a safety inspection for each side of a train car.

Shaw said there was no such time limit, but Cantwell said the document showed otherwise.

That was not enough time to conduct an adequate investigation, Whitaker said.

## **Railroad chief offers another apology**

As he had at another Senate hearing this month, Shaw again apologized to the East Palestine area and pledged "to make this right." The railroad was continuing cleanup efforts and was providing hotel rooms and supplies to area residents, he said.

Norfolk Southern has spent \$24 million since the derailment to support the community, he said. And the railroad is in the planning stages of developing a long-term medical compensation fund, property value assurance program and a water testing program, he said.

But he declined to fully endorse the Brown-Vance rail safety bill, saying he supported parts, but not all, of it.

Pressed by Minnesota Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar to say which parts he did not support, Shaw began to say what he did agree with. Klobuchar said she would seek a more complete answer in writing.

Appearing remotely from the East Palestine High School library, Republican Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, thanked the bill sponsors and called for swift congressional action.

He also demanded Norfolk Southern make the community whole.

"Norfolk Southern has an obligation to restore this community," DeWine said. "It was their training, their tracks, their accident. They're responsible for this tragedy ... Norfolk Southern must do everything in its power to put everything back as it was in East Palestine."

## **Workforce and profits**

The Brown-Vance bill would require two-worker crews on certain trains, which would force railroads to hire workers after deep labor cuts in recent years. The industry cut its workforce by 22% between 2017 and 2021, Cantwell said.

The industry has also cut its training program, Whitaker said. When he started as a railroad worker in 2000, he had 26 weeks of training. Now, the standard is six weeks, he said.

"We're hauling 200-plus-car trains of hazardous materials," he said. "That's not right. You're putting too much pressure on employees right now with inadequate training."

Whitaker also said he supported a rule to mandate at least two workers were on each train. That rule has been opposed by the rail industry.

A few Democrats on the panel criticized the rail industry for offering stock buybacks instead of investing in safety.

Sen. Peter Welch of Vermont pressed Shaw to suspend stock buybacks until the railroads finished their cleanup work in East Palestine.

Shaw declined, saying "stock buybacks never come at the expense of safety." The railroad spends about \$1 billion per year on safety programs, he said.

Schumer renews call for NTSB probe

In a floor speech Wednesday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer renewed his request for an NTSB investigation into the safety culture of all major U.S. railroads and said he hoped Homendy would commit to such an investigation during the hearing.

No senator directly asked Homendy about that possibility, and she did not commit to an industry-wide investigation.

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

## Moderna plan to hike COVID vaccine price to \$130 a dose rebuked at U.S. Senate hearing

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 22, 2023 4:21 PM

WASHINGTON — The CEO of Moderna on Wednesday defended the company's decision to drastically increase the price of its COVID-19 vaccine later this year, arguing that an expected drop in demand, changes to its distribution process and the overall benefit of the vaccine warrant the higher cost.

That decision was met with bipartisan condemnation from U.S. senators on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Many criticized the decision before noting the federal government invested nearly \$2 billion in Moderna's development of the vaccine as well as providing a collaboration with the National Institutes of Health.

CEO Stéphane Bancel pledged during the hearing that even with the price increasing from less than \$30 to about \$130 a dose, Moderna would develop a system to provide uninsured or underinsured Americans with the COVID-19 vaccine and boosters at no cost.

Bancel, however, was unable to answer numerous questions from U.S. lawmakers about how the process would work in practice, indicating the company was still working out the broad parameters as well as the details.

Bancel annoyed several members on the panel when he declined to say directly if Moderna would negotiate the new price with the federal government to reduce the cost to taxpayers for COVID-19 vaccines provided through Medicare, Medicaid, or the Veterans Affairs health care system.

Bancel also declined to say if people in the United States would pay less for the vaccine than those in other countries, whose governments didn't invest in its development.

"The price will depend on the value in each country," Bancel said. "The cost of health care is different in each country."

### Baldwin questions motives

Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin questioned if Moderna's decision to increase the price of its COVID-19 vaccine was linked to Bancel receiving a recent performance review in which the board said he "underperformed the company's target for sales income generated by the COVID-19 vaccine."

Baldwin said the decision to increase the price of the vaccine "appears tied to the impact of your personal performance assessment on your bonus and how much you would stand to gain personally from increasing the price of the COVID vaccine."

Bancel contended the two were not linked, saying the price of the vaccine is determined by the value of the product and how much money can be saved in the long term through reduced hospital stays. He noted the cost of a high-dose flu vaccine for the elderly costs about \$90 and the pneumonia vaccine costs about \$240.

Baldwin also asked about Moderna's stock buybacks, which totaled \$3.3 billion in 2022 and more than

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\$800 million in 2021.

"You are one of the, if not the, largest shareholders in Moderna," Baldwin told Bancel. "Yet, despite spending significantly to buy back stock over the last two years, Moderna's share price has actually declined. If you had not spent nearly \$5 billion on buybacks when your stock was at the highest price it's ever been, do you think you would be under less pressure to raise the price of COVID vaccine now?"

Bancel declined any connection, saying the vaccine's "price is not linked to the company's performance. The price is linked to the value of the product, to the patient and to the impact on the patient. That's how we set the price."

Bancel said Moderna believes the price it charged the U.S. government for the COVID-19 vaccine throughout the last couple of years represents a discount, in part because the company wanted to return the investment it got from the U.S. government to develop the vaccine, and in part because the federal government was purchasing in bulk.

## **Braun: 'preposterous' increase**

Indiana Republican Sen. Mike Braun told Bancel that Moderna's price increase "is indicative of a much bigger problem facing health care" and expressed frustration that some facets of the health care industry operate like an unregulated utility by not embracing competition or transparency.

Braun challenged Bancel for saying that one of the reasons the price is going up is to account for Moderna moving from the pandemic model, where it distributed the vaccine to the U.S. government through three Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warehouses, to a regular distribution process where it will need to get the vaccine to thousands of locations throughout the country.

"A 400% price increase is preposterous, especially when you've been given all this government largess," Braun said.

Bancel testified Moderna is trying to figure out how it could best set up the new distribution network, noting the company has never had a commercial product.

## **Taxpayer investment**

Christopher Morten, associate clinical professor of law at Columbia Law School, said during his testimony on a second panel that Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine costs just \$3 to make. He also criticized the price increase decision, saying Moderna benefited significantly from U.S. taxpayer investment.

"Mr. Bancel claims the value of these vaccines justifies Moderna's proposed price increase. But his testimony ignored a key question — who created that value?" Morten said. "It was the U.S. government, the American taxpayer that spent billions. It was government scientists that toiled alongside Moderna's."

Moderna wasn't the primary inventor of the three key scientific features of the vaccine, with the federal government providing the company with the specific mRNA sequence used in the vaccine, according to Morten.

The U.S. government also designed and ran the early clinical trials and provided Moderna with money and resources to expand its manufacturing, he said.

"To be clear, Moderna's scientists and engineers made many contributions of their own, as did many academic scientists. These people and their work deserve credit and celebration too," Morten said. "But Moderna cannot claim the vaccine's value for itself."

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

## U.S. Senate committee postpones vote on Denver airport chief's nomination to lead FAA

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 22, 2023 2:45 PM

The U.S. Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee postponed a scheduled vote Wednesday on Denver International Airport CEO Phil Washington's nomination to lead the Federal Aviation Administration.

The panel's chairwoman, Washington Democrat Maria Cantwell, said the vote would be held at an unspecified future date and offered few details about why it was pushed. The Denver airport chief has been a target of Republican criticism for months, delaying his confirmation and leaving an acting administrator in charge of the FAA for nearly a year.

"We will not be considering the nomination of Phil Washington," Cantwell said. "We are moving that to a future date, pending information that members have been seeking."

The committee's ranking Republican, Ted Cruz of Texas, has been a consistent critic of Washington and he cheered the postponement Wednesday.

"I think every member of this committee knows that Mr. Washington is not qualified for the position for which he is nominated," Cruz said. "Mr. Washington has never flown a plane. He was never a military pilot. He was never a commercial pilot. He's never worked at an airline. He's never worked at the FAA. He's never worked as an air traffic controller."

Cruz has led a Republican campaign against Washington, objecting to his relative lack of experience in aviation, ties to a Los Angeles corruption scandal and military experience.

Washington has led the third-busiest airport in the world, according to the industry group Airports Council International, since 2021, but before that worked for two decades in public transit.

At his confirmation hearing, Washington said his roles as head of the Denver and Los Angeles transit agencies were relevant experience that demonstrated his management and leadership skills. Previous FAA administrators — nominated by recent presidents of both parties — have also lacked major aviation experience.

Republicans have also noted Washington was named in a search warrant related to an ongoing corruption investigation in Los Angeles County. He is not the target of the investigation and has denied wrongdoing.

Washington also served 24 years in the U.S. Army, retiring as a command sergeant major in 2000. Cruz has said that experience disqualifies him from taking an FAA position that is required by statute to be held by a civilian.

The top lawyer at the U.S. Transportation Department said this month that Washington had been retired for 23 years and should be considered a civilian.

Cruz has repeatedly said that Washington does not have sufficient support to be confirmed. Democrats and independents who caucus with Democrats hold a slim 51-49 majority in the Senate and a 14-13 edge on the committee.

While Democrats generally gave Washington a positive reception during his confirmation hearing earlier this month, not all Democrats on the panel have said they will vote for him.

Harry Child, a spokesman for Montana Democrat Jon Tester, a moderate up for reelection in an increasingly Republican state, said Wednesday that Tester is still considering the nomination but did not ask for the committee vote to be delayed.

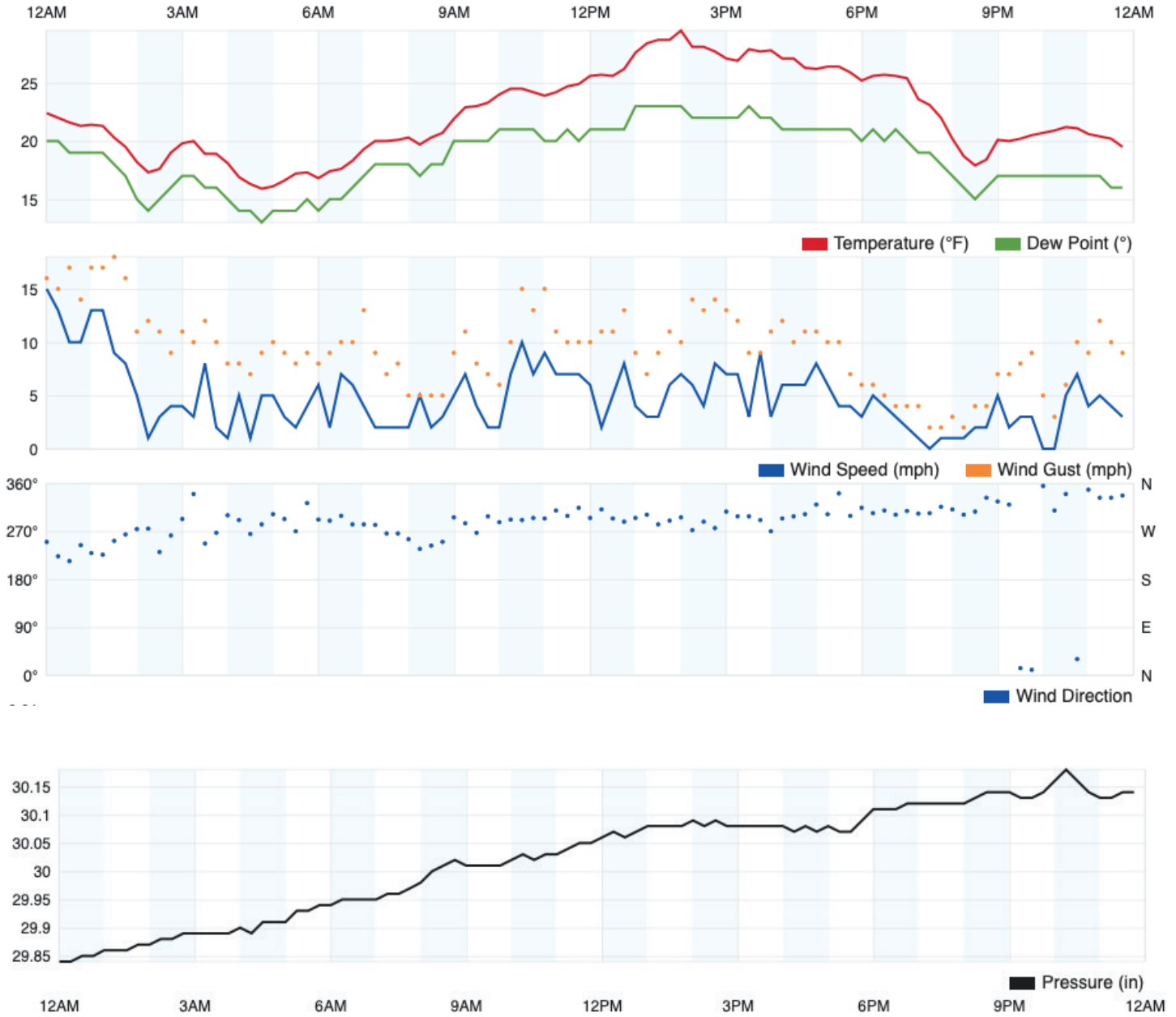
Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent who caucuses with Democrats, has also not said how she will vote on the nomination. Sinema's office did not respond to a message Wednesday, but typically her aides do not preview the senator's positions on upcoming votes.

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

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

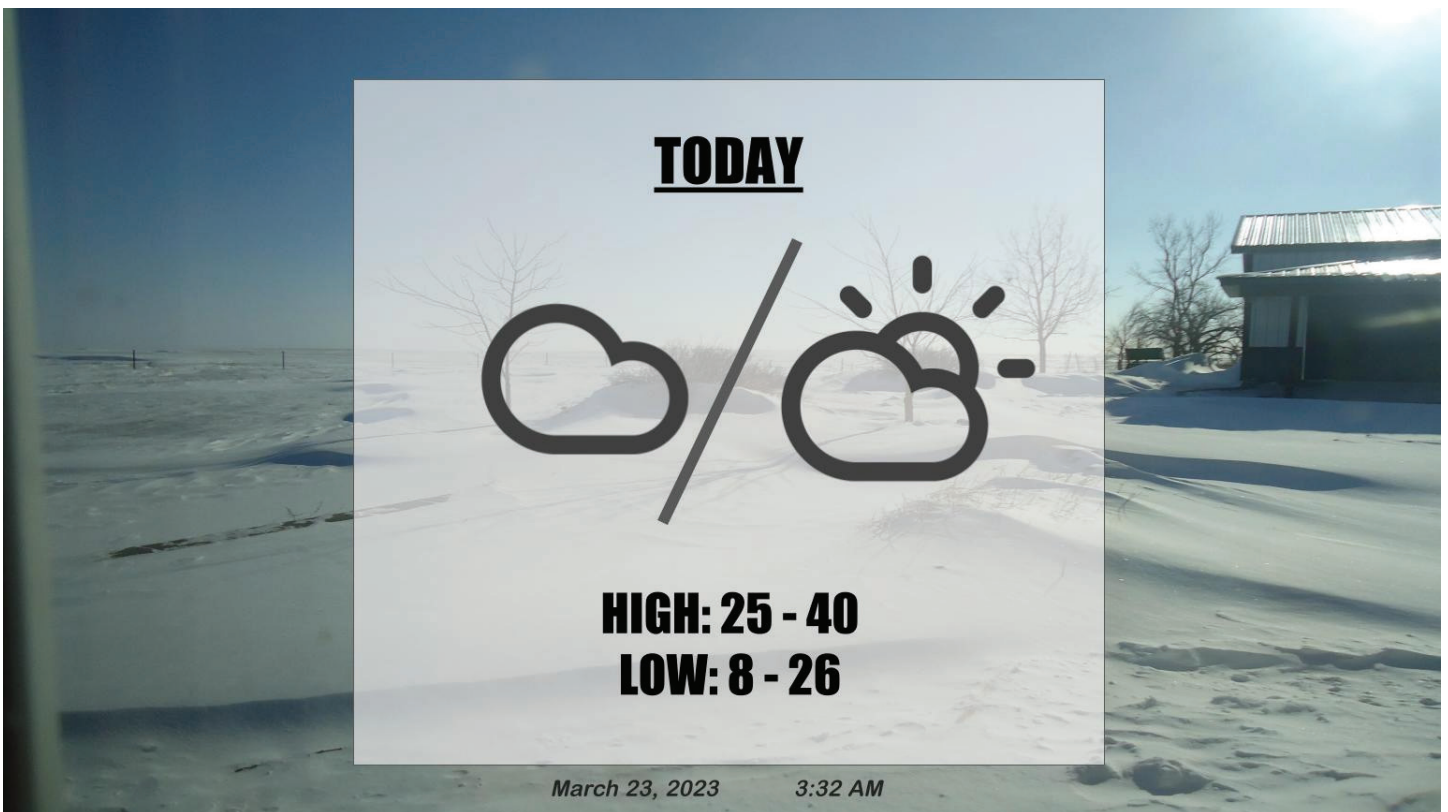





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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
						
Patchy Fog then Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny
High: 26 °F	Low: 9 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 21 °F	High: 31 °F	Low: 8 °F	High: 26 °F



**TODAY**



**HIGH: 25 - 40**  
**LOW: 8 - 26**

March 23, 2023 3:32 AM

Some northern counties could have patchy fog this morning. Otherwise, cloudy in central SD and some clearing in eastern SD today with high temperatures increasing from east to west.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 30 °F at 1:59 PM

Low Temp: 16 °F at 4:37 AM

Wind: 18 mph at 1:05 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 21 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 81 in 1963

Record Low: -21 in 1899

Average High: 46

Average Low: 23

Average Precip in March.: 0.61

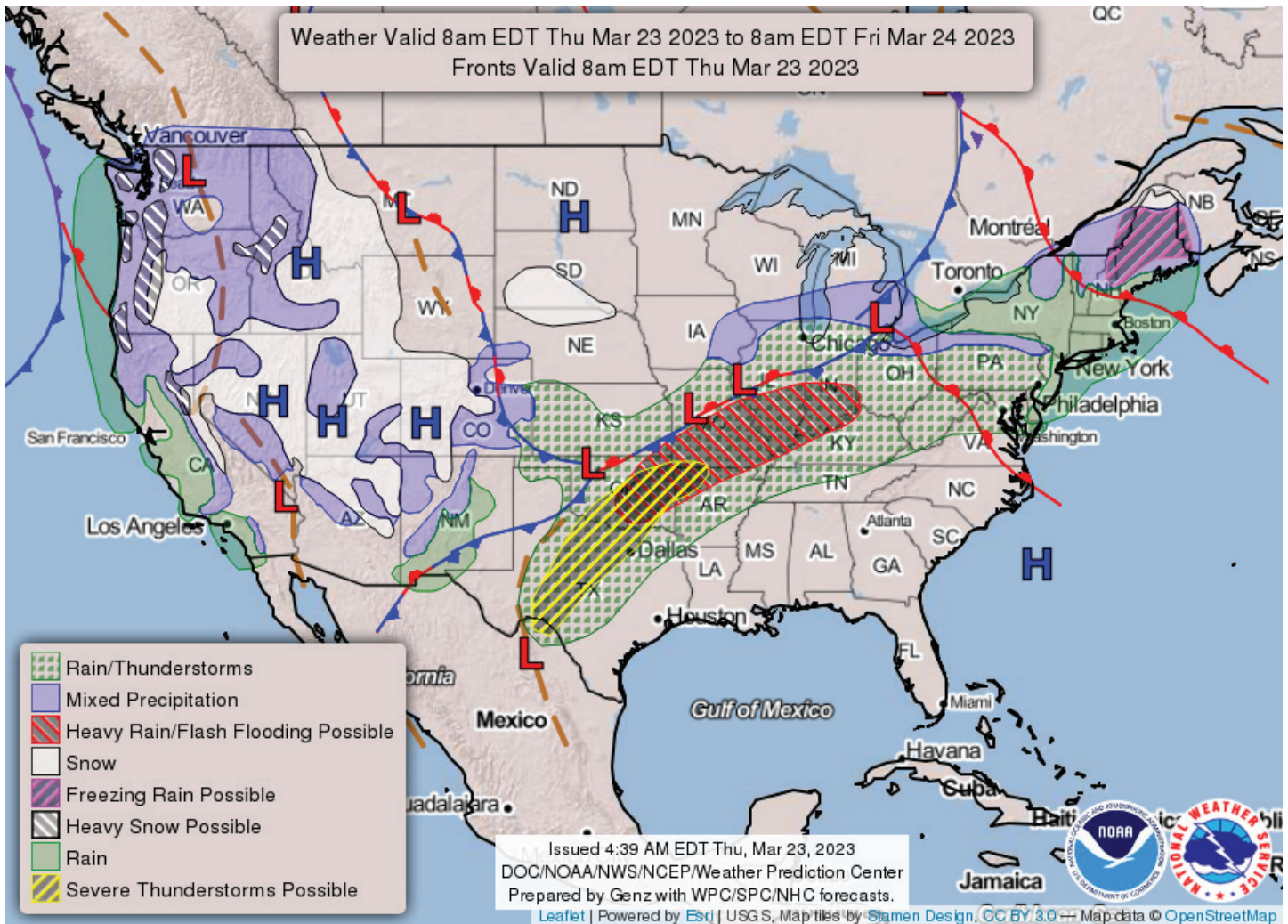
Precip to date in March.: 1.60

Average Precip to date: 1.78

Precip Year to Date: 3.18

Sunset Tonight: 7:49:52 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:26:07 AM



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## Today in Weather History

March 23, 1987: Strong winds and heavy snow produced blizzard conditions across South Dakota March 23rd through the 25th. Snow amounts ranged from 6 to 19 inches. Snow totals included 19" at Winner (in Tripp County), 15" at Murdo (in Jones County), and 12" at Woonsocket (in Sanborn County) and Platte (in Charles Mix County). The wind piled the snow into drifts up to 10 feet deep. The heavy, wet snow broke power lines in several counties in the south-central and east-central parts of the state knocking out power for up to a few days.

March 23, 2011: A low-pressure system brought a variety of precipitation to central and eastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota on March 22nd and 23rd. Areas experienced rain, hail, sleet, snow and in some cases thundersnow.

1907: Today was the warmest March day ever recorded in Washington, DC with a maximum temperature of 93 degrees. Washington DC has seen three, 90 degrees days in March, all of which occurred in 1907.

1913: A significant tornado outbreak occurred in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa on this day. Seven estimated F2 or stronger tornadoes killed 168 people.

1916 - Pocatello, ID, received a record 14.6 inches of snow in 24 hours. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A blizzard raged across western Kansas, and the panhandle of Texas and Oklahoma. Pampa TX received 21 inches of snow, and winds gusted to 78 mph at Dodge City KS Altus OK. Governor Hayden declared forty-six counties in western Kansas a disaster area. In southwest Kansas, the storm was described as the worst in thirty years. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms developing along a strong cold front spawned tornadoes near Roberts ID and Bridger MT. Strong and gusty winds prevailed in the western U.S. Wind gusts in the southwest part of Reno NV reached 89 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Charlotte and Wilmington, NC, reported rainfall records for the date as showers and thunderstorms prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Freezing rain glazed parts of North Carolina and southern Virginia. Gale force winds produced a heavy surf along the coast of North Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - An upper level storm system produced heavy snow in the Lower Missouri Valley. Snowfall totals ranged up to nine inches at Kansas City MO, with eight inches reported at Falls City NE, Columbia MO and Saint Louis MO. Thunderstorms produced heavy snow in the Kansas City area during the evening rush hour. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2007 - A trailer is thrown through a bowling alley as a tornado moves through Clovis, NM. About 100 homes and businesses are destroyed, at least three schools are damaged and telephone poles are snapped. Thirteen tornadoes struck a dozen communities along the New Mexico/Texas border. Two people were critically injured.

2011 - A series of tornados are spawned from severe thunderstorms in Pennsylvania. In Hempfield Township dozens of homes and a high school auditorium where students are rehearsing a play are severely damaged. People and caused extensive damage to the area on Easter Sunday.

2007: A tornado obliterates a section of the town Clovis in eastern New Mexico, flattening about 100 homes and businesses, snapping telephone poles and even heaving a trailer through a bowling alley. At least three schools are damaged. The tornado is one of thirteen that strike a dozen communities along the New Mexico - Texas border, leaving two people critically injured.

