

Groton Daily Independent

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Wednesday, Feb. 21

Senior Menu: Swiss steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, vegetable winter blend, carrot bars, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Cheese nachos.

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Service at Rosewood Court, 10 a.m.; Soup Supper (Emmanuel Men serving), 6 p.m.; Worship, 7 p.m.

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

United Methodist: Community coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m., Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.

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



Thursday, Feb. 22

Senior Menu: Hamburger chow mein, chow mein noodles, vegetable stir fry blend, peaches.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Sloppy joes, spudsters.

Girls Basketball Region 1A

State Wrestling at Sioux Falls

Friday, Feb. 23

Senior Menu: Salmon loaf, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, oranges, vanilla pudding, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Fish nuggets, tri taters.

State Wrestling at Sioux Falls

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian: One junior high game at 4 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity game to follow.

Robotics VRC state competition

This Saturday at 609 Cliff Avenue Harrisburg, South Dakota, starting at 10 AM

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

In partnership with [smartasset](#)

The US Supreme Court yesterday declined to review a case challenging the use of socioeconomic factors in the admissions criteria at a prestigious northern Virginia high school. A group of parents claims the policy discriminates against Asian Americans.

Retail giant Walmart is set to purchase TV maker Vizio for \$2.3B in a bid to expand its advertising business, according to the two companies yesterday. The move is expected to allow the worldwide operator of 11,000 department stores to better compete with Amazon's and

Google's ad businesses.

Three men accused of attempting to sell hand-written lyrics from the Eagles' album, "Hotel California," begin a criminal trial in New York today. Rare book dealer Glenn Horowitz, former Rock & Roll Hall of Fame curator Craig Inciardi, and memorabilia seller Edward Kosinski face charges of conspiracy and criminal possession of stolen property. Horowitz faces two additional charges of hindering prosecution.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 2024 MLS regular season kicks off tonight with Lionel Messi's Inter Miami taking on Real Salt Lake (8 pm ET, Apple TV and Fox Sports US); see season preview for all 29 teams. Andreas Brehme, German soccer star and World Cup winner, dies at 63.

Universal Music Group purchases \$240M stake in Chord Music, who owns music from artists like The Weeknd, John Legend, and David Guetta; purchase values the artist catalog company at \$1.85B.

Each of the four Beatles to get their own Sam Mendes-directed biopic film slated for 2027 release.

Science & Technology

Astronomers discover the Milky Way's Radcliffe Wave—a 9,000-light-year-long gas structure actively birthing new stars—is itself oscillating back and forth in space.

Genetic analysis of remains found at ancient burial sites across Europe reveals at least six infants exhibiting Down syndrome; findings suggest infants with the condition were well cared for.

International sting seizes assets of LockBit, the world's most prolific ransomware ring; group is responsible for more than 40% of global ransomware attacks, has extorted more than \$120M.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.6%, Dow -0.2%, Nasdaq -1.0%); stocks dragged down by Nvidia, which fell 4.4% and is set to report earnings after the bell today. Amazon to replace Walgreens in Dow Jones Industrial Average Feb. 26.

FuboTV files \$1B lawsuit seeking to block sports-streaming venture between Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, and Fox, alleging it violates antitrust law.

Ford Motor Co. slashes price of 2023 Mustang Mach-E by up to \$8,100; company reports US sales fell 51% in January after the Mach-E became ineligible for a federal tax credit.

Politics & World Affairs

Two men charged with murder in Kansas City mass shooting during the Chiefs' Super Bowl victory parade that left one dead, 22 others wounded; officials say more people may be charged. See previous write-up.

White House to reveal expanded sanctions package against Russia in wake of death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny; details expected Friday. Defected Russian pilot found shot to death in Spain.

US vetoes resolution from United Nations Security Council calling for a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip; vote was 13-1, with the UK abstaining.

City Council discusses downtown buildings issues, summer employment

Buildings in downtown Groton may be in danger.

The Groton City Council discussed maintenance of the alley east of Main Street at Tuesday's council meeting.

Topper Tastad, president of the Groton Community Historical Society, said the problem became apparent when two buildings (15 North Main Street and 29 North Main Street) began having water damage on walls facing the alley.

Water doesn't drain from the alley between North Main Street and North Third Street, he said. And the mess of water and mud has damaged the structures there, and may do more in the future.

"If we don't do this, these buildings are going to be gone," he said. "We're going to be another Stratford or Avon. These buildings will be gone. You don't replace these buildings."

This wasn't an issue likely discussed when Main Street businesses were built in the late 1800s and early 1900s, he said. Gravel has been brought in for years to try and make the alley better, but that has caused the alley to sit above where it should be, and it doesn't allow water to drain into the sewer system, he said.

"It will be everyone's fault if we don't fix this. These buildings will be gone in 20 years if we don't fix it," Tastad said. "...All those guys who owned the buildings a hundred years ago are gone. It's up to us."

Tastad proposed a number of projects to help the alleyway that runs from East Railroad Avenue north to East Third Avenue. The highest priority would be to pull three to five inches of gravel from behind some of the buildings and grade the alleyway with a low side to the west so that water will drain.

The second priority in Tastad's plan presented to the council would be for an engineer to determine what elevation the alley should be and to put a large storm drain in the alley.

The third and fourth priorities deal with the alley between East First and East Third avenues, specifically determining what elevations should be and reshaping the alley.

The proposal from Tastad may not be the best option, but something has to be done, he said.

"This is what I think is workable," he said. "No matter what, it has to happen, or we're going to lose these buildings."

This issue could have long-ranging consequences, Tastad warned. With recent talk of economic development and new building in town, "it's going to be a hard sell if we can't take care of our buildings."

The city is going to have to do something, Mayor Scott Hanlon agreed. He added he would speak with Public Works Coordinator Terry Herron about the best steps moving forward.

"There are a lot of variables, but we will get something going on this," he said. "We need to look into all these and get something figured out."

Councilman Brian Bahr cautioned the group about moving too quickly. The first thing that needs to be done, he said, is to locate the utilities so those aren't disrupted or damaged by alley-way work.

Summer employee list taking shape

The council approved hiring summer baseball employees, as well as setting pay rates for all summer employees.

Matt Locke will continue as baseball coordinator, with seven years of prior experience. Softball coordinator will be Jackie Iverson.

Additional baseball positions hired include:

- Seth Erickson as Legion Coach with two years of experience
- Aaron Severson as Jr. Legion Coach with one year of experience
- Spencer Locke as Jr. Teener Coach with four years of experience
- Susan Fjeldheim as U14 Softball Coach with six years of experience
- Christopher Frost as U12 Softball Coach in his first year
- Reilly Fuhrman as U10 Softball Coach with one year of experience

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- Sydney Kurtz as U8 Softball Coach with two years of experience

The city is also opening the application period for other summer positions, including swimming pool manager, swimming pool lifeguard, baseball groundskeeper, baseball gatekeeper and cemetery caretaker. Other positions opened include public works laborer and assistant part-time swimming pool manager, though those positions might not be filled.

The council also approved salaries and time of payment for summer employees.

- Public works laborer at \$16 per hour paid biweekly
- Cemetery caretaker at \$16 per hour paid biweekly
- Swimming pool manager at \$16 per hour paid biweekly
- Assistant part-time swimming pool manager at \$14 per hour paid biweekly
- Swimming pool lifeguard at \$11.20 per hour plus 25 cents per year of service paid biweekly
- Water Safety Instructor lifeguards during swim lessons at their regular salary plus \$1 per hour paid biweekly (plus \$25 bonus per private lesson session paid upon successful completion of entire swimming pool season)
- Water Safety Instructor assist lifeguard during swim lessons at their regular salary plus 50 cents per hour paid biweekly
- Concession manager at \$50 daily paid biweekly plus 50% net profit paid at the end of the season
- Baseball coordinator at a yearly rate of \$4,000 plus \$77.32 per year of service paid monthly
- Softball coordinator at a yearly rate of \$1,500 plus \$25.77 per year of service paid monthly
- Legion baseball coach at a yearly rate of \$4,000 paid monthly
- Jr. Legion baseball coach at a yearly rate of \$3,000 plus \$51.55 per year of service paid monthly
- Jr. Teener baseball coach (if only one is hired) at a yearly rate of \$2,000 plus \$51.55 per year of service paid monthly
- Jr. Teener baseball coach (if two are hired) at a yearly rate of \$1,500 plus \$38.66 per year of service paid monthly
- U8/U10/U12 day baseball coach at a yearly rate of \$2,500 plus \$50 per year of service paid monthly
- Girls softball coach (U8, U10, U12, U14) at a yearly rate of \$1,000 plus \$20.62 per year of service paid monthly
- Baseball groundskeeper at \$11.20 hourly plus 25 cents per year of service paid biweekly
- Baseball gatekeeper at \$11.20 hourly plus 25 cents per year of service paid biweekly

Other actions taken Tuesday:

- The city council named a building inspector to identify code violations in the community. Dennis "Mike" Olson, doing business as OCCS Consulting/Contracting Service, will identify issues with proper maintenance of building exteriors, maintenance of yard area and safety issues in commercial and residential areas. Olson is a retired Edmunds County sheriff (1979-95), Aberdeen code enforcement officer (2003-14) and Aberdeen City Councilman (2016-20).

- The council authorized accepting bids for the 2024 resurfacing of city streets, with bids to be opened at 7 p.m. March 5. Work on the project includes about 37,000 square yards of bituminous seal coat.

- The city will begin accepting quotes for 1,200 yards of gravel. Quotes are due March 5.

- Elizabeth Varin

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GBB Region 1A

Dunker has double-double night in Groton's win over Webster

A stubborn Webster Area girls' basketball team hung around until the fourth quarter when the Tiger defense wore down the Bearcats and the Lady Tigers posted a 50-31 win. It was the first round of Region 1A that was played at Aberdeen Roncalli. In the other game, Roncalli defeated Redfield, 43-37. Groton Area and Roncalli will play for the Region 1A title game on Thursday at Roncalli at 7 p.m.

Webster Area had the early lead, jumping out to a 9-2 advantage and held a 9-6 lead after the first quarter. The Tigers scored eight straight points to take the lead and led it at halftime, 22-19. Groton Area led, 37-29, going into the fourth quarter.

Rylee Dunker had a double-double night with 11 points and 14 rebounds plus she had two assists, five steals and one block. Sydney Leicht had eight points and two steals. Jaedyn Penning had eight points, seven rebounds, four assists, three steals and one block. Brooklyn Hansen had eight points, four rebounds, two assists and four steals. Jerica Locke had seven points, six rebounds, three assists and two steals. Faith Traphagen had four points and five rebounds. Kennedy Hansen had two points, one rebound, one assist and one steal. Talli Wright had two points and one rebound. Laila Roberts had two rebounds, one assist and one steal. Taryn Traphagen had one rebound.

Groton Area made 15 of 46 three-pointers for 33 percent, four of 17 in three-pointers for 24 percent, eight of 15 free throws for 53 percent, had 37 rebounds, 16 turnovers, 13 assists, 18 steals, nine fouls and two block shots.

Erin Cannes led Webster Area with 14 points followed by Allison Case with five, Payton Snell and Bailee Nine each had four, Harley Johnson had three and Chloe Mammenga added a free throw. The Bearcats made 13 of 42 field goals for 31 percent, three of four free throws, had 19 turnovers and 16 team fouls.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Coop, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Chiropractic Clinic, Groton Ford, Hanlon Brothers, John Sieh Agency, Krueger Brothers, Lori's Pharmacy, Professional Management Services, S & S Lumber, Spanier Harvesting & Trucking, Sun & Sea Travel, The MeatHouse, Witte Exteriors LLC. Shane Clark did the play-by-play assisted by Paul Kosel and Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera.

DIRECTOR OF NURSING

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(0214.0221)

Finance Officer Wanted

The Town of Andover is seeking a Finance Officer. This is a part time position. Must know word and excel. Resume can be sent to P O Box 35,

Andover, SD 57422, or email to bsmith@nvc.net. A complete job description is available by call 605-265-0236. EOE. (0214.0221)





SD Middle School All State Band

8th grader Libby Cole (Trombone), 7th grader Novalea Warrington (Flute/Piccolo), and 6th grader Liam Johnson (Alto Sax) have been accepted into the 2024 SD Middle School All State Band. This year marks the 25th anniversary with conductors Mr. Randall Standridge (Honor Band) and Dr. Larry Petersen (Festival Band). This year there were 598 auditions submitted from 75 schools. 199 students were selected with 52 schools represented in the state. Novalea and Liam were selected into the honor band and Libby was selected into the festival band. Libby will also be presented with her 3-year member award. MS All State Band will be held next week in Mitchell on March 1-2 with a concert on Saturday March 2nd at 3:00 pm.

