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Sunday, July 30

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.

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.

United Methodist: Conde worship at 8:30 a.m., coffee hour 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship at 10:30 a.m.
State Legion Tournament in Redfield

Monday, July 31

Senior Menu: Beef stroganoff with noodles, green beans, Jell-O with fruit, whole wheat bread.

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

Food Pantry open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Groton Community Center

State Legion Tournament in Redfield

First allowable day for soccer practice

Friday, July 28

Senior Menu: Ham salad croissant, tomato spoon salad, pineapple tidbits, cookie.

Olive Grove: BAE Tournament

State Legion Tournament in Redfield

Saturday, July 29

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. ago 1 p.m.

State Legion Tournament in Redfield

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

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

JULY 24, 2023

World in Brief

property and pose a risk to life.

France has called on anti-government military leaders in its ally and former colony Niger to abandon their ongoing coup and reinstate President Mohamed Bazoum.

Fans at Taylor Swift's Seattle "Eras" tour concert at Lumen Field shook the ground with enough force to register the equivalent of a 2.3 magnitude earthquake.

The 75th Primetime Emmy Awards, due to take place in September, have been postponed due to a strike by Hollywood actors and writers, according to reports.

Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's return to Russia for a summit with African leaders in St. Petersburg was likely approved by President Vladimir Putin because of Wagner's extensive operations in Africa, experts told Newsweek.

Singapore has executed Saridewi Djamani, the first death sentence to be carried out on a woman in the country since 2004, enraging human rights activists. She was sentenced to death for drug trafficking in 2018.

In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Kyiv's forces on the counteroffensive are hunting for Russian weak spots all along the 800-mile front line, Ukraine's Defense Ministry adviser said, amid reports of significant Ukrainian breakthroughs in the south and east of the country.

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE DAY AHEAD

President Joe Biden is expected to discuss his "Bidenomics" economic strategy while visiting a manufacturing plant in Auburn, Maine.

The Federal Reserve's closely watched PCE price index for June is due at 8:30 a.m. ET. Consumer sentiment data for July is scheduled to release at 10 a.m. ET.

The Republican Party of Iowa is hosting its annual Lincoln Dinner fundraiser in Des Moines this evening. Several 2024 GOP presidential candidates are expected to attend, including former President Donald Trump, former Vice President Mike Pence, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, and former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley.

Heritage Auctions in Dallas will be auctioning off the combat boots and dog tags actor Alan Alda wore as part of his wardrobe on M*A*S*H.

The next Mega Millions lottery drawing will occur at 11 p.m. ET. The jackpot is worth an estimated \$910 million, the fifth largest in the game's history.

Vice President Kamala Harris is expected to speak at the NAACP's annual convention on Saturday in Boston.

Donald Trump will host a campaign rally in Erie, Pennsylvania, on Saturday. Guest speakers will begin addressing the crowd at 4 p.m. ET, and Trump is scheduled to speak at 6 p.m. Former Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to deliver a keynote speech about his faith at the Napa Institute's annual summer conference in northern California.

The Senate passed the annual defense policy bill in an 86-11 vote, sidestepping legislation approved by the GOP-controlled House that included "culture war" amendments, including abortion access for service members.

Randy Meisner, a founding member of the Eagles whose contributions to hits like Take It Easy and Take It to the Limit helped the band's rise to fame, died at the age of 77 due to complications from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

60% of the U.S. population—around 200 million people—is currently under flood warnings or heat advisories, as the country's extreme weather continues to damage

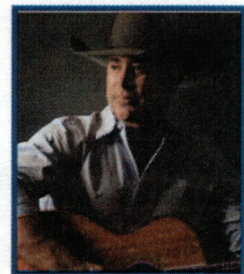
**2ND ANNUAL
COLUMBIA FEST
& PARKS DEDICATION
“A BLAST FROM THE PAST”
JULY 29, 2023**



COME FOR A FULL DAY OF FUN!

- 10:00 AM.....PARADE!**
- 10:00 AM - 3:00 PM.....Vendors**
- 11:00 AM.....Parks Dedication**
- 12:00 - 3:00 PM.....Ballgames**
- 3:00 - 4:00 PM.....Home Run Derby**
- 4:00 - 5:00 PM.....Harry Luge Performs**
- 5:00 PM.....Duck Race**
- 6:00 - 8:00 PM.....Karaoke**
- 9:00 PM.....Harry Luge**

Lots of GREAT ENTERTAINMENT, DELICIOUS FOOD and FUN ACTIVITIES. Bring your lawn chairs and picnic blanket.



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Gov. Noem, AG Jackley Respond to State Senator's Use of COVID Funds

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem and Attorney General Marty Jackley released two letters referencing the inappropriate use of COVID relief dollars by state Senator Jessica Castleberry of Rapid City.

Governor Noem sent a letter to Attorney General Jackley on Tuesday, July 25, asking that his office investigate possible Constitutional and statutory violations committed by Senator Castleberry when she and her business had accepted more than \$603,000 in COVID relief dollars while she served in the Legislature. The State Supreme Court ruled in 2020 that such payments to elected officials were illegal.

Attorney General Jackley sent a letter on Wednesday, July 26, to Gov. Noem responding to her request.

Also on July 26, Attorney General Jackley sent a letter to Senator Castleberry requesting she repay the full amount. Attorney General Jackley stated in his letter that the state will pursue court action if the full amount is not repaid. Senator Castleberry has 10 days to respond.

Governor Noem Announces "Freedom Works Here" NASCAR Stock Car

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. – Today, Governor Noem announced that the "Freedom Works Here" nationwide workforce recruitment campaign is partnering with Live Fast Motorsports to sponsor a NASCAR stock car.

"The momentum of 'Freedom Works Here' isn't slowing down – and so our efforts will not slow down," said Governor Noem. "In fact, they're about to get a lot faster. I'm talking up to 200 miles per hour fast."

The "Freedom Works Here" ads have been watched more than 300 million times. More than 3,500 Americans from every state have applied to move to South Dakota. 675 of those folks are in the final stages of the process of moving to our state.

"On behalf of Team Live Fast, we want to thank everyone at Freedom works Here for partnering with us this weekend at Richmond and later this season at Bristol," said Live Fast Motorsports Co-Owner Matt Tiff. "We're excited to unveil the Freedom Works Here #78 Chevy Camaro and bring recognition to the opportunities in the state of South Dakota!"

The racing team for the "Freedom Works Here" NASCAR stock car is going to be racing for South Dakota small businesses. This campaign is helping businesses across South Dakota fill their workforce needs.

"We appreciate what South Dakota is doing for their people through workforce initiatives while providing a beautiful state to build the American Dream. I look forward to partnering with them and spreading the message of Freedom Works Here," said the driver of #78, BJ McLeod.

Purple Heart Recognition Day

PIERRE, S.D. – At the request of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, Governor Kristi Noem has proclaimed Monday, August 7, 2023, as "Purple Heart Recognition Day," calling on all South Dakotans to acknowledge and remember the sacrifices made by the brave members of our military who are recipients of the Purple Heart Medal.

The Purple Heart, our nation's oldest military medal, is presented to service members who have been wounded or killed as a result of enemy action while serving in the U.S. military. A Purple Heart is a solemn distinction and means a service member has greatly sacrificed themselves, or paid the ultimate price, while in the line of duty.

According to the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor, more than 1.8 million Purple Heart medals have been presented to service members since the award was created in 1782.

"Every day, America's service members selflessly put their lives on the line to keep us safe and free," said Greg Whitlock, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs.

SDDVA encourages all South Dakotans to set aside time on August 7 to pay tribute to our heroes who have been honored with the Purple Heart. It is important for all Americans to learn the history of this important military award and the sacrifices made by the recipients.

"Our military remains as strong today as it has ever been. America's veterans have been defined by the virtues of selfless service, sacrifice, and devotion to duty," said Whitlock. "These men and w

Noem claims of transparency called into question

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

For more than 40 years, South Dakota journalist Kevin Woster has produced material for the state's two largest newspapers, its largest TV station and for South Dakota Public Broadcasting, where he remains a writer and commentator.

Now semi-retired, Woster continues to report on a variety of statewide topics. And while he is a generalist in his journalistic coverage, his two main areas of focus have long been on state politics and the outdoors.

In both areas, Woster said, he has seen problems in the past few years in regard to openness and willingness of state officials to keep the public informed, particularly in the governor's office and within the Game, Fish and Parks Department.

Woster is one of several media professionals interviewed by News Watch who said Gov. Kristi Noem and her administration have significantly reduced access of journalists to information and interviews over the past few years, despite Noem's campaign promises to be the most transparent governor in South Dakota history.

"It seems to have gotten worse during her time in office. Things seemed to have tightened up," Woster said.

"She was a different politician when she was in the (U.S.) House of Representatives, more open and more inclined to focus on South Dakota issues rather than the hard-right themes. And I honestly believed her 2018 campaign pledge to be the most open of administrations. Maybe I was naive, or maybe she changed. Or both."

Media members and experts interviewed by News Watch said that, in contrast to past administrations, Noem and others in state agencies have routinely denied interview requests, often refuse to answer simple questions about news topics or don't return calls or emails.

Often, they require questions to be sent in emails that are responded to with brief statements rather than specific answers. Noem has also moved more toward providing public information in prepared statements or in highly produced videos rather than through back-and-forth discussion with reporters from well-established South Dakota media outlets.

Meanwhile, Noem continues to trumpet her openness. And in response to questions for this article, her spokesperson, Ian Fury, said that the governor has provided more information to the public than any of her predecessors and often relies on communication methods beyond the traditional media.

"There are many ways to communicate with the public directly; answering reporters' questions is just one of those," Fury wrote. "If reporters are unsatisfied with the answers that they receive, then they can



South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem speaks with reporters on Wednesday, March 15, 2023, at C&B Operations in Mitchell. (Photo: Erin Woodiel / Argus Leader)

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Journalist Kevin Woster has worked at South Dakota newspapers and for South Dakota Public Broadcasting, where he continues to write a blog and provide on-air commentary. (Photo:

Courtesy SDPB)

always ask better questions.”

Lack of information on local level

David Bordewyk, executive director of the South Dakota Newspaper Association, said he has heard from numerous members of the press saying it’s increasingly difficult to reach state officials in Pierre as well as state employees who do important work in their local communities.

According to Bordewyk, media members say that while many had developed good relationships with state officials, who were easy to reach and would speak openly with them, those relationships have faded or been intentionally curtailed under the Noem administration.

“The relationships between the press and public officials, being able to share information and to help tell a story, that’s not happening, even for things that are not a controversial topic,” Bordewyk said.

“What the editors are finding is that they put in a request for an interview at the local level and then it has to go all the way back to Pierre to get the OK before the local person can respond, or they don’t respond whatsoever. That has pervaded throughout state government at all levels, and local editors are frustrated.”

‘Public deserves’ more transparency from Noem administration

Woster said previous governors in South Dakota, notably Gov. Bill Janklow, would occasionally be at odds with a member of the media

who reported negatively on their actions.

But Woster said he has never before seen such a blanket shutdown of media accessibility within an administration as he was with Noem over the past couple years.

Woster said other governors — including Republican Gov. Dennis Daugaard — took the approach that when it came to issues handled by officials and experts within state government, they provided wide latitude to those employees to speak openly with the public and news reporters.

The approach by Noem has not followed that tradition, and Woster said the state is not made better by restricting public access to information.

“Noem was right in promising to bring more transparency to state government. The public deserves it. The process of government deserves it. And the important issues involved in government deserve it,” Woster wrote in an email to News Watch.

“The closed-shop mentality that seems to have evolved in the Noem administration in the last few years looks particularly bad because it follows the commitment to openness during the Daugaard administration. I’m saddened by that, both as a journalist and as a South Dakotan.”

State agencies using social media instead

Fury, chief of communications for Noem, did not allow for an interview with herself or Noem but did send News Watch a statement in response to questions about media access to her administration.

“Gov. Noem is proud that her administration is the most transparent in history,” Fury wrote. “We communicate directly with the people of South Dakota, and the media is just one means of doing that.”

Fury wrote that Noem has published more material online than any prior governor, including through social media channels where Noem routinely releases written statements, photos of her travels around the state and nation and in crafted video messaging.

Fury said the governor answers reporter questions “at the appropriate time,” including at press conferences she holds at events, businesses and public meetings across the state.

Fury added that all state agencies follow the same policy in which media requests go through communications teams, which is done so other employees can focus fully on their own jobs.

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"The people of South Dakota hear from the governor and state agencies directly through social media more often than any prior administration," Fury wrote.

Government oversight 'essential for democracy'

Michael Card, a political science professor at the University of South Dakota, said elected officials demonstrate a certain level of accountability when they regularly respond to journalists' questions.

Local and state journalism outlets, he said, are where important issues and problems — and possibly corruption — are exposed, discussed and presented to the public for consideration and response.

"The public needs to be able to learn what their government is doing with some degree of detail," he said. "Knowing what it's doing and why is essential for democracy."

Card, a keen observer of South Dakota politics and government for decades, said he is aware of reduced accessibility to information within the Noem administration and state government overall. One goal of limiting interaction with the media can be for officials who may be subjected to tough questions to reduce the influence of journalists by questioning their motives or challenging their integrity.

"I suspect that some message has gone out from the governor's office to limit what they say to the press," he said. "It's just a distrust of the media, and it's a larger message that is coming out from our former president (Donald Trump) and our governor, who speak much the same language."

Card said some state employees may rightfully fear for their jobs if they speak to the media or say the wrong thing and draw the governor's ire in any way.

Crafting a message

Card was surprised by Noem's decision to travel out of state and not aggressively lobby lawmakers and the public amid the critical period of legislative consideration of her campaign promise to eliminate the sales tax on groceries, a measure that ultimately failed.

"There was a time during the legislative session where she was not accessible," he said. "Especially when Gov. Noem was trying, or appeared to be trying to seek campaign contributions from out-of-state donors, she was simply not accessible."

Card said he has noticed an increase in scripted, pre-packaged public messaging by Noem and a propensity of Fury, her spokesperson, to answer media inquiries with brief, sometimes snippy comments that are more provocative than they are useful to public discourse.

"I think we're seeing more of those short, pithy statements from the governor's spokesperson, and yet she's not responding to questions," he said. "They're trying to create an image. And from their perspective, it may be best to say nothing."

Card said he sees a downward trend nationally in the willingness of government officials to interact with media, and he said the decrease in accessibility is not good for the country or its people.

"I see a distance growing between what the government says it is doing and what it is actually doing, and I think that's a real problem," he said. "The public has a right to know and a need



Michael Card



Gov. Kristi Noem has often used highly produced photos, videos and social media messaging to communicate with the public. (Photo: Courtesy Gov. Noem)

to know, and if the government is not responsive, then trust in the government is reduced.”

Noem approach reminiscent of Nixon and Trump?

In an email to News Watch, Woster said Noem’s relatively locked-down approach could be compared similarly with that of former presidents Richard Nixon and Donald Trump, both of whom at times vilified the media.

“Things seemed to have tightened up. There seems to be more of a siege mentality within the Noem administration, almost a Nixon-like enemies list,” he said.

“And the enemies seem, in a Trump sort of way, to be members of the mainstream media or outlets that have written or broadcast things the Noem crew didn’t like. Meanwhile, the hard-right national media seems always welcome and always played to (by Noem).”

The “suppression” Woster said he has seen under Noem, and heard about from other people he trusts, may be based in an unwillingness to admit that she or her administration might be in error or has miscalculated in some way.

“The idea that she might be wrong about something seems completely foreign to her, or, maybe worse, it seems foreign to members of her staff,” Woster said.

The shift to limiting access of the press and public to government information by the Noem administration has spilled over into the Game, Fish and Parks Department, an agency Woster has covered for decades and which has frequent touch points with the public and historically heavy coverage by statewide media.

Some state officials ‘worried about their jobs’

At a recent media panel discussion in Rapid City, Woster said he has never seen such reticence among GFP officials and employees to talk to the media. Many employees he knows are fearful that saying the wrong thing could cost them their jobs.

“I think the agency today is the least open, and its employees are the most worried about their jobs that I can remember,” Woster wrote to News Watch in a follow-up email.

Woster recounted a recent experience in which he attempted to report about fencing around a South Dakota trout stream. Woster said he wrote to the GFP spokesperson and waited nearly two weeks before receiving a useful response. He eventually emailed questions back and forth with a GFP official but was never granted an actual interview.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen this kind of fear and this kind of suppression within Game, Fish and Parks that I’ve seen and heard about under Noem,” Woster wrote. “What we have now seems to be just an ongoing clamp down, as if reporters and news outlets who aggressively do their jobs are ‘enemies of the people,’” as Trump has called the profession.

Noem’s policy part of a national trend

The Noem policy of using public-information (PIO) or communications officers to filter media requests has become a more common practice in American government over the past couple decades, according to the Society of Professional Journalists, a top media trade group.



While running for governor, Kristi Noem was joined by then-President Donald Trump for a Sioux Falls fundraising event in 2018. One longtime South Dakota journalist said that Noem has followed Trump’s pattern of sparring with, rather than working with, journalists covering his actions. Photo: (Photo: Sioux Falls Argus Leader)



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SPJ calls the practice "Censorship by PIO" and decries the method as a way for the government to control its messaging and prevent the press from accessing information or personnel within government.

"The restrictions have become, in great part, a cultural norm in the United States. They also have become an effective form of censorship by which powerful entities keep the public ignorant about what impacts them," the SPJ reports on its website.

"This 'Censorship by PIO' works in tandem with other assaults on free speech including restrictions on public records, threats and physical assaults on reporters, prosecution of whistleblowers and threats of prosecution against reporters."

In numerous surveys sent to reporters across the country, SPJ found that 75% of reporters who cover federal agencies say they must get approval from communications officers before being granted interviews and that a wide majority of reporters consider the PIO process as a form of censorship.

Some reporters also argue that the process of requiring all questions to be submitted in writing and responding via government spokesperson, instead of having interviews featuring active discussions between reporter and source, is another way that governments can avoid answering questions they don't like. It also limits what information reporters can obtain, they say.

About 40% of PIOs surveyed by SPJ said they block access of some reporters to public officials based on prior reporting by those journalists.

Breaking traditions of the past

Bordewyk said he was disappointed when Noem ended the traditional practice of hosting weekly gubernatorial press briefings during the 2023 legislative session.

The briefings long served as a way for governors to update the state's residents on progress about major legislation but also as a way for media members to ask probing questions.

"In all my years, I can't recall a governor not holding regular press conferences during the legislative session, just like legislative leaders still do," Bordewyk said. "That was unique, no doubt."

Bordewyk said he hopes the reduced access to state government will be temporary and not become the norm. Bordewyk and others have said past governors, including Janklow, would occasionally limit press access but usually reverted back to openness when a crisis cleared.

"I don't like what I've seen in the last several years in terms of the relationship between the executive branch and the press in South Dakota," said Bordewyk, who has spent nearly 30 years as leader of the association that represents more than 100 daily and weekly newspapers across the state.

"I think it's unfortunate, and my hope is that down the road it can be better, whether it's within the next few years or beyond that," he said. "I hope this does not become institutionalized. It's notable when you yearn for the days of Bill Janklow to have better media access."

Noem uses national conservative media

Bordewyk noted that much of the governor's current communication strategy takes place on conservative national cable networks or through highly produced messaging on social media channels and not through contacts or interviews with local media.

In May 2019, the state agreed to pay \$75,000 to a Massachusetts company, VideoLink, to install a video



— “ —
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media access.
— ” —

Dave Bordewyk, SDNA
Executive Director

recording studio in the South Dakota Capitol that the governor has used to appear on national TV broadcasts, among other things.

Overall, taxpayers were on the hook for up to \$130,000 in the first year of operation of the studio, according to state records.

Noem refused to participate in a fall 2022 gubernatorial debate hosted by South Dakota Public Broadcasting, with her campaign complaining that SDPB and National Public Radio had an "extreme leftist slant" in its news coverage.

Noem still makes a significant number of local appearances at events and in pre-arranged press conferences at locations across the state.

An internet search by News Watch revealed that Noem or her spokesman did not provide a comment or answer questions posed by reporters on deadline on 27 occasions between October 2020 and June 2023. The findings uncovered only those times when reporters included references to unreturned calls or email or when specific questions went unanswered.

Lack of access prompts public safety concerns

Mark Watson has spent the past 18 years at the Black Hills Pioneer newspaper in Spearfish, serving 15 of those years as editor, where he also frequently covers the outdoors and environment.

Watson said he has noticed a sharp decline in the willingness, or ability, of GFP employees to speak with him and his staff on the record. Watson said GFP employees he's spoken with and interviewed for years, including some he knows on a personal basis, have recently said they are unable to speak with anyone from the media, and that all information requests must be in writing and sent to the main agency spokesperson, Nick Harrington.

Watson said the suppression prevented him from doing public-service reporting recently when a mountain lion was relocated from a residential neighborhood in Spearfish and when sightings of bears suddenly rose in western South Dakota.

Regarding the black bear article, Watson said he tried contacting numerous GFP staffers with no luck. After several days of phone calls and emails, Watson said he was granted an interview with a regional supervisor who was restricted in what he could discuss.

On the mountain lion story, Watson said he called a local GFP staffer to ask questions the day after the animal was relocated, but his request for an interview was denied. He was sent a generic statement late that day, and when he immediately replied to Harrington with follow-up questions about the mountain lion that was captured, he said he never received a response.

"There was no interview, and no conversation," he said. "I've talked to a half-dozen to a dozen GFP staffers recently, including in the grocery store, and every single one said all questions have to be submitted in writing and that they have to get the governor's office to sign off on the answers."

Watson said he hoped the GFP would provide information to him and to his readers on taking steps to reduce the chance that bears or lions might enter their properties or public spaces.

For an article on chronic-wasting disease in deer, Watson said Harrington never replied to his emails.

"If we're not able to get even a little bit of information from the GFP, somebody is going to get hurt," Watson said. "The delay of information from official sources is, in a worst-case scenario, going to get somebody hurt."

Watson added: "The state employees are generally great when we are able to talk to them. They, too, have told me that they are frustrated by their inability to discuss news topics with media."

GFP responds to media 'as appropriate'

Harrington, the GFP spokesperson, did not grant News Watch an interview.

He did respond to a series of questions with an email in which he said the GFP communications team



Mark Watson is the editor of the Black Hills Pioneer.

(Photo: Submitted)

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is dedicated to providing custom service that includes communicating with the public through the agency website, social media accounts, print materials, emails, videos, podcasts and press releases.

He said the communications team responds to media requests "as appropriate."

Harrington said the agency practice is to funnel any media requests through Harrington and the communications department as a way to keep in-field staff focused on their jobs.

"It is wholly within my core job duties to respond to media inquiries. It is not within the core job duties of staff in the field," he said. "This organization is so that they have the flexibility to do their jobs, and they trust me to do mine."

Harrington did not address specific questions related to whether there has been a shift in media access policy within the GFP or whether he believes he has done a good job of fulfilling media requests for interviews or information.

He did list a few occasions in which GFP has provided information to News Watch for articles related to the outdoors and GFP policy.

Harrington advised that media members and the public can engage with GFP through meetings of the GFP Commission, which meets regularly around the state, or by attending public hearings in person or virtually or by catching up on commission actions via state archives.

"Customer service is a key priority for our department, and we are dedicated to reaching our customers where they are, which includes through all these platforms," Harrington wrote.

Month delay in response from spokesman

Beyond the GFP silence, Watson has had difficulty getting information from other state sources, including the governor's office.

On June 2, Watson wrote to Fury with three questions about the governor's announced deployment of National Guard troops to the Southern U.S. border. Watson asked about the number of Guard members deployed, what units they would be from and what their mission would be.

Fury replied by email that day saying he was on paternity leave and would reply by email.

On June 30, four weeks later, Watson received a response from Fury indicating that "further details on the deployment will be available at a later date."

Watson also queried Fury about what he thought was a "gag order" placed on GFP officials regarding media inquiries. Fury replied that no such order exists, but that the administration's protocol was that all questions to GFP must be presented to the agency spokesperson and not to individual employees.

'Something has changed' in Noem administration

Watson, who serves as the chairman of the First Amendment Committee within the South Dakota Newspaper Association, said he is troubled by the lack of accessibility of government officials and information.

"Something has changed, and I don't know what it is, but it feels a lot like micromanaging," he said.

Watson said the shift to reduced access to information is bad for the public and the state because residents rely on newspapers and other trusted local media to get facts and not opinions presented as facts, which is common on social media.

"We want to get the official source to make sure this indeed did happen, or if it did not happen," Watson said.

"The state and local governments have a duty to inform citizens, and the best way to do that is through trusted and reputable news outlets throughout the state. The state should have a policy of maximum disclosure and minimum delays, and right now it's, 'We might get back to you and we might not.'"

Lack of basic checks and balances

George Vandell, a retired GFP official, said he has heard that the media have been kept at arm's length by the GFP.

Vandell, who serves on the board of outdoors groups, including the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, said GFP Secretary Kevin Robling has continued the practice of holding monthly conference calls with outdoors leaders across the state.

But Vandell said he is concerned that officials from GFP and other state agencies are reluctant to discuss

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any issue that might make the state look bad.

"I don't know what's going on, but I suspect that this is an administration that doesn't like bad news, so if it's anything negative, they don't want anybody talking to the news," Vandel said.

"I don't think there's great openness to talk to the press right now, which is unfortunate because they're spending the dollars of hunters and fishermen, and I'd like to think they could do a better job of communicating with them through the press."

Vandel and Wildlife Federation President Zachery T. Hunke both said they have seen a recent decline in the importance placed upon input from their organization and the public when it comes to the GFP Commission, an appointed board that makes outdoors policy decisions in South Dakota.

Hunke said that in May, the commission voted unanimously to approve the sale of more non-resident waterfowl licenses, despite strong written and in-person public comment against the increase.

"Over 90% of comments were against the proposal, and then 100% of the in-person comments were against the proposal," Hunke said. "And the proposal still passes unanimously, which makes me wonder if there is any checks and balances within our commission."

Hunke said he also has heard from members of the media and others that information is harder to get from GFP.

"It just seems like a recurring problem," he said.

South Dakota native shocked at lack of openness



Josh Linehan is a South Dakota native who formerly worked in journalism in Florida and Maine, where he said governments are far more open in terms of public records than South Dakota. Linehan now serves as editor of the Brookings Register. (Photo:

Courtesy Josh Linehan)

Josh Linehan is a native of Brookings who returned home in December to serve as the managing editor of his hometown paper, The Brookings Register.

He came back after journalism stints in Florida and Maine, both states known for strong public records laws that allow for access to significant government information. Linehan has experienced a culture shock of sorts since returning to the Rushmore State.

"The difference is night and day," Linehan said. "In Maine, we did a ton of freedom of information requests, and we would inevitably get material provided to us."

Linehan said he has faced some challenges in getting public information from local officials in Brookings, but obtaining information from state government officials in South Dakota has been more difficult.

"I've found that when we get something sent by the governor's office or anyone in Pierre, questions just are not answered," he said.

"It seems like the standard operating principle is to just deny any request outright and then force you to keep drilling down and drilling down to hopefully get some information."

Linehan recently filed a formal public records request to obtain information about calls made to the governor's anonymous "whistleblower hotline" for complaints about higher education in South Dakota.

After a long delay, Linehan received a letter from the state denying the request, saying the complaints fell under a records exemption for correspondence to an elected official.

"I cannot imagine that the governor's office created this hotline and it has not created one record subject to public records law," Linehan said.

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"I don't need anyone's name and phone numbers, but I believe we and our readers would like to know what kind of things are being said that could possibly affect South Dakota State University."

Linehan has contacted an attorney to appeal the state's ruling and hopefully reveal what types of complaints, if any, have been received.

"It's a frustrating process because they're the public's records and the public has a right to know," he said.

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at sdnewswatch.org. News Watch reporters Stu Whitney and Abbey Stegenga contributed to this report.



ABOUT BART PFANKUCH

Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native,

he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Rapid City senator accused of illegally accepting \$600,000 in COVID-19 relief funds

Castleberry denies wrongdoing, says she was following legal guidance

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JULY 27, 2023 5:38 PM

State Sen. Jessica Castleberry, R-Rapid City, is accused of illegally accepting over a half-million dollars in COVID-19 relief funds to support her child care business, according to the governor and attorney general.

Gov. Kristi Noem divulged the information in a news release Thursday, along with a letter from Attorney General Marty Jackley requesting that Castleberry repay the full amount or reach an agreement within 10 days, or face legal action.

Castleberry, who was appointed by Noem to the Legislature in 2019 after Sen. Lyndi DiSanto resigned, accepted more than \$603,000 in COVID relief money for her child care business, Little Nest Preschool, the release said. Castleberry also voted on legislation that appropriated the federal stimulus funding, according to a letter from Noem to Castleberry that Noem released publicly.

A South Dakota Supreme Court advisory opinion from 2020 is relevant to the situation, according to Noem and Jackley. That opinion says the South Dakota Constitution bans state lawmakers from having direct or indirect interest in state contracts during their tenure and a year after their service ends.

"The Supreme Court could not have spoken more clearly or on point to this issue," Noem wrote in her letter. "The senator has a personal and ethical obligation to avoid conflict of interests. The senator also swore an oath to support the state constitution."

Castleberry said she applied for federal funds to offset employee payroll, provide personal protection equipment and ensure the child care center remained open. While some COVID relief programs came directly from the federal government, like Paycheck Protection Program loans, other federal programs were funneled through the state.

The senator told South Dakota Searchlight in an emailed statement that she hired independent legal counsel about her company's eligibility to receive federal grants through the state.

"After consulting with legal counsel, I believed my company was eligible," Castleberry said. "Upon several occasions, I communicated directly and transparently with DSS staff regarding grant applications. I am committed to resolving the issue with the state and will work with them to ensure I acted in compliance with the state constitution."

The documents released by Noem don't itemize the allegedly illegal payments, but the state financial transparency website says Little Nest Preschool was awarded nearly \$355,400 in ARPA Childcare Stabilization Grants as of July 26. The business received an additional \$164,000 between July 2021 and February 2022. The website does not list transactions older than July 2021.

Little Nest Preschool also received \$164,520 in federal PPP loans, which are not part of the state-allocated federal funds.