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### BEGINNING AT THE END

One day a grief-stricken man prayed, "Dear Lord, I'm at the end of all my resources. I have nothing left." "My child," answered the Lord, "when you come to the end of your resources, you are just at the beginning of mine."

One of God's great gifts is allowing us to come to the place of hopelessness and helplessness. When we realize that we have nothing left to cling to, and no one else to depend on, we will realize how much we need the Lord. There are many times in our lives when we are convinced that we are brave or strong, energetic or invincible, only to have the "rug pulled out from under us." We are left feeling alone or abandoned, deserted or defeated.

It has been said that it is easier for someone to stand adversity with God than prosperity without Him. We learn in times of trouble and trials that "my grace is sufficient" or "Lo, I am with you always." In times of plenty, we may be forced to realize that "life does not consist in the abundance of things." And, actually, that may be what is best for us at that time.

Eventually, we as Christians may come to the place where we realize that "all things" are possible with and through Christ. But rarely do we realize this until we get to the other side of "whatever" may have brought us to the "end of our resources." Thank God for our "ends."

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for those times in life when we exhaust our resources and know that we need Yours to grow in Your grace and stand in Your strength. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God." Mark 10:27



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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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.21.23

1 21 25 27 40 11

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$302,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 7  
DRAW: Mins 17 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

14 18 21 50 51 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$39,880,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 7  
DRAW: Mins 17 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

7 19 30 33 44 18

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 14 Hrs 37 Mins 18  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

4 9 12 22 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 7  
DRAW: Mins 18 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

3 32 58 59 61 15

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 6  
DRAW: Mins 17 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.22.23

27 28 37 50 57 5

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$112,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 6  
DRAW: Mins 17 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Madison Daily Leader. March 19, 2023.

Editorial: Hats off to DSU women's basketball

The Dakota State University women's basketball team has capped off perhaps the best season in their storied history.

The Trojans set a school record for most victories in a season (29) and advanced to the semifinals of the NAIA national basketball tournament, farther than any other team in DSU's history. In the tournament, the Trojans eliminated teams that had 20-game, 15-game and 23-game winning streaks.

This is from a team that started the season 0-3 as it adjusted to losing valuable players from the year before, including conference Player of the Year Jessi Giles. But head coach David Moe kept calm the whole time. We remember him remarking last summer that the team would go through an adjustment period, then be in good shape. The team delivered, winning 29 of their next 32 games.

The DSU women's basketball team has a tremendous history, winning titles in three different conferences and qualifying for the national tournament multiple times. Before Moe, almost all of the coaching victories belonged to Judy Dittman, recently retired from DSU's administration, and Jeff Dittman, DSU's current athletic director.

From a fan's standpoint, the 2022-23 Trojans team was exciting to watch: shooting well, pushing the tempo, rebounding well and avoiding turnovers.

Beyond basketball, the players on this year's team are stellar. We've found them to be polite and pleasant when meeting them around Madison and gracious with fans after both losses and victories. And we understand they do well in the classroom, too. The two players from DSU on the All-Tournament national team are computer science major Savannah Walsdorf and biology major Elsie Aslesen.

We tip our hats to the DSU women's coaches, players and staff, not only for this year's on-court success but for the all-around excellence of the women's basketball program.

END

### Denver high school shooting suspect dead, coroner confirms

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A body found in the Colorado woods near an abandoned car was that of a 17-year-old student accused of wounding two administrators in a shooting at his Denver high school, a coroner's office said.

Park County Sheriff Tom McGraw said the body was discovered Wednesday not far from the student's car in a remote mountain area about 50 miles (80 kilometers) southwest of Denver, near the small town of Bailey, in Park County. The town had been ordered to shelter in place while officers from a number of agencies including the FBI combed the forest.

Earlier in the day, Denver police identified the suspect as Austin Lyle. The Park County coroner's office confirmed in a Facebook post that the body was that of Lyle's. Cause of death wasn't released, pending the completion of an autopsy.

The shooting occurred at East High School in Denver, not far from downtown, while two administrators searched Lyle for weapons, a daily requirement because of the boy's behavioral issues, authorities said. Lyle fled after the shooting.

It occurred at a school shaken by frequent lockdowns and violence, including the recent killing outside the school of a classmate that prompted East High School students to march on the Colorado Capitol earlier this month. Parents who converged on the 2,500-student campus on Wednesday voiced frustration that officials had not done enough to protect their children.



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"I am sick of it," said Jesse Haase, who planned to talk with her daughter about taking her out of classes for the rest of the school year.

Amid the flurry of criticism over lax security, Denver school officials said after the shooting that they would once again put armed officers into the city's public high schools.

There were no school resource officers on campus at the time of Wednesday's shooting, said Denver Police Chief Ron Thomas.

The shooting happened just before 10 a.m. in an office area as Lyle was undergoing a search as part of a "safety plan" that required him to be patted down daily, officials said.

The gun used in the shooting was not immediately recovered, Thomas said.

One of the wounded administrators was released from the hospital Wednesday afternoon and the second was in serious condition, said Heather Burke, a spokesperson for Denver Health hospital.

Hundreds of students on March 3 skipped class and marched in support of stricter gun laws following the death of Luis Garcia, 16, who was shot while sitting in a car near East High School.

In June 2020, amid a summer of protests over racial injustice following the murder of George Floyd, Denver Public Schools became one of the districts around the US that decided to phase out its use of police officers in school buildings. That push was fueled by criticism that school resource officers disproportionately arrested Black students, sweeping them into the criminal justice system.

After Wednesday's shooting, two armed officers will be posted at East High School through the end of the school year, and other city high schools also will each get an officer, said Denver Public Schools Superintendent Alex Marrero.

In a Wednesday letter to the city's Board of Education, Marrero said his decision violated district's policies but added he "can no longer stand on the sidelines."

"I am the leader of this district who is charged with keeping our scholars and staff safe every day," he wrote. The school board said it supported the decision.

Gun violence at schools has become increasingly common in the U.S. with more than 1,300 shooting incidents recorded between 2000 and June 2022, according to government researchers. Those shootings killed 377 people and wounded 1,025, according to a database maintained by the researchers.

Students from East High School had been scheduled to testify Wednesday afternoon before the Colorado Legislature on gun safety bills.

"This is the reality of being young in America: sitting through a shooting and waiting for information just hours before you're scheduled to testify in support of gun safety bills," said Gracie Taub, a 16-year-old East High School sophomore and volunteer with Students Demand Action in Colorado.

Lyle transferred to East High School after being disciplined and removed from a high school in nearby Aurora last school year because of unspecified violations of school policies, said Cherry Creek School District spokesperson Lauren Snell.

Marrero said safety plans for students are enacted in response to "past educational and also behavioral experiences," adding that it's a common practice throughout Colorado's public schools. Officials did not give further details on why Lyle was searched daily.

But daily pat downs are rare, said Franci Crepeau-Hobson, a University of Colorado Denver professor specializing in school violence prevention.

"Clearly they were concerned," said Crepeau-Hobson. "I can't imagine they'd do that if there wasn't a history of the kid carrying a weapon."

Safety plans often follow threatening or suicidal behavior from a student, said Christine Harms with the Colorado School Safety Resource Center.

In response to the shooting, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre repeated President Joe Biden's calls for stricter gun laws, including bans on assault-style weapons and high-capacity magazines, and for Congress to "do something" on gun control.

Wednesday was also the second anniversary of 10 people being shot and killed at a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado.

Associated Press reporters Sarah Brumfield in Silver Spring, Maryland, and Matthew Brown in Billings, Montana, contributed to this report.

Bedayn is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

## **A look at the uranium-based ammo the UK will send to Ukraine**

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russia threatened to escalate attacks in Ukraine after the British government announced it would provide a type of munition to Ukraine that Moscow falsely claims has nuclear components. The British defense ministry on Monday confirmed it would provide Ukraine with armor-piercing rounds containing depleted uranium.

Such rounds were developed by the U.S. during the Cold War to destroy Soviet tanks, including the same T-72 tanks that Ukraine now faces in its push to break through a stalemate in the east.

Depleted uranium is a byproduct of the uranium enrichment process needed to create nuclear weapons. The rounds retain some radioactive properties, but they can't generate a nuclear reaction like a nuclear weapon would, RAND nuclear expert and policy researcher Edward Geist said.

That didn't stop the Russians from offering a full-throated warning that the rounds were opening the door to further escalation. In the past, they have suggested the war could escalate to nuclear weapons use.

Both the the British ministry and the White House dismissed the Russian accusations. But the ammunition does carry risks even if it's not a nuclear weapon.

A look at depleted uranium ammunition:

### **WHAT IS DEPLETED URANIUM?**

Depleted uranium is a byproduct of the process to create the rarer, enriched uranium used in nuclear fuel and weapons. Although far less powerful than enriched uranium and incapable of generating a nuclear reaction, depleted uranium is extremely dense — more dense than lead — a quality that makes it highly attractive as a projectile.

"It's so dense and it's got so much momentum that it just keeps going through the armor — and it heats it up so much that it catches on fire," Geist said.

When fired, a depleted uranium munition becomes "essentially an exotic metal dart fired at an extraordinarily high speed," RAND senior defense analyst Scott Boston said.

In the 1970s, the U.S. Army began making armor-piercing rounds with depleted uranium and has since added it to composite tank armor to strengthen it. It also has added depleted uranium to the munitions fired by the Air Force's A-10 close air support attack plane, known as the tank killer. The U.S. military is still developing depleted uranium munitions, notably the M829A4 armor-piercing round for the M1A2 Abrams main battle tank, Boston said.

### **WHAT HAS RUSSIA SAID?**

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday warned that Moscow would "respond accordingly, given that the collective West is starting to use weapons with a 'nuclear component.'"

The British "have lost their bearings," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, warning that the munitions are "a step toward accelerating escalation."

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the announcement was "another step, and there aren't so many of them left."

The White House denounced Russia's claims as disinformation.

"Make no mistake, this is yet another straw man through which the Russians are driving a stake," U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

Russia also has depleted uranium munitions and just doesn't want Ukraine to have them, too, according to a White House official, who was not authorized to comment on the matter and spoke on condition of

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anonymity.

Pentagon press secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said Monday that to his knowledge, the U.S. was not sending depleted uranium munitions from its own arsenal to Ukraine.

## NOT A BOMB, BUT STILL A RISK

While depleted uranium munitions are not considered nuclear weapons, their emission of low levels of radiation has led the U.N. nuclear watchdog to urge caution when handling and warn of the possible dangers of exposure.

The handling of such ammunition "should be kept to a minimum and protective apparel (gloves) should be worn," the International Atomic Energy Agency cautions, adding that "a public information campaign may, therefore, be required to ensure that people avoid handling the projectiles.

"This should form part of any risk assessment and such precautions should depend on the scope and number of ammunitions used in an area."

The IAEA notes that depleted uranium is mainly a toxic chemical, as opposed to a radiation hazard. Particles in aerosols can be inhaled or ingested, and while most would be excreted again, some can enter the blood stream and cause kidney damage.

"High concentrations in the kidney can cause damage and, in extreme cases, renal failure," the IAEA says.

The low-level radioactivity of a depleted uranium round "is a bug, not a feature" of the munition, Geist said, and if the U.S. military could find another material with the same density but without the radioactivity it would likely use that instead.

Depleted uranium munitions were used in the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq's T-72 tanks and again in the invasion of the country in 2003, as well as in Serbia and in Kosovo. U.S. military veterans of those conflicts have questioned whether their use led to ailments they now face.

Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the Russian parliament's lower house, said supplies of rounds containing depleted uranium could lead to "a tragedy on a global scale that will primarily affect European countries."

Volodin said the use of such U.S. ammunition in the former Yugoslavia and Iraq led to "radioactive contamination and a sharp rise in oncological diseases."

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Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani in Washington, Frank Jordans in Berlin and Menelaos Hadjicostis in Nicosia, Cyprus, contributed to this report.

## Library association reports record book ban attempts in 2022

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Attempted book bans and restrictions at school and public libraries continue to surge, setting a record in 2022, according to a new report from the American Library Association being released Thursday.

More than 1,200 challenges were compiled by the association in 2022, nearly double the then-record total from 2021 and by far the most since the ALA began keeping data 20 years ago.

"I've never seen anything like this," says Deborah Caldwell-Stone, who directs the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom. "The last two years have been exhausting, frightening, outrage inducing."

Thursday's report not only documents the growing number of challenges, but also their changing nature. A few years ago, complaints usually arose with parents and other community members and referred to an individual book. Now, the requests are often for multiple removals, and organized by national groups such as the conservative Moms for Liberty, which has a mission of "unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government."

Last year, more than 2,500 different books were objected to, compared to 1,858 in 2021 and just 566 in 2019. In numerous cases, hundreds of books were challenged in a single complaint. The ALA bases its findings on media accounts and voluntary reporting from libraries and acknowledges that the numbers might be far higher.

Librarians around the country have told of being harassed and threatened with violence or legal action.

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"Every day professional librarians sit down with parents to thoughtfully determine what reading material is best suited for their child's needs," ALA President Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada said in a statement. "Now, many library workers face threats to their employment, their personal safety, and in some cases, threats of prosecution for providing books to youth they and their parents want to read."

Caldwell-Stone says that some books have been targeted by liberals because of racist language — notably Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" — but the vast majority of complaints come from conservatives, directed at works with LGBTIQ+ or racial themes. They include Maia Kobabe's "Gender Queer," Jonathan Evison's "Lawn Boy," Angie Thomas' "The Hate U Give" and a book-length edition of the "1619 Project," the Pulitzer Prize-winning report from The New York Times on the legacy of slavery in the U.S.

Bills facilitating the restriction of books have been proposed or passed in Arizona, Iowa, Texas, Missouri and Oklahoma, among other states. In Florida, where Gov. Ron DeSantis has approved laws to review reading materials and limit classroom discussion of gender identity and race books pulled indefinitely or temporarily include John Green's "Looking for Alaska," Colleen Hoover's "Hopeless," Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale" and Grace Lin's picture story "Dim Sum for Everyone!"

More recently, Florida's Martin County school district removed dozens of books from its middle schools and high schools, including numerous works by novelist Jodi Picoult, Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Beloved" and James Patterson's "Maximum Ride" thrillers, a decision which the bestselling author has criticized on Twitter as "arbitrary and borderline absurd."

DeSantis has called reports of mass bannings a "hoax," saying in a statement released earlier this month that the allegations reveal "some are attempting to use our schools for indoctrination."

Some books do come back. Officials at Florida's Duval County Public Schools were widely criticized after they removed "Roberto Clemente: The Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates," a children's biography of the late Puerto Rican baseball star. In February, they announced the book would again be on shelves, explaining that they needed to review it and make sure it didn't violate any state laws.

## Launch debut of 3D-printed rocket ends in failure, no orbit

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A rocket made almost entirely of 3D-printed parts made its launch debut Wednesday night, lifting off amid fanfare but failing three minutes into flight — far short of orbit.

There was nothing aboard Relativity Space's test flight except for the company's first metal 3D print made six years ago.

The startup wanted to put the souvenir into a 125-mile-high (200-kilometer-high) orbit for several days before having it plunge through the atmosphere and burn up along with the upper stage of the rocket.

As it turned out, the first stage did its job following liftoff from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station and separated as planned. But the upper stage appeared to ignite and then shut down, sending it crashing into the Atlantic.

It was the third launch attempt from what once was a missile site. Relativity Space came within a half-second of blasting off earlier this month, with the rocket's engines igniting before abruptly shutting down.

Although the upper stage malfunctioned and the mission did not reach orbit, "maiden launches are always exciting and today's flight was no exception," Relativity Space launch commentator Arwa Tizani Kelly said after Wednesday's launch.

Most of the 110-foot (33-meter) rocket, including its engines, came out of the company's huge 3D printers in Long Beach, California.

Relativity Space said 3D-printed metal parts made up 85% of the rocket, named Terran. Larger versions of the rocket will have even more and also be reusable for multiple flights.

Other space companies also rely on 3D-printing, but the pieces make up only a small part of their rockets.

Founded in 2015 by a pair of young aerospace engineers, Relativity Space has attracted the attention of investors and venture capitalists.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## 'On tour in hell': Wounded Ukrainian soldiers evacuated

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

DONETSK REGION, Ukraine (AP) — Their hands are blackened and grimy from the fight. Some are still wearing their combat boots, small flecks of black soil from the battlefield clinging to their torsos, bare under the emergency blanket.

With bandaged heads and splinted limbs, the wounded soldiers are stretchered into the waiting medical evacuation bus by members of the Hospitallers, a Ukrainian organization of volunteer paramedics who work on the front lines in the war in Ukraine.

The soldiers were all wounded recently in fierce fighting in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, where Russian forces have been pressing advances. The battle in Bakhmut, a city now encircled on three sides by Russian troops, has been particularly bloody, with soldiers describing endless days of combat, often at close quarters.

"We've been on tour in hell," said Yura, who like all the soldiers would give only his first name for safety reasons. He lay on a bed in a specially equipped medical bus, with his arm and leg badly wounded.

Blood stained the heavy bandages around his right forearm, which metal rods held together to stabilize the shattered bone. His bicep bore a deepening purple bruise left by the tourniquet applied to staunch the blood and save his life. The time it was put on was scrawled in pen across his right cheek: 19:45.

"They tried to get me with grenades," he said. soldiers would give only his first name.

Unlike most of the wounded, Yura is not Ukrainian. He is Russian, but fought on the side of Ukraine in Bakhmut since November. The Moscow native said he moved to Ukraine before the war, as did a friend of his who is also fighting for Ukraine and had spent 2 1/2 years in prison in Russia for reposting a social media post saying Crimea — annexed by Russia in 2014 — was Ukrainian.

It was his own countrymen who wounded him.

He was in Bakhmut for "eight days of almost uninterrupted combat." But he and his unit managed to repel all the assaults on their position, he said.

"On the fifth day without sleep, I had thoughts that I would go crazy," he said. "In fact, it's impossible to sleep there. They shell it in such a way that the earth trembles."

He showed a video on his mobile phone shot inside Bakhmut: the interior of a devastated building, holes punched through the walls by artillery, rubble strewn across the floor. Beyond the twisted metal remnants of a window, a glimpse of an urban hellscape of shattered buildings and splintered trees.

Yaroslav, 37, was also wounded in Bakhmut. The battle was so close that Russian and Ukrainian forces fought room to room inside buildings, he said.

Pale and with an almost imperceptible tremor, his lips nearly white, he propped himself up on an elbow as he waited to be carried on a stretcher from an ambulance onto the bus for the trip to a better equipped hospital in a city further west.

An explosion had sent shrapnel through his leg, piercing it below the knee.

"I came to my senses and saw that there is nobody around me, and then I understood that there is blood oozing into my shoe, blood squelching in my shoe," he said, quietly drawing on a cigarette. "It was totally dark."

As his unit had attempted to move from its position, the Russian forces began shelling.

"When I left, everything was on fire," he recalled. There were dead Russians lying on the ground, and dead Ukrainians, too. "People were running in the road and falling down, because mines were exploding, drones were flying."

He finished his cigarette and lay back on the stretcher. His eyes fixed on some invisible point before him, and he slowly closed his eyelids. The Hospitallers lifted his stretcher and carried it to the waiting bus.

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The medically equipped bus — named “Austrian,” the nickname of a Hospitaller paramedic who was killed in a crash of another medical evacuation bus — can carry six severely wounded patients on stretchers, and several more walking wounded.

“We’re doing evacuations as necessary. It could be twice or three times per day,” chief paramedic Kateryna Seliverstova said.

Bought with money from donations, the bus is better equipped medically than even some state hospitals, Seliverstova said. It is stocked with monitors, electrocardiographs, ventilators and oxygen tanks and can care for severely ill patients while they are transported to a major hospital.

“This project is really important, because it helps to economize resources,” Seliverstova said. “We can transport six injured people who are in serious or moderate condition,” whereas a normal ambulance can only transport one.

All six places were taken on the trip evacuating Yura and Yaroslav. Across the aisle from Yura, another soldier slipped in and out of consciousness, a brown bandage wrapped around his head. A paramedic checked his vital signs on a monitor, and helped him sip water from a syringe.

Behind him, a man coughed deeply. Only the blackened tip of his nose was visible from his heavily bandaged head. He had suffered extensive burns to his face.

Yura spoke softly to one of the paramedics. Without his expression changing, tears began rolling down the side of his face. The paramedic leaned over and gently wiped them away.

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Vasilisa Stepanenko and Evgeniy Maloletka contributed from Donetsk region, Ukraine.

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Follow AP’s coverage of the war in Ukraine: <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

## Ramadan begins in Mideast amid high costs, hopes for peace

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

KHARTOUM, Sudan (AP) — The first daily fast of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan began Thursday, as hundreds of millions of Muslims worldwide enter a four-week period of worship.

The observance comes at a time when numerous countries and governments across the Middle East are taking tentative steps towards calming enduring conflicts and crises made more acute by the costly war in Ukraine and a devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria that killed over 52,000 people.

During the coming four weeks, hundreds of millions of Muslims will abstain from food and water from dawn to dusk, before gathering with family and friends for indulgent nighttime meals. According to Islam, fasting draws the faithful closer to God and reminds them of the suffering of the poor.

In Sudan’s capital, families prepare and sell culinary delights weeks in advance to mark the break of the fast each evening, a meal known as Iftar.

The food and drink of choice for nighttime feasts across households in the Islamic African nation include assida, a semolina-based flour dish, and a sugary fermented drink called, “sweet bitter.” Both are recipes that date back generations.

“Those who can’t afford don’t have to pay,” said Fatima Mohammed Hamid, who sells the food items from her small home on Tuti island, just north of the Sudanese capital of Khartoum.

In addition to fasting, charity giving is another of Islam’s five pillars. During Ramadan, mosques and charities regularly provide meals for the poor at long tables that sprawl out onto the street.

For Sudan, the holy season comes as the promise of a new political era approaches. The country has been steeped in political chaos since a coup ousted a western powersharing government in October 2021.

A new transitional government could be formed before the holy month draws to a close, as promised by the country’s ruling military and other political forces earlier this week. However, many prominent Sudanese factions reject the move. Amid the uncertainty, most find common ground in complaining about the rising cost of living.

“Everything (the ingredients) costs double what it did last year,” said Hamid.

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Israeli and Palestinian leaders pledged this week to lower tensions as Ramadan begins, following months of deadly violence in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. This year, the fasting period coincides with the Jewish festival of Passover, spurring concern about fresh flare-ups with large numbers of Jewish and Muslim faithful expected to pour into Jerusalem's Old City.

From Gaza to Khartoum and Tunis to Sanaa, soaring prices are proving a further concern for those set to celebrate the occasion. Arab countries are continuing to suffer from the economic fallout of the war in Ukraine, with many reliant on grain imports from eastern Europe.

In Tunis' once-bustling Bab al-Fellah market, rising costs have left shoppers unable to splurge on Ramadan food shopping as they might have in past years.

"I have almost used up the 40 dinars (roughly \$13) that my husband gave me and I bought only vegetables, a chicken and some spices," said a woman who identified herself only as Fatima B.

In Pakistan, shoppers report similar hardships, with inflation surging to nearly 40%. To ease the struggle, many say they would consider breaking the daytime fast if free food were to be given out.

In war-torn Sanaa, the picture is bleaker still, with residents struggling to purchase even basic supplies. The country's ruinous civil war, now entering its ninth year, has killed more than 150,000 people and pushed millions of Yemenis to the brink of famine.

"I am not able to provide daily sustenance for the children," said Saleh al-Omrani, an unemployed resident from Sanaa. "We had Ramadan in the good old days, but today there is no longer Ramadan."

Diplomats and leaders had expressed new hope for peace efforts in the days leading up to Ramadan, amid signs of warming relations between two of the region's rival superpowers, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two are on opposing sides of the war in Yemen, and despite the flickers of warmth between them, sporadic fighting continues across that country. C lashes in Yemen killed at least 16 people earlier this week.

In southern Turkey and northwestern Syria, the destruction caused by last month's earthquake poses perhaps the steepest challenge of all.

In the Turkish city of Kahramanmaraş - near the epicentre of the quake - congregants held the first prayer of Ramadan inside a 1,000-person tent on the grounds of the city's famed Abdulhamid Han Mosque. Turkey's fourth largest mosque sustained slight damage in the temblor and has been closed to worshippers, Turkish media said.

Some 1,400 mosques have been destroyed or damaged by the quake, Turkish authorities say, leaving tens of thousands to pray in makeshift tents. More than 100 sound systems have been installed to recite the call to prayer.