(Photo from Desiree Yeigh's Facebook Page)

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Death Notice: Patricia Cutler

Patricia Cutler, 98, of Claremont passed away February 19, 2024 at Derian Place in Aberdeen. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Service Notice: Russell Sass

Memorial services for Russell Sass, 68, of Groton will be 11:00 a.m., Friday, February 23rd at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church. Father Gregory Tschakert will officiate. Military honors will be presented by Groton American Legion Post #39. Visitation will be held at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel on Thursday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m. Deacon Greg Sass will lead.

Russell passed away February 19, 2024 at Sanford Medical Center in Sioux Falls, surrounded by his family. He graciously gave life to others as a donor.

\$352 Million for Clean Water in South Dakota

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris announced \$6 billion from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to expand access to clean drinking water, replace lead pipes, improve wastewater infrastructure, and remove PFAS contamination in water in every single state and territory in the country.

This includes \$352.5 million for South Dakota for clean water and drinking water projects through federal fiscal year 2026. South Dakota Democratic Party Chair Shane Merrill released the statement below about this crucial funding to our state.

"The Biden Administration believes every South Dakotan deserves access to clean drinking water and recognizes that underserved communities in our state and

across the country have been left behind for far too long," said South Dakota Democratic Party Chair Shane Merrill "They are continuing to deliver on their promises and making an historic investment in water infrastructure for every American. South Dakota voters will remember at the ballot box this November that it was President Biden and Vice President Harris who are fighting for them."

As of January, \$347 million has been announced for clean water and water infrastructure projects in South Dakota through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. There are also several bills making their way through the South Dakota Legislature to allocate \$700 million from the American Rescue Plan Act for water projects across the state. Since President Biden took office, the Indian Health Service has allocated \$1.4 billion in funding from the Infrastructure Law to over 650 projects to build sanitation infrastructure in Tribal communities.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem collects unclaimed property check at county GOP event

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 20, 2024 9:31 PM

PIERRE — Gov. Kristi Noem got her money back Tuesday night.

Noem's acceptance of an oversized check for \$384.19 in unclaimed property came at the start of her keynote speech to the Hughes-Stanley County Republican Party Lincoln Day Dinner at the Ramkota Event Hall in Pierre.

The money was likely a holdover from an Edward Jones college account she'd opened for one of her children years ago, Noem told the party faithful.

It's been sitting on the state's unclaimed property list for well over a decade. The list is a perpetual liability for the state, a place for the listing of money from uncashed checks, stocks and a host of other sources, remitted to the state by banks or insurance companies unable to locate the owners.

State Treasurer Josh Haeder regularly appears in television, radio and social media ads urging people to check his agency's website to claim their money. Haeder had hoped to spend more to advertise unclaimed property, but lawmakers have advanced a bill that would require his office to seek legislative approval before adjusting his budget.

The governor told the crowd she'd been asked about her unclaimed property on multiple occasions since her entry into politics. She fielded multiple calls from reporters about it in 2010, the year then-state-lawmaker Noem ran for a U.S. House seat occupied at the time by Stephanie Herseth Sandlin. Noem won that race and served four terms in Congress before winning her first term as governor in 2018.

Most recently, South Dakota Searchlight made note of Noem's unclaimed property after she said in her December budget address that she wanted to do more to return unclaimed property to its rightful owners.

Last week, the county parties teased a "big announcement" for Noem's keynote speech. On Tuesday evening, after trumpeting her decision to once again send South Dakota National Guard troops to Texasto help police the U.S.-Mexico border, she signaled for Jason Williams of the state Treasurer's Office to come on stage.

"Tonight, I'm finally going to be delivered a check for my unclaimed property," she said.

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

Responding to abortion-rights effort, House approves bill allowing withdrawn petition signatures

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 20, 2024 6:49 PM

In response to a potential ballot measure that would reinstate abortion rights, the Republican-dominated South Dakota House of Representatives advanced a bill Tuesday in Pierre that would allow people to remove their signatures from ballot-question petitions.

The bill passed 59-9 — with the no votes coming from the chamber's seven Democrats and two of its Republicans — and now heads to a Senate committee. An emergency clause in the legislation would make it effective immediately, before this spring's deadline for petitions to place questions on the Nov. 5

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general election ballot.

Dell Rapids Republican Rep. Jon Hansen is the prime sponsor. He aims to establish a process for withdrawing signatures from petitions for initiated measures, initiated constitutional amendments and referendums. Initiated measures and referendums need 17,508 signatures from registered voters to make the ballot; initiated constitutional amendments need 35,017.

Those wishing to withdraw their signatures would need to notify the secretary of state in writing.

"People have approached me and they said, 'Hey, I signed that abortion petition because I thought it was pro-life. That's what they led me to believe,'" said Hansen, who also serves on the board of directors of South Dakota Right to Life. That organization supports a "Decline to Sign" campaign to keep the abortion-rights measure off the ballot.

Currently, abortions are banned in South Dakota, and the state's only exception is to save the life of the pregnant mother.

Hansen also alleged petition circulators are fooling South Dakotans who think they are signing a measure to repeal the sales tax on groceries but are being given the abortion petition. The Dakotans for Health ballot question committee is circulating both petitions.

"For those people who have been misled, or frankly, fraudulently induced, into signing one of these ballot measure petitions, this simply gives them the choice," Hansen said. "It gives that individual the choice to say, 'You know what, I'm sorry, I was misled into signing that. I want to take my name off the thing.'"

Rick Weiland of Dakotans for Health later said the bill is an attempt by Hansen and other anti-abortion activists to prevent the ballot question from reaching the November ballot.

"Why are Jon Hansen and his right to life politicians so afraid of letting the people decide?" Weiland said in an emailed statement. "Could it be that they know that simple restoration of the reproductive rights women had before the politicians and judges took them away is what South Dakota wants?"

Weiland said Dakotans for Health already has more than 50,000 signatures on the abortion-rights ballot petitions.

California, Idaho, Utah and Washington allow for signers of petitions to withdraw their signatures. Florida was on the list, but in 2009, that state Supreme Court said the state's signature revocation law was unconstitutional.

South Dakota risks taking on similar legal fees if the bill passes, said Sioux Falls Democratic Rep. Linda Duba.

"We have a personal responsibility to understand what we are signing," Duba said. "And if we disagree with that signature at a later time, we also have the opportunity to vote no."

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said he has "no idea why the courts would say we want to not allow an additional right for voters, which is what this gives."

"This adds rights to the voter," Mortenson said. "It adds voter discretion to come back and say, 'I want my name withdrawn from that.' And if there's a challenge, that can be duly considered at that point."

The Republican no votes came from Rep. David Kull, R-Brandon, and Rep. Ernie Otten, R-Tea. Otten echoed Duba's argument about personal responsibility when signing petitions.

"What beast are we unleashing on something that I may really like?" he said. "I don't know."

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

'Puts accountability in place': Bill tying teacher pay to state funding passes House

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 20, 2024 5:59 PM

A bill tying teacher pay to annual increases in state funding passed the state House of Representatives with a 58-9 vote Tuesday.

The bill, which now heads to a Senate committee, is a result of South Dakota drifting back down near the bottom in average teacher salary compared to the rest of the United States. The bill also aims to follow through on promises made to teachers when the Legislature passed a half-percentage-point increase in the state sales tax rate in 2016 to raise teacher salaries. Last year, legislators and Gov. Kristi Noem reduced the state sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%.

Rep. Kristin Conzet, the newly appointed Republican lawmaker from Rapid City, served in the Legislature in the years leading up to the sales tax increase and supported the effort.

"Careers ended over that tax increase. People weren't voted back in. We did what was best for our teachers," Conzet said Tuesday on the House floor. "What did not happen and what the intent was of raising that sales tax was to go directly to teachers. It wasn't to go to the administration; it wasn't to backfill student losses. ... This puts accountability in place. This puts teeth in what was supposed to be taken care of in that all-out battle six, seven years ago."

The legislation would set a statewide minimum teacher salary of \$45,000, beginning July 1, 2026. That minimum standard would increase each year by a percentage equal to the annual increase in state education funding approved by the Legislature and governor.

The bill would also require schools to raise their average teacher compensation — including pay and benefits — by percentages equal to annual increases in state funding. That requirement would begin with the 2025 fiscal year.

Beyond the regular annual increases in state education funding, schools would not receive additional state funding to comply with the mandates. Noem has recommended a 4% increase in state funding for the next state budget.

While nobody testified against the legislation during its committee hearing last week, several lobbyists representing the education community called it a work in progress.

Some lawmakers expressed concern on the House floor, saying that the bill needed more work to earn support from school district superintendents — especially those expecting enrollment decreases in the future, which could result in a decrease in state funding to those school districts.

Rep. Rocky Blare, R-Winner, said he is worried for the future if other costs increase, such as insurance, gas prices or other staff salaries. He said the legislation would limit school districts' ability to cover those needs.

"I think this bill needs to be looked at, needs to be refined, needs to be better," Blare said, as one of the few legislators to vote against the bill.

But Rep. Mike Stevens, R-Yankton, who worked with an informal group tasked with rewriting an earlier version of the bill, said it's time to hold school districts accountable, even if it's "not a perfect bill."

The legislation, Stevens said, would force school districts to tackle declining enrollment without sacrificing teacher pay by combining classes, closing schools, consolidating schools, passing an opt out of property tax limitations, using reserves, reducing staff or reducing services.

"If we have to make hard decisions," Stevens said, alluding to lawmakers making cuts to fit a balanced budget each year, "everybody else does too."

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

State Senate votes to put up 'guardrails' on medical pot for ex-inmates

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 20, 2024 5:02 PM

PIERRE — The state Senate endorsed a bill that would require parolees and probationers to get additional sign-offs from a health care practitioner to get a medical cannabis card.

Current law on medical cannabis has no prohibitions on access for people on probation or parole, even as steering clear of drugs and alcohol are often expectations for those serving out a sentence of supervision.

Senate Bill 191 wouldn't bar the issuance of a medical cannabis card for a person on supervised release. It would instead require that the prescribing practitioner certify that the drug is consistent with the patient's care plan for a debilitating medical condition, that it's reasonable based on the practitioner's observations about the patient, and that it's a better option than alternative treatments. Those certifications would need to be delivered in some form to a court services officer or parole officer.

Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, told the Senate that the state's Unified Judicial System and Department of Corrections wanted some "guardrails" against abuse of the medical cannabis system by people under their supervision.

"They just want to have some level of comfort that the folks who are receiving medical marijuana certifications, that there is a bona fide, debilitating condition and that they're receiving proper medical care," Mehlhaff said.

The language that cleared the Senate on Monday afternoon was looser than it had been in the bill's original version. As introduced last month, it would have banned the use of medical pot until the drug is approved for use nationally by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, essentially putting it off limits.

That version of the bill failed in the Senate Health and Human Services Committee on Feb. 5. Nine days later, it was reconsidered in light of its amended language and passed 4-3.

Mehlhaff and Sen. Erin Tobin, R-Winner, both served on the 2023 Medical Marijuana Oversight Committee. Tobin told the Senate on Monday she'd initially opposed the idea, as had most of that committee's members. The adjusted language was the product of conversations with health care professionals, she said, and now represents a bill she supports.

"It's important to make sure that we're using this in the right patient population for the right reasons," Tobin said. "I think granting judges some discretion with whether or not parolees and probationers have medical marijuana allows for really individualized health care, compassionate care and consideration of public safety concerns at the same time."

SB 191 passed on a 29-4 vote and now goes to a House committee.

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.

Fund controlled by governor may soon require legislative oversight

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 20, 2024 2:23 PM

Responding to recent controversy about a fund controlled exclusively by the Governor's Office, a committee of lawmakers endorsed a bill Tuesday that would require greater oversight of the spending.

"I think this is a good attempt to respond to a concern that's out there," said Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown.

The South Dakota Senate Commerce and Energy Committee endorsed the bill 7-1. It now heads to the full Senate.

The bill is an amended version of earlier, failed legislation that would have reduced the amount of money flowing to the Future Fund. The fund gets its money from a tax on employers, and the governor has exclusive authority in state law to spend Future Fund dollars on research and economic development. Unlike

other funds administered by the Governor's Office of Economic Development, Future Fund expenses don't go through a board of citizen appointees for vetting or approval.

