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Friday, Aug. 11

Senior Menu: Taco salad with chips, Mexican rice with black beans, Mandarin oranges, pineapple, breadstick.

Girls soccer hosts West Central: Varsity at 11 a.m., JV at 1 p.m.

Baseball Golf Tourney Fundraiser at Olive Grove Golf Course

Saturday, Aug. 12

Postponed: Girls Soccer hosts Dakota Valley: Varsity at 1 p.m., JV at 2:30 p.m.

Boys Soccer at Freeman Academy, 1 p.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 209 N Main, open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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

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.

Sunday, Aug. 13

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 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.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Monday, Aug. 14

Senior Menu: Chicken rice casserole, mixed vegetables, chocolate pudding with banana, whole wheat bread.

Boys Golf at Sioux Valley (Volga), 10 a.m.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

The Pantry at Groton Community Center, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Senior Citizens meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

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

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

World in Brief

worker intervened.

A federal judge overseeing Donald Trump's 2020 election case will hear arguments over a protective order to prohibit the former president from publicly speaking about the case. Prosecutors have asked for a trial to begin on Jan. 2, 2024.

Russia successfully launched Luna 25, its first moon mission since 1976, in a bid to be the first nation to make a soft landing on the lunar south pole.

China's Ministry of State Security claimed it has identified a Chinese national who has been providing sensitive military information to the CIA, potentially worsening ties between Washington and Beijing.

The Netherlands' women's soccer team, one of the strongest teams left in the Women's World Cup, was knocked out after a 2-1 defeat to Spain, who progressed to their first-ever semi-final at a Women's World Cup.

At least 20 people have been killed after gunmen believed to be members of the Islamic State jihadist group ambushed a bus carrying Syrian soldiers in the country's east.

In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia's Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev has claimed Russia faces a "critical" shortage of police officers, with as many as 5,000 law enforcement employees leaving their jobs in July..

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TALKING POINTS

"Every Republican running for President would be better than Joe Biden. Any candidate who does not commit to supporting the eventual nominee is putting themselves ahead of the future of our country. 2024 is too important for political games," Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp wrote on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter.

"This perfect combination of failed leadership has created a perfect storm of incompetence and chaos. It's no wonder Seattle has become a laughingstock of the nation and the globe. They are laughing about us on the international news. Aren't you embarrassed? I am," former Seattle police officer Jessica Taylor wrote in a letter announcing her resignation.

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine is barbaric, and I am categorically against it. I am horrified about the fate of people in Ukraine – many of them my personal friends and relatives – whose houses are being bombed every day. Although I moved to Israel in 2014, I have to take my share of responsibility for the country's actions," Russian billionaire tech executive Arkady Volozh said in a statement shared with Meduza and The Bell, an independent Russian-language news site based in Latvia.

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE DAY AHEAD

A hearing on the protective order request in special counsel Jack Smith's investigation into former President Donald Trump's alleged actions to overturn the 2020 election is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. ET.

Vice President Kamala Harris will be in Chicago to speak at Everytown for Gun Safety's annual conference.

Dozens of hip-hop artists will be performing tonight at Yankee Stadium for Hip Hop 50 Live, a concert celebrating 50 years of the genre.

At least 53 people have died from Hawaii's wildfires. Gov. Josh Green said it was a "heartbreaking day," calling the wildfires the "largest natural disaster in Hawaii state history." The town of Lahaina is mostly "burned down." President Joe Biden has ordered aid for recovery efforts. Airspace travel has been restricted.

The worker who was attacked in the Montgomery, Alabama, waterfront brawl on Saturday told police that the occupants of the pontoon boat involved in the fight were advised "five or six times" to move their vessel before the

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6 School Board Meeting August 14, 2023 – 7:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of July 10, 2023 school board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of July 2023 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
3. Approve Open Enrollment #24-16.
4. Approve Open Enrollment #24-17.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Review and adoption of FY2024 District Budget and authorize Business Manager to file tax request with county auditors.
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Approve bid for 1.0 acre of land in SW quarter of section 14 of Oak Gulch Township (former school site of Oak Gulch School District) and authorize Superintendent to execute paperwork to effectuate the sale.
2. Approve amended North Central Special Education Cooperative Membership Agreement.
3. Approve volunteer girls soccer coaches – Kaylin Kucker and Wyatt Locke.
4. Approve resignation/retirement of Jan Hoffman effective August 18, 2023.
5. Approve hiring Elizabeth Bahr, Kindergarten Paraprofessional, at \$14.74/hour.
6. Approve hiring Robert Moorlach, bus driver.
7. Approve hiring Delbert Hinkelman, bus driver.
8. Approve academic lane change for Eric Swenson from MS to MS+15.
9. Approve inter-district transportation requests pursuant SDCL 13-29-4
 - a. Webster Area School District
 - b. Langford Area School District

ADJOURN

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Highway Patrol Sturgis Rally Daily Information

Compiled from 6 a.m. Saturday August 5, 2023, to 6 a.m. Thursday August 10, 2023

Fatal Crashes: At 1:49am, Thursday, Interstate 90, mile marker 24: A 2004 Harley Davidson motorcycle was traveling eastbound in the westbound lanes and hit a 2008 GMC Yukon head on. The 61-year-old male driver of the motorcycle was wearing a helmet and was pronounced dead at the scene. The driver and passengers of the GMC were not injured.

Injury Crashes:

At 9:34am, Wednesday, Cheyenne Boulevard and Elk Vale Road: A 2015 Harley Davidson motorcycle was making a lefthand turn onto Elk Vale Road, hit a patch of debris, and tipped over. The driver and passenger were not wearing helmets and received minor injuries.

At 9:34am, Wednesday, South Dakota Highway 44, and US Highway 385: A 2023 Harley Davidson motorcycle while traveling south on US Highway 385 was attempting to make a lefthand turn onto SD 44 and was struck by a 2011 Yamaha motorcycle and 2013 Yamaha motorcycle traveling northbound on US Highway 385. All parties involved were wearing helmets. The drivers of the Harley Davidson and 2011 Yamaha received serious non-life-threatening injuries. The driver of the 2013 Yamaha received minor injuries.

At 10:14am, Wednesday, US Highway 87, mile marker 75: A 2012 Harley Davidson motorcycle was traveling northbound and failed to negotiate a curve. The driver and passenger became separated from the motorcycle. The driver and passenger were wearing helmets and received minor injuries.

At 10:39am, Wednesday, Interstate 90, mile marker 39: A 2007 Harley Davidson motorcycle was traveling eastbound, crossed the fog line, entered the median, and tipped. The driver was not wearing a helmet and received serious non-life-threatening injuries.

At 2:49pm, Wednesday, US Highway 85, mile marker 30: A 2002 Harley Davidson motorcycle and 2015 Harley Davidson motorcycle were both traveling southbound, collided with each other, and hit the guard rail. Both drivers were wearing helmets. The driver of the 2002 Harley Davidson was not injured, and the driver of the 2015 Harley Davidson received minor injuries.

At 3:30pm, Wednesday, South Dakota Highway 87, mile marker 47: A 2013 Harley Davidson motorcycle and 2016 Victory motorcycle were traveling southbound. An antelope ran out in front of the Victory motorcycle causing the driver to stop in the roadway. The Harley Davidson was unable to avoid collision and struck the Victory from behind. All individuals involved were wearing helmets. The passenger of the Victory received serious non-life-threatening injuries. All others received minor injuries.

At 4:53pm, Wednesday, Old Hill City Road: A 2001 Harley Davidson motorcycle was traveling westbound, failed to negotiate a curve, left the roadway, and hit an embankment. The driver and passenger were separated from the motorcycle. The driver and passenger were wearing helmets and received serious non-life-threatening injuries.

At 7:18pm, Wednesday, US Highway 14, mile marker 130: A 2011 Harley Davidson motorcycle was traveling eastbound, failed to negotiate a curve, and entered the south ditch. The driver was separated from the motorcycle. The driver was wearing a helmet and received serious non-life-threatening injuries.

At 7:57pm, Wednesday, US Highway 16A, mile marker 33: A 2021 Indian motorcycle was traveling eastbound, failed to negotiate a curve, left the roadway, and entered the north ditch. The driver and passenger were separated from the motorcycle. The driver and passenger were not wearing helmets and received serious non-life-threatening injuries.

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Item	Sturgis	Rapid City District	District Total	Last Year to Date
DUI Arrests	66	13	79	97
Misd Drug Arrests	109	42	151	102
Felony Drug Arrests	99	20	119	86
Total Citations	592	355	947	914
Total Warnings	1619	1096	2715	3253
Cash Seized	\$2005.00	\$0.00	\$2005.00	\$4335.00
Vehicles Seized	0	0	0	4
For Drug Poss.	0	0	0	4
For Serial No.	0	0	0	0
Non-Injury Accidents	9	23	32	27
Injury Accidents	11	30	41	35
Fatal Accidents	3	0	3	3
# of Fatalities	3	0	3	3

2023 Sturgis Rally Vehicle Count – Through Day Six

STURGIS, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) will provide daily traffic counts for vehicles entering Sturgis for the 83rd Annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally which runs from Aug. 4-13, 2023. The traffic counts to date at nine locations entering Sturgis for the 2023 Rally are as follows:

Friday, Aug. 4: 45,652 vehicles entered

Down 13.4% from the previous five-year average

Saturday, Aug. 5: 38,126 vehicles entered

Down 37.3% from the previous five-year average

Sunday, Aug. 6: 60,586 vehicles entered

Up 4.4% from the previous five-year average

Monday, Aug. 7: 50,487 vehicles entered

Down 16.9% from the previous five-year average

Tuesday, Aug. 8: 55,848 vehicles entered

Down 4.2% from the previous five-year average

Wednesday, Aug. 9: 56,444 vehicles entered

Down 1.4% from the previous five-year average

2023 Total to Date: 307,143 Vehicles

Previous Five-Year Average to Date: 346,334 Vehicles

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2 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. today (Friday)



Suggested Donation: \$4



Walking Taco or Taco Salad and a drink

Free Will Donation

Proceeds go to Groton's Angel Tree

15 N Main, Ste. 103

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

'Rethinking Suicide': Expert urges South Dakota audience to challenge assumptions

Mental illness, predictive factors less meaningful than many think, professor says

BY: JOHN HULT - AUGUST 10, 2023 7:46 PM

SIOUX FALLS — The Centers for Disease Control says up to 45% of the people who kill themselves had no history of mental illness.

Psychiatrists and psychologists think 90% of them have such a history.

The disconnect between the two figures is one reason health care professionals need to look beyond their assumptions if they ever hope to reverse the trend of suicide growth in the U.S., according to Thursday's opening keynote speaker at the second annual South Dakota Suicide Prevention Conference.

Dr. Craig Bryan, a psychiatrist and research fellow at Ohio State University and the author of the book "Rethinking Suicide," told the audience of about 500 that many long-held beliefs about what works and what doesn't aren't grounded in evidence.

Bryan's talk at the Sioux Falls Convention Center was part of the kickoff of the two-day summit, which will continue on Friday and includes a host of speakers and breakout sessions. The summit helps mental health professionals log continuing education hours to maintain their licenses, but is also attended by police officers and sheriff's deputies, educators at the K-12 and collegiate levels, and health care professionals.

Suicide rates have ticked up across the U.S. in recent years, but South Dakota's growth rate for the tragic metric is even higher.

Before Bryan's address on rethinking suicide prevention began, state Department of Health Secretary Melissa Magstadt presented a series of numbers to illustrate the problem.

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in South Dakota.

It's the leading cause of death for those 10-29 years old.

South Dakota has the seventh-highest suicide rate in the U.S.

Three South Dakota counties in Indian Country are in the top 1% of U.S. counties for high suicide rates.

"And our American Indian suicide rate is two and a half times higher than our white population," Magstadt said.

The state has poured millions of dollars – some of it allocated through federal legislation – into telehealth, the expansion of crisis response facilities and trainings, and suicide first aid training since 2020, but the rates remain stubbornly high.

Expert: Challenge assumptions

One goal of the conference was to explore why and to identify strategies that might make more sense. Dr. Bryan said the upward trajectory of suicide rates alongside increased spending on prevention, while more pronounced in South Dakota, tracks in every U.S. state.

"I've spent several years now wondering why it is that the trend line goes in one direction, even though we're doing so much more of the stuff that we believe should be reducing suicide," he said.

The U.S. is among the 25% of countries worldwide to experience long-term growth in suicide rates, largely because its approach to the problem is founded in false assumptions, Bryan said.

Focusing on those who survive a suicide attempt, for example, while important, obscures important details about those who don't survive. This "survivorship bias" is present all across health care.

"If we only focus on the people who survive a health condition or treatment, we might actually draw mistaken conclusions about the efficacy of treatments and interventions," he said.

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With the CDC figures, he said, one could fairly argue that a share of the 45% of suicide victims without a documented history of mental illness likely had issues but never sought treatment. But that alone doesn't account for the gulf between perception and reality among mental health professionals. It's partially a bias toward diagnosing mental health conditions for those who arrive in clinical settings, he said, even when the struggles expressed during a session might relate to stress over relationships, finances and the like.

"I think this is one of the sinister assumptions about suicide: that it's an outcome with mental illness," he said. "And indeed, I would contend that 90 to 95% of what we do in suicide prevention somehow involves mental health services and treatment."

Bryan also said that suicide screenings are ineffective tools for preventing suicide, because the idea to commit suicide can often metastasize into a suicide attempt with stunning speed.

The way to tackle the problem of suicide, he argued, is to home in on treatments that are proven, some of which have little or nothing to do with a diagnosis of mental illness.

Asking someone to talk about their suicidal feelings or their suicide attempt before barreling through questions on the frequency of those thoughts and feelings, their self-harm plans and their access to weapons tends to have a greater impact, he said.

Rote screening questions "are great for paperwork and lawyers," he added, "but it's terrible for patients."

Safety planning is more effective than medication or talk therapy in most cases, too, he said, because it puts tangible tools at the disposal of the person at risk. Such a plan, when produced thoughtfully with buy-in from a patient, offers a road map for how to cope with intense feelings and protect people from their worst instincts.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, which leans on coping skills and empowering patients with strategies to recognize and manage difficult emotions in advance, also tends to be more effective than other interventions.

Simply asking about gun storage is vital, he said, even though it can be an uncomfortable topic. It offers the person a chance to think about the potential for danger and who they might turn to if they need to lock their weapons away for a while.

988 counselors engage with callers

A rapport-building approach to conversations is baked-in for the counselors who answer the phones when a South Dakotan calls the 988 suicide prevention line, according to Janet Kittams, director of the Helpline Center and the manager of the state's 988 system.

Questions that might appear in a scripted screening are eventually explored, but Kittams told South Dakota Searchlight that operators understand that relationship building is key to helping those in crisis.

"We need them to connect with people to establish a rapport, to demonstrate that we care, because that's what they're not hearing in their lives," Kittams said. "They aren't getting that from someplace else."

Bryan's talk of safety planning and "means restriction" – securing weapons and other means of self-harm – caught Kittams' ear as a topic worth exploring for 988 operators.

"If it's not easy just to reach over and grab whatever the means are, if you have to go through a lock, you have to get to a safe, you have to go through something to get there, it gives you time to pause and think, and for other people to intervene potentially," Kittams said.

She also took note of Bryan's talk of suicide screenings and risk factors. That's important to keep in mind during prevention training, she said.

"Some people do experience or share the 14 signs, but other people do not," she said. "So I think it's important to educate people. It's not an all-or-nothing type of situation."

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.

Another death raises motorcycle rally's fatality count

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - AUGUST 10, 2023 3:47 PM

There has been another traffic fatality associated with this year's Sturgis Motorcycle Rally.

The latest death happened Thursday when a 2004 Harley Davidson motorcycle was traveling eastbound in the westbound lanes of Interstate 90 and hit a 2008 GMC Yukon head-on, according to the Highway Patrol. The 61-year-old male driver of the motorcycle was wearing a helmet but was pronounced dead at the scene. The driver and passengers of the GMC were not injured.

The first two deaths officially associated with the rally happened Sunday when a 54-year-old female motorcycle passenger was pronounced dead at the scene of a multi-vehicle collision, and a 41-year-old male motorcycle driver was pronounced dead at the scene after he failed to negotiate a curve and tumbled into a ditch.

In its official "rally tally," the Highway Patrol only includes traffic deaths that have occurred in western South Dakota since the first Saturday morning of the rally. There have been several other traffic deaths that may have been associated with the rally but occurred outside of those official parameters, including:

A 64-year-old man who died Friday when his motorcycle crashed into a ditch near Midland.

A 65-year-old man who died when he failed to negotiate a curve in Custer State Park with his motorcycle on July 31.

A 68-year-old man who died on Aug. 2 when he failed to maintain his lane of travel on his motorcycle, crossed onto the I-90 median and became separated from his bike.

Thursday's Highway Patrol news release also included a snapshot of arrest totals from 6 a.m. Saturday through 6 a.m. Thursday.

Misdemeanor and felony drug arrests, non-injury and injury accidents, and total citations are trending up. Meanwhile, drunken driving, cash seized and warnings given are trending down.

There was an officer-involved shooting on Wednesday in Sturgis that is under investigation by the state Division of Criminal Investigation.

Traffic counters in Sturgis have recorded an 11% drop in traffic compared to the most recent five-year average for the rally. The weather may be one factor in that trend, because the rally's opening days were unseasonably cool and rainy.

The rally began Aug. 4 and continues through this Sunday.

Congress brought back earmarks. Now they're one more point of drama in a divided House.

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - AUGUST 10, 2023 1:34 PM

WASHINGTON — The new Republican chairwoman of the U.S. House Appropriations Committee said just before taking over the panel that she planned to "tweak" how the chamber earmarks spending for community projects — coveted state and local funding that members of Congress request.

Some of those changes hinted at by Kay Granger of Texas have infuriated Democrats, who argue the House GOP has politicized a relatively bipartisan process renewed in 2021 after a decade-long hiatus, and unfairly tipped the scales by revoking funding for three LGBTQ projects.

House Republicans disagree, saying they've kept the same majority-minority split for earmark funding that Democrats came up with and got rid of projects that they deemed unworthy of taxpayer dollars.

The disagreement has led to several bouts of heated debate during House Appropriations Committee markups, especially after Republicans opted to eliminate funding for three LGBTQ projects in the transportation and housing bill after the GOP included them in the original legislation. It's one more stress point in a tumultuous year for federal spending, as a split among House Republicans raises the potential for a partial government shutdown at the end of September.

"The fact that you would take away members' earmarks simply because they refer to the LGBTQI+ community is insane, is bigoted," Wisconsin Democratic Rep. Mark Pocan said in mid-July.

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Dems complain they're shortchanged

About a month before tensions flared over the LGBTQ project funding, several Democratic appropriators rebuked House Republicans for allegedly shortchanging their earmark requests.

Maryland Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger said during committee debate on the Agriculture spending bill in June that he was frustrated no Democratic projects in that measure received more than \$1 million in funding — while more than 100 GOP earmarks received at least \$1 million.

"This is ridiculous," Ruppersberger said. "This isn't governing, this is partisan politics."

Democrats did receive more than \$1 million on several projects in other spending bills that had accounts eligible for earmark requests.

Rep. David Trone, also a Maryland Democrat, said many of the earmarks he requested were supposed to help out Republican areas of his sprawling district that stretches from the western part of the state to the D.C. suburbs, but that insufficient funding for those projects meant they likely wouldn't be able to move forward.

Democratic earmark requests, he said, were cut an average of 41%, with a ceiling of \$1 million, while Republican earmark request cuts averaged around 18% with a \$6 million cap.

That is not how House Democrats handled earmarks during the last two appropriations cycles when they were in the majority, Trone said.

"This partisanship, that's what ticks me off and why I think we just are going down the wrong route," Trone said. "We've got to figure out how to make life better for the folks that really need it, the folks that are struggling. And in my case, they're all Republicans and I'm trying to make it better for them. And we failed here."

Splitting up funds

House Appropriations ranking member Rosa DeLauro said Republicans' approach to earmarks this year was unacceptable.

"The split is inequitable ... based on the fairness and the direction in which we went for two years in this process," DeLauro said.

After DeLauro brought back earmarks two years ago with new transparency mechanisms and oversight guardrails, she said she worked with Republicans to figure out how much earmark funding would go to Democrats and how much would go to Republicans.

After Democrats submitted two-thirds of total earmark requests, with Republicans requesting the other one-third, DeLauro said she took into consideration that many House GOP lawmakers didn't want to participate.

In "conjunction" with Republicans, DeLauro determined that Democrats would receive about 63% of the earmark funding while Republicans received about 37%, DeLauro said.

After Republicans regained control of the House earlier this year, DeLauro said she made two proposals on how to split up earmark funding. The first was to split the difference between Democratic and Republican projects, which was rejected. The second was a 56-44 split, which was also rejected.

Maryland Republican Rep. Andy Harris attempted to throw cold water on Democrats' criticism that his party was shortchanging Democrats' earmark requests.

Harris argued Republicans had simply taken the same percentage of earmarks funding that Democrats had used when they were in the majority.

"Last year in the majority, the Democrats received \$97 million in community funding projects. This year we allocated \$145 million," Harris said, referring solely to earmarked funding in the Agriculture spending bill. "Now, even by common core math, that's \$48 million more in projects available."

LGBTQ projects survive in Senate

At least two of the LGBTQ projects that House Republicans stripped from their spending bill for the Transportation Department and Housing and Urban Development were included in the Senate.

Massachusetts Democratic Sens. Edward Markey and Elizabeth Warren secured \$850,000 for LGBTQ Senior Housing, Inc. in the Labor-HHS-Education bill after the House GOP removed Massachusetts Demo-

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cratic Rep. Ayanna Pressley's earmark from a separate spending bill. All three requested funding for the project at the beginning of the process.

"While Republicans continue their hateful, anti-gay crusade, we remain undeterred in our fight to affirm the dignity and humanity of our LGBTQ+ neighbors," Pressley said in a written statement.

"I'm grateful to Senators Warren and Markey for working in partnership with me to get this critical funding for The Pryde into the Senate appropriations bill," Pressley added, referring to the name of the project. "Our LGBTQ+ elders in the Massachusetts 7th deserve this affordable housing and community space, and we'll keep fighting to get this funding over the finish line."

Pennsylvania Democratic Sens. Bob Casey Jr. and John Fetterman were able to get \$1 million for Philadelphia's William Way LGBT Community Center's renovation and expansion project in the Senate spending bill. They both requested that level of funding at the beginning of the process.

Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. Brendan Boyle had requested and received a \$1.8 million earmark in the House bill for that project, before Republicans in that chamber reversed course.

Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. Chrissy Houlahan's earmark for a \$970,000 transitional housing program at the LGBT Center of Greater Reading didn't appear to get funding in the Senate appropriations bills. That might be because neither of Pennsylvania's senators included that in their original earmark requests to the spending committee.

DeLauro and several other Democrats rebuked Republicans for removing the three projects from the Transportation-HUD spending measure, arguing that they didn't violate any of the requirements for earmarks.

"They are only struck because they support projects for the LGBT community. That is a disgrace. In all the two years that I dealt, and this committee dealt, with community projects, never once, never once did we challenge any Republican project," DeLauro said. "We said you do what you want to do and we do what we want to. And that has been destroyed today."

Montana Republican Rep. Ryan Zinke and Harris both argued during committee debate that the types of services the community projects provided should not have received government funding.