In northwestern Idlib province — Syria's last rebel enclave -- very few families still have the energy or resources to make the necessary preparations for Ramadan this year.

Abdul Qahar Zakou, a cafe owner from the province, said he will decorate his cafe despite the prevailing misery and do his best to create a festive atmosphere.

"Despite all the odds, Ramadan will always have its own atmosphere, with a symbolism and spirituality that makes life easier," said Zakou.

Fasting is required for all healthy Muslims, with exemptions for those who are sick and for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Small children are not expected to fast.

Eating or drinking in public during the day is generally frowned upon in Muslim countries. Smoking and sexual intercourse are also not permitted during daylight hours.

Islam follows a lunar calendar, so Ramadan begins around a week and a half earlier each year. At the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate the joyous Eid al-Fitr holiday, when children often receive new clothes and gifts.

— Associated Press writers Ghaith Alsayed in Idlib, Bouazza ben Bouazza in Tunis, Andrew Wilks in Istanbul, and Ahmed al-Haj in Sanaa, Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Munir Ahmed in Islamabad, contributed to this report.

**TikTok CEO faces off with Congress over security fears**

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By KELVIN CHAN and HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The CEO of TikTok will make a high-profile appearance Thursday before a U.S. Congressional committee, where he'll face a grilling on data security and user safety while he makes his own case for why the hugely popular video-sharing app shouldn't be banned.

Shou Zi Chew's testimony comes at a crucial time for the company, which has acquired 150 million American users but is under increasing pressure from U.S. officials. TikTok and its parent company ByteDance have been swept up in a wider geopolitical battle between Beijing and Washington over trade and technology.

Chew, a 40-year-old Singapore native, is making a rare public appearance to counter the volley of accusations that TikTok has been facing. On Wednesday, the company sent dozens of popular TikTokers to Capitol Hill to lobby lawmakers to preserve the platform. It has also been putting up ads all over Washington that tout promises of securing users data and privacy and creating a safe platform for its young users.

Chew plans to tell the U.S. House Committee on Energy and Commerce that TikTok prioritizes the safety of its young users and deny allegations that the app is a national security risk, according to his prepared remarks released ahead of the hearing.

TikTok has been dogged by claims that its Chinese ownership means user data could end up in the hands of the Chinese government or that it could be used to promote narratives favorable to the country's Communist leaders.

"We understand the popularity of Tiktok, we get that," said White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre at a press conference Wednesday afternoon. "But the President's job is to make sure again that the Americans, national security is protected as well."

For its part, TikTok has been trying to distance itself from its Chinese origins, saying that 60% percent of its parent company ByteDance is owned by global institutional investors such as Carlyle Group. ByteDance was founded by Chinese entrepreneurs in Beijing in 2012.

"Let me state this unequivocally: ByteDance is not an agent of China or any other country," Chew said.

A U.S. ban on an app would be unprecedented and it's unclear how the government would go about enforcing it.

Experts says officials could try to force Apple and Google to remove TikTok from their app stores, preventing new users from downloading it as well as preventing existing users from updating it, ultimately rendering it useless.

The U.S. could also block access to TikTok's infrastructure and data, seize its domain names or force internet service providers like Comcast and Verizon to filter TikTok data traffic, said Ahmed Ghappour, a criminal law and computer security expert who teaches at Boston University School of Law.

But a tech savvy user could still get around restrictions by using a virtual private network to make it appear the user is in another country where it's not blocked, he said.

To avoid a ban, TikTok has been trying to sell officials on a \$1.5 billion plan called Project Texas, which routes all U.S. user data to domestic servers owned and maintained by software giant Oracle. Under the project, access to U.S. data is managed by U.S. employees through a separate entity called TikTok U.S. Data Security, which employs 1,500 people, is run independently of ByteDance and would be monitored by outside observers.

As of October, all new U.S. user data was being stored inside the country. The company started deleting all historic U.S. user data from non-Oracle servers this month, in a process expected to be completed later this year, Chew said.

A number of Western countries including Denmark, Canada, and New Zealand, along with the European Union, have already banned TikTok from devices issued to government employees, citing cybersecurity concerns.

In the U.S., the federal government, Congress, the armed forces and more than half of states have banned the app from official devices.

David Kennedy, a former government intelligence officer who runs the cybersecurity company TrustedSec,



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agrees with restricting TikTok access on government-issued phones because they might contain sensitive military information or other confidential material. A nationwide ban, however, might be too extreme, he said. He also wondered where it might lead.

"We have Tesla in China, we have Microsoft in China, we have Apple in China. Are they going to start banning us now?" Kennedy said. "It could escalate very quickly."

Chan reported from London.

## Eager young Albanians risk everything for new future in UK

By LLAZAR SEMINI Associated Press

BAJRAM CURRI, Albania (AP) — Monika Mulaj's son was in his second year of college in Albania, studying to become a mechanical engineer, when he resolved to make a daring change: He told his parents he would leave his lifelong home for a new future in Britain.

"We had tried to fulfil all his requests, for books and clothing, food and a bit of entertaining. But he was still dissatisfied," said Mulaj, a high school teacher in the northeastern town of Bajram Curri, which is in one of the country's poorest regions.

Five years later, her now 25-year-old son is working two jobs in Britain and hardly thinks of returning to his homeland. "Albania is in regress," he complains to his mother.

His path has been shared in recent years by thousands of young Albanians who have crossed the English Channel in small boats or inflatable dinghies to seek work in the U.K. Their odyssey reflects the country's anemic economy and a younger generation's longing for fresh opportunities.

In 2018, only 300 people reached Britain by crossing the channel in small boats. The number rose to 45,000 in 2022, in part because of arrivals from Albania, a country in southern Europe that is negotiating for membership in the European Union.

Other migrants were from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Unlike many countries that fuel migration, Albania is considered safe by U.K. officials.

Britain is attractive to Albanians because it has a better economy and higher-paying jobs than neighboring countries such as Greece or Italy. Many Albanians also have family ties in the U.K. Birmingham, for instance, has a large immigrant population from the Albanian town of Kukes, on the border with Kosovo.

The deputy mayor of Bajram Curri, Abedin Kernaja, said young people leave because of low wages and the difficulty of building "a comfortable family life." His two sons are in the U.K.

Xhemile Tafaj, who owns a restaurant on a scenic plateau outside town, said "young people have no money to follow school, no job to work, no revenue at all."

In such an environment, "only old men have remained and soon there will be empty houses," Tafaj said.

Northeastern Albania is known for its natural Alpine beauty and green sloping landscape. The region is also famous for chestnuts, blueberries, blackberries and medicinal plants, as well as wool carpets and other handmade goods.

But those products offer scant job opportunities. The only jobs are at town halls, schools and hospitals, plus a few more at cafes and restaurants.

Petrit Lleshi, who owns a motel in Kukes, has struggled to find waiters for two years.

"I would not blame a 25-year-old leaving because of the low salaries here," Lleshi said. "What our country offers is not enough to build a proper life."

Few migrants seek a visa. They generally pay smugglers 5,000 to 20,000 euros (\$5,300 to \$21,200) for the dangerous, illegal crossing.

Many migrants undertake the trip with the expectation of a secure job, only to find after arriving in the U.K. that they must work in cannabis-growing houses for up to two years to pay back the trafficking money, according to reports by Albanian news outlets.

The steady stream of migrants has provoked clashes between British and Albanian leaders in recent months.

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U.K. interior minister Suella Braverman has described the arrivals as an “invasion on our southern coast” — words that Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama blasted as a “crazy narrative” and an attempt to cover up for the U.K.’s failed border policies.

Albania also publicly protested what it called a “verbal lynching” by another U.K. official who made comments about Albanian immigrants. Rama accused the new U.K. Cabinet of scapegoating Albanians because it “has gone down a blind alley with its new policy resulting from Brexit.”

The prime minister also said that easing visa requirements would help reduce the number of people arriving illegally.

In response to the spike in migration, some agencies are investing in programs that aim to offer opportunities to both countries — jobs for eager Albanians and a supply of remote workers for businesses in the U.K.

Elias Mazloum of Albania’s Social Development Investment group said that immigration is “a cancer.”

“We are offering chemotherapy after a lot of morphine used so far only has delayed immigration,” he said.

Under his project, 10 companies in Ireland will employ 10 young Albanians to work remotely in an apprenticeship paying 500 euros (\$530) per month in the first year. Participants get a certificate from Ireland’s Digital Marketing Institute and then are hired remotely for 1,000 euros (\$1,060) per month.

The vision is for the project to help establish a remote-work ecosystem in the region.

“Albania, and in particular the northeast region, has the advantage of working from a blank canvas” to attract digital nomads and encourage its young people to stay, said Declan Droney, a business trainer and consultant in Galway, in the west of Ireland.

A British project in Kukes supports small and midsize businesses in tourism and agriculture and will open a school teaching different professions.

The Albanian government has also offered incentives. Young couples who launch a small business will be exempt from taxes for up to three years, and couples who return from the U.K. will receive 5,000 euros (\$5,300).

Mazloum’s organization has negotiated with Vodafone Albania to offer free high-speed internet to remote workers.

“The eyes cannot get enough from the beauty of this place — the food, the fresh air. This added to very hospitable people, ambitious youth who like to work hard,” Mazloum said. “Imagine if you give a little hope to the people here, what they could make this place.”

Follow Llazar Semini at <https://twitter.com/lsemini>

## March Madness: Athletes balance privacy, online profile

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer

Aliyah Boston recalls her parents prodding her to be more active on social media, to extend her brand as her basketball prowess began to draw national attention.

She said she would be more active — and then post just one photo in two months, which is no way for an athlete influencer to earn big money in the era of name, image and likeness compensation.

Eventually, the South Carolina superstar saw the light — and the green.

“With the NIL, my mom and my dad were like: this is the time for social media to continue to brand yourself,” Boston said. “That’s when I really started to post more.”

The NIL age has opened a vast new world of earning potential for athletes. Social media platforms, once solely windows into smaller worlds, are now heavily trafficked gateways to wider audiences and revenue streams. Social media also turbocharged March Madness, an event that already had communal elements — think bracket and office pool — before the internet even existed.

Taking advantage of this chaotic social media explosion to cash in requires a bit of savvy, discernment and engagement — lots of engagement.

“Some things you think will go viral and it goes nowhere,” said Jeffrey Weiner, senior vice president of

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sports marketing firm GSE Worldwide. "Some things you think are silly and no one's going to care about and it goes viral. You never know. You shouldn't worry about the 'like' numbers and things like that. Just post, post, post."

Finding the right fit is key when it comes to NIL deals.

If an athlete hawks something they don't believe in, it will show in their posts. No one is going to buy a product or solicit a business if the person promoting it appears to be going through the motions or comes off as a used car salesman — unless that's the schtick they're going for.

"I don't want my page to turn into full of advertisements and me shoving things down people's throats," said Nebraska pole vaulter Jess Gardner, who has partnered with about 15 different brands and has more than 300,000 combined followers on TikTok and Instagram.

"That's not why people are coming to my page," she said. "I make fun and lighthearted content, and so I can do that if I'm working with brands I actually love. That's where I want to take the NIL route."

Personality sells.

The tendency when promoting a product is to switch personalities, like a TV anchorperson shifting to an on-air persona. Many of the most successful influencers find a balance, staying true to their identity while still promoting the product.

Authenticity with a dash of amusement is the best bet.

"End of the day it's a video distribution platform and it allows athletes to showcase their personality however they see fit," said Julian Valentin, head of customer success for NIL platform Opendorse. "I always say with student athletes to only do what you're comfortable with."

That's the way Shaylee Gonzales approaches it.

The Texas guard has 206,000 TikTok followers on, 93,000 more on Instagram. Her posts are a mix of basketball, fashion, personal life and products she has deals with.

"The more you are yourself, the more people will like to follow you and feel like they know you," she said. "I love posting things that I enjoy doing or hobbies I like to do."

Find the right balance of business and whimsiness and social media opens the the NIL revenue stream.

Miami twin basketball players Haley and Hanna Cavinder are social media sensations who have cashed in on their online fame. Hanna Cavinder noted that the twins carefully choose what they post online.

"Everybody thinks they know you, but they only know the things you want to show them," she said. "Obviously, I love connecting with my audience and my fans and being organic. They love the twin thing, so we love sharing that. But honestly, I live a more private life than people think."

"You pick and choose what you want people to see," she added. "And that's just kind of how I go about it. Now, social media is more of my business, not more of my life."

With more than 4.4 million followers on their shared TikTok account alone, they have become millionaires through NIL deals.

Those deals will likely increase during March Madness, especially after the Hurricanes upset No. 1 seed Indiana in the NCAA Tournament.

"I think what I love the most is it's setting me up so much for the future," Haley Cavinder said. "And name, image and likeness, all athletes, especially female athletes, if you use it the right way and to your advantage and you remain consistent, it'll help you in the future."

That's what got Boston's attention — well, after her parents noticed first.

The All-American has promoted Buick, Crocs, Orange Theory, Under Armour and Six Star Nutrition, among other brands. She will likely be one of the WNBA's top draft picks and could have a lucrative overseas career as well, but has already set a firm financial foundation.

"I have people in my corner who help me be able to work with brands, agencies," she said. "It's been smooth."

And lucrative.

tributed.

AP March Madness coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness> and bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket> and <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-top-25-college-basketball-poll> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## **Gwyneth Paltrow ski collision trial set for family testimony**

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — Two daughters of a retired optometrist suing Gwyneth Paltrow are expected to testify on Thursday about the lasting effects of their father and Paltrow's 2016 ski collision as the trial takes on an increasingly personal note on the third day of proceedings.

Attorneys are expected to call Polly Grasham and Shae Herath to the stand and question them about the broken ribs and lasting brain damage that their father Terry Sanderson claims he sustained after he and Paltrow crashed at one of North America's most upscale ski resorts seven years ago.

Neurologist Richard Boehme and Paltrow herself could also be called to testify on either Thursday or Friday.

Sanderson is suing Paltrow for \$300,000, claiming she recklessly crashed into him while the two were skiing on a beginner run at Deer Valley Resort in Park City, Utah. In a counterclaim, Paltrow is seeking \$1 million and attorney fees. The amount of money at stake for both sides pales in comparison to the typical legal costs of a multiyear lawsuit and expert witness-heavy trial.

During the first two days of trial, Sanderson's attorneys and expert medical witnesses have described how injuries were likely caused by someone crashing into him from behind. They attributed noticeable changes in Sanderson's mental acuity to that day's injuries.

Paltrow's attorneys have worked to paint Sanderson as a 76-year-old whose decline followed a normal course of aging rather than resulted from crashing into their celebrity client. They have not yet called witnesses of their own to testify, but in opening statements previewed for jurors that they plan to call Paltrow's husband Brad Falchuk and her two children, Moses and Apple.

They have thus far attempted to poke holes in testimony from Sanderson's team of experts and are expected to question his two daughters about their father mentioning Paltrow's fame and an email alluding to footage recorded on a Go Pro camera that hasn't been found or included in evidence. Her team has previously accused Sanderson of suing to exploit Paltrow's wealth and celebrity. She is the Oscar-winning star of "Shakespeare in Love" and founder-CEO of the beauty and wellness company Goop.

## **African Union urges nearly \$90 million for its Somali force**

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The African Union appealed for nearly \$90 million Wednesday for its peace-keeping force in Somalia, which is providing support to its military forces battling al-Shabab extremists.

Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, the AU commissioner for political affairs, peace and security, told two reporters that the more than 19,600-strong AU force won't be able to function properly and help the Somalis unless that funding gap is filled.

A year ago, the U.N. Security Council unanimously approved a new African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, known as ATMIS, to support the Somalis until their forces take full responsibility for the country's security at the end of 2024.

If the AU force doesn't have the funds to operate effectively in the coming 21 months before the handover, Adeoye said, "it may mean that al-Shabab will eventually take over the responsibilities of a state in Somalia."

"The implications are huge," he said. "And we do not want the international community to lose focus or have diverted attention away from Somalia, because it's been on for almost two decades."

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Adeoye said the current Somali government is doing what many in the past never did — launch a full-scale offensive against al-Shabab instead of responding to al-Shabab attacks — and “there’s a need to encourage that offensive onslaught.”

He said a key reason for the AU financial plight is the European Union’s \$60 million cut in funding because of competing interests.

Adeoye attended a high-level meeting with U.N. member nations on financing for ATMIS after speaking to the reporters. He expressed hope that all countries help fill the \$89 million funding gap, especially Gulf nations, the global south and the EU.

The government of Somalia’s President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud declared “total war” last year on the thousands of al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab extremists. For more than a decade they have controlled parts of the country and carried out devastating attacks while exploiting clan divisions and extorting millions of dollars a year in their quest to impose an Islamic state.

The current offensive was sparked in part by local communities and militias driven to the brink by al-Shabab’s harsh taxation policies amid the country’s worst drought on record.

The United States has increased its military assistance to Somalia as it has seen success in battling al-Shabab, with 61 tons of weapons and ammunition arriving in the capital Mogadishu on March 1.

“The West is supporting Ukraine in the fight for the protection of their sovereignty, but Ukrainians are doing the fight,” Adeoye said. “So now the Somalis are doing the fighting, and we need to all encourage that fight by ensuring that the peace support operation of the African Union does not fail.”

He said a lack of resources will affect the withdrawal date for the AU force, and he warned that an uncoordinated AU withdrawal would be worse than the chaotic withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021. He added that “it will affect the whole region.”

Adeoye said everyone’s assessment is that the Somali forces have “improved tremendously militarily” and on the political side, where they worked with the AU in supporting elections last year.

But Adeoye said al-Shabab has been in Somalia for almost 20 years and it is definitely trying to adapt to a more robust Somali security force.

“They are resilient, so we have to be above game, and that’s why we are not just asking for resources to train, to pay troops,” he said. “We’re asking for resources for equipment as well — for the best state-of-the-art offensive weapons from the U.S., from those with the wherewithal to make an impact, and double-up what the Somali government is doing.”

## Holocaust survivor shares on TikTok to educate young people

By TED SHAFFREY Associated Press

MORRISTOWN, N.J. (AP) — Holocaust survivor Tova Friedman is a TikTok star at age 85, thanks to her 17-year-old grandson.

In the family living room in Morristown, New Jersey, he records short videos of his grandmother reminiscing about life in 1944 and 1945 when she was a 6-year-old child at the Auschwitz death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. She also discusses her experiences before and after the camp.

They say videos on her account have garnered 75 million views since the duo started posting in September 2021.

“It really snowballed,” said Friedman. “And then we realized it was a fabulous medium for the Holocaust, for young people who don’t want to read the books, who don’t like the classes in school, who don’t like the way the teachers teach or whatever, who are bored with it, or some who never heard of it. Here they are, listening.”

Her grandson, Aron Goodman, said their most-viewed videos are “ones that show her number” — the identification tattooed on prisoners’ arms at Auschwitz.

“People around the world can’t really get the chance to see a survivor, to see the history on their arm,” Goodman said. “So social media and TikTok is the way we kind of impart our message and show the evidence of the Holocaust that people unrightfully deny.”

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Commenters on the videos thank Friedman for posting her memories, with many remarking they had not learned much — or anything — about the Holocaust in school.

Goodman said he makes the videos to counter antisemitic speech online and to educate the TikTok generation about the horrors of the Holocaust.

"We need to focus on the history and warn people where hate can lead if it's unchecked, if no one does anything about it," the high schooler said.

Another TikTok features black-and-white footage of Friedman with other Jewish children in early 1945, as she pushes up her sleeve to show the tattooed number on her arm. The film was shot by the Soviet military a week after they liberated the camp.

When Friedman looks at the film, she remembers her mother, out of frame but nearby, who taught her how to survive in the camp by not making eye contact with the guards and hiding amid dead bodies. Her mother fell into despair after the war and died in her mid-40s.

Friedman said people often ask how she could ever trust or love people after what she witnessed. Friedman said she saw many other Holocaust survivors who lost their families in the camps go on to remarry and have more children, which they called "replacement children" in those days.

"Life is resilient, and you can live again," said Friedman, who works as a therapist and social worker and wrote a book about her experiences called "The Daughter of Auschwitz." "This is what I'd like to let people know. It's the hope that humanity can rebuild itself."

## Body found near Denver high school shooting suspect's car

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A body was found Wednesday night in the Colorado woods near the abandoned car that belonged to a 17-year-old student accused of shooting two administrators at his Denver high school earlier in the day, a sheriff said.

Park County Sheriff Tom McGraw said the body was discovered not far from the car in a remote mountain area about 50 miles (80 kilometers) southwest of Denver, near the small town of Bailey, in Park County. The town had been ordered to shelter in place while officers from a number of agencies including the FBI combed the forest.

But, authorities said they have not yet identified who it was and McGraw declined to say if it was a man or reveal the cause of death.

Earlier in the day, Denver police identified the suspect as Austin Lyle.

The shooting occurred at East High School in Denver while two administrators searched Lyle for weapons, a daily requirement because of the boy's behavioral issues, authorities said. Lyle fled after the shooting.

It occurred at a school shaken by frequent lockdowns and violence, including the recent killing outside the school of a classmate that prompted East High School students to march on the Colorado Capitol earlier this month. Parents who converged on the 2,500-student campus on Wednesday voiced frustration that officials had not done enough to protect their children.

"I am sick of it," said Jesse Haase, who planned to talk with her daughter about taking her out of classes for the rest of the school year.

Amid the flurry of criticism over lax security, Denver school officials said after the shooting that they would once again put armed officers into the city's public high schools.

There were no school resource officers on campus at the time of Wednesday's shooting, said Denver Police Chief Ron Thomas.

The shooting happened just before 10 a.m. in an office area as Lyle was undergoing a search as part of a "safety plan" that required him to be patted down daily, officials said.

The gun used in the shooting was not immediately recovered, Thomas said.

One of the wounded administrators was released from the hospital Wednesday afternoon and the second remained in serious condition, said Heather Burke, a spokesperson for Denver Health hospital.

Hundreds of students on March 3 skipped class and marched in support of stricter gun laws following

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the death of Luis Garcia, 16, who was shot while sitting in a car near East High School.

In June 2020, amid a summer of protests over racial injustice following the murder of George Floyd, Denver Public Schools became one of the districts around the US that decided to phase out its use of police officers in school buildings. That push was fueled by criticism that school resource officers disproportionately arrested Black students, sweeping them into the criminal justice system.

After Wednesday's shooting, two armed officers will be posted at East High School through the end of the school year, and other city high schools also will each get an officer, said Denver Public Schools Superintendent Alex Marrero.

In a Wednesday letter to the city's Board of Education, Marrero said his decision violated district's policies but added he "can no longer stand on the sidelines."

"I am the leader of this district who is charged with keeping our scholars and staff safe every day," he wrote. The school board said it supported the decision.

Gun violence at schools has become increasingly common in the U.S. with more than 1,300 shooting incidents recorded between 2000 and June 2022, according to government researchers. Those shootings killed 377 people and wounded 1,025, according to a database maintained by the researchers.

Students from East High School had been scheduled to testify Wednesday afternoon before the Colorado Legislature on gun safety bills.

"This is the reality of being young in America: sitting through a shooting and waiting for information just hours before you're scheduled to testify in support of gun safety bills," said Gracie Taub, a 16-year-old East High School sophomore and volunteer with Students Demand Action in Colorado.

Lyle transferred to East High School after being disciplined and removed from a high school in nearby Aurora last school year because of unspecified violations of school policies, said Cherry Creek School District spokesperson Lauren Snell.

Marrero said safety plans for students are enacted in response to "past educational and also behavioral experiences," adding that it's a common practice throughout Colorado's public schools. Officials did not give further details on why Lyle was searched daily.

But daily pat downs are rare, said Franci Crepeau-Hobson, a University of Colorado Denver professor specializing in school violence prevention.

"Clearly they were concerned," said Crepeau-Hobson. "I can't imagine they'd do that if there wasn't a history of the kid carrying a weapon."

Safety plans often follow threatening or suicidal behavior from a student, said Christine Harms with the Colorado School Safety Resource Center.

East High School, not far from downtown, was locked down as police investigated the shooting, and hundreds of parents lined up along a road outside the school.

Some parents and students vented frustration over violence at the school as they surrounded the police chief. Thomas listened quietly, nodding and promising to engage with the school board.

At the edge of the crowd, a man said the city's school board members should be recalled for getting rid of police in school, telling a nearby officer "I just want you to be able to do your job."

In response to the shooting, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre repeated President Joe Biden's called for stricter gun laws, including bans on assault-style weapons and high-capacity magazines, and for Congress to "do something" on gun control.