Noem's letter said Department of Social Services staff found the violations while processing a \$4,000 grant application from Castleberry's business, Little Nest Preschool, for another grant program. In that program, Noem approved \$12.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to help registered or licensed child care providers expand or start a new facility. Castleberry's application was denied by the state.

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.

Noem turns workforce recruitment focus to NASCAR fans

State will sponsor vehicle for two upcoming races

BY: JOHN HULT - JULY 27, 2023 12:54 PM

SIOUX FALLS — Gov. Kristi Noem wants a few more NASCAR fans in South Dakota.

Specifically, NASCAR fans from other states with job skills.

To that end, Noem announced Thursday that the state will use a portion of the \$5 million budget for the state's "Freedom Works Here" marketing campaign to sponsor a vehicle bearing state messaging in two upcoming NASCAR races.

The "Freedom Works Here" campaign has already drawn more than 3,700 out-of-state job applicants from around the country through targeted marketing, a website and a series of playful video ads starring Noem (one has her trying her hand at plumbing). The campaign also includes the offer of personal guidance from Department of Labor staffers on where to find housing, child care or how to handle South Dakota winters, and emails from Noem urging promising candidates to make the jump from their state to hers.

"Since we started this marketing campaign about four weeks ago, over 350 million people have seen the campaign, watched the commercials and have heard the story about how freedom works here," Noem said at the race car's unveiling at Falls Park in Sioux Falls.

Thus far, California leads the applicant numbers with more than 600, with Texas a distant second with less than half that figure.

Live Fast Motorsports driver B.J. McLeod will race the South Dakota-sponsored NASCAR Chevy Camaro in two upcoming races in Bristol, Tennessee, and Richmond, Virginia.

The workforce recruitment push is part of a broader, yearslong effort by the Noem administration to fill open positions in the state, of which she said there are at least 25,000. The state's current unemployment rate of 1.8% is tied with New Hampshire for the lowest in the nation.

Noem has placed a particular focus on trades, with cash infusions for things like the "Start Today South Dakota" apprenticeship program, and by pushing legislation to expand the list of occupations for which out-of-state licenses are recognized automatically.

The trades are areas of significant need.

"We would hire 25 plumbers right now, we would," said Chris Filsinger, the CFO of Sioux Falls' Hander Plumbing and Heating, who was on hand for the race car press conference.

The NASCAR angle, Noem said, fits squarely into the focus on trades.

"We've looked at sponsoring NASCAR's races before and partnering with teams in the past, because a lot of that demographic is who we're talking to," Noem said. "And so looking at who might be interested in moving to South Dakota, we knew it would be effective."

The campaign has been funded with general marketing dollars, according to Chris Schilken, South Dakota's commissioner of economic development. Some of the money also came in the form of leftovers from a less-successful workforce development campaign that offered direct resettlement payments to out-of-staters with in-demand skills.

Schilken confirmed that the NASCAR sponsorship dollars would be pulled from the \$5 million pool, but said during the press conference he wasn't certain what the final cost would be. A representative for the Governor's Office of Economic Development, one of the campaign's partners, later told South Dakota Searchlight via email that the sponsorship is estimated to cost \$130,000.

The recruitment campaign is set to sunset in September, but Schilken said his office is looking into the costs of an extension.

Noem's photo and the number "605," representing South Dakota's area code, were on the vehicle displayed at Falls Park, but Noem said they will not be affixed to McLeod's vehicle for the two races.

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

Johnson votes yes on VA spending bill that renews abortion, transgender fights

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JULY 27, 2023 1:46 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans approved their first government spending bill Thursday, following tense debate about whether the Department of Veterans Affairs should provide abortions in limited circumstances and the GOP's decision to cut military construction funding.

The 219-211 mostly party-line vote (Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, voted yes) on the Military Construction-VA appropriations bill sends the measure to the Senate, where that chamber's spending panel has written its own bipartisan version of the legislation. The House and Senate will likely begin working out their differences in a conference committee this fall.

But most House Democrats vehemently opposed their chamber's bill, arguing the policies GOP lawmakers added in were extreme and the funding levels too low. The legislation would roll back a rule sought by the VA that would allow taxpayer funding of abortions when the health of a pregnant veteran is endangered, along with other limited circumstances.

The bill also targets the funding of gender-affirming care for transgender veterans, the display of LGBTQ Pride flags and diversity, equity and inclusion training.

"VA is a place that all veterans should feel welcome, included and cared for," said Florida Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the top Democrat on the spending subcommittee. "All veterans means all veterans, and what this bill does is shameful."

Wasserman Schultz said the House spending bills for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1 are on a "collision course" with the Senate, where its version of this bill has broad bipartisan support.

Texas Republican Rep. Kay Granger, chair of the full Appropriations Committee, said the House's Military Construction-VA funding measure "honors" lawmakers' commitment to veterans while reducing some government spending.

"The bill prioritizes our nations' heroes by providing critical funding for military bases and facilities, improving the quality of life of our service members and their families, and ensuring veterans are appropriately honored in our cemeteries and battle monuments," Granger said.

The House bill would provide \$17.5 billion for military construction projects and \$137.8 billion in nondefense discretionary spending for veterans medical care. Current law provides \$19 billion for military construction and \$135.2 billion in nondefense discretionary spending for veterans health care.

The House Appropriations Committee released the bill in mid-May and approved the legislation on a party-line vote in mid-June after members on the panel debated and voted on several amendments.

Policy riders

The spending bill includes numerous conservative policy riders, including one that would bar the Department of Veterans Affairs from implementing an interim final rule on abortion access.

That rule says that VA could terminate a pregnancy "when the life or health of the pregnant veteran would be endangered if the pregnancy were carried to term or when the pregnancy is the result of an act of rape or incest."

In a move that could slightly confuse the VA, Republicans also added in long-standing language on federal funding for abortion access, which says taxpayer dollars can only go toward pregnancy termination when it's the result of rape or incest, or when it would endanger the life of the pregnant patient. That provision—which does not include a provision for the health of the pregnant veteran, like the interim rule—is generally referred to as the Hyde amendment.

The legislation would bar the Biden administration from closing the Guantánamo Bay detention facility in Cuba, where the U.S. military continues to hold about 30 detainees.

The United Nations issued a report last month, after an official visited the facility and garnered access to detainees.

The report said the official "identified significant improvements to the conditions of confinement but expressed 'serious concerns about the continued detention of 30 men and the systematic arbitrariness

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that pervades their day-to-day, bringing severe insecurity, suffering, and anxiety to all, without exception.”

UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, also wrote in the report that “closure of the facility remains a priority.”

The House’s spending legislation doesn’t include any dedicated funding for the Defense Department to clean up PFAS or forever chemical contamination on the more than 700 military sites throughout the country where it’s been detected.

Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. Madeleine Dean criticized the GOP for its decision not to include specific PFAS cleanup funding, like the \$200 million Democrats provided in the committee report that accompanied last year’s spending law.

“The service members that call these bases work or home have been continually exposed to these forever chemicals, as have their neighbors in the surrounding area,” Dean said. “Congress and the White House have a responsibility to protect our current and future service members as well as their neighbors.”

Dean said the forever chemicals, or PFAS, can harm people’s health in several ways, including possible decreased fertility, increased risk of cancer, obesity and thyroid hormone disruption.

The bill bars the VA from using any funding “for surgical procedures or hormone therapies for the purposes of gender affirming care.”

It prohibits spending any taxpayer dollars to display any flag at a VA facility or national cemetery other than the U.S. flag, a state or territory’s flag, a tribal flag, a department flag, an Armed Services flag, or the POW/MIA flag. The language is intended to prevent flying the LGBTQ pride flag.

The bill bars funding from being used “for any office, programs, or activity for the purposes of diversity, equity, and inclusion training or implementation.”

Crisis line, cannabis, masks

Lawmakers added more than 30 amendments to the bill during floor debate, including an amendment from North Carolina Republican Rep. Richard Hudson that added \$10 million in additional funding for the veterans crisis line.

The House also added a provision that would allow veterans to enroll in state-run medical cannabis programs without VA interference. The bipartisan amendment was backed by Florida Republican Brian Mast, Oregon Democrat Earl Blumenauer, Ohio Republican Dave Joyce, California Democrat Barbara Lee, Massachusetts Democrat Jim McGovern and Florida Republican Matt Gaetz.

House lawmakers adopted an amendment from Montana Republican Matt Rosendale that would bar the VA from keeping COVID-19 mask mandates in its medical facilities.

Lawmakers rejected several amendments to the bill, including two proposals that would have reduced spending on NATO’s Security Investment Program.

The first proposal from Tennessee Republican Rep. Andy Ogles would have cut the account by \$3 million while a different amendment from Georgia GOP Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene would have cut \$73 million for the program.

An amendment from Greene that would have cut \$86 million for the VA’s Office of Resolution Management, Diversity and Inclusion was also rejected.

Second spending bill postponed

House Republicans were scheduled to debate a second spending bill this week, the Agriculture and rural development funding bill that includes spending on the Food and Drug Administration, but leadership pulled that from the calendar mid-week.

It’s likely that the bill, drafted by Maryland GOP Rep. Andy Harris, didn’t have the votes to pass the House amid disagreements on total spending for the upcoming fiscal year.

The House Appropriations Committee has written the dozen annual bills to funding levels well below the bipartisan agreement that Speaker Kevin McCarthy and President Joe Biden negotiated earlier this year when they brokered a debt limit agreement.

But those lower funding levels on discretionary programs, which make up about one-third of annual

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federal spending, aren't low enough for the far-right Freedom Caucus.

That group has been calling for House Republican leaders to cut additional spending and discount so-called budget gimmicks that claw back already approved federal spending and then reallocate it to spending in the GOP bills.

Some of the Freedom Caucus' members are already forecasting a partial government shutdown later this year. The soonest that could happen is Oct. 1, the start of the new fiscal year.

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.

Dakota State president moderates artificial intelligence briefing for senators

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - JULY 27, 2023 9:20 AM

Dakota State University President Dr. José-Marie Griffiths moderated a briefing Wednesday on artificial intelligence for members of the U.S. Senate, according to Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota.

Griffiths said in a news release, "With so many questions about where AI is heading and how it will change the world, it is important that our leaders and policymakers understand AI technology."

The briefing was the third bipartisan education session hosted by the Senate's AI working group, which is led by Rounds, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-New York, and Sens. Martin Heinrich, D-New Mexico, and Todd Young, R-Indiana. Griffiths was invited by Rounds to moderate the briefing.

Rounds said DSU, which is in Madison, and Griffiths are nationally recognized leaders in cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.

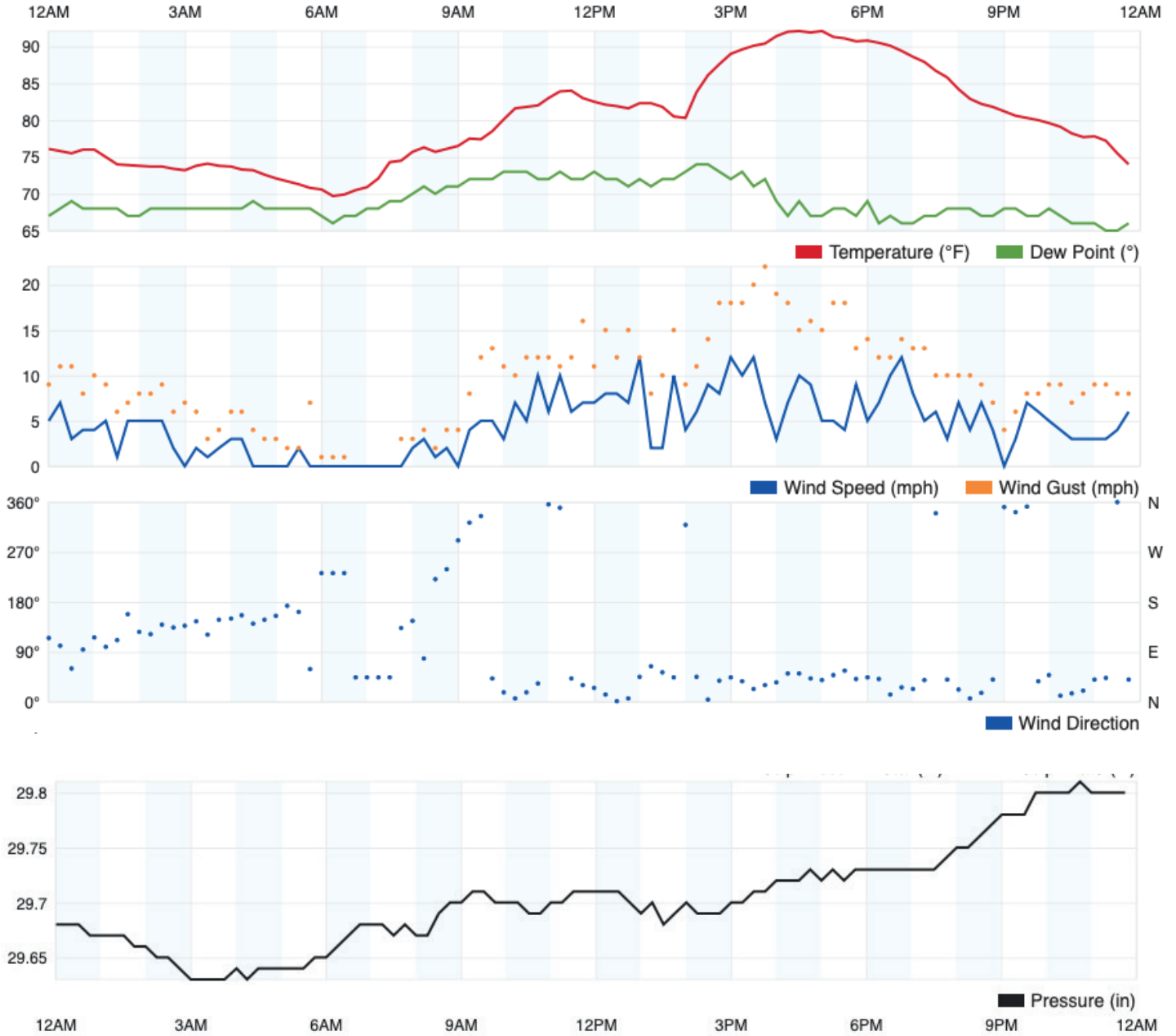
"The goal of the working group is to unite the Senate in a bipartisan way to address the challenges and opportunities posed by AI," Rounds said in a news release.

DSU has three Centers of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense, Research and Cyber Operations. There are 10 institutions in the United States that have all three of those designations, according to Rounds.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
Slight Chance T-storms then Chance Showers and Breezy	Slight Chance Showers then Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Slight Chance Showers	Slight Chance Showers
High: 83 °F	Low: 57 °F	High: 80 °F	Low: 56 °F	High: 83 °F	Low: 61 °F	High: 85 °F



Isolated Severe Storms Possible Today

July 28, 2023
5:36 AM

Timing/Location

A Marginal Risk (risk level 1 of 5) for severe weather is outlined in the dark green color on the map. Thunderstorms are possible this afternoon and evening, worse further south.

Hazards

The strongest of the thunderstorms that develop will have the potential to produce large hail and damaging winds. Chances for each hazard type:

Tornado



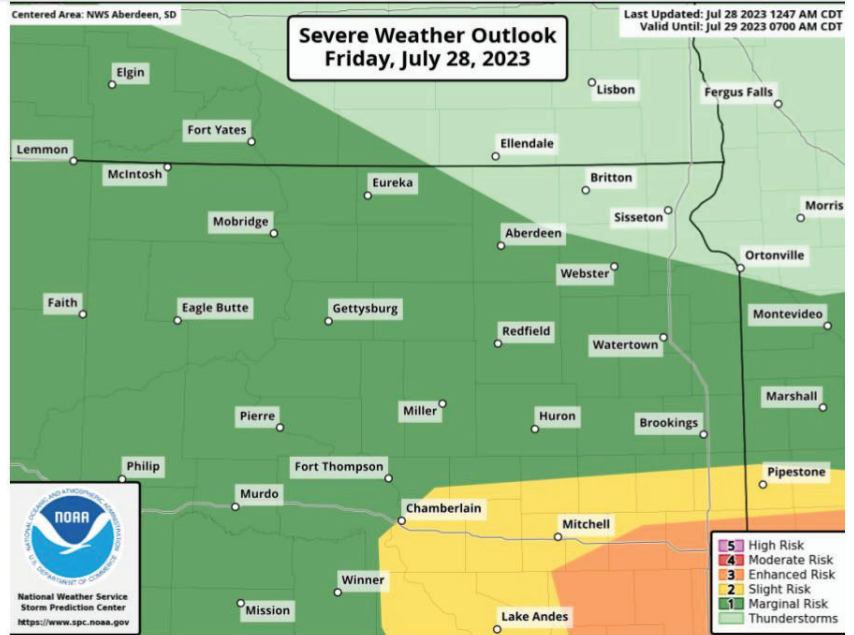
Hail



Wind



Flooding



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A Marginal Risk for severe weather is across much of the area for today. The main threats with the strongest storms are large hail and damaging winds. Although, it appears the threat for more organized and higher areal coverage of storms is just south of the forecast area.

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Today in Weather History

July 28, 1986: Very intense thunderstorms developed in South Dakota and Nebraska and moved into Iowa. The first of these storms produced a tornado that crossed into Iowa south of Sioux City and slammed into a coal-burning power plant. This storm caused between 25 and 50 million dollars damage to the plant. The tornado continued across farmland, then damaged a store and flattened a motel in Sloan before lifting up.

1819 - A small but intense hurricane passed over Bay Saint Louis, MS. The hurricane was considered the worst in fifty years. Few houses were left standing either at Bay Saint Louis or at Pass Christian, and much of the Mississippi coast was desolate following the storm. A U.S. cutter was lost along with its thirty-nine crew members. The storm struck the same area that was hit 150 years later by Hurricane Camille. (David Ludlum)

1898: A severe thunderstorm produced considerable hail (some stones to 11 ounces) in Chicago, Illinois business district. Some people were hurt, not by hail, but by several hundred runaway horses spooked by the hailstones.

1930 - The temperature at Greensburg, KY, soared to 114 degrees to set a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1934 - The temperature at Grofino, ID, climbed to 118 degrees to establish a record for Idaho. (The Weather Channel)

1952 - A severe storm with hail up to an inch and a half in diameter broke windows, ruined roofs, and stripped trees of leaves near Benson, AZ. The temperature dropped to 37 degrees, as hail was three to four inches deep, with drifts 46 inches high. (The Weather Channel)

1976: At 3:42 AM, an earthquake measuring between 7.8 and 8.2 magnitudes on the Richter scale flattens Tangshan, a Chinese industrial city with a population of about one million people. An estimated 242,000 people in Tangshan and surrounding areas were killed, making the earthquake one of the deadliest in recorded history, surpassed only by the 300,000 who died in the Calcutta earthquake in 1737, and the 830,000 thought to have perished in China's Shaanxi province in 1556.

1986 - Severe thunderstorms moving out of South Dakota across Iowa produce high winds which derailed eighteen piggyback trailer cars of a westbound freight train near Boone, IA. Sixteen of the cars fell 187 feet into the Des Moines River. The thunderstorms also spawned a number of tornadoes, including one which caused twenty-five to fifty million dollars damage at Sloan, near Sioux City, IA. (Storm Data)

1987 - Thunderstorms in Nevada produced wind gusts to 70 mph at Searchlight, reducing visibilities to near zero in blowing dust and sand. Thunderstorms in Montana drenched Lonesome Lake with 3.78 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms drenched Wilmington, NC, with 3.33 inches of rain, bringing their monthly total 14.46 inches. Seven cities in Michigan and Minnesota reported record high temperatures for the date. Marquette, MI, hit 99 degrees, and the record high of 94 degrees at Flint MI was their tenth of the month. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Afternoon thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in Massachusetts. Early evening thunderstorms over Florida produced wind gusts to 68 mph at Fort Myers, and evening thunderstorms in South Dakota produced nearly two inches of rain in twenty minutes at Pierpoint. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

SING TO THE LORD!

When Herbert Hoover was president, he asked Rudy Vallee to sing at the White House. He was very impressed by the famous "megaphone crooner" and entertainer and at the end of his performance said, "You are great, Mr. Vallee. If you can sing a song that would make people feel good, forget their problems, and relieve their depression, I will give you a medal." However, Vallee did not have a song that he could sing that would bring about those results.

But there is One who can do that. David said, "I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praises to my God as long as I live. May my meditation be pleasing to Him as I rejoice in the Lord."

The Hebrew word for meditate includes two words from the English language: one is "think," and the other suggests "speech" or "audible thinking," or "thinking out loud." If we put them together, they can bring about significant results!

Imagine how our lives would be different if, when we thought about God's Word, we would begin to "talk" to Him. For example, if 1 John 1:9 came to mind during a time of meditation, we might say something like, "Oh, thank You Lord for Your forgiveness. How grateful I am that if I come to You, confess my sin, ask You for Your forgiveness and repent, You will forgive me. Thank You for the assurance of Your grace and mercy. How much I need it. And please, Lord, fill my life with Your Spirit so that when I am tempted to sin, I can ask You to give me the strength to overcome the temptation!"

Prayer: Father, as I read and focus on You, please fill my mind with Your Word. Let it speak to my heart and then may my heart speak to You! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praises to my God as long as I live. May my meditation be pleasing to Him as I rejoice in the Lord. Psalm 104:33-34



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 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 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
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 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
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 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:
07.25.23

3 5 6 44 61 25

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$910,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 8 Mins 59
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.26.23

4 8 25 36 42 8

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$6,490,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 23
DRAW: Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.27.23

19 25 32 36 40 12

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 38 Mins 59
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.26.23

1 6 15 30 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 38
DRAW: Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.26.23

31 43 51 60 69 13

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 7
DRAW: Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.26.23

3 16 40 48 60 14

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$60,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 7
DRAW: Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Military factions wrangle for power in Niger 2 days after coup, sources say

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Various factions of Niger's military wrangled for power Friday, an analyst and a Western military official said, two days after members of the presidential guard staged a coup, setting off political chaos that could set back the country's fight against jihadists and increase Russia's influence in West Africa.

It remained unclear who was in charge, and if efforts at mediation had begun. A delegation from neighboring Nigeria left shortly after arriving, and the president of Benin, nominated as a mediator by a regional body, had not arrived.

An analyst who has spoken with participants in the talks said that the Presidential Guard, which led the coup, is negotiating with the army about who should be in charge. The analyst asked not to be named because of the sensitive situation.

A western military official in Niger who is not authorized to speak to the media confirmed that the military factions were believed to be negotiating, and said that situation remains tense and all of the ingredients are on the table for it to erupt in fighting.

Speaking in Papua New Guinea, French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the coup as "completely illegitimate and profoundly dangerous for the Nigeriens, Niger and the whole region." He said that he had spoken repeatedly with President Mohamed Bazoum, and that the detained leader is in good health.

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna told French media that there was still time to end what she described as an "attempted coup."

"If you are hearing me speak of an attempted coup, that's because we do not regard things as definitive," French media quoted Colonna as saying. She also spoke of "possible exits if those responsible for this attempt hear the message from the international community."

Niger is seen as the last partner in the West's efforts to battle jihadists linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group in Africa's Sahel region, where Russia and the west have been vying for influence in the fight against extremism. France, which ruled Niger as a colony until 1960, has 1,500 soldiers in the country, who conduct joint operations with the Nigeriens.

On Thursday, several hundred people gathered in the capital, Niamey, and chanted support for the Russian private military group Wagner while waving Russian flags. Later, they burned cars and ransacked the headquarters of the president's political party. "We're fed up," said Omar Issaka, one of the protestors.

"We are tired of being targeted by the men in the bush ... Down with the French people. We're going to collaborate with Russia now," he said.

The mutinous soldiers have not announced a leader and President Mohamed Bazoum, who was elected two years ago in Niger's first peaceful, democratic transfer of power since its independence from France in 1960, has not resigned.

Some of the last public communications from the government included a defiant tweet by the president Thursday declaring that democracy would prevail and a call by the Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou, on media outlet France 24, for Nigeriens to stand against the mutiny.

However, it's unclear who's involved in these dialogues, the nature of the discussions or how they're proceeding.

Earlier this week, The Economic Community of West African States said it was sending Benin President Patrice Talon to lead mediation efforts, but as of Friday Talon was not in the country. During their first address to the nation Wednesday night, the mutineers urged "external partners" not to interfere.

Macron said France supports regional organizations, in particular ECOWAS, "in the decisions that it will have to take -- of mediation or condemnation and sanctions against the putschists if they make progress

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and finalize their plan.

Analysts say the coup threatens to starkly reshape the international community's engagement with the Sahel region.

On Thursday, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, said the country's "substantial cooperation with the Government of Niger is contingent on Niger's continued commitment to democratic standards".

Niger could lose millions of dollars in military aid and assistance, which the United States and European countries have recently poured in an attempt to help in the fight against Islamic extremism.

The United States in early 2021 said it had provided Niger with more than \$500 million in military assistance and training programs since 2012, one of the largest such support programs in sub-Saharan Africa. The European Union earlier this year launched a 27 million-euro (\$30 million) military training mission in Niger.

The United States has more than 1,000 service personnel in the country.

The coup has dashed hopes of collaboration between Sahelian countries and Western powers, which offered a more robust response to the jihadist insurrection when compared with the strategies to arm civilians in Burkina Faso or the responsibility given to Wagner in Mali, said Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, senior Sahel analyst for the International Crisis Group.

Neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso have both ousted the French military, which previously provided aid in their fight against jihadists. Mali has contracted Wagner, and it's believed the mercenaries will soon be in Burkina Faso. Now, concerns are mounting that Niger will follow in their footsteps.

As uncertainty lingers about who's in charge, insecurity could worsen. "The army officers will be busy positioning themselves in power struggles and abandon the fight against jihadists," said Ulf Laessing, head of the Sahel program at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

Rights groups also warn that civilians usually bear the brunt of these mutinies.

"During a coup, the first victims are always the same: the most vulnerable, women and children," said Drissa Traore, secretary-general of the International Federation for Human Rights.

On Thursday the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said it has paused operations in Niger, where more than 370,000 people are internally displaced and more than 4 million rely on aid.

AP writer John Leicester in Paris contributed to this report.

Nearly 200 million people in US are under heat or flood advisories

BY DREW COSTLEY AP Science Writer

Nearly 200 million people in the United States, or 60% of the U.S. population, are under a heat advisory or flood warning or watch as high temperatures spread and new areas are told to expect severe storms.

The National Weather Service said a "dangerous" heat wave began to scorch the Northeast and mid-Atlantic on Thursday and will continue into the weekend. Severe thunderstorms and flash floods are possible for parts of the Northeast and South, New England and South Florida. Meanwhile, the string of record-breaking temperatures will persist for the Southwest and Midwest.

"It's (hitting) all the big cities," said Bob Oravec, lead forecaster with the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center. "That's why the population (affected) is so high."

Scientists have long warned that climate change, driven by the burning of fossil fuels, will lead to more and prolonged bouts of extreme weather.

The prediction for continued excessive heat comes a day after the World Meteorological Organization and the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service declared July 2023 the hottest month on record.

On Thursday, heat and humidity in major cities along the East Coast, including Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and New York City, created a real feel above 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 degrees Celsius). Forecasters expect several records may break Friday with temperatures 10 to 15 degrees Fahrenheit (5.5 to 8 degrees Celsius) above average.

In New England, communities are bracing for the "dual threats," as Oravec called them, of extreme heat

and flash floods.

"You could have really bad heat for a good part of the day and then get a strong thunderstorm that produces heavy rains and then can produce flooding," he said.

The Southwest and southern Plains continue to experience record-breaking heat. There, the oppressive temperatures have been blanketing the region for weeks. One meteorologist based in New Mexico called the prolonged period of temperatures over 100 degrees (37.8 C) unprecedented.

"They probably aren't going to have a lot of sympathy for the rest of the country," Oravec said.

Due to the extreme heat, two of the nation's largest power grids are under stress, which could affect Americans' ability to cool off.

The country's largest power grid, PJM Interconnection, declared a level one energy emergency alert for its 13-state grid on Wednesday, meaning the company is concerned about its ability to provide enough electricity.

"PJM currently has enough generation to meet forecast demand, but operators continue to monitor the grid conditions for any changes," said Jeffrey Shields, a spokesperson for the company.

PJM isn't the only electrical grid to issue such an alert. The Midcontinent Independent System Operator, which mostly covers states in the Midwest and Northern Plains, issued a similar alert on Thursday.

The California Independent System Operator also issued an energy emergency alert for the evening on Wednesday, in part due to excess heat in Southern California, but it expired the same day. Anne Gonzales, a CAISO spokesperson, said they expect to be able to meet demand the next few days.

And a spokesperson for the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which covers most of Texas, said they expect their grid will operate per usual during this latest blast of extreme weather across the country.

Follow Drew Costley on Twitter: @drewcostley.

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.

Judge sets a trial date for next May in Trump's classified documents case in Florida

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge in Florida has scheduled a trial date for next May for former President Donald Trump in a case charging him with illegally retaining hundreds of classified documents.

The May 20, 2024, trial date, set Friday by U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon, is a compromise between a request from prosecutors to set the trial for this December and a bid by defense lawyers to put it off indefinitely until sometime after the 2024 presidential election.

If the date holds, it would follow close on the heels of a separate New York trial for Trump on dozens of state charges of falsifying business records in connection with an alleged hush money payment to a porn actor. It also means the trial would not start until deep into the presidential nominating calendar and probably well after the Republican nominee is clear — though before that person is officially nominated at the Republican National Convention.

In pushing back the trial from the Dec. 11 start date that the Justice Department had asked for, Cannon wrote that "the Government's proposed schedule is atypically accelerated and inconsistent with ensuring a fair trial." She agreed with defense lawyers that the amount of evidence that would need to be sifted through before the trial, including classified information, was "voluminous and likely to increase in the normal course as trial approaches."

"The Court finds that the interests of justice served by this continuance outweigh the best interest of the public and Defendants in a speedy trial," Cannon wrote.

In a statement referring to the Department of Justice, the Trump campaign called Cannon's order "a major setback to the DOJ's crusade to deny President Trump a fair legal process. The extensive schedule

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allows President Trump and his legal team to continue fighting this empty hoax.”

Trump could yet face additional trials in the coming year. He revealed this week that he had received a letter informing him that he was a target of a separate Justice Department investigation into efforts to undo the results of the 2020 presidential election, an indication that charges could be coming soon.