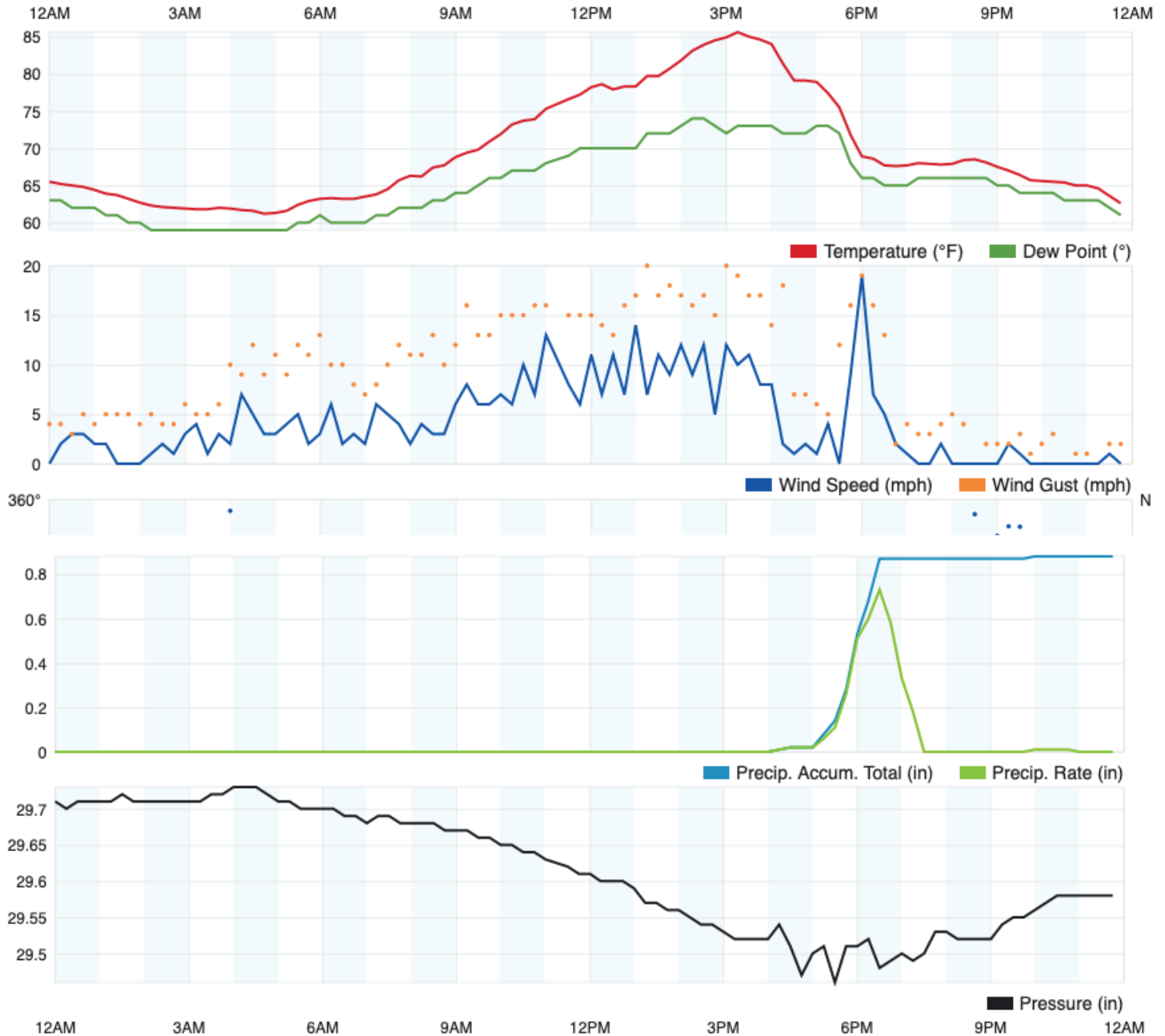
"Should America's taxpayers pay for this? The answer is 'No,'" Zinke said after listing off the events and services that the William Way LGBT Community Center offers.

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

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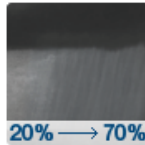



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
			 20% → 70%	 60%		
Patchy Fog then Sunny	Clear	Sunny	Slight Chance Showers then Showers Likely	Showers Likely and Breezy	Partly Cloudy and Breezy then Mostly Clear	Sunny
High: 84 °F	Low: 54 °F	High: 84 °F	Low: 59 °F	High: 73 °F	Low: 54 °F	High: 76 °F



Weekend Outlook – Showers and thunderstorms possible Saturday night and Sunday

Today



Highs: 80s
Mainly Dry

Saturday



Highs: 80s
Dry
Showers & storms returning in the evening over central SD

Sunday



Highs: 70s
Cooler
Showers & thunderstorms likely

Aug 11th, 2023
4:00 am

weather.gov/aberdeen

Today and Saturday will feature mainly dry conditions. Look for showers and thunderstorms to return to the area Saturday night and Sunday. A few of the thunderstorms could be strong Saturday night.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 86 °F at 3:20 PM

Low Temp: 61 °F at 4:40 AM

Wind: 20 mph at 1:09 PM

Precip: : 0.88

Day length: 14 hours, 21 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 103 in 1988

Record Low: 34 in 1902

Average High: 84

Average Low: 58

Average Precip in Aug.: 0.80

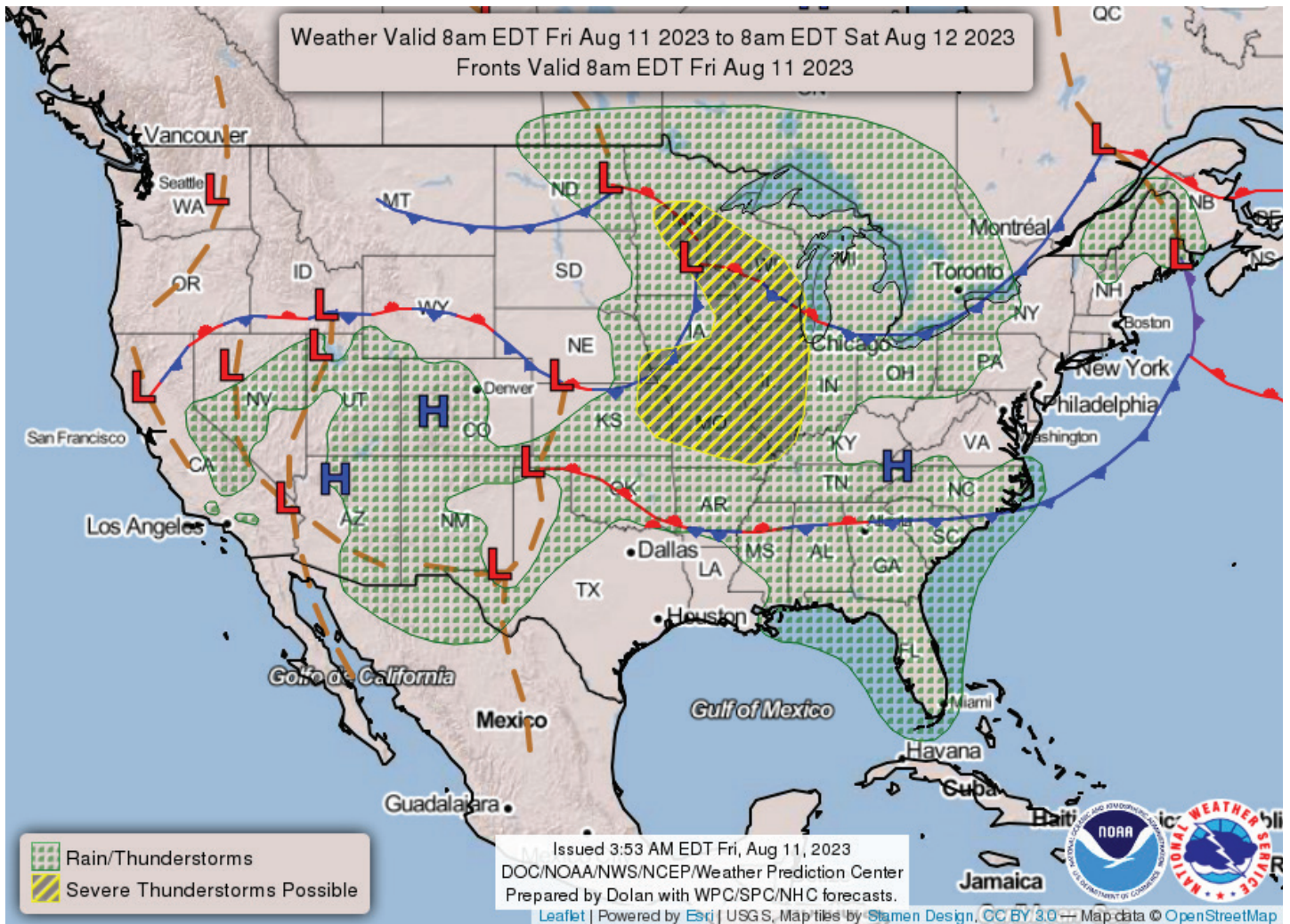
Precip to date in Aug.: 3.26

Average Precip to date: 14.90

Precip Year to Date: 15.93

Sunset Tonight: 8:48:20 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:28:06 AM



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Today in Weather History

August 11, 1975: A line of thunderstorms raced across portions of central and eastern South Dakota during the early morning hours. Winds gusted to 70 mph, causing considerable damage to trees. At Canton, in Lincoln County, the winds were estimated as high as 70 mph. In Sioux Falls, the peak wind gust measured 69 mph. Wind damage was also reported in Miller and Ree Heights in Hand County, as well as in Selby and Mobridge in Walworth County.

August 11, 1985: Lightning set off eleven fires in the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation area. Twenty acres of grassland were burned two miles northeast of Bear Creek. About 600 acres of grassland were burned 8 miles southwest of Lantry. About 3,000 acres of grassland burned near Eagle Butte.

August 11, 2011: Severe thunderstorms brought hail up to the size of ping pong balls and damaging winds up to 90 mph to parts of central South Dakota. Jones and Lyman Counties received the brunt of the strong winds with eighty mph winds downing several grain bins along with knocking a few semis off of Interstate-90 near Murdo. The winds also downed some power lines and poles along with destroying a hanger. The two planes in the hanger were damaged at the Murdo Airport. Near Kennebec in Lyman County, eighty mph winds took shingles off the house and also damaged the deck. A barn was also destroyed with a horse being injured. Many tree branches were also downed.

1940: A Category 2 hurricane struck the Georgia and South Carolina coast. A 13-foot storm tide was measured along the South Carolina coast, while over 15 inches of rain fell across northern North Carolina. Significant flooding and landslides struck Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia during the system's slow trek as a weakening tropical storm, and then as an extratropical cyclone, through the Southeast. The landslides which struck North Carolina were considered a once in a century event. Damages relating to the storm totaled \$13 million (1940 USD), and 50 people perished.

1944 - The temperature at Burlington, VT, soared to an all-time record high of 101 degrees. (The Weather Channel) The Dog Days officially come to an end on this date, having begun the third day in July. Superstition has it that dogs tend to become mad during that time of the year. (The Weather Channel)

1980 - Clouds and moisture from Hurricane Allen provided a brief break from the torrid Texas heatwave, with daily highs mostly in the 70s to lower 90s. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - An early evening thunderstorm in Wyoming produced hail up to two inches in diameter from Alva to Hulett. Snow plows had to be used to clear Highway 24 south of Hulett, where hail formed drifts two feet deep. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Moisture from what remained of Tropical Storm Beryl resulted in torrential rains across eastern Texas. Twelve and a half inches of rain deluged Enterprise TX, which was more than the amount received there during the previous eight months. Philadelphia PA reported a record forty-four days of 90 degree weather for the year. Baltimore MD and Newark NJ reported a record fourteen straight days of 90 degree heat. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - One of the most severe convective outbreaks of record came to a climax in southern California after four days. Thunderstorms deluged Benton CA with six inches of rain two days in a row, and the flooding which resulted caused more than a million dollars damage to homes and highways. Thunderstorms around Yellowstone Park WY produced four inches of rain in twenty minutes resulting in fifteen mudslides. Thunderstorms over Long Island NY drenched Suffolk County with 8 to 10 inches of rain. Twenty-three cities in the southeastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. It was, for some cities, the fourth straight morning of record cold temperatures. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1999: An F2 tornado touched down in the metropolitan area of Salt Lake City. The tornado lasted ten minutes and killed one person, injured more than 80 people, and caused more than \$170 million in damages. It was the most destructive tornado in Utah's history and awakened the entire state's population to the fact that the Beehive State does experience tornadoes.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

"TO THE GLORY OF GOD"

Johann Sebastian Bach is recognized as one of the world's most famous musicians. He was orphaned when he was ten years old and went to live with his oldest brother, a church organist. Recognizing his joy for music, his brother began teaching him how to play various instruments. At age fourteen he was awarded a scholarship to study music at a famous university. After graduation, he auditioned for a job he deeply wanted but was not hired.

He refused to be discouraged and dedicated himself to becoming a gifted musician and composer. On the top part of each composition, he wrote the words, "To the glory of God."

How would our lives be different if we preceded each word or deed or thought with the words: "Will what I am about to do or say or think bring glory to God?" Would our lips be sealed, our hands idle, or our minds blank if what we said, or thought or did could not bring glory to God? Would we become as still as a statue?

The Bible makes no apologies when it declares, "Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God!" All that we do or think or say is to be done to bring glory to God. Keeping this Scripture in mind will help us realize the impact our behavior has on others - positively or negatively - and the glory it brings to God.

Prayer: Father, may every word or deed, thought or action, bring unending glory to Your name each day of our lives. Let our thoughts, words, and deeds glorify Your Name. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31



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:

08.08.23

13 19 20 32 33 14

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 9 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.09.23

1 10 12 33 39 5

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$7,750,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 24 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.10.23

8 15 23 38 42 15

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 39 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.09.23

13 15 25 27 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 39 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.09.23

1 42 51 61 63 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 8 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.09.23

10 15 21 67 69 3

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$194,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 8 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Tensions rise as West African nations prepare to send troops to restore democracy in Niger

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Tensions are escalating between Niger's new military regime and the West African regional bloc that has ordered the deployment of troops to restore Niger's flailing democracy.

The ECOWAS bloc said on Thursday it had directed a "standby force" to restore constitutional order in Niger after its Sunday deadline to reinstate ousted President Mohamed Bazoum expired.

Hours earlier, two Western officials told The Associated Press that Niger's junta had told a top U.S. diplomat they would kill Bazoum if neighboring countries attempted any military intervention to restore his rule.

It's unclear when or where the force will deploy and which countries from the 15-member bloc would contribute to it. Conflict experts say it would likely comprise some 5,000 troops led by Nigeria and could be ready within weeks.

After the ECOWAS meeting, neighboring Ivory Coast's president, Alassane Ouattara, said his country would take part in the military operation, along with Nigeria and Benin.

"Ivory Coast will provide a battalion and has made all the financial arrangements ... We are determined to install Bazoum in his position. Our objective is peace and stability in the sub-region," Ouattara said on state television.

Niger, an impoverished country of some 25 million people, was seen as one of the last hopes for Western nations to partner with in beating back a jihadi insurgency linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group that's ravaged the region. France and the United States have more than 2,500 military personnel in Niger and together with other European partners had poured hundreds of millions of dollars into propping up its military.

The junta responsible for spearheading the coup, led by Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, has exploited anti-French sentiment among the population to shore up its support.

On Thursday night after the summit, France's foreign ministry said it supported "all conclusions adopted." U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said his country appreciated "the determination of ECOWAS to explore all options for the peaceful resolution of the crisis" and would hold the junta accountable for the safety and security of President Bazoum. However, he did not specify whether the U.S. supported the deployment of troops.

The mutinous soldiers that ousted Bazoum more than two weeks ago have entrenched themselves in power, appear closed to dialogue and have refused to release the president. Representatives of the junta told U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland of the threat to Bazoum's life during her visit to the country this week, a Western military official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation.

A U.S. official confirmed that account, also speaking on condition of anonymity, because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

"The threat to kill Bazoum is grim," said Alexander Thurston, assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati. There have been unwritten rules until now about how overthrown presidents will be treated and violence against Bazoum would evoke some of the worst coups of the past, he said.

Human Rights Watch said Friday that it had spoken to Bazoum, who said that his 20-year-old son was sick with a serious heart condition and has been refused access to a doctor. The president said he hasn't had electricity for nearly 10 days and isn't allowed to see family, friends or bring supplies into the house.

It's unclear if the threat on Bazoum's life would change ECOWAS' decision to intervene militarily. It might give them pause, or push the parties closer to dialogue, but the situation has entered uncharted territory, analysts say.

"An ECOWAS invasion to restore constitutional order into a country of Niger's size and population would

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be unprecedented," said Nate Allen, an associate professor at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Niger has a fairly large and well-trained army that, if it actively resisted an invasion, could pose significant problems for ECOWAS. This would be a very large and significant undertaking, he said.

While the region oscillates between mediation and preparing for war, Nigeriens are suffering the impact of harsh economic and travel sanctions imposed by ECOWAS.

Before the coup, more than 4 million Nigeriens were reliant on humanitarian assistance and the situation could become more dire, said Louise Aubin, the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Niger.

"The situation is alarming. ... We'll see an exponential rise and more people needing more humanitarian assistance," she said, adding that the closure of land and air borders makes it hard to bring aid into the country and it's unclear how long the current stock will last.

Aid groups are battling restrictions on multiple fronts.

ECOWAS sanctions have banned the movement of goods between member countries, making it hard to bring in materials. The World Food Program has some 30 trucks stuck at the Benin border unable to cross. Humanitarians are also trying to navigate restrictions within the country as the junta has closed the airspace, making it hard to get clearance to fly the humanitarian planes that transport goods and personnel to hard-hit areas.

Flights are cleared on a case-by-case basis and there's irregular access to fuel, which disrupts aid operations, Aubin said.

The U.N. has asked ECOWAS to make exceptions to the sanctions and is speaking to Niger's foreign ministry about doing the same within the country.

More evacuations considered in Norway where the level in swollen rivers continues to rise

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — More evacuations were being considered Friday in southeastern Norway, where the level of water in swollen rivers and lakes continued to grow after days of torrential rain.

Huge amounts of water, littered with broken trees, debris and trash, were thundering down the usually serene rivers. It flooded abandoned houses, left cars coated in mud and swamped camping sites.

One of the most affected places was the town of Hoenefossen where the Begna river had gone over its banks and authorities were considering moving more people downstream for fear of landslides. Up to 2,000 people have already been evacuated.

"We constantly try to think a few steps ahead. We are ready to press an even bigger red button," Magnus Nilholm, a local emergency manager in the Hoenefossen region, told Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

Ivar Berthling of Norway's Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE) told Norwegian news agency NTB that the water levels around Hoenefossen, some 40 kilometers (25 miles) north of Oslo, were expected to continue rising and remain high until at least Monday. Up north, near the Strondafjorden lake, the water level was reported to be 2.5 meters (8.2 feet) above normal.

"We are still facing critical days," the Ringerike municipality, where Hoenefossen lies, said in a statement.

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre was to visit Hoenefossen later Friday while King Harald and Queen Sonja were to visit the headquarters of the NVE.

Authorities did not provide a nationwide count of evacuees. According to a rough estimate, damage could so far amount to 1 billion kroner (nearly \$100 million).

Authorities on Friday urged people not to check on their cabins in the devastated part of the country.

"Hytte," the Norwegian word for cabin, is part of the Scandinavian country's outdoors lifestyle, and thousands of Norwegians have access to a cabin — some in the mountains, others by the coast — that they use as a retreat from everyday life.

"We fully understand that many cabin owners are anxious about the cabin's condition after the ravages of the extreme weather, but we hope people will abstain now from making the trip just to check," Lars Aune of the National Police said in a statement. "This is to avoid unnecessary strain on exposed roads."

Storm Hans on Monday and Tuesday battered northern Europe, leading to transportation disruption, flooding and power cuts across the Nordic and Baltic region. At least three people were killed.

Southeastern Norway was particularly badly affected. A hydroelectric river dam collapsed Wednesday as water forced its way through, and earlier this week a train derailed in neighboring Sweden when a railway embankment was washed away by floods.

Maui residents had little warning before flames overtook their town. At least 55 people died

By TY O'NEIL, CLAIRE RUSH, JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER and REBECCA BOONE Associated Press LAHAINA, Hawaii (AP) — Maui residents who made desperate escapes from oncoming flames, some on foot, asked why Hawaii's famous emergency warning system didn't alert them as fires raced toward their homes.

Hawaii emergency management records show no indication that warning sirens were triggered before a devastating wildfire killed at least 55 people and wiped out a historic town, officials confirmed Thursday.

Hawaii boasts what the state describes as the largest integrated outdoor all-hazard public safety warning system in the world, with about 400 sirens positioned across the island chain to alert people to various natural disasters and other threats. But many of Lahaina's survivors said in interviews at evacuation centers that they didn't hear any sirens and only realized they were in danger when they saw flames or heard explosions nearby.

Thomas Leonard, a 70-year-old retired mailman from Lahaina, didn't know about the fire until he smelled smoke. Power and cell phone service had both gone out earlier that day, leaving the town with no real-time information about the danger.

He tried to leave in his Jeep, but had to abandon the vehicle and run to the shore when cars nearby began exploding. He hid behind a seawall for hours, the wind blowing hot ash and cinders over him.

Firefighters eventually arrived and escorted Leonard and other survivors through the flames to safety.

Hawaii Emergency Management Agency spokesperson Adam Weintraub told The Associated Press on Thursday that the department's records don't show that Maui's warning sirens were triggered on Tuesday. Instead, the county used emergency alerts sent to mobile phones, televisions and radio stations, Weintraub said.

It's not clear if those alerts were sent before widespread power and cellular outages cut off most communication to Lahaina.

Communications have been spotty across Maui, with 911, landline and cellular service failing at times. Power was also out in parts of the island.

Fueled by a dry summer and strong winds from a passing hurricane, the fire started Tuesday and took Maui by surprise, racing through parched brush covering the island and then flattening homes and anything else that lay in its path.

Maui Fire Department Chief Brad Ventura said the fire moved so quickly from brush to neighborhood that it was impossible for to get messages to the emergency management agencies responsible for emergency alerts.

The wildfire is already the state's deadliest natural disaster since a 1960 tsunami, which killed 61 people on the Big Island. During a Thursday press conference, Gov. Josh Green said the death toll will likely rise further as search and rescue operations continue.

"Lahaina, with a few rare exceptions, has been burned down," Green said after walking the ruins of the town Thursday morning with Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen. "Without a doubt, it feels like a bomb was dropped on Lahaina."

The fire is also the deadliest U.S. wildfire since the 2018 Camp Fire in California, which killed at least 85 people and laid waste to the town of Paradise.

Lahaina's wildfire risk was well known. Maui County's hazard mitigation plan, last updated in 2020, identified Lahaina and other West Maui communities as having frequent wildfire ignitions and a large number

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of buildings at risk of wildfire damage.

The report also noted that West Maui had the island's highest population of people living in multi-unit housing, the second-highest rate of households without a vehicle, and the highest rate of non-English speakers.

"This may limit the population's ability to receive, understand and take expedient action during hazard events," the plan noted.

Maui's firefighting efforts may also have been hampered by a small staff, said Bobby Lee, the president of the Hawaii Firefighters Association. There are a maximum of 65 firefighters working at any given time in Maui County, and they are responsible for fighting fires on three islands — Maui, Molokai and Lanai — he said.