The new version of the bill would require the Governor's Office of Economic Development to provide quarterly reports to legislative committees, detailing each award or grant from the fund. The reports would include the recipient's name, amount, location, the research or economic development purpose, the economic impact measures, and the number of jobs created or retained.

Noem's uses of the Future Fund last year included \$2.5 million for a Governor's Cup rodeo in Sioux Falls and \$5 million for Noem's "Freedom Works Here" workforce recruitment campaign, which stars her in a series of advertisements. The latter also came under scrutiny for allegations that the politically connected Ohio firm chosen to conduct the campaign stole the idea for it from a South Dakota firm.

The commissioner of the Governor's Office of Economic Development, Chris Schilken, defended the governor's use of the fund during a hearing on the prior version of the bill earlier this month. On Friday, he stepped down from his leadership position to take a subordinate role in the office, citing a desire to spend more time with his family.

According to the state Department of Labor and Regulation, 28,261 employers paid \$23 million into the Future Fund in 2022, which equated to an average of \$814 per employer. Governors can spend as much or as little from the fund as they want, and legislators have altered the contribution rates over the years, so the balance fluctuates. Noem distributed \$30.34 million from the fund last year.

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

Legislative committee endorses proposal for more control over state treasurer's budget

Office wants to spend more on finding unclaimed property owners

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 20, 2024 1:36 PM

The state Treasurer's Office may have to seek permission from the Legislature to increase the office's budget for finding unclaimed property owners.

The House Appropriations Committee voted 5-3 on Tuesday in Pierre to endorse legislation containing that requirement.

"This bill is an important way of improving the legislative oversight in this area," said the bill's prime sponsor, Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls.

He said the office's current ability to set its own budget is "highly unusual within state government."

Unclaimed property consists of an array of abandoned or forgotten private assets, including money from bank accounts, stocks, life insurance payouts, uncashed checks, and even the contents of safe deposit boxes.

The holder of the money or items, such as a bank, tries to find the owners. After three years of dormancy, the property reverts to the state and most of the money goes into the state budget. Yet the owners of the unclaimed property can still claim it, and the state Treasurer's Office maintains an online database and makes other efforts to connect people with that property.

To get more property back to its rightful owners, Governor Kristi Noem and the Treasurer's Office plan to spend more of the value of unclaimed property on advertising and other efforts to find those owners. Current state law does not require the office to request approval from state lawmakers for that.

Treasurer Josh Haeder is already appearing in commercials encouraging people to visit the state's unclaimed property website.

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Budget plan, reaction

Haeder told lawmakers in a previous budget committee hearing that the plan is to adjust his office's annual advertising and outreach budget from a flat \$125,000 to 1% of the value of unclaimed property remitted to the state each year. Based on the current record amounts, that 1% would be more than \$1 million.

Following that committee hearing, Venhuizen said the Legislature, which sets annual state budgets, should have oversight of increased spending.

"This is really a process bill," Venhuizen told South Dakota Searchlight. "This bill just makes sure that the budget for this office is handled like any other state agency."

Haeder told South Dakota Searchlight the bill would impede the office's "ability to make good faith efforts to return people their property." Returning more unclaimed property could require more time and staff, Haeder said, so the office should have discretion to adjust its spending.

The bill has since been amended to ensure the treasurer retains discretion over the payment of unclaimed property claims and audits. But the bill would require the treasurer to get legislative approval of the office's administrative budget, including marketing expenses.

During Tuesday's House Appropriations Committee, Venhuizen said the bill as amended "addresses those major objections" that Haeder brought up.

However, Haeder said the bill, "even with the amendment, is still not practical." He said that because the office uses unclaimed properties to create its annual budget – which is an amount based on a projection of properties coming into the state each year – his office should not have to go through appropriators, who oversee the spending of tax revenue.

"We will need to put together an entirely new budget," he said.

Additionally, Haeder said Venhuizen ignored the office's suggested changes to the bill, which Haeder called "incredibly disrespectful."

"Our input was not accepted," Haeder said, adding that because of the lack of communication, the bill could have "unintended consequences." He said the bill disrupts a system that "works perfectly fine at this point in time."

Venhuizen said he's available to talk.

"I spend my time here in the appropriations room," Venhuizen said. "He's a two-minute walk away. It's easy to talk at any point."

Impact on banks debated

Haeder said banks expect the state to work hard to return unclaimed properties, and any efforts to hinder that would give them a reason to leave the state.

"If we don't do more, we're going to lose a large holder," he said. "On that note, unfortunately, one of our major holders has indicated they plan to leave South Dakota — one of our major remitters of unclaimed property."

Haeder said the office learned that information on Friday and is working with the Governor's Office to learn more. He told South Dakota Searchlight that no further details are publicly available yet.

Venhuizen rejected Haeder's suggestion that banks are going to pack up and leave if the office has to go through the budget committee.

"These banks are not interested in the technical way the state budgets for unclaimed property administration," said Venhuizen, who added he has been involved in recruiting banks to the state. "That is not a factor in where they site their charters."

Venhuizen said that while unclaimed property is not tax revenue, whatever is not paid back to rightful owners ultimately ends up in the state's budget. Therefore, it's "six of one, half a dozen of the other" whether people say the office's administrative budget comes from the state budget or unclaimed property.

"The difference is," he said, "the administration costs would go through the general appropriations process," where lawmakers approve departments' budgets.

Since 1954 when the federal Unclaimed Property Act was passed, the state has taken in about 2.5 mil-

lion pieces of unclaimed property worth about \$1.1 billion. The vast majority of that — about 2.2 million properties — has yet to be claimed.

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

Noem deploying troops to Mexican border again

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - FEBRUARY 20, 2024 11:38 AM

Republican South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem announced Tuesday that she will once again deploy National Guard troops to the U.S.-Mexico border, and she said the troops will help with “construction of a wall.”

Noem said 60 South Dakota National Guard soldiers will deploy “on a rolling basis over a three-month period” this spring.

She said it will be the fifth deployment of South Dakota Guard troops to assist in border security efforts during her administration.

“The border is a warzone, so we’re sending soldiers,” Noem said in a news release. “These soldiers’ primary mission will be construction of a wall to stem the flow of illegal immigrants, drug cartels, and human trafficking into the United States of America.”

She said the deployment answers a call from Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to help that state respond to large numbers of people flowing across the southern border. Two of the prior deployments were also in response to requests for assistance from Texas, and two were in response to requests by the federal government.

Last month, Noem requested and was granted a joint session of the Legislature to give a speech about the situation at the border. That followed a visit by her to the border in January.

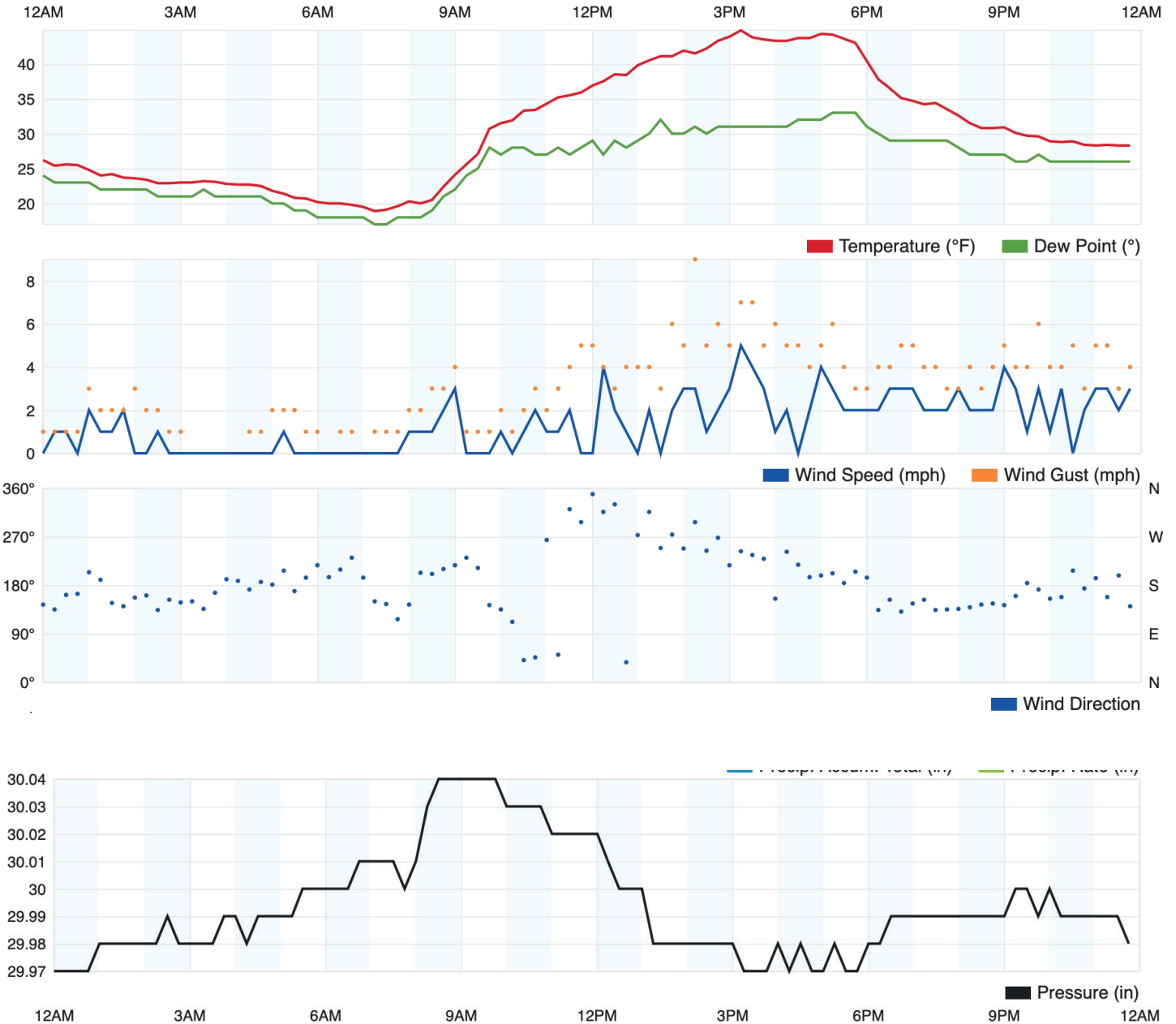
Noem has spent at least \$1.3 million of state funds on prior troop deployments to the Texas-Mexico border through agreements that relieve Texas of any obligation to repay the money. Noem has used South Dakota’s Emergency and Disaster Fund to cover those costs. Additional funding for past deployments came from a private donor in Tennessee, and from the federal government.

Texas Gov. Abbott announced last week that he plans to build an 80-acre base camp in Eagle Pass for Texas National Guard soldiers conducting Operation Lone Star, the state’s effort to deter people from immigrating into Texas illegally. Texas has spent \$10 billion on the operation.