The target letter referred to multiple distinct statutes Trump could be charged with violating, including conspiracy to defraud the government, according to a person familiar with the matter who insisted on anonymity to discuss private correspondence.

Trump’s new lawyer in that investigation, John Lauro, told Fox News on Friday that prosecutors appeared to be accusing Trump of “some kind of effort to obstruct” the Jan. 6, 2021, counting of state electoral votes and “whether or not President Trump intimidated anyone or ballot stuffed.” He said Trump would not be appearing before a grand jury because “he did absolutely nothing wrong.”

“He’s done nothing criminal,” Lauro said. “And he’s made his case that he was entitled to take these positions as president of the United States. When he saw all these election discrepancies and irregularities going on, he did what any president was required to do because he took an oath to do exactly that.” Multiple judges appointed by Trump and Trump’s own attorney general said there was no evidence of widespread fraud that could have affected the outcome of the election.

Prosecutors in Georgia, meanwhile, plan to announce charging decisions within weeks in an investigation into attempts by Trump and his allies to subvert the vote in that state.

The trial before Cannon would take place in a federal courthouse in Fort Pierce.

It arises from a 38-count indictment last month, filed by Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith, that accused Trump of willfully hoarding classified documents, including top secret records, at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach and conspiring with his valet, Walt Nauta, to hide them from investigators who demanded them back.

Trump and Nauta have both pleaded not guilty.

Associated Press writers Jill Colvin and Michael R. Sisak in New York contributed to this report.

Big 12 not quite the same, but it feels like home to a 98-year-old Colorado fan

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Peggy Coppom hasn’t quite seen it all with the Colorado Buffaloes, but she’s seen much more than most, so believe her when she says Thursday was a good day to be a fan.

The 98-year-old has been attending football games since her family moved from the high plains of eastern Colorado to Boulder in 1939 to escape the Dust Bowl, and she’s missed only a couple home games since buying season tickets in 1966.

The excitement in her voice was obvious during a phone call minutes after university regents approved the school’s return to the Big 12 in 2024.

“I’m so happy to get back to the Big 12 — or the Big 15 or whatever it ends up being,” she said, laughing. “It seems like that’s where we belong. We don’t belong with the West Coast people.”

Of course, the Big 12 isn’t the same league it was when the Buffs left for the Pac-12 in 2012. Nebraska and Missouri are gone, and Oklahoma and Texas will be, too. BYU could become a rival, but the Buffs have little in common with Cincinnati, Houston and Central Florida.

“I wish some of those old schools were there, but we’ll make the best of it,” Coppom said.

The conference change, plus the hiring of Deion Sanders, has her eagerly anticipating watching the Buffs from her seats near the 40-yard line on the west side of Folsom Field — “God willing, I always have to add,” she said.

Coppom, carrying a gold pom-pom, was escorted onto the field by Sanders during the spring game in April. Coppom said Sanders and the return to the Big 12 has created the most buzz about the team since it won a share of the national championship in 1990.

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Former CU fullback Jim Kelleher, who was second in the Big Eight with 15 rushing touchdowns in 1976, said he's in wait-and-see mode about the move.

"I originally wasn't that excited about it, but at the same time, the Pac-12 had let things get to such a point where you had to do something," he said. "The Big 12 signed a good media rights agreement. It's just sad the Pac-12 hasn't been able to get a TV contract."

Kelleher said that while Colorado will get exposure across three time zones, which is a positive, he's sad to see how traditions and geographic rivalries have been sacrificed with realignment in general.

Specific to Colorado, he said, the Buffs seemed to be a good fit in the Pac-12. He said his sentimental attachment to the Big 12 won't be there without Nebraska and other teams he played against in the old Big Eight.

"Whether it's the school or the individual athletes — with TV and NIL — it's all money, money, money," he said. "I understand their decision. Hey, I'm part of the Colorado team, so I'm for my team and hope it works out."

Tom Osborne, the College Football Hall of Fame coach at Nebraska and its former athletic director, shepherded the Cornhuskers' move from the Big 12 to Big Ten in 2011. He said he's able to view past, present and future realignment from the perspective of both a fan and administrator.

"You're talking about lost traditions," Osborne said. "I can share the feelings of the fans in that I miss those drives to Manhattan, Kansas; Lawrence, Kansas; Ames, Iowa, and some of those relationships."

Nebraska's move to the Big Ten had as much or more to do with finding stability as it did with finances, Osborne said. In the summer of 2011, Osborne said, Big 12 South teams were negotiating with the Pac-12, Missouri wanted to go to the SEC and Texas A&M also was looking to leave.

"Finances are driving this thing more than anything, and my guess is that the uncertainty about where the Pac-12 stands right now appears to make the Big 12 better for Colorado — even though the Big 12 has not been a paragon of stability."

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Japan raises alarm over China's military, Russia ties and Taiwan tensions in new defense paper

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The Japanese government stepped up its alarm over Chinese assertiveness, warning in a report issued Friday that the country faces its worst security threats since World War II as it plans to implement a new strategy that calls for a major military buildup.

The 2023 defense white paper, approved by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's Cabinet, is the first since the government adopted a controversial new National Security Strategy in December, seen as a break from Japan's postwar policy limiting the use of force to self-defense.

China, Russia and North Korea contribute to "the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II," according to the 510-page report. It says China's external stance and military activities have become a "serious concern for Japan and the international community and present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge."

On Thursday, Russian and Chinese delegates joined North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in North Korea's capital for a military parade that showed off the country's latest drones and long-range nuclear-capable missiles.

Russia and China have also stepped up strategic ties, the white paper said, noting five joint bomber flights since 2019, and several joint navigations of Chinese and Russian warships that it said were "clearly intended for demonstration of force against Japan and of grave concern" to both Japan and the region.

The report predicted that China will possess 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035 and increase its military

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superiority over Taiwan, in what Japan views as a security threat, especially to its southwestern islands including Okinawa.

While Okinawan Gov. Denny Tamaki has called for U.S. bases there to be reduced and for greater efforts in diplomacy and dialogue with Beijing, the central government has been reinforcing the defenses of the remote southwestern islands, including Ishigaki and Yonaguni, where new bases for missile defense have been installed.

Many residents of Okinawa have bitter memories of the Battle of Okinawa, in which Japan's wartime military essentially sacrificed the local population in an attempt to delay a U.S. landing on the main Japanese islands. Many Okinawans worry they would be the first to suffer in the event of a Taiwan emergency.

Earlier this week, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno visited Ishigaki and acknowledged the challenges of evacuating residents from remote islands, and pledged to give firm support. Ishigaki Mayor Yoshitaka Nakayama asked for airport and port facilities to be reinforced and for underground shelters to be built as preparation for a possible Taiwan emergency.

China claims self-governing Taiwan as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, who in 2017 set a goal of building a "world-class military" by the mid-21st century, may move the target forward, the report said, noting his call for a rapid advancement of the People's Liberation Army in his speech at the Communist Party congress in October.

North Korea is rapidly progressing in its nuclear and missile development and poses "a graver, more imminent threat to Japan than ever before," the report said. North Korea has test-fired around 100 missiles since the start of 2022, including ICBMs, and the report noted it is now believed to have an ability to conduct nuclear attacks on Japan and the continental United States.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said the Japanese defense paper interfered in China's internal affairs and "deliberately played up the so-called Chinese threat and created tensions in the region." She said Japan's own military buildup has drawn concern from its Asian neighbors and the international community, and urged Tokyo to "stop finding excuses for its military expansion."

She said China's military policy is defensive, and "military cooperation such as joint patrols with relevant countries is in line with international law and practice."

South Korea, despite the rapid improvement of its ties with Japan this year due to shared concern over China's threat, slammed Japan's claim in the defense report to a South Korean-controlled contested island, calling it "unjust."

The report comes seven months after Kishida's government adopted new national security and defense strategies that called for doubling the defense budget to 43 trillion yen (\$310 billion) by 2027.

Questions have been raised about whether the ambitious expansion of military capability and funding for it is feasible in a country that has a rapidly aging and shrinking population.

A government-commissioned panel recently adopted a package of recommendations for Japan's military to maintain troop numbers despite population concerns, including scholarships, extension of the retirement age, hiring retirees, improving the workplace environment and tackling harassment.

Associated Press writers Joe McDonald in Beijing and Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul, South Korea, contributed to this report.

Young Chinese opt out of the rat race and pressures at home to pursue global nomad lifestyle

By YUCHENG TANG Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Shortly after China opened its borders with the end of "zero-COVID," Zhang Chuannan lost her job as an accountant at a cosmetic firm in Shanghai and decided to explore the world.

"The cosmetics business was bleak," said Zhang, 34, who explained everyone wore face masks during the pandemic. After being laid off, she paid \$1,400 for an online Thai course, got an education visa and moved to the scenic northern Thai city of Chiang Mai.

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Zhang is among a growing number of young Chinese moving overseas not necessarily because of ideological reasons but to escape the country's ultra-competitive work culture, family pressures and limited opportunities after living in the country under the strict pandemic policies for three years. Southeast Asia has become a popular destination given its proximity, relatively inexpensive cost of living and tropical scenery.

There is no exact data on the number of young Chinese moving overseas since the country ended pandemic restrictions and reopened its borders. But on the popular Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu, hundreds of people have discussed their decisions to relocate to Thailand. Many get a visa to study Thai while figuring out their next steps.

At Payap University in Chiang Mai, around 500 Chinese began an online Thai course early this year.

Royce Heng, owner of Duke Language School, a private language institute in Bangkok, said around 180 Chinese inquire each month about visa information and courses.

The hunt for opportunities far from home is partly motivated by China's unemployment rate for people ages 16 to 24, which rose to a record high of 21.3% in June. The scarcity of good jobs increases pressure to work long hours.

Opting out is an increasingly popular way for younger workers to cope with a time of downward mobility, said Beverly Yuen Thompson, a sociology professor at Siena College in Albany, New York.

"In their 20s and early 30s, they can go to Thailand, take selfies and work on the beach for a few years and feel like they have a great quality of life," Thomson said. "If those nomads had the same opportunities they hoped for in their home countries, they could just travel on vacation."

During the pandemic in China, Zhang was cooped up in her Shanghai apartment for weeks at a time. Even when lockdowns were lifted, she feared another COVID-19 outbreak would prevent her from moving around within the country.

"I now value freedom more," Zhang said.

A generous severance package helped finance her time in Thailand and she is seeking ways to stay abroad long-term, perhaps by teaching Chinese language online.

Moving to Chiang Mai means waking up in the mornings to bird songs and a more relaxed pace of life. Unlike in China, she has time to practice yoga and meditation, shop for vintage clothes and attend dance classes.

Armonio Liang left the western Chinese city of Chengdu in landlocked Sichuan province for the Indonesian island of Bali, a popular digital nomad destination. His Web3 social media startup was limited by Chinese government restrictions while his use of cryptocurrency exchange apps drew police harassment.

Moving to Bali gave the 38-year-old greater freedom and a middle-class lifestyle with what might be barely enough money to live on back home.

"This is what I cannot get in China," said Liang, referring to working on his laptop on the beach and brainstorming with expatriates from around the world. "Thousands of ideas just sprouted up in my mind. I had never been so creative before."

He also has enjoyed being greeted with smiles.

"In Chengdu, everyone is so stressed. If I smiled at a stranger, they would think I am an idiot," he said.

Life overseas is not all beach chats and friendly neighbors, though. For most young workers, such stays will be interludes in their lives, Thompson said.

"They can't have kids, because kids have to go to school," Thompson said. "They cannot fulfill their responsibilities to their parents. What if their aging parents need help? They eventually will get a full-time job back home and get called back home because of one of those things."

Zhang said she faces pressure to get married. Liang wants his parents to move to Bali with him.

"It's a big problem," Liang said. "They worry they will be lonely after moving out of China and worry about medical resources here."

Huang Wanxiong, 32, was stranded on Bohol Island in the Philippines for seven months in 2020 when air travel halted during the pandemic, and he spent his time learning free diving, which involves diving to great depths without oxygen tanks.

He eventually flew home to the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, but lost his job at a private tutoring company after the government cracked down on the industry in 2021. His next gig was driving more than 16 hours a day for a ride-hailing business.

"I felt like a machine during those days," Huang said. "I can accept a stable and unchanging life but I cannot accept not having any hope, not trying to improve the situation and surrendering to fate."

Huang returned to the Philippines in February, escaping family pressures to get a better job and find a girlfriend in China. He renewed his Bohol Island friendships and qualified as a dive instructor.

But without Chinese tourists to teach and no income, he flew home again in June.

He still hopes to make a living as a diver, possibly back in Southeast Asia, though he also may agree to his parents' proposal to emigrate to Peru to work in a family-run supermarket.

Huang recalled he once surfaced too quickly from a 40-meter (131-foot) dive and his hands trembled from a dangerous lack of oxygen, known as hypoxia. The lesson he took was to avoid rushing and maintain a steady climb. Until his next move, he plans to use that free diver discipline to counter the anxieties of living in China.

"I will apply the calm I learned from the sea surrounding that island to my real life," Huang said. "I will maintain my own pace."

Russian and Chinese delegates join North Korean leader Kim at a parade showing his newest missiles

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was joined by senior Russian and Chinese delegates as he displayed his most powerful nuclear-capable missiles in a military parade marking a major war anniversary with a show of defiance against the United States and deepening ties with Moscow as tensions on the peninsula are at their highest point in years.

Kim attended Thursday night's parade with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chinese ruling party official Li Hongzhong from a balcony looking over a brightly illuminated Kim Il Sung Square, named after Kim's grandfather, the founder of North Korea.

Edited footage from North Korean state TV on Friday showed streets and stands packed with tens of thousands of mobilized spectators, who roared in approval as waves of goose-stepping soldiers, tanks and huge, intercontinental ballistic missiles wheeled out on launcher trucks filled up the main road. People were brought from around the country to the capital, Pyongyang, to fill the crowd, according to state media.

The parade began with warm-up events that featured ceremonial flights of newly developed surveillance and attack drones, which were first unveiled by state media this week as they reported on an arms exhibition attended by Kim and Shoigu.

The main event began with Kim arriving at the square in a limousine escorted by a formation of motorcycles. Kim saluted honor guards and military officials and walked down a red carpet to enter a building where Shoigu and Li greeted him at the balcony, as troops below chanted "protect Kim Jong Un with our lives!"

Organizers broadcast messages in Russian, Chinese and Korean while introducing Kim's guests to the crowd, drawing cheers and applause.

As the parade proceeded, Kim was constantly talking and exchanging smiles with Shoigu and Li, who respectively stood to his right and left at the balcony's center. Kim and Shoigu repeatedly raised their hands to salute the parading troops. The broadcast did not show Kim making a speech.

Kim's biggest weapons were saved for the end, when his troops rolled out new ICBMs that were flight-tested in recent months and demonstrated ranges that could reach deep into the U.S. mainland, the Hwasong-17 and Hwasong-18. Some analysts say the missiles are based on Russian designs or know-how.

North Korean Defense Minister Kang Sun Nam spoke, describing the parade as a historic celebration of the country's "great victory" against "U.S. imperialist aggression forces and groups of its satellite states."

He condemned the United States for its expanding military exercises with South Korea, which the North

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portrays as invasion rehearsals, and also holding new rounds of nuclear contingency planning meetings with Seoul. The allies describe their drills as defensive, and say the upgrades in training and planning are necessary to cope with the North's evolving nuclear threat.

"We solemnly declare that if they attempt military confrontation as now, the exercise of our state's armed forces will go beyond the scope of the right to defense for the United States of America and (South Korea)," Kang said, repeating previous North Korean threats of nuclear conflict.

"The U.S. imperialists have no room of choice of survival in case they use nuclear weapons against the DPRK," he said, using the initials of his country's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Clouds over Pyongyang in recent days made it difficult for satellites to monitor preparations for the parade, which took place at night.

Satellite images showed what appeared to be a massing of people at the square at 1316 GMT (10:16 p.m. local) Thursday, said Dave Schmerler, a senior research associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, which is part of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.

North Korea's invitation of Russian and Chinese delegates was a rare diplomatic opening since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts say Kim is trying to break out of diplomatic isolation and boost the visibility of his partnership with authoritarian allies to counter pressure from the United States.

The parade followed meetings between Kim and Shoigu this week that demonstrated North Korea's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and added to suspicions the North was willing to supply arms to Russia, whose war efforts have been compromised by defense procurement and inventory problems.

North Korean state media also highlighted a message sent by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who thanked Kim for "firmly supporting" his war efforts in Ukraine. Putin said that interests between Moscow and Pyongyang were aligning as they counter the "collective West in its policy to stand in the way of establishing a genuinely multipolar and just world order," according to the Kremlin's version of the letter.

Kim also held a luncheon and dinner banquet for Shoigu and his delegation following a second day of talks about expanding the countries' "strategic and tactical collaboration and cooperation" in defense and security, the North's official Korean Central News Agency said.

"Given Russia's need for ammunition for its illegal war in Ukraine and Kim Jong Un's willingness to personally give the Russian defense minister a tour of North Korea's arms exhibition, U.N. member states should increase vigilance for observing and penalizing sanctions violations," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

He added: "China's representation at North Korea's parading of nuclear-capable missiles raises serious questions about Beijing enabling Pyongyang's threats to global security."

The parade capped off the North Korean festivities for the 70th anniversary of the armistice that stopped fighting in the 1950-53 Korean War. North Korea, which triggered the war with a surprise attack on the South in June 1950, was supported by Chinese troops and the then-Soviet air force. South Korea, the United States and troops from other nations under the aegis of the U.N. fought to push back the invasion.

The July 1953 truce was never replaced with a peace treaty, leaving the Korean Peninsula in a technical state of war, but the North still sees it as a victory in the "Grand Fatherland Liberation War."

The anniversary events were more somber in South Korea, where President Yoon Suk Yeol visited a war cemetery in Busan to honor foreign troops who died while fighting for the South.

In the face of growing North Korean threats, Yoon has pushed to expand South Korea's military exercises with Washington and is seeking stronger U.S. reassurances that it would use its nuclear capabilities to defend the South in the event of a nuclear attack.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also marked the anniversary with a statement expressing concern over what he described as a growing "nuclear risk" on the Korean Peninsula.

"I urge the parties to resume regular diplomatic contacts and nurture an environment conducive to dialogue," he said.

___Associated Press writers Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates and Edith Lederer in New York contributed to the report.

Defense Secretary Austin says the US stands with countries against China's 'bullying behavior'

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Friday the United States stands with countries fighting Chinese "bullying behavior" as he launched bilateral talks in Australia aimed at countering Beijing's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Austin and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in the Australian city of Brisbane late Thursday ahead of annual bilateral meetings on Friday and Saturday that will focus on a deal to provide Australia, a defense treaty partner, with a fleet of submarines powered by U.S. nuclear technology.

Ahead of a meeting with Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles, Austin said both countries share concerns about China's break from international laws and norms that resolve disputes peacefully and without coercion.

"We've seen troubling P.R.C. coercion from the East China Sea, to the South China Sea, to right here in the Southwest Pacific," Austin told reporters, referring to the People's Republic of China.

"We'll continue to support our allies and partners as they defend themselves from bullying behavior," he added.

China has imposed a series of official and unofficial trade barriers in recent years against Australian exports including coal, wine, barley, beef, seafood and wood. The barriers are widely seen as a punitive reaction to Australian government policy that has cost Australian exporters as much as \$15 billion a year.

Australia's icy relationship with Beijing was thawing since a change of Australian government at elections last year. Meanwhile, the sharing of U.S. nuclear secrets with Australia takes that bilateral relationship to a new level.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is planning state visits to both the United States and China before the end of the year.

Under the AUKUS partnership — an acronym for Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States — Australia will buy three Virginia-class submarines from the United States and build five of a new AUKUS-class submarine in cooperation with Britain.

Australian media have focused on a letter signed by more than 20 Republican lawmakers to President Joe Biden that warned the deal would "unacceptably weaken the U.S. fleet" without a plan to boost U.S. submarine production.

Albanese said he remained "very confident" that the United States would deliver the three submarines.

The prime minister said he'd been reassured by discussions he had with Republicans and Democrats earlier in July at a NATO summit in Lithuania.

"What struck me was their unanimous support for AUKUS, their unanimous support for the relationship between the Australia and United States," Albanese said.

Marles agreed the AUKUS program was on track.

"Congress can be a complicated place as legislation makes its way through it, but actually we're encouraged by how quickly it is going through it and we are expecting that there will be lots of discussions on the way through," Marles said.

"Fundamentally, we have reached an agreement with the Biden administration about how Australia acquires the nuclear-powered submarine capability and we're proceeding along that path with pace," he added.

Australia understood there was "pressure on the American industrial base" and would contribute to submarine production, Marles said. The AUKUS deal is forecast to cost Australia up to 368 billion Australian dollars (\$246 billion) over 30 years.

Albanese publicly welcomed Austin and Blinken at a media event before the three began a meeting with Marles, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, U.S. Ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy and Australian Ambassador to the United States Kevin Rudd, a former prime minister.

"The relationship between Australia and the United States has never been stronger," Albanese told the two visitors.

Sudan conflict brings new atrocities to Darfur as militias kill, rape, burn homes in rampages

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Amna al-Nour narrowly escaped death twice. The first was when militias torched her family's home in Sudan's Darfur region. The second was two months later when paramilitary fighters stopped her and others trying to escape as they tried to reach the border with neighboring Chad.

"They massacred us like sheep," the 32-year-old teacher said of the attack in late April on her home city Geneina. "They want to uproot us all."

Al-Nour and her three children now live in a school-turned-refugee housing inside Chad, among more than 260,000 Sudanese, mostly women and children, who have fled what survivors and rights groups say is a new explosion of atrocities in the large western region of Sudan.

Two decades ago, Darfur became synonymous with genocide and war crimes, particularly by the notorious Janjaweed Arab militias against populations that identify as Central or East African. Fears are mounting that that legacy is returning with reports of widespread killings, rapes and destruction of villages in Darfur amid a nationwide power struggle between Sudan's military and a powerful paramilitary group called the Rapid Support Forces.

"This spiraling violence bears terrifying similarity with the war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated in Darfur since 2003," said Tigere Chagutah, a regional director with Amnesty International. "Even those seeking safety are not being spared."

Fighting erupted in the capital Khartoum in mid-April between the military and the RSF after years of growing tensions. It spread to other parts of the country, but in Darfur it took on a different form – brutal attacks by the RSF and its allied Arab militias on civilians, survivors and rights workers say.

During the second week of fighting in Khartoum, the RSF and militias stormed Geneina, the capital of West Darfur state, located near the Chad border. In that and two other assaults since, the fighters went on a rampage of burning and killing that reduced large parts of the city of more than half a million people to wreckage, according to footage shared by activists.

"What happened in Geneina is indescribable," said Sultan Saad Abdel-Rahman Bahr, the leader of the Dar Masalit sultanate, which represents Darfur's Masalit ethnic community. "Everywhere (in the city) there was a massacre. All was planned and systemic."

The sultanate said in a report that more than 5,000 people were killed in Geneina alone and at least 8,000 others were wounded as of June 12 in attacks by the RSF and Arab militias.

The report detailed three main waves of attacks on Geneina and surrounding areas in April, May, and June, which it said aimed at "ethnically cleansing and committing genocide against African civilians."

The RSF was born out of the Janjaweed militias that during the conflict in the 2000s were accused of mass killings, rapes and other atrocities against Darfur's African communities. Former President Omar al-Bashir later formed the RSF out of Janjaweed fighters and put it under the command of Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, who hails from Darfur's Arab Rizeigat tribe.

The RSF didn't respond to repeated requests by The Associated Press for comment on the allegations concerning the recent violence, including rapes. On its social media, the paramilitary force characterized the fighting in Darfur as renewed tribal clashes between Arabs and non-Arabs.

In interviews with the AP, more than three dozen people and activists gave similar descriptions of waves of attacks by the RSF and Arab militias on Geneina and other towns in West Darfur. Fighters stormed houses, driving out residents, taking men away and burning their homes, they said. In some cases, they would kill the men and rape women and often shot people fleeing in the streets, al-Nour and other survivors said. Almost all interviewees said the military and other rebel groups in the region failed to provide protection to civilians.

"They were looking for men. They want to eliminate us," said Malek Harun, a 62-year-old farmer who survived an attack in May on his village of Misterei, near Geneina. He said gunmen attacked the village

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from all directions. They looted homes and detained or killed the men.

His wife was killed when she was shot by fighters firing in the village market, he said. He buried her in his home's yard. Arab neighbors then helped him escape and he arrived in Chad on June 5.

On July 13, the U.N. Human Rights Office said a mass grave was found outside Geneina with at least 87 bodies, citing credible information. The international group Human Rights Watch said it also documented atrocities including summary executions and mass graves in Misterei.

The Sudanese Unit for Combating Violence against Women, a government organization, said it documented 46 rape cases in Darfur, including 21 in Geneina and 25 in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, as well as 51 in Khartoum.

The true number of cases of sexual violence are likely in the thousands, said Sulima Ishaq Sharif, head of the unit.

"There is an emerging pattern of large-scale targeted attacks against civilians based on their ethnic identities," said Volker Perthes, the U.N. envoy in Sudan. The International Criminal Court's prosecutor, Karim Khan, told the U.N. Security Council last week they were investigating alleged new war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.

Al-Nour, whose husband was killed in a bout of tribal clashes in early 2020, said assailants stormed her district of Jamarek in Geneina in late April and burned down dozens of houses, including hers. "They forced people to get out of their homes, then shot at them," she said, speaking by phone from the Chadian border town of Adre.

She and her children — aged 4, 7 and 10 — escaped with the aid of Arab neighbors. They kept moving from town to town amid clashes.

In mid-June, she and a group of 40 men, women and children started on foot down the 20-kilometer (12-mile) highway to the border, planning to escape to Chad. They were soon stopped at an RSF checkpoint, she said.

Holding the group at gunpoint, the fighters asked about their ethnicity. Two of the 14 men in the group were Arab, with fairer skin. The fighters abused and beat the others, who were darker skinned and had Masalit accents.

"You want to escape? You will die here," one fighter told the Masalit. They whipped everyone in the group, men and women. They beat the men to the ground with rifle butts and clicked the triggers of their guns to frighten them. One man was shot in the head and died immediately, al-Nour said.

They took away the remaining men along with four women in their 20s, she said. She does not know what happened to them but fears the women were raped. They allowed the rest of the women and children to continue their trip.

Other refugees in Adre reported similar violence on the road to the border.

"It was a relief to reach Chad," said Mohammed Harun, a refugee from Misterei who arrived in Adre in early June, "but the wounds (from the war) will last forever."

The Mega Millions jackpot is now \$910 million after months without a big winner

By The Associated Press undefined

Lottery players will have another shot at a huge Mega Millions jackpot Friday night and a chance to break a stretch of more than three months without a big winner of the game.

The estimated \$910 million prize has been building since someone last matched all six numbers and won the jackpot April 18. Since then, there have been 28 straight drawings without a jackpot winner.

The jackpot is now the eighth-largest ever in the U.S. It comes a little over a week after someone in Los Angeles won a \$1.08 billion Powerball prize that ranked as the sixth-largest in U.S. history. It's still a mystery who won that prize.

Lottery jackpots grow so large because the odds of winning are so small. For Mega Millions, the odds

of winning the jackpot are about 1 in 302.6 million.

The \$910 million prize would be for a sole winner choosing to be paid through an annuity with annual payments over 30 years. Jackpot winners almost always opt for a lump sum payment, which for Friday night's drawing would be an estimated \$464.2 million.

Winners also would be subject to federal taxes, while many states also tax lottery winnings.

Mega Millions is played in 45 states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Takeaways from AP's report on bodies from migrant boats buried on the beach in Senegal

By SAM MEDNICK and RENATA BRITO Associated Press

SAINT-LOUIS, Senegal (AP) — In the seaside town of Saint-Louis, Senegal, officials and residents say bodies of migrants from capsized boats attempting the dangerous trip from West Africa to Spain are buried in unmarked beach graves. Most of the families of those buried will never know what happened to their loved ones.

Bodies wash ashore or are found by fishermen at sea, then are buried by authorities, and lawyers and human rights experts say it's unclear whether the deaths are documented or investigated as required by Senegalese and international law.

More people are making the trip across the Atlantic in rickety wooden boats known as pirogues trying to reach Spain's Canary Islands. With reports of capsized boats and drownings on the rise, locals say they can tell where bodies are buried by the bits of thick rope and black plastic resembling body bags that stick out from mounds of sand.

HOW MANY MIGRANTS ARE MAKING THE TRIP?

The route from West Africa to Spain is one of the world's most dangerous, yet the number of migrants leaving from Senegal has surged over the past year. That means more missing people and deaths — relatives, activists and officials have reported hundreds over the past month, though exact figures are difficult to verify.

The increases come amid pressure from the European Union for North and West African countries to stop migrant crossings. Like most nations in the region, Senegal releases little information about the crossings, the migrants who attempt the trip or those who die trying.

But according to the International Organization for Migration, at least 2,300 migrants left Senegal trying to reach the Canaries in the first six months of the year, doubling the number from the same period in 2022. A Spanish official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the figures weren't authorized for release, told AP that about 1,100 arrived in the Canaries.

It's unclear what happened to the 1,000-plus people who didn't make it to Spain. They may have died at sea, been rescued from capsized boats or be held by authorities. Through June, Senegal detained 725 migrants, said interior ministry spokesman Maham Ka, though officials wouldn't say whether the nine vessels involved had left shore yet.

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE BODIES?

Authorities in Saint-Louis admitted to AP that bodies are sometimes buried on the beach. They said it happens only when approved by the local prosecutor — and usually the bodies are severely decomposed.

"Why take it to the morgue since no one can recognize it?" said Amadou Fall, commander of the fire brigade for three northern Senegal regions.

The prosecutor in Saint-Louis wouldn't respond to AP's questions about approval of burials or say whether investigations were opened into the deaths. AP phoned and texted Senegal's justice ministry, responsible for investigating deaths, but received no response.

In Saint-Louis, the beach is now marked in parts with the remnants of black plastic that resemble body bags from the morgue and knotted rope that appear to be securing what lies beneath the sand.

The beach burials have happened for years but skyrocketed for 2023, with about 300 bodies in the first seven months, compared with just over 100 for all of 2022, according to a local official who works closely

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with authorities and insisted on anonymity for fear of reprisal.