Those crews have about 13 fire engines and two ladder trucks, but they are all designed for on-road use. The department does not have any off-road vehicles, he said.

That means fire crews can't attack brush fires thoroughly before they reach roads or populated areas, Lee said. The high winds caused by Hurricane Dora made that extremely difficult, he said.

"You're basically dealing with trying to fight a blowtorch," Lee said. "You've got to be careful — you don't want to get caught downwind from that, because you're going to get run over in a wind-driven fire of that magnitude."

Mandatory evacuation orders were in place for Lahaina residents, Bissen noted, while tourists in hotels were told to shelter in place so that emergency vehicles could get into the area.

The mayor said that downed power poles added to the chaos as people attempted to flee Lahaina by cutting off two important roads out of town. Speaking at a Thursday afternoon press conference, he said that 29 poles fell with live wires still attached, and leaving only the narrow highway toward Kahakuloa.

Marlon Vasquez, a 31-year-old cook from Guatemala who came to the U.S. in January 2022, said that when he heard fire alarms, it was already too late to flee in his car.

"I opened the door, and the fire was almost on top of us," he said from an evacuation center at a gymnasium. "We ran and ran. We ran almost the whole night and into the next day, because the fire didn't stop."

Vasquez and his brother Eduardo escaped via roads that were clogged with vehicles full of people. The smoke was so toxic that he vomited. He said he's not sure his roommates and neighbors made it to safety.

Lahaina residents saw the Hale Mahaolu senior living facility erupt in flames as they were escaping.

Chelsey Vierra's great-grandmother, Louise Abihai, was living at Hale Mahaolu, and the family doesn't know if she got out. "She doesn't have a phone. She's 97 years old," Vierra said Thursday. "She can walk. She is strong."

Relatives are monitoring shelter lists and calling the hospital. "We got to find our loved one, but there's no communication here," said Vierra, who fled the flames. "We don't know who to ask about where she went."

Tourists were advised to stay away, and tens of thousands of people have crowded airports to leave the island. Officials turned the Hawaii Convention Center in Honolulu into an assistance center, stocking it with water, food, and volunteers who help visitors arrange travel home.

President Joe Biden declared a major disaster on Maui. Traveling in Utah on Thursday, he pledged that the federal response will ensure that "anyone who's lost a loved one, or whose home has been damaged or destroyed, is going to get help immediately." Biden promised to streamline requests for assistance and said the Federal Emergency Management Agency was "surging emergency personnel" on the island.

With hundreds lost in the migrant shipwreck near Greece, identifying the dead is painfully slow

By ELENA BECATOROS and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Nearly two months after a dilapidated fishing trawler crammed with people heading from Libya to Italy sank in the central Mediterranean, killing hundreds, relatives are still frantically searching for their loved ones among the missing and the dead.

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Many questions remain about Greek authorities' response and exactly how and why the boat, carrying an estimated 500-750 people mostly from Pakistan, Syria and Egypt, capsized and sank in the early hours of June 14 in what became one of the deadliest migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean.

Only 104 people were pulled from the sea alive — all men and boys. Eighty-two bodies, only one of them a woman, were recovered. The rest, including women and children, sank in one of the deepest parts of the Mediterranean. With depths of around 4,000 meters (13,000 feet) in that area, any recovery of the vessel or its victims are all but impossible.

Identifying the dead and determining exactly who was on board is a slow, meticulous, heart-wrenching process.

By Aug. 7, around 40 of the recovered bodies were identified through a painstaking process combining DNA analysis, dental records, fingerprints and interviews with survivors and relatives, police Lt. Col. Pantelis Themelis, commander of Greece's Disaster Victim Identification Team, told The Associated Press.

The task is complicated by a lack of information on who was on the boat, and by the fact that many were from countries where, due to war and civil turmoil, relatives are struggling to provide DNA samples.

For some, the lack of a body to bury means they hold out hope, however improbable, that their loved one is somehow still alive.

"In my heart I feel that my son is alive, by God's grace, and I don't believe even 1% that my son is dead," said Mohamad Diab, whose 21-year-old son Abdulrahman has been missing since the trawler sank. "I don't even think about this."

In his nearly two-month quest for his son, Diab has all but exhausted his options. He provided a DNA sample through the International Commission on Missing Persons, sent relatives to Greece, and spends hours on his phone, making calls and watching and re-watching videos of survivors on social media.

The housepainter from an impoverished Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon on the outskirts of Beirut clings to a single, tenuous discovery: A brief moment in a video of the immediate aftermath of the sinking, when a man resembling his son is carried into a hospital in the southern Greek city of Kalamata.

Although inquiries at the hospital and with Greek authorities drew a blank, Diab insists his son might be in a coma, or imprisoned and unable to contact his family.

But all injured survivors have long since been released from hospital, and the nine survivors arrested as suspected smugglers are all Egyptians. Abdulrahman Diab's name is not among them.

The thought of having lost his eldest son is unbearable. So Diab clings desperately to the hope that somehow, somewhere, Abdulrahman is out there, still breathing, still alive.

"My faith in God is great," he said.

In Athens, the members of the Disaster Victim Identification Team continue the slow process of piecing together the identities of the bodies.

The team is still receiving DNA test results from prospective relatives abroad, Themelis said. And a telephone hotline in six languages set up after the disaster will remain operational for at least another two months, although calls now are few and far between.

An international mass-casualty event "requires a good investigative procedure that is time-consuming, with persistence and patience, to be able to collect information on missing people," said Themelis. "This is fundamental. Who really were the people who might have been on the ship?"

His team, set up in 2018, draws on staff from a variety of services as needed, including the fire department, coroners, translators and the police. It was this team that was called in to identify the remains of more than 50 people killed in the Feb. 28 railway disaster in central Greece.

DVI work, Themelis said, is humanitarian. "It is separate from anything else and has no job other than the humanitarian work of the identification of disaster victims."

Pakistan has already sent hundreds of DNA test results to help in the identification process, Themelis said. In countries where interviews with close relatives and DNA collection were problematic, that role was being carried out by the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

For Diab, a positive DNA match would mean all hope is lost for Abdulrahman, who grew up with his three younger brothers in Lebanon's infamous Shatila camp for Palestinian refugees on the outskirts of Beirut,

a cramped urban enclave with narrow alleys and crackling power lines overhead.

As a teenager he helped his father paint houses, but work dried up after Lebanon sank into a major financial crisis in 2019.

Relatives and friends, including Abdulrahman's uncle who runs a supermarket in Germany, took the risk to travel to Europe. Eventually, he decided to follow them, arranging flights to Egypt and then Libya, and the risky voyage across the Mediterranean, using a network of smugglers and middlemen.

Mohamad Diab sold his belongings and borrowed money to raise the \$7,000 in smuggling fees, hoping for a better future for his son. He never thought the journey could be fatal.

And for as long as he has no confirmation that it was, he can still cling to the belief that Abdulrahman will one day come home.

"I still have hope, I will not lose hope until I see his body," Diab said. "I still have hope that I will see him and hear his voice."

Killing of Ecuador candidate deepens country's sense of vulnerability to crime

By SARA ESPAÑA Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The brazen assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio at a crowded political rally Wednesday night deepened the country's sense of vulnerability to the crime that's spread across the country in recent years.

After multiple threats for his stance against drug trafficking and corruption, Villavicencio was under the watch of police and private security guards. His shooting death has focused global attention on his country's wave of violent deaths, which began about three years ago, and the connection between organized crime and other powerful interests there.

HOW WAS VILLAVICENCIO THREATENED?

He said during his campaign that he and his team he had been threatened by the Ecuadorian criminal group known as Los Choneros and their leader Alias Fito, whom Villavicencio linked to Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.

Villavicencio said popular support would protect him,

"You're my bulletproof vest. I don't need one. You're a brave people and I'm as brave as you are," Villavicencio said at a public meeting in the city of Chone, the heart of Los Choneros territory. "Bring on the drug lords. Bring on the hitmen," said Villavicencio, wearing only a blue shirt.

His campaign slogan, "Time for the Brave," referred to his proposal to fight corruption and organized crime by firing large numbers of corrupt security officials if he won, which polls showed as unlikely.

He had already reported threats to his loved ones, and shots were fired at his family home in Quito in September.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR THE KILLING?

Prosecutors said Wednesday that six people had been arrested in searches in the capital and on Thursday they said that the six are Colombian. One suspect died of wounds sustained in a shootout with police.

Few further details of the investigation have been made public, although Presidente Guillermo Lasso said on the social network X, previously known as Twitter, that he had asked for FBI help investigating, and that FBI agents shortly would be arriving in the country.

WHICH OTHER PUBLIC FIGURES HAVE BEEN KILLED IN ECUADOR?

Villavicencio's assassination took out the highest public figure eliminated yet in Ecuador's battle with organized crime. But not the only one.

On July 23, the mayor of Manta, Ecuador's third largest city, was also shot to death as he toured a crowded neighborhood. Agustín Intriago had been reelected in February and was widely liked for his open hostility to organized crime.

He and seven other mayors lived under police guard, and officials recorded at least 15 attacks on candidates in the last municipal elections, most in the coastal provinces of Manabí and Esmeraldas, where

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there is a large presence of traffickers moving cocaine by ship out of the country.

Among those killed was Julio César Farachio, 45, a candidate in Salinas, near the port city of Guayaquil, who was shot to death by a hitman during a campaign stop.

ARE ECUADORIAN POLITICS AND ORGANIZED CRIME CONNECTED?

Villavicencio himself had made complaints to prosecutors naming 21 mayoral candidates and other citizens as linked to drug trafficking, and said that he had given authorities information, including financial evidence, that backed up his accusation. He described organized crime, illegal mining and the drug trade as "part of the same criminal structure," but no criminal case has publicly emerged.

WHEN, AND WHY, DID VIOLENCE RISE IN ECUADOR?

Government authorities say the national wave of violence was triggered by the disappearance of Jorge Zambrano, alias "Rasquiña," the leader of Los Choneros. His disappearance was followed by a power vacuum and a riot that broke out simultaneously in three prisons in 2021 and left 79 prisoners dead.

Since then, at least a dozen prison riots have killed at least 400 prisoners and moved out onto the streets, where kidnapping, killing and other crimes have terrified the population.

In 2023 so far, Ecuador has seen 3,600 violent deaths. The previous year had 4,600 violent deaths, the country's highest in history and double the number in 2021. Drug seizures have also risen sharply.

WHAT'S THE LINK TO MEXICAN CARTELS?

Ecuador sits between two of the world's biggest cocaine producers: Peru and Colombia.

Violence has been attributed to fights for territory between local groups like Los Choneros, Lobos and Tiguerones, which have links to Mexican cartels such as Sinaloa and the Jalisco New Generation, among others.

WHAT GOVERNMENT ACTION IS THERE?

Lasso declared a state of emergency allowing military action in two provinces and prisons nationwide after Villavicencio's killing, one of at least 19 states of emergency the government has declared over the last two years.

Lasso also wants to increase the number of police and military on the streets and better equip them, although the contracting process has taken longer than expected.

53 people have died from the Maui wildfires, governor says, and historic Lahaina has burned down

By TY O'NEIL, CLAIRE RUSH, JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press LAHAINA, Hawaii (AP) — A search of the wildfire devastation on the Hawaiian island of Maui on Thursday revealed a wasteland of obliterated neighborhoods and landmarks charred beyond recognition, as the death toll rose to at least 53 and survivors told harrowing tales of narrow escapes with only the clothes on their backs.

A flyover of historic Lahaina showed entire neighborhoods that had been a vibrant vision of color and island life reduced to gray ash. Block after block was nothing but rubble and blackened foundations, including along famous Front Street, where tourists shopped and dined just days ago. Boats in the harbor were scorched, and smoke hovered over the town, which dates to the 1700s and is the biggest community on the island's west side.

"Lahaina, with a few rare exceptions, has been burned down," Hawaii Gov. Josh Green told The Associated Press. More than 1,000 structures were destroyed by fires that were still burning, he said.

Already the state's deadliest natural disaster since a 1960 tsunami killed 61 people on the Big Island, the death toll will likely rise further as search and rescue operations continue, Green added.

"We are heartsick," Green said.

Many businesses, including one of the town's oldest shops, were destroyed. As owner Tiffany Kidder Winn assessed the damage Wednesday at the Whaler's Locker gift store, she came upon a line of burned-out vehicles, some with charred bodies inside.

"It looked like they were trying to get out, but were stuck in traffic and couldn't get off Front Street,"

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she said. She later spotted a body leaning against a seawall.

Winn said the destruction was so widespread, "I couldn't even tell where I was, because all the landmarks were gone."

Fueled by a dry summer and strong winds from a passing hurricane, the fire started Tuesday and took Maui by surprise, racing through parched growth covering the island and then feasting on homes and anything else that lay in its path.

The official death toll of 53 as of Thursday makes this the deadliest U.S. wildfire since the 2018 Camp Fire in California, which killed at least 85 people and laid waste to the town of Paradise. The Hawaii toll could rise, though, as rescuers reach parts of the island that had been inaccessible due to the three ongoing fires, including the one in Lahaina that was 80% contained on Thursday, according to a Maui County news release. Dozens of people have been injured, some critically.

"We are still in life preservation mode. Search and rescue is still a primary concern," said Adam Weintraub, a spokesperson for Hawaii Emergency Management Agency.

Search and rescue teams still won't be able to reach certain areas until the fire lines are secure and access is safe, Weintraub added.

The flames left some people with mere minutes to act and led some to flee into the ocean. A Lahaina man, Bosco Bae, posted video on Facebook from Tuesday night that showed fire burning nearly every building on a street as sirens blared and windblown sparks raced by. Bae, who said he was one of the last people to leave the town, was evacuated to the island's main airport and was waiting to be allowed to return home.

Marlon Vasquez, a 31-year-old cook from Guatemala who came to the U.S. in January 2022, said that when he heard the fire alarms, it was already too late to flee in his car.

"I opened the door, and the fire was almost on top of us," he said from an evacuation center at a gymnasium. "We ran and ran. We ran almost the whole night and into the next day, because the fire didn't stop."

Vasquez and his brother Eduardo escaped via roads that were clogged with vehicles full of people. The smoke was so toxic that he vomited. He said he's not sure his roommates and neighbors made it to safety.

Lahaina residents Kamuela Kawaakoa and Iulia Yasso described their harrowing escape under smoke-filled skies. The couple and their 6-year-old son got back to their apartment after a quick dash to the supermarket for water, and only had time to grab a change of clothes and run as the bushes around them caught fire.

"We barely made it out," Kawaakoa, 34, said at an evacuation shelter, still unsure if anything was left of their apartment.

As the family fled, they called 911 when they saw the Hale Mahaolu senior living facility across the road erupt in flames.

Chelsey Vierra's great-grandmother, Louise Abihai, was living at Hale Mahaolu, and the family doesn't know if she got out. "She doesn't have a phone. She's 97 years old," Vierra said Thursday. "She can walk. She is strong."

Relatives are monitoring shelter lists and calling the hospital. "We got to find our loved one, but there's no communication here," said Vierra, who fled the flames. "We don't know who to ask about where she went."

Communications have been spotty on the island, with 911, landline and cellular service failing at times. Power was also out in parts of Maui.

Tourists were advised to stay away, and about 11,000 flew out of Maui on Wednesday with at least 1,500 more expected to leave Thursday, according to Ed Sniffen, state transportation director. Officials prepared the Hawaii Convention Center in Honolulu to receive thousands.

In coastal Kihei, southeast of Lahaina, wide swaths of ground glowed red with embers Wednesday night as flames continued to chew through trees and buildings. Gusty winds blew sparks over a black and orange patchwork of charred earth and still-crackling hot spots.

The fires were fanned by strong winds from Hurricane Dora passing far to the south. It's the latest in a series of disasters caused by extreme weather around the globe this summer. Experts say climate change is increasing the likelihood of such events.

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Wildfires aren't unusual in Hawaii, but the weather of the past few weeks created the fuel for a devastating blaze and, once ignited, the high winds created the disaster, said Thomas Smith an associate professor in Environmental Geography at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Hawaii's Big Island is also currently seeing blazes, Mayor Mitch Roth said, although there were no reports of injuries or destroyed homes there.

With communications hampered, it was difficult for many to check in with friends and family members. Some people were posting messages on social media. A Family Assistance Center opened at the Kahului Community Center for people looking for the missing.

Maj. Gen. Kenneth Hara, of the Hawaii State Department of Defense, said Wednesday night that officials were working to get communications restored, distribute water and possibly add law enforcement personnel. He said National Guard helicopters had dropped 150,000 gallons (568,000 liters) of water on the fires.

The Coast Guard said it rescued 14 people who jumped into the water to escape the flames and smoke.

Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen Jr. said Wednesday that officials hadn't yet begun investigating the immediate cause of the fires.

President Joe Biden declared a major disaster on Maui. Traveling in Utah on Thursday, he pledged that the federal response will ensure that "anyone who's lost a loved one, or whose home has been damaged or destroyed, is going to get help immediately." Biden promised to streamline requests for assistance and said the Federal Emergency Management Agency was "surging emergency personnel" on the island.

Two years after fall of Kabul, tens of thousands of Afghans languish in limbo waiting for US visas

By RAHIM FAIEZ and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Shukria Sediqi knew her days in safety were numbered. As a journalist who advocated for women's rights, she'd visited shelters and safe houses to talk to women who had fled abusive husbands. She went with them to court when they asked for a divorce.

According to the Taliban, who bar women from most public places, jobs and education, her work was immoral.

So when the Taliban swept into her hometown of Herat in western Afghanistan in August 2021 as the U.S. was pulling out of the country, she and her family fled.

First they tried to get on one of the last American flights out of Kabul. Then they tried to go to Tajikistan but had no visas. Finally in October 2021, after sleeping outside for two nights at the checkpoint into Pakistan among crowds of Afghans fleeing the Taliban, she and her family made it into the neighboring country.

The goal? Resettling in the U.S. via an American government program set up to help Afghans at risk under the Taliban because of their work with the U.S. government, media and aid agencies.

But two years after the U.S. left Afghanistan, Sediqi and tens of thousands of others are still waiting. While there has been some recent progress, processing U.S. visas for Afghans has moved painfully slowly. So far, only a small portion of Afghans have been resettled.

Many of the applicants who fled Afghanistan are running through savings, living in limbo in exile. They worry that the U.S., which had promised so much, has forgotten them.

"What happens to my children? What happens to me?" Sediqi asked. "Nobody knows."

During two decades in Afghanistan after its 2001 invasion, the U.S. relied on Afghans helping the U.S. government and military. Afghan journalists went to work at a growing number of media outlets. Afghans, often women working in remote areas, were the backbone of aid programs providing everything from food to tutoring.

Since 2009, the U.S. has had a special immigrant visa program to help Afghans like interpreters who worked directly with the U.S. government and the military.

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Then, in the waning days of the U.S. presence in the country, the Biden administration created two new programs for refugees, expanding the number of Afghans who could apply to resettle in the U.S.

The visas, known as P-1 and P-2, are for aid workers, journalists or others who didn't work directly for the U.S. government but who helped promote goals like democracy and an independent media that put them at risk under the Taliban.

The programs were intended to help people like Enayatullah Omid and his wife — Afghans who helped build the country after the 2001 Taliban ouster and were at "risk due to their U.S. affiliation" once the U.S. withdrew.

In 2011, Omid started a radio station in Baghlan province with the help of the U.S.-based media training nonprofit Internews and funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development. He was the station's general manager but did everything from reporting on-air to sweeping the floors at night. His wife, Homaira Omid Amiri, also worked at the station and was an activist in the province.

When the Taliban entered Baghlan on Aug. 9, 2021, Omid said he did one last thing: He burned documents to keep the Taliban from identifying his staff. Then he and his wife fled.

They stayed at shelters arranged by a committee to protect Afghan journalists until the Taliban shut them down. Internews referred Omid to the U.S. refugee program in the spring of 2022. Told he had to leave Afghanistan for his case to proceed, Omid and his wife went to Pakistan in July 2022.

Even in Pakistan Omid doesn't feel safe. Worried about the Taliban's reach, he's moved three times. There are police raids targeting Afghans whose visas have run out. As he spoke to The Associated Press, he was getting text messages about raids in another Islamabad neighborhood and wondered how much he should tell his already stressed wife.

He said America has a saying: Leave no one behind.

"We want them to do it. It shouldn't be only a saying for them," he said.

The American airlift in August 2021 carried more than 70,000 Afghans to safety, along with tens of thousands of Americans and citizens of other countries — plane after plane loaded with the lucky ones who managed to make their way through the massive crowds encircling Kabul airport. Most gained entry to the U.S. under a provision known as humanitarian parole.

Many more are still waiting. There are about 150,000 applicants to the special immigrant visa programs — not including family members. A report by the Association of Wartime Allies said at the current rate it would take 31 years to process them all.

Separately, there are 27,400 Afghans who are in the pipeline for the two refugee programs created in the final days of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, according to the State Department. That doesn't include family members, which potentially adds tens of thousands more. But since the U.S. left Afghanistan it's only admitted 6,862 of these Afghan refugees, mostly P-1 and P-2 visa applicants, according to State Department figures.

In June, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the U.S. has relocated about 24,000 Afghans since September 2021, apparently referring to all the resettlement programs combined.

Among the refugee program applicants are about 200 AP employees and their families, as well as staff of other American news organizations still struggling to relocate to the U.S.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said the U.S. refugee process in general can be agonizingly slow, and waits of as long as 10 years are common. Furthermore, former U.S. President Donald Trump gutted the refugee system, lowering the annual number of accepted refugees to its lowest ever.

Other challenges are unique to Afghan immigrants, said Vignarajah. Many Afghans destroyed documents during the Taliban takeover because they worried about reprisals. Now they need them to prove their case.

"The grim reality is that they'll likely be waiting for years on end and often in extremely precarious situations," Vignarajah said.

In a recent report, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, a body created by Congress to oversee government spending in Afghanistan, faulted the various resettlement programs set

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up for Afghans.

"Bureaucratic dysfunction and understaffing have undermined U.S. promises that these individuals would be protected in a timely manner, putting many thousands of Afghan allies at high risk," the report said.

It also criticized the lack of transparency surrounding the refugee programs, which it said has left Afghans considering whether to leave their country to await processing without "critical information" they need for such a crucial decision.

In a sign of the confusion surrounding the process, applicants like Omid and his wife were told they had to leave Afghanistan to apply, a costly endeavor involving selling their possessions, going to another country and waiting. They, like many others, ended up in Pakistan — one of the few countries that allows Afghans in — only to discover the U.S. was not processing refugee applications there.

That changed late last month when the State Department said it would begin processing applications in Pakistan.

However, Congress has so far failed to act on a bill that seeks to improve efforts to help Afghans still struggling to get to America.

The State Department declined an AP request for an interview but said in a statement it is committed to processing Afghan refugee visas. In June, Blinken applauded the efforts that have gone into helping Afghans resettle in America but emphasized the work continues.

At the same time, the Biden administration has made progress in recovering from the Trump-era curtailment of the refugee system. The administration raised the cap on refugees admitted to the U.S. to 125,000 a year, compared to Trump's 15,000 in his final year in office. It's unlikely the Biden administration will reach the cap this year, but the number of refugees and Afghans admitted is increasing.

Shawn VanDiver, who heads a coalition supporting Afghan resettlement efforts called #AfghanEvac, said he doesn't agree with criticism that the refugee programs are a failure.

They have gotten off to a "really slow start and there are vulnerable people that are waiting for this much needed relief," he said. "But I also know that ... from my conversations with government, that there is movement happening to push on this."