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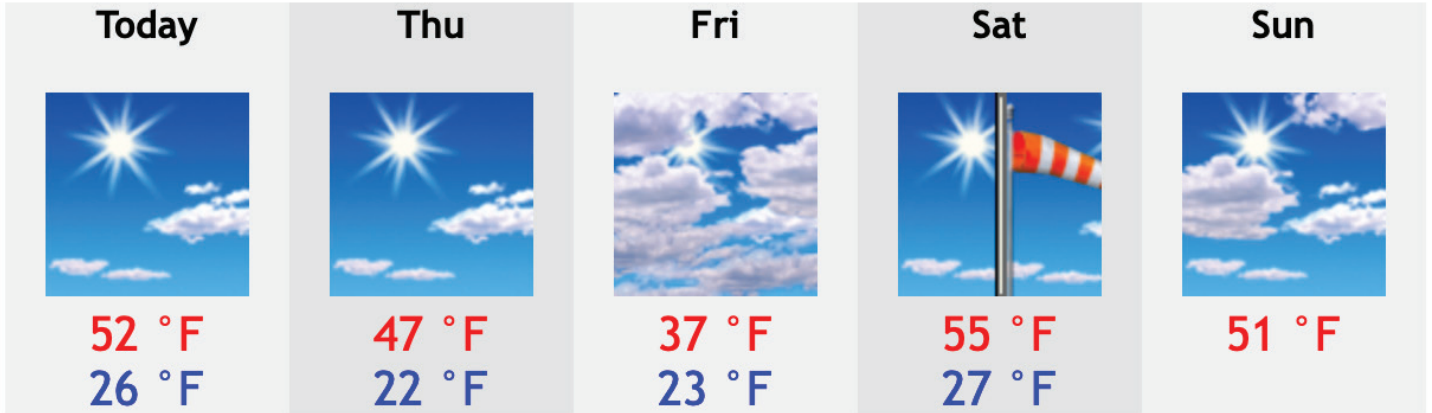
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



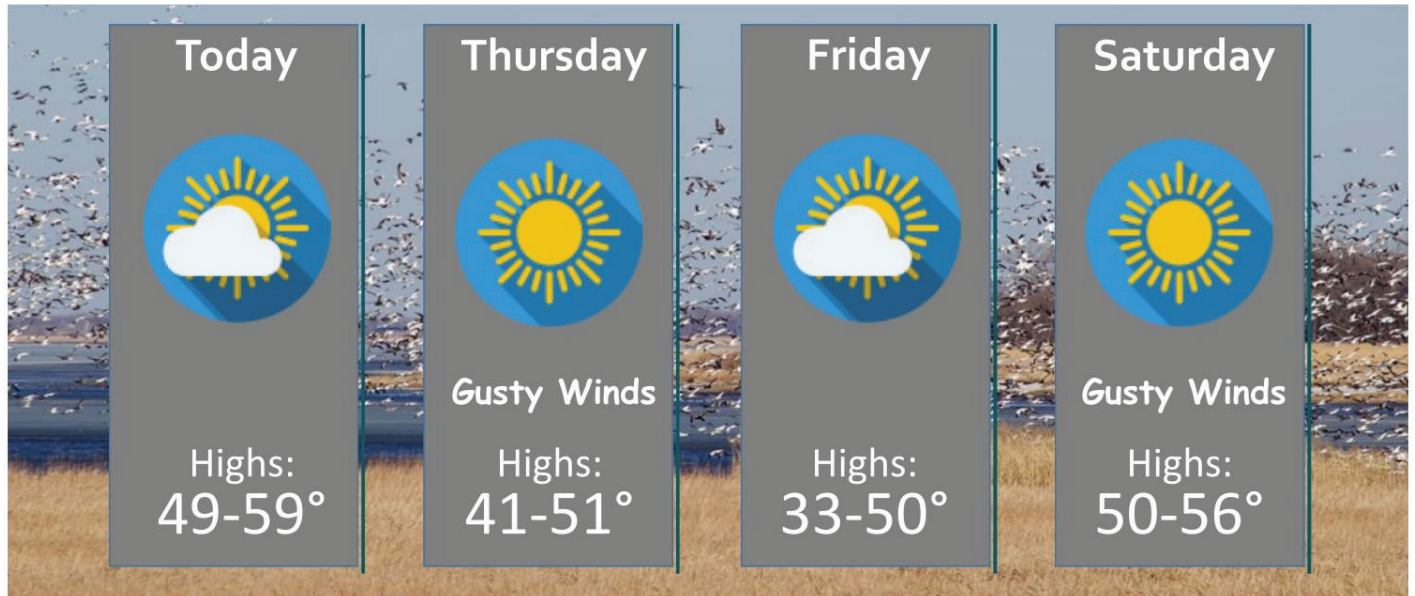
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Continued Mild & Dry

February 21, 2024
4:25 AM



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

We will continue to see mild weather to close out February. The mild weather does come with a cost, as winds will be on the increase, so to will we see more fire weather concerns as things continue to dry out.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 45 °F at 3:15 PM

Low Temp: 19 °F at 7:11 AM

Wind: 9 mph at 2:09 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 45 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 64 in 2017

Record Low: -30 in 1918

Average High: 31

Average Low: 9

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.44

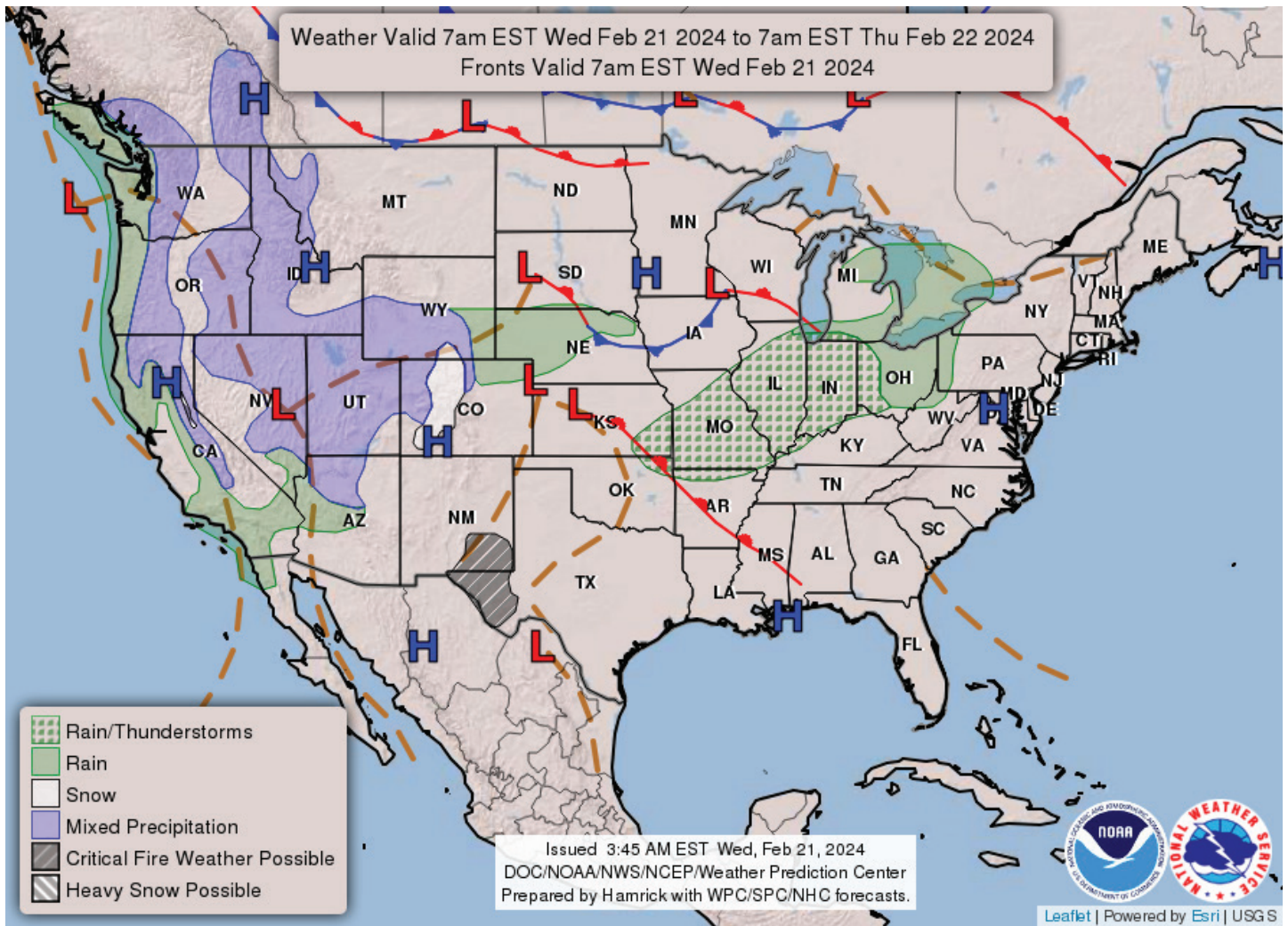
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 0.99

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:08:56 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:21:24 am



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Today in Weather History

February 21, 1918: Due to Chinook winds, a warm-up of 83 degrees in just 12 hours occurred in Granville, North Dakota. The temperature soared from an early morning low of 33 degrees below zero to an afternoon temperature of 50.

February 21, 1969: Heavy snow and winds of 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which closed many roads. Snowfall amounts of 5 to 12 inches were typical across eastern South Dakota from the 20th to the 22nd. Some snowfall amounts included 5 inches at Clear Lake and Brookings, 6 inches at Wilmot, 7 inches at Milbank, Redfield, and Mitchell, 8 inches at Conde, and 9 inches at Webster, Sioux Falls, and Huron.

1918 - A spectacular chinook wind at Granville, ND, caused the temperature to spurt from a morning low of 33 degrees below zero to an afternoon high of 50 degrees above zero. (David Ludlum)

1935: Frequent dust storms occurred in eastern Colorado during the month, forcing schools to close and people to stay indoors. A fatality happened on this date when two section cars collided on the railroad near Arriba Colorado due to poor visibility.

1936 - The temperature at Langdon, ND, climbed above zero for the first time in six weeks. Readings never got above freezing during all three winter months. (David Ludlum)

1971 - An outbreak of tornadoes hit northeastern Louisiana and northern and central Mississippi. The tornadoes claimed 121 lives, including 110 in Mississippi. Three tornadoes accounted for 118 of the deaths. There are 1600 persons injured, 900 homes were destroyed or badly damaged, and total damage was 19 million dollars. (David Ludlum)

1971 - Elk City, OK, was buried under 36 inches of snow to establish a 24 hour snowfall record for the state. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Low pressure over central California produced gale force winds along the coast, and produced thunderstorms which pelted Stockton, Oakland and San Jose with small hail. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A storm tracking across southern Canada produced high winds in the north central U.S., with gusted to 90 mph reported at Boulder CO. The high winds snapped trees and power lines, and ripped shingles off roofs. The Kentucky Fried Chicken Bucket was blown off their store in Havre MT. An eighteen foot fiberglass bear was blown off its stand along a store front in west Cody WY, and sailed east into downtown Cody before the owners were able to transport their wandering bear back home in a horse trailer. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing during the morning hours spread severe weather across Georgia and the Carolinas. Strong thunderstorm winds caused one death and thirteen injuries in North Carolina, and another four injuries in South Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Overnight thunderstorms produced heavy rain in central Texas. Rainfall totals ranged up to 2.80 inches at Camp Verde, with 2.20 inches reported at Leakey. Thunderstorms early in the day produced high winds in southern Texas, with wind gusts to 60 mph reported at Alice. Daytime thunderstorms in eastern Texas drenched Rosenberg with four inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2013: An astonishing 515 cm (202.8" or almost 17') level of snow depth was measured at Sukayu Onsen, Aomori on Honshu Island in Japan, on February 21, 2013, the deepest snow measured at an official weather site in Japan records.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE GAMBLERS

In the Middle Ages, there was a group of men who called themselves The Gamblers. Wherever there was sickness or suffering, plagues or pestilence, they would take their lives into their own hands - gamble against all odds - to help others. They willingly gambled with their lives for the good of others.

But they were not the first to do this. The Apostle Paul talks about one of his co-workers: Epaphroditus. In speaking of him, he wrote, "he risked his life for the work of Christ and he was at the point of death while trying to do for me the things you couldn't do because you were far away."

We do not know very much about Epaphroditus. We do know that he delivered money to Paul while he was in prison. We do know that he helped Paul during a time of great physical and financial need. We do know that he became sick while he was staying with Paul. And we do know that Paul trusted him to deliver a most important "thank-you" letter to the church at Philippi.

The world honors those who are recognized for being rich, athletic, wealthy, entertaining, and intelligent. But here we see God recognizing and honoring a servant. And Paul also said, "Welcome him with Christian love, great joy, and be sure to honor people like him." A simple servant, honored eternally, for taking a risk for God. What are you doing for the Lord?