Locals say the government is trying to hide the scale of the problem because it tarnishes Senegal's reputation.

WHAT DO THE LAWS SAY?

Senegal has agreed to several international accords, including The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and The Global Compact on Migration, to ensure the investigation of disappearances and arbitrary deaths, identify the dead, and inform families.

Even if a body has decomposed, the obligation remains to do everything possible to identify the person and seek support if resources are lacking, said Judith Sunderland, of Human Rights Watch.

"It's completely unacceptable for state authorities to bury people without investigating the causes of their deaths or attempting to identify them," she said.

Survivors of failed boat trips told AP they were forced to tell the families of friends who died what happened because authorities left them in the dark. Some relatives file missing-person reports but hear little to no information from officials.

WHY DO PEOPLE ATTEMPT THE TRIP?

Senegal has long been regarded as a beacon of democratic stability in a region riddled with coups and insecurity, but political tension is mounting, with at least 23 killed last month during weeklong protests between opposition supporters and police. Some cite political strife for the surge in migration; others note that most who leave are young Senegalese men who say poverty and a lack of jobs are driving them to risk their lives.

Since 2006, Spain has worked with Senegal to crack down on migrant boats. That year, arrivals to the Canary Islands first peaked, with more than 30,000 people arriving on Spanish shores — many of them Senegalese. Today, Spain's national police and civil guard are deployed in Senegal to assist local authorities. The country also received more than \$190 million from the EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa for development programs aimed at addressing the root causes of migration.

But residents here say little has improved.

From May to July, about 30 boats left Saint-Louis for Europe and about 10 sank, said El Hadji Dousse Fall, a member of the Organization for the Fight Against Clandestine Immigration, which tries to prevent youths from crossing the sea and teaches them about legal migration pathways. Still, many have already made up their minds.

"They have a saying," Fall said, speaking partly in the local Wolof language. "Barca or Barsakh" — Barcelona or die.

Brito reported from Barcelona and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain.

As more migrants go missing at sea, many say bodies end up on Senegal's beaches in unmarked graves

By SAM MEDNICK and RENATA BRITO Associated Press

SAINT-LOUIS, Senegal (AP) — The small mounds of sand that dot the beach in northern Senegal blend into the terrain. But thick rope juts out from beneath the piles. Pieces of black plastic bags are scattered nearby, and green netting is strewn on top.

That's how residents in the small fishing town of Saint-Louis say they know where the bodies lie.

These unmarked beach graves hold untold numbers of West African migrants who are increasingly attempting the treacherous journey across parts of the Atlantic to Europe, Senegalese authorities, residents along the coast and survivors of failed boat trips told The Associated Press.

Bodies wash ashore or are found by fishermen at sea, then are buried by authorities with no clarity as to whether the deaths are documented or investigated as required by Senegalese and international law, according to lawyers and human rights experts. Most of the families of those buried will never know what

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happened to their loved ones.

The route from West Africa to Spain is one of the world's most dangerous, yet the number of migrants leaving from Senegal on rickety wooden boats has surged over the past year. That means more missing people and deaths — relatives, activists and officials have reported hundreds over the past month, though exact figures are difficult to verify.

The increases come amid European Union pressure for North and West African countries to stop migrant crossings. Like most nations in the region, Senegal releases little information about the crossings, the migrants who attempt the trip or those who die trying.

But according to the International Organization for Migration, at least 2,300 migrants left Senegal trying to reach Spain's Canary Islands in the first six months of the year, doubling the number from the same period in 2022. A Spanish official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the figures weren't authorized for release, told AP that about 1,100 arrived in the Canaries.

It's unclear what happened to the 1,000-plus people who didn't make it to Spain. They may have died at sea, been rescued from capsized boats or be held by authorities. Through June, Senegal detained 725 migrants, said interior ministry spokesman Maham Ka, though officials wouldn't say whether the nine vessels involved had left shore yet.

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"Why take it to the morgue since no one can recognize it?" said Amadou Fall, fire brigade commander for three northern Senegal regions.

The prosecutor in Saint-Louis wouldn't respond to questions about approval of burials or say whether investigations were opened into the deaths. AP phoned and texted Senegal's justice ministry, responsible for investigating deaths, but received no response.

For families, the silence can be agonizing. Mouhamed Niang's 19- and 24-year-old nephews went missing a month ago. He filed missing-person reports, he said, but got no updates from authorities. Friends alerted him when boats were recovered or bodies washed ashore. He'd make the three-hour bus trip from Mbour north to Saint-Louis to check with officials or visit the morgue.

He told AP he knows about the bodies on the beach. His worst fear: that the young men were among them.

"They are human beings," Niang, 51, said. "They should be buried where human beings are buried."

If the journey goes smoothly, reaching Spain takes about eight days from Saint-Louis on pirogues — long, colorful wooden boats. Saint-Louis, bordering Mauritania, is a key hub for departures. There, the beach is now marked in parts with remnants of the black plastic resembling body bags from the morgue and the knotted rope that appears to secure what lies beneath the sand.

In recent years, the Canary Islands have again become a main gateway for those trying to reach Europe. Previously, most boats traveled from Morocco, Western Sahara and Mauritania, with fewer from Senegal. This year, that changed. The Spanish official who spoke to AP said numbers from Mauritania plummeted last year following pressure by local authorities with on-the-ground Spanish support. When one route is cut off, migrants tend to look for alternatives, even if they're longer and more dangerous.

Senegal has long been regarded as a beacon of democratic stability in a region riddled with coups and insecurity, but tension is mounting, with at least 23 killed last month during protests between opposition supporters and police. Some cite political strife for surging migration; others note that most who leave are young Senegalese men who say poverty and a lack of jobs drive them.

"There's no freedom in Senegal," said Papa, 29, who made it to the Canaries this month after a boat journey during which the engine failed, food ran out and fights erupted.

He said he's seeking asylum in Spain because of Senegal's political problems. He described police shooting at people like him who took to the streets to oppose President Macky Sall. He and others among the hundreds of Senegalese who made it to the Canaries in recent weeks blamed unemployment, a struggling

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economy and rising food prices on Sall's administration.

"The salaries are not good, rice is too expensive. You need a lot of money to eat," said Papa, who has two wives and children to feed in Senegal. Wearing a bracelet with the name of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, Papa gave only his first name, citing fears about deportation.

Since 2006, Spain has worked with Senegal to crack down on migrant boats. That year, Canary arrivals first peaked, with 30,000-plus people — many of them Senegalese. Today, Spain's national police and civil guard are deployed in Senegal to assist local authorities. Senegal also received more than \$190 million from the EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa for programs aimed at addressing the root causes of migration.

But residents here say little has improved.

From May to July, about 30 boats left Saint-Louis for Europe and about 10 sank, said El Hadji Dousse Fall, of the Organization for the Fight Against Clandestine Immigration, which tries to prevent youths from crossing the sea and teaches them about legal migration pathways. Still, many have already made up their minds.

"They have a saying," Fall said, speaking partly in the local Wolof language. "Barca or Barsakh" — Barcelona or die.

Senegalese officials won't give data on how many people are unaccounted for trying to cross that stretch of the Atlantic. Sometimes, they refute reports of missing people — this month, Spanish rights group Walking Borders rang the alarm that 300 Senegalese were missing, and the government called the statements unfounded.

The beach burials have happened for years but skyrocketed for 2023, with about 300 bodies in the first seven months, compared with just over 100 for all of 2022, according to a local official who works closely with authorities and insisted on anonymity for fear of reprisal.

Locals say the government tries to hide the scale of the problem because it tarnishes Senegal's reputation.

"It's a sign of failure that undermines the government's public policy record," said Alioune Tine, founder of West African think tank Afrikajom Center.

During a visit to Saint-Louis, AP spoke with two survivors of attempted trips. The men departed within days of each other, from Mbour in early July. Both boats got lost and capsized at the mouth of the Saint-Louis river, where waves swell and conditions can turn volatile. One survivor saw another boat capsize minutes after his.

The men said that of about 420 people aboard the three vessels, roughly 60 were rescued.

Ibnou Diagne, 35, said the boat capsized days into the trip. He watched a piece of broken boat wood ram into the stomach of a teenage passenger, stabbing him before he fell into the sea.

But what haunts him most are memories of his longtime friend Abdourahmane, who drowned. "Everyday when I sleep, it's Abdourahmane's image and face that emerge in front of me," he said.

The other survivor said he fled after the rescue — he was taken for questioning but got out of the car and hid. On condition of anonymity for fear of being detained again, he described waking at 4 a.m. to his boat being launched in the air upon hitting a giant wave.

Thrown into the water but able to swim, he anchored himself to a smaller nearby vessel and waited for rescue. Two friends who boarded with him drowned. Days later, he called their mothers to tell them their sons were dead. Without him, he said, the families would have no idea what happened to the men.

Senegal has agreed to several international accords, including The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and The Global Compact on Migration, to ensure the investigation of disappearances and arbitrary deaths, identify the dead, and inform families.

Even if a body has decomposed, the obligation remains to do everything possible to identify the person and seek support if resources are lacking, said Judith Sunderland, of Human Rights Watch.

"It's completely unacceptable for state authorities to bury people without investigating the causes of their deaths or attempting to identify them," she said.

Boubacar Tiane Balde, chief of the anti-smuggling regional branch in Saint-Louis, said stemming the tide of migration is challenging, with new cases daily. And smugglers, paid by migrants to get across the

border, are embedded in the community.

"The biggest difficulty is first to have clear information," Balde said. "Not everyone is willing to collaborate."

Some say officials aren't serious about cracking down. Many boats bribe authorities on the water, sometimes paying \$1,700 to get through, said a smuggler who insisted on anonymity over fears for his safety. To stay undetected, he uses smaller boats to shuttle passengers so it appears they're just fishing, he said, and for safety, he's cut the number of passengers allowed to 80 from 140.

Such measures come as little comfort to those with missing relatives.

During Niang's fourth visit to Saint-Louis to look for his nephews, he was called to the morgue. But the men weren't there. Later, authorities reached out to their mother, Niang's sister. They wanted her and her husband to make a photo identification. Based on a ring and his long hair, they knew the body was their son.

They still don't know the fate of his brother. They aren't alone in their grief, but that brings little solace.

"Every day I see people looking for relatives lost at sea," Niang said. "Some of them conduct funerals without the bodies."

The family will travel to Saint-Louis, then bring the body home. They'll hold one funeral, with prayers for both brothers.

Brito reported from Barcelona and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain.

Mounting job vacancies push state and local governments into a wage war for workers

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

FULTON, Mo. (AP) — At the entrance to Missouri prisons, large signs plead for help: "NOW HIRING" ... "GREAT PAY & BENEFITS."

No experience is necessary. Anyone 18 and older can apply. Long hours are guaranteed.

Though the assertion of "great pay" for prison guards would have seemed dubious in the past, a series of state pay raises prompted by widespread vacancies has finally made a difference. The Missouri Department of Corrections set a record for new applicants last month.

"After we got our raise, we started seeing people come out of the woodwork, people that hadn't worked in a while," said Maj. Albin Narvaez, chief of custody at the Fulton Reception and Diagnostic Center, where new prisoners are housed and evaluated.

Public employers across the U.S. have faced similar struggles to fill jobs, leading to one of the largest surges in state government pay raises in 15 years. Many cities, counties and school districts also are hiking wages to try to retain and attract workers amid aggressive competition from private sector employers.

The wage war comes as governments and taxpayers feel the consequences of empty positions.

In Kansas City, Missouri, a shortage of 911 operators doubled the average hold times for people calling in emergencies. In one Florida county, some schoolchildren frequently arrived late as a lack of bus drivers delayed routes. In Arkansas, abused and neglected kids remained longer in foster care because of a caseworker shortage. In various cities and states, vacancies on road crews meant cracks and potholes took longer to fix than many motorists might like.

"A lot of the jobs we're talking about are hard jobs," said Leslie Scott Parker, executive director of the National Association of State Personnel Executives.

Lingering vacancies "eventually affects service to the public or response times to needs," she added.

Workforce shortages worsened across all sorts of jobs due to a wave of retirements and resignations that began during the pandemic. Many businesses, from restaurants to hospitals, responded nimbly with higher wages and incentives to attract employees. But governments by nature are slower to act, requiring pay raises to go through a legislative process that can take months to complete — and then can take months more to kick in.

Meanwhile, vacancies mounted.

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In Georgia, state employee turnover hit a high of 25% in 2022. Thousands of workers left the Department of Corrections, pushing its vacancy rate to around 50%. The state began a series of pay raises. This year, all state employees and teachers got at least a \$2,000 raise, with corrections officers getting \$4,000 and state troopers \$6,000.

The Georgia Department of Corrections used an ad agency to bolster recruitment and held an average of 125 job fairs a month. It's starting to pay off. In the first week of July, the department received 318 correctional officer applications — nearly double the weekly norm, said department Public Affairs Director Joan Heath.

Almost 1 in 4 positions — more than 2,500 jobs -- were empty in the Missouri Department of Corrections late last year, which was twice the pre-pandemic vacancy rate in 2019.

Missouri gave state workers a 7.5% pay raise in 2022. This spring, Gov. Mike Parson signed an emergency spending bill with an additional 8.7% raise, plus an extra \$2 an hour for people working evening and night shifts at prisons, mental health facilities and other institutions. The vacancy rate for entry level corrections officers now is declining, and the average number of applications for all state positions is up 18% since the start of last year.

At the Fulton prison, where staff shortages have led to a standard 52-hour work week, newly hired employees can earn around \$60,000 annually — an amount roughly equal to the state's median household income. The prison also is proposing to provide free child care to correctional officers willing to work nights.

If prison staffing is too low, "it can get dangerous" for both inmates and guards, Narvaez said.

Public safety concerns also have arisen in Kansas City, where a country music fan attacked before a concert last month waited four minutes for a 911 call to be answered and an hour for an ambulance to arrive. About one-quarter of 911 call center positions are vacant — "a huge factor" in the longer wait times to answer calls, said Tamara Bazzle, assistant manager of the communications unit for the Kansas City Police Department.

In Biddeford, Maine, a 15-person roster of 911 dispatchers dipped to just eight employees in July as people quit a "pressure cooker job" for less stress or better pay elsewhere, Police Chief JoAnne Fisk said. The city is now offering fully certified dispatchers \$41 an hour to help plug the gaps on a part-time basis — \$10 an hour more than comparable new workers normally would earn.

This month, Biddeford also launched a \$2,000 bonus for city employees who refer others who get jobs. That comes a year after Biddeford adopted a four-day work week with paid lunch periods to try to make jobs more appealing, said City Manager Jim Bennett.

To attract workers, other governments have dropped college degree requirements and spiced up drab job descriptions.

Nationally, the turnover rate in state and local governments is twice the average of the previous two decades, according federal labor statistics.

Uncompetitive wages were the most common reason for leaving cited in exit interviews, according to a survey of 249 state and local government human resource managers conducted by MissionSquare Research Institute, a Washington, D.C. -based nonprofit. The hardest positions to fill included police and corrections officers, doctors, nurses, engineers and jobs requiring commercial driver's licenses.

Along Florida's east coast, the Brevard County transit system and school district have been competing for bus drivers. On days when drivers are lacking, the transit system has cut the frequency of bus stops on some routes. The school system, meanwhile, has asked some bus drivers to run a second route after dropping children off at school, often resulting in the second busload arriving late.

Since 2022, the county has twice raised bus driver wages to a current rate of \$17.47 an hour. The school board recently countered with a \$5 increase to a minimum \$20 an hour for the upcoming school year. The goal is to hire enough drivers to regularly get kids to class on time, said school system communications director Russell Bruhn.

In Arkansas, the goal is to get foster kids into permanent homes in less than a year. But during the first three months of this year, the state met that target for just 32% of foster children — well below the na-

tional standard of over 40%. More than one-fifth of the roughly 1,400 positions in the Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services are vacant.

Many new employees leave in less than two years because of heavy caseloads and the “very difficult, emotionally tolling work,” Mischa Martin, the Department of Human Services’ deputy secretary of youth and families, told lawmakers last month.

“If we had a knowledgeable, experienced workforce,” she said, “they would be able to work cases in a better way to get kids home quicker.”

Teen was sexually abused at therapeutic boarding school, lawsuit says as parents advocate oversight

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

A teenager with special needs was repeatedly sexually assaulted by an employee at a small private boarding school in South Carolina, his parents said in a lawsuit as they advocate for more oversight of similar therapeutic facilities.

The teen, who attended Whetstone Academy between October 2018 and January 2020, was “frequently sexually assaulted” and raped beginning when he was 14, the lawsuit said.

The lawsuit accuses Singleton Investment Properties, the school’s parent company, of negligence and failure to reasonably protect the teenager. The company denies the allegations.

The parents are identified anonymously in the lawsuit filed in April as Mother Doe and Father Doe and their son as John Doe. The Associated Press generally does not identify people who say they have been sexually abused and is not naming the parents to avoid revealing their son’s identity.

The parents previously sued the school and in January reached a confidential settlement. But they said they hope to bring about broad change and accountability by going after the corporate structure in this subsequent suit.

The judge earlier this month indicated a trial would likely be held next spring, but has ordered the two sides to participate in mediation to see if a settlement can be reached before then.

“We’re really hoping there’s some systematic change, some legislation enacted and real accountability here,” the Does’ attorney, Tyler Bailey, told the AP.

Therapeutic boarding schools like Whetstone should be regulated similarly to state-licensed daycare centers, with complaints tracked and publicly accessible, to the extent possible, Baily said.

“Money is one thing but change so parents and children don’t go through what they have gone through, that’s what they’re seeking to get done by this case,” Bailey said.

John Singleton Jr., who owns Singleton Investment Properties and Whetstone Academy, said in an email, “We specifically deny the allegations.” The company also denied the allegations in a court filing earlier this month.

Once the school learned of the allegations from the South Carolina Department of Social Services, the employee was immediately suspended and the school fully cooperated with an investigation by the state agency. Since the agency took no action and no criminal investigation was undertaken or charges filed, the employee was reinstated and has returned to work at the school, Singleton said.

The employee is not named in the lawsuit.

“Whetstone Academy’s focus was, is, and always will be on ensuring that every student is cared for in a safe and nurturing environment with close supervision and stringent staff oversight,” Singleton wrote. “Students receive individual and family therapy by our licensed clinicians. We provide evidence-based training for our staff who are guided by our policies and procedures.”

The Does, who live in Alabama, said their son was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder when he was young. By age 14, he was having several outbursts a day, breaking things and emotionally troubled, the father said in a phone interview. An educational consultant suggested sending him to a therapeutic boarding school for extra care and therapy.

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Whetstone Academy, in the remote Mountain Rest community in the northwest corner of South Carolina, takes students in grades five through nine and was one of the schools suggested by the consultant.

The teen initially seemed to be making progress at the school, but after about 10 months his behavior was so difficult that the parents were advised to send him to a different facility for more intensive treatment, the father said. After a summer in that facility, he returned to Whetstone.

"He stayed there for a little while, but he realized that if he acted out, he would get kicked out and he did," the mother said. "Thank God he did."

The Does then sent their son to a school in Utah. After about six months there, his parents flew him to a resort in Georgia for a vacation. At dinner one night, John Doe told his parents he had been sexually assaulted numerous times and raped by an employee at Whetstone, his mother said.

The Does called their son's therapist at the Utah school for advice. Bound by mandatory reporting requirements, the therapist contacted authorities, who interviewed the teenager and said they notified South Carolina authorities to investigate, the father said.

South Carolina's social services agency doesn't license therapeutic boarding schools, but spokesperson Connelly-Anne Ragley said in an email that the agency investigates upon receiving reports of sexual abuse involving minors. Any sexual abuse allegation sent to the agency's intake line would be reported to law enforcement within 24 hours as required by state law, she said.

The Department of Social Services told the AP that information about child abuse investigations is confidential and not releasable under the state's open records law.

The sheriff's office in Oconee County, where Whetstone is located, only conducts criminal investigations when an official report is filed and, in most cases, sexual assault prosecutions require the victim's cooperation, Master Deputy Jimmy Watt said in an email.

He said the agency had no records related to any allegations against the employee accused of sexually abusing John Doe. A State Law Enforcement Division spokesperson said that agency has not been involved.

The Does want to make sure cases like their son's are referred to law enforcement for thorough investigation and don't fall through the cracks. They haven't filed a report with South Carolina law enforcement because they don't trust authorities in the small, insular community to investigate, their lawyer said.

John Doe, now 18, is still mistrustful at times and it has taken years for his parents to repair their relationship with him, they said. They've talked to him about how pursuing this case could result in people finding out what happened to him, his mother said.

"He's the bravest kid I've ever met because he said, 'I don't care. This is all about helping others, Mom,'" she said.

Homeless struggle to stay safe from record high temperatures in blistering Phoenix

By THOMAS MACHOWICZ and ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Homeless in America's hottest big metro, Stefon James Dewitt Livengood was laid out for days inside his makeshift dwelling, struggling to breath, nauseous and vomiting.

Every day this month, temperatures have soared past 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43.3 degrees Celsius).

Livengood said he stopped briefly at a free clinic that took his blood pressure and declared it acceptable. But he received no other medical help for his apparent heat exhaustion, or for the peeling skin on his arms he believes was caused by sun exposure. He is careful when he walks through the sprawling tent city, cognizant that if he falls, the simmering black asphalt could seriously burn his skin.

"If you're going outside, let somebody know where you're going so you can be tracked so you don't pass out out there," he said. "If you fall out in the heat, you don't want a third degree burn from the ground."

The 38-year-old sleeps in a structure cobbled together with a frame of scavenged wood and metal covered by blue vinyl tarp. The space inside is large enough to stand up and walk around in and features an old recliner and a bicycle Livengood uses less now that he spends more time inside with the sides of his dwelling open.

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"Some of the friends that I've made down here, they come check on me if they don't see me moving around," he said.

Homeless people are among those most likely to die in the extreme heat in metro Phoenix. The city is seeing its longest run of consecutive days of 110 Fahrenheit (43.3 Celsius) ever recorded, clocking 28 in a row as of Thursday, even as the first monsoon storm of the season brought some overnight relief.

"It has been a scary situation this year and it's especially scary for our homeless population," said Dr. Geoff Comp, an emergency room physician for Valleywise Health in central Phoenix. "They have a more constant exposure to the heat than most of us."

People living outside are also vulnerable to surface burns from contact with hot metal, concrete or asphalt. Surgeons at the Arizona Burn Center-Valleywise Health recently warned about burns caused by walking, sitting or falling on outside surfaces reaching up to 180 degrees Fahrenheit (82.2 degrees Celsius). The burn center last year saw 85 people admitted with heat-related surface burns for the months of June through August. Seven died.

Record high overnight temperatures persisted above 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32.2 degrees Celsius) for 16 days straight after finally slipping to 89 Fahrenheit (31.6 Celsius) on Thursday after a storm Wednesday evening kicked up dust, high winds and a bit of rainfall.

If temperatures don't drop sufficiently after the sun sets, it's hard for people's bodies to cool down, health professionals say, especially those who live in flimsy structures without air conditioning or fans.

"People really need a lot of water and a cooling system to recover overnight," Comp said.

There is no air conditioner, fan or even electricity in Livengood's home, just a little, flat piece of plastic he uses as a hand fan.

Unhoused people accounted for about 40% of the 425 heat-associated deaths tallied last year in Maricopa County, home to Phoenix, during its hottest summer on record. More than half of the 425 deaths occurred in July and 80% occurred outdoors.

Maricopa County reported Wednesday that as of July 22, there were 25 heat-associated deaths confirmed this year going back to April 11. Another 249 deaths remain under investigation.

Livengood's shack stands among some 800 people living in tents and other makeshift dwellings outside Arizona's largest temporary shelter. The tents stand close together on concrete sidewalks, and seem to increase the stifling heat from the encampment called "The Zone."

But the location is convenient. Nearby agencies provide social services, food and life-saving water, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA and St. Mary's Food Bank.

Livengood can get breakfast and lunch with faith-based groups in the area before taking a nap in his recliner.

On some hot days, the local transportation agency Valley Metro send over a couple of empty buses so people can sit for hours in the air conditioning. On other days, Livengood and a few friends walk to a nearby city park and sit in the grass under shade trees outside a public swimming pool.

"It's a definite part of what keeps everybody safe down here in the 'The Zone,'" Livengood said, ticking off the things people distribute: hygiene items, sunscreen, lip balm, hats and cooling rags. "A lot of love is given out here."

Livengood tells of a childhood of trauma and neglect. Born in Phoenix and originally named Jesse James Acosta Jr., Livengood spent much of his early years in public housing in a low-income, largely African American neighborhood of south Phoenix. Both of his parents spent time in prison. His mother struggled with addiction, giving birth to a daughter behind bars, and later slipped into homelessness.

"My childhood has been filled with a lot of memories of being bounced around, never really having anything stable," Livengood said.

Livengood was adopted at age 12 by a woman named Denise who legally changed his name to the current one. He and the rest of his adoptive family moved to Alaska, where his adoptive mother died in a traffic accident.

Livengood struggled in school and met the mother of his son. He later left behind the woman and their child to return to Phoenix, a decision he regrets.

Back in the desert, Livengood said he is well aware of the dangers from extreme heat from the pamphlets volunteers pass out with bottles of icy water.

"Yeah, it gets really hot out here, guys," he said. "Stay hydrated, drink plenty of water even when you think you've had a lot of water. And drink more."

Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations. See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Senate passes defense bill with bipartisan support, but clash looms with House over social issues

By STEPHEN GROVES and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate has passed a massive annual defense bill that would deliver a 5.2% pay raise for service members and keep the nation's military operating, avoiding partisan policy battles with an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote.

Senate passage, 86-11, sets up a clash with the House, which passed its own version of the annual defense bill along party lines earlier this month after pointed debates over social issues like abortion access and diversity initiatives. The sharply partisan arguments over the House legislation veered from a bipartisan tradition of finding consensus on national defense policy.

The strong bipartisan vote for the legislation in the Senate Thursday evening, just before the Senate left for its August recess, could give it momentum as the two chambers next look to settle their differences in the fall.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said there is a "glaring contrast" between the two chambers' defense bills. The Senate had no "animus or acrimony," in contrast to the House's partisan battles, he said.

Mississippi Sen. Roger Wicker, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that "I don't think either party got exactly what they wanted" in the Senate bill. But he said the legislation would help the military improve recruitment and prevent conflict.

The two chambers will now have to write a final bill, a test of the deeply divided House, in particular, as the traditionally bipartisan legislation was swept up in the disputes over race, equity and women's health care that have been political priorities for the Republican party.

Wicker said talks with the House will start "very soon" and he feels confident they will be able to pass the legislation, as Congress has annually since 1961.

"We always have," Wicker said.

Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., a member of the Armed Services panel, predicted the bipartisan Senate approach would mostly prevail.

"The fact that we're going to have a strong bipartisan approach on it says that we're probably closer to where we're going to end up than what the House has done on a partisan basis," said Rounds.

The massive Senate defense bill would set defense spending levels at \$886 billion for the coming year, similar to President Joe Biden's budget request. Congress has to pass separate spending legislation to allocate the money, but the defense legislation lays out budget and policy for the Pentagon.

The House debate earlier this month was marked by amendments from hardline conservatives that were adopted and pushed the bill to the right — including proposals to roll back diversity and inclusion measures at the Pentagon and to block some medical care for transgender personnel.

In the Senate, where most amendments need 60 votes to pass, additions to the bill were bipartisan and more focused on military policy, with many focused on countering potential American adversaries like Russia and China.

One bipartisan provision would require two-thirds of the Senate to approve if a U.S. president tries to withdraw from NATO. Former President Donald Trump, who is running again for his old office, has been deeply critical of the military alliance and repeatedly questioned its value to the U.S.

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Rounds also joined with Democratic Sen. Jon Tester of Montana to successfully push an amendment to the bill that would prevent agents of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea from purchasing agricultural land in the U.S. Another bipartisan duo, Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas and Bob Casey, D-Pa., pushed an amendment to increase Treasury Department oversight of U.S. investment into Russian and Chinese technology firms that work with "sensitive technology," such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence.

Another provision that won support from both parties would allow the Treasury Department to use sanctions against people and organizations involved in the international fentanyl trade.

Also included is language sponsored by Schumer requiring the government to collect records relating to "unidentified aerial phenomena" — the official term the U.S. government uses instead of unidentified flying objects — and review whether they need to stay classified. The amendment would allow the release of some of those records over time.

Still unresolved, though, is Alabama Sen. Tommy Tuberville's refusal to allow the quick confirmation of hundreds of military nominations and promotions in the Senate. Tuberville is protesting the Defense Department's abortion policy, which covers the cost of travel for service members seeking abortion and reproductive care.

Tuberville has shown little interest in backing down even as some of his fellow Republican senators have encouraged him to drop it. He is preventing quick action on over 260 nominations of senior military officers, including a commandant for the U.S. Marine Corps and others, frustrating leaders at the Pentagon and his own colleagues.

The House bill contains a provision that would end the Defense Department's new abortion policy. But that would not pass the Democratic-led Senate.

Biden called Tuberville's hold "outrageous" in a speech at the National Archives Thursday evening.

"There is a growing cascade of damage and disruption all because of one senator from Alabama," Biden said.

Biden's administration did appear to work out a deal on nominations with a different Republican senator late Thursday. After meetings with State Department officials during the day, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul released his holds on several department nominees. The Senate later confirmed more than a dozen ambassadors, including former Delaware Gov. Jack Markell as ambassador to Italy.

Hours earlier, Paul told reporters he was working with the department to receive more information on projects in China that were funded by the U.S. government.

Associated Press writer Fatima Hussein contributed to this report.

Colorado leaving Pac-12 and returning to Big 12 in 2024 following unanimous vote by board of regents

By ARNIE STAPLETON AP Sports Writer

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — Colorado is leaving the Pac-12 to return to the conference the Buffaloes jilted a dozen years ago, and the Big 12 celebrated the reunion with a two-word statement released through Commissioner Brett Yomark: "They're back."

"The landscape of collegiate sports is ever-evolving, and the University of Colorado Boulder has determined the Big 12 is the best future fit for our athletic teams," CU President Todd Saliman said after the board of regents voted 9-0 in a special remote meeting Thursday to approve the conference switch in 2024.