Wednesday was also the second anniversary of 10 people being shot and killed at a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado.

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Associated Press reporters Sarah Brumfield in Silver Spring, Maryland and Matthew Brown in Billings, Mont. contributed.

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Bedayn is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to

report on undercovered issues.

## Arizona court declines most of Lake's appeal over gov's race

By JACQUES BILLEAUD Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The Arizona Supreme Court has declined to hear most of Republican Kari Lake's appeal in a challenge of her defeat in the governor's race but revived a claim that was dismissed by a trial court.

In an order Wednesday, the state's highest court said a lower court erroneously dismissed Lake's claim challenging the application of signature verification procedures on early ballots in Maricopa County. The court sent the claim back to a trial court to consider.

Lake said late Wednesday that she's thrilled with the ruling.

"The signature verification process in Maricopa County is a house of cards," Lake said in a statement. "Thanks to this ruling my team will get the chance to topple it."

Lake, who lost to Democrat Katie Hobbs by just over 17,000 votes, was among the most vocal 2022 Republican candidates promoting former President Donald Trump's election lies, which she made the centerpiece of her campaign. While most other election deniers around the country conceded after losing their races in November, Lake did not.

In her challenge, the former TV anchor focused on problems with ballot printers at some polling places in Maricopa County, home to more than 60% of the state's voters.

The defective printers produced ballots that were too light to be read by the on-site tabulators at polling places. Lines backed up in some areas amid the confusion. Lake alleged ballot printer problems were the result of intentional misconduct.

County officials say everyone had a chance to vote and all ballots were counted because those affected by the printers were taken to more sophisticated counters at election headquarters.

In mid-February, the Arizona Court of Appeals rejected Lake's assertions, concluding she presented no evidence that voters whose ballots were unreadable by tabulators at polling places were not able to vote.

The appeals court noted that even a witness called to testify on Lake's behalf confirmed ballots that couldn't initially be read at polling places may ultimately have been counted. And while a pollster testified that the polling place problems disenfranchised enough voters to change the election's outcome, the appeals court said his conclusion was baseless.

Lake's attorneys also said the chain of custody for ballots was broken at an off-site facility where a contractor scans mail-in ballots to prepare them for processing. The lawyers asserted that workers put their own mail-in ballots into the pile rather than returning them through normal channels, and that paperwork documenting ballot transfers was missing. The county disputes the claims.

Hobbs' attorneys have said Lake was trying to sow distrust in Arizona's election results and offered no proof to back up her allegations.

Lake faced extremely long odds in her challenge, which required proving misconduct specifically intended to deny her victory and that it resulted in the wrong woman being declared the winner.

Hobbs took office as governor on Jan. 2.

## Court: Arizona governor not required to carry out execution

By JACQUES BILLEAUD Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The Arizona Supreme Court has ruled that state law doesn't require Gov. Katie Hobbs to carry out the April 6 execution of a prisoner who was convicted of murder.

The decision marks a legal victory for the newly elected Democratic governor whose office said the state isn't currently prepared to carry out the death penalty. The high court had set the April execution date for Aaron Gunches, who fatally shot Ted Price near Mesa, Arizona, in 2002.

The order came after Hobbs said executions will not be carried out until Arizonans can be confident that the state isn't violating constitutional rights when it enforces the death penalty.

The governor vowed two weeks ago that she wouldn't carry out the court's order while the state reviews



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death penalty protocols that she ordered because of Arizona's history of mismanaging executions.

Lawyers for Hobbs said the department lacks staff with proper expertise and does not have a current contract for a pharmacist to compound the pentobarbital needed for an execution. They also said corrections officials are unable to find out the identity of the state's prior compounding pharmacist, who primarily had contact with an official no longer with the department.

A top corrections leadership position critical to planning executions remains unfilled.

Corrections Director Ryan Thornell has said he was unable to find enough documentation to understand key elements of the execution process and instead has had to piece it together through conversations with employees on what might have occurred in past executions.

Hobbs maintained that while the court authorized Gunches' execution, its order doesn't require the state to carry it out.

Karen Price, whose brother was the victim in Gunches' case, had asked the court to order Hobbs to carry out the execution. Colleen Clase, an attorney for Karen Price, didn't immediately return a call seeking comment on Wednesday evening.

Gunches pleaded guilty to murdering Ted Price, who was his girlfriend's ex-husband.

Arizona, which currently has 110 prisoners on death row, carried out three executions last year after a nearly eight-year hiatus brought on by criticism that a 2014 execution was botched and because of difficulties obtaining execution drugs.

Since then, the state has been criticized for taking too long to insert an IV for lethal injection into a condemned prisoner's body and for denying the Arizona Republic permission to witness the three executions.

Gunches, who is not a lawyer, represented himself in November when he asked the Supreme Court to issue his execution warrant so that, he said, justice could be served and the victim's families could get closure. In Republican Mark Brnovich's last month as state attorney general, his office asked the court for a warrant to execute Gunches.

But Gunches then withdrew his request in early January, and newly elected Democratic Attorney General Kris Mayes later asked for the warrant to be withdrawn.

The state Supreme Court rejected Mayes' request, saying that it must grant an execution warrant if certain appellate proceedings have concluded and that those requirements were met in Gunches' case.

In another reversal, Gunches said in a filing that he still wants to be executed and asked to be transferred to Texas, where, he wrote, "the law is still followed and inmates can still get their sentences carried out." Arizona's high court denied the transfer.

## Biden approval dips near lowest point: AP-NORC poll

By JOSH BOAK and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Approval of President Joe Biden has dipped slightly since a month ago, nearing the lowest point of his presidency as his administration tries to project a sense of stability while confronting a pair of bank failures and inflation that remains stubbornly high.

That's according to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, which shows there have been modest fluctuations in support for Biden over the past several months. The president notched an approval rating of 38% in the new poll, after 45% said they approved in February and 41% in January. His ratings hit their lowest point of his presidency last July, at 36%, as the full weight of rising gasoline, food and other costs began to hit U.S. households.

In recent months, approval of Biden had been hovering above 40%.

Interviews with poll respondents suggest the public has mixed feelings about Biden, who is expected to announce a reelection bid this summer. When it comes to the president, people generally do not swing between the extremes of absolute loyalty and aggressive loathing that have been a feature of this era's divided politics.

"Neutral towards approve," Andrew Dwyer, 30, said of Biden. "I don't think he's the best at representing my position and issues. But I know being president involves compromises."

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Dwyer, a data analyst in Milwaukee, said he voted for the president in 2020 and considers himself to be liberal. He acknowledged the recent failures of the Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, but he said that the economy is adjusting to higher interest rates set by the Federal Reserve to combat inflation.

"We all got so used to cheap debt and the ability to throw money around," Dwyer said. He said there were "pain points" caused by higher borrowing costs but that he thinks the process will "ultimately" lead to a healthier economy.

The president has taken ambitious steps to boost the U.S. economy, with his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package from 2021, infrastructure investments, support for computer chip plants and taxes on corporations and the wealthy to help fund health care and a shift away from fossil fuels.

But those efforts involve multiyear investments that have yet to provide much optimism to a public dealing with annual inflation at 6%. The president and other administration officials have toured the country to promote their achievements. But to many, the economy feels as though it could be on a knife's edge after the recent bank failures, as well as the debt limit showdown with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., that could put the U.S. government at risk of defaulting.

Just 31% approve of Biden's stewardship of the national economy, about where it's been over the course of the last year. His handling of the nation's economic fortunes has been a weak point at least since late 2021, when the inflation that the administration had suggested was transitory became a bigger pain point for businesses and families.

Michael McComas, 51, voted Republican in 2020 and described Biden as "not great — average, I guess." A resident of Westland, Michigan, he noted that it will take years to determine whether federal infrastructure spending fulfills the promises made by Biden.

McComas said he believes inflation is the direct result of government spending to counter the pandemic, a claim that Biden has personally rejected when asked by reporters.

"We poured so much money into the system — that's a little frustrating that we were shocked that we got hit by inflation when a lot of our policies were inflationary," McComas said.

The difference between Biden's approval overall and his approval on the economy is driven largely by Democrats, 76% of whom say they approve of how he's handling his job as president while 63% approve of his handling of the economy. Few Republicans approve of Biden on either count.

Democrats under the age of 45 feel less positive about Biden, causing a drag on his approval ratings. Just 54% approve of the president's economic leadership, compared to 72% of Democrats older than 45. Similarly, just 66% of Democrats under 45 approve of Biden overall, compared to 85% of older Democrats.

Only about a quarter of Americans say the national economy is good or that the country is headed in the right direction, the poll shows. Those numbers have also fluctuated only slightly over the last few months.

Ratings of Biden's handling of foreign policy (39%) and climate change (41%) are about on par with his overall approval ratings. Seventy-four percent of Democrats and 9% of Republicans approve of Biden on foreign policy, while 67% of Democrats and 17% of Republicans approve of his handling of climate change.

Theresa Ojuro, a 29-year-old doctoral student in Rochester, New York, said she "expected more" from Biden — "just a little bit more stability with the economy." Ojuro, who voted for Biden in 2020, also noted that the bank failures are dragging down her sentiment, but she worries about how high taxes are in New York state relative to the benefits provided.

"If Biden is doing his job, why in a state like this can you see people really suffering?" Ojuro said.

The poll of 1,081 adults was conducted Mar. 16-20 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points.

## Prosecutors reveal planned Proud Boys witness was informant

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal prosecutors disclosed Wednesday that a witness expected to testify for

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the defense at the seditious conspiracy trial of former Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío and four associates was secretly acting as a government informant for nearly two years after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, a defense lawyer said in a court filing.

Carmen Hernandez, a lawyer for former Proud Boys chapter leader Zachary Rehl, asked a judge to schedule an immediate emergency hearing and suspend the trial "until these issues have been considered and resolved." Lawyers for the other four defendants joined in Hernandez's request.

Hernandez said in court papers that the defense team was told by prosecutors on Wednesday afternoon that the witness they were planning to call to the stand on Thursday had been a government informant.

The judge ordered prosecutors to file a response to the defense filing by Thursday afternoon and scheduled a hearing for the same day, putting testimony in the case on hold until Friday. The U.S. attorney's office did not immediately comment on the filing.

In her court filing, Hernandez said the unnamed informant participated in "prayer meetings" with relatives of at least one of the Proud Boys on trial and had discussions with family members about replacing one of the defense lawyers on the case. The informant also has been in contact with at least one of the defense lawyers and at least one of the five defendants, Hernandez wrote.

It's the latest twist in a trial that has been bogged down by bickering between lawyers and the judge and already lasted much longer than expected. Defense lawyers have repeatedly asked the judge in vain to declare a mistrial over a variety of issues they say have been unfair to their clients.

The trial in Washington's federal court is one of the most serious cases to emerge from the Jan. 6 attack. Tarrío, Rehl and three other Proud Boys — Joseph Biggs, Ethan Nordean and Dominic Pezzola — are charged with conspiring to block the transfer of presidential power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden after the 2020 election.

Tarrío, a Miami resident, served as national chairman for the far-right extremist group, whose members describe it as a politically incorrect men's club for "Western chauvinists." He and the other Proud Boys could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted of seditious conspiracy.

Defense attorneys have argued there is no evidence the Proud Boys plotted to attack the Capitol and stop Congress from certifying Biden's electoral victory.

Hernandez didn't name the informant in her court filing, but she said it is somebody who has been serving as a "confidential human source" for the federal government since April 2021 through at least January 2023. Prosecutors knew in December that the person was a potential trial witness but didn't inform defense lawyers until Wednesday that the witness has been a federal informant, she said.

It's not the first time the government's use of informants has become an issue in the case. Defense attorneys have repeatedly pushed to get more information about informants in the far-right extremist group as they try to undermine the notion that the group had a plan to attack the Capitol on Jan. 6.

FBI Agent Nicole Miller testified last week that she was aware of two informants in the Proud Boys, including one who marched on the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Hernandez said there are "reasons to doubt the veracity of the government's explanation and justification for withholding information about the (confidential human sources) who have been involved in the case." She could not immediately be reached for additional comment.

Law enforcement routinely uses informants in criminal investigations, but their methods and identities can be closely guarded secrets. Federal authorities haven't publicly released much information about their use of informants in investigating the Proud Boys' role in a mob's attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Nordean, of Auburn, Washington, was a Proud Boys chapter leader. Biggs, of Ormond Beach, Florida, was a self-described Proud Boys organizer. Rehl was president of the Proud Boys chapter in Philadelphia. Pezzola was a Proud Boys member from Rochester, New York.

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Associated Press writer Alanna Durkin Richer in Boston contributed to this report.

**AP source: Blackhawks will not wear Pride-themed jerseys**

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By JAY COHEN AP Sports Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — The Chicago Blackhawks will not wear Pride-themed warmup jerseys before Sunday's Pride Night game against Vancouver because of security concerns involving a Russian law that expands restrictions on activities seen as promoting LGBTQ rights in the country.

The decision was made by the NHL organization following discussions with security officials within and outside the franchise, according to a person familiar with the situation who spoke to the AP on Wednesday on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the move.

The Blackhawks have worn Pride warmup jerseys previously and donned special warmup jerseys on some other themed nights this season. There had been ongoing conversations about a Pride jersey with the players, according to the person who talked to the AP, but the organization made the decision to hold Pride Night without the jerseys this year.

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law in December that significantly expands restrictions on activities seen as promoting LGBTQ rights in the country. Chicago defenseman Nikita Zaitsev is a Moscow native, and there are other players with family in Russia or other connections to the country.

The decision by the Blackhawks comes after San Jose Sharks goalie James Reimer and Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Ivan Provorov refused to take part in warmups with Pride-themed jerseys. The New York Rangers opted not to wear Pride jerseys or use Pride stick tape as part of their night in January despite previously advertising that plan.

Russians Nikolai Knyzhov and Alexander Barabanov wore the Pride-themed jerseys for the Sharks on Saturday.

While Chicago will go without Pride warmup jerseys this year, the team has planned a variety of activities in conjunction with Sunday's game. DJs from the LGBTQ community will play before the game and during an intermission, and the Chicago Gay Men's Chorus also is slated to perform. There also are plans to highlight a couple of area businesses with ties to the LGBTQ community.

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AP Sports Writer Josh Dubow contributed to this report.

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## 'The Young and the Restless' celebrates 50 years of drama

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — It all started on a late morning on a highway. A camera panned to the cab of a large semi-trailer truck. The driver wore a plaid shirt and a day's growth of beard. Next to him was a mysterious hitchhiker in expensive clothes that were ripped and a fresh head wound.

He got out at Genoa City. And he stayed.

That's how "The Young and the Restless" began on March 26, 1973, and a lot of people also stuck around Genoa City. The soap opera celebrates its 50th anniversary this month as the No. 1 daytime drama for 35 consecutive years, with fans growing up alongside the actors.

"I think a huge reason why the audience has stuck with us for so long is because we are the same people. We are family members. We show up every day — sometimes more than a regular family member," says Lauralee Bell, a star and daughter of the show's founders.

Created by the late William J. Bell and Lee Phillip Bell, "The Young and the Restless" concerns the goings-on of several Midwestern families, some of whom have a lot and some who don't. William Bell was head writer for decades, giving the show a singular vision, unusual for soaps.

Lauralee Bell, an Emmy-winner who plays good-girl Christine Blair Williams and first joined the show in 1983, says her dad would likely not be surprised by the show's new milestone. "He said if you have two families that come from different backgrounds and good, solid characters, it's endless material."

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One of the ways the show will celebrate its milestone is with a masquerade ball storyline starting Thursday and continuing through the following week. Creators promise "surprise visits from fan favorites and secrets are revealed, forever changing the lives for the residents of Genoa City." "Entertainment Tonight" also plans a March 27 special.

The CBS soap has helped launch the careers of such primetime and film actors as Vivica A. Fox, David Hasselhoff, Adam Brody, Tom Selleck, Penn Badgley, Shemar Moore, Eva Longoria, Justin Hartley and the late Paul Walker. Eric Braeden plays the male lead Victor Newman, a villain of the highest quality who once kept his wife's lover locked in his basement.

Professor Elana Levine, who teaches media studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and wrote "Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History," says the staying power of soaps is that they get passed down from one generation to the next.

"What streaming TV has shown us is that serialized narratives and stories that continue from episode to episode are really appealing and engaging," she says. "Soaps did that before anybody and are the maximum version of that because the story is going for decades."

Among the cake-throwing food fights and evil twins on "The Young and the Restless," there have also been important firsts — it aired the first live facelift on TV, back in 1984, and when veteran actor Kristoff St. John died in 2019, the cast and crew held a funeral for his character, bringing tears to a returning Moore.

It became the first daytime drama with a character who had a mastectomy, it was the first soap opera to broadcast in HD and, perhaps most importantly, it welcomed leading Black actors in the 1980s before many other soaps.

"The Young and the Restless' attracted a big African American audience starting at that time because they were putting Black characters, front center, more so than some of the other soaps were," says Levine.

That's a legacy Bell is proud of and she puts it squarely as a result of her parents, whom she calls hard-working creators who demanded a lot from their writers and actors, even their kids.

"My dad was not afraid of being first. All the social issues he dealt with — date rape, AIDS, alcoholism, all of that. He really felt that if our audience bonded with these characters that they would learn," says Bell. "If we could even help one person, it was worth it."

Show veteran Melody Thomas Scott recalls a story that featured infant CPR, which is nothing like the adult version. "I think Bill and Lee wanted the world to know the difference," she says. On the soap, a baby swallows a coin and Victor Newman — of course — becomes the hero by showing viewers the correct CPR technique.

"We got so many calls in our 'Y&R' office the day after that episode aired, some mothers in tears, so grateful," she says. "That is the ultimate goal of sneaking in some social issues because it can save lives. It can change people's lives."

One of Bill Bell's hallmarks was telling stories in real time, for instance waiting for a couple's first hand holding, then waiting a while before their first kiss. "If the audience doesn't believe it and grow with them. It's hard to buy sometimes," his daughter says. The soap always stayed in the realm of reality: No getting possessed by the devil in Genoa City.

Scott is celebrating her 44th year on the show as Nikki Newman, a poor girl from the wrong side of the tracks. Her character has gone from a tempestuous, alcoholic stripper to the serial's luminous and resourceful leading lady.

She says the show has stayed true to Bill Bell's vision of a show with compelling characters played by beautiful people. Visually, the soap has stayed lush and elegant, with plenty of fresh flowers or candles on set. "We look different from any other show," she says.

Bell not only had a knack for storylines — he also knew his actors. Scott recalls being surprised when Bell paired her bratty character with tycoon Victor Newman, two people she thought had nothing in common.

"We discovered that we had this chemistry that we certainly didn't expect. But I think Bill, in all of his wisdom, somehow saw it in us," she says. "You can't force yourself to have chemistry with another actor. It just either is or isn't. So we are eternally grateful that Bill was so psychic in knowing that we would click."

The Bell family has continued to be part of the DNA of modern soaps, with Lauralee acting, her brother

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Brad serving as executive producer and head writer for sister soap "The Bold and the Beautiful" and brother Bill Jr. as president of the family production companies who made a deal for "The Young and the Restless" to be seen overseas, with versions in Israel, Canada, Turkey and France, among others.

"It was one of the first daytime soaps that got sold internationally," says Levine. "I think that has been a key to its continued success and profitability. The money that any daytime soap brings in domestically has lessened over time and the audience has gotten smaller."

If any viewers need convincing the "The Young and the Restless" has penetrated popular culture, look for further than Mary J. Blige, who sampled the show's theme song in her 2001 hit "No More Drama."

That mysterious man in the very first scene was Brad Elliot and ahead of him was plenty of drama — a love triangle with a pair of sisters, a marriage, the heartache of a miscarriage, a diagnosis of blindness and a divorce petition. Surgery restored his sight but his marriage never recovered. He left Genoa City after five years. The show continued.

When Lauralee Bell looks at the TV landscape today, she sees variations on what her parents created in primetime shows like "The Crown" and "Succession."

"Every show is a soap, every nighttime show is a soap, all of these streaming shows are versions of soap operas," she says. "So we're all sort of a little tired of the soaps-are-on-their-way-out — well, every show is a soap, really."

\_\_\_ Mark Kennedy is at <http://twitter.com/KennedyTwits>

## Arrest made in fire at planned Wyoming abortion clinic

By MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — A woman was arrested on charges of setting fire to a building in Wyoming that was being renovated to house the state's only full-service abortion clinic, authorities said Wednesday, hours after a judge temporarily blocked a ban on abortion that went into effect a few days ago.

Lorna Roxanne Green, 22, of Casper, was arrested on Tuesday by Casper police and agents from the FBI and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Wyoming U.S. Attorney Nicholas Vassallo said in a statement.

Green faces up to 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine if convicted, according to the statement. She is scheduled to appear in federal court in Cheyenne on Thursday morning.

The fire was set on May 25, 2022, at a stucco house in Casper, the state's second-largest city and the site of frequent anti-abortion protests.

A witness told police they heard glass breaking and saw a person leaving the area carrying a gas can and a black bag. Security video released by police showed a woman in a hooded shirt and mask carrying what appeared to be a red fuel can through a room of the building just before the fire.

No one was injured in the blaze, which left the planned WellSpring Health Access clinic with broken windows and smoke damage.

"Now that a suspect has been arrested, we can continue our singular focus on providing quality reproductive health care to the Casper community in a safe, compassionate environment," WellSpring President Julie Burkhart said in a statement.

The clinic had been scheduled to open last summer as the only facility of its kind in the state, offering women's health care, family planning and gender-affirming health care in addition to abortion services. But the fire delayed those plans.

It was then slated to open next month but was thrown into doubt after Gov. Mark Gordon allowed a broad new abortion ban to take effect on Sunday without his signature. On Wednesday, Teton County District Court Judge Melissa Owens halted the ban after a hearing in which abortion-rights supporters said the law harms pregnant women and their doctors and violates the state constitution. Owens suspended the ban for at least two weeks.

The ban prohibits abortion at all stages of pregnancy except in cases of rape or incest that's reported to police, or to save a woman's life. An amendment in the Wyoming Constitution says adults have a right to

make their own health care decisions, so Republicans enacted a ban that states abortion is not health care. Owens had also blocked a previous ban since shortly after it took effect last summer. Prior to the latest ban, a clinic in the mountain town of Jackson provided medication abortions.

## 'Rick and Morty' creator has domestic abuse charges dropped

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — California prosecutors on Wednesday dropped domestic violence charges against Justin Roiland, who created the Cartoon Network animated series "Rick and Morty" and provided the voices of the show's two title characters.

Orange County district attorney's spokeswoman Kimberly Edds said the two felony counts involving a former girlfriend were dropped "due to a lack of sufficient evidence beyond a reasonable doubt."

Roiland responded to the dismissal on Twitter.

"I have always known that these claims were false — and I never had any doubt that this day would come," he said. "I'm thankful that this case has been dismissed but, at the same time, I'm still deeply shaken by the horrible lies that were reported about me during this process."

He added that he is "disappointed that so many people were so quick to judge without knowing the facts, based solely on the word of a bitter ex trying to bypass due process and have me 'canceled.'"

Roiland, 43, had been awaiting trial on charges of corporal injury and false imprisonment by menace, fraud, violence or deceit against the woman, who he was living with at the time. She was not identified in court documents.

The charges dated to May of 2020, but they apparently went unnoticed by media outlets until NBC News reported on them in January of this year.

Roiland and Dan Harmon created the animated sci-fi sitcom about a mad scientist and his grandson, both voiced by Roiland. It has aired for six seasons on Cartoon Network as part of its Adult Swim nighttime programming block, and it has been renewed for a seventh.

Adult Swim and Cartoon Network cut ties with him when the charges were reported and said his roles would be recast. 20th TV Animation and Hulu Originals, which produce two other animated series Roiland worked on, did the same.

The companies declined comment on Wednesday.

In his tweet, Roiland said he is "determined to move forward and focus both on my creative projects and restoring my good name."

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Follow AP Entertainment Writer Andrew Dalton on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/andyjamesdalton>

## Gwyneth Paltrow ski collision trial brings doctors to stand

By SAM METZ Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — Two doctors on Wednesday described X-rays, brain scans and neurological tests documenting the medical condition of a man suing Gwyneth Paltrow for a 2016 ski collision at an upscale Utah ski resort.

"After his accident, he deteriorated abruptly," Dr. Wendell Gibby said of 76-year-old Terry Sanderson, the man suing Paltrow, in court in Park City.