Prayer: We think, Lord, of those who do for You what few are willing to do - risk their lives. Thank You for the missionaries who serve You quietly. Honor them greatly. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Welcome him in the Lord's love and with great joy, and give him the honor that people like him deserve. For he risked his life for the work of Christ, and he was at the point of death while doing for me what you couldn't do from far away. Philippians 2:25-30



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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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.20.24

5 45 55 58 68 7

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$525,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 6
DRAW: Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.24

4 14 31 37 41 8

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$3,150,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 21 Mins 57
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.20.24

5 7 13 37 39 14

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 36 Mins 57
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.17.24

10 20 27 29 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$55,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 36 Mins 57
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.24

9 18 30 47 63 14

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 5 Mins 58
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.24

4 23 45 50 53 17

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$348,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 5 Mins 58
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Harrisburg 73, Marshall, Minn. 49
Huron 58, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 55
Mitchell 59, Brandon Valley 54
Sioux Falls Jefferson 64, Pierre 47
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 55, Aberdeen Central 53
Sturgis Brown 56, Douglas 50
Watertown 64, Yankton 58

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Mitchell 62, Brandon Valley 56
Pierre 51, Sioux Falls Jefferson 47
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 73, Huron 20
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 38, Aberdeen Central 28
Sturgis Brown 55, Douglas 40
Watertown 42, Yankton 32
SDHSAA Playoffs=
Class A Region 1=
Quarterfinal=
Aberdeen Roncalli 43, Redfield 37
Groton 50, Webster 31
Milbank 53, Waubay/Summit 37
Sisseton 86, Tiospa Zina 22
Class A Region 2=
Sioux Valley 64, Great Plains Lutheran 50
Quarterfinal=
Flandreau 61, Clark-Willow Lake 40
Florence-Henry 49, Estelline-Hendricks 28
Hamlin 52, Elkton-Lake Benton 31
Class A Region 3=
Quarterfinal=
Garretson 46, Madison 38
Sioux Falls Christian 88, Baltic 30
Tri-Valley 53, Dell Rapids 25
West Central 53, McCook Central-Montrose 23
Class A Region 4=
Quarterfinal=
Elk Point-Jefferson 42, Canton 37
Lennox 59, Dakota Valley 56
Tea 72, Beresford 39
Vermillion 68, Parker 34
Class A Region 5=
Quarterfinal=
Hanson 62, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 18

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Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 65, Bon Homme 45
Parkston 52, Chamberlain 40
Wagner 69, Platte-Geddes 51
Class A Region 6=
Quarterfinal=
Crow Creek Tribal School 57, Dupree 45
McLaughlin 60, North Central 27
Miller 48, Stanley County 24
Mobridge-Pollock 62, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 24
Class A Region 7=
Quarterfinal=
Lakota Tech 69, Bennett County 42
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud High School 68, St Francis 29
Todd County 55, Little Wound 53
Winner 71, Pine Ridge 18
Class A Region 8=
Quarterfinal=
Hill City 44, Lead-Deadwood 19
Rapid City Christian 51, Custer 41
St Thomas More 55, Hot Springs 28
Class B Region 1=
Quarterfinal=
Britton-Hecla 46, Hitchcock-Tulare 40
Leola-Frederick High School 52, Wilmot 35
Northwestern 50, Langford 40
Warner 70, Aberdeen Christian 35
Class B Region 2=
Quarterfinal=
Arlington 59, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 34
Deubrook 52, DeSmet 37
Iroquois-Lake Preston 52, Castlewood 49
James Valley Christian 64, Wolsey-Wessington 44
Class B Region 3=
Quarterfinal=
Chester 55, Dell Rapids St Mary 39
Colman-Egan 46, Bridgewater-Emery/Ethan 35
Howard 58, Canistota 45
Class B Region 4=
Quarterfinal=
Centerville 55, Freeman Academy-Marion 9
Freeman 63, Menno 47
Gayville-Volin High School 51, Alcester-Hudson 46
Viborg-Hurley 54, Irene-Wakonda 18
Class B Region 5=
Quarterfinal=
Andes Central-Dakota Christian 76, Marty 44
Avon 65, Corsica/Stickney 44
Lyman 64, Ipswich 25
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 51, Burke 44
Wessington Springs 54, Gregory 33

Class B Region 6=
Quarterfinal=
Herreid-Selby 53, Lower Brule 47
Highmore-Harrold 54, Faulkton 44
Potter County 62, Sully Buttes 50
Class B Region 7=
Kadoka 56, Edgemont 27
Wall 50, New Underwood 27
Quarterfinal=
Philip 41, Jones County 24
White River 87, Oelrichs 40
Class B Region 8=
Quarterfinal=
Faith 46, Newell 33
Harding County 75, Bison 20
Lemmon High School 79, Tiospaye Topa 21
Timber Lake 60, Wakpala 53

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

A pacemaker for the brain helped a woman with crippling depression. It may soon be available widely

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Emily Hollenbeck lived with a deep, recurring depression she likened to a black hole, where gravity felt so strong and her limbs so heavy she could barely move. She knew the illness could kill her. Both of her parents had taken their lives.

She was willing to try something extreme: Having electrodes implanted in her brain as part of an experimental therapy.

Researchers say the treatment — called deep brain stimulation, or DBS — could eventually help many of the nearly 3 million Americans like her with depression that resists other treatments. It's approved for conditions such as Parkinson's disease and epilepsy, and many doctors and patients hope it will become more widely available for depression soon.

The treatment gives patients targeted electrical impulses, much like a pacemaker for the brain. A growing body of recent research is promising, with more underway — although two large studies that showed no advantage to using DBS for depression temporarily halted progress, and some scientists continue to raise concerns.

Meanwhile, the Food and Drug Administration has agreed to speed up its review of Abbott Laboratories' request to use its DBS devices for treatment-resistant depression.

"At first I was blown away because the concept of it seems so intense. Like, it's brain surgery. You have wires embedded in your brain," said Hollenbeck, who is part of ongoing research at Mount Sinai West. "But I also felt like at that point I tried everything, and I was desperate for an answer."

"NOTHING ELSE WAS WORKING"

Hollenbeck suffered from depression symptoms as a child growing up in poverty and occasional homelessness. But her first major bout happened in college, after her father's suicide in 2009. Another hit during a Teach for America stint, leaving her almost immobilized and worried she'd lose her classroom job and sink into poverty again. She landed in the hospital.

"I ended up having sort of an on-and-off pattern," she said. After responding to medication for a while, she'd relapse.

She managed to earn a doctorate in psychology, even after losing her mom in her last year of grad school.

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But the black hole always returned to pull her in. At times, she said, she thought about ending her life.

She said she'd exhausted all options, including electroconvulsive therapy, when a doctor told her about DBS three years ago.

"Nothing else was working," she said.

She became one of only a few hundred treated with DBS for depression.

Hollenbeck had the brain surgery while sedated but awake. Dr. Brian Kopell, who directs Mount Sinai's Center for Neuromodulation, placed thin metal electrodes in a region of her brain called the subcallosal cingulate cortex, which regulates emotional behavior and is involved in feelings of sadness.

The electrodes are connected by an internal wire to a device placed under the skin in her chest, which controls the amount of electrical stimulation and delivers constant low-voltage pulses. Hollenbeck calls it "continuous Prozac."

Doctors say the stimulation helps because electricity speaks the brain's language. Neurons communicate using electrical and chemical signals.

In normal brains, Kopell said, electrical activity reverberates unimpeded in all areas, in a sort of dance. In depression, the dancers get stuck within the brain's emotional circuitry. DBS seems to "unstick the circuit," he said, allowing the brain to do what it normally would.

Hollenbeck said the effect was almost immediate.

"The first day after surgery, she started feeling a lifting of that negative mood, of the heaviness," said her psychiatrist, Dr. Martijn Figeo. "I remember her telling me that she was able to enjoy Vietnamese takeout for the first time in years and really taste the food. She started to decorate her home, which had been completely empty since she moved to New York."

For Hollenbeck, the most profound change was finding pleasure in music again.

"When I was depressed, I couldn't listen to music. It sounded and felt like I was listening to radio static," she said. "Then on a sunny day in the summer, I was walking down the street listening to a song. I just felt this buoyancy, this, 'Oh, I want to walk more, I want to go and do things!' And I realized I'm getting better."

She only wishes the therapy had been there for her parents.

THE TREATMENT'S HISTORY

The road to this treatment stretches back two decades, when neurologist Dr. Helen Mayberg led promising early research.

But setbacks followed. Large studies launched more than a dozen years ago showed no significant difference in response rates for treated and untreated groups. Dr. Katherine Scangos, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, also researching DBS and depression, cited a couple of reasons: The treatment wasn't personalized, and researchers looked at outcomes over a matter of weeks.

Some later research showed depression patients had stable, long-term relief from DBS when observed over years. Overall, across different brain targets, DBS for depression is associated with average response rates of 60%, one 2022 study said.

Treatments being tested by various teams are much more tailored to individuals today. Mount Sinai's team is one of the most prominent researching DBS for depression in the U.S. There, a neuroimaging expert uses brain images to locate the exact spot for Kopell to place electrodes.

"We have a template, a blueprint of exactly where we're going to go," said Mayberg, a pioneer in DBS research and founding director of The Nash Family Center for Advanced Circuit Therapeutics at Mount Sinai. "Everybody's brain is a little different, just like people's eyes are a little further apart or a nose is a little bigger or smaller."

Other research teams also tailor treatment to patients, although their methods are slightly different. Scangos and her colleagues are studying various targets in the brain and delivering stimulation only when needed for severe symptoms. She said the best therapy may end up being a combination of approaches.

As teams keep working, Abbott is launching a big clinical trial this year, ahead of a potential FDA decision.

"The field is advancing quite quickly," Scangos said. "I'm hoping we will have approval within a short time."

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But some doctors are skeptical, pointing to potential complications such as bleeding, stroke or infection after surgery.

Dr. Stanley Caroff, an emeritus professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, said scientists still don't know the exact pathways or mechanisms in the brain that produce depression, which is why it's hard to pick a site to stimulate. It's also tough to select the right patients for DBS, he said, and approved, successful treatments for depression are available.

"I believe from a psychiatric point of view, the science is not there," he said of DBS for depression.

MOVING FORWARD

Hollenbeck acknowledges DBS hasn't been a cure-all; she still takes medicines for depression and needs ongoing care.

She recently visited Mayberg in her office and discussed recovery. "It's not about being happy all the time," the doctor told her. "It's about making progress."

That's what researchers are studying now — how to track progress.

Recent research by Mayberg and others in the journal *Nature* showed it's possible to provide a "readout" of how someone is doing at any given time. Analyzing the brain activity of DBS patients, researchers found a unique pattern that reflects the recovery process. This gives them an objective way to observe how people get better and distinguish between impending depression and typical mood fluctuations.

Scientists are confirming those findings using newer DBS devices in a group of patients that includes Hollenbeck.

She and other participants do their part largely at home. She gives researchers regular brain recordings by logging onto a tablet, putting a remote above the pacemaker-like device in her chest and sending the data. She answers questions that pop up about how she feels. Then she records a video that will be analyzed for things such as facial expression and speech.

Occasionally, she goes into Mount Sinai's "Q-Lab," an immersive environment where scientists do quantitative research collecting all sorts of data, including how she moves in a virtual forest or makes circles in the air with her arms. Like many other patients, she moves her arms faster now that she's doing better.

Data from recordings and visits are combined with other information, such as life events, to chart how she's doing. This helps guide doctors' decisions, such as whether to increase her dose of electricity — which they did once.

On a recent morning, Hollenbeck moved her collar and brushed her hair aside to reveal scars on her chest and head from her DBS surgery. To her, they're signs of how far she's come.

She makes her way around the city, taking walks in the park and going to libraries, which were a refuge in childhood. She no longer worries that normal life challenges will trigger a crushing depression.

"The stress is pretty extreme at times, but I'm able to see and remember, even on a bodily level, that I'm going to be OK," she said.

"If I hadn't had DBS, I'm pretty sure I would not be alive today."

Live updates:

Israeli strikes across Gaza kill 67 Palestinians overnight

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli strikes across Gaza killed at least 67 Palestinians overnight and into Wednesday, including in areas where civilians have been told to seek refuge.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs hospital in Deir al-Balah says it received 44 bodies after multiple strikes in central Gaza. Associated Press reporters saw the bodies arriving in ambulances and private vehicles.

Also Wednesday, the aid group Doctors Without Borders said that two people were killed when a shelter housing staff in the Gaza Strip was struck during an Israeli operation in an area where Palestinians have been told to seek shelter.

"While details are still emerging, ambulance crews have now reached the site, where at least two family

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members of our colleagues have been killed and six people wounded. We are horrified by what has taken place," the group said in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The attack took place in Muwasi, a sandy, mostly undeveloped strip of land along the coast that has been transformed into a sprawling tent camp with little in the way of basic services.

The war began when Hamas-led militants rampaged into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking around 250 hostage. About a fourth of some 130 captives still being held are believed to be dead. Israel has laid waste to much of the Palestinian territory in response. Gaza's Health Ministry estimates more than 29,000 Palestinians have been killed.

Currently:

- US vetoes Arab-backed UN Security Council cease-fire resolution
- A UN agency says it can't deliver aid to northern Gaza because of chaos, and famine fears are rising
- Attacks on ships and US drones show Yemen's Houthis can still fight despite US-led airstrikes
- More than 29,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel-Hamas war, Gaza Health Ministry says
- Israel orders new evacuations in northern Gaza, where UN says 1 in 6 children are malnourished
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

ISRAELI STRIKES ACROSS GAZA KILL 67 PALESTINIANS OVERNIGHT

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli strikes across Gaza killed at least 67 Palestinians overnight and into Wednesday, including in areas where civilians have been told to seek refuge.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs hospital in Deir al-Balah says it received 44 bodies after multiple strikes in central Gaza. Associated Press reporters saw the bodies arriving in ambulances and private vehicles. Relatives held funeral prayers in the hospital courtyard early Wednesday.