Colorado becomes the third school to leave the Pac-12 in the last year; UCLA and USC are joining the Big Ten next year, leaving the Pac-12, at least for the moment, with only nine member schools for the 2024-25 season.

Colorado is expected to take in \$31.7 million in annual television revenue over the course of the Big 12's new deal, but Chancellor Philip DiStefano and athletic director Rick George insisted that money wasn't the only factor in CU becoming the first Power Five school to return to the conference it had left.

"A decision this big has to do with a lot more than just money," George said, emphasizing that the Buf-

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faloes will get greater exposure playing in earlier time slots and by returning from road games at a more reasonable hour.

"CU Boulder is a national university, and by spanning three time zones, the Big 12 is very much a national conference," added DiStefano. "The national exposure that joining the Big 12 provides will shine a spotlight not only on our incredible student-athletes, but also on our groundbreaking research that really changes the world."

While some of the regents expressed disappointment about leaving the Pac-12, they said the shifting sports landscape left CU no option but to rejoin the conference where they were a founding member before heading West in 2011.

One lure for the Buffaloes bolting the Big 12 in the first place was the school's large West Coast alumni base, a factor mitigated by the impending departures of the Trojans and Bruins.

"The Pac-12 is a great conference with vital institutions and it was a privilege to be a member for the last 12 years," DiStefano said. "While it's difficult to leave, we're excited about what the future holds for CU Boulder as we start our next era in the Big 12."

Pac-12 presidents and chancellors, athletic directors and Commissioner George Kliavkoff were scheduled to convene Thursday to discuss the next moves for the conference, two people with knowledge of the meeting told AP on condition of anonymity because the conference is not making its internal moves public.

Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark has spoken for months about his desire to expand the conference and add schools in the Mountain and Pacific time zones. A person familiar with the Big 12's expansion aspirations, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AP the school and league had been in contact for more than a month about a potential departure from the Pac-12.

There could be more defections from the Pac-12, which has seemed vulnerable to more poaching after losing USC and UCLA and with negotiations for a new media rights contract dragging on. Current deals with ESPN and Fox expire after this school year just about the same time the three schools leave.

The Big 12 last year came to an agreement with ESPN and Fox on a six-year extension worth more than \$2 billion that runs through 2030-31.

The Buffaloes' football team has had only one winning record over a full season since joining the Pac-12, and went 1-11 last year, leading to the hiring of former NFL star Deion Sanders.

"I will tell you, there's tremendous benefits for being in the Big 12 for the direction that Coach Prime is going as it relates to recruiting, being able to play in Orlando, against UCF, where he's recruited very heavily," George said. "The state of Texas has always been a priority for us and now (we're) playing four teams in that area. And then just up north, Oklahoma State."

Chris Yuhl, a Los Angeles attorney and 1983 CU graduate who attends home and road football games, said he disagrees with the move from a fan standpoint but understands why it happened.

"It's like Rick George and Phil DiStefano are at a craps table and have a hot hand, getting Deion and doing what they did here," Yuhl said. "We went from nobody wanting CU last October to being the first girl everyone wants to dance with in the Big 12 right now."

The Big 12 has 14 members this year, but Texas and Oklahoma are leaving for the Southeastern Conference next year. A second person familiar with the Big 12's discussions told AP the conference would ideally like to expand to 16 schools with Arizona, Arizona State, Utah and Colorado all coming over from the Pac-12 to create a Western wing of the league.

Although the Big 12 landscape is different this time around with the additions of BYU, Central Florida, Houston and Cincinnati, the Buffaloes have several rivalries to renew.

"Iowa State is thrilled to welcome the University of Colorado back into the Big 12 Conference," Iowa State Athletic Director Jamie Pollard said. "The Cyclones and Buffaloes enjoyed a spirited rivalry for more than 60 years in the Big 7, Big 8 and early years of the Big 12, so we are excited to resume competing with them next year."

George said he will seek a seventh home game to replace what were non-conference games at Houston in 2025 and Kansas State in 2028.

Trump accused of asking staffer to delete camera footage in Florida classified documents case

By ERIC TUCKER and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump faced new charges Thursday in a case accusing him of illegally possessing classified documents, with prosecutors alleging that he asked a staffer to delete camera footage at his Florida estate in an effort to obstruct a federal investigation into the records.

The new indictment includes extra charges of obstruction and willful retention of national defense information, adding fresh detail to a criminal case issued last month against Trump and a close aide.

The Florida charges came as a surprise at a time of escalating anticipation of a possible additional indictment in Washington over his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. The latest allegations also make clear the vast, and still not fully known, scope of legal exposure faced by Trump as he seeks to reclaim the White House in 2024 while fending off criminal cases in multiple cities.

The updated indictment from special counsel Jack Smith centers on surveillance footage at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, evidence that has long been vital to the case. Trump is alleged to have asked for the footage to be deleted after FBI and Justice Department investigators visited in June 2022 to collect classified documents he took with him after leaving the White House. The new indictment also charges him with illegally holding onto a document he's alleged to have shown off to visitors in New Jersey.

A Trump spokesperson dismissed the new charges as "nothing more than a continued desperate and flailing attempt" by the Biden administration "to harass President Trump and those around him" and to influence the 2024 presidential race.

Prosecutors accuse Trump of scheming with his valet, Walt Nauta, and a Mar-a-Lago property manager, Carlos De Oliveira, to conceal the footage from federal investigators after they issued a subpoena for it. Video from the property would ultimately play a significant role in the investigation because, prosecutors said, it captured Nauta moving boxes of documents in and out of a storage room — including a day before an FBI visit to the property. The boxes were moved at Trump's direction, the indictment alleges.

According to the indictment, Nauta met with De Oliveira on June 25, 2022, at Mar-a-Lago, where they went to a security guard booth where surveillance video is displayed on monitors and walked with a flashlight through a tunnel where the storage room was located, observing and pointing out surveillance cameras.

Two days later, according to the indictment, De Oliveira walked through a basement tunnel with an unidentified Trump employee to an audio closet, where De Oliveira in a private conversation asked how many days the server retained footage.

De Oliveira, prosecutors said, told the employee that "the boss" wanted the server deleted and asked, "What are we going to do?"

During a voluntary interview with the FBI last January, prosecutors say, De Oliveira lied when he said he "never saw nothing" with regard to boxes at Mar-a-Lago.

De Oliveira was added to the indictment, charged with obstruction and false statements related to that FBI interview. His lawyer declined to comment Thursday evening.

The new charges were filed as Trump is bracing for the prospect of an additional indictment related to his efforts to undo the 2020 election in the run-up to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol. Last week, he revealed he had received a letter from the Justice Department informing him he was a target in that probe, suggesting that charges could be forthcoming. His lawyers met with prosecutors on Smith's office earlier Thursday to discuss that case.

But despite the anticipation, the only charges filed Thursday were in Florida, not Washington.

The superseding indictment also charges Trump with an additional count of willfully retaining national defense information, arising from a document he showed off to visitors at his Bedminster, New Jersey, golf club during an July 2021 interview for a memoir of his onetime chief of staff Mark Meadows. Prosecutors have described the document as a Pentagon plan of attack and Meadows, in his subsequent book, said the country it concerned was Iran.

The indictment says the document was returned to the federal government on Jan. 17, 2022, which is

the date Trump provided 15 boxes of records to the National Archives. The decision to charge him with possession of that document is notable since the other records cited in the indictment are ones that Trump either handed over to authorities in June 2022 in response to a grand jury subpoena demanding the return of classified documents, or are ones the FBI found during an August search of Mar-a-Lago.

Trump has denied he had secret documents before him when he spoke.

"There wasn't a document. I had lots of paper. I had copies of newspaper articles, I had copies of magazines, I had copies of everything," he said in an interview with Fox News host Bret Baier.

Both Trump and Nauta have pleaded not guilty to the original 38-count indictment. De Oliveira is due in court in Florida on Monday.

The trial for Trump and Nauta is currently scheduled for May 20, 2024. It was unclear if the addition of a new defendant could result in a postponement.

Associated Press writers Alanna Durkin Richer in Boston, Michael Kunzelman, Lindsay Whitehurst, Farnoush Amiri, Nomaan Merchant, Lisa Mascaro and Gary Fields in Washington and Jill Colvin in New York contributed to this report.

Donald Trump faces new charges in the Mar-a-Lago classified documents case. Here's what to know

By MEG KINNARD and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

New charges — and a new defendant — added to the classified documents case against former President Donald Trump underscore how the Mar-a-Lago investigation is still very much ongoing, even as the focus has been on an expected indictment in a separate case related to the 2020 election.

In an updated indictment handed down Thursday, prosecutors allege that Trump asked a staffer to delete camera footage at his Florida estate in an effort to obstruct the federal investigation into his possession of classified documents.

The indictment includes new counts of obstruction and willful retention of national defense information. Prosecutors also added a third defendant to the case: Mar-a-Lago property manager Carlos De Oliveira, who they say schemed with Trump and his valet, Walt Nauta, to conceal the footage from investigators.

Trump has denied any wrongdoing, and a spokesperson dismissed the new charges as "nothing more than a continued desperate and flailing attempt" by the Biden administration "to harass President Trump and those around him" and to influence the 2024 presidential race.

Here's the latest on Trump's new charges and where his other legal cases stand:

'THE BOSS' SAID TO DO IT

The new indictment alleges that Trump demanded that security footage at his Mar-a-Lago estate be deleted after investigators visited in June 2022 to collect classified documents he took with him after the left the White House.

The indictment says that in late June 2022, De Oliveira took another employee to a small room known as an "audio closet" and told the other employee the conversation should remain between the two of them. De Oliveira asked the employee how many days the server retained surveillance footage and said "the boss" wanted the server deleted. When the employee said he didn't believe he was able to do that, De Oliveira insisted the "boss" wanted it done, asking, "What are we going to do?"

The coded language and talk about needing to carry out the boss' wishes is reminiscent of how others, including former Trump attorney Michael Cohen, have described life inside Trump's inner circle. Once Trump's fixer, Cohen has likened Trump to a mob boss, who would bully others into doing his bidding but would speak in "code" and never directly tell them to do something wrong.

Cohen, who served time in prison in another special counsel's investigation, testified as a key prosecution witness in the unrelated New York hush-money case against Trump.

An attorney for De Oliveira declined to comment Thursday.

CHANGE IN APPROACH

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The new charges against Trump include an additional count of willfully retaining national defense information related to a presentation about military activity in another country. Investigators say Trump showed off that document during July 2021 meeting at his Bedminster, New Jersey, resort with the writer and publisher of the memoir of his former chief of staff Mark Meadows. Details about that document and the meeting were included in the original indictment, but none of the charges had related to it until now.

Trump had returned that document to the government on Jan. 17, 2022 — nearly a year after he left office, according to the indictment.

Bringing the charge marks a shift in the prosecution's approach, with the Justice Department charging him with holding onto a document they say he knew was highly sensitive after he left office, but returned to the government before the FBI opened its criminal investigation in March 2022.

The charges Trump was already facing stemmed from documents prosecutors say Trump was illegally hoarding at Mar-a-Lago after the federal grand jury investigation began.

Prosecutors allege that during the July 2021 meeting at Bedminster, Trump had waved around the classified attack plan to his guests. "This is secret information," he said, according to a recording cited in the documents, claiming that, "as president I could have declassified it" but hadn't.

Trump has since denied he had secret documents before him when he spoke.

TRIAL DELAY?

The addition of a third defendant could impact the trial date, which has already been a source of contention in the case.

Trump's lawyers have claimed that he can't get a fair trial before the 2024 election, while prosecutors had wanted the case to go to trial in December.

U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon, in a compromise last week, scheduled the trial to begin in May. If it holds that date could mean a trial will not start until deep into the presidential nominating calendar, and probably well after the Republican nominee is clear — though before that person is officially nominated at the Republican National Convention.

But adding De Oliveira to the case may lead to that getting pushed back.

"It will be just about impossible to keep all of the scheduled deadlines with a new defendant coming in," said David Oscar Markus, a criminal defense attorney in Miami who is not involved in the case.

In a separate court filing Thursday, prosecutors wrote that the new charges "should not disturb" the May trial date, "and the Special Counsel's Office is taking steps related to discovery and security clearances to ensure that it does not do so."

But Trump will likely use the new charges — and new evidence prosecutors say they have against him — in a renewed effort to delay the trial.

MORE POTENTIAL CHARGES LOOMING

News of the indictment came just hours after Trump's attorneys met with members of special counsel Jack Smith's team ahead of the expected indictment over the former president's efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss to Joe Biden. Trump said on his Truth Social network that his attorneys "had a productive meeting" and that "no indication of notice was given during the meeting."

Trump disclosed earlier this month that he had received a letter from the Justice Department advising him that he was a target of the agency's election-related investigation. Such letters often precede criminal charges.

The status of the secretive grand jury proceedings remained unclear Thursday, despite building speculation that a criminal case could be near. In a sign of heightened expectations, police officers were photographed gathered outside the courthouse.

MORE LEGAL WOES ON THE HORIZON

The federal investigations are far from Trump's only legal worries.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has said any indictments resulting from her two-year investigation into whether Trump and his allies illegally meddled in the 2020 election in Georgia would likely come next month.

In October, a civil trial is scheduled to begin in New York state court, where New York Attorney General Letitia James has sued Trump and the Trump Organization, alleging they misled banks and tax authorities about the value of assets including golf courses and skyscrapers to get loans and tax benefits.

Trump scheduled to stand trial in March in a New York hush money case. He's pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records, which are linked to a series of checks that were written to his lawyer Michael Cohen to reimburse him for his role in paying off porn actor Stormy Daniels, who alleged a sexual encounter with Trump in 2006.

DeSantis is defending new slavery teachings. Civil rights leaders see a pattern of 'policy violence'

By STEVE PEOPLES, BRENDAN FARRINGTON and KAT STAFFORD Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Civil rights activists cheered when Ron DeSantis pardoned four Black men wrongfully convicted of rape as one of his first actions as Florida's governor. But four years later, as DeSantis eyes the presidency, their hope that the Republican would be an ally on racial justice has long faded.

Instead, African American leaders decry what they call a pattern of "policy violence" against people of color imposed by the DeSantis administration that reached a low point after the recent release of an "anti-woke" public school curriculum on Black history. Specifically, Florida's teachers are now required to instruct middle-school students that enslaved people "developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit."

DeSantis has repeatedly defended the new language while insisting that his critics, who include Vice President Kamala Harris and two leading Black Republicans in Congress, are intentionally misinterpreting one line of the sweeping curriculum. Civil rights leaders who have watched DeSantis closely dismiss such explanations.

"DeSantis has perfected the art of using policy violence that we must stop," said Derrick Johnson, president and CEO of the NAACP. His organization issued a travel advisory for Florida in May warning African Americans against DeSantis' "aggressive attempts to erase Black history and to restrict diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in Florida schools."

The divisive debate highlights the political and practical risks of DeSantis' approach to racial issues as he seeks to reset his struggling campaign and the Republican Party works to strengthen its dismal standing with voters of color.

Ambitious Republican leaders have long seized on white grievance to animate the party's most passionate voters, who are almost exclusively white. But DeSantis, a combative conservative who leads one of the nation's largest states, has embraced far-right positions on race perhaps more aggressively than anyone in the 2024 presidential contest as he tries to position himself to the right of Trump.

The 44-year-old governor was as defiant as ever on Thursday when asked about the critics within his own party who echoed the Democratic vice president's concerns.

"At the end of the day, you got to choose: Are you going to side with Kamala Harris and liberal media outlets or are you going to side with the state of Florida?" DeSantis told reporters as he campaigned in Iowa. "I think it's very clear that these guys did a good job on those standards. It wasn't anything that was politically motivated."

DeSantis is now facing criticism from Florida teachers, civil rights leaders and the Biden White House. Harris, the nation's first Black vice president, traveled to Florida last week to condemn the curriculum. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, who is the chamber's sole Black Republican and is also seeking the White House, issued a direct rebuke of DeSantis on Thursday while campaigning in Iowa.

"What slavery was really about was separating families, about mutilating humans and even raping their wives. It was just devastating," he told reporters. "So I would hope that every person in our country — and certainly running for president — would appreciate that. People have bad days. Sometimes they regret

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what they say. And we should ask them again to clarify their positions.”

Most of DeSantis’ other GOP presidential opponents have stayed silent. But other Black conservatives have begun to speak out. Rep. Byron Donalds, R-Fla., one of the most powerful Black Republicans in the state, said he has a problem with the part of the curriculum that suggests enslaved people derived any benefit from their situation.

“To me, yes, that section needs some adjustments,” he told southwest Florida’s WINK News this week.

“The talking point narrative around it, yeah, it sounds awful,” said Donalds, who, like almost every Republican in Florida’s congressional delegation, has endorsed Trump over DeSantis in the primary. “Nobody should be accepting of that. But when you read through the standards, they actually did a very good job in covering all aspects of Black history in the United States.”

Donalds said he planned to work with the State Board of Education to “bring refinement” to that topic.

The DeSantis administration later went on the attack against Donalds, a popular conservative seen as a rising star in the GOP.

The state’s education commissioner, Manny Diaz Jr., vowed on social media Wednesday not to change the teaching standards “at the behest of a woke @WhiteHouse, nor at the behest of a supposedly conservative congressman.” DeSantis’ spokesperson, Jeremy Redfern, piled on, posting that “supposed conservatives in the federal government are pushing the same false narrative that originated from the @WhiteHouse.”

As the dynamic unfolds under the bright spotlight of presidential politics, DeSantis’ approach risks alienating would-be conservative supporters while undermining his core message to Republican voters, which relies on the notion that he is more electable than Trump against President Joe Biden in the general election.

Republican strategists acknowledge that the curriculum fight could undermine the party’s modest gains with some voters of color in recent elections. African Americans and Latinos, particularly young men, have shifted slightly toward the GOP, although both groups still overwhelmingly backed Democrats.

“There are much more valuable issues that DeSantis should focus on,” said Republican strategist Alice Stewart, who added that the current debate could “absolutely” alienate voters of color and suburban whites alike.

Still, she suggested DeSantis was being unfairly criticized.

“It’s important as always to make sure that you read everything before you take one part and blow it up,” Stewart said. “This is one part of a larger curriculum. And this was written and approved and signed off by an African American scholar.”

The group that revised the Black history curriculum included William B. Allen, a Black professor emeritus at Michigan State University who has defended the wording about slavery.

Former Republican strategist Tara Setmayer, now an adviser with the anti-Trump Lincoln Project, said the debate reflects an unfortunate political reality in today’s GOP: Far-right positions on race have become incredibly popular since Trump’s rise. She argued there is virtually no short-term downside to emphasizing the issue for candidates running in Republican primaries, which are dominated by the party’s white base.

“I was a Republican for 27 years, and at no time did the Republican Party try to whitewash American history,” she said. “Now, that’s a mainstream Republican talking point.”

DeSantis is far from alone in pushing the limits of the GOP’s rightward shift on race.

Trump dined last fall with noted white supremacist Nick Fuentes. Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga. and Paul Gosar, R-Ariz. spoke at a gathering of white supremacists in Florida earlier in the year. Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., has repeatedly refused to denounce white nationalists serving in the U.S. military in recent weeks. Rep. Eli Crane, R-Ariz. referred to Black people as “colored people” on the House floor this month.

In the GOP’s presidential primary, all the candidates have come out against critical race theory, the idea that racism is systemic in the nation’s institutions, which function to maintain the dominance of white people in society. They regularly insist that America is not a racist nation, accusing Democrats of perpetuating that notion to score political points.

In many cases, however, DeSantis has gone further than his 2024 rivals in using the levers of government to enshrine the conservative position — much of it coming after his presidential ambitions came into view.

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Even before he was sworn in, DeSantis faced allegations of racism for saying Florida voters would not “monkey” up the election by voting for his Black Democratic opponent in 2018. But DeSantis then drew praise for opening his governorship by pardoning the Groveland Four, a group of four Black men convicted of a 1949 rape they did not commit.

The praise didn't last.

In 2020, DeSantis pushed the Florida Legislature to approve the so-called anti-riot act, which was designed to crack down on violence associated with African American demonstrations against police violence. That's even as he's downplayed the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

More recently, DeSantis pushed through the Stop WOKE (Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees) Act, a law that limits discussions on race in schools and by corporations. The law was intended, at least in part, to prevent white people from feeling guilty or uncomfortable about racial injustices committed by other white people.

DeSantis has also banned state universities from using state or federal money for diversity programs.

In a move that has not gained as much attention, he has declined to select individuals for the Florida Civil Rights Hall of Fame in four years, despite a state law that requires nominees to be submitted to him annually. He has continued to name people to the Florida Artists Hall of Fame and the Florida Women's Hall of Fame.

DeSantis also demanded that former Democratic Rep. Al Lawson's congressional district be redrawn to dilute the influence of Black voters in north Florida. As a result, Florida no longer has Black representation in Washington for an area stretching about 360 miles (580 kilometers) from the Alabama line to the Atlantic Ocean and from the Georgia line south to Orlando.

Still, Black Republican activist Quisha King of Jacksonville says she's been thrilled by DeSantis' leadership, especially on education.

King said it's “ignorant” and “simple-minded” to condemn the provision of Florida's new education curriculum related to slavery.

“My great, great, grandfather was born a slave. He bought his freedom. How do they think he was able to buy his freedom?” she asked. “They used the skills that they had to make some money and save it up and buy their freedom.”

The Department of Education said Wednesday that it released a statement on the new Black history curriculum last week and would not comment further.

Meanwhile, state Democratic Sen. Shevrin Jones, who is Black, said that painting a rosier picture of atrocities does not benefit anyone.

“Their idea is to teach history in a way to make white people not be looked at in a bad light,” Jones said. “There's no silver bow that you can tie around the history of Black people. You can't make lynching look good, you can't make the raping of women look good.”

“There's no benefit to that,” he added. “There was nothing right about that. There was nothing just about that. It was torture.”

Bolivia is the latest South American nation to use China's yuan for trade in challenge to the dollar

By CARLOS VALDEZ and DANIEL POLITI Associated Press

LA PAZ, Bolivia (AP) — Bolivia is now using the yuan to pay for imports and exports, becoming the latest country in South America to regularly use the Chinese currency in a small but growing challenge to the hegemony of the U.S. dollar for international financial transactions in the region.

Between May and July of this year, Bolivia conducted financial operations amounting to 278 million Chinese yuan (\$38.7 million), which accounts for 10% of its foreign trade during that period, Economy Minister Marcelo Montenegro said on Thursday.

“We're already using the yuan. It's a reality and a good start,” Montenegro said during a news confer-

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ence. "Banana, zinc, and wood manufacturing exporters are conducting transactions in yuan, as well as importers of vehicles and capital goods." These electronic transactions are carried out through the state-owned Banco Unión.

"The amount being used in yuan is still relatively small, but it will increase over time," Montenegro said.

With these transactions, Bolivia joins other countries in South America, most notably Brazil and Argentina, which are using the yuan. The three countries are ruled by leftist or left-leaning governments.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the use of the yuan is growing especially "in those countries that are looking to establish stronger ties with China, that view themselves as in some way politically aligned on this particular objective on decreasing their overall reliance on the dollar and on the U.S. in general," said Margaret Myers, director of the Asia & Latin America Program at the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue.

The use of the yuan comes at a time when China's footprint in the region is increasing with rising trade and investment.

"There is a lot of anxiety in Washington about threats to the special role of the dollar in regions like Latin America," Benjamin Gedan, director of the Latin America Program at the Washington-based Wilson Center, said. "China's new role as a lender of last resort in Argentina, and the use of the yuan for international trade by Bolivia, are a sign of the times."

Earlier this year, Argentina's government unveiled a plan to use the yuan to pay for imports from China as a way to preserve its dwindling foreign reserves and it has raised the possibility of paying off debts with the International Monetary Fund using the Chinese currency. In Brazil, the yuan surpassed the euro as the second most important currency in its foreign reserves at the end of 2022, when 5.37% of the central bank's holdings were in the Chinese currency, compared to 4.74% for the euro.

In Bolivia, the yuan started to be used after months of severe dollar shortages that have been impacting the country's economy since February.

Some analysts and members of the opposition have questioned the move to use the yuan.

"It is not a long-term solution, and it seems more like an attempt to cover up economic problems," said José Gabriel Espinoza, an economics professor at Bolivia's Catholic University.

The manager of the Chamber of Exporters of Bolivia, Marcelo Olguín, dismissed the criticism, characterizing the use of the yuan as merely "an alternative to operate."

Beyond political considerations, looking for alternatives to the U.S. dollar that has become more expensive amid rising interest rates also makes economic sense, said Rebecca Ray, senior academic researcher at the Boston University Global Development Policy Center.

"They're all facing the same global macroeconomic conditions, and the most important part of that is the US dollar is really expensive and hard to get a hold of. So there's basically a global dollar shortage among current central banks," Ray said. "Central banks everywhere are looking for alternatives."

Bolivia's President Luis Arce said earlier this month the Andean country was looking for alternatives amid a "dollar liquidity crisis."

During a visit to China in April, Brazilian President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva questioned the omnipresence of the U.S. dollar in foreign trade.

"Who was it that decided that the dollar was the currency after the disappearance of the gold standard?" he said.

Beijing is welcoming this new dynamic after years of a concerted effort to push for the yuan to be used more widely on the international stage.

"China clearly wants to challenge the global dominance of the dollar, both for practical and symbolic purposes," Gedan said.

Now that is starting to be more appealing to more countries.

"China has been wanting to internationalize (its currency) for many years. What is new is that other countries are receptive to the idea because the current situation isn't sustainable," Ray said.

Experts agree though that any large-scale shift to the yuan is unlikely in the near future.

"I think there's a sort of natural limit that most countries will hit," Myers said. "So many transactions still need to be done using the dollar."

The "primary limitation here is the fact that the Chinese financial system is still relatively closed," Myers added.

Gedan added that at least "for now, there is generally more faith in the Fed than in China's central bankers."

Niger's president vows democracy will prevail after mutinous soldiers detain him and declare a coup

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Niger's president defiantly declared Thursday that democracy would prevail, a day after mutinous soldiers detained him and announced they had seized power in a coup because of the West African country's deteriorating security situation.

While many people in the capital of Niamey went about their usual business, it remained unclear who was in control of the country and which side the majority might support. A statement tweeted by the army command's account declared that it would back the coup to avoid a "murderous confrontation" that could lead to a "bloodbath." It was not possible to confirm that the statement was genuine.

President Mohamed Bazoum — who was elected in 2021 in Niger's first peaceful, democratic transfer of power since its independence from France in 1960 — appeared to have the backing of several political parties. Bazoum is a key ally in the West's efforts to battle jihadists linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group in Africa's Sahel region.

"The hard-won achievements will be safeguarded. All Nigeriens who love democracy and freedom will see to it," Bazoum tweeted early Thursday.

Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou issued a similar call on news network France 24, asking "all Nigerien democratic patriots to stand up as one to say no to this factious action."

He demanded the president's unconditional release and said talks were ongoing.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who spoke to Bazoum by phone on Wednesday, told reporters Thursday that he was "extremely worried" about the situation in Niger and warned of the "terrible effects on development" and civilians due to "successive unconstitutional changes of government in the Sahel region."

The U.N. Security Council scheduled emergency closed consultations on the situation Friday at the request of its three African members, Ghana, Gabon and Mozambique.

The Economic Community of West African States sent Benin President Patrice Talon to lead mediation efforts.

Russia and the West have been vying for influence in the fight against extremism in the region. Extremists in Niger have carried out attacks on civilians and military personnel, but the overall security situation is not as dire as in neighboring nations.

Bazoum is seen by many as the West's last hope for partnership in the Sahel after Mali turned away from former colonial power France and sought support from the Russian mercenary group Wagner. Wagner appears to be making inroads in Burkina Faso as well.

The U.S. is "gravely concerned" about the situation in Niger, said State Department spokesman Vedant Patel during a briefing with reporters Thursday.

"We are monitoring the situation closely and continue to be in close touch with the embassy," Patel said.

Western countries have poured aid into Niger, and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited in March, seeking to strengthen ties. American, French and Italian troops train the country's soldiers, while France also conducts joint operations.

But the threat to Bazoum has raised concerns that Niger could also turn away from the West.

On Thursday, several hundred people gathered in the capital and chanted support for Wagner while waving Russian flags. Later, they began throwing rocks at a passing politician's car.

"If Mohamed Bazoum resigns from the presidency, Niger will probably move to the top of the list of

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countries where the Wagner Group will seek to expand," said Flavien Baumgartner, an Africa analyst at Dragonfly, a security and political risk consultancy.

Wagner already had its sights set on Niger, in part because it's a large producer of uranium. But Bazoum posed an impediment because of his pro-French and pro-Western stance, said Baumgartner.

Wagner's head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, weighed in on Thursday, describing the developments as part of Niger's fight against the "colonizers."

"It effectively means winning independence. The rest will depend on the people of Niger, on how efficient they could govern," Prigozhin, who led a brief mutiny against the Kremlin last month, said in a statement.

The U.S. State Department isn't aware of any signs that the Wagner Group was involved in the coup, Patel said. He declined to speculate, saying the "situation continues to be quite fluid."

Former Wagner mercenary, Marat Gabidullin, told the AP that if Niger's new rulers wanted the group's help, they'd do the same job as in the Central African Republic, where it's been operating for five years. Advocacy groups have accused Wagner of hijacking state resources and committing human rights atrocities in the Central African Republic and other countries where it operates.

Underscoring the importance of Niger to the West, Blinken said Thursday that he had spoken with the president, saying that he "made clear that we strongly support him as the democratically elected president of the country."

Blinken, who was in New Zealand, repeated the U.S. condemnation of the mutiny and said his team was in close contact with officials in France and Africa.

If designated a coup by the United States, Niger could lose millions of dollars of military support and aid.

Alexander Thurston, assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati, said the coup deals a blow to democratic culture in the Sahel.

"Western governments are left without a strong partner in the region, and may shift even more towards attempting to contain the region's problems, rather than helping to solve them," Thurston said.

Members of the presidential guard surrounded Bazoum's house and detained him on Wednesday morning.

The mutinous soldiers, who call themselves the National Council for the Safeguarding of the Country, took to state television and announced they had seized control because of deteriorating security and poor economic and social governance in the nation of 25 million people. They said they had dissolved the constitution, suspended all institutions and closed all the borders.