Left with little information, Afghans in Pakistan compare what they hear from U.S. officials about their cases in What's App chat groups that have organized social media protests demanding swifter U.S. action.

"Avoid putting our lives in danger again," one post read.

Pakistan was already home to millions of Afghans who fled decades of conflict when the Taliban returned to power and an estimated 600,000 more surged into the country. While many had valid travel documents, renewing them is a lengthy and costly process. Raids looking for Afghans with expired visas have heightened tensions.

Abdul, who declined to give his surname for fear of arrest because his visa has expired, worked as head of security for an aid group in Afghanistan that specialized in economic help for women. The risks were enormous; three colleagues were killed while he worked there.

One of his last tasks was getting the group's foreign staff to the airport to escape. The organization stayed open into 2022, when the Taliban detained Abdul for two weeks. After his release, a Taliban member said he could protect his family — if Abdul gave him his daughter in marriage.

Abdul knew it was time to leave. He, his wife and children fled that night to Iran. Late last year, when they were told their referral to one of the refugee programs had been approved, they went to Pakistan. Since then, there's been no information.

Their visas now expired, the family is terrified to leave the house.

"The future is completely dark," Abdul said. "I'm not afraid to die, I'm just really worried about the future of my children."

EPA weighs formal review of vinyl chloride, toxic chemical that burned in Ohio train derailment

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration says it could soon launch a formal evaluation of risks posed by vinyl chloride, the cancer-causing chemical that burned in a towering plume of toxic black smoke following the fiery train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.

The Environmental Protection Agency is set to review risks posed by a handful of chemicals later this year, and is considering chemicals used for plastic production as a key benchmark. Vinyl chloride is among a range of chemicals eligible for review, and "EPA could begin a risk evaluation on vinyl chloride in the near future," the agency said in a statement to The Associated Press.

If selected, EPA would study vinyl chloride to determine whether it poses an "unreasonable risk to human health or the environment," a process that would take at least three years.

Environmental and public health activists cheered the development, saying EPA should have banned vinyl chloride years ago.

"If one positive thing can come out of the toxic train derailment in East Palestine — and I would argue nothing positive has come out of it so far — it is for the Biden administration to use their existing legal authority to start the process to ban vinyl chloride," said Judith Enck, a former regional EPA administrator and president of Beyond Plastics, an advocacy group that seeks to end plastic pollution.

"That accident was a chilling warning that we must act now to ban petrochemicals like vinyl chloride, and keep communities safe from known carcinogens," added Heather McTeer Toney, another former regional EPA administrator who leads a separate group called Beyond Petrochemicals.

Vinyl chloride is a flammable gas used to make polyvinyl chloride plastic, better known as PVC. The chemical is found in plastic PVC pipes, as well as vinyl siding, packaging and a range of consumer goods, including furniture, car parts, shower curtains and toys used by children and pets.

Inhalation of vinyl chloride has been linked to liver cancer and other health problems, according to the National Cancer Institute, and its use has long been banned in cosmetics, hair spray and other personal products. PVC plastic is not a known or suspected carcinogen, the agency said.

The Vinyl Institute, a trade group that represents manufacturers, called the effort to ban vinyl chloride misguided.

A July 27 news conference at EPA headquarters, attended by Enck, Toney and other activists, was little more than a "publicity stunt that irresponsibly ignores decades of credible science" showing that vinyl chloride is "safely and responsibly manufactured in the United States," Ned Monroe, president and CEO of the Vinyl Institute, said in a statement.

"Regrettably, Beyond Plastics has chosen to use the tragic events of East Palestine to advance deceptive and disproven claims about our industry that only serve to mislead the public," Monroe added.

Vinyl chloride monomer is an intermediary chemical found in PVC products used every day, Monroe said, "including PVC pipes that deliver clean drinking water, vinyl windows, siding for energy-efficient homes and lifesaving medical products like IV blood bags."

Debate over vinyl chloride has simmered for years, but gained a new urgency after the Feb. 3 derailment of a 50-car Norfolk Southern freight train in East Palestine. Three days later, emergency crews released toxic vinyl chloride from five tank cars and burned it to keep them from exploding.

That sent a billowing plume of black smoke over the town near the Pennsylvania border and prompted the evacuation of about half of its 5,000 residents. Months later, residents are concerned about lingering impacts on health, even though state and federal officials say tests show the town's air and water are safe.

Since an evacuation order was lifted near the derailment site, vinyl chloride has not been found in the community at or above an intermediate screening level, the EPA said. The intermediate level represents an estimate of exposure to a contaminant that is not expected to cause non-cancer health effects over a period of at least 15 days.

Jessica Conard, an East Palestine resident who lives near the crash site, called the Ohio train derailment

"a very grim warning." The crash demonstrates that the rail industry "values profit over human lives and the environment," while state and federal regulators "failed to keep the industry in check," she said.

Conard faulted what she called "an insatiable demand" by Americans for plastic products that has "driven the need for increased transport of these hazardous substances, placing communities like mine at risk every single day."

Conard and other activists delivered more than 27,500 signatures to the EPA urging a ban on vinyl chloride.

"We're here today for one reason and one reason only: to tell the EPA that it's time now. We can't wait to ban vinyl chloride. We can't slow-walk this," said Daniel Winston, co-executive director of River Valley Organizing, a community group in eastern Ohio.

Winston, who lives 17 miles from the derailment site, said the controlled burn, conducted just three days after the derailment, allowed Norfolk Southern to quickly reopen the tracks "so they could get their profits back up. And now a community and the surrounding area is affected by this in a way that people are still getting sick today."

The Feb. 6 burn sparked worries that it could have formed dioxins, a known carcinogen created from burning chlorinated carbon materials.

"Vinyl chloride is bad, dioxins are worse as carcinogens and that comes from burning," said Neil Donahue, a chemistry professor at Carnegie Mellon University.

Dioxins are a group of persistent environmental pollutants that last in the ground and body for years and have been one of the major environmental problems and controversies in the United States.

EPA ordered testing for the highly toxic compounds after the derailment and said results so far suggest there's a low chance that dioxins were released following the derailment.

Judge Chutkan to hear arguments in protective order fight in Trump's 2020 election conspiracy case

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST, MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal judge overseeing the 2020 election conspiracy case against Donald Trump will hear arguments Friday over a request by prosecutors for a protective order seeking to bar the former president from publicly disclosing evidence shared by the government.

The protective order sought by special counsel Jack Smith's team has become an early flashpoint in the case accusing the Republican of illegally scheming to subvert the will of voters and cling to power after he lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

Protective orders aren't unusual in criminal cases, and they're different from "gag orders" that bar parties from talking publicly about an ongoing case outside the courtroom. But lawyers for Trump — who has railed against prosecutors and U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan on social media and during campaign events — say the proposed protective order goes too far and would restrict Trump's free speech rights.

In seeking the protective order, prosecutors pointed to a post on Trump's Truth Social social media platform in which the former president promised he would be "coming after" those who "go after" him. Prosecutors expressed concern that Trump might share secret grand jury information that could have a "harmful chilling effect on witnesses."

The hearing in Washington's federal court will be the first time the lawyers appear before Chutkan, an appointee of President Barack Obama who has a reputation for being one of the toughest punishers of defendants charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Trump is not expected to attend the hearing.

He pleaded not guilty last week before a magistrate judge to charges including conspiracy to defraud the United States and obstructing Congress' certification of Biden's electoral victory.

The protective order would set rules on what Trump and his defense team can do with evidence handed over by prosecutors. Prosecutors' proposal seeks to prevent Trump and his lawyers from disclosing those materials to anyone other than people on his legal team, possible witnesses, the witnesses' lawyers or others approved by the court.

Trump's team wants the judge to impose a more limited order that would bar the public release only of materials deemed "sensitive" — such as grand jury documents. They wrote in court papers that the need to protect sensitive information "does not require a blanket gag order over all documents produced by the government."

Prosecutors have accused Trump of objecting to their proposal because he wants to be able to use the government's evidence to "try the case in the media rather than in the courtroom."

Trump has characterized the case and two others he faces as efforts to hurt his campaign to reclaim the White House in 2024. His legal team has indicated that it will argue that he relied on the advice of attorneys around him in 2020 and that Trump had a right to challenge an election that he believed had been stolen.

Trump has already said he will push to have the case moved out of Washington, claiming he can't get a fair trial in the heavily Democratic city that voted overwhelmingly for Biden. But it's extremely difficult to get a case moved, and judges in Washington — including the one overseeing his case — have repeatedly rejected similar efforts by Trump supporters charged in the Jan. 6 Capitol attack.

Prosecutors on Thursday told the judge they are seeking a Jan. 2 trial date in the case. Trump's lawyers have yet to suggest a trial date but have indicated they will seek to slow down the case. The judge is expected to choose a date at the next hearing scheduled for Aug. 28.

Trump is already scheduled to go to trial in March in a case in New York stemming from hush money payments made during the 2016 campaign. The former president is also scheduled to go to trial in May in another case brought by Smith over his handling of classified documents found at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida.

A rocket with a lunar landing craft blasts off on Russia's first moon mission in nearly 50 years

By JIM HEINTZ and EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — A rocket carrying a lunar landing craft blasted off Friday on Russia's first moon mission in nearly 50 years, racing to land on Earth's satellite ahead of an Indian spacecraft.

The launch from Russia's Vostochny spaceport in the Far East of the Luna-25 craft to the moon is Russia's first since 1976 when it was part of the Soviet Union.

The Russian lunar lander is expected to reach the moon on Aug. 23, about the same day as an Indian craft which was launched on July 14. The Russian spacecraft will take about 5.5 days to travel to the moon's vicinity, then spend three to seven days orbiting at about 100 kilometers (62 miles) before heading for the surface.

Only three governments have managed successful moon landings: the Soviet Union, the United States and China. India and Russia are aiming to be the first to land at the moon's south pole.

Roscosmos, Russia's space agency, said it wants to show Russia "is a state capable of delivering a payload to the moon," and "ensure Russia's guaranteed access to the moon's surface."

"Study of the moon is not the goal," said Vitaly Egorov, a popular Russian space analyst. "The goal is political competition between two superpowers — China and the USA — and a number of other countries which also want to claim the title of space superpower."

Sanctions imposed on Russia after it invaded Ukraine make it harder for it to access Western technology, impacting its space program. The Luna-25 was initially meant to carry a small moon rover but that idea was abandoned to reduce the weight of the craft for improved reliability, analysts say.

"Foreign electronics are lighter, domestic electronics are heavier," Egorov said. "While scientists might have the task of studying lunar water, for Roscosmos the main task is simply to land on the moon — to recover lost Soviet expertise and learn how to perform this task in a new era."

The Luna-25 launched flawlessly from the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Russia's Far East, according to video feed from Roscosmos.

The spaceport is a pet project of Russian President Vladimir Putin and is key to his efforts to make

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Russia a space superpower and move Russian launches from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. A previous Indian attempt to land at the moon's south pole in 2019 ended when the lander crashed into the moon's surface.

The lunar south pole is of particular interest to scientists, who believe the permanently shadowed polar craters may contain water. The frozen water in the rocks could be transformed by future explorers into air and rocket fuel.

"The moon is largely untouched and the whole history of the moon is written on its face," said Ed Bloomer, an astronomer at Britain's Royal Observatory, Greenwich. "It is pristine and like nothing you get on Earth. It is its own laboratory."

The Luna-25 is to take samples of moon rock and dust. The samples are crucial to understanding the moon's environment ahead of building any base there, "otherwise we could be building things and having to shut them down six months later because everything has effectively been sand-blasted," Bloomer said.

DeSantis is resetting his campaign again. Some Republicans worry his message is getting in the way

By STEVE PEOPLES, THOMAS BEAUMONT and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

CORALVILLE, Iowa (AP) — Ron DeSantis largely dismissed his own decision to replace his campaign leadership team as he returned to Iowa on Thursday in the midst of a weeks-long reset. The Republican presidential hopeful also made no mention of the two rounds of campaign layoffs he made recently in response to unexpected fundraising troubles.

Instead, the Florida governor leaned into his central message — a self-described "war on woke" — and flashed a big smile as he courted an audience of roughly 200 cheering Republicans gathered at a family restaurant for the first of four scheduled stops on his latest bus tour through the first-in-the-nation caucus state.

"We're clicking. We're doing well," DeSantis told reporters after a fiery speech, dismissing questions about the turmoil that has plagued his White House bid in recent weeks. He said the average voter is far more focused on his plans for the country than his campaign leadership. "This process stuff, I think, is way overblown."

Whether DeSantis acknowledges his challenges or not, they have not gone away.

Less than five months before the first votes are cast in Iowa's opening presidential contest, a growing chorus of would-be supporters within his own party is questioning DeSantis' core message and political instincts amid a prolonged effort to stabilize his campaign that has involved three significant personnel decisions so far — the two rounds of cuts and replacement of the campaign manager. At the same time, new signs of tension have emerged between DeSantis' formal campaign and an allied super PAC that's now planning to dramatically increase spending on paid advertising to help make up for DeSantis' financial challenges.

"It remains to be seen whether or not he can save his campaign. He's not run a particularly effective one to date, obviously," said Eric Levine, a New York-based Republican donor who has been calling for the GOP to unify behind an alternative to former President Donald Trump. "He needs to be able to speak to a broader range of issues than the culture wars. To me, that is fundamentally at the core of his problem."

That message still resonates with many Iowa Republicans, who frequently mention DeSantis as one of their top two or three picks heading into the caucus. But most successful campaigns require steady leadership and donors who are willing to stick out the tough moments — and that's where DeSantis appears vulnerable.

After cutting one-third of his staff last month, DeSantis this week replaced campaign manager Generra Peck with James Uthmeier, his chief of staff in the Florida governor's office. Uthmeier, who has never managed a campaign, was a central figure in some of DeSantis' most controversial moves as governor, including the decision to fly migrants from Texas to an island off the Massachusetts coast last year.

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As part of the leadership overhaul, DeSantis tapped veteran political operative David Polyansky, a senior adviser to his allied Never Back Down super PAC, to serve as deputy campaign manager. Some close to DeSantis' operation believe that while Uthmeier has the campaign manager title and DeSantis' trust, Polyansky will be effectively running the campaign given his extensive experience in presidential politics, especially in Iowa.

While DeSantis shrugs off his challenges, his allies are aware that multiple rounds of staffing cuts and stagnant polling numbers are undermining the campaign's central message that DeSantis is better positioned than Trump to defeat President Joe Biden next fall.

Still, the DeSantis campaign tried to project optimism in a memo shared with campaign supporters and donors earlier in the week, which was obtained by The Associated Press.

"During the last few weeks, we have seen great success as a result of the changes we have made to run an insurgent campaign focused on the early nominating states," the memo says, highlighting an increased reliance on interviews with mainstream media to spread his message and a new focus on smaller, more intimate events organized by the super PAC at no cost to the campaign.

In adopting the new strategy, DeSantis is testing the limits of federal laws that prohibit direct coordination between campaigns and super PACs by leaning more heavily on the Never Back Down super PAC, which can raise and spend unlimited sums of money — unlike the campaign, which is bound by strict fundraising limits.

Never Back Down has effectively adopted the role of candidate travel organizer, having chauffeured him, his wife and children by bus to roughly 20 Iowa events over the past month, including this weekend's three-day trip. Technically, DeSantis is only a guest of the super PAC, which is paying for the transportation and setup costs.

In another shift, the super PAC is increasing its Iowa advertising investment, which was never the super PAC's primary function, in direct response to the campaign's cash crunch. Reports of ad purchases in Iowa for the coming weeks show the super PAC tripling its spending in the state.

DeSantis' increasing reliance on the super PAC comes as Never Back Down faces the prospect of financial trouble of its own. The organization's biggest individual donor, hotel entrepreneur Robert Bigelow, told Reuters last week that he would not donate any more money unless the Florida governor attracts new major donors and adopts a more moderate approach.

"Extremism isn't going to get you elected," Bigelow said.

Billionaire hedge fund manager Ken Griffin, who told Politico last year that he was ready to back DeSantis if he ran for president, has not met with DeSantis or donated to his campaign since its May launch, according to a person familiar with his thinking who requested anonymity to disclose private deliberations.

Griffin has been unsettled by DeSantis' policies about teaching gender and sexuality in Florida schools and his ongoing fight with Disney, according to the person. The Republican mega-donor is also concerned that DeSantis has been pursuing policies that undermined individual rights and liberties.

Griffin declined to comment on any particular campaign, but said in a statement that he was "assessing how the policies of each candidate will strengthen our democracy."

Meanwhile, DeSantis is showing no interest in backing off his focus on culture wars, which are popular with the GOP's most passionate voters and remained a central focus of his stump speech this week in Iowa.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, he said he gets a lot of questions about culture and made a direct connection between cultural issues and the economy. Specifically, he pointed to his opposition to ESG — or environmental, social and governance investments that are guided by corporations' policies.

"That is taking an ideological agenda and using the economy to try to advance it," DeSantis said. "That's bad because those policies are things that most Iowans don't support and that I don't support."

DeSantis allies are also divided about his primary strategy.

The super PAC continues to stress its commitment to winning or finishing a close second in the first three states — Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina — while they spend big to build out a pro-DeSantis political organization in several of the so-called "Super Tuesday" states that vote on March 5. Yet DeSantis' campaign has shifted sharply toward Iowa in recent weeks.

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By the end of Friday, DeSantis will have appeared at more than two dozen separate events in Iowa since mid-July. That's compared to just two events in New Hampshire and South Carolina over the same period.

On Thursday, DeSantis noted that he was touching down in his 31st Iowa county and promised to campaign in all 99 on Iowa's sprawling checkerboard before the state's Jan. 15 presidential caucuses. But when asked, he avoided predicting a clear victory over Trump, who is the early heavy favorite.

"What you have to do is you have to win a majority of the delegates, you know," DeSantis told reporters after a brief stop in Cedar County's Tipton Family Restaurant. In Iowa, he added, "I think we're ahead of where we thought we would be, thus far."

Millions of kids are missing weeks of school as attendance tanks across the US

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. (AP) — When in-person school resumed after pandemic closures, Rousmery Negrón and her 11-year-old son both noticed a change: School seemed less welcoming.

Parents were no longer allowed in the building without appointments, she said, and punishments were more severe. Everyone seemed less tolerant, more angry. Negrón's son told her he overheard a teacher mocking his learning disabilities, calling him an ugly name.

Her son didn't want to go to school anymore. And she didn't feel he was safe there.

He would end up missing more than five months of sixth grade.

Across the country, students have been absent at record rates since schools reopened during the pandemic. More than a quarter of students missed at least 10% of the 2021-22 school year, making them chronically absent, according to the most recent data available. Before the pandemic, only 15% of students missed that much school.

All told, an estimated 6.5 million additional students became chronically absent, according to the data, which was compiled by Stanford University education professor Thomas Dee in partnership with The Associated Press. Taken together, the data from 40 states and Washington, D.C., provides the most comprehensive accounting of absenteeism nationwide. Absences were more prevalent among Latino, Black and low-income students, according to Dee's analysis.

The absences come on top of time students missed during school closures and pandemic disruptions. They cost crucial classroom time as schools work to recover from massive learning setbacks.

Absent students miss out not only on instruction but also on all the other things schools provide — meals, counseling, socialization. In the end, students who are chronically absent — missing 18 or more days a year, in most places — are at higher risk of not learning to read and eventually dropping out.

"The long-term consequences of disengaging from school are devastating. And the pandemic has absolutely made things worse and for more students," said Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, a nonprofit addressing chronic absenteeism.

In seven states, the rate of chronically absent kids doubled for the 2021-22 school year, from 2018-19, before the pandemic. Absences worsened in every state with available data — notably, the analysis found growth in chronic absenteeism did not correlate strongly with state COVID rates.

Kids are staying home for myriad reasons — finances, housing instability, illness, transportation issues, school staffing shortages, anxiety, depression, bullying and generally feeling unwelcome at school.

And the effects of online learning linger: School relationships have frayed, and after months at home, many parents and students don't see the point of regular attendance.

"For almost two years, we told families that school can look different and that schoolwork could be accomplished in times outside of the traditional 8-to-3 day. Families got used to that," said Elmer Roldan, of Communities in Schools of Los Angeles, which helps schools follow up with absent students.

When classrooms closed in March 2020, Negrón in some ways felt relieved her two sons were home in Springfield. Since the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, Negrón, who grew up in Puerto Rico, had become convinced mainland American schools were dangerous.

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A year after in-person instruction resumed, she said, staff placed her son in a class for students with disabilities, citing hyperactive and distracted behavior. He felt unwelcome and unsafe. Now, it seemed to Negrón, there was danger inside school, too.

"He needs to learn," said Negrón, a single mom who works as a cook at another school. "He's very intelligent. But I'm not going to waste my time, my money on uniforms, for him to go to a school where he's just going to fail."

For people who've long studied chronic absenteeism, the post-COVID era feels different. Some of the things that prevent students from getting to school are consistent — illness, economic distress — but "something has changed," said Todd Langager, who helps San Diego County schools address absenteeism. He sees students who already felt unseen, or without a caring adult at school, feel further disconnected.

Alaska led in absenteeism, with 48.6% of students missing significant amounts of school. Alaska Native students' rate was higher, 56.5%.

Those students face poverty and a lack of mental health services, as well as a school calendar that isn't aligned to traditional hunting and fishing activities, said Heather Powell, a teacher and Alaska Native. Many students are raised by grandparents who remember the government forcing Native children into boarding schools.

"Our families aren't valuing education because it isn't something that's ever valued us," Powell said.

In New York, Marisa Kosek said son James lost the relationships fostered at his school — and with them, his desire to attend class altogether. James, 12, has autism and struggled first with online learning and then with a hybrid model. During absences, he'd see his teachers in the neighborhood. They encouraged him to return, and he did.

But when he moved to middle school in another neighborhood, he didn't know anyone. He lost interest and missed more than 100 days of sixth grade. The next year, his mom pushed for him to repeat the grade — and he missed all but five days.

His mother, a high school teacher, enlisted help: relatives, therapists, New York's crisis unit. But James just wanted to stay home. He's anxious because he knows he's behind, and he's lost his stamina.

"Being around people all day in school and trying to act 'normal' is tiring," said Kosek. She's more hopeful now that James has been accepted to a private residential school that specializes in students with autism.

Some students had chronic absences because of medical and staffing issues. Juan Ballina, 17, has epilepsy; a trained staff member must be nearby to administer medication in case of a seizure. But post-COVID-19, many school nurses retired or sought better pay in hospitals, exacerbating a nationwide shortage.

Last year, Juan's nurse was on medical leave. His school couldn't find a substitute. He missed more than 90 days at his Chula Vista, California, high school.

"I was lonely," Ballina said. "I missed my friends."

Last month, school started again. So far, Juan's been there, with his nurse. But his mom, Carmen Ballina, said the effects of his absence persist: "He used to read a lot more. I don't think he's motivated anymore."

Another lasting effect from the pandemic: Educators and experts say some parents and students have been conditioned to stay home at the slightest sign of sickness.

Renee Slater's daughter rarely missed school before the pandemic. But last school year, the straight-A middle schooler insisted on staying home 20 days, saying she just didn't feel well.

"As they get older, you can't physically pick them up into the car — you can only take away privileges, and that doesn't always work," said Slater, who teaches in the rural California district her daughter attends. "She doesn't dislike school, it's just a change in mindset."