Sanderson's attorneys called on medical experts to try to persuade jurors that the collision left their client with irreparable, life-altering injuries. Sanderson, who is a retired optometrist, has been described in court filings and the initial days of the trial as a man who frequently skis at high-end resorts and travels internationally. Still, his attorneys have worked to frame the celebrity lawsuit as a David-versus-Goliath struggle, with their older but active client injured by the actor-turned-wellness-tycoon's negligence.

Gibby, a radiologist, said brain images suggested Sanderson's head trauma was likely caused by a skier crashing into him, supporting Sanderson's claims that he was hit by Paltrow. He said lasting effects on Sanderson's overall health were consistent with the severity of the collision. "The rib fractures certainly

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corroborate that there was enough force to cause a head injury," Gibby added.

Dr. Samuel Goldstein, a neuropsychologist, called Sanderson's post-crash trajectory an "acute rapid downturn" — and urged jurors to use their common sense rather than get bogged down in questions about white matter beneath the cortex of the brain.

"Were it not for that particular accident, the life he was living in the six months to a year before that ... he would continue to be living," Goldstein said of Sanderson.

Sanderson claims Paltrow's recklessness left him with physical injuries and brain damage. After a judge threw out his earlier \$3.1 million lawsuit and ruled that he wasn't entitled to punitive damages, Sanderson amended his claims and now alleges damages of "more than \$300,000."

Paltrow will likely testify Friday, and her children Moses and Apple are also expected to take the stand sometime during the trial, her attorney said.

The amount of money sought pales in comparison to the typical legal costs of a multiyear lawsuit and expert witness-heavy trial. More than a dozen are expected to testify throughout the eight-day trial in Park City — a posh ski town known for welcoming celebrities each year for the Sundance Film Festival.

In a counterclaim to Sanderson's amended lawsuit, Paltrow is seeking \$1 and attorney fees — a familiar, symbolic action that highlights how reputation, not money, is often what's at stake for celebrities at trial like Paltrow. Taylor Swift similarly countersued a radio host for the same, symbolic amount in 2017.

Though the court is not publishing a witness list for the celebrity trial, attorneys said that Sanderson's daughters would likely be called to the stand next to testify. Attorneys are expected to question them about their father's health, as well as emails exchanged post-crash that mention GoPro camera footage and Paltrow's fame.

Both parties blame the other for the collision and claim they were crashed into from behind, relying on a little-known Utah law stipulating that whoever is downhill has the right of way when skiing or snowboarding.

Paltrow's attorneys have pled with Judge Kent Holmberg to grant special restrictions throughout the trial, including limiting photography both in the courtroom and in the public parking lot outside — where a rope cordons off Paltrow's entrance and exit paths.

Sanderson left the courtroom Wednesday before experts testified on his health and mental acuity, but on the opening day of the trial, he sat across the courtroom from Paltrow. Both appeared unfazed while hearing arguments that have become familiar over the seven years since they crashed. Paltrow, the founder and CEO of the wellness company Goop, arrived in court on Wednesday drinking a green juice.

The trial is expected to hinge on how the 10 jurors — six women and four men — interpret evidence from medical experts, and whether they see Sanderson's injuries as directly related to the accident or normal parts of aging. The jurors are all residents of wealthy Summit County, where the median home last month sold for \$1.3 million, according to Redfin.

On Wednesday, jurors stretched and yawned through hours of testimony that was dense with medical jargon. After Sanderson's attorneys called experts to the stand to describe Sanderson's health, Paltrow's attorneys delved into the complexities of different kinds of MRIs and neurological tests, casting doubt on the experts' conclusions.

In a trial expected to feature a long list of medical experts, Paltrow's attorneys have cautioned the jury not to be biased by feeling sympathy for Sanderson. They opened the trial by calling his story "utter B.S." — building off earlier claims from court filings and previous depositions where they accused him of suing to exploit the wealth and celebrity of the Oscar-winning star of "Shakespeare in Love."

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Associated Press writer Anna Furman contributed reporting from Los Angeles.

## Trump lawyer ordered to turn over Mar-a-Lago case documents

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal appeals court in a sealed order Wednesday directed a lawyer for Donald Trump to turn over to prosecutors documents in the investigation into the former president's retention of classified records at his Florida estate.



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The ruling is a significant win for the Justice Department, which has focused for months not only on the hoarding of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago but also on why Trump and his representatives resisted demands to return them to the government. It suggests the court has sided with prosecutors who have argued behind closed doors that Trump was using his legal representation to further a crime.

The order was reflected in a brief online notice by a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. The case is sealed, and none of the parties in the dispute is mentioned by name.

But the details appear to correspond with a secret fight before a lower court judge over whether Trump lawyer M. Evan Corcoran could be forced to provide documents or give grand jury testimony in the Justice Department special counsel probe into whether Trump mishandled top-secret information at Mar-a-Lago.

Corcoran is regarded as relevant to the investigation in part because last year he drafted a statement to the Justice Department asserting that a "diligent search" for classified documents had been conducted at Mar-a-Lago in response to a subpoena. That claim proved untrue as FBI agents weeks later searched the home with a warrant and found roughly 100 additional documents with classified markings.

Another Trump lawyer, Christina Bobb, told investigators last fall that Corcoran had drafted the letter and asked her to sign it in her role as a designated custodian of Trump's records.

A Justice Department investigation led by special counsel Jack Smith and his team of prosecutors is examining whether Trump or anyone in his orbit obstructed its efforts to recover all the classified documents, which included top-secret material, from his home. No charges have yet been filed. The inquiry is one of multiple legal threats Trump faces, including probes in Atlanta and Washington over his efforts to undo the election result and a grand jury investigation in New York over hush money payments. The New York case appears to be nearing completion and building toward an indictment.

Last week, Beryl Howell, the outgoing chief judge of the U.S. District Court, directed Corcoran to answer additional questions before the grand jury. He had appeared weeks earlier before the federal grand jury investigating the Mar-a-Lago matter, but had invoked attorney-client privilege to avoid answering certain questions.

Though attorney-client privilege shields lawyers from being forced to share details of their conversations with clients before prosecutors, the Justice Department can get around that if it can convince a judge that a lawyer's services were used in furtherance of a crime — a principle known in the law as the "crime-fraud" exception.

Howell ruled in the Justice Department's favor shortly before stepping aside as chief judge Friday, according to a person familiar with the matter, who was not authorized to discuss a sealed proceeding and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity. That ruling was subsequently appealed, and the court records show the dispute before the federal appeals panel concerned an order that was issued last Friday by Howell.

The three-judge panel that issued the decision include Cornelia Pillard, an appointee of former President Barack Obama, and J. Michelle Childs and Florence Pan, both appointees of President Joe Biden. The order came just hours after the court imposed tight deadlines on both sides to file written briefs making their case.

A lawyer for Corcoran did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment Wednesday, and a lawyer for Trump declined to comment on the sealed order.

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Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

## Analysis: China's sway over Russia grows amid Ukraine fight

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — It was a revealing moment during Chinese leader Xi Jinping's tightly scripted visit to Moscow: Standing in the doorway of the Grand Kremlin Palace, he told Russian President Vladimir Putin that the two of them were "witnessing the changes that haven't been seen in more than a century, and

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we are pushing them together.”

“I agree,” Putin responded.

The remarks — caught on a Kremlin camera over a bodyguard’s shoulder — offered a rare glimpse into Xi’s ambitions and his relationship with Russia after more than a year of fighting in Ukraine.

While Moscow increasingly looks like a junior partner to Beijing, Xi is likely to offer a strong lifeline to Putin, his key partner in efforts to reshape the world to try to limit U.S. domination.

Xi’s unusually blunt statement capped more than 10 hours of Kremlin talks, which ended with long declarations filled with florid rhetoric about expanding the “comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation” between Russia and China, pledges to champion a multilateral approach to global affairs and criticism of Washington.

In his concluding statement, Putin hailed the Chinese proposal for a settlement in Ukraine, which the West had all but rejected as a non-starter. The Russian leader also rolled out a slew of initiatives that cemented his country’s role as a key source of energy and other raw materials for China’s giant economy. He proposed building new energy pipelines, invited the Chinese to fill the niche left after the exodus of Western businesses, and vowed to boost the export of agricultural products to China.

Xi remained tight-lipped, avoiding any firm commitments regarding specific projects and mostly sticking to general and vague rhetoric about expanding ties.

“A lot of things that Vladimir Putin would have liked to happen did not, in fact, happen,” Rana Mitter, professor of Chinese history and politics at Oxford University, told The Associated Press. “There was no point at which Xi explicitly said that he accepted Russia’s position on the Ukraine war over the position of Ukraine.”

In fact, there was “a sense that China was reserving for itself the right to step away from a complete endorsement” of the Russian position, Mitter added.

Moscow and Beijing said they would increase contacts between their militaries and stage more joint sea and air patrols and drills, but there wasn’t even the slightest hint from China about helping Russia with weapons, as the U.S. and other Western allies feared.

Speaking Wednesday before a Senate committee, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said China so far has heeded strong U.S. warnings against providing lethal material support for Russia in Ukraine. “We have not seen them cross that — cross that line,” he said.

A top analyst at the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency said Beijing wants to be seen as a peacemaker and diplomatic heavyweight.

“So I think China would be very reluctant to be seen openly supporting Russia with lethal aid,” said Doug Wade, head of the DIA’s China mission group. “It would undermine their whole narrative about their role in the world that they’re trying so hard to sell.”

U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby described the Putin-Xi relationship as “a marriage of convenience,” in which they pool efforts to challenge U.S. leadership, and the Russians “certainly are the junior partner.” He added at a briefing earlier this week that Putin sees Xi as “a lifeline of sorts” amid the fighting in Ukraine.

Many commentators argued that the summit marked Putin’s failure to win any specific aid from Beijing and cemented Russia’s increasingly subordinate role in the alliance with China.

“China’s domination of Russia is complete,” tweeted Sam Greene, professor in Russian politics at King’s College London. “While there were undoubtedly agreements we are not meant to know about, there is no indication here of a significant increase in military support for Russia — nor even of a willingness on Xi’s part to ramp up diplomatic support. A swing and a miss for Putin.”

After more than a year of fighting in Ukraine and bruising Western sanctions, Russia’s dependence on China has increased significantly. Facing Western restrictions on its oil, gas and other exports, Russia has shifted its energy flows to China and sharply expanded other exports, resulting in a 30% hike in bilateral trade.

Western price caps on Russia’s oil forced Moscow to offer it to China and other customers at a sharp

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discount, but despite those lower prices, the vast Chinese market ensured a stable flow of oil revenue to the Kremlin's coffers.

As long as Russia can trade with China and other Asian states, it will face "no danger of running out of money or being forced to concede on the battlefield, said Chris Weafer, CEO of the consulting firm Macro-Advisory.

While profiting handsomely from Moscow's desperate situation, Beijing would be certain to ramp up its support if it sees Russia dangerously weakened.

"The nightmare scenario for China is that collapse of Russia militarily leads to collapse of the regime and installment of some pro-Western government," said Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment.

Gabuev argued that Beijing would be unlikely to provide any direct military assistance to Moscow any-time soon simply because it doesn't feel the pressing need to do so. "Russia is not doing great on the battlefield, but it's obviously not losing it, so the need to support the Russian military efforts so far is questionable from both sides," he said.

More than ammunition, tanks and rockets, Russia badly needs China's help in skirting Western sanctions to maintain the flow of high-tech components for its weapons industries and other economic sectors. Sergei Markov, a pro-Kremlin political analyst, predicted that China could be expected to act more resolutely to help Russia get them.

"Russia doesn't need weapons from China," Markov wrote on his messaging app channel. "It needs microchips and components, and they will come."

Some observers say that while Beijing has been coy about supporting Moscow, it has vital interest in shoring up its ally to avoid being left alone in any potential confrontation with the United States.

Mikhail Korostikov, an expert on Russia-China ties, said in a commentary for the Carnegie Endowment that China has been closely watching Russia's experience in facing massive Western sanctions. "For Beijing, a close study and partial use of instruments and decisions used by Russia is a reasonable course in a situation when China's confrontation with the West looks inevitable," he said.

Korostikov noted that while Moscow's dependence on Beijing is growing, China's room for maneuvering is also shrinking.

"There is no alternative to Russia as a partner providing resources that China will critically need in case of an escalation in its confrontation with the West," he said. "It helps balance the situation and allows Moscow to hope that Beijing will not overuse its newly-acquired economic levers."

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Isachenkov has covered Russia and other former Soviet nations for The Associated Press since 1992.

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Associated Press writers Michael Weissenstein in New York, and Matthew Lee, Zeke Miller and Nomaan Merchant in Washington contributed.

## Fed raises key rate by quarter-point despite bank turmoil

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve extended its year-long fight against high inflation Wednesday by raising its key interest rate by a quarter-point despite concerns that higher borrowing rates could worsen the turmoil that has gripped the banking system.

At a news conference, Fed Chair Jerome Powell sought to reassure Americans that it is safe to leave money in their banks, two weeks after a rush of depositors pulled funds from Silicon Valley Bank, which collapsed in the second-biggest bank failure in U.S. history. Signature Bank fell soon afterward.

"We have the tools to protect depositors when there's a threat of serious harm to the economy or to the financial system," Powell said. "Depositors should assume that their deposits are safe."

The Fed chair also underscored that the central bank remains focused on fighting high inflation, which could require additional rate hikes. Yet he also signaled that the Fed might not need to impose many more

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increases if more banks were to reduce their lending to conserve cash. This could lead to slower growth, hiring and inflation, Powell said.

The Fed "is trying to have its cake and eat it too," said Subadra Rajappa, head of rates strategy at the investment bank Societe Generale. "They wanted to show a bias towards hiking but didn't want to actually commit to more hikes."

In fact, the Fed also signaled that it could be nearing the end of its aggressive streak of rate increases. In its policy statement, it removed language that had previously said it would keep raising rates at future meetings. The statement now says "some additional policy firming may be appropriate" — a weaker commitment to tightening credit.

And in their latest quarterly economic projections, the policymakers forecast that they expect to raise their key rate just once more — from its new level of about 4.9% to 5.1%, the same peak they had projected in December.

Still, the Fed's statement included some language that indicated that its inflation fight remains far from complete. It noted that "inflation remains elevated," and it removed a phrase, "inflation has eased somewhat," that was in its February statement.

"The process of getting inflation back down to 2% has a long way to go and is likely to be bumpy," Powell said.

Despite the Fed's projection that it will impose only one more rate hike, Powell also said the central bank could still carry out additional hikes if inflation remained chronically high. Inflation was 6% in February compared with a year ago, far above the Fed's 2% target.

If banks do pull back on lending in the coming months, that could slow the economy and possibly act as the equivalent of an additional quarter-point rate hike, Powell said. In other words, the problems in the banking sector could do some of the Fed's work for it by slowing the economy and cooling inflation.

"Events in the banking system over the past two weeks are likely to result in tighter credit conditions for households and businesses," the Fed chair said. "It is too soon to determine the extent of these effects and therefore too soon" for the Fed to know how or whether its plans for interest rates might be affected.

Wednesday's rate hike, the Fed's ninth since last March, suggests that Powell is confident that the Fed can manage a dual challenge: Cool still-high inflation through higher loan rates while defusing turmoil in the banking sector through emergency lending programs and the Biden administration's decision to cover uninsured deposits at the two failed banks.

Pressed at his news conference about the Fed's missing what observers say were clear signs that Silicon Valley Bank was at high risk of collapsing into the second-largest bank failure in U.S. history, Powell acknowledged that "we do need to strengthen supervision and regulation."

But he declared the overall banking system secure, saying, "These are not weaknesses that are there at all broadly through the system."

Powell promised that he would not involve himself in the Fed's investigation into its supervisory and regulatory failures regarding Silicon Valley, which was announced last week. It will be led by the central bank's vice chair for supervision, Michael Barr.

With Wednesday's hike, the Fed's benchmark short-term rate has reached its highest level in 16 years. The new level will likely lead to higher costs for many loans, from mortgages and auto purchases to credit cards and corporate borrowing. The succession of Fed rate hikes have also heightened the risk of a recession.

The Fed's latest policy decision reflects an abrupt shift. Early this month, Powell had told a Senate panel that the Fed was considering raising its rate by a substantial half-point. At the time, hiring and consumer spending had strengthened more than expected. Inflation data had also been revised higher.

The troubles that suddenly erupted in the banking sector two weeks ago likely led to the Fed's decision to raise its benchmark rate by a quarter-point rather than a half-point.

Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank were both brought down, indirectly, by higher rates, which pummeled the value of the Treasuries and other bonds they owned. As depositors withdrew money en masse, the banks had to sell the bonds at a loss to pay the depositors. They couldn't raise enough cash to do so.

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After the fall of the two banks, Credit Suisse was taken over by UBS. Another struggling bank, First Republic, has received large deposits from its rivals in a show of support, though its share price plunged Monday before stabilizing.

Other major central banks are also seeking to tame high inflation without worsening financial instability. Even with the anxieties surrounding the global banking system, for instance, the Bank of England faces pressure to approve an 11th straight rate hike Thursday.

And the European Central Bank, saying Europe's banking sector was resilient, last week raised its benchmark rate by a half point to combat inflation of 8.5%. At the same time, the ECB president, Christine Lagarde, has shifted to an open-ended stance regarding further rate increases.

In the United States, most recent data still points to a solid economy and strong hiring. Employers added a robust 311,000 jobs in February. And while the unemployment rate rose, from 3.4% to a still-low 3.6%, that mostly reflected an influx of new job-seekers who were not immediately hired. In its latest quarterly projections, the Fed predicts that the unemployment rate will rise from its current 3.6% to 4.5% by year's end.

## Lindsay Lohan, other celebs settle with SEC over crypto case

By ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Actress Lindsay Lohan, rapper Akon and several other celebrities have agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars to settle claims they promoted crypto investments to their millions of social media followers without disclosing they were being paid to do so.

Lohan, Akon, recording artists Ne-Yo, and Lil Yachty, boxer and internet personality Jake Paul, and adult film performer Michele Mason all agreed to pay more than \$400,000 combined in disgorgement, interest and penalties to settle the claims, the Securities and Exchange Commission said Wednesday.

None admitted or denied the SEC's findings as part of the settlement. Two other celebrities named in the SEC's complaint, rapper Soulja Boy and pop singer Austin Mahone, did not reach a settlement with the SEC, the agency said.

In response to a request for comment, Lohan's publicist Leslie Sloane said the actress was contacted in March 2022, was unaware of the disclosure requirement, and agreed to pay a fine to resolve the matter. Lohan, who last week announced she is pregnant, was called to give up the \$10,000 she was paid, plus interest, and pay a \$30,000 fine, according an SEC complaint.

A spokeswoman for Paul declined to comment. Emails left with representatives for the other celebrities named in the SEC complaint weren't immediately returned Wednesday.

In the complaint filed by the SEC in federal court in New York, the agency claims the celebrities were paid to promote Tronix (TRX) and BitTorrent (BTT), both crypto asset securities that were offered for sale by three companies owned by Justin Sun, a Chinese national. Sun is the permanent representative of Grenada to the World Trade Organization and may be living in Singapore or Hong Kong, according to the complaint.

Starting at around August 2017, Sun allegedly offered to sell billions in the unregistered securities and engaged in manipulative trading, while also creating secondary markets on which Tronix and BitTorrent could be traded, according to the complaint.

"Although the celebrities were paid to promote TRX and BTT, their touts on social media did not disclose that they had been paid or the amounts of their payments," according to the complaint. "Thus, the public was misled into believing that these celebrities had unbiased interest in TRX and BTT, and were not merely paid spokespersons."

Many celebrities and athletes have used their influence and massive social media followings to promote cryptocurrencies in recent years, including Matt Damon, Tom Brady and Reese Witherspoon. But doing so without disclosing when they're being paid to do so is illegal, and has landed some big names in hot water with securities regulators. Last fall, Kim Kardashian agreed to pay a \$1 million fine to settle federal charges that she recommended Ethereum Max tokens, a crypto security, to her millions Instagram fol-

lowers without making clear that she was paid to do so.

In 2020, actor Steven Seagal agreed to pay more than \$300,000 as part of a similar settlement with the SEC, which also banned him from promoting investments for three years.

Entertainment Writer Andrew Dalton contributed to this report.

## What made Beethoven sick? DNA from his hair offers clues

By MADDIE BURAKOFF AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Nearly 200 years after Ludwig van Beethoven's death, researchers pulled DNA from strands of his hair, searching for clues about the health problems and hearing loss that plagued him.

They weren't able to crack the case of the German composer's deafness or severe stomach ailments. But they did find a genetic risk for liver disease, plus a liver-damaging hepatitis B infection in the last months of his life.

These factors, along with his chronic drinking, were probably enough to cause the liver failure that is widely believed to have killed him, according to a study published Wednesday in the journal *Current Biology*.

This Sunday marks the 196th anniversary of Beethoven's death in Vienna on March 26, 1827, at the age of 56. The composer himself wrote that he wanted doctors to study his health problems after he died.

"With Beethoven in particular, it is the case that illnesses sometimes very much limited his creative work," said study author Axel Schmidt, a geneticist at University Hospital Bonn in Germany. "And for physicians, it has always been a mystery what was really behind it."

Since his death, scientists have long tried to piece together Beethoven's medical history and have offered a variety of possible explanations for his many maladies.

Now, with advances in ancient DNA technology, researchers have been able to pull genetic clues from locks of Beethoven's hair that had been snipped off and preserved as keepsakes. They focused on five locks that are "almost certainly authentic," coming from the same European male, according to the study.

They also looked at three other historical locks, but weren't able to confirm those were actually Beethoven's. Previous tests on one of those locks suggested Beethoven had lead poisoning, but researchers concluded that sample was actually from a woman.

After cleaning Beethoven's hair one strand at a time, scientists dissolved the pieces into a solution and fished out chunks of DNA, said study author Tristan James Alexander Begg, a biological anthropologist at the University of Cambridge.

Getting genes out was a challenge, since DNA in hair gets chopped up into tiny fragments, explained author Johannes Krause, a paleogeneticist at Germany's Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.

But eventually, after using up almost 10 feet (3 meters) of Beethoven's hair, they were able to piece together a genome that they could "quiz" for signs of genetic disease, Krause said.

While researchers didn't find any clear genetic signs of what caused Beethoven's gastrointestinal issues, they found that celiac disease and lactose intolerance were unlikely causes. In the future, the genome may offer more clues as we learn more about how genes influence health, Begg said.

The research also led to a surprising discovery: When they tested DNA from living members of the extended Beethoven family, scientists found a discrepancy in the Y chromosomes that get passed down on the father's side. The Y chromosomes from the five men matched each other — but they didn't match the composer's.

This suggests there was an "extra-pair paternity event" somewhere in the generations before Beethoven was born, Begg said. In other words, a child born from an extramarital relationship in the composer's family tree.

The key question of what caused Beethoven's hearing loss is still unanswered, said Ohio State University's Dr. Avraham Z. Cooper, who was not involved in the study. And it may be a difficult one to figure out, because genetics can only show us half of the "nature and nurture" equation that makes up our health.

But he added that the mystery is part of what makes Beethoven so captivating: "I think the fact that

we can't know is OK," Cooper said.

AP journalist Daniel Niemann contributed to this report from Bonn, Germany.

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## DeSantis to expand 'Don't Say Gay' law to all grades

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' administration is moving to forbid classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in all grades, expanding the controversial law critics call "Don't Say Gay" as the Republican governor continues to focus on cultural issues ahead of his expected presidential run.

The proposal, which would not require legislative approval, is scheduled for a vote next month before the state Board of Education and has been put forward by the state Education Department, both of which are led by appointees of the governor.

The rule change would ban lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity from grades 4 to 12, unless required by existing state standards or as part of reproductive health instruction that students can choose not to take. The initial law that DeSantis championed last spring bans those lessons in kindergarten through the third grade. The change was first reported by the Orlando Sentinel.

DeSantis has leaned heavily into cultural divides on his path to an anticipated White House bid, with the Republican aggressively pursuing a conservative agenda that targets what he calls the insertion of inappropriate subjects in schools.

Spokespeople for the governor's office and the Education Department did not immediately return an emailed request for comment.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre condemned the proposal saying "It's wrong, it's completely, utterly wrong." She called it "part of a disturbing and dangerous trend that we're seeing across the nation" of targeting LGBTQ people.

Last year's Parental Rights in Education Act drew widespread backlash nationally, with critics saying it marginalizes LGBTQ people and their presence in society. President Joe Biden called it "hateful."