Military experts say some of the people who appeared on state television were high-ranking officers, including Gen. Moussa Salaou Barmou, the head of Niger's special forces who has a strong relationship with the United States.

According to someone close to the president who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the situation, the president has not and will not resign and is safe in his residence.

In a statement Wednesday, several political parties expressed their support for him, calling the coup "suicidal and anti-republican madness."

The "country, faced with insecurity, terrorism and the challenges of underdevelopment, cannot afford to be distracted," they said. Protesters also came out in support of Bazoum that day.

More than 4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and hundreds of thousands are internally displaced, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters after speaking to senior U.N. officials in Niger.

The international community denounced the coup in Niger, where there have been multiple coups since independence in 1960.

"We firmly condemn the coup that took place in Niger against the country's civilian democratic authorities," the French Foreign Ministry said Thursday. It called for the liberation of Bazoum and his family, and for their security to be ensured. It also called for the immediate restoration of the integrity of Niger's democratic institutions.

France has 2,500 troops in Niger and Chad, conducting anti-terror operations in the Sahel region

U.N. Human Rights chief Volker Türk called for Bazoum's release and said "all efforts must be undertaken to restore constitutional order and the rule of law."

Russia also called for the president's release. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Thursday in televised

remarks that "it's necessary to restore the constitutional order in Niger." "We believe that the coup is unconstitutional, and we always take a principled and clear position on that," he said.

Trump says his lawyers have met with prosecutors ahead of possible 2020 election indictment

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawyers for Donald Trump met Thursday with members of special counsel Jack Smith's team ahead of a potential indictment over the former president's efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election in the run-up to the Jan. 6, 2021 riot at the U.S. Capitol, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Trump himself confirmed the meeting in a post on his Truth Social network, writing, "My attorneys had a productive meeting with the DOJ this morning, explaining in detail that I did nothing wrong, was advised by many lawyers, and that an Indictment of me would only further destroy our Country."

He added that "no indication of notice was given during the meeting."

It was not immediately clear what was discussed at the meeting, though a similar sit-down with lawyers occurred in the days before Trump was indicted last month on charges of illegally retaining classified documents. Thursday's meeting included Trump attorney John Lauro, said the person familiar with the case, who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity to describe a private gathering. Lauro said in a Fox News television interview last week that his client had done "nothing wrong."

The status of the secretive grand jury proceedings remained unclear despite building speculation that a criminal case could be near. No indictment was filed Thursday, though Trump did face new charges in the classified documents case, with prosecutors accusing him of asking a staffer to delete security camera footage in an apparent effort to obstruct the investigation.

Trump, the front-runner in the 2024 Republican presidential primary, was informed earlier this month by Smith's office that he was a target of the Justice Department's investigation, suggesting that an indictment could be soon.

The investigation has focused on the turbulent two-month period after the November 2020 election in which Trump refused to accept his loss to Democrat Joe Biden and spread lies that victory was stolen from him. The turmoil resulted in the riot at Capitol, when Trump loyalists violently broke into the building, attacked police officers and disrupted the congressional counting of electoral votes. More than 1,000 people have been charged with federal crimes related to that assault.

In between the election and the riot, Trump urged local election officials to undo voting results in their states, pressured Vice President Mike Pence to halt the certification of electoral votes and falsely claimed that the election had been stolen — despite the fact that numerous federal and local officials, a long list of courts, top former campaign staffers and even his own attorney general have all said there is no evidence of the fraud he alleges.

A spokesman for Smith declined to comment on Thursday's meeting. Lauro, Trump's lawyer, didn't immediately respond to a message seeking comment.

Trump was charged by Smith's team last month with illegally hoarding classified documents at his Palm Beach, Florida, estate, Mar-a-Lago, and concealing them from investigators. He was also indicted in New York in March on charges of falsifying business records in connection with an alleged hush money payment to a porn actor. And prosecutors in Fulton County, Georgia, are preparing to announce charging decisions in the coming weeks related to efforts to subvert the election in that state.

For clergy abuse survivors, Sinead O'Connor's protest that offended so many was brave and prophetic

By HOLLY MEYER Associated Press

In 1992, Sinéad O'Connor destroyed a photo of Pope John Paul II on U.S. national television. The push-back was swift, turning the late Irish singer-songwriter's protest of sex abuse in the Catholic Church into a career-altering flashpoint.

More than 30 years later, her "Saturday Night Live" performance and its stark collision of popular culture and religious statement is remembered by some as an offensive act of desecration. But for others — including survivors of clergy sex abuse — O'Connor's protest was prophetic, forecasting the global denomination's public reckoning that was, at that point, yet to come. O'Connor, 56, died Wednesday.

The SNL moment stunned David Clohessy, a key early member of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. In his 30s at the time, he had only recently recalled the repressed memories of the abuse he suffered. He found O'Connor's act deeply moving. It was something he and other survivors never thought possible.

That night O'Connor, head shaved and looking straight into the camera, stood alone singing Bob Marley's song "War" a capella. She finished the final lines, "We know we will win/ We have confidence in the victory/of good over evil," and then moved an off-screen photo of Pope John Paul II in front of the camera.

Then O'Connor ripped it to pieces. She called out, "Fight the real enemy," before she threw the scraps to the ground. Clohessy remembers it well.

"We were all just deeply convinced that we would go to our graves without ever seeing any public acknowledgment of the horror and without any kind of validation whatsoever," Clohessy said. "That's what made her words so very powerful."

THE RIPPLES IT CAUSED

Reaction at the time was fierce from many corners. Later that month she was booed at an all-star tribute to Bob Dylan at Madison Square Garden. One group destroyed more than 200 of her albums, cassettes and CDs with a steamroller lumbering down New York's Sixth Avenue.

The SNL performance also appalled Thomas Plante, a Catholic psychology professor at California's Santa Clara University, and his wife who is Jewish. Plante was well aware of the issue since he was researching, evaluating and treating clerical sex offenders at the time.

"It is understandable that people would want to make strong statements about their issues with the Catholic Church, but tearing up a picture of the Pope on live TV was way over the top," Plante said in an email. "Many people feel free to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' when it comes to criticism of the Catholic Church."

He also noted the prevalence of anti-Catholic hate, especially following the Boston Globe's 2002 report revealing widespread abuse and cover-up by the church. Plante said the clergy abuse crisis was horrible, but people often fail to recognize that it is a problem of the 20th century and earlier — cases are extremely rare in this century, he said.

"Much progress has been made and current policies and procedures are actually working," he said.

The quarter-century legacy of John Paul II — then pope, now a saint — has been badly tarnished by evidence he turned a blind eye to abuse even when the Vatican had copiously well-documented cases and even when bishops in the U.S., facing mounting legal liability, begged the Vatican for fast-track ways to defrock abusers in the 1980s.

Vatican officials have long excused John Paul's attitude by arguing that he had seen first-hand how priests in his native Poland were intentionally discredited with false accusations by Communist authorities, and thus believed any accusations against clerics were mere "calumnies" intended to harm the church.

O'Connor was found unresponsive Wednesday at her home in southeast London. Saddened by her passing, Brenna Moore, a theology professor at Fordham University in New York and a big fan of O'Connor, described her as "a kind of prophetic truth-teller."

Society, especially in the English-speaking world, is used to men taking on this role, Moore said, but

when a woman does it, she's accused of being crazy and angry. Moore, referencing O'Connor's memoir, said the singer was more than a rebel with a shaved head.

"She sort of stands in a long line of artists and poets who have a kind of rebellious punk ability to speak truth to power in a very performative way," Moore said. "She was a profoundly spiritual person, a profound seeker of transcendence and the truth."

FOR SOME, THE ACT WAS COURAGEOUS AND EVEN WISE

Jamie Manson, president of Catholics for Choice, was a teen living on Long Island with her traditional Catholic Italian family in 1992; she recalled just how horrified they were by O'Connor's protest. But for Manson, who was feeling a call to the priesthood at the time, looked at it more with curiosity.

Manson called O'Connor a visionary, especially given that neither the Irish or U.S. Catholic hierarchy had yet publicly reckoned with the pervasiveness of clergy sex abuse.

"Not many people that we would call prophetic are willing to risk everything, and she was. ... And she lost almost everything as a result," Manson said. "It is very, very scary to challenge the church in a very public way. And it takes enormous bravery and a willingness to be able to let go of everything."

Clohessy also depicted the 1992 protest as courageous: "I think young people can't know — and older people to some extent have forgotten — just how extraordinarily powerful the Catholic hierarchy was in those days."

Invoking the famous Martin Luther King Jr. quote, Clohessy said that "the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. She's proof of that. And it bends so slowly — and it bends backwards along the way."

Attorney Jeff Anderson, who has represented victims of Catholic clergy sex abuse in numerous cases across the U.S., connected with O'Connor around the time of her SNL appearance. In a statement, Anderson called her wise and ahead of her time.

"Sinéad saw predator priests not as a 'couple bad apples' but as signs and proof of a deeply corrupt and almost untouchable clerical system," Anderson said. "It took tremendous courage for her to be one of those early, lonely voices for the voiceless."

Michael McDonnell, interim executive director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said O'Connor "wore the anguish of victims of clergy abuse and it seems as though she knew in 1992 the horrors that hadn't yet been revealed.

"Ultimately," he said, "she relieved the pain for tens of thousands of victims with rebellion."

Casino mogul Steve Wynn fined \$10M to end fight over claims of workplace sexual misconduct in Nevada

By KEN RITTER Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Casino mogul Steve Wynn has ended a yearslong legal fight with Nevada gambling regulators that started with claims of workplace sexual misconduct, agreeing to pay a \$10 million fine and cut ties to the industry he helped shape in Las Vegas.

The Nevada Gaming Commission accepted a settlement Thursday to end the state's look at allegations that led to Wynn's resignation from his corporate empire in February 2018. Wynn admitted no wrongdoing. The decision was 4-0. Commission Chairwoman Jennifer Togliatti abstained from voting, citing a conflict arising from her previous work as a state court mediator.

Wynn is now 81 and lives in Florida. He did not attend the hearing held in Carson City and livestreamed on the internet. His attorney, Colby Williams, called the case the final regulatory matter that Wynn faced stemming from the allegations five years ago.

Wynn "looks forward to moving on to other phases of his life," Williams told The Associated Press.

The fine is the largest ever imposed by the commission, second only to \$20 million paid in February 2019 by Wynn's former company, Wynn Resorts Ltd., for failing to investigate the sexual misconduct claims made against Wynn.

Craig Newby, first assistant Nevada attorney general, reminded the commission that a seven-month investigation by the Nevada Gaming Control Board "found evidence of sexual conduct by Mr. Wynn involv-

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ing some subordinate female employees.”

“This stipulation,” Newby said, “would bring this sordid affair to conclusion.”

“It’s a huge blemish on the (casino) industry,” Commissioner Rosa Solis-Rainey said. “While Mr. Wynn made some incredible contributions, the nature of the allegations that were made and the history behind that ... warrant at least the amount of fine that was negotiated.”

“I think it’s in everybody’s best interest to move forward,” she said.

Forbes puts Wynn’s net worth at \$3.2 billion, among the top 400 of its ranking of richest Americans.

Wynn signed a seven-page document on July 17 acknowledging he had been accused of “failure to exercise discretion and sound judgment” to prevent actions that “reflected negatively on the reputation” of Nevada and its gambling industry.

Violating the agreement could lead to a finding of “unsuitability” for association with Nevada casinos and an additional fine.

“Unsuitability” would be extraordinary for a man widely credited with starting a boom that grew Las Vegas Strip properties from gambling halls with all-you-can-eat buffets and showrooms into huge destination resorts featuring celebrity-chef restaurants, massive gambling floors, nightclubs and huge stage productions.

Wynn developed luxury properties including the Golden Nugget, Mirage, Treasure Island, Bellagio, Wynn and Encore in Las Vegas; Golden Nugget in Atlantic City, New Jersey; Beau Rivage in Biloxi, Mississippi; Wynn Macau in the Chinese gambling enclave; and Encore Boston Harbor in Massachusetts.

He resigned after the Wall Street Journal published allegations by several women that he sexually harassed or assaulted them at his hotels. He divested company shares, quit the corporate board and resigned as finance chairman of the Republican National Committee.

Wynn has consistently denied sexual misconduct allegations in multiple courts.

In the Gaming Commission case, the Nevada Supreme Court ruled against him in March 2022, finding that a state judge in Las Vegas acted prematurely in late 2020 when she sided with Wynn’s lawyers and decided the state lacked authority to punish him.

Wynn’s attorneys, also including Donald Campbell, argued that the Gaming Control Board and Gaming Commission no longer had legal jurisdiction over Wynn.

State regulators launched their investigation after the allegations against Wynn emerged. The board said Wynn’s license had been placed on administrative hold and the commission moved in October 2019 to discipline or fine Wynn.

At a December 2019 hearing, which Wynn did not attend, commissioners began considering a fine of up to \$500,000 and a declaration that Wynn was unsuitable to renew ties to gambling in Nevada.

Months earlier, the commission fined his former company the record \$20 million.

Massachusetts gambling regulators fined Wynn Resorts Ltd. another \$35 million and new company chief executive Matthew Maddox \$500,000 for failing to disclose while applying for a license for the Boston-area resort that there had been sexual misconduct allegations against Wynn.

Wynn Resorts agreed in November 2019 to accept \$20 million in damages from Wynn and \$21 million more from insurance carriers on behalf of current and former employees of Wynn Resorts to settle shareholder lawsuits accusing company directors of failing to disclose misconduct allegations.

The agreements included no admission of wrongdoing.

Cases of tick-borne illnesses are on the rise. Some experts believe climate change is the cause

By ZOYA TEIRSTEIN, Grist undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — In 2022, doctors recorded the first confirmed case of tick-borne encephalitis virus acquired in the United Kingdom.

It began with a bike ride.

A 50-year-old man was mountain biking in the North Yorkshire Moors, a national park in England known

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for its vast expanses of woodland and purple heather. At some point on his ride, at least one black-legged tick burrowed into his skin. Five days later, the mountain biker developed symptoms commonly associated with a viral infection — fatigue, muscle pain, fever.

At first, he seemed to be on the mend, but about a week later, he started to lose coordination. An MRI scan revealed he had developed encephalitis, or swelling of the brain. He had been infected with tick-borne encephalitis, or TBE, a potentially deadly disease that experts say is spreading into new regions due in large part to global warming.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of a collaboration between The Associated Press and Grist exploring the intersection of climate change and infectious diseases.

For the past 30 years, the U.K. has become roughly 1 degree Celsius warmer (1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) on average compared to the historical norm. Studies have shown that several tick-borne illnesses are becoming more prevalent because of climate change. Public health officials are particularly concerned about TBE, which is deadlier than more well-known tick diseases such as Lyme, due to the way it has quickly jumped from country to country.

Gábor Földvári, an expert at the Center for Ecological Research in Hungary, said the effects of climate change on TBE are unmistakable.

"It's a really common problem which was absent 20 or 30 years ago," he added.

Ticks can't survive more than a couple of days in temperatures below zero, but they're able to persevere in very warm conditions as long as there's enough humidity in the environment. As Earth warms on average and winters become milder, ticks are becoming active earlier in the year. Climate change affects ticks at every stage of their life cycle — egg, six-legged larva, eight-legged nymph, and adult — by extending the length of time ticks actively feed on humans and animals. Even a fraction of a degree of global warming creates more opportunity for ticks to breed and spread disease.

"The number of overwintering ticks is increasing and in spring there is high activity of ticks," said Gerhard Dobler, a doctor who works at the German Center for Infection Research. "This may increase the contact between infected ticks and humans and cause more disease."

Since the virus was first discovered in the 1930s, it has mainly been found in Europe and parts of Asia, including Siberia and the northern regions of China. The same type of tick carries the disease in these areas, but the virus subtype — of which there are several — varies by region. In places where the virus is endemic, tick bites are the leading cause of encephalitis, though the virus can also be acquired by consuming raw milk from tick-infected cattle. TBE has not been found in the United States, though a few Americans have contracted the virus while traveling in Europe.

According to the World Health Organization, there are between 10,000 and 12,000 cases of the disease in Europe and northern Asia each year. The total number of cases worldwide is likely an undercount, as case counts are unreliable in countries where the population has low awareness of the disease and local health departments are not required to report cases to the government. But experts say there has been a clear uptick since the 1990s, especially in countries where the disease used to be uncommon.

"We see an increasing trend of human cases," Dobler said, citing rising cases in Austria, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, and other European countries.

TBE is not always life-threatening. On average, about 10 percent of infections develop into the severe form of the illness, which often requires hospitalization. Once severe symptoms develop, however, there is no cure for the disease. The death rate among those who develop severe symptoms ranges from 1 to 35 percent, depending on the virus subtype, with the far-eastern subtype being the deadliest. In Europe, for example, 16 deaths were recorded in 2020 out of roughly 3,700 confirmed cases.

Up to half of survivors of severe TBE have lingering neurological problems, such as sleeplessness and aggressiveness. Many infected people are asymptomatic or only develop mild symptoms, Dobler said, so the true caseload could be up to 10 times higher in some regions than reports estimate.

While there are two TBE vaccines in circulation, vaccine uptake is low in regions where the virus is new. Neither vaccine covers all of the three most prevalent sub-types, and a 2020 study called for development of a new vaccine that offers higher protection against the virus. In Austria, for example, the TBE vaccine rate is near 85 percent, Dobler said, and yet the number of human cases continues to trend upward — a sign, in his opinion, of climate change's influence on the disease.

In central and northern Europe, where for the past decade average annual temperatures have been roughly 2 degrees Celsius above pre industrial times (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), documented cases of the virus have been rising in recent decades — evidence, some experts say, that rising global temperatures are conducive to more active ticks. The parasitic arachnids are also noted to be moving further north and higher in altitude as formerly inhospitable terrain warms to their preferred temperature range. Northern parts of Russia are a prime example of where TBE-infected ticks have moved north. Some previously tick-free mountains in Germany, Bavaria, and Austria are reporting a 20-fold increase in cases over the past 10 years.

The virus's growing shadow across Europe, Asia, and now parts of the United Kingdom throws the dangers of tick-borne disease into sharp relief. The U.K. bicyclist who was the first domestically acquired case of the disease survived his bout with TBE, but the episode serves as a warning to the region: though the virus is still rare, it may not stay that way for long.

Fighting intensifies in southeastern Ukraine with Kyiv claiming gains in its counteroffensive

By HANNA ARHIROVA and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Fierce fighting raged Thursday in southeastern Ukraine, where a Western official said Kyiv has launched a major push and Russian President Vladimir Putin said "hostilities have intensified significantly."

Battles in recent weeks have taken place on multiple points along the over 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line as Ukraine wages a counteroffensive with Western-supplied weapons and Western-trained troops against Russian forces who invaded 17 months ago.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy congratulated his troops on reclaiming control of a village, while Putin praised Russian troops "heroism" in repelling attacks in the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region.

Putin insisted on state TV that the Ukrainian troops' push "wasn't successful" and charged that they suffered heavy casualties, although it was not possible to independently verify his claim. Putin was in St. Petersburg at a summit of African leaders.

Ukrainian troops have made only incremental gains since launching a counteroffensive in early June, and Putin has repeatedly claimed Ukraine has suffered heavy losses, without offering evidence.

Ukraine has committed thousands of troops in the region in recent days, said a Western official who was not authorized to comment publicly on the matter.

A U.S. official said Ukraine has begun to commit troops from the 10th Corps, although it's not certain all of its units are moving into the fight. Ukraine had been holding the 10th Corps in reserve, with the expectation it would be used to exploit gaps or soft spots the ground forces opened up. Those additional new forces would be used to take advantage of places where Ukrainian troops have been able to break through some of Russia's defenses.

The U.S. official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing military operations.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Pentagon reporters last week that Ukraine was "preserving their combat power" and that a "significant" amount of it had not yet entered action as Ukrainian forces slowly and deliberately worked their way through the Russian minefields.

It was unclear how the current effort differs from previous ones by the Ukrainian military to break through deeply entrenched Russian defenses. The Russian army has set up vast minefields to stymie Ukrainian advances and used combat aircraft and loitering munitions to strike Ukrainian armor and artillery.

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Zelenskyy posted a video Thursday in which a group of Ukrainian soldiers said they had taken control of the village of Staromaiorske in the Donetsk region next to the Zaporizhzhia province. "Our South! Our guys! Glory to Ukraine!" Zelenskyy declared.

Russian military bloggers have confirmed that Ukrainian forces have taken part of the village that was the focus of Ukraine's attacks in recent days. If Russian defenses in the area collapse, it would open the way for the Ukrainian forces to push southward toward the coast.

Ukrainian authorities have kept operational details of the counteroffensive under wraps, and they have released scant information about its progress.

However, Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar said Wednesday that troops are advancing toward the city of Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia region.

The seizure of Melitopol near the Sea of Azov would be a major success for Ukraine, which hopes to punch through the land corridor between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, illegally annexed by Moscow in 2014. That could split Russian forces into two and cut supply lines to units farther west. Russia currently controls the whole Sea of Azov coast.

The Institute of Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, reported that Ukrainian forces launched "a significant mechanized counteroffensive operation" in western Zaporizhzhia on Wednesday and "appear to have broken through certain pre-prepared Russian defensive positions."

The reinvigorated Ukrainian push comes in the wake of Russian military and political turmoil in June that saw Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner private military company, stage a short-lived rebellion that posed the gravest threat to Putin in his 23-year rule.

The mercenaries have withdrawn from the battlefield in Ukraine, where they played a pivotal role in capturing the stronghold of Bakhmut following the war's longest battle. Thousands of Wagner troops have reportedly deployed to Belarus to help train its troops before moving to Africa.

Zelenskyy, meanwhile, visited the city of Dnipro, along the Dnieper River to the north of Zaporizhzhia, meeting with military commanders to discuss air defenses, ammunition supplies and regional recruitment.

He also visited a medical facility caring for the wounded from the front, thanking the staff and emphasizing the importance of their work in saving the lives. A recent increase in wounded at a Dnipro hospital hinted that the tempo of fighting had increased.

In what appeared to be a precautionary move, Russia's Federal Security Service, known as the FSB, prohibited civilian access to the Arabat Spit in Crimea, a narrow strip of land that links the peninsula to the partially occupied Kherson region. The open-ended ban is needed to contain security threats, the FSB said in a statement quoted by Russia's state news agency RIA Novosti.

U.S. officials, who have provided Kyiv with weapons and intelligence, declined to comment publicly on the latest developments, though they have previously urged patience as Ukraine seeks to grind down Russian positions.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during a visit to Papua New Guinea that Kyiv's effort to retake land seized by Russia since its full-scale invasion in February 2022 would be tough and long, with successes and setbacks.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said "an intense battle" is taking place but declined to provide details.

"We believe that tools, the equipment, the training, the advice that many of us have shared with Ukrainians over many months puts them in good position to be successful on the ground in recovering more of the territory that Russia has taken from Ukraine," Blinken said in New Zealand.

Meanwhile, a missile strike on Ukraine's southern Odesa region killed one civilian and further damaged its port infrastructure in the latest attack since Moscow broke off a grain export agreement, Odesa Gov. Oleh Kiper said.

The attack used Kalibr cruise missiles launched from the Black Sea, he said.

Ukraine's air force said it intercepted 36 Russian missiles launched from Tu-95MS strategic bombers.

Bronny James discharged from hospital as LeBron sends thanks and says family is 'safe and healthy'

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Bronny James has been discharged from Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and is resting at home, three days after the 18-year-old son of LeBron James went into cardiac arrest.

Dr. Merije Chukumerije, a consulting cardiologist for Bronny James, said in a statement issued by the hospital Thursday that James was "successfully treated for a sudden cardiac arrest." Chukumerije gave credit to "the swift and effective response by the USC athletics' medical staff" after the incident Monday at the University of Southern California's Galen Center, where the incoming freshman guard was participating in basketball practice.

"He arrived at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center fully conscious, neurologically intact and stable," Chukumerije said. "Mr. James was cared for promptly by highly-trained staff and has been discharged home, where he is resting. Although his workup will be ongoing, we are hopeful for his continued progress and are encouraged by his response, resilience, and his family and community support."

Earlier Thursday, LeBron James said his family is "safe and healthy" in a message of thanks posted on social media. The words were the Los Angeles Lakers superstar's first public comments since Bronny James was hospitalized Monday morning.

"I want to thank the countless people sending my family love and prayers," LeBron James wrote. "We feel you and I'm so grateful. Everyone doing great. We have our family together, safe and healthy, and we feel your love. Will have more to say when we're ready but I wanted to tell everyone how much your support has meant to all of us!"

The top scorer in NBA history concluded his message with the hashtag "JamesGang," his nickname for the tightknit family unit built around their three children by James and his wife, Savannah.

Bronny James spent only a brief time in intensive care, and he is healthy enough to be discharged only three days after the event. Both are positive signs for his long-term recovery, but he still is expected to undergo extensive testing to investigate the cause of his cardiac arrest, as is typical in this situation.

Bronny James has built a promising basketball career for himself in his father's considerable shadow. The 6-foot-3 teenager became a top recruit as a two-way point guard for Sierra Canyon School in suburban Chatsworth.

He decided in May to attend USC, which is expected to have one of the most intriguing teams in the nation. The Trojans were holding summer practices in preparation for a 10-day tour in Europe next month.

With his family fame and huge social media following, Bronny James has the top name, image and likeness valuation in sports at \$6.3 million, as estimated by On3.com.

Bronny James was the second high-profile USC basketball recruit to go into cardiac arrest in the last year. Vincent Iwuchukwu also was stricken during a workout last July, but the 7-foot-1 center returned to the court six months later, eventually appearing in 14 games for the Trojans as a freshman.

It's too soon to know how Bronny James' hoops career could be affected by this health setback. Dr. Sameer Amin, a cardiologist and the chief medical officer at L.A. Care Health Plan, told The Associated Press that the teenager's move out of intensive care this week was encouraging.

"It's a really positive sign that they didn't sustain too much brain damage or any brain damage, or any major heart damage in the setting of their heart stopping," said Amin, who is not treating Bronny James. "Usually we see that when somebody's heart gets restarted very quickly after it stops. Also, in young people, you tend to get these bounce-backs a lot faster. It's a really positive outcome that he's already out of the ICU."

Amin said it's too soon to speculate on whether Bronny James can return to basketball, or how quickly it could happen.

"If (the cardiac event) is happening because of a unusual blow to the chest like in the Damar Hamlin case, oftentimes those people can have a positive outcome because it's a rare and unusual event that led to the heart stopping," Amin said. "In those where there's an underlying genetic problem or an underlying

electrical issue, it can be a little bit more tricky to get somebody back on the playing field.”

GOP measures would undo protections for endangered lesser prairie chicken, northern bat

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress has approved two measures to undo federal protections for the lesser prairie chicken and northern long-eared bat — two endangered animals that have seen their populations plummet over the years.

In separate votes Thursday, the House gave final legislative approval to rescind protections for the lesser prairie chicken — a rare prairie bird once thought to number in the millions, but now hover around 30,000, officials said — and the long-eared bat, one of 12 bat types decimated by a fungal disease called white-nose syndrome.

The legislative actions, backed mostly by Republicans, represent rare congressional involvement in matters usually left to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. The Endangered Species Act tasks the agencies with deciding which animals and plants to list as endangered or threatened and how to rebuild their populations.

The lesser prairie chicken, which belongs to the grouse family, is found in parts of the Midwest and Southwest, including one of the country’s most prolific oil and gas fields — the oil-rich Permian Basin in New Mexico and Texas. The bird’s range also extends into parts of Colorado, Oklahoma and Kansas, but has diminished across about 90% of its historical range, officials said.

The House voted 221-206 to reverse protections for the prairie bird.

A separate 220-209 vote would overturn protections for the northern long-eared bat, which has seen its population reduced by 97% or more in some areas because of white-nose syndrome. The bat is found in 37 eastern and north-central states, plus Washington, D.C., and much of Canada.

The House votes follow similar action in the Senate in May and send both plans to President Joe Biden, who has threatened to veto both resolutions.

Overturning protections for the lesser prairie chicken “would undermine America’s proud wildlife conservation traditions, risk the extinction of a once-abundant American bird and create uncertainty for landowners and industries who have been working for years to forge the durable, locally led conservation strategies that this rule supports,” the White House said in a statement.

In a separate statement, the White House said bats are “critical to healthy, functioning ecosystems and contribute at least \$3 billion annually to the U.S. agriculture economy through pest control and pollination.” Overturning protections “would risk extinction of a species.”

Environmentalists have long sought stronger federal protections for the prairie bird, which they consider severely at risk due to oil and gas development, livestock grazing and farming, along with roads and power lines.

The crow-size, terrestrial birds are known for spring courtship rituals that include flamboyant dances by the males as they make a cacophony of clucking, cackling and booming sounds.

White-nose syndrome, meanwhile, has spread across about 80% of the northern bat’s range and caused a precipitous decline in bat populations. Critics of the endangered listing contend it would hamper logging and other land uses that aren’t responsible for the bat’s sharp decline.

Rep. Bruce Westerman, an Arkansas Republican who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee, called the Endangered Species Act an important but outdated part of U.S. history.

“The unavoidable truth about the ESA is that a listing means less private investment, which harms conservation efforts,” he said.

In the case of the lesser prairie chicken, the protected status “is a tool for Fish and Wildlife to go implement the Biden administration’s none-of-the- above energy policy,” Westerman said on the House floor. “It’s another attack on low-cost energy for the American taxpayers. It’s an attack on jobs in America and it’s making us more dependent” on hostile countries in the Middle East and South America, he said.

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Arizona Rep. Raul Grijalva, the top Democrat on the natural resources panel, said the GOP measures "give industry and not science the upper hand in making decisions about endangered species."

He labeled Republican opposition to the Endangered Species Act "a vendetta." He also said the two votes on Thursday were egregious since the GOP-controlled House has not taken action to address climate change, even as Arizona and other states suffer through "one of the most brutal summers in this country's recorded history."

Climate change "isn't about some distant warning about melting icecaps in the far-off future. The climate crisis is here, it is now," Grijalva said, noting that Phoenix has set a record with a 27-day streak of temperatures over 110 degree Fahrenheit.

"People are suffering. People are dying, and the GOP isn't doing a thing about it," he said.

The Republican majority "has had zero hearings on climate change" since taking over in January and has "introduced zero bills to seriously address climate change," Grijalva said.