Most states have yet to release attendance data from 2022-23, the most recent school year. Based on the few that have shared figures, it seems the chronic-absence trend may have long legs. In Connecticut and Massachusetts, chronic absenteeism remained double its pre-pandemic rate.

In Negrón's hometown of Springfield, 39% of students were chronically absent last school year, an improvement from 50% the year before. Rates are higher for students with disabilities.

While Negrón's son was out of school, she said, she tried to stay on top of his learning. She picked up

a weekly folder of worksheets and homework; he couldn't finish because he didn't know the material.

"He was struggling so much, and the situation was putting him in a down mood," Negrón said.

Last year, she filed a complaint asking officials to give her son compensatory services and pay for him to attend a private special education school. The judge sided with the district.

Now, she's eyeing the new year with dread. Her son doesn't want to return. Negrón said she'll consider it only if the district grants her request for him to study in a mainstream classroom with a personal aide. The district told AP it can't comment on individual student cases due to privacy considerations.

Negrón wishes she could homeschool her sons, but she has to work and fears they'd suffer from isolation. "If I had another option, I wouldn't send them to school," she said.

Ecuador arrests 6 Colombians in slaying of presidential candidate as violence weighs on nation

By GONZALO SOLANO and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — Ecuador's transformation into a major drug trafficking hub and the ensuing three-year surge of violence is weighing on the nation following the killing of a presidential candidate whose life's work was to fight crime and corruption.

Six Colombian men were arrested Thursday in connection with the fatal shooting of Fernando Villavicencio a day earlier in the capital, Quito. He was not a front-runner in the race, but his assassination in broad daylight less than two weeks before the special presidential election underscored the challenge Ecuador's next leader will face in any attempt to curb gangs and cartels whose activities have claimed thousands of lives.

A report of the men's arrest reviewed by The Associated Press showed the men were captured hiding in a house in Quito. Law enforcement officers, according to the report, seized four shotguns, a 5.56-mm rifle, ammunition and three grenades as well as a vehicle and one motorcycle.

Ecuador's Interior Minister Juan Zapata described the killing as a "political crime of a terrorist nature" aimed at sabotaging the Aug. 20 election. The police report doesn't say whether the Colombians are members of a criminal group. But Zapata, who confirmed the arrests of some foreigners without giving their nationalities, said the suspects were linked to organized crime.

Villavicencio, 59, had said he was threatened by affiliates of Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, one of a slew of international organized crime groups that now operate in Ecuador. He said his campaign represented a threat to such groups.

"The Ecuadorian people are crying, and Ecuador is mortally wounded," said Patricio Zuquilanda, Villavicencio's campaign adviser.

With almost 400 miles (640 kilometers) of Pacific coast, shipping ports and some key exports, Ecuador has been turned by international traffickers from a minor player in the drug business into a big regional hub for the smuggling of cocaine.

An intensifying struggle over power and territory since the pandemic has seen drug cartels battle among themselves and enlist local gangs and even recruit children, leaving Ecuadorians reeling from unprecedented violence.

"Ecuador has the geographical misfortune of being sandwiched between Colombia and Peru, the two largest cocaine producers in the world, and underlying it all is a certain degree of institutional weakness in the judiciary, police and military," said Cynthia Arnson, a distinguished fellow at the Washington-based Wilson Center and an expert in Latin America.

She added the killing shows "criminal actors most likely connected to organized crime in Ecuador feel that they can act with impunity, going as far as to assassinate an anti-corruption political candidate."

The country's National Police tallied 3,568 violent deaths in the first six months of this year, far more than the 2,042 reported during the same period in 2022. That year ended with 4,600 violent deaths, the country's highest in history and double the total in 2021.

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Just last month, the mayor of the port city of Manta was shot to death. President Guillermo Lasso then declared a state of emergency covering two provinces and the country's prison system in an effort to stem the violence.

Video of the political rally posted on social media shows Villavicencio leaving surrounded by guards. He is then seen getting into a white pickup truck before gunshots are heard, followed by screams and commotion around the truck.

Zuquilanda said Villavicencio had received at least three death threats before the shooting and reported them to authorities, resulting in one detention.

Lasso said the candidate's killers threw a grenade into the street to cover their flight, but it did not explode. Police later destroyed the grenade with a controlled explosion.

Lasso declared three days of national mourning and a state of emergency that involves deploying additional military personnel throughout the country.

Villavicencio, one of eight candidates running for president, was the candidate of the Build Ecuador Movement. In his final speech before he was killed, Villavicencio promised a roaring crowd that he would fight corruption, including among police forces, and imprison more criminals.

"Here I am showing my face. I'm not scared of them," Villavicencio said in a statement before his death, naming detained crime boss José Adolfo Macías by his alias, "Fito."

People waiting for buses in Guayaquil, a port city south of Quito that has been the epicenter of gang violence, expressed shock over Villavicencio's killing.

"It shows that the violence in the country is increasing," pharmacist Leidy Aguirre, 28, said. "Politicians supposedly have more security than citizens and this shows that not even they are safe."

Villavicencio's security detail included police officers and private security guards.

Elsewhere, people went about their lives by taking outdoor exercise classes and daily walks because they are resigned to live amid the violence. Among them was Marjorie Lino, who lamented the danger as she walked with a friend along the main road that leads to one of the country's most violent neighborhoods.

"To us as women, our husbands tell us not to go out here, but it doesn't matter (because) when one is going to die, one dies even at the door of one's house," Lino, a 38-year-old housewife, said. She does not believe that any of the presidential candidates will be able to end the violence.

Villavicencio was an independent journalist who investigated corruption in previous governments before entering politics as an anti-graft campaigner. He was one of the country's most critical voices of the 2007-2017 government of President Rafael Correa.

Villavicencio, who was married and is survived by five children, filed many judicial complaints against high-ranking members of the Correa government, including against the ex-president himself. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison for defamation over his criticisms of Correa, and fled to Indigenous territory in Ecuador, later receiving asylum in neighboring Peru.

One of Villavicencio's investigations led to criminal proceedings and an eight-year prison sentence on corruption charges against Correa. The former president, who moved to Belgium in 2017, was sentenced in absentia in April 2020.

Edison Romo, a former military intelligence colonel, said the anti-corruption complaints made Villavicencio "a threat to international criminal organizations."

The country has faced a series of political upheavals in recent years. A snap election was called after Lasso, a conservative former banker, dissolved the National Assembly by decree in May, in a move to avoid being impeached over allegations that he failed to intervene to end a faulty contract between the state-owned oil transport company and a private tanker company.

Authorities said that at least nine others were injured in Wednesday's shooting, including a congressional candidate.

Arnson said the killing of Villavicencio could have a chilling effect in the upcoming election.

"It's a message to Ecuadorian society as a whole that those who attempt to stand up to this kind of corruption and and illegality can pay with their lives," she said.

US suicides hit an all-time high last year

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — About 49,500 people took their own lives last year in the U.S., the highest number ever, according to new government data posted Thursday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which posted the numbers, has not yet calculated a suicide rate for the year, but available data suggests suicides are more common in the U.S. than at any time since the dawn of World War II.

"There's something wrong. The number should not be going up," said Christina Wilbur, a 45-year-old Florida woman whose son shot himself to death last year.

"My son should not have died," she said. "I know it's complicated, I really do. But we have to be able to do something. Something that we're not doing. Because whatever we're doing right now is not helping."

Experts caution that suicide is complicated, and that recent increases might be driven by a range of factors, including higher rates of depression and limited availability of mental health services.

But a main driver is the growing availability of guns, said Jill Harkavy-Friedman, senior vice president of research at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Suicide attempts involving guns end in death far more often than those with other means, and gun sales have boomed — placing firearms in more and more homes.

A recent Johns Hopkins University analysis used preliminary 2022 data to calculate that the nation's overall gun suicide rate rose last year to an all-time high. For the first time, the gun suicide rate among Black teens surpassed the rate among white teens, the researchers found.

"I don't know if you can talk about suicide without talking about firearms," Harkavy-Friedman said.

U.S. suicides steadily rose from the early 2000s until 2018, when the national rate hit its highest level since 1941. That year saw about 48,300 suicide deaths — or 14.2 for every 100,000 Americans.

The rate fell slightly in 2019. It dropped again in 2020, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some experts tied that to a phenomenon seen in the early stages of wars and natural disasters, when people pull together and support each other.

But in 2021, suicides rose 4%. Last year, according to the new data, the number jumped by more than 1,000, to 49,449 — about a 3% increase vs. the year before. The provisional data comes from U.S. death certificates and is considered almost complete, but it may change slightly as death information is reviewed in the months ahead.

The largest increases were seen in older adults. Deaths rose nearly 7% in people ages 45 to 64, and more than 8% in people 65 and older. White men, in particular, have very high rates, the CDC said.

Many middle-aged and elderly people experience problems like losing a job or losing a spouse, and it's important to reduce stigma and other obstacles to them getting assistance, said Dr. Debra Houry, the CDC's chief medical officer.

Suicides in adults ages 25 to 44 grew about 1%. The new data indicates that suicide became the second leading cause of death in that age group in 2022, up from No. 4 in 2021.

Despite the grim statistics, some say there is reason for optimism. A national crisis line launched a year ago, meaning anyone in the U.S. can dial 988 to reach mental health specialists.

The CDC is expanding a suicide program to fund more prevention work in different communities. And there's growing awareness of the issue and that it's OK to ask for help, health officials say.

There was a more than 8% drop in suicides in people ages 10 to 24 in 2022. That may be due to increased attention to youth mental health issues and a push for schools and others to focus on the problem, CDC officials said.

But even the smaller number masks tragedy for families.

Christina Wilbur lost her 21-year-old son, Cale, on June 16 last year. He died in her home in Land O' Lakes, Florida.

Cale Wilbur had lost two friends and an uncle to suicide and had been dealing with depression. On that horrible morning, he and his mother were having an argument. She had confronted him about his drug use, his mother said. She left his bedroom and when she returned he had a gun.

"I was begging him not to, and to calm down," she said. "It looked like he relaxed for a second, but then he killed himself."

She describes her life since as black hole of emptiness and sorrow, and had found it hard to talk to friends or even family about Cale.

"There's just this huge 6-foot-2 hole, everywhere," she said. "Everything reminds me of what's missing."

It's hard to find professionals to help, and those that are around can be expensive, she said. She turned to support groups, including an organization called Alliance of Hope for Suicide Loss Survivors that operates a 24/7 online forum.

"There's nothing like being with people who get it," she said.

Tropical storm weakens after leaving scattered damage in South Korea, which turns to Scout concert

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Flights and trains resumed and power was mostly restored Friday after a tropical storm blew through South Korea, which was preparing a pop concert for 40,000 Scouts whose global Jamboree was disrupted by the weather.

Much of Khanun's damage was concentrated in the country's southern and eastern regions, where several cities and towns saw 30 to 40 centimeters (12 to 16 inches) of rain. Dozens of houses and buildings were damaged, roads were closed and at least one death was reported.

Khanun had weakened by the time it arrived in the densely populated Seoul metropolitan area Thursday night, and it blew into North Korea early Friday as a tropical depression.

South Korean officials lifted a nationwide alert over the storm and were channeling much of their administrative resources into throwing a K-pop concert at a Seoul soccer stadium Friday evening as the closing event of the World Scout Jamboree.

The event had been held at a coastal campsite before Khanun forced a mass relocation efforts to house the Scouts in university dormitories, government and corporate training centers and hotels in the greater Seoul region and nearby areas.

No major storm damage has been reported in Seoul, where rain was continuing through the morning. In the nearby port city of Incheon, workers responded to flooded homes and collapsed walls.

In the southern inland city of Daegu, a 67-year-old man found near a bloated stream was later pronounced dead and workers were still searching for another person who was swept into a stream while using a wheelchair.

In Gangwon province, a mountainous region on the east coast that was drenched with some of Khanun's heaviest rain, emergency workers in the seaside cities of Gangneung and Sokcho waded across rivers of brown, thigh-high water covering what used to be streets.

Nearly 16,000 people, mostly in southern regions, had been forced to evacuate from the storm but around 9,700 have returned home as of Friday, according to the Ministry of the Interior and Safety.

The storm damaged or destroyed at least 64 roads and damaged around 50 homes and buildings. Power was restored to most of the 46,484 homes that lost electricity, the ministry said.

Authorities were continuing to restrict access to nearly 700 motorways as rain continued to fall, but there weren't any cancellations in commercial flights scheduled for Friday.

North Korea's state media had no immediate reports about damage caused by the storm. State media has previously described nationwide efforts to strengthen the monitoring of roads, railways, bridges and coastlines, and to employ measures to protect factory machines and crops.

Two rival robotaxi services win approval to operate throughout San Francisco despite safety concerns

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — California regulators on Thursday approved an expansion that will allow two rival robotaxi services to operate throughout San Francisco at all hours, despite safety worries spurred by recurring problems with unexpected stops and other erratic behavior that resulted in unmanned vehicles blocking traffic, including emergency vehicles.

The state's Public Utilities Commission voted to approve rival services from Cruise and Waymo to operate around-the-clock service. It will make San Francisco first major U.S. city with two fleets of driverless vehicles competing for passengers against ride-hailing and taxi services dependent on humans to operate the cars.

It is a distinction that San Francisco officials didn't want, largely because of the headaches that Cruise and Waymo have been causing in the city while testing their robotaxis on a restricted basis during the past year.

But it ended in a major victory for Cruise — a subsidiary of General Motors — and Waymo — a spinoff from a secret project at Google — after spending years and billions of dollars honing a technology that they believe will revolutionize transportation. Both companies view approval of their San Francisco expansions as a major springboard to launching similar services in other congested cities that would benefit from a technology that they contend will be more reliable, convenient and cheaper than ride-hailing and taxi services reliant on human drivers.

"We can't wait for more San Franciscans to experience the mobility, safety, sustainability and accessibility benefits of full autonomy for themselves — all at the touch of a button," Waymo co-CEO Tekedra Mawakana said in a blog post.

During five-and-half hours of public comments at Thursday's meeting, many speakers derided the robotaxis as annoying nuisances at best and dangerous menaces at worst. Others vented their frustration about San Francisco being transformed into a "tech playground" and the equivalent of an "ant farm" for haphazard experimentation.

Supporters of the robotaxis also stepped up to passionately defend the technology as a leap forward that will keep San Francisco on the cutting edge of technology, while helping more disabled people who are unable to drive to get around town and reducing the risks posed by drunk driving. One speaker predicted that unleashing the robotaxis would create a tourist attraction that could become as popular as rides on the fabled cable cars that have been navigating the city's streets for 150 years. Waymo says there is so much interest in its robotaxis that it has already built up a waiting list of more than 100,000 people vying to take a driverless ride through the streets of San Francisco.

The rising fears about the safety of the robotaxis had come into sharper focus during a preliminary hearing Monday that included a sobering appearance by San Francisco Fire Department Chief Jeanine Nicholson, who warned regulators that the robotaxis had been repeatedly undermining firefighters' ability to respond to emergencies. .

"They are still not ready for prime time because of the way they have impacted our operations," Nicholson said during a four-hour hearing held Monday in advance of Thursday's pivotal vote.

To underscore her point, Nicholson cited 55 written reports of the robotaxis interfering with emergency responses. She said she is worried the problems will get worse if Cruise and Waymo are allowed to operate their services wherever and whenever they want in San Francisco — raising the risk of their disruptions resulting in injury, death or the loss of property that could have been saved.

The Public Utilities Commission still decided to approve the expansion by a 3-1 vote. Although the panel consists of five commissioners, only four voted on the proposed robotaxi expansion. Commissioner Karen Douglas was absent from Thursday's hearing for an undisclosed reason.

Both Cruise and Waymo cited their unblemished safety records as proof their robotaxis are less dangerous than vehicles operated by people who can be distracted, intoxicated or just lousy drivers.

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Cruise has been currently testing 300 robotaxis during the day when it can only give rides for free, and 100 robotaxis at night when it has been allowed to charge for rides in less congested parts of San Francisco for the past 14 months. Waymo has been operating about 100 of the 250 robotaxis it has available to give free rides to volunteers and employees throughout San Francisco.

But the proposed San Francisco expansion has been facing increasingly staunch resistance, prompting regulators to postpone two previously scheduled votes on the issue in June and July.

In a May 31 letter urging state regulators to continue to restrict the operations of Cruise and Waymo, San Francisco transportation officials asserted the driverless vehicles rely on a "developmental technology that is not ready for unconstrained commercial deployment."

In a June 22 letter, the president of the union for San Francisco police officers warned of potentially dire consequences if Cruise and Waymo are allowed to expand throughout the city. Tracy McCray, the union president, cited a robotaxi obstructing emergency vehicles responding to a recent mass shooting that injured nine people as a chilling example of how the technology could imperil the public.

"While we all applaud advancements in technology, we must not be in such a rush that we forget the human element and the effects such technology unchecked can cause in dangerous situations," McCray wrote. "Delays of even seconds in our line of work can be a matter of life or death."

Unless Cruise and Waymo are able to fix the problems that have been cropping up in their robotaxis, the San Francisco expansion could turn out to be a pyrrhic victory, warned Nico Larco, who has been tracking the progress of autonomous vehicles as director of the University of Oregon's Urbanism Next Center.

"There is a real public sentiment risk here," Larco said. "If they don't figure some of these things out, there will be growing frustration from the general public. And it's tough to bring that back and put the genie back in the bottle."

Virgin Galactic's first space tourists finally soar, an Olympian and a mother-daughter duo

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN and MARCIA DUNN Associated Press

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES, N.M. (AP) — Virgin Galactic rocketed to the edge of space with its first tourists Thursday, a former British Olympian who bought his ticket 18 years ago and a mother-daughter duo from the Caribbean.

The space plane glided back to a runway landing at Spaceport America in the New Mexico desert, after a brief flight that gave passengers a few minutes of weightlessness.

This first private customer flight had been delayed for years; its success means Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic can now start offering monthly rides, joining Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin and Elon Musk's SpaceX in the space tourism business.

"That was by far the most awesome thing I've ever done in my life," said Jon Goodwin, who competed in canoeing in the 1972 Olympics.

Goodwin, 80, was among the first to buy a Virgin Galactic ticket in 2005 and feared, after later being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, that he'd be out of luck. Since then he's climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and cycled back down, and said he hopes his spaceflight shows others with Parkinson's and other illnesses that "it doesn't stop you doing things."

Ticket prices were \$200,000 when Goodwin signed up. The cost is now \$450,000.

He was joined on the flight by sweepstakes winner Keisha Schahaff, 46, a health coach from Antigua, and her daughter, Anastatia Mayers, 18, a student at Scotland's University of Aberdeen. They high-fived and pumped their fists as the spaceport crowd cheered their return.

"A childhood dream has come true," said Schahaff, who took pink Antiguan sand up with her. Added her daughter: "I have no words. The only thought I had the whole time was 'Wow!'"

With the company's astronaut trainer and one of the two pilots, it marked the first time women outnumbered men on a spaceflight, four to two.

Cheers erupted from families and friends watching below when the craft's rocket motor fired after it

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was released from the twin-fuselage aircraft that had carried it aloft. The rocket ship's portion of the flight lasted about 15 minutes and it reached 55 miles (88 kilometers) high.

It was Virgin Galactic's seventh trip to space since 2018, but the first with a ticket-holder. Branson, the company's founder, hopped on board for the first full-size crew ride in 2021. Italian military and government researchers soared in June on the first commercial flight. About 800 people are currently on Virgin Galactic's waiting list, according to the company.

In contrast to Virgin Galactic's plane-launched rocket ship, the capsules used by SpaceX and Blue Origin are fully automated and parachute back down.

Like Virgin Galactic, Blue Origin aims for the fringes of space, quick ups-and-downs from West Texas. Blue Origin has launched 31 people so far, but flights are on hold following a rocket crash last fall. The capsule, carrying experiments but no passengers, landed intact.

SpaceX, is the only private company flying customers all the way to orbit, charging a much heftier price, too: tens of millions of dollars per seat. It's already flown three private crews. NASA is its biggest customer, relying on SpaceX to ferry its astronauts to and from the International Space Station. since 2020.

People have been taking on adventure travel for decades, the risks underscored by the recent implosion of the Titan submersible that killed five passengers on their way down to view the Titanic wreckage. Virgin Galactic suffered its own casualty in 2014 when its rocket plane broke apart during a test flight, killing one pilot. Yet space tourists are still lining up, ever since the first one rocketed into orbit in 2001 with the Russians.

Branson, who lives in the British Virgin Islands, watched Thursday's flight from a party in Antigua. He was joined by the country's prime minister, as well as Schahaff's mother and other relatives.

"Welcome to the club," he told the new spacefliers via X, formerly Twitter.

Several months ago, Branson held a virtual lottery to establish a pecking order for the company's first 50 customers

Biden asks Congress for \$40 billion to support Ukraine, replenish US disaster aid and bolster border

By LISA MASCARO and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration on Thursday asked Congress to provide more than \$13 billion in emergency defense aid to Ukraine and an additional \$8 billion for humanitarian support through the end of the year, another massive infusion of cash as the Russian invasion wears on and Ukraine pushes a counteroffensive against the Kremlin's deeply entrenched forces.

The package includes \$12 billion to replenish U.S. federal disaster funds at home after a deadly climate season of heat and storms, and funds to bolster the enforcement at the Southern border with Mexico, including money to curb the flow of deadly fentanyl. All told, it's a \$40 billion package.

While the last such supplemental spending request from the White House for Ukraine funding was easily approved in 2022 despite reservations from Republicans, there's a different dynamic this time.

A political divide on the issue has steadily grown, with the Republican-led House facing enormous pressure to demonstrate support for the party's leader, Donald Trump, who has been very skeptical of the war. And American support for the effort has been slowly softening.

White House budget director Shalanda Young, in a letter to House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, urged swift action to follow through on the U.S. "commitment to the Ukrainian peoples' defense of their homeland and to democracy around the world" as well as other needs.

The request was crafted with an eye to picking up support from Republicans, as well as Democrats, particularly with increased domestic funding around border issues — a top priority for the GOP. The Republicans have been highly critical of the Biden administration's approach to halting the flow of migrants crossing from Mexico.

Still, the price tag of \$40 billion may be too much for Republicans who are fighting to slash, not raise,

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federal outlays. As a supplemental request, the package the White House is sending to Congress falls outside the budget caps both parties agreed to as part of the debt ceiling showdown earlier this year.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said in a statement there was strong bipartisan support in the U.S. Senate.

"The latest request from the Biden administration shows America's continued commitment to helping Americans here at home and our friends abroad," he said. "We hope to join with our Republican colleagues this fall to avert an unnecessary government shutdown and fund this critical emergency supplemental request."

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, who has championed support for Ukraine, was more subdued.

"I look forward to carefully reviewing the Administration's request to make sure it is necessary and appropriate," McConnell said in a statement, "to keep America safe, secure our borders, support our allies, and help communities rebuild after disasters."

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., released a statement urging Congress to swiftly pass critical funding for disaster relief programs while separately considering military aid for Ukraine.

President Joe Biden and his senior national security team have repeatedly said the United States will help Ukraine "as long as it takes" to oust Russia from its borders. Privately, administration officials have warned Ukrainian officials that there is a limit to the patience of a narrowly divided Congress — and American public — for the costs of a war with no clear end.

"For people who might be concerned the costs are getting too high, we'd ask them what the costs — not just in treasure but in blood, perhaps even American blood — could be if Putin subjugates Ukraine," White House national security spokesman John Kirby said this week.