DeSantis and other Republicans have repeatedly said the measure is reasonable and that parents, not teachers, should be broaching subjects of sexual orientation and gender identity with their children.

Critics of the law say its language — "classroom instruction," "age appropriate" and "developmentally appropriate" — is overly broad and subject to interpretation. Consequently, teachers might opt to avoid the subjects entirely for fear of being sued, they say.

The law also kicked off a feud between the state and Disney, one of the state's largest employers and political donors, after the entertainment giant publicly opposed the law and said it was pausing political donations in the state.

At the governor's request, the Republican-dominated Legislature voted to dissolve a self-governing district controlled by Walt Disney World over its properties in Florida, and eventually gave DeSantis control of the board. The move was widely seen as a punishment for the company opposing the law. The board oversees municipal services in Disney's theme park properties and was instrumental in the company's decision to build near Orlando in the 1960s.

Disney later this year will host a large conference on LGBTQ workplace representation with the group Out & Equal, continuing a longstanding relationship with the organization.

DeSantis has faced calls from at least one Republican presidential contender to go even further than the existing law, with former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley last month saying the prohibition could be more stringent and extended into later grades.

The proposed rule change this year also signals the governor's willingness to bypass even the compliant

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state legislature and instead leverage state boards in order to accomplish his high-profile political goals. Late last year, at DeSantis' urging, state medical boards voted to ban children from receiving hormones or undergoing surgeries to treat gender dysphoria.

"Everything he does is about what can further his own career ambitions," said Brandon Wolf, press secretary for the LGBTQ advocacy group Equality Florida. "And it's clear he sees the anti-LGBTQ movement as his vehicle to get him where he wants to go."

Associated Press reporter Aamer Madhani contributed from Washington.

## War on gangs forges new El Salvador. But the price is steep.

By MEGAN JANETSKY and FERNANDA PESCE Associated Press

SOYAPANGO, El Salvador (AP) — With semiautomatic weapons pressed to their chest, a pack of camouflage-clad police officers marches through rows of small brick homes winding up hills on the fringes of El Salvador's capital.

They rap sharply on door after door, pushing into homes with dozing teenagers listening to music or toddlers eating breakfast and watching cartoons.

Stepping foot in La Campanera, once one of El Salvador's bloodiest neighborhoods, would have been unthinkable before the government suspended constitutional rights and started an all-out offensive on the gangs one year ago.

Today, police march past skeletons of ransacked homes, abandoned by those fleeing the bloodshed that marked these streets for decades. Officers demand men strip off their shirts so they can examine their bodies for tattoos, and flip through deeds and energy bills, once unpaid under gang rule. Residents scrape together any evidence they can to prove they aren't members of Barrio 18, the gang that once dominated here.

Neighbors look on not with surprise, but resigned acceptance.

"Now it's normal," Katherine Zaldivar said after her house was searched, her 4-year-old daughter peering up at the two officers as she sat on the floor finishing her cereal. "They're always here."

El Salvador has undergone a radical transformation since President Nayib Bukele — the self-described "world's coolest dictator" — ordered a state of emergency in response to an alarming surge in gang violence. Bukele has imprisoned over 65,000 of the nation's 6.3 million people, packing thousands inside a "mega-prison" that's set to be one of the world's largest. Bloodshed has faded away in places like La Campanera as the presence of the most fearsome gangs dwindles.

Police stops like the one at Zaldivar's home are the new norm. The national homicide rate, the highest in the world as recently as 2015, has dipped to numbers more comparable to Maine or New Hampshire, though some analysts question the integrity of the government data.

Small freedoms mark the monumental shift for many Salvadorans. They enjoy traversing San Salvador by night, order pizza from delivery services newly entering former gang territories, and open businesses without gangs extorting them for money.

For others, the transformation comes at a steep price.

Tens of thousands of children are torn from their parents, who have been taken to prisons with conditions fueling a flood of reported human rights abuses. Observers raise alarms about the slipping of a delicate democracy, a decay threatening to ripple across the region. For many, fear of the gangs has been replaced by fear of the very government claiming to protect them.

"The long term question, and what I fear, is: Is this going to become a police state?" said Michael Paarlberg, a political science professor at Virginia Commonwealth University researching El Salvador.

Bukele's government declined various requests by The Associated Press for interviews, written comment or access to the prisons.

And despite the relative calm, the gangs still lurk.

Yet for the family of 44-year-old Maritza Pacheco, opening a corner shop outside their home four months



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ago was a small miracle.

On the dusty streets of the Primero de Diciembre neighborhood, they lived in a state of constant panic. Members of the notorious Mara Salvatrucha gang, or MS-13, would war with nearby Barrio 18 rivals, sending gunfire ringing out over flimsy tin-sheet homes.

The gangs were formed in Los Angeles in the 1970s and '80s by migrants fleeing war in Central America. After many members were deported, the groups took root in El Salvador and flourished. Before the crack-downs, the government said 118,000 gang members were on the streets nationwide.

They long terrorized and extorted poor communities. To scrape by, Pacheco and her daughter secretly sold fruits and vegetables in a market in another neighborhood, avoiding gang payments simply referred to as "rent."

The family of 11 tried to isolate themselves, determined not to get sucked into the lawlessness around them. But the gangs began closing in on her teenage son. Early last year, Pacheco paid to have him and his sister smuggled to the U.S.

"As he got older, those guys would go looking for him, and that scared me," Pacheco said. "Raising a child only to lose him to this? No way."

Then, in May, two months after the state of emergency came into effect and police stormed the neighborhood, something unprecedented happened: Pacheco watched as the truck of a local soda provider, SalvaCola, rolled by their house.

Then came fruit vendors. Then banks, one of which gave them a loan to start her own business.

Today, Pacheco sells candies, sodas and pastries to neighborhood kids playing nearby. The family went from earning \$15 a day, just enough to subsist, to \$60, enough to save for the future.

"Things have changed a lot," she said. "People come and stay sometimes until 12 or 1 in the morning. And it's so safe that we can stay open."

That change is painted across San Salvador. As the sun sets, families amble through the streets in a religious procession, instead of hiding away at the first hint of darkness. Cradling candles, they drift past packed pupuserías and bustling karate gyms. Police trucks on patrol roar past as dozens of elderly Salvadorans doing aerobics in a park; nearby, gangs were known to pile bodies in mass graves. Prisoners, under careful watch, slap brown paint over faded blue MS-13 graffiti on a brick wall.

Such graffiti, once speckling the city, has all but disappeared in Bukele's efforts to erase any trace of the gangs. Less visible is the damage left by the crackdown.

Bukele's administration has suppressed critics and journalists, wielding a robust disinformation machine and a tightly controlled communications strategy. Nowhere is that more evident than inside prisons, likened to torture chambers by two government officials and a former prisoner who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because they fear retribution by the government and gangs.

They describe cells so packed that inmates can't sit down, struggling to go to the bathroom. Prisoners rarely see the light of day, and cells reek of unwashed inmates. Many of them cough, including women and elderly prisoners. One former inmate described watching others carried away in body bags.

The government confirmed in November that at least 90 have died in custody, but since has been largely tight-lipped about death counts.

Little is known officially about the facilities outside of highly produced videos Bukele plasters on social media layered over dramatic, action-movie music. One video released last week shows police packing their new "mega-prison" with 2,000 more tattooed young men. Bukele's government says it could fit up to 40,000 people.

"This will be their new house, where they will live for decades, mixed together, unable to do any more harm to the population," Bukele tweeted following the opening of the prison, referring to prisoners as "terrorists."

Pressure to make detentions was so great that in December, extra Christmas vacation days were offered to those who could get the highest capture counts, said one of the officials who spoke to AP — an officer who has worked for decades in gang-controlled zones.

"We received specific orders that we in the streets had to arrest a certain number of people, whether

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they were gangsters or not," the officer said. "Many innocents were detained and their rights were violated. "We've committed crimes."

Nearly one in six people who have been imprisoned are innocent, estimates the country's police union tracking detentions.

Human Rights Watch estimates that more than 1,000 children as young as 12 have been detained. The organization accused Bukele's government of due process violations, targeting marginalized communities with "indiscriminate" raids, torturing detainees and overpacking prisons.

Local rights group Cristosal documented 3,344 cases of human rights violations in the first 11 months of the state of emergency. Still, advocates say people are often too scared to report cases.

But most civilians who spoke to AP view human rights concerns as collateral damage for a greater good. And the president's approval rating has soared to 91%, according to a March poll by LPG Data. So, too, has approval for the crackdown.

"The president is doing what no one has been able to. You know there are a lot of innocent people caught in the middle," said Jorge Guzmán, a pastor of a church in a former red zone. "But you accept what's happening as something that had to happen."

Bukele has harnessed his approval to further consolidate power, according to the officials who spoke to AP, as well as watchdogs and analysts.

"It's a very attractive model," said Abraham Abrego, a leader of Cristosal. "It's a model that sells a kind of punitive populism to gain popularity and stay in power."

The government has extended Bukele's state-of-exception measures a dozen times. In September, he announced he would run for reelection despite El Salvador's constitution banning presidents from consecutive terms.

When asked what she thought of Bukele, Pacheco, the owner of the corner shop, responded: "I've never voted in my life. Now, I would vote for him."

While Bukele has dealt a historic blow to the gangs, they still quietly linger in the areas they once controlled, according to locals, law enforcement and government personnel.

The police official told AP that in the push to stack arrest counts, many of those captured by the government were low-level foot soldiers, people collecting "rents," or lookouts.

Many gang members remain free in parts of Mexico and Guatemala. It's in part, critics say, due to Bukele's reported negotiations with MS-13, though he denies making any deals with gangs. The officer said that in Bukele's ranks, there is a widespread fear that the gangs are biding their time, and that they will then become targets.

And inside prisons, officials and former prisoners say, gang members simmer with a sort of vengeful rage. The second official who spoke to AP on condition of anonymity, a social worker, called it "a time bomb."

In many areas, locals are still being extorted and paying gangs. In others, small-scale drug operations are still active. Across San Salvador, people speak about the groups in hushed voices.

Many, like Jennifer Luna de Diaz, Pacheco's 27-year-old daughter who helps run the corner shop, believe the gangs are still quietly monitoring their barrios. Family members and girlfriends of gang members have a strong presence in former gang territories.

"They're still here. All day. Listening, overseeing things," Luna de Diaz said. "I'm scared for my kids, my two boys."

Most recently, watchdogs have raised alarms about the government's anonymous tip line being weaponized to seek revenge and intimidate those no longer paying the gangs.

In late February, someone made such a call about Pacheco's family, accusing them of being affiliated with gangs, they said.

Police arrived and forced them to strip to search for tattoos, and eventually let them go, the family said. It scared Luna de Diaz enough that she decided to use money she's saved to send her 12-year-old son to the U.S. like her brothers.

Other families agonize over the unknown: Is my son alive? Why did my mother get detained? Will I ever

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see my brother again?

Gisel was 17 when the police came for her parents chasing an anonymous tip. She and her 8-year-old brother, Brayan, lived a quiet life in a coffee-growing town. Her construction-worker father was never involved with the gangs, she said. On weekends, they played soccer together in the park, said Gisel, who spoke to AP on condition that her family's full name not be used, over fears of government retribution and to protect her minor brother.

Six months ago, she returned from class to find her small community teeming with dozens of soldiers. Her parents sat handcuffed on the side of the road. She rushed home and found Brayan sitting alone. It was the last they heard of their parents.

For more than 45,100 children nationally, at least one parent has been detained, according to internal data from the country's social services entity shared with AP. At least 1,675 children have been left without any parents or extended relatives to care for them.

The social worker who spoke to AP described traumatized children. Confused kids as young as 3 sink into depression thinking their parents don't love them, the social worker said. Teenagers get angry and lash out.

"Emotionally they feel totally abandoned, and economically they have no support. So what's waiting for these kids down the line?" she said.

Gisel and Brayan's aunt would bus four hours from San Salvador to care for them, giving up her job to do so. Their extended family pools money for their care.

Gisel started having nightmares. One night, she awoke to her brother sobbing next to her.

"The pain eats him from the inside," Gisel, now 18, said. "Before he was a more caring person ... Now, he doesn't share his feelings; he isolates himself. He suffers, I know he suffers."

While they await news of their parents, their family has asked courts to do a psychological examination to assess the trauma from the separation.

She clings to small pieces of their past life, flipping through a photo book in their home that now feels empty.

"I miss the love that we can't get from them now. Hugs from my mom, hugs from my dad," Gisel said.

## Sotheby's hopes for record sale of ancient Hebrew Bible

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — One of the oldest surviving biblical manuscripts, a nearly complete 1,100-year-old Hebrew Bible, could soon be yours — for a cool \$30 million.

The Codex Sassoon, a leather-bound, handwritten parchment tome containing almost the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, is set to go on the block at Sotheby's in New York in May. Its anticipated sale speaks to the still bullish market for art, antiquities and ancient manuscripts even in a worldwide bear economy.

Sotheby's is drumming up interest in hopes of enticing institutions and collectors to bite. It has put the price tag at an eye-watering \$30 million to \$50 million.

On Wednesday, Tel Aviv's ANU Museum of the Jewish People opened a week-long exhibition of the manuscript, part of a whirlwind worldwide tour of the artifact in the United Kingdom, Israel and the United States before its expected sale, on Wednesday.

"There are three ancient Hebrew Bibles from this period," said Yosef Ofer, a professor of Bible studies at Israel's Bar Ilan University: the Codex Sassoon and Aleppo Codex from the 10th century, and the Leningrad Codex, from the early 11th century.

Only the Dead Sea Scrolls and a handful of fragmentary early medieval texts are older, and "an entire Hebrew Bible is relatively rare," he said.

Starting a few centuries before the Codex Sassoon's creation, Jewish scholars known as Masoretes started codifying oral traditions of how to properly spell, pronounce, punctuate and chant the words of Judaism's holiest book. Unlike Torah scrolls, where the Hebrew letters are devoid of vowels and punctuation, these manuscripts contained extensive annotation instructing readers how to recite the words correctly.

Precisely where and when the Codex Sassoon was made remains uncertain. Sharon Liberman Mintz, a

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senior Judaica specialist at Sotheby's, said that radiocarbon dating of the parchment gave an estimated date of 880 to 960. The codex's writing style suggests its creator was an unspecified early 10th-century scribe in Egypt or the Levant.

"It's like the emergence of the biblical text as we know it today," Mintz said. "It's so foundational not only for Judaism, but also for world culture."

Though it's certainly ancient and rare, scholars say the Codex Sassoon doesn't match the pedigree and quality of its contemporary — the Aleppo Codex.

"Any Masoretic scholar in their right mind would take the Aleppo Codex over the Sassoon Codex, without any regret or hesitation," said Kim Phillips, a Bible expert at the Cambridge University Library. He said the scribal quality was "surprisingly sloppy" compared to its counterpart.

The Aleppo Codex, dated to around 930, has been considered the gold standard of the Masoretic Bibles for around 1,000 years. The Codex Sassoon's margins contain an annotation from a later scholar who says he checked its text against the Aleppo Codex — referring to the manuscript by the Arabic title a-Taj, "the Crown."

"The Aleppo Codex is more precise than the Sassoon Codex, there's no doubt," Ofer said. "But because it's missing (a third of its pages), in those parts that are absent, there is great significance to this manuscript." The Codex Sassoon's 792 pages make up around 92% of the Hebrew Bible.

These venerable manuscripts were protected and treasured by Syrian Jewish communities for centuries until the 20th century. How the Sassoon Codex survived the ages is an epic in its own right.

A note on the manuscript attest to its owners in centuries past: A man named Khalaf ben Abraham gave it to Isaac ben Ezekiel al-Attar, who gave it to his sons Ezekiel and Maimon.

It later migrated east to the town of Makisin in what's today northeast Syria, where it was dedicated to a synagogue in the 13th century. Sometime in the following decades, the synagogue was destroyed and the codex entrusted to Salama ibn Abi al-Fakhr until the synagogue was rebuilt.

It never was rebuilt, but the book survived.

Its whereabouts for the next 500 years remain uncertain until it resurfaced in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1929, and was bought by a legendary collector of Jewish manuscripts whose name it still bears.

David Solomon Sassoon was a Bombay-born son of an Iraqi Jewish business magnate who filled his London home with a massive collection of Jewish manuscripts.

"His capacity was astounding, both in terms of number but also in terms of what he was able to find," said Raquel Ukeles, head of collections at Israel's National Library.

Sassoon roved across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa buying up old books, and by his death in 1942, he had amassed over 1,200 manuscripts.

Sassoon's estate was broken up after he died and the codex was sold by Sotheby's in Zurich in 1978 to the British Rail Pension Fund, which had started investing in art several years earlier, for around \$320,000.

The pension fund flipped the Codex Sassoon 11 years later for 10 times its hammer price. Jacqui Safra, a banker and art collector, bought it in 1989 for \$3.19 million and is now putting it up for auction.

If the target price is realized, the Codex Sassoon could not only eclipse the most expensive Jewish document ever sold — the 2021 sale of the Luzzatto Machzor, a 14th-century prayerbook, for \$8.3 million. It also could break the record for the priciest historical document ever sold at public auction. That honor is currently held by a 1787 copy of the U.S. Constitution sold in 2021 for \$43 million.

Yoel Finkelman, a former curator of Judaica at Israel's National Library, said that prices for Judaica manuscripts have skyrocketed in recent years, but Sotheby's proposed range is "a different league."

Few institutions, and only a small handful of ultrawealthy collectors, could afford such a price tag. There is precedent, however, of museums joining forces to buy prized manuscripts or philanthropists donating their purchases to libraries and other bodies.

Ukeles said that the National Library managed to purchase seven of Sassoon's manuscripts when his collection was auctioned off in the 1970s, "but this one got away. And so for us, this is an opportunity to bring this great treasure home."

## What the Fed rate increase means for your credit card bill

By ADRIANA MORGA and CORA LEWIS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Federal Reserve raised its key rate by another quarter point Wednesday, bringing it to the highest level in 15 years as part of an ongoing effort to ease inflation by making borrowing more expensive.

If you have money to save, you'll probably earn a bit more interest on it, but the increase will make it even costlier to borrow for homes, autos and other purchases. The interest rate increase comes at a time when credit card debt is at record levels.

Here's what the increase means for your credit card bill and what you can do if you're carrying debt:

### HOW DOES THE FED DECISION AFFECT CREDIT CARD DEBT?

The Federal Reserve doesn't directly dictate how much interest you pay on your credit card debt. But the Fed's rate is the basis for your bank's "prime rate." In combination with other factors, such as your credit score, the prime rate helps determine the Annual Percentage Rate, or APR, on your credit card.

The latest increase will likely raise the APR on your credit card 0.25%. So, if you have a 20.4% rate, which is the average according to Bankrate, it might increase to 20.65%.

If you don't carry a balance from month to month, the APR is less important.

But if, for example, you have a \$4,000 credit balance and your interest rate is 20%, if you only make a fixed payment of \$110 per month, it would take you a bit under five years to pay off your credit card debt and you would pay approximately \$2,200 in interest.

If your APR increases by a percentage point, paying off your balance would take two months longer and cost an additional \$215.

### HOW DO I FIND OUT THE APR ON MY CREDIT CARD?

Courtney Alev, consumer financial advocate at Credit Karma, said that knowing the Annual Percentage Rate, or APR, on your card is an important first step for anyone looking to get out of credit card debt.

"If you are carrying a balance month to month, that balance just got more expensive," she said.

To figure out your APR, you can log in to your online banking account, look at your financial statement, or call the number on the back of your credit card, Alev says.

### WHAT DO I DO IF MY APR IS HIGH?

After that, both Alev and analyst Greg McBride of Bankrate.com advise signing up for a credit card that offers a zero percent interest or low interest balance transfer promotion. These allow you to transfer your higher interest credit card debt to a low interest credit card, and some offer promotions up to 21 months.

Banks do sometimes charge a flat fee, such as 3% of the balance transferred.

"It doesn't make sense to pay 20% in interest just to get 2% in cash back," McBride said. "Put your interest rate first and pursue rewards once you're debt-free."

Other debt payoff strategies include taking a low-rate personal loan as a form of consolidation and pursuing a debt management plan offered by a reputable nonprofit credit counseling agency such as Money Management International, he said.

### HOW CAN I REDUCE MY CREDIT CARD DEBT?

If your income just covers your necessities, reducing credit card debt can be challenging. Elena Pelayo, educator at How Money Works, a financial literacy organization, recommends that even if you live paycheck to paycheck, you might want to add at least \$10 above the minimum payment of your credit card with the highest interest rate.

And if you can afford it, she recommends paying 10% more than the minimum payment per month.

A well-known payment method is the "debt snowball" where you pay down your debts from smallest to largest, to build momentum and good habits. Once the smaller debts are paid off and you have built a habit of paying off debt, the money you were used to putting aside every month can then go toward larger debts. NerdWallet offers a calculator to use this method.

Another small way to tackle debt is the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's recommendation to "use cash when it's under \$20" to avoid overspending on your credit card.

Find all of AP's financial wellness coverage at: <https://apnews.com/hub/financial-wellness>

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## Rapper Tekashi 6ix9ine injured in assault at Florida gym

LAKE WORTH, Fla. (AP) — Rapper Tekashi 6ix9ine, whose testimony against his own gang helped convict two high-ranking members, was assaulted by several people at a gym in Florida, officials said Wednesday. An "altercation between several individuals" brought Palm Beach County sheriff's deputies to an LA Fitness outlet in Lake Worth on Tuesday night, the sheriff's office said in a social media post.

The assault left the rapper, whose real name is Daniel Hernandez, with several injuries. He was taken to a hospital but his injuries were not considered life-threatening, officials said.

A motive for the assault, including whether it was connected to his cooperation with prosecutors, was unclear. No arrests have been made, and investigators have asked anyone with information to contact them.

The rapper's attorney, Lance Lazzaro, did not respond to an email from The Associated Press. But he told other news outlets that Hernandez was attacked by three or four people in the gym's sauna.

Tekashi 6ix9ine, known for his rainbow-colored hair and "69" tattoo on his forehead, previously faced decades in prison as part of a racketeering case in which he was accused of using a violent gang as a "personal hit squad."

Instead, his sentence was reduced to about two years after his testimony against the Nine Trey Gangsta Bloods, earning him a label as a "snitch."

## Los Angeles strike highlights paltry US school worker pay

By JOCELYN GECKER and COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writers

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Bus drivers shuttle America's children to schools where cafeteria workers feed them and teacher aides assist students who need the most help.

And their pay is notoriously low. School support staffers earn, on average, about \$25,000 a year in Los Angeles, barely enough to get by in one of the most expensive cities in America.

The pay is a driving factor behind a three-day strike that has shut down the entire Los Angeles school system and put a spotlight on the paltry pay of support staff that serves as the backbone of schools nationwide.

Even outside pricey California, the school gigs often don't pay enough to live on.

Arthur Anderson, a school worker in Virginia, says it's a shame it took a walkout to draw attention to the longstanding problem, but he hopes it helps.

"People are so frustrated. We all are," said Anderson, a teacher's assistant in the Chesapeake Public School System where he has worked for 30 years and makes \$32,000. He works three other part-time jobs to make ends meet. "I struggle to pay my rent. I struggle to pay my bills," he said. "I love what I do. I just don't love what I get paid."

Anderson works 36 hours as a special education aide in his school's science department. But he is also asked to fill in as a bus driver and a custodian. When a science teacher is absent, he fills in as a substitute, which pays an extra \$10 per class. "I did that today. I got an extra \$20."

The strike against the Los Angeles Unified School District that started Monday has been led by the teachers' assistants, custodians and other support staff who are among the district's lowest-paid workers. They're demanding better wages and increased staffing. Teachers joined the picket lines, in a show of solidarity that forced the district to close schools in the nation's second-largest district that serves a half million students.

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School support staff around the country tell stories of spending entire careers in public education, filling jobs that keep schools functioning. Yet, many are not making a living wage and like the striking workers in Los Angeles cannot afford to live in the communities where they work.

"The issue in Los Angeles is not confined to Los Angeles. It's an issue across the country and it has been decades in the making," said Princess Moss, vice president of the National Education Association, which represents about half a million educational support staff.

The NEA, the nation's largest teachers' union, last year released data that showed full-time school support staff earned an average salary of \$32,800. Delaware had the highest salary for full-time K-12 support staff (\$44,738), while Idaho had the lowest (\$25,830), but salaries vary widely by state. They can also vary by metro area and even within school districts, depending on how long a person has been in a job.