An airstrike on a home in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah killed a family of eight, according to Marwan al-Hams, the director of the Abu Youssef al-Najjar hospital. Nasser Abuel-Nour, a university professor; his wife, Nour, a human rights lawyer; their five children and grandchild were all killed in the strike.

Al-Hams says another two people were killed in a strike on a vehicle in Rafah. At least seven people were killed in strikes in the southern city of Khan Younis, the main focus of Israel's offensive in recent weeks, and another six were killed in Muwasi, an area Israel had declared a safe zone, the hospital said.

The war sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel has killed over 29,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, and driven some 80% of the population of 2.3 million from their homes.

Most heeded Israeli orders to flee south and around 1.5 million have crowded into Rafah. Israel has vowed to expand its ground offensive to the southernmost city as it seeks to destroy Hamas, which is still fighting Israeli forces across the territory.

2 KILLED IN GAZA WHERE PALESTINIANS WERE TOLD TO SHELTER, DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS SAYS

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — The aid group Doctors Without Borders says two people were killed when a shelter housing staff in the Gaza Strip was struck during an Israeli operation in an area where Palestinians have been told to seek shelter.

"While details are still emerging, ambulance crews have now reached the site, where at least two family members of our colleagues have been killed and six people wounded. We are horrified by what has taken place," the group said Wednesday in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The attack took place in Muwasi, a sandy, mostly undeveloped strip of land along the coast that has been transformed into a sprawling tent camp with little in the way of basic services.

Doctors Without Borders, known by the French acronym MSF, did not identify the source of fire. The Israeli military said it was looking into the reports.

Israel has continued to carry out strikes in all parts of the territory, and has vowed to expand its ground offensive to the southernmost city of Rafah, adjacent to Muwasi, where hundreds of thousands of people are sheltering.

QATAR SAYS HAMAS IS DELIVERING MEDICATION TO ISRAELI HOSTAGES

The Qatari Foreign Ministry said Hamas has started delivering medication for the approximately 100

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hostages held in Gaza, a month after the medications arrived in Gaza.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Dr. Majed Al-Ansari said Tuesday evening that Hamas confirmed they had begun to deliver the medications to the hostages in exchange for medicines and humanitarian aid for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

France and Qatar mediated a deal in January for the shipment of medicine for dozens of hostages held by Hamas in Gaza. The deal was the first agreement between Israel and the militant group since a weeklong cease-fire in November, but there was no evidence that the medications had arrived.

France said it took months to organize the shipment of the medicines. Qatar, which has long served as a mediator with Hamas, helped broker the deal that will provide three months' worth of medication for chronic illnesses for 45 of the hostages, as well as other medicine and vitamins.

UN WORLD FOOD PROGRAM SUSPENDS AID IN NORTHERN GAZA

The United Nations' World Food Program announced a pause in food and aid deliveries to northern Gaza on Tuesday after its drivers faced gunfire and violence from desperate residents swarming the trucks.

The convoys "faced complete chaos and violence due to the collapse of civil order," according to a statement from the program. WFP had attempted to resume aid deliveries in northern Gaza after a three-week pause following an Israeli strike on an aid convoy.

In a rare public criticism of Israel, a top U.S. envoy, David Satterfield, said this week that its targeted killings of Gaza police commanders guarding truck convoys have made it "virtually impossible" to distribute the goods safely.

The WFP said 1 in 6 children under age 2 are acutely malnourished and people are dying of hunger-related causes.

"In these past two days our teams witnessed unprecedented levels of desperation," the WFP said.

Hamas' government media office described the WFP decision as a "death sentence" for hundreds of thousands of people in northern Gaza. It called on all UN agencies to return and avert "catastrophic consequences of the famine" there.

HOUTHİ REBEL STRIKES ON RED SEA SHIPPING COSTING US MILLIONS

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels are still able to launch attacks in a crucial Red Sea corridor despite a month of U.S.-led airstrikes.

The rebels claimed more attacks Tuesday night after seriously damaging a ship and apparently downing an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars in recent days. The U.S. shot down 10 bomb-carrying Houthi drones, as well as a cruise missile heading toward a U.S. destroyer over the last day, Central Command said Tuesday. The U.S. military also targeted a Houthi surface-to-air missile launcher and a drone prior to its launch.

The Houthi have said they aim to prevent Israeli ships from navigating the Red Sea until Israel ends its war in the Gaza Strip, even though few of the ships targeted have any direct links to Israel. Their guerrilla-style attacks show the difficulty of suppressing asymmetrical warfare, and the U.S.-led campaign to protect the shipping route has boosted the rebels' standing in the Arab world.

So far, no U.S. sailor or pilot has been wounded, but the U.S. continues to lose drones worth tens of millions of dollars and fire off million-dollar cruise missiles to counter the Houthis, who are using far-cheaper weapons that experts believe largely have been supplied by Iran.

Based off U.S. military's statements, American and allied forces have destroyed at least 73 missiles before they were launched, as well as 17 drones, 13 bomb-laden drone boats and one underwater explosive drone, according to a tally by The Associated Press. Those figures don't include the initial Jan. 11 joint U.S.-U.K. strikes that began the monthlong campaign. The American military also has shot down dozens of missiles and drones already airborne as well since November.

BRITAIN'S PRINCE WILLIAM LAMENTS 'SHEER SCALE OF HUMAN SUFFERING'

LONDON — Prince William, the heir to the British throne, called Tuesday for an end to fighting in the Gaza Strip as soon as possible, lamenting the "terrible human cost" since the Hamas-led Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel and the "desperate need for increased humanitarian support for Gaza."

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William stopped short of calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza as the House of Commons prepares for a vote on that issue on Wednesday. The message, written in white on a black background, was placed under William's cypher on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"Sometimes it is only when faced with the sheer scale of human suffering that the importance of permanent peace is brought home," William said.

William used careful language focused on universal humanity rather than taking sides. The prince plans to meet with aid workers active in the region and, separately, join a discussion at a synagogue with young people of different faiths who are fighting antisemitism.

"Even in the darkest hour, we must not succumb to the counsel of despair," William said. "I continue to cling to the hope that a brighter future can be found and I refuse to give up on that."

US VETOES ARAB-BACKED UN CEASE-FIRE RESOLUTION

The U.S. vetoed an Arab-backed U.N. resolution Tuesday demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war in the embattled Gaza Strip.

The vote in the Security Council reflected wide global support for ending the more than four-month war that started with Hamas' surprise invasion of southern Israel that killed about 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage. Israel's military response has killed more than 29,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants but says the majority are women and children.

It was the third U.S. veto of a Security Council resolution demanding a cease-fire in Gaza.

In a surprise move ahead of the vote, the U.S. circulated a rival U.N. Security Council resolution that would support a temporary cease-fire in Gaza linked to the release of all hostages, and call for the lifting of all restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid. Both of these actions "would help to create the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities," the draft resolution obtained by the AP says.

U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood told several reporters Monday that the Arab-backed resolution is not "an effective mechanism for trying to do the three things that we want to see happen — which is get hostages out, more aid in, and a lengthy pause to this conflict."

UN AID AGENCY SAYS ISRAEL HASN'T SHOWN EVIDENCE ITS WORKERS JOINED RAMPAGE

JERUSALEM — The head of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees says the United Nations still has not received any evidence from Israel supporting its claims that 12 of the agency's employees participated in the Oct. 7 rampage that sparked the war.

Israel released a document last month identifying the 12 workers along with the allegations against them and accusing some of participating in kidnappings. But it has released little of the evidence collected against the workers.

The allegations prompted key donors, including the U.S., to suspend funding to the main provider of aid in Gaza.

Philippe Lazzarini, the director of UNRWA, has dismissed the 10 surviving workers; the agency says the other two were killed in fighting. The U.N. has also opened two investigations. But in a podcast Tuesday, Lazzarini said Israel still has not presented formal evidence to the U.N.

"The UN has never, never, ever received any written dossier, despite our repeated call for cooperation from the Israeli authorities," he said, asking that anyone with evidence share it with the investigation team.

Israel has long accused UNRWA of tolerating Hamas activities in and around U.N. facilities and in some cases even cooperating with the militant group. Lazzarini has denied this and says his agency has safeguards to discipline any employee who violates the U.N. ideals of neutrality.

UNICEF SAYS 1 IN 6 CHILDREN ARE ACUTELY MALNOURISHED IN NORTHERN GAZA

One in six children are acutely malnourished in the isolated and largely devastated northern Gaza, according to a UNICEF study, while Israel has vowed to expand its five-month offensive against Hamas to the enclave's southernmost city of Rafah.

The report by the Global Nutrition Cluster says more than 90% of children under 5 in Gaza eat two or fewer food groups a day, known as severe food poverty. A similar percentage are affected by infectious diseases, with 70% experiencing diarrhea in the last two weeks. More than 80% of homes lack clean and

safe water, with the average household having 1 liter (1 quart) per person per day.

The U.N. Security Council is set to vote on a U.N. resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire Tuesday, but the U.S. said it would veto it because it's trying to arrange a deal on its own that would bring a truce and the release of hostages held by Hamas.

The number of Palestinians killed during the war in Gaza has risen to 29,195, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, which does not distinguish between civilian and combatant casualties in its count. A quarter of Gaza's residents are starving. About 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed and around 250 abducted in Hamas' attack on Israel on Oct. 7 that sparked the war.

WHO SAYS 32 CRITICAL PATIENTS TRANSFERRED FROM SOUTHERN GAZA

GENEVA — The World Health Organization says 32 patients in critical condition have been transferred from Nasser Medical Complex in southern Gaza to the European Gaza Hospital to the north and field hospitals over the last two days.

The U.N. health agency said Tuesday that four Palestinian Red Crescent Society ambulances carried out the transfers after Nasser became "non-functional" following a weeklong siege and a military raid on the complex on Wednesday.

"Nasser Hospital has no electricity or running water, and medical waste and garbage are creating a breeding ground for disease," WHO said in a statement. Some 130 sick and injured patients and at least 15 doctors and nurses remain inside the hospital.

WHO reiterated its call that medical personnel, patients, health infrastructure and civilians should be protected and that hospitals must not be militarized or attacked.

"The dismantling and degradation of the Nasser Medical Complex is a massive blow to Gaza's health system," WHO said. "Facilities in the south are already operating well beyond maximum capacity and are barely able to receive more patients."

Biden to create cybersecurity standards for nation's ports as concerns grow over vulnerabilities

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is expected to sign an executive order and create a new federal rule Wednesday aimed at better securing the nation's ports from potential cyberattacks.

The administration is outlining a set of cybersecurity regulations that port operators must comply with across the country, not unlike standardized safety regulations that seek to prevent injury or damage to people and infrastructure.

"We want to ensure there are similar requirements for cyber, when a cyberattack can cause just as much if not more damage than a storm or another physical threat," said Anne Neuberger, deputy national security adviser at the White House.

Nationwide, ports employ roughly 31 million people and contribute \$5.4 trillion to the economy, and could be left vulnerable to a ransomware or other brand of cyber attack, Neuberger said. The standardized set of requirements is designed to help protect against that.

The new requirements, to be published Wednesday, are part of the federal government's focus on modernizing how critical infrastructure like power grids, ports and pipelines are protected as they are increasingly managed and controlled online, often remotely. There is no set of nationwide standards that govern how operators should protect against potential attacks online.

The threat continues to grow. Hostile activity in cyberspace — from spying to the planting of malware to infect and disrupt a country's infrastructure — has become a hallmark of modern geopolitical rivalry.

For example, in 2021, the operator of the nation's largest fuel pipeline had to temporarily halt operations after it fell victim to a ransomware attack in which hackers hold a victim's data or device hostage in exchange for money. The company, Colonial Pipeline, paid \$4.4 million to a Russia-based hacker group, though Justice Department officials later recovered much of the money.

Ports, too, are vulnerable. In Australia last year, a cyber incident forced one of the country's largest port operators to suspend operations for three days.

In the U.S., roughly 80% of the giant cranes used to lift and haul cargo off ships onto U.S. docks come from China, and are controlled remotely, said Admiral John Vann, commander of the U.S. Coast Guard's cyber command. That leaves them vulnerable to attack, he said.