Support among the American public for providing Ukraine weaponry and direct economic assistance has softened with time. An AP-NORC poll conducted in January 2023 around the one-year mark of the conflict, found that 48% favored the U.S. providing weapons to Ukraine, down from the 60% of U.S. adults who were in favor sending Ukraine weapons in May 2022. While Democrats have generally been more supportive than Republicans of offering weaponry, their support dropped slightly from 71% to 63% in the same period. Republicans' support dropped more, from 53% to 39%.

Dozens of Republicans in the House and some GOP senators have expressed reservations, and even voted against, spending more federal dollars for the war effort. Many of those Republicans are aligning with Trump's objections to the U.S. involvement overseas.

That means any final vote on Ukraine aid will likely need to rely on a hefty coalition led by Democrats from Biden's party to ensure approval.

The funding includes money to counter Russian and Chinese influence elsewhere by bolstering the World Bank and providing aid to resist Russian-aligned Wagner forces in Africa. Domestically, there's an additional \$60 million to address increased wildfires that have erupted nationwide. And the request includes \$4 billion for the Southern border, including \$2.2 billion for border management and \$766 million to stop the flow of fentanyl and provide prevention and recovery support. There is also \$100 million earmarked for the Department of Labor to ramp up investigations of suspected child labor violations.

To ease passage, Congress would likely try to attach the package to a must-pass measure for broader government funding in the U.S. that's needed by Oct. 1 to prevent any shutdown in federal offices.

Members of Congress have repeatedly pressed Defense Department leaders on how closely the U.S. is tracking its aid to Ukraine to ensure that it is not subject to fraud or ending up in the wrong hands. The Pentagon has said it has a "robust program" to track the aid as it crosses the border into Ukraine and to keep tabs on it once it is there, depending on the sensitivity of each weapons system.

Ukraine is pushing through with its ongoing counteroffensive, in an effort to dislodge the Kremlin's forces from territory they've occupied since a full-scale invasion in February 2022. The counteroffensive has come up against heavily mined terrain and reinforced defensive fortifications.

The U.S. has approved four rounds of aid to Ukraine in response to Russia's invasion, totaling about

\$113 billion, with some of that money going toward replenishment of U.S. military equipment that was sent to the frontlines. Congress approved the latest round of aid in December, totaling roughly \$45 billion for Ukraine and NATO allies. While the package was designed to last through the end of the fiscal year in September, much depends upon events on the ground.

"We remain confident that we'll be able to continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes," said Pentagon press secretary Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder.

There were questions in November about waning Republican support to approve the package, but it ultimately passed. Now, though, House Speaker McCarthy is facing pressure to impeach Biden over unproven claims of financial misconduct and it's not clear whether a quick show of support for Ukraine could cause political damage in what's expected to be a bruising 2024 reelection campaign.

Trump contends that American involvement has only drawn Russia closer to other adversarial states like China, and has condemned the tens of billions of dollars that the United States has provided in aid for Ukraine.

Ecuador arrests six Colombians as suspects in slaying of anti-corruption presidential candidate

By GONZALO SOLANO and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — The six men arrested as suspects in the assassination of an anti-corruption Ecuadorian presidential candidate are Colombian nationals, a police report said Thursday as authorities investigated the motive for a crime that shocked a nation already reeling from a surge in drug-related violence.

The six men were captured hiding in a house in Quito, Ecuador's capital, said the report, which was reviewed by The Associated Press. Officers also seized four shotguns, a 5.56-mm rifle, ammunition and three grenades, along with a vehicle and a motorcycle, it said.

Fernando Villavicencio, 59, who was known for speaking up against drug cartels, was assassinated in Quito on Wednesday, less than two weeks before a special presidential election. He was not a front-runner, but his death deepened the sense of crisis around organized crime that has already claimed thousands of lives and underscored the challenge that Ecuador's next leader will face.

Ecuador's interior minister, Juan Zapata, had earlier confirmed the arrest of some foreigners in the case, although he didn't give their nationalities.

Zapata described the killing as a "political crime of a terrorist nature" aimed at sabotaging the Aug. 20 presidential election.

The police report doesn't say whether the Colombians are alleged members of a criminal group. Zapata said those arrested were linked to organized crime, although he didn't give more details.

Villavicencio had said he was threatened by affiliates of Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, one of a slew of international organized crime groups that now operate in Ecuador. He said his campaign represented a threat to such groups.

The involvement of Colombian nationals brings to the mind the 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, who was shot a dozen times at his private home. Among the people arrested in the case are 18 former soldiers from Colombia.

Video of the rally in Quito posted on social media appeared to show Villavicencio walking out of the rally surrounded by guards. The footage then showed the candidate getting into a white pickup truck before gunshots were heard, followed by screams and commotion around the truck.

The sequence of events was confirmed to AP by Patricio Zuquilanda, Villavicencio's campaign adviser.

The candidate had received at least three death threats before the shooting and reported them to authorities, resulting in one detention, the adviser said.

"The Ecuadorian people are crying, and Ecuador is mortally wounded," Zuquilanda said. "Politics cannot lead to the death of any member of society."

Former Vice President Otto Sonnenholzner, who also is seeking the presidency, bemoaned the loss at

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a news conference: "We are dying, drowning in a sea of tears, and we do not deserve to live like this."

The assassins threw a grenade into the street to cover their flight, but it did not explode, President Guillermo Lasso said. Police later destroyed the grenade with a controlled explosion.

One suspect died in custody from wounds sustained in a firefight, the attorney general's office said. The authorities had reported on Wednesday that six people had been detained, but they didn't give any details until Thursday.

Lasso suggested the slaying could be linked to organized crime and insisted on proceeding with the election scheduled for Aug. 20. He declared three days of national mourning and a state of emergency that involves deploying additional military personnel throughout the country.

"Given the loss of a democrat and a fighter, the elections are not suspended. On the contrary, they have to be held, and democracy has to be strengthened," Lasso said Thursday.

In his final speech before he was killed, Villavicencio promised a roaring crowd that he would fight corruption and imprison more criminals.

Villavicencio, one of eight candidates running for president, was the candidate of the Build Ecuador Movement.

As drug traffickers have begun to use the country's coastal ports, Ecuadorians have reeled from violence not seen for decades. Gunfire is heard in many major cities as rival gangs battle for control, and gangs have recruited children.

Just last month, the mayor of the port city of Manta was shot and killed. On July 26, Lasso declared a state of emergency covering two provinces and the country's prison system in an effort to stem the violence.

People waiting for buses in Guayaquil, a port city south of Quito that has been the epicenter of gang violence, expressed shock over Villavicencio's killing.

"It shows that the violence in the country is increasing," pharmacist Leidy Aguirre, 28, said. "Politicians supposedly have more security than citizens and this shows that not even they are safe."

Elsewhere, people went about their lives by taking outdoor exercise classes and daily walks because they are resigned to live amid the violence.

Marjorie Lino, a 38-year-old housewife, lamented the danger as she walked with a friend along the main road that leads to one of the country's most violent neighborhoods.

"To us as women, our husbands tell us not to go out here, but it doesn't matter (because) when one is going to die, one dies even at the door of one's house," she said. She does not believe that any of the presidential candidates will be able to end the violence.

Villavicencio was one of the country's most critical voices against corruption, especially during the 2007-2017 government of President Rafael Correa.

He was an independent journalist who investigated corruption in previous governments before entering politics as an anti-graft campaigner.

Villavicencio filed many judicial complaints against high-ranking members of the Correa government, including against the ex-president himself. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison for defamation over his criticisms of Correa, and fled to Indigenous territory in Ecuador, later receiving asylum in neighboring Peru.

Lasso, a conservative former banker, was elected in 2021 on a business-friendly platform and clashed from the start with the left-leaning majority coalition in the National Assembly.

A snap election was called after Lasso dissolved the National Assembly by decree in May, in a move to avoid being impeached over allegations that he failed to intervene to end a faulty contract between the state-owned oil transport company and a private tanker company.

Phil Mickelson has wagered more than \$1 billion, according to book by renowned gambler Billy Walters

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

Phil Mickelson has wagered more than \$1 billion over the last three decades and wanted to place a \$400,000 bet on the 2012 Ryder Cup while playing for Team USA, according to a much-anticipated book by renowned gambler Billy Walters.

Mickelson denied ever betting on the Ryder Cup.

"While it is well known that I always enjoy a friendly wager on the course, I would never undermine the integrity of the game," Mickelson said in a statement Thursday.

The stunning betting estimates Walters provides — from his own detailed record and from what he describes as two reliable sources — are detailed in an excerpt of Walters' book, "Gambler: Secrets from a Life of Risk."

The book is scheduled to be available on Aug. 22. The Fire Pit Collective obtained the excerpt.

Walters is widely regarded as America's most famous gambler who claims to have a winning streak of more than 30 straight years.

He said he ended his betting partnership with Mickelson in 2014. Two years later, Walters was indicted in an insider trading case that partly involved stock tips prosecutors said he illegally passed to Mickelson. Mickelson was never charged but had to repay about \$1 million he made off a stock deal. Walters was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. He claims he could have avoided prison if Mickelson had told a "simple truth."

Walters said he never told Mickelson he had inside information on Dean Foods stock, and he believed that Mickelson could have helped him by testifying.

"All Phil had to do was publicly say it. He refused," Walters wrote. "The outcome cost me my freedom, tens of millions of dollars and a heartbreak I still struggle with daily. While I was in prison, my daughter committed suicide — I still believe I could have saved her if I'd been on the outside."

Walters said Mickelson told him he had two offshore accounts, and that Mickelson had limits of \$400,000 on college games and \$400,000 on the NFL.

He said based on his detailed record and additional records provided by sources, Mickelson's gambling between 2010 and 2014 included:

— Betting \$110,000 to win \$100,000 on 1,115 occasions, and betting \$220,000 to win \$200,000 on 858 occasions. That alone comes out to just over \$311 million.

— Mickelson in 2011 made 3,154 bets for the year and on one day (June 22) he placed 43 bets on Major League Baseball games that resulted in \$143,500 in losses.

— He placed 7,065 bets on football, basketball and baseball.

"Based on our relationship and what I've since learned from others, Phil's gambling losses approached not \$40 million as has been previously reported, but much closer to \$100 million. In all, he wagered a total of more than \$1 billion during the past three decades," Walters wrote.

"The only other person I know who surpassed that kind of volume is me."

In his statement, Mickelson said he has been open about his gambling addiction. In an interview with Sports Illustrated last year, Mickelson referred to it reaching a point of being "reckless and embarrassing."

"I have previously conveyed my remorse, took responsibility, have gotten help, have been fully committed to therapy that has positively impacted me and I feel good about where I am now," Mickelson said.

Walters said they met for the first time at the 2006 AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am, and formed a betting partnership two years later.

Most stunning to Walters, he writes in the excerpt, was a phone call from the Ryder Cup in 2012 at Medinah. He said Mickelson was so confident he asked Walters to bet \$400,000 for him on the U.S. winning.

"I could not believe what I was hearing," Walters wrote. "Have you lost your (expletive) mind?' I told him, 'Don't you remember what happened to Pete Rose?' The former Cincinnati Reds manager was banned from baseball for betting on his own team. 'You're seen as a modern-day Arnold Palmer,' I added. 'You'd

risk all that for this?' I want no part of it."

He said Mickelson replied, "Alright, alright."

"I have no idea whether Phil placed the bet elsewhere. Hopefully, he came to his senses," Walters wrote.

Europe rallied from a 10-6 deficit on Sunday, staging the greatest comeback by a visiting team. Mickelson and Keegan Bradley won three straight matches before Mickelson urged U.S. captain Davis Love III to rest them Saturday afternoon. Mickelson lost his singles match to Justin Rose, a pivotal moment in Europe's comeback.

Rory McIlroy, at odds with Mickelson over the divide between the PGA Tour and LIV Golf, couldn't resist a dig at Lefty over the claims in the book.

"At least he can bet on the Ryder Cup this year because he won't be part of it," McIlroy said Thursday in Memphis, Tennessee, at the PGA Tour's FedEx St. Jude Championship.

The PGA Tour suspended Mickelson in early 2022 for helping Saudi-backed LIV Golf recruit PGA Tour players. He signed with LIV for a bonus reported to be upward of \$150 million.

Walters was so successful with his gambling operation that bookmakers often limited the amount of his wagers. He would partner with others who had larger limits. He wrote his partnership with Mickelson was a 50-50 split.

"In all the decades I've worked with partners and beads, Phil had accounts as large as anyone I'd seen," Walters wrote. "You don't get those types of accounts without betting millions of dollars."

Prosecutors seek Jan. 2 trial date for Donald Trump in his 2020 election conspiracy case

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

Prosecutors with special counsel Jack Smith's team asked a judge on Thursday to set a Jan. 2 trial date for former President Donald Trump in the case charging him with plotting to overturn his 2020 election loss.

If U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan agrees with prosecutors' proposal, the case against the early front-runner for the 2024 Republican presidential primary would open right before the anniversary of the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol, which was fueled by Trump's false claims about the election.

The proposed date is also just under two weeks before the first votes are set to be cast in the Republican presidential race, with Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucuses scheduled for Jan. 15.

Trump reacted angrily to the proposed trial date on his Truth Social platform. "Only an out of touch lunatic would ask for such a date, ONE DAY into the New Year, and maximum Election Interference with IOWA!" he wrote Thursday night.

Prosecutors said in court papers that they want the case to move to trial swiftly in Washington's federal court, setting up a likely battle with defense attorneys who have already suggested they will try slow things down. Smith's team says the government's case should take no longer than four to six weeks.

"A January 2 trial date would vindicate the public's strong interest in a speedy trial — an interest guaranteed by the Constitution and federal law in all cases, but of particular significance here, where the defendant, a former president, is charged with conspiring to overturn the legitimate results of the 2020 presidential election, obstruct the certification of the election results, and discount citizens' legitimate votes," prosecutors wrote.

Trump's lawyers have not submitted their proposed trial date. The judge is expected to set the date during a court hearing scheduled for Aug. 28.

Trump is already scheduled to be in a courtroom in the heat of next year's presidential primary season, with a March 25 criminal trial scheduled in a separate case in New York stemming from hush money payments made during the 2016 campaign. The former president is scheduled to go to trial in May in another case brought by Smith over his handling of classified documents found at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida.

Trump faces charges including conspiracy to defraud the United States for what prosecutors say was a weeklong plot to subvert the will of voters and cling to power after he lost the 2020 election to Democrat

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Joe Biden.

The indictment accuses Trump of spreading lies about election fraud he knew were false to sow distrust in the democratic process and pressuring Vice President Mike Pence and state election officials to take action in a brazen attempt to cling to power.

Trump, who pleaded not guilty last week, says he is innocent and has portrayed the investigation as politically motivated. His legal team has indicated it will argue that he was relying on the advice of lawyers around him in 2020 and had the right to challenge an election he believed was rigged.

Trump has already said he will push to have the 2020 election case moved out of Washington, claiming he can't get a fair trial in the heavily Democratic city, which voted overwhelmingly for Biden. But it's extremely difficult to convince a judge that a jury pool is so biased that a trial must be moved. And judges in Washington, including Chutkan, have repeatedly rejected similar efforts by Trump supporters charged in the Jan. 6 Capitol attack.

Smith's Washington case accuses Trump of orchestrating schemes to enlist slates of fake electors in seven battleground states won by Biden to sign false certificates representing themselves as legitimate electors and try to use the investigative power of the Justice Department to launch sham election fraud probes. When his efforts failed, prosecutors say, he badgered Pence to disrupt the ceremonial counting of electoral votes before Congress on Jan. 6, 2021, the day an angry mob of his supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol.

In an early glimpse into the intense legal fighting to come in the case, prosecutors and defense attorneys have been arguing over a protective order that would place rules on what Trump's legal team can do with evidence handed over by the government as they prepare for trial. Protective orders are not uncommon in criminal cases and are usually imposed with little legal wrangling.

But Trump's lawyers say prosecutors' proposal — which seeks to prevent Trump and his lawyers from publicly disclosing evidence handed over by the government — is too broad and would restrict his First Amendment rights. They are urging the judge to impose a more limited protective order that would restrict only the public sharing of information deemed "sensitive," like grand jury materials.

In urging the judge to impose the order, prosecutors noted Trump's tendency to use social media to talk about the legal cases against him and expressed concern that he would share sensitive information that could intimidate witnesses.

Chutkan is expected to hold a hearing on the matter on Friday in Washington's federal court.

It comes as Trump is also gearing up for a possible fourth indictment, in a case out of Fulton County, Georgia, over alleged efforts by him and his Republican allies to illegally meddle in the 2020 election in that state. The county district attorney, Fani Willis, a Democrat, has signaled that any indictments in the case would likely come this month.

COVID-19 took a toll on heart health and doctors are still grappling with how to help

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Firefighter and paramedic Mike Camilleri once had no trouble hauling heavy gear up ladders. Now battling long COVID, he gingerly steps onto a treadmill to learn how his heart handles a simple walk.

"This is, like, not a tough-guy test so don't fake it," warned Beth Hughes, a physical therapist at Washington University in St. Louis.

Somehow, a mild case of COVID-19 set off a chain reaction that eventually left Camilleri with dangerous blood pressure spikes, a heartbeat that raced with slight exertion, and episodes of intense chest pain.

He's far from alone. How profound a toll COVID-19 has taken on the nation's heart health is only starting to emerge, years into the pandemic.

"We are seeing effects on the heart and the vascular system that really outnumber, unfortunately, effects on other organ systems," said Dr. Susan Cheng, a cardiologist at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

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It's not only an issue for long COVID patients like Camilleri. For up to a year after a case of COVID-19, people may be at increased risk of developing a new heart-related problem, anything from blood clots and irregular heartbeats to a heart attack — even if they initially seem to recover just fine.

Among the unknowns: Who's most likely to experience these aftereffects? Are they reversible — or a warning sign of more heart disease later in life?

"We're about to exit this pandemic as even a sicker nation" because of virus-related heart trouble, said Washington University's Dr. Ziyad Al-Aly, who helped sound the alarm about lingering health problems. The consequences, he added, "will likely reverberate for generations."

Heart disease has long been the top killer in the nation and the world. But in the U.S., heart-related death rates had fallen to record lows in 2019, just before the pandemic struck.

COVID-19 erased a decade of that progress, Cheng said.

Heart attack-caused deaths rose during every virus surge. Worse, young people aren't supposed to have heart attacks but Cheng's research documented a nearly 30% increase in heart attack deaths among 25- to 44-year-olds in the pandemic's first two years.

An ominous sign the trouble may continue: High blood pressure is one of the biggest risks for heart disease and "people's blood pressure has actually measurably gone up over the course of the pandemic," she said.

Cardiovascular symptoms are part of what's known as long COVID, the catchall term for dozens of health issues including fatigue and brain fog. The National Institutes of Health is beginning small studies of a few possible treatments for certain long COVID symptoms, including a heartbeat problem.

But Cheng said patients and doctors alike need to know that sometimes, cardiovascular trouble is the first or main symptom of damage the coronavirus left behind.

"These are individuals who wouldn't necessarily come to their doctor and say, 'I have long COVID,'" she said.

In St. Louis, Camilleri first developed shortness of breath and later a string of heart-related and other symptoms after a late 2020 bout of COVID-19. He tried different treatments from multiple doctors to no avail, until winding up at Washington University's long COVID clinic.

"Finally a turn in the right direction," said the 43-year-old Camilleri.

There, he saw Dr. Amanda Verma for worsening trouble with his blood pressure and heart rate. Verma is part of a cardiology team that studied a small group of patients with perplexing heart symptoms like Camilleri's, and found abnormalities in blood flow may be part of the problem.

How? Blood flow jumps when people move around and subsides during rest. But some long COVID patients don't get enough of a drop during rest because the fight-or-flight system that controls stress reactions stays activated, Verma said.

Some also have trouble with the lining of their small blood vessels not dilating and constricting properly to move blood through, she added.

Hoping that helped explain some of Camilleri's symptoms, Verma prescribed some heart medicines that dilate blood vessels and others to dampen that fight-or-flight response.

Back in the gym, Hughes, a physical therapist who works with long COVID patients, came up with a careful rehab plan after the treadmill test exposed erratic jumps in Camilleri's heart rate.

"We'd see it worse if you were not on Dr. Verma's meds," Hughes said, showing Camilleri exercises to do while lying down and monitoring his heart rate. "We need to rewire your system" to normalize that fight-or-flight response.

Camilleri said he noticed some improvement as Verma mixed and matched prescriptions based on his reactions. But then a second bout with COVID-19 in the spring caused even more health problems, a disability that forced him to retire.

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How big is the post-COVID heart risk? To find out, Al-Aly analyzed medical records from a massive Veterans Administration database. People who'd survived COVID-19 early in the pandemic were more likely to experience abnormal heartbeats, blood clots, chest pain and palpitations, even heart attacks and strokes up to a year later compared to the uninfected. That includes even middle-aged people without prior signs of heart disease.

Based on those findings, Al-Aly estimated 4 of every 100 people need care for some kind of heart-related symptom in the year after recovering from COVID-19.

Per person, that's a small risk. But he said the pandemic's sheer enormity means it added up to millions left with at least some cardiovascular symptom. While a reinfection might still cause trouble, Al-Aly's now studying whether that overall risk dropped thanks to vaccination and milder coronavirus strains.

More recent research confirms the need to better understand and address these cardiac aftershocks. An analysis this spring of a large U.S. insurance database found long COVID patients were about twice as likely to seek care for cardiovascular problems including blood clots, abnormal heartbeats or stroke in the year after infection, compared to similar patients who'd avoided COVID-19.

A post-infection link to heart damage isn't that surprising, Verma noted. She pointed to rheumatic fever, an inflammatory reaction to untreated strep throat -- especially before antibiotics were common -- that scars the heart's valves.

"Is this going to become the next rheumatic heart disease? We don't know," she said.

But Al-Aly says there's a simple take-home message: You can't change your history of COVID-19 infections but if you've ignored other heart risks -- like high cholesterol or blood pressure, poorly controlled diabetes or smoking -- now's the time to change that.

"These are the ones we can do something about. And I think they're more important now than they were in 2019," he said.

From eggs to electronics to used cars, consumer inflation eased its grip on US households in July

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Inflation in the United States edged up in July after 12 straight months of declines. But excluding volatile food and energy costs, so-called core inflation matched the smallest monthly rise in nearly two years, a sign that the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes have continued to slow price increases.

The inflation data the government reported Thursday showed that overall consumer prices rose 3.2% from a year earlier. That was up from a 3% annual rise in June, which was the lowest rate in more than two years. The latest figure remained far below last year's peak of 9.1%, though still above the Fed's 2% inflation target.

The Fed, economists and investors, though, pay particular attention to core inflation figures for signs of where price pressures might be headed. From June to July, core inflation remained a tame 0.2%, thanks to easing prices for such items as used vehicles and electronics. And compared with 12 months earlier, core prices rose 4.7% in July, the smallest such increase since October 2021.

"Core prices are moving in the right direction," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist for High Frequency Economics. "That will be welcome news to (the Fed's) policymakers."

Thursday's price data will be among the key barometers the central bank will weigh in deciding whether to continue raising interest rates. In its drive to tame inflation, the Fed has raised its benchmark rate 11 times since March 2022 to a 22-year high.

Overall prices, measured on a month-to-month basis, rose 0.2% in July; roughly 90% of it reflected higher housing costs. Excluding shelter, Paul Ashworth of Capital Economics calculated that core prices actually fell 0.1% from June to July.