Amid staff shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have struggled to hire during a strong labor market, adding to the burden on the staff that remain.

A RAND survey of school leaders last year found that around three-fourths of school leaders say they are trying to hire more substitutes, 58% are trying to hire more bus drivers and 43% are trying to hire more tutors. In recent years, staff also have found themselves on the front lines of enforcing pandemic protocols or helping students struggling with their mental health or behavior.

More than half of the nation's public schools started this school year feeling understaffed, with many struggling to fill key support staff jobs, especially in transportation and custodial work, according to an Education Department survey. Asked about the biggest challenges, roughly four in 10 said candidates felt the salary and benefits weren't good enough.

Local 99 of the Service Employees International Union represents about 30,000 LAUSD teachers' aides, special education assistants, bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers and other support staff. The union says many live in poverty because of low pay or limited work hours while struggling with inflation and the high cost of housing. Support staff, including many who work part-time, earn about \$25,000 a year, according to the union, which is asking for a 30% raise.

The school district has offered a cumulative 23% raise, starting with 2% retroactive as of the 2020-21 school year and ending with 5% in 2024-25. The package would also include more full-time positions and an expansion of healthcare benefits. Superintendent Alberto Carvalho has accused the union of refusing to negotiate and said that he was prepared to meet at any time.

Leaders of United Teachers of Los Angeles, which represents 35,000 educators, counselors and other staff, have pledged solidarity with the strikers.

Experts say it is unusual for different unions in the same school district to band together but the unified labor action in Los Angeles could mark an inflection point.

"The idea of the teachers union and service personnel union saying we can do better if we stick together, could be a contagion in other communities looking and saying, 'Hey, they did it in Los Angeles — maybe we can do it,'" said Lee Adler, a lecturer and expert on education union issues at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

The fight for higher wages has been brewing in other school systems.

In one example, food service workers in Hastings, Minnesota, have been on strike for six weeks over higher wages and other issues. The union representing the 35 workers says the starting wage is less than \$15 an hour in the suburban school district, which serves about 4,300 students.

"There's a growing movement to fight for a living wage," said Rebecca Kolins Givan, an associate professor at Rutgers University's School of Management and Labor Relations. "Schools can't function without workers in these roles. And it's a fiction to suggest that people don't need to live on the wages they earn."

With 26 years' experience as a bus driver, Carl Kirchgessner earns \$20.35 an hour driving for a school system outside Rochester, N.Y. His Rush-Henrietta Central School District is still struggling with driver shortages coming out of the pandemic, when many had to double up on routes. He said he can afford to make ends meet only because his wife also works.

"If it was just me alone," he said, "no way."

Binkley reported from Washington, D.C.

The Associated Press education team receives support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## A 5,000-mile seaweed belt is headed toward Florida

By SUMAN NAISHADHAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A 5,000-mile seaweed belt lurking in the Atlantic Ocean is expected in the next few months to wash onto beaches in the Caribbean Sea, South Florida, and the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico.

The Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt — as the biomass stretching from West Africa to the Gulf of Mexico is called — contains scattered patches of seaweed on the open sea, rather than one continuous blob of sargassum. It's not a new occurrence, but satellite images captured in February showed an earlier start than usual for such a large accumulation in the open ocean.

Once it washes ashore, sargassum is a nuisance — a thick, brown algae that carpets beaches, releasing a pungent smell as it decays and entangling humans and animals who step into it. For hotels and resorts, clearing the stuff off beaches can amount to a round-the-clock operation.

Here's a look at this year's sargassum seaweed bloom:

### WHAT IS SARGASSUM?

A leafy brown seaweed festooned with what look like berries. The seaweed floats on the open ocean and — unlike other seaweeds — reproduces on the water's surface, helped by air-filled structures that give it buoyancy.

Sargassum originates in a vast stretch of the Atlantic Ocean called the Sargasso Sea, which lies well off the southeast U.S. The Sargasso has no land boundaries; instead, four prevailing ocean currents form its boundaries.

The matted brown seaweed stretches for miles across the ocean and provides breeding ground, food and habitat for fish, sea turtles and marine birds, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"It's a dynamic, constantly changing set of pieces of this large mass," said Rick Lumpkin, director of the Physical Oceanography Division at NOAA. "It's not one big continuous blob heading straight to South Florida."

### WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

Sargassum piles up on beaches where it quickly decomposes under hot sun, releasing gases that smell like rotten eggs.

In recent years, sargassum has carpeted beaches on some Caribbean islands and Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula in the spring and summer months. Beach towns and cities and hotels have struggled to keep up with the huge amounts of seaweed that wash ashore.

### WHAT ABOUT THIS YEAR?

Some sargassum has already reached beaches in Key West, said Chuanmin Hu, a professor of oceanography at the University of South Florida. But most of it will arrive in the summer, Hu said.

"What is unusual this year compared to previous years is it started early," Hu said. The algae generally blooms in the spring and summer, but "this year, in the winter, we already have a lot."

Southern Florida, the Caribbean and the Yucatán Peninsula typically see sargassum piling up in the summer months and could expect the same this year, Hu said.

### IS THIS MUCH SARGASSUM UNUSUAL?

It's a lot, but it's been worse.

Scientists estimate there's more than 10 million metric tons of sargassum in the belt this year. Lumpkin called it "one of the strongest years, but not the strongest" since scientists began closely observing the biomass via satellite imagery in 2011.

He said there was more in 2018. The years 2019 and 2021 also saw a great deal of sargassum, he said.

### WHAT CAUSES IT?

Scientists aren't exactly sure, in part because it wasn't closely monitored until 2011.



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"We do know that to get a lot of seaweed, you need nutrients, and you need sunlight. Of course, as you get close to the equator, there's going to be more sunlight," said Mike Parsons, a professor of marine science at Florida Gulf Coast University.

Parsons and other experts say agricultural runoff seeping into the Amazon and Orinoco rivers and eventually the ocean could explain the increased growth of the belt on the western side. Parsons said warming waters likely help the seaweed grow faster. Changes in wind patterns, sea currents, rainfall and drought could also affect blooms.

"It may be the entire belt is fed more some years than others by dust that contains iron and other nutrients that comes from the Sahara Desert," said Lumpkin, of NOAA.

It's not clear whether climate change is playing any part. Hu said extreme weather that is happening more frequently due to climate change — high wind events, storms, more precipitation — could be a contributor.

## IS SARGASSUM HARMFUL TO HUMAN HEALTH?

It can be. When sargassum decomposes, it releases ammonia and hydrogen sulfide, which accounts for the rotten-egg stench. Brief exposure isn't enough to make people sick, but prolonged exposure — especially for those with respiratory issues — can be dangerous, scientists say.

Hu said it could be an issue for hotel workers and others who may spend hours removing the decomposing sargassum from beaches.

Left to rot on the beach, sargassum can turn into a problem. It can harm coastal marine ecosystems and also supports the growth of fecal bacteria.

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## Holy month of Ramadan begins for Muslims across the world

By The Associated Press undefined

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The Muslim holy month of Ramadan began at sundown on Wednesday, as the faithful prepared for a month of dawn-to-dusk fasting intended to bring them closer to God and to remind them of the suffering of those less fortunate.

For the next 30 days, Muslims will refrain from eating or drinking anything — even the tiniest sip of water — from sunrise to sunset. Many will strictly observe prayers, read the Quran and donate to charity as they seek to draw closer to God. Family and friends will gather for joyful nightly feasts.

This year many will struggle to afford holiday treats amid soaring prices fueled in part by the war in Ukraine. Iran, Egypt and Lebanon are grappling with economic crises that have weakened their local currencies, making things even more expensive.

The holy month will also be shadowed by the suffering in Turkey and Syria, where an earthquake last month killed more than 52,000 people, and in conflict zones across the Muslim world, though there have been some encouraging signs of possible reconciliation.

"We used to look forward to Ramadan as the most beautiful month of every year," said 19-year-old Rama Jamal, recalling how her family would decorate the house and sit together reading the Quran.

Now she lives alone in the war-ravaged northern Idlib province of Syria. After surviving more than a decade of war, her parents and brother were killed in the earthquake.

"Now I'm by myself, and there's no mood of Ramadan, there's no joy," Jamal said. "I'm missing my family all the time, every hour."

In the impoverished Gaza Strip, which has been under an Israeli blockade since the militant group Hamas seized power there in 2007, residents struggling to cope with higher prices also fear another war amid months of soaring Israeli-Palestinian violence.

"The prices of many staples have increased crazily," said Mohammed Forra, a grocery store owner in the Gaza City. He said the price of cooking spices has doubled since last year.

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More than 1.8 billion Muslims, who account for around a quarter of the world's population, are expected to observe Ramadan. Islam follows a lunar calendar, so the month begins a week and a half earlier each year, cycling through the seasons, including the long days of hot summers.

The start of the month depends on the sighting of the crescent moon by local religious authorities and astronomers, and can sometimes vary from country to country. But this year there was broad agreement that it began Wednesday evening, with Thursday declared as the first day of fasting.

In Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, worshippers flooded mosques for evening prayers after authorities declared that several Islamic astronomy observer teams had sighted the crescent moon in different regions. Muslim authorities in Saudi Arabia and several other Middle Eastern countries have also announced that Ramadan will begin Wednesday night.

Muslims believe God began revealing the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad during Ramadan more than 1,400 years ago.

The fast is one of the five pillars of Islam and is required for all Muslims, though exceptions are made for young children and the sick, as well as women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or menstruating. Travelers are also exempt, including athletes attending tournaments away from home.

Those observing the fast must refrain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse from sunrise to sunset. They are also encouraged to refrain from cursing, fighting, gossip or road rage throughout the holy month.

Many Muslims, particularly those who live in the U.S. and Europe, are accepting and welcoming of others around them who are not observing Ramadan. They also are not expecting shorter work hours, as is the case in the public sector across much of the Arab world during Ramadan.

Eating or drinking in public during the day is generally frowned upon in Muslim-majority countries. In some, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — home to a large expatriate population in Dubai and Abu Dhabi — it can be punished by fines or imprisonment.

The normal bustle of cities dies down by late afternoon, with streets emptying and shops closing early. Muslims traditionally break the fast at sunset as the Prophet Muhammad was said to have done, with a sip of water and a few dates. Some can be seen happily indulging in a long-awaited cigarette.

After sunset prayers, family and friends gather for "iftars" — feasts with local holiday treats like candies and nuts. Mosques and charities set up outdoor banquets where the poor can eat for free each night of Ramadan. Muslims then wake up early for "suhoor," a small meal eaten just before dawn.

Five-star hotels, particularly in wealthy Arab Gulf countries, host lavish iftars, and cable networks unveil big-budget soap operas, raking in millions in advertising. Both practices have been criticized by conservatives who fear Ramadan is becoming too commercial.

Ramadan culminates in Laylat al-Qadr, or the Night of Destiny, during the last 10 nights of the month, when Muslims engage in intense late night worship. Muslims believe this was the night God sent the Angel Gabriel to the prophet to reveal the first verses of the Quran.

After the last day of fasting, Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr, a festive three-day holiday in which children are often given new clothes and gifts.

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Associated Press writers Ghaith Alsayed in Idlib, Syria, Fares Akram in Gaza City, Gaza Strip, and Niniek Karmini in Jakarta, Indonesia contributed to this report.

## Murdaugh trial gives unsolved death investigation a boost

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press  
COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) —

A mother whose son was found dead in the middle of a South Carolina road eight years ago is opening a private investigation into his death after raising almost \$90,000 amid the publicity surrounding the murder trial of Alex Murdaugh.

There is no current evidence linking Stephen Smith's death to the Murdaugh family, the lawyers for the

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mother say. State investigators, who are also looking into Smith's death, have remained tight-lipped about taking over the case around the same time police said Murdaugh killed his wife and son. He is serving a life sentence for those killings.

But the lack of evidence hasn't stopped speculation. And that attention in turn helped Sandy Smith raise in less than two weeks more than \$87,000 through Go Fund Me. Her goal was \$15,000 — enough to pay to exhume her son's body and have a private autopsy.

"It's important to me because I love my son and since I couldn't protect him, I'm going to fight for him," Sandy Smith told reporters Monday as her lawyers announced the private investigation.

Stephen Smith was found dead in the middle of a two-lane Hampton County road on July 8, 2015. His car with the gas cap removed and his wallet still inside was found a short distance away

The trooper who responded didn't think it was a hit and run, but the pathologist who did the autopsy theorized Smith was hit in the head by the side mirror of a passing truck that did not stop.

Police said it appeared he ran out of gas and was walking for help, but attorney Eric Bland, who is representing the Smith family, said Smith didn't make any calls on his cellphone and his shoes, which were tied loosely, were still on his feet. People hit by cars are often found without their shoes from the force of the wreck.

Smith's family thinks his injuries, including head injuries and a dislocated arm bent behind him, indicate he was beaten to death and dropped on the highway. There were no skid marks on the road or debris like broken glass or mirror parts found nearby, said Ronnie Richter, another lawyer for the Smiths.

State agents took over the case in 2021, though they have never said why they decided to do that or whether it is linked to information found during the investigation into the death of Alex Murdaugh's wife and son. Troopers typically investigate traffic deaths in South Carolina, where state agents typically investigate other crimes.

State Law Enforcement Division Chief Mark Keel reached out to Smith's new lawyers to ask if they will share any new information they find through the autopsy or any other investigation, agency spokesperson Renée Wunderlich said.

"We do believe it was a murder," Keel told The State newspaper on Tuesday night. "We don't believe it was a hit-and-run."

Investigators think people might be more willing to talk now that the murder trial is finished, said the Smith family attorney Bland.

The first step for the private investigation will be getting permission from a judge to exhume Stephen Smith's body. The backing of state agents would likely help that request.

Bland also hopes the private investigators can gather and analyze cellphone data from Smith and the people he was communicating with to reconstruct who he was hanging out with and what he was doing not just right before his body was found but also in the weeks before his death.

"Stephen had to live a secret life. Being young and gay in the Lowcountry was not an easy thing to do," Bland said.

Smith and Alex Murdaugh's surviving son, Buster, went to the same high school, leading to rumors that the Murdaugh family was involved in his death. Richter went out of his way this week to say they have no evidence Buster Murdaugh was involved in anything with Smith.

The talk has gotten so loud, Buster Murdaugh issued a statement Monday, saying he could no longer ignore the "vicious rumors" as he grieves "over the brutal murders of my mother and brother. I love them so much and miss them terribly."

He said he is being harassed and targeted by defamatory comments.

"These baseless rumors of my involvement with Stephen and his death are false," Buster Murdaugh wrote in his statement. "I unequivocally deny any involvement in his death, and my heart goes out to the Smith family."

**More deaths, injuries linked to recalled eyedrops**

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WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. officials are reporting two more deaths and additional cases of vision loss linked to eyedrops tainted with a drug-resistant bacteria.

The eyedrops from EzriCare and Delsam Phama were recalled in February and health authorities are continuing to track infections as they investigate the outbreak.

In the latest government tally, 68 people were diagnosed with infections from the bacteria, which has now caused a total of three deaths and eight cases of people losing their vision, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported on Tuesday. That's up from one death and five cases of permanent vision loss reported last month.

The CDC said four people have undergone surgery to remove an eyeball due to the infections.

The outbreak is considered particularly worrisome because the bacteria driving it is resistant to standard antibiotics.

The CDC has now identified cases in 16 states, including California, New York, Illinois, Texas and Pennsylvania. Most of the cases have been linked to four regional clusters and Ezricare's drops are the only product used by patients in each of those groups.

The recalled drops were manufactured by Global Pharma Healthcare in India, where the bacteria — *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* — is commonly linked to outbreaks in hospitals. It can spread through contaminated hands or medical equipment.

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The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Why TikTok's security risks keep raising fears

By KELVIN CHAN and HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

The battle between the U.S. and China over TikTok comes into full view on Thursday when the social media platform's CEO testifies before Congressional lawmakers.

Shou Zi Chew's hearing is happening at what he's called a "pivotal moment" for the hugely popular short video sharing app. TikTok is owned by parent company ByteDance, which has offices in Beijing. The platform has 150 million American users but it's been dogged by persistent claims that it threatens national security and user privacy, or could be used to promote pro-Beijing propaganda and misinformation.

Chew will attempt to persuade lawmakers not to pursue a ban on the app or force its sale to new owners.

So are the data security risks real? And should users be worried that the TikTok app will be wiped off their phones?

Here's what to know:

### WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS ABOUT TIKTOK?

Both the FBI and officials at the Federal Communications Commission have warned that ByteDance could share TikTok user data — such as browsing history, location and biometric identifiers — with China's authoritarian government.

Officials fear that TikTok, which like many other social media platforms collects vast amounts of data on its users, would be forced to give it to Beijing under a 2017 law that compels companies to turn over any personal data relevant to China's national security.

Concerns around TikTok were heightened in December when ByteDance said it fired four employees who accessed data on journalists from BuzzFeed News and The Financial Times while attempting to track down the source of a leaked report about the company.

### HOW IS THE U.S. RESPONDING?

The Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. — known as CFIUS and part of the Treasury Department — is carrying out a review, and has reportedly threatened a U.S. ban on the app unless its Chinese owners divest their stake. China's Foreign Ministry in turn accused the United States itself of spreading disinformation about TikTok's potential security risks.

White House officials have said there are "legitimate national security concerns with respect to data integrity."

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Some U.S. senators urged CFIUS last year to quickly wrap up its investigation and "impose strict structural restrictions" between TikTok's American operations and ByteDance, including potentially separating the companies.

At the same time, lawmakers have introduced measures that would expand the Biden administration's authority to enact a national ban on TikTok. The White House has already backed a Senate proposal that has bipartisan support.

## HOW HAS TIKTOK ALREADY BEEN RESTRICTED?

Authorities in North America, Europe and Asia-Pacific have banned the TikTok app, mostly on government-issued phones or devices used for official business, citing cybersecurity concerns. Last week Britain imposed a government phone ban while New Zealand restricted lawmakers and other workers in its Parliament from having it on their phones.

The European Union's three main institutions, the executive Commission, Parliament and Council, have ordered staffers to remove it from their work phones. So has Denmark's defense ministry. The Canadian government said its ban includes blocking civil servants from downloading the app in the future. Norway and Netherlands warned this week against installing TikTok on government devices.

The White House ordered U.S. federal agencies to delete TikTok from all government-issued mobile devices. Congress, the U.S. armed forces and more than half of U.S. states had already banned the app.

## WHAT DOES TIKTOK SAY?

In a TikTok video this week, Chew appealed against a ban, saying it could take the app away from 150 million American users.

In his testimony, he plans to outline how the company's data protection and security efforts go "above and beyond" anything that its social media and online entertainment rivals do.

Under a \$1.5 billion project dubbed Project Texas that's underway, data from U.S. users is being routed through servers controlled by Oracle, the Silicon Valley company it partnered with in an effort to avoid a nationwide ban.

Older U.S. user data stored on non-Oracle servers will be deleted this year. Under this arrangement, there's no way for Beijing to access the data, Chew said in prepared remarks released ahead of the hearing.

TikTok has also sought to portray ByteDance as a global company, not a Chinese one. Executives have been pointing out that ByteDance's ownership consists of 60% big global investors, 20% employees and 20% Chinese entrepreneurs who founded the company. TikTok itself is headquartered in Singapore.

## ARE THE SECURITY RISKS LEGITIMATE?

It depends on who you ask.

Some tech privacy advocates say while the potential abuse of privacy by the Chinese government is concerning, other tech companies have data-harvesting business practices that also exploit user information.

"If policy makers want to protect Americans from surveillance, they should advocate for a basic privacy law that bans all companies from collecting so much sensitive data about us in the first place, rather than engaging in what amounts to xenophobic showboating that does exactly nothing to protect anyone," said Evan Greer, director of the nonprofit advocacy group Fight for the Future.

Karim Farhat, a researcher with the Internet Governance Project at Georgia Tech, said a TikTok sale would be "completely irrelevant to any of the alleged 'national security' threats" and go against "every free market principle and norm" of the state department's internet freedom principles.

Others say there is legitimate reason for concern.

People who use TikTok might think they're not doing anything that would be of interest to a foreign government, but that's not always the case, said Anton Dahbura, executive director of the Johns Hopkins University Information Security Institute. Important information about the United States is not strictly limited to nuclear power plants or military facilities; it extends to other sectors, such as food processing, the finance industry and universities, Dahbura said.

## IS THERE PRECEDENCE FOR BANNING TECH COMPANIES?

The U.S. has banned the communications equipment sold by Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE, citing national security risks. But banning the sale of items is easier than banning a free app.

Such a move might also wind up in courts on grounds that it could violate the First Amendment, as some civil liberties groups have argued.

Another possibility, albeit remote, is forcing a sale. That's what happened in 2020 when Beijing Kunlun, a Chinese mobile video game company, agreed to sell gay dating app Grindr after an order from CFIUS.

Beijing Kunlun said it signed a "national security agreement" with CFIUS to sell Grindr to San Vicente Acquisition for \$608.5 million, promising not to send sensitive user data to China, cease its operations there and maintain its headquarters in the U.S.

## Republicans invoke Soros to steer narrative on Trump probe

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — As former President Donald Trump braces for a potential indictment related to hush money payments made on his behalf during his 2016 campaign, Republicans blasting the case as politically motivated are blaming a frequent target: George Soros.

The 92-year-old billionaire investor and philanthropist — who has been falsely accused of everything from hiring violent rioters to committing election crimes — doesn't know and didn't donate directly to the New York prosecutor steering the probe. But that hasn't stopped Trump and other high-profile Republicans from accusing Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, who convened the grand jury investigating Trump, of acting on Soros' behalf.

Trump on Monday used his Truth Social platform to misleadingly claim that Bragg "received in EXCESS OF ONE MILLION DOLLARS" from Soros. Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance tweeted that the prosecutor was "bought by George Soros." Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis called the case a "manufactured circus by some Soros-DA."

Experts say the claims exploit a gray area of campaign fundraising, where tenuous connections between PAC donors and the candidates who ultimately receive the funds can be unclear.

Scapegoating Soros, who is Hungarian American and Jewish, also perpetuates deep-rooted false ideas about Jewish people and immigrants to underscore the conspiracy theory that he is a shadowy villain orchestrating world events.

The misleading claims about Soros' link to the Trump case stem from a real donation the philanthropist made in 2021. Soros gave \$1 million to Color of Change PAC, a political group that ran an independent expenditure campaign to support Bragg's district attorney run.

But Soros spokesman Michael Vachon confirmed the wealthy donor's contribution to the PAC was not earmarked to be used for Bragg. Soros didn't donate to Bragg's campaign directly, and the two have never met in person, by phone or virtually, Vachon said.

Soros' contribution to Color of Change PAC, which told The Associated Press it supports prosecutors looking to change the criminal justice system, follows a pattern for the investor, who "has made numerous contributions in support of reform-minded prosecutors across the country since 2015," Vachon said. Soros wrote in an op-ed in 2022 that he supports these candidates because they invest in changes he supports, including mental health programs and treating drug addiction as a disease instead of a crime. Personally and through another PAC, Soros donated about \$4 million to Color of Change PAC between 2016 and 2022, Vachon said.

Still, Republicans and social media users have sought to use the 2021 donation to link Soros to the looming potential charges against Trump. Some widely shared posts have even falsely claimed that Soros donated directly to Bragg's campaign or personally prompted the probe.

In a situation like this, when a donor gives non-earmarked funds to a PAC whose spending he doesn't control, "there's no connection between the original contributor and the ultimate beneficiary the PAC has chosen to support," said Jerry Goldfeder, a New York campaign finance expert and special counsel at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP.

But even as it's false to suggest Soros directly contributed to Bragg's election effort, it's fair to say Soros-linked entities invested a significant sum to see Bragg elected, said New York political consultant Hank Sheinkopf. Soros' son and daughter-in-law, Jonathan Soros and Jennifer Allan Soros, gave directly to Bragg's campaign, according to public contribution data.

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That gives political cover for Republicans to tie Bragg to Soros — a name that “makes people on the populist right lose their minds,” Sheinkopf said.

Soros has given billions of dollars to liberal and anti-authoritarian causes all over the world, and as a result, he’s long been a boogeyman for conservatives. Unfounded conspiracy theories over the years have falsely cast him as backing violent protesters and interfering with elections. They’ve also falsely accused him of having family ties to political figures ranging from Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

These attacks give people partial to conspiracy theories a simple answer for a complicated world — but one that promotes damaging antisemitic ideas, according to Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University.