Late last month, U.S. officials said they had disrupted a state-backed Chinese effort to plant malware that could be used to damage civilian infrastructure. Vann said this type of potential attack was a concern as officials pushed for new standards, but they are also worried about the possibility for criminal activity.

The new standards, which will be subject to a public comment period, will be required for any port operator and there will be enforcement actions for failing to comply with the standards, though the officials did not outline them. They require port operators to notify authorities when they have been victimized by a cyberattack. The actions also give the Coast Guard, which regulates the nation's ports, the ability to respond to cyber attacks.

Lawyers for the US to tell a British court why WikiLeaks' Julian Assange should face spying charges

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Lawyers for the American government are to tell a London court on Wednesday why they think Julian Assange should face espionage charges in the United States, in response to a last-ditch bid by his defense to stop the extradition of the WikiLeaks founder.

Assange's lawyers are asking the High Court to grant him a new appeal — his last legal roll of the dice in the long-running legal saga that has kept him in a British high-security prison for the past five years.

The 52-year-old Australian has been indicted on 17 charges of espionage and one charge of computer misuse over his website's publication of classified U.S. documents almost 15 years ago. American prosecutors say Assange helped U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal diplomatic cables and military files that WikiLeaks later published, putting lives at risk.

Lawyers for the U.S. have argued in written submissions that said Assange was being prosecuted "because he is alleged to have committed serious criminal offences."

Attorney James Lewis said Assange's actions "threatened damage to the strategic and national security interests of the United States" and put individuals named in the documents — including Iraqis and Afghans who had helped U.S. forces — at risk of "serious physical harm."

To his supporters, however, Assange is a secrecy-busting journalist who exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan. They argue that the prosecution is politically motivated and he won't get a fair trial in the U.S.

Assange's lawyers argued on the first day of the hearing on Tuesday that American authorities are seeking to punish Assange for WikiLeaks' "exposure of criminality on the part of the U.S. government on an unprecedented scale," including torture and killings.

Lawyer Edward Fitzgerald said Assange may "suffer a flagrant denial of justice" if he is sent to the U.S.

Assange's lawyers say he could face up to 175 years in prison if convicted, though American authorities have said the sentence is likely to be much shorter.

Assange was not in court on Tuesday because he is unwell, his lawyer said. Stella Assange, his wife, said Julian had wanted to attend, but was "not in good condition."

Assange's family and supporters say his physical and mental health have suffered during more than a decade of legal battles, including seven years in self-exile in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and the last five years in the high-security prison on the outskirts of the British capital.

Stella Assange, who married the WikiLeaks founder in prison in 2022 — said last week that his health has deteriorated during years of confinement and "if he's extradited, he will die."

Supporters holding "Free Julian Assange" signs and chanting "there is only one decision — no extradition" held a noisy protest outside the neo-Gothic High Court building for a second day on Wednesday.

Assange's legal troubles began in 2010, when he was arrested in London at the request of Sweden, which wanted to question him about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women. In 2012, Assange jumped bail and sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian Embassy.

The relationship between Assange and his hosts eventually soured, and he was evicted from the embassy in April 2019. British police immediately arrested and imprisoned him for breaching bail in 2012. Sweden dropped the sex crimes investigations in November 2019 because so much time had elapsed.

A U.K. district court judge rejected the U.S. extradition request in 2021 on the grounds that Assange was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions. Higher courts overturned that decision after getting assurances from the U.S. about his treatment. The British government signed an extradition order in June 2022.

Meanwhile, the Australian parliament last week called for Assange to be allowed to return to his homeland.

If judges Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson rule against Assange, he can ask the European Court of Human Rights to block his extradition — though supporters worry he could be put on a plane to the U.S. before that happens, because the British government has already signed an extradition order.

The two justices could deliver a verdict at the end of the hearing on Wednesday, but they're more likely to take several weeks to consider their decision.

Iran accuses Israel of sabotage attack that saw explosions strike natural gas pipeline

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — An Israeli sabotage attack on an Iranian natural gas pipeline caused the multiple explosions that struck it a week ago, Iran's oil minister alleged Wednesday, further raising tensions between the regional archenemies amid Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The comments by Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji come as Israel has been blamed for a series of attacks targeting Tehran's nuclear program.

The "explosion of the gas pipeline was an Israeli plot," Owji said, according to Iran's state-run IRNA news agency. "The enemy intended to disturb gas service in the provinces and put people's gas distribution at risk."

He added: "The evil action and plot by the enemy was properly managed." Owji provided no evidence to support his claims.

Israel has not acknowledged carrying out the attack, though it rarely claims its espionage missions abroad. The office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a longtime foe of Iran, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The blasts on Feb. 14 hit a natural gas pipeline running from Iran's western Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province up north to cities on the Caspian Sea. The roughly 1,270-kilometer (790-mile) pipeline begins in Asaluyeh, a hub for Iran's offshore South Pars gas field.

Owji earlier compared the attack to a series of mysterious and unclaimed assaults on gas pipelines in 2011 — including around the anniversary of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Tehran marked the 45th anniversary of the revolution just days before the pipeline blasts.

Israel has carried out attacks in Iran that have predominantly targeted its nuclear program. Last week, the head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog warned that Iran is "not entirely transparent" regarding its atomic program, particularly after an official who once led Tehran's program announced the Islamic Republic has all the pieces for a weapon "in our hands."

Tensions over Iran's nuclear program comes as groups that Tehran is arming in the region — Lebanon's militant group Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthi rebels — have launched attacks targeting Israel over the war in Gaza. The Houthis continue to attack commercial shipping in the region, sparking repeated airstrikes from the United States and the United Kingdom.

Despite a month of U.S.-led airstrikes, the Houthi rebels remain capable of launching significant attacks.

This week, they seriously damaged a ship in a crucial strait and downed an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars.

Meanwhile Wednesday, a suspected Israeli strike hit a neighborhood in Syria's capital, Damascus, where other likely Israeli strikes have targeted members of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

Family friend of Texas girl Audrii Cunningham facing charges in 11-year-old's death, prosecutor says

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

A family friend of 11-year-old Audrii Cunningham was in jail Wednesday as prosecutors say they plan to charge him in the girl's death after her body was found in a river near her rural Texas home.

Polk County Sheriff Byron Lyons said the body of the young girl — who went missing last week — was found Tuesday during a search in the Trinity River in a rural area north of Houston. Lyons said cell phone data was used to help identify places to look and that the local river authority slowed down the outflow of a reservoir to help search teams that were in the water.

Cunningham's body was found about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from her home near Lake Livingston.

"My heart aches with this news," Lyons said.

Audrii's family had reported her missing on Thursday after she failed to return after school to her home in Livingston. After she was reported missing, investigators discovered that she never got on the bus to go to school that morning.

Polk County District Attorney Shelly Sitton said officials were preparing an arrest warrant for Don Steven McDougal, 42, on a recommended charge of capital murder. She said they do not yet know if they would seek the death penalty in the case.

Lyons said there is "substantial evidence" in the case, and that cell phone data and videos helped identify places to search. He added that the Trinity River Authority lowered water levels on the river, which led to the discovery of her body.

Authorities have said McDougal is a friend of the girl's father and lived in a camper on the family's property. Audrii lived with her father, grandparents and other family members, authorities said.

Lyons has said that in the past, McDougal had taken Audrii to the bus stop or would take her to school if she missed the bus.

A backpack that authorities believe belonged to the child was found Friday near the dam on Lake Livingston, one of the state's largest lakes.

As authorities investigated Audrii's disappearance last week, they had named McDougal as a person of interest and he was arrested Friday on an unrelated assault charge. He remains in jail on that charge. Jail records did not list an attorney for him.

Court records from Brazoria County, south of Houston, show McDougal pleaded no contest to two felony counts of enticing a child stemming from a 2007 incident and was sentenced to two years in prison.

The sheriff said that the girl's body has been taken to the Harris County medical examiner's office in Houston to determine the cause of death.

How the Kremlin weaponized Russian history — and has used it to justify the war in Ukraine

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Earlier this month, when Tucker Carlson asked Vladimir Putin about his reasons for invading Ukraine two years ago, Putin gave him a lecture on Russian history. The 71-year-old Russian leader spent more than 20 minutes showering a baffled Carlson with dates and names going back to the ninth century.

Putin even gave him a folder containing what he said were copies of historical documents proving his points: that Ukrainians and Russians historically have always been one people, and that Ukraine's sover-

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eighty is merely an illegitimate holdover from the Soviet era.

Carlson said he was “shocked” at being on the receiving end of the history lesson. But for those familiar with Putin’s government, it was not surprising in the least. In Russia, history has long been a propaganda tool used to advance the Kremlin’s political goals.

In an effort to rally people around their world view, Russian authorities have tried to magnify the country’s past victories while glossing over the more sordid chapters of its history. They have rewritten textbooks, funded sprawling historical exhibitions and suppressed — sometimes harshly — voices that contradict their narrative.

Russian officials have also regularly bristled at Ukraine and other European countries for pulling down Soviet monuments, widely seen there as an unwanted legacy of past oppression, and even put scores of European officials on a wanted list over that in a move that made headlines this month.

“In the hands of the authorities,” says Oleg Orlov, co-founder of Memorial, Russia’s oldest and most prominent rights group, “history has become a hammer — or even an axe.”

From the early years of his quarter-century rule, Putin has repeatedly contended that studying their history should make Russians proud. Even controversial figures, such as Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, contributed to Russia’s greatness, Putin argues.

The Russian president has said that there should be one “fundamental state narrative” instead of different textbooks that contradict each other. And he has called for a “universal” history textbook that would convey that narrative. But that idea, criticized heavily by historians, didn’t gain much traction for quite a while — until Russia invaded Ukraine.

Last year, the government rolled out a series of four new “universal” history textbooks for 10th- and 11th-graders. One featured a chapter on Moscow’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, blamed the West for the Cold War and described the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.”

Some historians derided it as blatant propaganda. “The Soviet Union, and later Russia, is (depicted in the textbook as) always a besieged fortress, which constantly lives surrounded by enemies,” says historian Nikita Sokolov.

The Kremlin-friendly vision of Russian history is also dominating a chain of sprawling, state-funded “history parks” – venues that host history-themed exhibitions in 24 cities across the country. Some of those popular expositions were criticized by historians for inaccurate claims and deliberate glorification of Russian rulers and their conquests.

Central to the narrative of an invincible Russia is the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Marked on May 9 — Germany officially capitulated after midnight Moscow time on May 9, 1945 — the Soviet victory has become integral to Russian identity.

The Soviet Union lost an estimated 27 million people in the war, pushing German forces from Stalingrad, deep inside Russia, all the way to Berlin. The suffering and valor that went into the German defeat have been touchstones ever since, and under Putin Victory Day has become the country’s primary secular holiday.

For the authorities, “Russia’s history is a road from one victory to the next,” sums up Orlov, whose group won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022. “And more beautiful victories lie ahead. And (the Kremlin says that) we must be proud of our history; history is a means of instilling patriotism. Of course in their view, patriotism is appreciation of the leadership – be it the leadership of the czarist Russia, the leadership of the Soviet Russia or the current leadership.”

As celebrations of Victory Day over the years grew more imperious, Putin’s government grew less tolerant of any questioning or criticism of the Soviet Union’s actions in that war — or generally.

In 2014, Russian cable networks dropped Dozhd, the county’s sole independent TV channel, after it hosted a history program on the 1941-44 Siege of Leningrad and asked viewers to vote on whether Soviet authorities should have surrendered Leningrad to save lives. That same year, the Russian government adopted a law that made “rehabilitating Nazism” – or “spreading knowingly false information about the actions of the USSR during World War II” – a criminal offense. The first conviction on those charges was

reported in 2016.

Research and public debate about mass repressions by Stalin also have faced significant resistance in recent years. Historians and rights advocates cite the inevitable parallels to the current crackdown against dissent that has already landed hundreds of people behind bars.

And a queue of people waiting for their turn to read out the names of victims of Soviet repressions no longer snakes through central Moscow streets in late October. The tradition to read them aloud once a year in front of a monument to victims of Soviet repressions — called “Returning the Names” — was started in 2007 and once attracted thousands of people. In 2020, Moscow authorities stopped authorizing it, citing COVID-19.

According to prominent history teacher Tamara Eidelman, the historical narrative the Kremlin is trying to impose on society contains several main elements: the primacy of the state, the affairs of which are always more important than individual lives; the cult of self-sacrifice and readiness to give up one’s life for a greater cause; and the cult of war.