Food prices, which have pressured Americans' budgets for more than two years, rose a mild 0.2% from June to July. Eggs, meat, beer and dairy products all declined in price, though food is still up 4.9% over the past 12 months. Also falling in July were prices of televisions, audio equipment and pet food.

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Energy costs rose just 0.1%. Modestly higher gasoline prices were offset by falling electricity prices.

Used-vehicle prices fell for a second straight month, dipping 1.3% from June and 5.6% from a year ago. Those prices had surged last year as a shortage of computer chips disrupted production of new vehicles, forcing more buyers into the used market. The chip shortage has eased, and new-car production has rebounded, thereby reducing demand for used cars and trucks.

On a three-month basis, consumer inflation was an annualized 1.9% from May through July, the slowest such pace in three years. Some economists prefer the three-month figure because it captures inflation trends with less volatility than the month-to-month figures.

Economists say that in the Fed's fight to conquer inflation, the easy progress has likely already been achieved. Gasoline prices, for example, though liable to bounce around from month to month, have already plunged from a peak national average of more than \$5 a gallon, which was reached in June of last year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Much of the inflationary surge that began in 2021 was caused by clogged supply chains: Ports, factories and freight yards were overwhelmed by the explosive economic rebound from the pandemic recession of 2020. The result was delays, parts shortages and higher prices. But supply-chain backlogs have eased in the past year, sharply reducing upward pressure on goods prices. Prices of long-lasting manufactured goods actually dipped in June.

Now, the Fed faces a daunting problem: Inflationary pressures in service businesses — restaurants, hotels, entertainment venues and the like — where wages represent a substantial share of costs. Worker shortages have led many of these services companies to sharply raise pay.

Last week, for example, the Labor Department reported that average hourly wages rose 4.4% in July from a year earlier, more than expected. To cover their higher labor costs, companies have typically raised their prices, thereby fueling inflation.

Another factor working against continued declines in year-over-year inflation rates is that prices soared in the first half of last year before slowing in the second half. So any price increase in July would have the effect of boosting the year-over-year inflation rate.

Still, economists caution against reading too much into one month of numbers. Many of them expect inflation to continue trending lower.

Despite chronic concerns about higher labor costs, one closely watched measure of wages and salaries — the Labor Department's employment cost index — grew more slowly from April through June. Excluding government jobs, employee pay rose 1%, less than the 1.2% increase in the first three months of 2023. Compared with a year earlier, wages and salaries grew 4.6%, down from a year-over-year increase of 5.1% in the first quarter.

Many Americans continue to feel under pressure from higher prices.

"There are some things you can stop buying or slow down on buying," said Mark Dye of Port St. Lucie, Florida. "The cost of junk food has gone outrageously high. It's \$5, \$6 for a bag of chips. And I just think that is ridiculous. And then we pay even more for the healthy stuff."

Likewise, Richard Priedits of Grand Rapids, Michigan, said he's noticed higher costs during his annual vacation out West.

"We are using credit cards a lot more," he said as he stopped at the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area in Nevada. "The hotel was probably about \$100 more ... We filled up the tank this morning. It was like \$90."

Prices, he said, are high back in Michigan, too: "It's expensive everywhere."

Fed officials will have plenty of data to absorb before deciding whether to continue raising rates. Thursday's report is the first of two CPI numbers the policymakers will see before their next meeting Sept. 19-20. In addition, their favored inflation gauge, called the personal income expenditures price index, comes out on Aug. 31. And the August jobs report will be released Sept. 1.

The moderating pace of inflation, combined with a resilient job market, has raised hopes that the Fed may achieve a difficult "soft landing": — raising rates enough to tame inflation without causing a painful

recession.

"Barring a hot August CPI and labor market report, the progress should encourage the (Fed) to skip a rate hike on Sept. 20 and, in our view, for the remainder of this exceptional tightening cycle," said Sal Guatieri, senior economist at BMO Capital Markets. "That can only increase the prospect for a soft landing."

Many economists and market analysts think the Fed's most recent rate hike in July will prove to be its last: More than 90% of traders now expect no Fed hike next month, according to the CME Group's Fed-Watch Tool.

Russia's military push on the eastern front prompts Ukraine to evacuate thousands of civilians

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian authorities ordered a mandatory evacuation Thursday of nearly 12,000 civilians from 37 towns and villages in the eastern Kharkiv region, where Russian forces reportedly are making a concerted effort to punch through the front line.

The local military administration in Kharkiv's Kupiansk district said residents must comply with the evacuation order or sign a document saying they would stay at their own risk. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar had said the previous day that "the intensity of combat and enemy shelling is high" in the area.

The city of Kupiansk and the territories around it were under Russian occupation until September 2022, when Ukrainian forces conducted a rapid offensive operation that dislodged the Kremlin's forces from nearly the entire Kharkiv region.

The retaking of those areas strengthened Ukraine's arguments that its troops could deliver more stinging defeats to Russia with additional armament deliveries, which its Western allies duly provided. But as Ukraine has pursued a slow-moving counteroffensive in recent weeks, Russian forces have struck back in some areas.

Maliar said Russia "has formed an offensive group and is attempting to move forward" in the area in an effort to advance on the Ukrainian-held city of Kupiansk, an important rail junction.

Russia has concentrated assault troops supported by tank units, aviation and artillery in the Kupiansk area, Ukraine National Guard spokesman Ruslan Muzychuk said on national television.

The Russians have formed eight so-called "Storm-Z" detachments - made up of convicts released from prison acting under military commanders - for the push, and fighting in the area was "intense," according to Oleksandr Syrskyi, the ground forces commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

"Some positions are passed from hand to hand constantly," he said.

It was not possible to independently verify either side's battlefield claims.

Ukrainian authorities have periodically ordered evacuations, especially of children, from areas where the fighting has heated up. Officials have previously said the evacuations are necessary to save lives and enable the Ukrainian army to better defend towns from the Russian advance.

Millions of Ukrainian refugees left the country after Russia's invasion started in February 2022, and millions more left their homes but stayed in Ukraine.

One person was killed and nine injured in a Russian missile strike on the city of Zaporizhzhia late Thursday, said regional governor Yuriy Malashko. In Russia, two people died in Ukrainian shelling of the village of Chausi, five kilometers (three miles) from the border, said Bryansk regional governor Alexander Bogomaz.

Earlier Thursday, Russian air defense systems shot down two drones heading toward Moscow for a second straight day, officials said. The reported attack disrupted flights at two international airports as Ukraine appeared to step up its assault on Russian soil.

One drone was downed in the Kaluga region southwest of Moscow and another near a major Moscow ring road, according to Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin and the Russian Defense Ministry, which blamed the attack on Ukraine.

No casualties or damage were immediately reported.

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Domodedovo airport, south of the city, halted flights for more than two hours and Vnukovo airport, southwest of the city, stopped flights for more than two and a half hours, according to Russian news agencies. Ten flights were diverted, Russia's Federal Agency for Air Transport said.

Firing drones at Moscow after more than 17 months of war has little apparent military value for Ukraine, but the strategy has served to unsettle Russians and bring home to them the conflict's consequences.

Kyiv officials, as usual, neither confirmed nor denied Ukraine's possible involvement in the drone strikes, though Air Force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat remarked: "This cannot but please us because people in Moscow thought they were safe. Now, the war affects each and every Russian."

"We now see that 'something' happens in Moscow on a regular basis," he added.

Russia's Defense Ministry also said it had stopped Ukrainian drone attacks in Moscow-annexed Crimea. It said it shot down two drones near the port city of Sevastopol and electronically jammed nine that crashed into the Black Sea.

The Pentagon is to provide Ukraine with another \$200 million in weapons and ammunition to help sustain the counteroffensive, according to U.S. officials.

Ukraine has already received more than \$43 billion from the U.S. since Russia invaded last year.

Ukraine's presidential office said at least six civilians were killed and 27 were injured between Wednesday and Thursday mornings.

Meanwhile, 12 people remained missing after an explosion Wednesday at a factory that makes optical equipment for Russian security forces, Russian state news agency RIA Novosti reported, citing emergency officials.

Russia's Emergency Ministry said 71 people required medical assistance after the explosion.

Russian officials did not offer a suspected cause of the explosion at the Zagorsk plant in the region around Moscow, which added to jitters about potential Ukrainian drone strikes.

The fallout from Russia's war against Ukraine has brought concerns to neighboring countries, including the presence of Russia-linked Wagner group mercenaries in Belarus this summer after their short-lived mutiny in Russia.

Poland's defense minister said Thursday that the country intends to put 10,000 soldiers along its border with Belarus amid fears of a spike in illegal immigration.

Polish officials have accused Belarusian authorities of organizing illegal border crossings to disrupt and pressure Warsaw, which along with other NATO countries has provided support for Kyiv's war effort.

Paper exams, chatbot bans: Colleges seek to 'ChatGPT-proof' assignments

By JOCELYN GECKER Associated Press

When philosophy professor Darren Hick came across another case of cheating in his classroom at Furman University last semester, he posted an update to his followers on social media: "Aaaaand, I've caught my second ChatGPT plagiarist."

Friends and colleagues responded, some with wide-eyed emojis. Others expressed surprise.

"Only 2?! I've caught dozens," said Timothy Main, a writing professor at Conestoga College in Canada. "We're in full-on crisis mode."

Practically overnight, ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence chatbots have become the go-to source for cheating in college.

Now, educators are rethinking how they'll teach courses this fall from Writing 101 to computer science. Educators say they want to embrace the technology's potential to teach and learn in new ways, but when it comes to assessing students, they see a need to "ChatGPT-proof" test questions and assignments.

For some instructors that means a return to paper exams, after years of digital-only tests. Some professors will be requiring students to show editing history and drafts to prove their thought process. Other instructors are less concerned. Some students have always found ways to cheat, they say, and this is just the latest option.

An explosion of AI-generated chatbots including ChatGPT, which launched in November, has raised

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new questions for academics dedicated to making sure that students not only can get the right answer, but also understand how to do the work. Educators say there is agreement at least on some of the most pressing challenges.

— Are AI detectors reliable? Not yet, says Stephanie Laggini Fiore, associate vice provost at Temple University. This summer, Fiore was part of a team at Temple that tested the detector used by Turnitin, a popular plagiarism detection service, and found it to be “incredibly inaccurate.” It worked best at confirming human work, she said, but was spotty in identifying chatbot-generated text and least reliable with hybrid work.

— Will students get falsely accused of using artificial intelligence platforms to cheat? Absolutely. In one case last semester, a Texas A&M professor wrongly accused an entire class of using ChatGPT on final assignments. Most of the class was subsequently exonerated.

— So, how can educators be certain if a student has used an AI-powered chatbot dishonestly? It’s nearly impossible unless a student confesses, as both of Hicks’ students did. Unlike old-school plagiarism where text matches the source it is lifted from, AI-generated text is unique each time.

In some cases, the cheating is obvious, says Main, the writing professor, who has had students turn in assignments that were clearly cut-and-paste jobs. “I had answers come in that said, ‘I am just an AI language model, I don’t have an opinion on that,’” he said.

In his first-year required writing class last semester, Main logged 57 academic integrity issues, an explosion of academic dishonesty compared to about eight cases in each of the two prior semesters. AI cheating accounted for about half of them.

This fall, Main and colleagues are overhauling the school’s required freshman writing course. Writing assignments will be more personalized to encourage students to write about their own experiences, opinions and perspectives. All assignments and the course syllabi will have strict rules forbidding the use of artificial intelligence.

College administrators have been encouraging instructors to make the ground rules clear.

Many institutions are leaving the decision to use chatbots or not in the classroom to instructors, said Hiroano Okahana, the head of the Education Futures Lab at the American Council on Education.

At Michigan State University, faculty are being given “a small library of statements” to choose from and modify as they see fit on syllabi, said Bill Hart-Davidson, associate dean in MSU’s College of Arts and Letters who is leading AI workshops for faculty to help shape new assignments and policy.

“Asking students questions like, ‘Tell me in three sentences what is the Krebs cycle in chemistry?’ That’s not going to work anymore, because ChatGPT will spit out a perfectly fine answer to that question,” said Hart-Davidson, who suggests asking questions differently. For example, give a description that has errors and ask students to point them out.

Evidence is piling up that chatbots have changed study habits and how students seek information.

Chegg Inc., an online company that offers homework help and has been cited in numerous cheating cases, saw its shares tumble nearly 50% in a single day in May after its CEO Dan Rosensweig warned ChatGPT was hurting its growth. He said students who normally pay for Chegg’s service were now using ChatGPT’s AI platform for free instead.

At Temple this spring, the use of research tools like library databases declined notably following the emergence of chatbots, said Joe Lucia, the university’s dean of libraries.

“It seemed like students were seeing this as a quick way of finding information that didn’t require the effort or time that it takes to go to a dedicated resource and work with it,” he said.

Shortcuts like that are a concern partly because chatbots are prone to making things up, a glitch known as “hallucination.” Developers say they are working to make their platforms more reliable but it’s unclear when or if that will happen. Educators also worry about what students lose by skipping steps.

“There is going to be a big shift back to paper-based tests,” said Bonnie MacKellar, a computer science professor at St. John’s University in New York City. The discipline already had a “massive plagiarism problem” with students borrowing computer code from friends or cribbing it from the internet, said MacKellar.

lar. She worries intro-level students taking AI shortcuts are cheating themselves out of skills needed for upper-level classes.

"I hear colleagues in humanities courses saying the same thing: It's back to the blue books," MacKellar said. In addition to requiring students in her intro courses to handwrite their code, the paper exams will count for a higher percentage of the grade this fall, she said.

Ronan Takizawa, a sophomore at Colorado College, has never heard of a blue book. As a computer science major, that feels to him like going backward, but he agrees it would force students to learn the material. "Most students aren't disciplined enough to not use ChatGPT," he said. Paper exams "would really force you to understand and learn the concepts."

Takizawa said students are at times confused about when it's OK to use AI and when it's cheating. Using ChatGPT to help with certain homework like summarizing reading seems no different from going to YouTube or other sites that students have used for years, he said.

Other students say the arrival of ChatGPT has made them paranoid about being accused of cheating when they haven't.

Arizona State University sophomore Nathan LeVang says he doublechecks all assignments now by running them through an AI detector.

For one 2,000-word essay, the detector flagged certain paragraphs as "22% written by a human, with mostly AI voicing."

"I was like, 'That is definitely not true because I just sat here and wrote it word for word,'" LeVang said. But he rewrote those paragraphs anyway. "If it takes me 10 minutes after I write my essay to make sure everything checks out, that's fine. It's extra work, but I think that's the reality we live in."

Western officials: Niger junta warned they'd kill deposed president after any military intervention

By SAM MEDNICK and CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Niger's junta told a top U.S. diplomat that they would kill deposed President Mohamed Bazoum if neighboring countries attempted any military intervention to restore his rule, two Western officials told The Associated Press.

They spoke to the AP shortly before the West African bloc ECOWAS said it had directed the deployment of a "standby force" to restore democracy in Niger, after its deadline of Sunday to reinstate Bazoum expired.

The threat to the deposed president raises the stakes both for ECOWAS and for the junta, which has shown its willingness to escalate its actions since it seized power on July 26.

Niger was seen as the last country in the Sahel region south of the Sahara Desert that Western nations could partner with to counter jihadi violence linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group that has killed thousands and displaced millions of people. The international community is scrambling to find a peaceful solution to the country's leadership crisis.

Representatives of the junta told U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland of the threat to Bazoum during her visit to the country this week, a Western military official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation.

A U.S. official confirmed that account, also speaking on condition of anonymity, because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

The threats from both sides escalate tensions but hopefully nudge them closer to actually talking, said Aneliese Bernard, a former U.S. State Department official who specialized in African affairs and is now director of Strategic Stabilization Advisors, a risk advisory group.

"Still, this junta has escalated its moves so quickly that it's possible they do something more extreme, as that has been their approach so far," she cautioned.

Nine leaders from the 15-member West African bloc met Thursday in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, to discuss their next steps.

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Speaking after the talks, ECOWAS commission president Omar Alieu Touray said he could only reaffirm the decisions by "the military authorities in the subregion to deploy a standby force of the community."

Financing had been discussed and "appropriate measures have been taken," he said.

He blamed the junta for any hardship caused by the sanctions imposed on Niger and said further actions by the bloc would be taken jointly.

"It is not one country against another country. The community has instruments to which all members have subscribed to," he said.

A former British Army official who has worked in Nigeria told The Associated Press the ECOWAS statement could be seen as the green light to begin assembling their forces with the ultimate aim of restoring constitutional order.

With regards to the use of force, the official, who was not authorized to speak to the media, said there was currently nothing in place other than Nigerian forces. Without enablers and the support of other regional armies, it's unlikely they'd enter, the official said.

ECOWAS has imposed harsh economic and travel sanctions on Niger, but analysts say it may be running out of options as support fades for intervention. The bloc has failed to stem past coups in the region: Niger is the fourth of its member states to undergo a coup in the last three years.

Nnamdi Obasi, a senior adviser with the Crisis Group think tank, said ECOWAS should further explore diplomacy in Niger.

"The use of force could lead to unintended and catastrophic consequences with unpredictable outcomes," he said, warning that a military intervention could also trigger a "major regional conflict" between democratic governments and an alliance of military regimes.

The wider African Union has yet to weigh in on this crisis.

"The AU Peace and Security Council could well overrule this ECOWAS decision if it felt that wider peace and security on the continent was threatened by an intervention," said Cameron Hudson, a former official for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

"Any coup that has succeeded beyond 24 hours has come to stay. So, as it is, they are speaking from the point of strength and advantage," said Oladeinde Ariyo, a security analyst in Nigeria. "So, negotiating with them will have to be on their terms."

The junta has cut ties with France and exploited popular grievances toward its former colonial ruler. It also has asked for help from the Russian mercenary group Wagner, which operates in a handful of African countries and has been accused of committing human rights abuses.

Moscow is using Wagner and other channels of influence to discredit Western nations, asserted Lou Osborn, an investigator with All Eyes on Wagner, a project focusing on the group.

Tactics include using social media to spread rumors, mobilize demonstrations and spread false narratives, Osborn said.

She pointed to a Telegram post on Wednesday by an alleged Wagner operative, Alexander Ivanov, asserting that France had begun the "mass removal of children" likely to be used for slave labor and sexual exploitation.

Neither Russia's government nor Wagner responded to questions.

Meanwhile, Niger's approximately 25 million people are feeling the impact of the sanctions.

Some neighborhoods in the capital, Niamey have little access to electricity and there are frequent power cuts across the city. The country gets up to 90% of its power from Nigeria, which has cut off some of the supply.

Since the coup, Hamidou Albade, 48, said he's been unable to run his shop on the outskirts of Niamey because there's been no electricity. He also works as a taxi driver but lost business because a lot of his foreign clients have left.

"It's very difficult, I just sit at home doing nothing," he said. Still, he supports the junta. "We're suffering now, but I know the junta will find a solution to get out of the crisis," he said.

Trump valet pleads not guilty in classified documents case; property manager's arraignment postponed

By CURT ANDERSON and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

FORT PIERCE, Fla. (AP) — Donald Trump's valet pleaded not guilty on Thursday to new charges in the case accusing the ex-president of illegally hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate while the property manager had his arraignment postponed because he still hasn't secured a Florida-based attorney.

Trump waived his right to appear alongside valet Walt Nauta and property manager Carlos De Oliveira at the hearing in the federal court in Fort Pierce, and the judge accepted a not guilty plea he made in court papers last week.

De Oliveira's failure to finalize local counsel marks the latest delay in the case, which is scheduled to go to trial in May — a date Trump's lawyers made clear they want to push back. The judge set a new arraignment date for De Oliveira on Tuesday.

Attorneys for Trump, De Oliveira and Nauta left the courthouse without commenting to reporters about the case.

An updated indictment brought by special counsel Jack Smith late last month accuses Nauta and De Oliveira of scheming with the Republican former president to try to delete Mar-a-Lago surveillance video sought by investigators. They face charges including conspiracy to obstruct justice in the case stemming from secret government documents found at the Palm Beach club after Trump left the White House in 2021.

Nauta and Trump were charged in June and previously pleaded not guilty, but a new indictment added more charges and De Oliveira to the case.

De Oliveira made an initial appearance in court in July but didn't enter a plea because he hadn't retained local counsel. A Florida-based attorney appeared with De Oliveira in court on Thursday but hadn't been retained on the case.

Trump was already charged with dozens of felony counts, and the indictment added new counts of obstruction and willful retention of national defense information.

It's one of three different criminal cases Trump is facing this year as he tries to reclaim the White House in 2024. He's also gearing up for a possible fourth indictment, in a case out of Fulton County, Georgia, over alleged efforts by him and his Republican allies to illegally meddle in the 2020 election in that state. The county district attorney, Fani Willis, a Democrat, has signaled that any indictments in the case would likely come this month.

Trump has denied any wrongdoing and has characterized all the cases against him as politically motivated.

He pleaded not guilty in Washington's federal court last week in a second case brought by Smith that accuses him of conspiring with allies to overturn his 2020 election loss to Democrat Joe Biden.

Smith's team is expected on Thursday to propose a trial date for that case. Trump is already scheduled to stand trial in March in a New York state case stemming from hush money payments made during the 2016 election and in May in the classified documents case.

The updated indictment in the documents case centers on surveillance footage at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate. 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.

Video from Mar-a-Lago would ultimately become vital to the government's case because, prosecutors said, it shows Nauta moving boxes in and out of a storage room — an act alleged to have been done at Trump's direction and in an effort to hide records not only from investigators but also from Trump's own lawyers.

Days after the Justice Department sent a subpoena for video footage at Mar-a-Lago to the Trump Organization in June 2022, prosecutors say, De Oliveira asked an information technology staffer how long the server retained footage and told the employee "the boss" wanted it 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?"

Prosecutors allege that De Oliveira later lied in interviews with investigators, falsely claiming that he

hadn't even seen boxes moved into Mar-a-Lago after Trump left the White House.

De Oliveira's Washington attorney, John Irving, told reporters after the last hearing that he looks forward to seeing what potential evidence the Justice Department has, and he declined to comment about whether De Oliveira has been asked to testify against Trump.

The new indictment also charges Trump with illegally holding on to a document he's alleged to have shown off to visitors in New Jersey.

Indictment shows White House lawyers struggling for control as Trump fought to overturn election

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A few hours after rioters laid siege to the Capitol, overpowering police in a violent attack on the seat of American democracy on Jan. 6, 2021, the White House's top lawyer, Pat Cipollone, called his boss with an urgent message.

It's time to end your objections to the 2020 election, Cipollone told Donald Trump, and allow Congress to certify Joe Biden as the next president. Trump refused.

Trump was no longer listening to his White House counsel, the elite team of attorneys who take an oath to serve the office of the president. But by all accounts, he hadn't been listening to them for some time.

The extraordinary moment — fully detailed for the first time in the latest federal indictment against Trump unsealed last week — vividly illustrates the extent to which the former president's final weeks in office were consumed by a struggle over the law, with two determined groups of attorneys fighting it out as the future of American democracy hung in the balance.

Trump's attempts to remain in power, according to the indictment and evidence compiled in congressional investigations, were firmly rejected by Cipollone and his top deputy, Pat Philbin. So Trump turned to outside allies including Rudy Giuliani, John Eastman and Kenneth Chesebro, among other legal advisers, to launch what federal prosecutors have called a "criminal scheme" to fraudulently overturn the election.

Cipollone and Philbin had been heard from before, as both testified to the House Jan. 6 committee under subpoena. But they were unable to disclose to Congress their interactions with Trump, citing the executive privilege that customarily shields their work in the White House.