“We need to understand that this has nothing to do with Soros,” Sarna said. “But it has everything to do with a very old, antisemitic view that even though Jews are small in number, they really control everything. The idea that behind the scenes, and barely visible, look for the Jew.”

The spread of such narratives has been linked to real-world harm. In 2018, a Florida man mentioned Soros dozens of times on social media before mailing pipe bombs to newsrooms, top Democrats and Soros himself.

“What has been so dispiriting for many American Jews is that they really thought we had put a lot of those antisemitic tropes behind us,” Sarna said. “And now, lo and behold, they’re back.”

As Trump awaited possible charges Wednesday, he continued to push Soros rhetoric in an email to supporters. He has denied any wrongdoing amid the hush-money probe.

## Ship dislodges, tips over in Scotland dry dock; 25 injured

LONDON (AP) — A large ship tipped over while dry-docked in Scotland, injuring 25 people Wednesday, emergency workers said.

Police and emergency services were called to the Imperial Dock in Edinburgh after receiving reports that a ship had become dislodged from its holding.

The Scottish Ambulance Service said 15 people were taken to the hospital, while 10 others were treated and discharged at the scene. Local police urged the public to avoid the area to allow access for emergency services.

Photos from the scene showed the ship leaning to the side at a 45-degree angle. Adam McVey, a local official, tweeted that it became dislodged due to strong winds.

The 76-meter (250-foot) long vessel, named the Petrel, was a research vessel previously bought and outfitted by the late Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. The Petrel is equipped with deep-sea exploration technology and has led several high-profile missions to locate historic shipwrecks, including the discovery of the USS Indianapolis in 2017 in the Philippine Sea.

The BBC reported the ship had been moored since 2020 due to challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Trump’s potential indictment caps decades of legal scrutiny

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — For 40 years, former President Donald Trump has navigated countless legal investigations without ever facing criminal charges. That record may soon come to an end.

Trump could be indicted by a Manhattan grand jury as soon as this week, potentially charged with falsifying business records connected to hush money payments during his 2016 campaign to women who accused him of sexual encounters.

It’s one of several investigations that have intensified as Trump mounts his third presidential run. He has denied any allegations of wrongdoing and accuses prosecutors of engaging in a politically motivated “witch hunt” to damage his campaign.

An indictment in New York would mark an extraordinary turn in American history, making Trump the

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first former president to face a criminal charge. And it would carry tremendous weight for Trump himself, threatening his long-established ability to avoid consequences despite entanglement in a dizzying number of cases.

Indictment, says biographer Michael D'Antonio, would be a "shocking event, both because of the fact that a former president is being indicted for the first time, but also because one of the slipperiest people at the highest level of business, whose devotion to abusing the system is so well established, is being caught."

"Throughout his life, he has done things for which he could have been investigated and potentially prosecuted and learned from those experiences that he could act with impunity," he said.

Trump first faced legal scrutiny in the 1970s when the Department of Justice brought a racial discrimination case against his family's real estate business.

Trump and his father fiercely fought the suit, which accused them of refusing to rent apartments to Black tenants in predominantly white buildings. Testimony showed that applications filed by prospective Black tenants were marked with a "C" for "colored." Trump counter-sued for \$100 million, accusing the government of defamation.

The case ended with a settlement that opened the way for some Black tenants but did not force the Trumps to explicitly acknowledge they had "failed and neglected" to comply with the Fair Housing Act.

Since then, Trump and his businesses have been the subject of thousands of civil lawsuits and numerous investigations. There have been probes into his casino and real estate dealings, allegations of bribery and improper lobbying, fraud allegations against the now-defunct Trump University and charitable Trump Foundation and a probe by the Manhattan district attorney into sales at the Trump SoHo hotel-condominium in Lower Manhattan.

Indeed, according to Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a government watchdog group abbreviated CREW, as of November 2022, Trump had been accused of committing at least 56 criminal offenses since he launched his campaign in 2015, not including allegations of fraudulent business dealings. But he has never been formally indicted.

Trump is a master of delay tactics, "finding ways to endlessly delay in the hopes that the investigation and litigation will go away. And he's had remarkable success," says CREW president Noah Bookbinder, a former federal corruption prosecutor.

"It makes accountability absolutely essential because we can't have people in a functioning democracy operating in positions of power with total impunity where they can commit crimes and never have to face any consequences," he said.

Trump's retort to such strong talk: He commits no crimes, so consequences would themselves be unjust.

As president, Trump continued to face legal scrutiny. For two years, the Justice Department investigated his 2016 campaign's ties to Russia. While special counsel Robert Mueller never found direct evidence of collusion, his final report did lay out evidence for obstruction. He noted that, because of a department opinion that bars indicting a sitting president, he couldn't recommend Trump be criminally charged, even in secret.

Since Trump left office, the investigations have circled ever closer.

In January, his namesake company was fined \$1.6 million for tax crimes, including conspiracy and falsifying business records. The company's longtime executive, Allen Weisselberg, is currently serving jail time as punishment for dodging taxes on job perks.

Additional cases are still being pursued. In Georgia, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has been investigating whether Trump and his allies illegally meddled in the 2020 election. The foreperson of a special grand jury, which heard from dozens of witnesses, said last month that the panel had recommended that numerous people be indicted, and hinted Trump could be among them. It is ultimately up to Willis to decide whether to move forward.

In Washington, Trump is under scrutiny from special counsel Jack Smith for his handling — allegations say mishandling — of classified documents after leaving office, as well as for his much-publicized efforts to stay in power, despite his 2020 election loss. Justice Department lawyers in the documents probe have said they have amassed evidence of potential crimes involving Trump's retention of national defense in-



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formation as well as potential efforts to obstruct their work.

Some legal experts have questioned the wisdom of having the Manhattan case be the first brought against Trump, when more serious charges could be looming. Trump is expected to be charged with falsifying business records, a misdemeanor unless prosecutors can prove it was done to conceal another crime. And the case dates back years.

"Clearly it's not the cleanest criminal case that could be brought of all of them that are existing right now," said Michael Weinstein, an attorney and former Justice Department prosecutor, who said Trump would likely use its potential weaknesses to his political advantage.

"By this case coming first, it gives him a opening to go on offense and attack, which for him is the only way he knows," Weinstein said.

Still, he said the possible charges felt like a natural culmination of the "unbelievable array of investigations" the former president "has lived through and battled for the last 40 years."

"There's a history and pattern of him saying and doing things without resulting in any consequences," Weinstein said. "After 40 years, do the criminal chickens come home to roost? He's been fighting a long time, and it could be in the next 12 months he's facing two or three criminal cases that carry serious criminal liability for him."

The New York case involves payments made by Trump's former lawyer, Michael Cohen, who served prison time after pleading guilty in 2018 to federal charges, to porn actor Stormy Daniels and model Karen McDougal. Cohen was reimbursed by Trump, whose company logged the reimbursements as "legal expenses."

Politically, Trump allies believe the case actually will benefit the former president in the short term by energizing his base in a competitive Republican primary, and would provide another boost later on if it ultimately fails to yield a conviction.

"The prosecutor in New York has done more to help Donald Trump get elected," says Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., echoing other GOP officials, who have also argued the probe will likely help Trump in the short term, even if it could prove damaging in a general election.

An indictment wouldn't stop Trump from continuing his campaign. There is no prohibition against running while facing criminal charges — or even following conviction. Indeed, convicted felons have run for president before, including from behind bars.

"It boggles the mind to think that we have an ex-president on the eve of being indicted still the front-runner for the Republican Party in 2024," says presidential historian Douglas Brinkley. "You would have thought (potentially) being arrested would have been a disqualifying factor in presidential politics. But Trump constantly surprises people by his devious and inappropriate behavior that he transcends by turning it into being a victim of a witch hunt."

## Race issues dog 'wild card' prosecutor in Ronald Greene case

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

FARMERVILLE, La. (AP) — In this conservative corner of northern Louisiana, where reverence for law enforcement runs deep and Blue Lives Matter flags often fly alongside the Stars and Stripes, the case of five white officers charged in the deadly 2019 arrest of Black motorist Ronald Greene is seen as anything but a slam dunk.

So even with explosive body-camera video showing officers stunning, beating and dragging Greene, the Black district attorney in mostly white Union Parish has decided to bring in a hired gun: an experienced white special prosecutor with a folksy law-and-order bravado and a three-decades-long reputation for winning complicated cases across the state.

But Hugo Holland's background is also marked by accusations of racial bias, including new claims uncovered by The Associated Press, that make him an unlikely advocate for racial justice. In fact, he says the concept has no place in the Greene case or anywhere in the justice system.

"Justice is justice," Holland told the AP. "It doesn't make any difference what race the offender or the victim is. F—— race has got nothing to do with it."

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Holland drew criticism as a local prosecutor for displaying a portrait in his office of Confederate general and early KKK leader Nathan Bedford Forrest. He once sent a fellow lawyer an email joking about chasing down "a Black guy or a Mex-can." And he wrote the judge in the 2021 Kyle Rittenhouse murder trial to say he would never have charged the teen acquitted of killing two people during unrest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, calling it a "good shoot."

Beyond that, Holland has served as a reserve police officer in Bossier City for 20 years and has been criticized for rarely prosecuting police, deciding in 2018 against charging two white sheriff's deputies seen on body-camera video kicking a Black suspect in the face.

"How can we expect him to fight for us to get justice when he is — and loves — the police?" said Breka Peoples, a Shreveport activist who initially thought it was a joke when she heard Holland had been hired in the Greene case. "He's part of the problem that we have today."

But state prosecutors are betting that Holland's long record of convictions can finally bring justice to a high-stakes, politically fraught case that has simmered for nearly four years.

Greene's May 10, 2019, death on a rural roadside near Monroe was initially blamed by the Louisiana State Police on a car crash at the end of a high-speed chase over a traffic violation. After officials from the governor on down refused for more than two years to release the body-camera video, the AP obtained and published the footage showing white troopers converging on Greene before he could get out of his car and repeatedly stunning and punching him as he wails, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared!" A trooper can later be seen dragging the heavyset Greene by his ankle shackles and he is left face down for more than nine minutes before he eventually goes limp.

Years of investigations culminated in December with four current and former Louisiana State Police troopers and a local sheriff's deputy indicted on various state counts ranging from negligent homicide to malfeasance and obstruction.

From the beginning, Greene's family and others worried whether prosecutors could make the indictment stick in a northern Louisiana parish that's nearly 70% white and deeply conservative. On the same day the officers were charged, a federal jury in Shreveport deadlocked in a civil rights trial, despite viewing graphic footage of a white police officer kicking and assaulting a Black man in custody.

"A case like this can be complicated. We really needed someone with a lot of experience," John Belton, the first Black district attorney of Union Parish, said of his decision to hire Holland for the Greene case. "Hugo is one of the top prosecutors in the state and has a history of seeking justice — regardless of politics and regardless of race."

In an interview, Holland bristled at the accusations of bias he's faced throughout his career, including that he consistently excluded Black people from juries. If those claims were true, he said, then why would an elected Black district attorney knowingly "hire a closet Klansman?"

Holland added that, while he is still reviewing evidence in Greene's death, he would have preferred to have been brought in before the grand jury issued its indictments.

"I'm going to review this case with a completely fresh eye," Holland said. "If I think the grand jury overreached, I'm going to tell the district attorney. If I think something additional needs to be done, I'm going to tell him that as well."

"These cases are sort of like prosecuting a parent for cruelty for disciplining their child: Where is the line? That line is fuzzy. It's not black and white," he said. "It's very unusual for there to be an unlawful use of force. It's extremely rare."

Of particular interest to Holland are accusations that some officers were involved in a cover-up of Greene's death. He likened the situation to the Watergate scandal that doomed Richard Nixon's presidency. "If I can prove the cover-up," he said, "those people are in trouble."

Holland's hiring underscores the lingering uncertainty in the Greene case. The U.S. Justice Department is conducting a sweeping review of the Louisiana State Police but has not said whether it will bring its own charges against officers or higher-ups. Meanwhile, a legislative inquiry formed to determine the extent of Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards' role in the case has been dormant for months as members of the

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committee sought higher office. Even Belton, the district attorney, is running in this year's race for state attorney general.

Greene's mother, Mona Hardin, who has traveled the country drawing attention to her son's death, remains skeptical about the prospects of the state case.

"I want so much to believe that something or someone greater is waiting to do Ronnie justice, but there are question marks all over the place," said Hardin, who was a guest at the recent State of the Union Address when her attorneys told her the "wild card" Holland had been hired.

"All I hear is that he doesn't like losing," she said. "But who is he winning for? Is he doing this for the blue?"

Bald and bellicose, the 59-year-old Holland is loved and loathed in Louisiana for his brash rhetoric and near-obsession with capital punishment. After a scandal over obtaining automatic weapons forced him from his job as an assistant district attorney in Shreveport, he began prosecuting high-stakes cases around the state on a freelance basis, driven by a passionate belief in "lex talionis," the law of retaliation.

"It would not faze me in the least to watch a man executed," Holland said in a 2017 interview. "I can't imagine how it's fair for you to take another human being's life and yours not be forfeited."

It's not clear how that mindset will apply to Greene's violent in-custody death, which a medical expert recently deemed a homicide.

In 2018, Holland determined two white Rapides Parish sheriff's deputies had been justified in kicking Deterrian Simmons after violently taking the Black man to the ground. Even two steel-toed "distraction strikes" to the man's face were lawful, he said, in part because they did not fracture Simmons' skull, jaw or orbital socket.

"Like almost every other suspect injured by officers in any fashion, Simmons' failure to comply caused this entire incident," Holland wrote in a memo obtained by AP. "It is a waste of time to bring the officers before a grand jury."

Speaking of the case this week, Holland said: "F——— comply and you won't get a bloody lip."

Last year, defense lawyers seeking to show bias in the case of a man sentenced to death turned up an email from Holland in 2017 when he wrote that in observance of Veterans Day he planned to "take my pickup and find a Black guy or a Mex-can."

Holland defended his words as "clearly humor." But defense attorneys argued the email harkened to the infamous 1998 killing of James Byrd, a Black man dragged from a pickup by white supremacists in Texas.

Holland also sent an unsolicited letter of support to Judge Bruce Schroeder, the Wisconsin jurist who drew criticism over his courtroom commentary and unorthodox handling of Rittenhouse's 2021 murder trial.

"Haters gonna hate," Holland wrote, boasting that he too had aroused "the ire of the liberal media."

"I would not have even bothered to take the Rittenhouse case to the grand jury," he added. "I would have pronounced it a good shoot and been done with it."

Holland wrote that he had long ago stopped reading news coverage about himself, and that his life had become calmer as a result.

"I recommend this course to you and remind you that Antonin Scalia said, 'a man who has made no enemies is probably not a very good man.'"

Contact AP's global investigative team at [Investigative@ap.org](mailto:Investigative@ap.org).

## 2 escape jail and go to IHOP, where patrons report them

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — Two inmates in a Virginia jail used primitively made tools to create a hole in the wall of their cell and escape, only to be found hours later at an IHOP restaurant nearby, a sheriff said.

Authorities discovered the two men, ages 37 and 43, missing from their cell in the Newport News jail annex during a routine head count Monday evening, according to a statement from the Newport News Sheriff's Office.

A preliminary investigation found the men exploited a weakness in the jail's construction design and used

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tools made from a toothbrush and a metal object to access rebars between the walls — and then used the rebar to further their escape, the statement said. After escaping their cell, they scaled a containment wall around the jail.

Authorities had asked for the public's help to find the men, and they were taken into custody again early Tuesday at an IHOP in Hampton when other patrons called police.

"It reinforces what we always say, 'See something, say something,'" Sheriff Gabe Morgan said.

The sheriff's office said it is investigating to help prevent further escapes.

One man, who lives in Hampton, had been in custody on charges including contempt of court and probation violations.

Another, a Gloucester resident, was being held on charges including credit card fraud, forgery, grand larceny and probation violation.

Charges related to the escape are pending, the sheriff said.

## China and Russia: explaining a long, complicated friendship

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Chinese leader Xi Jinping just concluded a three-day visit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a warm affair in which the two men praised each other and spoke of a profound friendship. It's a high point in a complicated, centuries-long relationship during which the two countries have been both allies and enemies.

Chinese and Russian states have loomed large in each other's foreign affairs since the 17th century, when two empires created a border with a treaty written in Latin.

Neighbors can be good friends, or bitter rivals. Sharing a border of thousands of miles, Beijing and Moscow have been both.

"China and Russia relations have always been uneasy," said Susan Thornton, a former diplomat and a senior fellow at the Paul Tsai China Center at Yale Law School.

"THE SOVIET UNION'S TODAY IS OUR TOMORROW"

The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, following a brutal Japanese occupation during World War II and a bloody civil war between the Nationalist and Communist Parties.

Russia was part of the Soviet Union, a global superpower, while China was poor, devastated by war and unrecognized by most governments. Communist leader Mao Zedong was junior to Josef Stalin, who led the Soviet Union until his death in 1953.

The early People's Republic depended on the Soviet Union for economic aid and expertise. In 1953, the slogan that appeared in Chinese newspapers was "The Soviet Union's today is our tomorrow." The Soviets sent some 11,000 experts in 1954-58 to help China rebuild after its civil war, according to Joseph Torigian, an associate professor at American University's School of International Service.

The two countries also had a formal military alliance, but Moscow decided against giving China the technology for nuclear arms.

SINO-SOVIET SPLIT

But there were points of friction, especially after the death of Stalin.

In 1956, then-Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev condemned Stalin's "cult of personality" in an address to Communist Party members later known as the "secret speech." Mao, who had modeled himself on the former Soviet leader, took it personally.

When Mao decided to shell two outlying islands of Taiwan held by the Nationalist Party he had defeated in the Chinese civil war, he did not warn Khrushchev. Khrushchev saw it as a betrayal of the alliance, Torigian said. In 1959, the Soviet Union remained neutral during a border conflict between China and India, which led China to feel that it was not getting enough support from its ally.

The relationship soured until the two countries broke off their alliance in 1961 in the Sino-Soviet Split.

They quickly became open rivals. Beijing blasted Moscow for "phony communism" and revisionism, or straying from the Marxist path. Soldiers clashed along their borders in China's northeast and the western

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region of Xinjiang.

## US-CHINA-RUSSIA TRIANGLE

The Sino-Soviet Split left Beijing isolated, but set the stage for outreach to the United States. In 1972, the revolutionary communist state welcomed President Richard Nixon for a visit that paved the way for global recognition of Mao's government and for the U.S. and China to enter into a tacit alignment against Moscow.

The 1990s led to a rapprochement between China and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The two countries formally settled their border disputes.

In the years since, the world has changed greatly, as have the fortunes of the two countries. China is now the world's second-largest economy, while Russia's economy was stagnating long before its invasion of Ukraine last year. Today, it is China facing the U.S. in a strategic competition fueled by intense nationalism on both sides.

Once again, Moscow and Beijing are finding common ground. Under Xi Jinping, "repairing the damage and cultivating the relationship has gone much faster than it has ever before," Thornton, the former diplomat, said.

## LEADERS SEE EYE TO EYE

Meanwhile, the similarities between the two leaders, as well as their personal relationship, has helped ties grow.

Both Xi and Vladimir Putin see Western attempts to spread democracy as an attempt to de-legitimize themselves, and they believe that authoritarian regimes are better for confronting the challenges of the modern world. Russia supplies energy and China exports manufactured goods to Russia.

And while some analysts and commentators have started saying that China is now the senior partner in the relationship, given the history, it's not necessarily how that's viewed in China.

Russia's hold over China is not only historical, but also cultural. Students read translated Russian stories and poems in their literature classes, while many educated Chinese of an older generation learned Russian instead of English.

"Many Chinese people, including elites, have not yet realized the historic reversal of China's comprehensive national strength compared to Russia," wrote Feng Yujun, a prominent Russia scholar at Shanghai's Fudan University, in an article published last month that was shared widely. Feng declined to be interviewed.

"Although China's national strength is now ten times that of Russia, the biggest challenge is that many Chinese people are still subservient to Russia ideologically," he wrote.

—  
AP news researcher Wanqing Chen contributed to this report from Beijing.

## Today in History: March 23, "Titanic" wins 11 Oscars

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 23, the 82nd day of 2023. There are 283 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 23, 1919, Benito Mussolini founded his Fascist political movement in Milan, Italy.

On this date:

In 1775, Patrick Henry delivered an address to the Virginia Provincial Convention in which he is said to have declared, "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

In 1806, explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, having reached the Pacific coast, began their journey back east.

In 1933, the German Reichstag adopted the Enabling Act, which effectively granted Adolf Hitler dictatorial powers.

In 1942, the first Japanese-Americans evacuated by the U.S. Army during World War II arrived at the internment camp in Manzanar, California.

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In 1965, America's first two-person space mission took place as Gemini 3 blasted off with astronauts Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom and John W. Young aboard for a nearly 5-hour flight.

In 1981, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *H.L. v. Matheson*, ruled that states could require, with some exceptions, parental notification when teenage girls seek abortions.

In 1993, scientists announced they'd found the renegade gene that causes Huntington's disease.

In 1994, Aeroflot Flight 593, an Airbus A310, crashed in Siberia with the loss of all 75 people on board; it turned out that a pilot's teenage son who was allowed to sit at the controls had accidentally disengaged the autopilot, causing loss of control.

In 1998, "Titanic" tied an Academy Awards record by winning 11 Oscars, including best picture, director (James Cameron) and song ("My Heart Will Go On").

In 2003, during the Iraq War, a U.S. Army maintenance convoy was ambushed in Nasiriyah (nah-sih-REE'-uh); 11 soldiers were killed, including Pfc. Lori Ann Piestewa (py-ES'-tuh-wah); six were captured, including Pfc. Jessica Lynch, who was rescued on April 1, 2003.

In 2010, claiming a historic triumph, President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, a \$938 billion health care overhaul.

In 2020, President Donald Trump said he wanted to reopen the country for business in weeks, not months; he asserted that continued closures could result in more deaths than the coronavirus itself. Britain became the latest European country to go into effective lockdown, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered the closure of most retail stores and banned public gatherings.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama concluded a four-day visit to the Middle East as he marveled at the beauty of one of the region's most stunning sites, the fabled ancient city of Petra in Jordan. Pope Francis traveled from the Vatican to Castel Gandolfo south of Rome to have lunch with his predecessor, Benedict XVI. Boris Berezovsky, 67, a self-exiled and outspoken Russian tycoon who'd had a bitter falling out with Russian President Vladimir Putin, was found dead at his home in Ascot, England.

Five years ago: A French-Moroccan gunman killed four people before being killed by police in southern France who stormed a supermarket where he had taken hostages; the victims included a police officer who had swapped himself for a hostage being held in the supermarket. President Donald Trump released an order banning most transgender troops from serving in the military except under "limited circumstances." The online classified ads site Craigslist removed its personals section; the action came after the U.S. Senate passed an anti-sex-trafficking bill that could hold the website and others responsible for illegal activity.

One year ago: NATO estimated that 7,000 to 15,000 Russian soldiers were killed in four weeks of fighting in Ukraine, where the country's defenders put up stiffer-than-expected resistance and denied Moscow the lightning victory it hoped for. Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson faced a barrage of Republican questioning about her sentencing of criminal defendants, as her history-making bid to join the Supreme Court veered from lofty constitutional questions to attacks on her motivations as a judge. Madeleine Albright, a child refugee from Nazi- and then Soviet-dominated eastern Europe who rose to become the first female U.S. secretary of state and a mentor to many current and former American statesmen and women, died of cancer at 84.

Today's Birthdays: Movie director Mark Rydell is 94. International Motorsports Hall of Famer Craig Breedlove is 86. Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is 71. Singer Chaka Khan is 70. Actor Amanda Plummer is 66. Actor Catherine Keener is 64. Actor Hope Davis is 59. Actor Richard Grieco is 58. Actor Marin Hinkle is 57. Rock singer-musician Damon Albarn (Blur) is 55. Actor Kelly Perine is 54. Actor-singer Melissa Errico is 53. Rock musician John Humphrey (The Nixons) is 53. Bandleader Reggie Watts (TV: "The Late Late Show With James Corden") is 51. Actor Randall Park is 49. Actor Michelle Monaghan is 47. Actor Keri Russell is 47. Actor Anastasia Griffith is 45. Gossip columnist-blogger Perez Hilton is 45. Actor Nicholle Tom is 45. Actor Brandon Dirden is 45. Country singer Brett Young is 42. Actor Nicolas Wright is 41. Actor Ben Rappaport is 37. NBA point guard Kyrie Irving is 31.