The House votes follow actions by Congress earlier this year to block a clean water rule imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency and a separate Labor Department measure that allows retirement plan managers to consider the effects of climate change in their investment plans. Biden vetoed both legislative measures.

Biden announces an advanced cancer research initiative as part of his 'moonshot' effort

By ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration on Thursday announced the first cancer-focused initiative under its advanced health research agency, aiming to help doctors more easily distinguish between cancerous cells and healthy tissue during surgery and improve outcomes for patients.

The administration's Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, or ARPA-H, is launching a Precision Surgical Interventions program, seeking ideas from the public and private sectors to explore how to dramatically improve cancer outcomes in the coming decades by developing better surgical interventions to treat the disease.

ARPA-H is modeled after the military-focused DARPA, which spawned the internet and GPS. The administration hopes the new investment will yield tools that will help surgeons avoid healthy nerves and blood vessels, while ensuring they can remove all cancerous cells.

ARPA-H, along with the administration's "cancer moonshot," is a key part of Biden's "unity agenda" announced during his 2022 State of the Union address to bring Washington together on a bipartisan basis to combat cancer, improve veterans' health and make mental health more accessible.

In a statement Thursday announcing the initiative, Biden called it a "major milestone in the fight to end cancer as we know it."

"Harnessing the power of innovation is essential to achieving our ambitious goal of turning more cancers from death sentences to treatable diseases and — in time — cutting the cancer death rate in half," Biden said. "As we've seen throughout our history, from developing vaccines to sequencing the genome, when the U.S. government invests in innovation, we can achieve breakthroughs that would otherwise be impossible, and save lives on a vast scale."

The initiative could markedly improve cancer treatments and make scientific breakthroughs that have as yet unknown applications, said Arati Prabhakar, the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology.

"What's true is that many cancer treatments still start with surgery," she told The Associated Press in an interview. "So being really smart and attacking and developing new technology to make that first step better could really revolutionize how we are able to treat cancer for so many Americans."

Prabhakar, a former director of DARPA, said most federal research dollars are designed to go to university or government labs, while ARPA-H programs will search more broadly.

"They are just dead focused on those goals, and whoever it takes to get there is who they'll be trying to

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make sure they bring to the table," she said. "What you're looking for is the quality of the ideas and then the ability to really be bold and fearless and experimenting and then start prototyping in the real world."

The agency is hosting an event in Chicago in September for interested researchers with the aim of quickly identifying and approving projects.

Prabhakar acknowledged that the ARPA-H model entails risks, but she said that even in failure most projects have significant payoffs.

"The mission is to reach for things that aren't that obvious or feasible today — and to do that, you have to take risks," she said. "The process allows you to explore things that could have a bigger impact if they do work and very often what I have seen is that the overall program succeeds even though some of the individual pieces don't succeed."

The Department of Veterans Affairs on Thursday is also announcing that veterans exposed to toxic burn pits during their service will be able to access breast cancer risk assessments and mammograms regardless of their age or if they are enrolled in VA healthcare. And on Tuesday, the department announced that it would study the relationship between deployed servicemembers' toxic exposures and additional cancers.

ARPA-H has also placed an open call for other research objectives, said Danielle Carnival, the director of the White House cancer moonshot, calling the agency's work a "central pillar" of the administration's plans to meet its goals of reducing mortality and improving outcomes from cancer.

"I would expect some really great ideas and new projects to come out of that call," she said.

White House deputy chief of staff Bruce Reed said the ARPA-H announcement helps meet Biden's efforts to show "that government can still work, both sides can come together, and we can get things done."

"Mental health, cancer, veterans, our efforts on fentanyl, are all priorities that affect everyone without regard to party," Reed said.

July has been so blistering hot, scientists already calculate that it's the warmest month on record

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — July has been so hot thus far that scientists calculate that this month will be the hottest globally on record and likely the warmest human civilization has seen, even though there are several days left to sweat through.

The World Meteorological Organization and the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service on Thursday proclaimed July's heat is beyond record-smashing. They said Earth's temperature has been temporarily passing over a key warming threshold: the internationally accepted goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degree Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

Temperatures were 1.5 degrees warmer than pre-industrial times for a record 16 days this month, but the Paris climate accord aims to keep the 20- or 30-year global temperature average to 1.5 degrees. A few days of temporarily beating that threshold have happened before, but never in July.

July has been so off-the-charts hot with heat waves blistering three continents — North America, Europe and Asia — that researchers said a record was inevitable. The U.S. Southwest's all-month heat wave is showing no signs of stopping while also pushing into most of the Midwest and East with more than 128 million Americans under some kind of heat advisory Thursday.

"Unless an ice age were to appear all of sudden out of nothing, it is basically virtually certain we will break the record for the warmest July on record and the warmest month on record," Copernicus Director Carlo Buontempo told The Associated Press.

Scientists say that such shattering of heat records is a harbinger for future climate-altering changes as the planet warms. Those changes go beyond just prolonged heat waves and include more flooding, longer-burning wildfires and extreme weather events that put many people at risk.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pointed to the calculations and urged world leaders, in particular of rich nations, to do more to reduce emissions of heat-trapping gases. Despite years of international climate negotiations and lofty pledges from many countries and companies, greenhouse gas

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emissions continue to go up.

"Climate change is here. It is terrifying. And it is just the beginning," Guterres told reporters in a New York briefing. "The era of global warming has ended; the era of global boiling has arrived."

Buontempo and other scientists said the records are from human-caused climate change augmented by a natural El Nino warming of parts of the central Pacific that changes weather worldwide. But Buontempo said ocean warming in the Atlantic also has been so high — though far away from the El Nino — that's there's even more at play. While scientists long predicted the world would continue to warm and have bouts of extreme weather, he said he was surprised by the spike in ocean temperatures and record-shattering loss of sea ice in Antarctica.

"The climate seems to be going crazy at times," Buontempo said.

Copernicus calculated that through the first 23 days of July, Earth's temperature averaged 16.95 degrees Celsius (62.5 degrees Fahrenheit). That's nearly one-third of a degree Celsius (almost 0.6 degrees Fahrenheit) hotter than the previous record for the hottest month, July 2019.

Normally records are broken by hundredths of a degree Celsius, maybe a tenth at most, said Russell Vose, climate analysis group director for the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Usually records aren't calculated until a week or longer after a month's end. But Vose, who wasn't part of the research, his NASA record-keeping counterpart Gavin Schmidt and six other outside scientists said the Copernicus calculations make sense.

Buontempo's team found that 21 of the first 23 days of July were hotter than any previous days in the database.

"The last few weeks have been rather remarkable and unprecedented in our record" based on data that goes back to the 1940s, Buontempo said.

Both the WMO-Copernicus team and an independent German scientist who released his data at the same time came to these conclusions by analyzing forecasts, live observations, past records and computer simulations.

Separate from Copernicus, Karsten Haustein at Leipzig University did his own calculations, using forecasts that show at best the warming may weaken a tad at the end of month, and came to the conclusion that July 2023 will pass the old record by 0.2 degrees Celsius (.36 degrees Fahrenheit).

"It's way beyond everything we see," Haustein said in his own press briefing. "We are in absolutely new record territory."

Haustein said even though records only go back to the middle of the 19th century, using tree rings, ice cores and other proxies he calculates that this month is the hottest in about 120,000 years, which Buontempo said makes sense. Other scientists have made similar calculations.

"The reason that setting new temperature records is a big deal is that we are now being challenged to find ways to survive through temperatures hotter than any of us have ever experienced before," University of Wisconsin-Madison climate scientist Andrea Dutton said in an email. "Soaring temperatures place ever increasing strains not just on power grids and infrastructure, but on human bodies that are not equipped to survive some of the extreme heat we are already experiencing."

It's no accident that the hottest July on record has brought deadly heat waves in the U.S. and Mexico, China and southern Europe, smoke-causing wildfires and heavy floods worldwide, said Imperial College of London climate scientist Friederike Otto.

The average temperature being measured is like "the fever temperature that we measure for our planet," Otto said.

"We are in uncharted territory as far as humans on this planet are concerned, so our records are falling with increasing frequency and that's exactly what we expect to — and what we've been predicting would — happen," said Texas Tech climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe.

In the middle of some of the worst heat, where Phoenix is now at a record 27 straight days and counting of 110 degrees or higher temperatures, University of Arizona climate scientist Katharine Jacobs said the records are giving humanity a message about reducing emissions of heat-trapping gases from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas.

"Events like this are signposts along a highway we don't want to travel," Jacobs said in an email. "It is time to stop playing political games and get serious in order to protect ourselves and future generations."

Ryan Kelley, ex-candidate for Michigan governor, pleads guilty to misdemeanor in Capitol riot case

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A former Republican candidate for Michigan governor pleaded guilty on Thursday to a misdemeanor charge for his participation in the U.S. Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021.

Ryan Kelley pleaded guilty more than a year after the ardent supporter of former President Donald Trump was arrested in the case, roiling the already messy gubernatorial Republican primary. Kelley, a real estate broker, finished fourth in a field of five Republican candidates.

An email seeking comment was sent to Kelley's attorney on Thursday. Kelley had previously decried the prosecution as a "witch hunt," and after his arrest his campaign posted on Facebook the words "political prisoner."

His attorney, Gary Springstead, told The Detroit News last month that Kelley wants to "put this behind him so he can focus on his family and his successful career as a commercial real estate agent."

Kelley pleaded guilty to a charge of illegally entering a restricted area and is scheduled to be sentenced on Oct. 17. His trial was supposed to start on July 31, before he reached a plea agreement with federal prosecutors.

Kelley came to Washington to protest the certification of the 2020 election won by President Joe Biden, and joined the crowd that marched from the "Stop the Steal" rally to the Capitol, according to court documents.

Kelley climbed an "architectural feature" outside the Capitol and then gestured for other rioters behind him to move toward stairs leading up to the building, court papers say. Kelley also pulled a covering off a structure that had been set up for Biden's inauguration.

Conservative commentator Tudor Dixon won the Republican primary but ultimately lost to incumbent Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, in November.

At a debate last year, Kelley said the riot was "a First Amendment activity by a majority of those people, myself included."

"We were there protesting the government because we don't like the results of the 2020 election, the process of how it happened. And we have that First Amendment right. And that's what 99% of the people were there for that day," he said.

Kelley was wearing some of the same clothing on Jan. 6 that he was at an American Patriot Council rally in Lansing, Michigan, in May 2020. Kelley spoke at the rally against extending Gov. Whitmer's emergency declaration for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kelley also spoke at a "Stop the Steal" rally at the state Capitol in Lansing in November 2020, shortly after the presidential election. Kelley urged others at the rally to "stand and fight, with the goal of preventing Democrats from stealing the election," the FBI said.

He also said COVID-19 "was made so that they can use the propaganda to control your minds so that you think, if you watch the media, that Joe Biden won this election. We're not going to buy it. We're going to stand and fight for America, for Donald Trump. We're not going to let the Democrats steal this election."

What's next for Hunter Biden in court and Congress after his plea deal derails

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The unraveling of Hunter Biden's plea agreement has thrust his criminal case into uncertain waters and given new fodder to Republican critics in Congress as they push ahead with investigations into the president's youngest son.

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Biden was supposed to plead guilty Wednesday to misdemeanor charges for failing to pay taxes. But U.S. District Judge Maryellen Noreika in Delaware put the brakes on the guilty plea after raising concerns during an hourslong hearing about the structure and terms of the agreement and another deal that would allow him to avoid prosecution on a gun charge if he meets certain conditions.

Plea deals are carefully negotiated between defense lawyers and prosecutors over the course of weeks or months and it's unusual — especially in high-profile cases — for judges to not sign off on them. But Wednesday's hearing revealed that the two sides apparently did not see eye to eye on the scope of the agreement around a non-prosecution clause for crimes outside of the gun charge.

A look at what happens now in the criminal case and what's next for the Biden investigations in Congress:
WHAT HAPPENS NOW IN COURT?

Noreika — an appointee of former President Donald Trump — told both sides to file written briefs addressing her concerns within 30 days. Among other things, Noreika took issue with a provision in the agreement on the gun charge that she said would have created a role for her where she would determine if he violated the terms. The lawyers said they wanted her to serve as a neutral fact finder in determining if a violation happened, but Noreika said that is the Justice Department's job — not the judge's.

Hunter Biden's lawyers and the Justice Department also disagreed on the extent to which the agreement gave him immunity from future prosecution. A prosecutor said Wednesday their investigation was ongoing, and that the agreement protecting him from other potential charges was limited only to certain offenses over a certain time frame. Hunter Biden's lawyers said it was broader than that. After intense courtroom negotiations, the two sides appeared to agree to a more narrow non-prosecution clause.

Biden's lawyers and prosecutors will now continue negotiations to see if they can salvage the agreement in a way that satisfies the judge.

"They are going to have to go back and figure out how they can come to an agreement terms of the plea and they have to come to a meeting of the minds, which is clear they don't have here," said Jessica Tillipman, associate dean for government procurement law studies at George Washington University Law School. "So I think what you'll see is a renewed effort — or it's just going to collapse."

The judge may ultimately accept the deal that was proposed or reject it. If the deal totally falls apart, Hunter Biden could eventually face a trial.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Thursday that President Joe Biden would not pardon his son.

WILL HE AVOID JAIL TIME?

Even if the judge ultimately accepts the plea agreement, she will have the final say on whether he serves any time behind bars. Prosecutors have said that they will recommend probation, but the judge can decide not to follow that. The two tax charges carry up to a year in prison. And the judge suggested on Wednesday that it was too soon to say whether she's willing to sign off on probation.

"I can't predict for you today whether that is an appropriate sentence or not," Noreika said. "I can't say that I will accept the sentence recommendation or whether a different sentence would be more appropriate."

WHAT'S GOING ON IN CONGRESS?

The collapse of the younger Biden's plea deal Wednesday came as joyful news to House Republicans vying to connect him and his questionable business dealings to his father. Republicans had already slammed the agreement as a "sweetheart deal."

"The judge did the obvious thing, they put a pause on the plea deal, so I think that was progress," Rep. James Comer, the Republican chairman of the House Oversight Committee, said Wednesday. "I think it adds credibility to what we're doing." He added that this will only propel their investigation to get answers "as to what the family did, and what level of involvement the president had."

Comer has been investigating Hunter Biden's financial ties and transactions since gaining the gavel in January. The Kentucky lawmaker has obtained thousands of pages of financial records from various members of the Biden family through subpoenas to the Treasury Department and various financial institutions.

Last month, shortly after Hunter Biden reached an agreement with the government, Comer joined forces with two chairmen of powerful committees to launch a larger investigation into claims by two IRS agents

who claimed the Justice Department improperly interfered in the yearslong case.

IRS supervisory special agent Greg Shapley and a second agent, Joe Ziegler, testified before Congress last week that there was a pattern of "slow-walking investigative steps" into Hunter Biden, including during the Trump administration in the months before the 2020 election that Biden won.

One of the most detailed claims was that U.S. Attorney David Weiss in Delaware, the federal prosecutor who led the investigation, asked for special counsel status in order to bring the tax cases against Hunter Biden in jurisdictions outside Delaware, including the District of Columbia and California, but was denied.

Weiss and the Justice Department have denied that, saying he had "full authority" and never sought to bring charges in other states. Despite the denials, Republicans are moving forward with their probes, asking Weiss to come in and testify about the case directly. The Justice Department has offered to have the prosecutor come before lawmakers after the August recess.

Israeli army kills 14-year-old Palestinian as an Israeli minister visits a flashpoint holy site

By TIA GOLDENBERG and ISAAC SCHARF Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military killed a 14-year-old Palestinian boy in the occupied West Bank on Thursday, Palestinian health officials said, as an ultranationalist Israeli Cabinet minister visited a sensitive Jerusalem holy site that has been a flashpoint for violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

The visit by Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir to the disputed hilltop compound comes during a period of heightened Israeli-Palestinian violence in the West Bank for the past year and a half and threatens to inflame already surging tensions.

It also prompted the Hamas militant group to announce the launch of a rare rocket from the West Bank and drew condemnation from across the Muslim world.

The site is revered by Jews and Muslims, and the competing claims lie at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Early Thursday, the Palestinian Health Ministry said 14-year-old Fares Abu Samra was killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank town of Qalqilya. The Israeli military said Palestinians threw rocks and firebombs at troops, who responded by firing into the air. It said the incident was being reviewed.

Residents of Qalqilya accused the Israeli military of opening fire toward civilians after storming into the town to arrest a Palestinian. Fares' father, Sharhabeel Abu Samra, a Palestinian security officer, claimed his son was walking in the street and "not doing anything," when Israeli soldiers shot at him and then hit him with their jeep.

"Where are the human rights?" he said, crying.

Ben-Gvir joined hundreds of Jews visiting the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound — the location in antiquity of two biblical Jewish temples — to mark the Jewish holiday of Tisha B'Av. During the day of mourning and repentance, Jews reflect on the destruction of the First and Second Temples, pivotal events in Jewish history.

The Waqf, an Islamic trust that runs civil matters at the mosque, said that 2,240 Jews had entered the compound for the holiday — the highest number recorded in five years.

"This is the most important place for the people of Israel which we must return to and show our rule," Ben-Gvir said in a video released by his office, with the golden Dome of the Rock in the background.

The Palestinian Authority's Jerusalem Affairs Ministry warned that the government and extremists like Ben-Gvir would "push things toward religious war" by provoking Muslims worldwide. The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it considered Ben-Gvir's visit an attempt to impose Israeli sovereignty over the site.

Neighboring Jordan, which acts as a custodian over the site and has a peace agreement with Israel, said such visits "threaten to trigger new cycles of violence." Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's two holiest cities and a country with which Israel hopes to normalize ties, denounced the visit as "a provocation of the feelings of Muslims around the world." Turkey demanded that Israeli authorities "restrain these provocations."

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Waqf officials said crowds of Jewish visitors danced, whistled and sang the Israeli national anthem as they streamed through the compound.

"The government is giving cover to these extremists," said Bassam Abu Labda, a Waqf official. "This is very dangerous."

Ben-Gvir, a former West Bank settler leader and far-right activist who years ago was convicted of incitement and supporting a Jewish terror group, now oversees the country's police force.

Thursday was Ben-Gvir's third public visit to the contested site since joining Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government. The site, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, is the holiest site in Judaism. Today, it is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam.

Police said they had arrested 16 people for violating "visitation regulations" at the site. Under longstanding arrangements, Jews are permitted to visit the site, but not to pray there. But in recent years, a growing number of Jewish visitors have begun to quietly pray, raising fears among Palestinians that Israel is plotting to divide or take over the site. Ben-Gvir has long called for increased Jewish access.

As Palestinian anger rose over Ben-Gvir's visit, the Hamas military wing in the West Bank released a video purporting to show militants in the northern city of Jenin firing a rocket toward northern Jewish settlements across Israel's separation barrier. The group identified the rocket as a Qassam-1, a primitive and notoriously inaccurate type of rocket with a range of some 4 kilometers (2.5 miles).

The Israeli military said it had found remains of an improvised rocket near the Palestinian village of Silat al-Harithiya, just northwest of Jenin. While Hamas' military wing launches hundreds of rockets from the Hamas-run Gaza Strip during skirmishes with Israel, rocket fire from the West Bank remains rare. But last month, Palestinian militants similarly attempted to fire rockets into Israeli settlements from Jenin, which also fell short.

Since early last year, Israel has been staging near-nightly raids into Palestinian areas which it says are meant to stamp out militancy and thwart future attacks. More than 160 Palestinians have been killed in the fighting this year, according to a tally by The Associated Press. At least five of them, including the boy killed on Thursday, were age 14 or under.

The military says most of those killed have been militants. But stone-throwing youths protesting the incursions and others not involved in the confrontations have also been killed. At least 26 people have been killed in Palestinian attacks against Israelis since the start of 2023.

Israel captured east Jerusalem, where the holy compound lies, along with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians seek those territories for a future independent state, with east Jerusalem as its capital. Israel annexed east Jerusalem in a move unrecognized by most of the international community and considers the city its undivided, permanent capital.

Netanyahu's government has intensified steps to solidify Israel's hold on the Palestinian territories, angering Israel's top ally, the United States, and dimming hopes for Palestinian statehood.

How the coup in Niger could expand the reach of Islamic extremism, and Wagner, in West Africa

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

More than 1,000 U.S. service personnel are in Niger, which until Wednesday's coup by mutinous soldiers had avoided the military takeovers that destabilized West African neighbors in recent years.

The country had been seen as the last major partner standing against extremism in a Francophone region where anti-French sentiment had opened the way for the Russian private military group Wagner.

Various Islamic extremist groups are active around Niger, which isn't to be confused with Nigeria, Africa's most populous country. Niger lies just to the north, part of the sprawling region directly below the Sahara Desert that for years has faced a growing threat from various groups of Islamic extremists.

Here's what to know:

What does this mean for regional security?

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Signaling Niger's importance in the region where Wagner also operates, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited in March to strengthen ties and announce \$150 million in direct assistance, calling the country "a model of democracy."

Now a critical question is whether Niger might pivot and engage Wagner as a counterterrorism partner like its neighbors Mali and Burkina Faso, which have kicked out French forces. France shifted more than 1,000 personnel to Niger after pulling out of Mali last year.

Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin said in a statement Thursday that "what happened in Niger is the fight of its people against the colonizers. ... It effectively means winning independence. The rest will depend on the people of Niger."

Hundreds of people gathered on Thursday in Niger's capital, Niamey, and chanted support for Wagner while waving Russian flags.

Niger's government had been "pretty open in terms of dialogue and engaging both domestically and with international partners," said Paul Melly, a consulting fellow with the Africa program at the Chatham House think tank in London. "So quite a lot is at stake here."

Niger has been a base of international military operations for years as Islamic extremists have greatly expanded their reach in the Sahel. Those include Boko Haram in neighboring Nigeria and Chad, but the more immediate threat comes from growing activity in Niger's border areas with Mali and Burkina Faso from the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the al-Qaida affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, known as JNIM.

Meanwhile, Niger's military expenditures reached \$202 million in 2021.

What about counterterrorism efforts?

U.S. partners battling extremists in the Sahel are dwindling. Notably, Mali's military junta last month ordered the 15,000-strong United Nations peacekeeping mission to leave, claiming they had failed in their mission. However, Wagner forces remain there, accused by watchdogs of human rights atrocities.

The United States in early 2021 said it had provided Niger with more than \$500 million in military assistance and training programs since 2012, one of the largest such support programs in sub-Saharan Africa. The European Union earlier this year launched a 27 million-euro (\$30 million) military training mission in Niger.

The U.S. has operated drones out of a base it constructed in Niger's remote north as part of counterterrorism efforts in the vast Sahel. The fate of that base and other U.S. operational sites in the country after this week's coup isn't immediately known.

"It is too soon to speculate on any potential future actions or activities," a spokesman with the U.S. Africa Command, John Manley, said in an email. He said approximately 1,100 U.S. personnel are in Niger.

Niger was the site of one of the deadliest encounters for U.S. forces in Africa in recent years, an ambush by extremists in 2017 that left four soldiers dead. The attack again raised questions by some critics in Washington about why the U.S. would be involved on the continent.

How deadly is extremism in the region?

Observers say West Africa's Sahel region has become one of the world's deadliest regions for extremism. West Africa recorded over 1,800 extremist attacks in the first six months of this year, resulting in nearly 4,600 deaths, a top regional official told the United Nations Security Council this week.

Most of those deaths occurred in Burkina Faso and Mali, while just 77 occurred in Niger, said the official, Omar Touray, the president of the ECOWAS Commission, the executive arm of the West African economic bloc. Observers have warned that the extremist threat is also expanding south toward states like Ghana and Ivory Coast.

The coup in Niger brings yet more insecurity. "We are witnessing that the whole belt south of the Sahara is becoming an extremely problematic area," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said.

Niger is one of the world's poorest countries, struggling with climate change along with migrants from across West Africa trying to make their way across the Sahara en route toward Europe. It has received millions of euros of investment from the EU in its efforts to curb migration via smugglers.

Dangerous fungus is becoming more prevalent. Scientists believe climate change could be to blame

By CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — In 2016, hospitals in New York state identified a rare and dangerous fungal infection never before found in the United States. Research laboratories quickly mobilized to review historical specimens and found the fungus had been present in the country since at least 2013.

In the years since, New York City has emerged as ground zero for *Candida auris* infections. And until 2021, the state recorded the most confirmed cases in the country year after year, even as the illness has spread to other places, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data analyzed by The Associated Press.

Candida auris is a globally emerging public health threat that can cause severe illness, including bloodstream, wound and respiratory infections. Its mortality rate has been estimated at 30% to 60%, and it's a particular risk in healthcare settings for people already with serious medical problems.

Last year, the most cases were found in Nevada and California, but the fungus was identified clinically in patients in 29 states. New York state remains a major hotspot.

A prominent theory for the sudden explosion of *Candida auris*, which was not found in humans anywhere until 2009, is climate change.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of a collaboration between The Associated Press and Grist exploring the intersection of climate change and infectious diseases.

Humans and other mammals have warmer body temperatures than most fungal pathogens can tolerate, so have historically been protected from most infections. However, rising temperatures can allow fungi to develop tolerance to warmer environments, and over time humans may lose resistance. Some researchers think this is what is already happening with *Candida auris*.

The pathogen emerged spontaneously 14 years ago on three continents, in Venezuela, India, and South Africa. Fungal disease expert Arturo Casadevall, a microbiologist, immunologist and professor at Johns Hopkins University, said this was puzzling, because the climates in these places are quite different.

"We have tremendous protection against environmental fungi because of our temperature. However, if the world is getting warmer and the fungi begin to adapt to higher temperatures as well, some ... are going to reach what I call the temperature barrier," Casadevall said, referring to the way mammals' warm body temperatures historically protected them.

When *Candida auris* was first spreading, said Meghan Marie Lyman, a CDC medical epidemiologist for the mycotic diseases branch, the cases were linked to people who had traveled to the U.S. from other places. Now, most cases are acquired locally — generally spreading among patients in healthcare settings.

In the U.S., there were 2,377 confirmed clinical cases diagnosed last year — an increase of over 1,200% since 2017. But *Candida auris* is becoming a global problem. In Europe, a survey last year found case numbers nearly doubled from 2020 to 2021.

"The number of cases has increased, but also the geographic distribution has increased," Lyman said. She noted that while screenings and surveillance have improved, the skyrocketing case numbers do reflect a true increase.

In March, a CDC press release noted the seriousness of the problem, citing the pathogen's resistance to traditional antifungal treatments and the alarming rate of its spread. Public health agencies are focused primarily on strategies to urgently mitigate transmission in healthcare settings.

"It's kind of an active fire they're trying to put out," Lyman said.

Dr. Luis Ostrosky, a professor of infectious diseases at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth Houston, thinks *Candida auris* is "kind of our nightmare scenario."

"It's a potentially multi-drug resistant pathogen with the ability to spread very efficiently in healthcare settings," he said. "We've never had a pathogen like this in the fungal infection area."

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It is nearly always resistant to the most common class of antifungal medication, and is sometimes also resistant to another medication primarily used for severe catheter fungal infections in hospitals.

"I've encountered cases where I'm sitting down with the family and telling them we have nothing that works for this infection your loved one has," Ostrosky said.

Ostrosky has treated about 10 patients with the fungal infection but has consulted on many more. He said he has seen it spread through an entire ICU in two weeks.

Researchers, academics, and public health groups are discussing and investigating theories that explain the emergence of *Candida auris*. Ostrosky said that climate change is the most widely accepted one.

The CDC's Lyman said it's possible the fungus was always among the microorganisms that live in the human body, but because it wasn't causing infection, no one investigated until it recently started causing health problems. She also said there are reports of the fungus in the natural environment — including soil and wetlands — but environmental sampling has been limited, and it's unclear whether those discoveries are downstream effects from humans.

"There are also a lot of questions about there being increased contact with humans and intrusion of humans into nature, and there have been a lot of changes in the environment, and the use of fungi in agriculture," she said. "These things may have allowed *Candida auris* to escape into a new environment or broaden its niche."

Wherever and however it originated, the fungus poses a significant threat to human health, researchers say. Immunocompromised patients in hospitals are most at risk, but so are people in long-term care centers and nursing homes, which generally have less access to diagnostics and infection control experts.

Candida auris is not only challenging to treat, but also difficult to diagnose. It is quite rare and many clinicians are not aware it exists.

Common symptoms of infection include sepsis, fever, and low blood pressure, which all can have many causes. The fungus is diagnosed with a blood test. Blood is placed in a nutrient-rich medium to allow any infectious organism to grow and become more detectable.

But Ostrosky notes this misses about half the cases. "Our gold standard is a little bit better than flipping a coin," he said, adding there is a newer technology that improves bloodstream detection but it's expensive and not widely available in hospitals.

Beyond the increase in cases, popular culture has helped increase awareness of fungal infections. A popular HBO series, "The Last of Us," is a drama about the survivors of a fungal outbreak. A fungal infection that can transform humans into zombies is a work of fiction, but addressing climate change, which is altering the kinds of diseases seriously threatening human health, is a real world challenge.

"I think the way to think about how global warming is putting selection pressure on microbes is to think about how many more really hot days we are experiencing," said Casadevall of Johns Hopkins. "Each day at (100 degrees Fahrenheit, or 37.7 degrees Celsius) provides a selection event for all microbes affected — and the more days when high temperatures are experienced, the greater probability that some will adapt and survive."

"We've been flying under the radar for decades in mycology because fungal infections didn't used to be frequently seen," said Ostrosky of UTHealth Houston.

Formed to combat Olympic sex abuse, SafeSport center is struggling 6 years after opening

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

DENVER (AP) — The case involves almost everything a victim of sexual harassment would be desperate to avoid.

Dozens of emails and multiple requests for follow-up interviews about a traumatizing episode. Bickering over legal fees. Documents with dense legalese and no conclusive answers about the outcome of the three-year-long case.

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"At the end of the day, they didn't even investigate," the female curler said of her 2020 complaint about sexual harassment at her Colorado curling club filed with the U.S. Center for SafeSport.

Established six years ago to create accountability in the aftermath of sex-abuse scandals in Olympic sports that landed USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar in prison, the SafeSport center's mandate covers not only the elite facilities molding the nation's top athletes but also grassroots clubs like the one where the woman trained, which form the backbone of the Olympic system.