Special counsel Jack Smith, who brought the indictment against Trump, faced no such barrier. A federal judge ruled the lawyers had to testify about their interactions with Trump in the chaotic weeks before the Jan. 6 insurrection.

As a result, prosecutors were able to obtain extraordinary new details that were used in the indictment of the former president. And Cipollone and Philbin seem likely to become important witnesses in Trump's upcoming trial.

Requests for comment from them were not returned.

The breakdown of the relationship between Trump and his White House counsel — a lawyer-president arrangement that dates back to Franklin D. Roosevelt — began in the weeks after the 2020 presidential election. Cipollone and Philbin at the time were providing "candid" advice to Trump that there was no evidence of fraud that could change the results of the election.

Despite this advice, Trump began to parade outside advisers into the White House for a series of long, contentious and at times nasty meetings about steps he could take to challenge the election.

In a now infamous Dec. 18, 2020 session in the Oval Office, Trump allies including Sidney Powell and Michael Flynn, the former national security adviser, proposed ordering the military to seize voting machines in crucial states Trump had lost.

Cipollone was blindsided by the meeting, having learned of it just as he was about to leave the White House for the night. He recalled in testimony to the Jan. 6 committee that Trump's advisers "forcefully" verbally attacked him and other White House lawyers when they shot down the idea of seizing voting machines.

"It was being brought to the president by people who I don't believe had his best interest in mind," Cipol-

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lone told lawmakers in June 2022. "They were doing the country and the president, both in his capacity as president and his personal capacity, a disservice."

Attorneys who have served as White House counsel said they were dumbfounded by what they read in the Trump indictment, calling the situation "unbelievable" and unlike anything they experienced in office.

"You cannot be effective as a lawyer, not just as White House Counsel, as a lawyer to any client, if you cannot have candid conversations about legal requirements," said Alberto Gonzales, who served as President George W. Bush's White House counsel. "In the case of the presidency, to protect them from engaging in conduct, that while it may not turn out to be criminal, will have serious political consequences."

And that is exactly what prosecutors say White House lawyers attempted to do. By January, when it was clear that they could not get Trump to listen, the lawyers began warning others about the grave consequences of continuing to deny the results of the election.

Three days before Jan. 6, Philbin told Jeffrey Clark, a Justice Department lawyer, that if Trump remained in office despite no evidence of fraud there would be "riots in every major city in the United States."

To which Clark, according to prosecutors, responded: "That's why there's an Insurrection Act," referring to the specific statute that gives the president the power, in rare circumstances, to use military force inside the United States.

In a meeting that evening, Trump met with leadership at the Justice Department as well as Cipollone and Philbin to express his frustration that the Justice Department was "failing to do anything to overturn the election results," the indictment stated.

Clark, a low-level Justice Department attorney who had positioned himself as an eager advocate for election fraud claims in the weeks after the election, was in attendance. He was pushing to send a letter to key state legislatures stating falsely that the Justice Department had identified problems in the election results.

In that contentious Jan. 3 Oval Office meeting, Trump toyed with replacing acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen with Clark but backed down after he was told that it would result in mass resignations at the Justice Department and his own White House counsel's office. Cipollone scathingly called Clark's draft letter a "murder-suicide pact."

"There is no world, there is no option in which you do not leave the White House on January 20th," Philbin told Trump that day, according to the indictment.

By Jan. 4, Trump, tired of hearing no from his White House lawyers, began to convene meetings behind their backs, according to the indictment.

Kathryn Ruemmler, who served as Barack Obama's White House counsel, said that if she had ever been "intentionally excluded" from meetings where the president was being given contrary legal advice, she would have resigned.

"You really can't operate at all under those circumstances and conditions," she said.

That day Trump also met with then-Vice President Mike Pence and his chief of staff and legal counsel. The point of the meeting was for Trump — who at that point had lost numerous lawsuits and failed to identify evidence of widescale fraud — to convince Pence to use his ceremonial role overseeing the counting of the Electoral College votes on Jan. 6 to prevent Biden from becoming president.

Pence, both in that meeting and days later on Jan. 6, refused to do so. Since the indictment, he has said Trump was led astray by a group of "crackpot lawyers" who wanted to violate the Constitution.

But even in the hours after the Jan. 6 riot, as police struggled to clear the Capitol, Trump wasn't done trying to stop the certification of the election.

Trump and Giuliani began to make calls to Republican lawmakers in the House and Senate after the riot, according to the indictment, seeking to "exploit" the violence of the day to convince them they should delay naming Biden the winner.

Amid it all, Cipollone made his own final plea to Trump in a phone call at 7:01 p.m. asking him to withdraw his objections and allow the certification to move forward.

"I expressed what I needed to express," Cipollone told lawmakers last year, when describing the call. He declined at the time to reveal what was said.

Tropical Storm Khanun pounds South Korea's coastal regions before reaching Seoul in weakened state

By KIM TONG-HYUNG, YONG JUN CHANG and AHN YOUNG-JOON Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Tropical Storm Khanun poured intense rain on South Korea on Thursday, turning roads into chocolate-colored rivers and leaving at least one person dead, before weakening as it reached major urban centers near the capital.

More than a foot of rain fell in eastern and southern areas after the storm made landfall on the mainland in the morning. Emergency workers responded to increasing reports of flooding and landslides by the afternoon.

More than 15,000 people, mostly in southern regions, were evacuated from their homes as emergency workers responded to landslides, flood-damaged homes and rising rivers and streams. As of Thursday night, workers managed to restore electricity to 38,000 of the 40,300 homes that experienced power outages.

Officials shut down hundreds of freeways, streets and public parks and sent text alerts warning about the perils posed by Khanun, which is hitting South Korea weeks after torrential rains caused flash floods and landslides that killed at least 47 people.

After making landfall at around 9:20 a.m. near the southeastern port city of Geoje, Khanun on Thursday night was passing the densely populated Seoul metropolitan area, where half of the country's 51 million people live.

The storm delivered heavy rain as it slowly plowed across the country, but its strength increasingly diminished as it moved deeper inland. Khanun was generating maximum wind speeds of 72 kilometers per hour (45 miles per hour), compared to around 129 kph (80 mph) at the point of landfall.

There were no immediate reports of major damage in Seoul. In the nearby port city of Incheon, workers responded to flooded homes and collapsed walls, but there were no immediate reports of injuries or deaths in the area.

The storm was expected to move into North Korea early Friday, but forecasters said the greater Seoul area would still feel its force until Friday afternoon.

Among the areas of South Korea hardest hit by Khanun was the southern inland city of Daegu, where rescue workers navigated a submerged village in rubber boats, looking for residents who might have been left behind.

A 67-year-old man who was found unconscious near a bloated stream was later pronounced dead at a hospital, according to Lee Ga-yeon, an official at the Daegu fire department. The city's emergency workers were searching for another person who got swept into a stream while using a wheelchair.

In Gangwon province, a mountainous region on the east coast where the Korea Meteorological Administration forecast 50 to 60 centimeters (20 to 23 inches) of rain in some places, emergency workers in the seaside cities of Gangneung and Sokcho waded across rivers of brown, thigh-high water covering what used to be streets.

In nearby Yangyang county, workers repaired the embankment of another stream that crumbled and was spilling water on a major highway.

In the southern city of Changwon, emergency workers used ropes to rescue pedestrians trapped in huge zones of flooded roads and responded to landslides that spilled dirt and other debris over motorways. Residents and shop owners blocked their doors with sandbags while workers established flood shields to protect a major seafood market.

In Geoje, emergency workers in helmets examined a parking lot where vehicles were smashed or damaged by bricks and other debris apparently blown by forceful winds.

In coastal Busan, South Korea's second-largest city, several motorways were closed because of flooding. Emergency workers cleared uprooted trees that collapsed over roads and responding to destroyed walls and fences, broken windows, and other damage. A public park in the Yeonje district was submerged.

The neighboring cities and towns of Gimhae, Ulsan, Pohang, Gimcheon issued flood warnings for areas near rivers and streams that flow through its urban districts.

At least 63 roads and 39 homes and buildings were destroyed or damaged by floods, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety said.

More than 620 motorways were shut down, more than 400 flights were grounded and nearly 1,600 schools closed nationwide, according to the safety ministry and aviation authorities. Hundreds of train rides were canceled, ferry services were fully halted, and more than 60,000 fishing vessels sent to port.

In North Korea, state media described nationwide efforts to strengthen the monitoring of roads, railways, bridges and coastlines, and to employ measures to protect factory machines and crops.

Khanun meandered around southern Japanese islands for more than a week, knocking out power and disrupting transit. The Japan Meteorological Agency warned of possible mudslides and flooding in the areas affected. It also said Typhoon Lan was gaining strength in the Pacific Ocean and forecast to affect Japan's main islands next week.

Lan was about 220 kilometers (136 miles) south of Chichi island and packing winds up to 126 kph (78 mph) on Thursday, threatening the remote islands with high winds and heavy rain through the weekend, Japan's meteorologists said.

The Central Japan Railway Co. said some Shinkansen bullet train services may be delayed or suspended between Sunday and Wednesday depending on the typhoon's path.

Khanun previously forced South Korea to evacuate the World Scout Jamboree that was taking place at a coastal campsite. About 37,000 Scouts were transferred to university dormitories, government and corporate training centers, and hotels in Seoul and nearby areas.

Despite the storm, organizers were proceeding with plans to hold a K-Pop concert Friday to go with the Jamboree's closing ceremony.

Workers dressed in raincoats worked on scaffolding at the Seoul World Cup Stadium to set up lights and other stage preparations Thursday afternoon, even as the wind started to pick up in the city.

Norwegians prepare for more flooding and destruction after days of heavy rain

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Rescuers on Thursday evacuated inundated areas of southeastern Norway and residents braced for more landslides and flooding as rivers swollen by days of heavy rain carried large amounts of water through the mountainous landscape.

People living near waterways were moved to safety, taking their belongings from their homes and moving their cars to higher ground. Helicopters were on standby to help move people out of remote areas while volunteers assisted in towns like Hønefossen.

The Begna river, which runs through the town, had gone over its banks Thursday and because of fear of landslides, the municipality announced an evacuation. Some 200 people were taken in buses to a nearby hotel, aided by people from the Red Cross and the civil defense.

"Darn, this is bad. I don't think everyone understands how much water we are talking about. The peak is far from being reached. More is to come when the locks are opened," Tone Velo, a local resident, wrote on Facebook.

Authorities did not provide a nationwide count of evacuees, but Norwegian broadcaster NRK said it was up to at least 4,000.

The initial damage estimate was at 1 billion kroner (nearly \$100 million), according to the Norwegian Natural Perils Pool, an insurance regulator.

"We expect far more damage reports in the future," spokeswoman Stine Neverdal said, stressing the figures were preliminary.

Although the rain has mostly stopped, authorities say the flooding is expected to continue until at least Friday. Major roads and train lines were likely to be closed for days.

The catastrophic flooding, among the worst in the Scandinavian country in recent years, was triggered

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by days of heavy summer rain.

In 2020, 10 people were killed in a landslide in Ask, a village north of Oslo, in one of the worst landslides in Norway's modern history. A landslide in the central part of the country in 1893 killed 116 people.

On Wednesday, a dam partially burst after Norway's largest river spilled over and broke through the structure. Downstream communities had been evacuated and no casualties were reported. Police said the situation at the dam was being continuously assessed but as of Thursday it no longer deemed critical.

There had been fears that a train bridge over the Lågen River would collapse because of the large volume of water, but railway officials said Thursday that it was now stable. All traffic across the bridge was halted Monday.

For the first time in 35 years, the popular Peer Gynt open-air festival will end two days early, on Friday, because of the flooding, according to its chief executive, May Brit Støve.

The nine-day event features dance, concerts, art exhibitions and more and is held in a picturesque valley near Lillehammer, which hosted the 1994 Winter Olympics. The festival has been held since 1989.

Storm Hans battered northern Europe starting Monday, causing damage and disruptions in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. Ferries were canceled, flights were delayed, roads and streets were flooded, people were injured by falling branches and thousands remained without electricity. Southeastern Norway was particularly badly affected.

Norway's acting police chief Håkon Skulstad said "the situation is serious and constantly developing."

On Thursday, the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate raised its warning for floods and landslides from orange to red for parts of southern Norway.

Norwegian royals were to visit some of the affected areas: Norway's King Harald and Queen Sonja on Friday while his son, Crown Prince Haakon who is heir to the throne, on Saturday.

In neighboring Sweden, parts of the harbor in the second-largest city, Goteborg, remained flooded. Roads and train lines in the area were closed due to the water.

The Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute issued orange warnings — the second highest level — because of a risk of flooding in parts of the country along the border with Norway.

Putin profits off US and European reliance on Russian nuclear fuel

By MARTHA MENDOZA and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. and its European allies are importing vast amounts of nuclear fuel and compounds from Russia, providing Moscow with hundreds of millions of dollars in badly needed revenue as it wages war on Ukraine.

The sales, which are legal and unsanctioned, have raised alarms from nonproliferation experts and elected officials who say the imports are helping to bankroll the development of Moscow's nuclear arsenal and are complicating efforts to curtail Russia's war-making abilities. The dependence on Russian nuclear products — used mostly to fuel civilian reactors — leaves the U.S. and its allies open to energy shortages if Russian President Vladimir Putin were to cut off supplies. The challenge is likely to grow more intense as those nations seek to boost production of emissions-free electricity to combat climate change.

"We have to give money to the people who make weapons? That's absurd," said Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Washington-based Nonproliferation Policy Education Center. "If there isn't a clear rule that prevents nuclear power providers from importing fuel from Russia — and it's cheaper to get it from there — why wouldn't they do it?"

Russia sold about \$1.7 billion in nuclear products to firms in the U.S. and Europe, according to trade data and experts. The purchases occurred as the West has leveled stiff sanctions on Moscow over its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, blocking imports of such Russian staples as oil, gas, vodka and caviar.

The West has been reluctant to target Russia's nuclear exports, however, because they play key roles in keeping reactors humming. Russia supplied the U.S. nuclear industry with about 12% of its uranium last year, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Europe reported getting about 17% of its uranium in 2022 from Russia.

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Reliance on nuclear power is expected to grow as nations embrace alternatives to fossil fuels. Nuclear power plants produce no emissions, though experts warn that nuclear energy comes with the risk of reactor meltdowns and the challenge of how to safely store radioactive waste. There are about 60 reactors under construction around the world — 300 more are in the planning stages.

Many of the 30 countries generating nuclear energy in some 440 plants are importing radioactive materials from Russia's state-owned energy corporation Rosatom and its subsidiaries. Rosatom leads the world in uranium enrichment, and is ranked third in uranium production and fuel fabrication, according to its 2022 annual report.

Rosatom, which says it is building 33 new reactors in 10 countries, and its subsidiaries, exported around \$2.2 billion worth of nuclear energy-related goods and materials last year, according to trade data analyzed by the Royal United Service Institute, a London-based think-tank. The institute said that figure is likely much larger because it is difficult to track such exports.

Rosatom's CEO Alexei Likhachyov told the Russian newspaper Izvestia the company's foreign business should total \$200 billion over the next decade. That lucrative civilian business provides critical funds for Rosatom's other major responsibility: designing and producing Russia's atomic arsenal, experts say.

Ukrainian officials have pleaded with world leaders to sanction Rosatom to cut off one of Moscow's last significant funding streams and to punish Putin for launching the invasion. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy again pressed Western leaders to target Rosatom after Russian forces captured the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Rosatom is running the partially shutdown plant, and the International Atomic Energy Agency has repeatedly warned that a radiation leak at the Russian-occupied facility could be a major disaster.

"Ukraine does not understand why sanctions have not yet been introduced against Rosatom and its leadership," Zelenskyy said in May, "when representatives of this company continue to occupy Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and put our general security at risk."

Nuclear energy advocates say the U.S. and some European countries would face difficulty in cutting off imports of Russian nuclear products. The U.S. nuclear energy industry, which largely outsources its fuel, produces about 20% of U.S. electricity.

The value of Russian nuclear fuel and products sent to the U.S. hit \$871 million last year, up from \$689 million in 2021 and \$610 million in 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In terms of weight, U.S. imports of uranium products from Russia nearly doubled from 6.3 tons in 2020 to 12.5 tons in 2022, according to trade data from ImportGenius.

The reasons for that reliance goes back decades. The U.S. uranium industry took a beating following a 1993 nonproliferation deal that resulted in the importation of inexpensive weapons-grade uranium from Russia, experts say. The downturn accelerated after a worldwide drop in demand for nuclear fuel following the 2011 meltdown of three reactors at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi power plant.

American nuclear plants purchased 5% of their uranium from domestic suppliers in 2021, the last year for which official U.S. production data are available, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. The largest source of uranium for such plants was Kazakhstan, which contributed about 35% of the supply. A close Russian ally, Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer of uranium.

The Biden administration says it is trying to revive uranium mining and the production of nuclear fuel, and lawmakers have introduced legislation to speed up the process. This week, however, President Joe Biden announced the formation of a national monument to preserve land around Grand Canyon National Park that would prevent new uranium mining in the region.

"It is critical that we stop funding Russia's state-owned nuclear monopoly, Rosatom," said Sen. John Barrasso, the Wyoming Republican who introduced legislation earlier this year to fund America's nuclear fuel supply chain. "We also need to give America's nuclear fuel suppliers market certainty."

Europe is in a bind largely because it has 19 Russian-designed reactors in five countries that are fully dependent on Russian nuclear fuel. France also has a long history of relying on Russian-enriched uranium. In a report published in March, Greenpeace, citing the United Nations' Comtrade database, showed that French imports of enriched uranium from Russia increased from 110 tons in 2021 to 312 tons in 2022.

Europe spent nearly \$828 million (almost €750 million) last year on Russian nuclear industry products —

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including fuel elements, nuclear reactors, and machinery — according to Eurostat, the EU's statistics office.

Some European nations are taking steps to wean themselves off Russian uranium. Early on in the Ukraine conflict, Sweden refused to purchase Russian nuclear fuel. Finland, which relies on Russian power at two out of its five reactors, scrapped a trouble-ridden deal with Rosatom to build a new nuclear power plant. Finnish energy company Fortum also announced an agreement with the U.S. Westinghouse Electric Company to supply fuel for two reactors after its contracts with Rosatom subsidiary Tvel expire over the next seven years.

The Czech Republic has sought to wean itself off Russian supplies completely and turned to Westinghouse and the French company Framatome for future shipments of fuel assemblies for its only nuclear power plant, currently supplied by Tvel, with the new supplies expected to begin in 2024. Slovakia and Bulgaria, two other countries that rely on Tvel for nuclear fuel, have also turned to different suppliers.

Despite the challenges, experts believe political pressure and questions over Russia's ability to cut off supplies will eventually spur much of Europe to abandon Rosatom. "Based on apparent prospects (of diversification of fuel supplies), it would be fair to say that Rosatom has lost the European market," said Vladimir Slivyak, co-chair of the Russian environmental group Ecodefense.

What remains unclear, Slivyak said, are how Hungary and France will address the issue. France has not expressed a willingness to shut off Russia's uranium spigot. Hungary, which maintains close ties to Russia, is fully dependent on Moscow to provide fuel for its four-reactor nuclear power plant. It has plans to expand that plant by two Rosatom reactors — a project that is financed by a 10 billion euro line of credit from a Russian bank.

Those reactors, experts said, will be fully reliant on Russian nuclear fuel for years, if not decades, to come.

Today in History: August 11, Joe Biden names Kamala Harris as his running mate

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Aug. 11, the 223rd day of 2023. There are 142 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Aug. 11, 1997, President Bill Clinton made the first use of the historic line-item veto, rejecting three items in spending and tax bills. (The U.S. Supreme Court later struck down the veto as unconstitutional.)

On this date:

In 1860, the nation's first successful silver mill began operation near Virginia City, Nevada.

In 1919, Germany's Weimar Constitution was signed by President Friedrich Ebert.

In 1934, the first federal prisoners arrived at Alcatraz Island, a former military prison, in San Francisco Bay.

In 1949, President Harry S. Truman nominated General Omar N. Bradley to become the first chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In 1952, Hussein bin Talal was proclaimed King of Jordan, beginning a reign lasting nearly 47 years.

In 1956, abstract painter Jackson Pollock died in an automobile accident on Long Island, New York at age 44.

In 1965, rioting and looting that claimed 34 lives broke out in the predominantly Black Watts section of Los Angeles.

In 1992, the Mall of America, the nation's largest shopping-entertainment center, opened in Bloomington, Minnesota.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton named Army Gen. John Shalikashvili (shah-lee-kash-VEE'-lee) to be the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, succeeding the retiring Gen. Colin Powell.

In 2014, Academy Award-winning actor and comedian Robin Williams died in Tiburon, California at age 63.

In 2016, the Obama administration said it had decided marijuana would remain on the list of most dangerous drugs, rebuffing growing support across the country for broad legalization, but said it would allow more research into its medical uses.

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In 2020, Democrat Joe Biden named California Sen. Kamala Harris as his running mate; Harris was the first Black woman on a major party's presidential ticket.

Ten years ago: Israel approved building 1,200 more settlement homes and agreed to release 26 long-held Palestinian security prisoners. Suspected militants gunned down 47 worshippers as they recited their early morning prayers at a mosque in Konduga, Nigeria, and killed another 12 civilians in a nearby village. Jason Dufner won his first major title with a two-stroke victory over Jim Furyk at the PGA Championship.

Five years ago: Nobel Prize-winning novelist V.S. Naipaul died at his London home at the age of 85. President Donald Trump said former White House staffer and reality-TV star Omarosa Manigault Newman was a "lowlife"; Manigault Newman had been promoting a book in which she said Trump is a racist who had used racial slurs on the set of "The Apprentice." Republican U.S. Rep. Chris Collins of New York ended his re-election bid, days after his indictment on insider trading charges.

One year ago: The Justice Department asked a court to unseal the warrant the FBI received before searching the Florida estate of former President Donald Trump. Attorney General Merrick Garland also said he personally approved the search warrant. The top U.S. public health agency relaxed its COVID-19 guidelines and dropping the recommendation that Americans quarantine themselves if they come into close contact with an infected person. Model and actor Jerry Hall and media mogul Rupert Murdoch agreed to the terms of their pending divorce.

Today's Birthdays: Rock musician Jim Kale (Guess Who) is 80. Magazine columnist Marilyn Vos Savant is 77. Country singer John Conlee is 77. Singer Eric Carmen is 74. Computer scientist and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak is 73. Wrestler-actor Hulk Hogan is 70. Singer Joe Jackson is 69. Playwright David Henry Hwang is 66. Actor Miguel A. Nunez Jr. is 64. Actor Viola Davis is 58. Actor Embeth Davidtz is 58. Actor Duane Martin is 58. Actor-host Joe Rogan is 56. R&B musician Chris Dave is 55. Actor Anna Gunn is 55. Actor Ashley Jensen is 55. Actor Sophie Okonedo (oh-koh-NAY'-doh) is 55. Rock guitarist Charlie Sexton is 55. Hip-hop artist Ali Shaheed Muhammad is 53. Actor Nigel Harman is 50. Actor Will Friedle is 47. Rock singer Ben Gibbard is 47. Actor Rob Kerkovich is 44. Actor Merritt Wever is 43. Actor Chris Hemsworth is 40. Rock musician Heath Fogg (Alabama Shakes) is 39. Rapper Asher Roth is 38. Actor Alyson Stoner is 30.