The woman's case, which she shared with The Associated Press on condition she and her sports facility not be named to protect her privacy, was one of five examined by the AP that exposed deep flaws in an overwhelmed agency criticized by athletes, Olympic leaders and investigators with Washington connections.

"What came out of it was feeling that SafeSport is woefully under-equipped for their mission," said rugby referee Gray Montrose of her own 2021 complaint that she was groped by another referee while driving him to a college tournament in Virginia.

The male referee was given six-months probation, but after Montrose expressed concern about his return to the sport, the center turned around and opened a case against her.

Because of outcomes like this, athletes are often reluctant to criticize SafeSport for "fear of retaliation from the center itself if you have too strong of an opinion," said Steve McNally, executive director of USA Taekwondo.

Max Cobb, the former president of US Biathlon who was a key leader in U.S. Olympic sports, said the problems go deeper.

"Too often, the investigations take months or years to begin, and in the end are too slow to be effective within the real-life timeframe in which our athletes and sports happen," Cobb said. "This creates a long period of inaction that in many cases is worse or nearly as bad as the initial offense."

A congressionally appointed committee charged with investigating the U.S. Olympic system has received numerous complaints about SafeSport. "Over and over again, we're hearing that athlete safety and the SafeSport process must be a top priority" for reform, said Han Xiao, a retired table tennis player who co-chairs the committee.

Last week, the U.S. Soccer Athletes Council sent a letter to Congress signed by 100 national team players, including the entire U.S. Women's World Cup team, imploring lawmakers to fix SafeSport.

"SafeSport was created with noble and important intentions, but we believe that as it stands today, SafeSport is failing in what it was meant to achieve," the letter said.

The Denver-based center has about 1,000 open cases, a quarter of which are more than a year old, SafeSport spokesman Dan Hill said. With only about 60 full-time investigators it gets around 150 new complaints each week.

According to the center's 2022 annual report, less than 15% of the 12,751 cases it investigated from March 2017 through 2022 ended with a formal resolution. Another nearly 38% were "administratively closed," meaning SafeSport made no findings, imposed no sanctions and there was no public record of the allegations. The agency declined to pursue virtually all the rest, saying they fell outside its mandate of sexual misconduct in sports.

"We have come a long way but we also get complaints and we also get feedback," SafeSport CEO Ju'Riese Colon told the AP. "There's a lot of work for us to do, but all things considered. I think the organization is doing quite well."

In the wake of the Nassar abuse case, Congress held hearings and authorized studies that led to legislation creating SafeSport. The idea was to form an independently run agency, much like the successful U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, to decide cases without interference from the entities it oversees.

But while the government provides more than half of the anti-doping agency's \$28.5 million budget, in 2022 it gave just \$2.3 million to SafeSport, placing the onus for the rest of its \$23 million budget on the organizations it regulates — the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee and the 50-plus individual sports organizations it oversees.

Colon said today's budget was created when the center was receiving just 2,700 complaints a year, not

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the 8,000 a year it gets now. "If I was to look into the future about what we really need, we need at least double what we have today," she said.

Critics say there's no way SafeSport can be effective if the bulk of its funding comes from those it polices. "Going to SafeSport is like your local diocese saying 'Hey, got a problem with a local priest? Call us,'" said attorney Jon Little, who represented USA Badminton in a long-running case involving a teen athlete who, in 2012, accused a coach of forcing her to have sex.

"There's no way the way it's set up was ever going to work," Little said.

On any given day, SafeSport is as likely to receive calls from a member of a local sports training club or the parents of a kid taking taekwondo classes as from an Olympic gymnast or other elite competitor.

Among the conclusions drawn by former U.S. attorney general Sally Yates in a report on abusive behavior and sexual misconduct in U.S. professional soccer was that SafeSport, which covers nearly 11 million athletes, was overwhelmed.

"It does not have the resources necessary to promptly address the volume of complaints it receives," Yates wrote in her 2022 report.

Colon defended SafeSport's broad mandate.

"If the center were to only focus on elite athletes, that would leave around 10 million people in a place where they had no recourse," she said of the vast number of grassroots athletes.

The five cases the AP examined illustrate how the center's system has led to an overload of work for a staff that often gave contradictory, confusing and incomplete information to complainants that sometimes didn't even align with the center's own rules for handling investigations.

The curler's case involved allegations that a club worker had harassed her in 2017 and 2018, including sending pornographic photos and videos to her cellphone. The woman also expressed concerns others were being harassed.

SafeSport sent the man a "letter of admonishment," and though he stopped working at the club, he continued to show up as a volunteer. The woman reached out again to SafeSport and was urged to contact leaders at USA Curling, the Olympic committee and SafeSport itself.

"I know your experience has not been ideal," Colon wrote in response to the woman's email. "Please know that we continue to make improvements to our process and communications with all those involved."

The woman also took her case to the Olympic committee's head of athlete safety, Nicole Deal, who filed her own complaint against the curling club for its failure to report the harassment allegations to SafeSport.

That led to multiple SafeSport interview requests. The woman refused, saying she would not repeat the draining hours of questioning she underwent after filing her first complaint. The woman was never informed about the outcome of Deal's complaint, though she was billed nearly \$4,000 in unexpected legal fees.

SafeSport's handling of the other cases the AP examined, in rugby, badminton, snowboarding and weightlifting, were filled with contradictions and confusion that led to a lack of trust in the center from the athletes alleging abuse.

— Earlier this year, SafeSport's former interim CEO, Regis Becker, was placed on temporary suspension and a weightlifting meet director was reprimanded for their handling of a sexual-misconduct complaint. The Pennsylvania meet organizer — who shared details with AP on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic — asked Becker what to do about a coach seen smacking the behinds of his female athletes at the meet. Becker told the director she should give him a warning to cease the offensive behavior.

Later, photos the coach posted on social media of him spotting female lifters in inappropriate and suggestive positions were turned into SafeSport. The center responded by reprimanding the meet director for not immediately filing a complaint with it. Becker was suspended for six months for "abuse of process" and failing to report the misconduct.

"When you apply rules that way, that arbitrarily, and don't think about situations individually, it lends itself to these wastes of resources and prosecutions that you see from SafeSport," Little, the lawyer, said.

— A long-running case in which snowboarding coach Peter Foley was accused of sexual assault and harassment led US Ski & Snowboarding to open its own investigation that led to Foley's dismissal in March

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2022. SafeSport, which was slow to open a case on Foley, complained to Sen. Chuck Grassley, a supporter, that the snowboard federation had meddled in its process. One athlete in the case said she didn't want to involve SafeSport because of the "extensive and challenging" reporting process.

— The USA Badminton case involved tense exchanges between SafeSport center Vice President Bobby Click and Little, who advocated taking sexual abuse cases to police before going to the center.

"The bottom line is, you should never call SafeSport, you should call the police," Little said. "Then, if the police say it's OK, you should call SafeSport. The reason I say that is, it's the law."

While the center tries to get a grasp on its massive mission, the stakes involved are hard to miss.

A 2021 survey by the global advocacy group World Players found 13% of 297 athletes surveyed worldwide had reported experiencing sexual abuse at least once as a child in sports.

On its own website, SafeSport referenced a study by the Crimes Against Children Research Center that says one-in-five girls and one-in-20 boys in America become victims of sexual abuse.

Research center director David Finkelhor said most youth-serving organizations — including church groups, Boy and Girl Scouts and sporting organizations — have one thing in common when it comes to preventing abuse.

"They don't necessarily have the skills that most need to be applied," he said. "They don't necessarily have the funds to support the things that need to be done. There aren't programs and practices that can be adopted from other places that necessarily fit their environment."

Cobb gave credit to SafeSport for the job it does educating athletes, coaches and administrators about how to keep sports safe.

Ultimately, though, he said SafeSport needs a more collaborative approach "that brings athletes and their families together" with sports leaders and the center to set policy.

"We've lost too much time," Cobb said. "It's time for a fundamental reset."

Trump once condemned the Jan. 6 rioters. Now he's become one of their biggest supporters

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The day after Jan. 6, 2021, then-President Donald Trump denounced the rioters who violently stormed the Capitol building, breaking through barricades, battling law enforcement and sending members of Congress — who were set to formally certify his reelection loss — running for their lives.

"Like all Americans, I am outraged by the violence, lawlessness and mayhem," he said in a video, condemning what he called a "heinous attack."

That condemnation was delayed and only offered amid widespread criticism — including from fellow Republicans — for his role in sparking the mayhem. But 2 1/2 years later, any sign of regret or reprimand from Trump has vanished as he prepares to face federal criminal charges for his efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

Now the early but commanding front-runner in the 2024 Republican presidential primary, Trump regularly downplays the violence, lionizes the rioters as patriots and spreads false claims about who was involved. He has not only vowed to pardon a "large portion" of Jan. 6 defendants if he wins a second term, but he has also fundraised for them, befriended their families and collaborated on a song that became a surprise iTunes hit.

"They were there proud, they were there with love in their heart. ... And it was a beautiful day," Trump said at a recent CNN town hall. When asked if he had any regrets about his actions that day, Trump voiced no remorse and instead seemed most concerned about the lack of attention paid to his crowd size.

"Jan. 6: It was the largest crowd I've ever spoken to," he said.

Trump was always reluctant to condemn the actions of supporters spurred by his lies of a stolen election. As the violence unfolded, Trump ignored the desperate pleas of aides and allies to denounce the rioters and ask them to stand down. And when he did speak out, hours later, his response was tepid: He said he

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loved the rioters and shared their pain.

Trump's evolution began at a time when he was garnering relatively little mainstream media coverage. And it echoed the efforts of some Republicans in Congress, who had tried to recast the mob as nonviolent despite reams of video footage, public testimony and accounts from members of Congress, journalists and Capitol Police officers, 140 of whom were injured that day.

It also coincided with a broader shift in public opinion. Polling from Monmouth University showed that between March and November 2021, Republicans grew increasingly likely to say the anger that led to the Capitol attack was justified, with 54% saying the anger was either fully or partially justified in the fall — up from 40% that spring.

The Pew Research Center also found that, between March and September 2021, Republicans grew less likely to say it was important for law enforcement agencies to find and prosecute the rioters. Only 57% said that it was very or somewhat important in the fall, down from about 8 in 10 six months earlier.

That March, in an interview with Fox News Channel's Laura Ingraham, Trump claimed the rioters had posed "zero threat" to the lawmakers who had assembled in the Capitol to certify the Electoral College vote — even though the mob tried to breach the House chamber.

"Look, they went in — they shouldn't have done it. Some of them went in, and they're hugging and kissing the police and the guards, you know, they had a great relationship," he said.

In fact, many of the protesters violently clashed with police as they stormed the building, smashing windows and ramming through doors. Some brandished weapons; others wore tactical gear. Dozens of officers were severely injured.

By that time, many of Trump's supporters had already painted Ashli Babbitt, one of five people who died during or immediately after the riot, as a martyr unjustly killed by police,

Babbitt was fatally shot by an officer while trying to climb through the broken window of a barricaded door as Capitol Police scrambled to evacuate members.

That summer, Trump began to publicly demand the release of the shooter's identity, despite the officer being cleared of wrongdoing by two federal investigations.

"Who shot Ashli Babbitt?" Trump asked repeatedly.

Trump called Babbitt "an innocent, wonderful, incredible woman" in an interview with Fox News and described his supporters that day in glowing terms, claiming that there had been a "love fest between the Capitol police and the people that walked down to the Capitol."

"They were peaceful people. These were great people. The crowd was unbelievable," he said. "And I mentioned the word 'love.' The love — the love in the air, I've never seen anything like it."

That fall, Trump taped a video that was played at an event commemorating what would have been Babbitt's birthday in which he demanded "justice" for her and her family.

In January 2022, Trump first publicly dangled the prospect of pardons for the Jan. 6 defendants at a rally in Texas.

"If I run and if I win, we will treat those people from Jan. 6 fairly," he told the crowd. "And if it requires pardons, we will give them pardons because they are being treated so unfairly." At that point, more than 670 people had been convicted of crimes related to the attack, including some found guilty of seditious conspiracy and assaulting police officers.

In September 2022, Trump told conservative radio host Wendy Bell that he was helping some of the defendants, though aides declined at the time to elaborate or say how much he had contributed.

"I'm financially supporting people that are incredible, and they were in my office actually two days ago. It's very much on my mind," he said. "It's a disgrace what they've done to them. ... Contributions should be made."

Days later, Trump held a rally in Pennsylvania that included remarks from Cynthia Hughes, the founder of the Patriot Freedom Project, whose nephew was convicted for storming the Capitol. Geri Perna, whose nephew died by suicide while awaiting sentencing after pleading guilty to riot-related charges, also spoke.

Later that month, the former president called into a small rally held outside a Washington jail where Jan.

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6 defendants have been held, led by Micki Witthoeft, Babbitt's mother.

"We're with you. We're working with a lot of different people on this. And we can't let this happen," he said via a cellphone held up to a microphone.

Trump's support has only intensified since he formally launched his third campaign.

Earlier this year, he collaborated on "Justice for All," a song that features a choir of Jan. 6 defendants singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," recorded over a prison phone line and overlaid with Trump reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Trump featured the song at the first official rally of his 2024 campaign, standing with his hand on his heart as a music video featuring violent footage of the riot played behind him on two giant screens.

In June, he spoke at a Patriot Freedom Project fundraiser to support the defendants that was held at his Bedminster, New Jersey, club.

"They've been made to pay a price that is very unfair, in many cases," he said.

Trump also recorded a video played at the group's holiday fundraising event in Washington and hosted a dinner for family members of Jan. 6 defendants at Mar-a-Lago in March.

"He is very concerned for these families," Hughes said after the event.

An Associated Press review of social media posts, voter registrations, court files and other public records found that the mob was overwhelmingly made up of longtime Trump supporters, including GOP officials, donors and far-right militants.

But that hasn't stopped Trump from falsely claiming that others were responsible for the attack, including antifa and Black Lives Matter. Last weekend on his social media site, Trump amplified messages claiming that Jan. 6 had been a "staged riot" orchestrated by the government.

Trump was still in charge of the government at the time.

Elon Musk wants to turn tweets into 'X's'. But changing language is not quite so simple

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Elon Musk may want to send "tweet" back to the birds, but the ubiquitous term for posting on the site he now calls X is here to stay — at least for now.

For one, the word is still plastered all over the site formerly known as Twitter. Write a post, you still need to press a blue button that says "tweet" to publish it. To repost it, you still tap "retweet."

But it's more than that.

With "tweets," Twitter accomplished in just a few years something few companies have done in a lifetime: It became a verb and implanted itself into the lexicon of America and the world. Upending that takes more than a top-down declaration, even if it is from the owner of Twitter-turned-X, who also happens to be one of the world's richest men.

"Language has always come from the people that use it on a day-to-day basis. And it can't be controlled, it can't be created, it can't be morphed. You don't get to decide it," said Nick Bilton, the author of "Hatching Twitter: A True Story of Money, Power, Friendship, and Betrayal" about Twitter's origins.

Twitter didn't start out as Twitter. It was "twtr" — without vowels, which was the trend in 2006 when the platform launched and SMS texting was wildly popular. The iPhone only came out in 2007.

Twitter co-founder Evan Williams "went one day and purchased the vowels, two vowels for essentially \$7,500 each," when he bought the URL for twitter.com from a bird enthusiast, Bilton said.

At the beginning, people didn't "tweet" — it was "I'm going to twitter this," Bilton recalled. But "twittered" doesn't roll off the tongue and "tweet" soon took over, first in the Twitter office, then San Francisco, then everywhere.

We've been tweeting for well over a decade. World leaders, celebrities and athletes, dissidents in repressive regimes, propaganda trolls, sex workers and religious icons, meme queens and actual queens. Former President Donald Trump's incendiary use of the bird app quickly punted "tweet" into near-constant

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headlines during his presidency. People who never signed up for Twitter knew what the word meant.

For now, we still tweet, retweet and quote tweet, and sometimes — perhaps not often enough — delete tweets. News sites embed tweets in their stories and TV programs scroll them. No other social network has a word for posting that's entered the vernacular like "tweet" — though Google did the same for "googling."

The Oxford English Dictionary added "tweet" in 2011. Merriam-Webster followed in 2013. The Associated Press Stylebook entered it in 2010.

"Getting into the dictionary is an indication that people are already using it," said Jack Lynch, a Rutgers University English professor who studies the history of language. "Dictionaries are usually pretty tentative or cautious about letting new words in, especially for new phenomena, because they don't want things to be just a flash in the pan."

As Twitter grew into a global communications platform and struggled with misinformation, trolls and hate speech, its friendly brand image remained. The blue bird icon evokes a smile, like the Amazon up-turned-arrow smile — in contrast to the X that Musk has imposed.

Martin Grasser was two years out of art school when Twitter hired him for the logo redesign in 2011. His wasn't the first bird logo for Twitter, but it would be the most enduring.

"They knew they wanted a bird. So we weren't starting completely over, but they wanted it to be on par with Apple and Nike. That was really the brief," he said.

Twitter launched Grasser's design in May 2012; the company went public on Wall Street later that year. One early in-house design shown to Grasser looked like "a flying goose with a tail. It looked kind of like a dragon. It was crazy," he said. Jack Dorsey, another co-founder (and twice-CEO) wanted something simpler.

The bird represented a vision of Twitter as a friendly place "where everyone can weigh in and chat," Grasser said.

"The round form evokes a sense of optimism, the bird even being sort of turned upward, as corny as that sounds, I think is different than a bird flying down or flat," he said. "We wanted to give it this idea of like soaring."

The word "Twitter" itself is playful, as is "tweet." This was no accident, Bilton said.

Other names that floated as the platform started out included "Status" and "Friend Stalker."

It was Noah Glass, another co-founder who never quite got the credit he deserved for his role in hatching Twitter, who had the winning idea.

Glass, Bilton said, "had been thinking about like heartbeats and emotions. He was going through a divorce and he literally went through the dictionary word by word until he came across the word twitter. And he just knew instantly that was it."

"He was one of the four founders who had the emotional intelligence to be able to understand that this was about connecting with humans," Bilton said. "It was inviting, it was emotional. It was about connecting with humans and your friends and your loved ones."

Musk began his quest erasing Twitter's corporate culture and image in favor of his own vision as soon as he took over the company in October 2022. He lost three-quarters of the company's staff through firings, layoffs and voluntary departures, auctioned off furniture and décor, and upended policies on hate speech and misinformation. The rebranding to X was no surprise.

Twitter's rebranding is rooted in ambition that Musk began to pursue nearly a quarter century ago after he sold his first startup, Zip2, to Compaq Computer. He set out to create a one-stop digital shop for finance called X.com — an "everything" service that would provide bank accounts, process payments, make loans and handle investments.

He has not given up on the dream. Twitter is now X, falling in line with Musk's other X-named brands, SpaceX and Tesla's Model X. Not to mention his young son, whom he calls "X."

His goal for X is to turn it into an "everything" app — for video, photos, messaging, payments and other services, although he has given few details. For now, X.com is still, essentially Twitter.com, even as the blue bird and other playful tidbits start to disappear.

"There used to be a saying inside Twitter that Twitter was the company that couldn't kill itself. I think that still rings true, whether it's called Twitter or X," Bilton said.

"I think that it's kind of become a fabric of society. And even Elon Musk may not be able to break it."

Bluffing or not, Putin's declared deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus raises tensions

By The Associated Press undefined

Sometime this summer, if President Vladimir Putin can be believed, Russia moved some of its short-range nuclear weapons into Belarus, closer to Ukraine and onto NATO's doorstep.

The declared deployment of the Russian weapons on the territory of its neighbor and loyal ally marks a new stage in the Kremlin's nuclear saber-rattling over its invasion of Ukraine and another bid to discourage the West from increasing military support to Kyiv.

Neither Putin nor his Belarusian counterpart, Alexander Lukashenko, said how many were moved — only that Soviet-era facilities in the country were readied to accommodate them, and that Belarusian pilots and missile crews were trained to use them.

The U.S. and NATO haven't confirmed the move. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg denounced Moscow's rhetoric as "dangerous and reckless," but said earlier this month the alliance hasn't seen any change in Russia's nuclear posture.

While some experts doubt the claims by Putin and Lukashenko, others note that Western intelligence might be unable to monitor such movement.

Earlier this month, CNN quoted U.S. intelligence officials as saying they had no reason to doubt Putin's claim about the delivery of the first batch of the weapons to Belarus and noted it could be challenging for the U.S. to track them.

Unlike nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles that can destroy entire cities, tactical nuclear weapons for use against troops on the battlefield can have a yield as small as about 1 kiloton. The U.S. bomb in Hiroshima in World War II was 15 kilotons.

The devices are compact: Used on bombs, missiles and artillery shells, they could be discreetly carried on a truck or plane. Aliaksandr Alesin, an independent Minsk-based military analyst, said the weapons use containers that emit no radiation and could have been flown into Belarus without Western intelligence seeing it.

"They easily fit in a regular Il-76 transport plane," Alesin said. "There are dozens of flights a day, and it's very difficult to track down that special flight. The Americans could fail to monitor it."

Belarus has 25 underground facilities built during the Cold War for nuclear-tipped intermediate-range missiles that can withstand missile attacks, Alesin said. Only five or six such depots could actually store tactical nuclear weapons, he added, but the military operates at all of them to fool Western intelligence.

Early in the war, Putin referenced his nuclear arsenal by vowing repeatedly to use "all means" necessary to protect Russia. He has toned down his statements recently, but a top lieutenant continues to dangle the prospect with terrifying ease.

Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy head of Russia's Security Council who served as a placeholder president in 2008-12 because Putin was term-limited, unleashes near-daily threats that Moscow won't hesitate to use nuclear weapons.

In a recent article, Medvedev said "the apocalypse isn't just possible but quite likely," and the only way to avoid it is to bow to Russian demands.

The world faces a confrontation "far worse than during the Cuban missile crisis because our enemies have decided to really defeat Russia, the largest nuclear power," he wrote.

Many Western observers dismiss that as bluster.

Putin seems to have dialed down his nuclear rhetoric after getting signals to do so from China, said Keir Giles, a Russia expert at Chatham House.

"The evident Chinese displeasure did have an effect and may have been accompanied by private messaging to Russia," Giles told The Associated Press.

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Moscow's defense doctrine envisages a nuclear response to an atomic strike or even an attack with conventional weapons that "threaten the very existence of the Russian state." That vague wording has led some Russian experts to urge the Kremlin to spell out those conditions in more detail and force the West to take the warnings more seriously.

"The possibility of using nuclear weapons in the current conflict mustn't be concealed," said Dmitry Trenin, who headed the Moscow Carnegie Center for 14 years before joining Moscow's state-funded Institute for World Economy and International Relations.

"The real, not theoretical, perspective of it should create stimuli for stopping the escalation of the war and eventually set the stage for a strategic balance in Europe that would be acceptable to us," he wrote recently.

Western beliefs that Putin is bluffing about using nuclear weapons "is an extremely dangerous delusion," Trenin said.

Sergei Karaganov, a top Russian foreign affairs expert who advises Putin's Security Council, said Moscow should make its nuclear threats more specific in order to "break the will of the West" and force it to stop supporting Ukraine as it seeks to reclaim Russian-held areas in a grinding counteroffensive.

"It's necessary to restore the fear of nuclear escalation; otherwise mankind is doomed," he said, suggesting Russia establish a "ladder" of accelerating actions.

Deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus was the first step, Karaganov said, with perhaps a follow-up of warning ethnic Russians in countries supporting Ukraine to evacuate areas near facilities that could be nuclear targets.

If that doesn't work, Karaganov suggested a Russian nuclear strike on Poland, alleging Washington wouldn't dare respond in kind to protect a NATO ally, for fear of igniting a global war.

"If we build the right strategy of intimidation and even the use of it, the risk of a retaliatory nuclear or any other strike on our territory could be reduced to a minimum," he said. "Only if a madman who hates his own country sits in the White House would America risk to launch a strike 'in the defense' of the Europeans and draw a response, sacrificing Boston for Poznan."

The Moscow-based Council of Foreign and Defense Policies, a panel of leading military and foreign policy experts that includes Karaganov, denounced his comments as "a direct threat to all of mankind."

While pro-Kremlin analysts floated such scenarios, Lukashenko, the Belarusian leader, says hosting Russian nuclear weapons in his country is meant to deter aggression by Poland.

He claimed a number of nuclear weapons were flown to Belarus without Western intelligence noticing, with the rest coming later this year. Officials in Moscow and Minsk said the warheads could be carried by Belarusian Su-25 ground attack jets or fitted to short-range Iskander missiles.

Giles, of Chatham House, said the deployment was about "cementing Putin's control over Belarus" and did not offer Moscow any military advantage over placing them in Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad that borders Poland and Lithuania.

The West should recognize this as a ploy "that has far more to do with Russia's ambitions for Belarus than any genuine impact on European security beyond that," Giles said.

Some observers question whether the deployment to Belarus has even happened.

Miles Pomper, a senior fellow at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute, challenged Lukashenko's claim that nuclear weapons were covertly flown to Belarus. They are normally moved by rail, he said, and there are no signs of "the support elements that you would see that would go with shipments of weapons."

Others note Russia could have deployed the weapons without adhering to protocols used in the 1990s, when Moscow wanted to show the West its nuclear arsenal was secure amid economic and political turmoil.

Belarusian military analyst Valery Karbalevich said keeping such details secret could be a Kremlin strategy of "applying permanent pressure and blackmailing Ukraine and the West. The unknown scares more than certainty."

Alesin, the Minsk-based analyst, argued that U.S. and NATO may play down the deployment of nuclear

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weapons to Belarus because they pose a threat the West finds difficult to counter.

"The Belarusian nuclear balcony will hang over a large part of Europe. But they prefer to pretend that there is no threat, and the Kremlin is just trying to scare the West," he said.

If Putin decides to use nuclear weapons, he may do it from Belarus in hopes that a Western response would target that country instead of Russia, Alesin said.

The political opposition to Lukashenko warns that such a deployment turns Belarus into a hostage of the Kremlin.

While Lukashenko sees such weapons as a "nuclear umbrella" protecting the country, "they turn Belarus into a target," said exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who tried to unseat the authoritarian leader in a 2020 election widely viewed as fraudulent.

"We are telling the world that preventative measures, political pressure and sanctions are needed to resist the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus," she said. "Regrettably, we haven't seen a strong Western reaction yet."

Today in History: July 28, The First World War begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, July 28, the 209th day of 2023. There are 156 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On July 28, 1914, World War I began as Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

On this date:

In 1609, the English ship *Sea Venture*, commanded by Adm. Sir George Somers, ran ashore on Bermuda, where the passengers and crew founded a colony.

In 1932, federal troops forcibly dispersed the so-called "Bonus Army" of World War I veterans who had gathered in Washington to demand payments they weren't scheduled to receive until 1945.

In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced the end of coffee rationing, which had limited people to one pound of coffee every five weeks since it began in Nov. 1942.

In 1945, A U.S. Army bomber crashed into the 79th floor of New York's Empire State Building, killing 14 people.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced he was increasing the number of American troops in South Vietnam from 75,000 to 125,000.

In 1976, an earthquake devastated northern China, killing at least 242,000 people, according to an official estimate.

In 1984, the Los Angeles Summer Olympics opened.

In 1995, a jury in Union, South Carolina, rejected the death penalty for Susan Smith, sentencing her to life in prison for drowning her two young sons (Smith will be eligible for parole in 2024).

In 2015, it was announced that Jonathan Pollard, the former U.S. Naval intelligence analyst who had spent nearly three decades in prison for spying for Israel, had been granted parole.

In 2016, Hillary Clinton accepted the Democratic presidential nomination at the party's convention in Philadelphia, where she cast herself as a unifier for divided times as well as an experienced leader steered for a volatile world while aggressively challenging Republican Donald Trump's ability to lead.

In 2019, a gunman opened fire at a popular garlic festival in Gilroy, California, killing three people, including a six-year-old boy and a 13-year-old girl, and wounding 17 others before taking his own life.

In 2020, President Donald Trump issued a stout defense of the disproved use of a malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, to treat COVID-19, hours after social media companies took down videos shared by Trump, his son and others promoting its use.

Ten years ago: Pope Francis' historic trip to his home continent of South America ended after a marathon week in Brazil. In southern Italy, 39 people were killed when a tour bus plunged into a ravine. An armed

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thief stole a \$136 million diamond collection from a jewelry show at the Carlton International Hotel in Cannes, France. Actress and singer Eileen Brennan died in Burbank, California at age 80.

Five years ago: Pope Francis accepted the resignation of U.S. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the emeritus archbishop of Washington, D.C., following allegations of sexual abuse, including one involving an 11-year-old boy. A magnitude-6.4 earthquake in Lombok, Indonesia destroyed homes, killed at least 16 people and injured dozens more.

One year ago: President Biden declared his support for the "historic" inflation-fighting agreement struck by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and holdout Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, an expansive health care and climate change package that had eluded the White House and seemed all but lost. Biden said the bill will be a "godsend" for American families. Rescue workers plucked people off rooftops amid fast-rising water in central Appalachia, where torrential rains unleashed devastating flooding that caused at least three deaths in Kentucky. Beloved British actor Bernard Cribbins died at the age of 93.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Darryl Hickman is 92. Musical conductor Riccardo Muti is 82. Former Senator and NBA Hall of Famer Bill Bradley is 80. "Garfield" creator Jim Davis is 78. Singer Jonathan Edwards is 77. Actor Linda Kelsey is 77. TV producer Dick Ebersol is 76. Actor Sally Struthers is 76. Rock musician Simon Kirke (Bad Company) is 74. Rock musician Steve Morse (Deep Purple) is 69. Former CBS anchorman Scott Pelley is 66. Actor Michael Hayden is 60. Actor Lori Loughlin is 59. Jazz musician-producer Delfeayo Marsalis is 58. Former hockey player Garth Snow is 54. Actor Elizabeth Berkley is 51. Singer Afroman is 49. Rock singer Jacoby Shaddix (Papa Roach) is 47. Actor John David Washington is 39. Actor Jon Michael Hill is 38. Actor Dustin Milligan is 38. Actor Nolan Gerard Funk is 37. Rapper Soulja Boy is 33. Pop/rock singer Cher Lloyd (TV: "The X Factor") is 30. Golfer Nelly Korda is 25.