“Of course, (the latter) is never explicitly spelled out. ‘We have always strived for peace ... We have always been attacked and merely fought back,’” Eidelman says.

That laid the perfect ideological groundwork for the invasion of Ukraine, she says, and points out how the “Never again!” sentiment regarding World War II for some in Russia in recent years turned into “We can do it again” — a slogan that became popular after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and as the Kremlin adopted increasingly aggressive rhetoric towards the West.

It’s an election year, and Biden’s team is signaling a more aggressive posture toward the press

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Occupants of the White House have grumbled over news coverage practically since the place was built. Now it’s Joe Biden’s turn: With a reelection campaign underway, there are signs that those behind the president are starting to more aggressively and publicly challenge how he is portrayed.

Within the past two weeks, an administration aide sent an unusual letter to the White House Correspondents’ Association complaining about coverage of a special counsel’s report on Biden’s handling of classified documents. In addition, the president’s campaign objected to its perception that negative stories about Biden’s age got more attention than remarks by Donald Trump about the NATO alliance.

It’s not quite “enemy of the people” territory. But it is noticeable.

“It is a strategy,” said Frank Sesno, a professor at George Washington University and former CNN Washington bureau chief. “It does several things at once. It makes the press a foil, which is a popular pattern for politicians of all stripes.”

It can also distract voters from bad news. And while some newsrooms quickly dismiss the criticism, ge says, others may pause and think twice about what they write.

THE WHITE HOUSE OBJECTS TO THE FRAMING OF STORIES

The letter from Ian Sams, spokesman for the White House counsel’s office, suggested that reporters improperly framed stories about the Feb. 8 release of Special Counsel Robert Hur’s report. Sams pointed to stories by CBS News, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press and others emphasizing that Hur had found evidence that Biden willfully retained and disclosed classified material. Sam wrote that much of that so-called evidence didn’t hold up and was negated by Hur’s decision not to press charges.

He said it was critical to address it when “significant errors” like misstating the findings and conclusions of a federal investigation of a president occur.

It was Sams’ second foray into press criticism in a few months; last fall he urged journalists to give more scrutiny to House Republicans and the reasons behind their impeachment inquiry of Biden.

“Everybody makes mistakes, and nobody’s perfect,” Sams told the AP. “But a healthy back and forth over what’s the full story helps make both the press and the government sharper in how the country and

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world get the news they need to hear.”

Kelly O'Donnell, president of the correspondents' association and an NBC News correspondent, suggested Sams' concerns were misdirected and should be addressed to individual news organizations.

“It is inappropriate for the White House to utilize internal pool distribution channels, primarily for logistics and the rapid sharing of need-to-know information, to disseminate generalized critiques of news coverage,” O'Donnell said.

In a separate statement, Biden campaign spokesman T.J. Ducklo criticized media outlets for time spent discussing the 81-year-old president's age and mental capacity, an issue that was raised anew when Biden addressed the Hur report with reporters. Americans deserve a press corps that covers Trump “with the seriousness and ferocity this moment requires,” said Ducklo, who resigned from the White House in 2021 for threatening a reporter.

To be fair, Trump's comments at a rally Friday night likely came past the deadlines of some sections where Biden stories appeared that weekend. And his remarks have hardly been ignored by media outlets.

A.G. Sulzberger, publisher of The Times, noted in an interview with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism that Biden's team had been “extremely upset” about its coverage lately. “We're not anyone's opposition,” he said, “and we're not anyone's lapdog.”

HOW MUCH IS THE PRESIDENT AVAILABLE?

The criticism comes amid the backdrop of unhappiness among some journalists about how much Biden is made available for questions — an issue that surfaced again when Biden turned down an opportunity to appear before tens of millions of Americans in an interview during the Super Bowl pregame show.

The 33 news conferences Biden has given during the first three years of his presidency is lower than any other American president in that time span since Ronald Reagan, said Martha Kumar, a Towson University professor emeritus and expert on presidents and the press. Similarly, the 86 interviews Biden has given is lower than any president since she began studying records with Reagan. By comparison, Barack Obama gave 422 interviews during his first three years.

Instead, Biden prefers more informal appearances where reporters ask a few questions, with comparatively little opportunity for follow-up, she said: The 535 such sessions that Biden conducted was second only to Trump's 572.

One example followed Biden's remarks Friday after the death of Russian dissident Aleksey Navalny. Another was Biden's early evening availability following the release of Hur's report, a chaotic scene where reporters tried to shout one another. The president's performance, and remarks about his forgetfulness that were made in Hur's report, led to more questions about the impact of age on his ability.

“It did not serve him well,” Kumar said. Some on Biden's team, meanwhile, believe the president showed a combativeness in the face of criticism that Americans will appreciate.

Sesno said he can understand the Biden team's worry that the president's fitness for the job becomes a story they lose control of, much like former President Gerald Ford's stumbles led to the perception that he was a bumbler. Nikki Usher, a media professor at the University of San Diego, said she was surprised that Biden's team hadn't become more aggressive earlier.

“He needs to jump out in front of the narrative,” Usher said.

The Biden pushback seems mild in comparison to Trump's epic badmouthing of news organizations like CNN and The New York Times. Republican voters, in general, are much more apt to respond to efforts that make journalists the villain. Democrats, meanwhile, tend to have a greater appreciation for the press' role in a democracy, Usher says, so the Biden team has to be more careful with attacks.

Particularly with the age issue, there's only so much that the president's team can say, Sesno said: “People will make up their minds based on what they see and hear from Joe Biden.”

For many Ukrainians, life is split in two: Before and after the war. This is one family's story

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Kateryna Dmytryk had been waiting for this moment for almost two years — nearly all of her son's life.

Side by side, they ran, 2-year-old Timur leading the way as snow crunched beneath their feet. A slender, pale man made his way to the pair from the military hospital. Artem Dmytryk hadn't seen his family for about 24 months, almost all of which he spent in Russian captivity.

He picked up his son. Kateryna pinched her husband and clasped his hand, anything to reassure herself this wasn't a dream. All three embraced, kissed, laughed.

Kateryna had buried her mother, fled her hometown and passed through Russian checkpoints with her son, all while imagining the worst about her husband's captivity. She knew the wounds would take years to heal, but in that moment, she broke into a smile.

As Russia launched its war in Ukraine, the lives of millions of Ukrainians were irreversibly changed. Like the Dmytryks, they mark their lives in two periods: before and after Feb. 24, 2022. Tens of thousands have laid loved ones to rest, millions have fled their homes, and the country has been thrust into an exhausting war.

For Kateryna, her husband's liberation brought a glimmer of light back to her family's life. But she knows their experiences over the past two years will stay with them forever.

"We've had two years of our lives stolen," she said. "And those two years were like living in a constant hell."

"NORMAL FAMILY LIFE"

The Dmytryks were just beginning life as a family of three when the war started.

Kateryna and Artem met as teens in their hometown of Berdiansk, southeastern Ukraine. They immediately liked each other and started dating. He joined the army and served in the State Border Guard Service, stationed in Berdiansk.

In May 2021, they got married and soon welcomed Timur.

"It was a peaceful, simply normal family life," Kateryna said.

On Valentine's Day 2022, Artem received a call to combat alert. Kateryna didn't think much of it, even with escalating tensions amid Russia's military buildup on the border.

The last time Artem was home was Feb. 23. He asked Kateryna's friend to come over and stay with her. It was unusual — he didn't want her to be alone. But, Kateryna said, "I never imagined that a war on such a scale would unfold."

In the early hours of Feb. 24, Kateryna was startled by Timur's sudden cries, swiftly followed by a powerful blast.

In shock, she called Artem. Already on duty at sea, he instructed her to gather her belongings and head to her parents' village nearby.

She did as Artem said, and that evening they spoke again.

He'd received orders to go defend Mariupol.

"UKRAINE WILL PREVAIL"

Within several days, Russian forces had occupied Berdiansk and the surrounding area. Artem could rarely be in touch — only through the news did Kateryna learn what was happening in Mariupol. The city was surrounded, thousands of residents were trapped, and one of the war's bloodiest battles was playing out.

In their rare, brief conversations, Artem told her: "Everything will be fine. Ukraine will prevail."

Some calls lasted only a minute. Once, Artem asked her to take a photo of Timur every day, so one day he could see how his son was growing.

Kateryna couldn't sleep. She spent her days crying and praying for Artem's safety.

Eventually, Artem grew to fear he wouldn't survive. He called to say goodbye.

"He said that if he didn't make it, he would become a guardian angel for our son," Kateryna said.

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DARING TO LEAVE

Artem urged Kateryna to flee her parents' village for territory controlled by Ukraine.

But her mother had stage 4 cancer. "He knew I wouldn't leave," she said, "because I wouldn't be able to say goodbye to my mom."

On April 14, 2022, Kateryna's mom died. Kateryna mourned for over two weeks. Only then did she dare to leave.

There was no safe way to do so — no humanitarian corridors, no international organizations to guarantee safety. Kateryna and Timur ended up driving with a couple who offered to help, even though it was risky with a soldier's wife.

Over two days, they traveled to Zaporizhzhia — pre-war, a three-hour trip. At Russian checkpoints, they said Kateryna was their daughter-in-law, traveling to their son in territory under Ukrainian control.

Once in Zaporizhzhia, she made her way to Kyiv, where her sister-in-law lived. A new stage of struggle began — almost 21 months awaiting Artem's return from captivity.

"WE'RE WAITING"

Artem was among more than 2,500 soldiers taken into Russian captivity when the massive Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol fell.

Kateryna lost track of days, months, years. She awoke every night in anxiety. Where was Artem? What was happening to him?

The only one who could pull her out of the darkness was Timur. He looked and acted more like his father every day, she said.

She showed Timur a photo of Artem on her phone and told him Daddy would one day come home.

"Hello, Daddy?" Timur would say into the phone.

Kateryna started attending rallies, with relatives of prisoners of war gathered. She was largely in the dark about Artem's situation. But when his comrades were released during an exchange, they told her he was in the occupied Luhansk region.

She devised tricks to feel connected. She assembled a bag for the hospital where prisoners were typically taken after exchanges, stocking it with clothes and small items he cherished. She arranged duplicate keys for their Kyiv apartment and ordered a keychain with the message, "I love you very much. We're waiting for you at home."

REUNITING

On Feb. 8, Kateryna received a text from the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs.

Artem Dmytryk was part of a prisoner swap. She couldn't believe her eyes.

A few hours later, he called. "Hello, I'm in Ukraine," he said.

He was brought by bus to Kyiv. Kateryna finally got to bring the bag she'd long prepared to the military hospital where he'd undergo rehabilitation.

They hardly talk about the captivity. Artem, now 25, isn't keen to share what he went through. Instead, they focus on catching up on things they missed.

"We're rediscovering each other, falling in love all over again," Kateryna, now 23, said.

Each of them has changed — they're stronger and learning to live together again.

"Even now, you can't just return to a peaceful life," Kateryna said. She thinks often of the thousands of Ukrainian soldiers still in Russian captivity, even as her family enjoys the happy ending to this chapter.

The first night Artem spent at their home in Kyiv, Kateryna slept soundly.

France honors foreign Resistance fighters as WWII hero Manouchian is inducted into the Panthéon

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — While France hosts grandiose ceremonies commemorating D-Day, Missak Manouchian and his Resistance fighters' heroic role in World War II are often overlooked. French President Emmanuel Macron is seeking to change that by inducting Manouchian into the Panthéon national monument on Wednesday.

A poet who took refuge in France after surviving the Armenian genocide, Manouchian was executed in 1944 for leading the resistance to Nazi occupation. Macron is to lead a Paris ceremony in homage to Manouchian at the Panthéon, the resting place of France's most revered figures, in the presence of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

The tribute will also include members of his Resistance group.

"With them, it's all foreign Resistance fighters who enter into the Panthéon," said historian Denis Peschanski, who led efforts to honor Manouchian's memory.

The move comes as France gets ready to celebrate the 80th anniversary of D-Day this year in the presence of heads of states and World War II veterans.

Manouchian's coffin, covered with the French flag, will be carried in the street in front of the Panthéon by soldiers of the Foreign Legion.

On Tuesday, a homage was being held at Mont Valérien, where Manouchian and his group members were shot by the Nazis. The site has become a memorial to French WWII fighters. The Holocaust Memorial in Paris was also holding an exhibit in his honor.

"Missak Manouchian chose France twice, first as a young Armenian who loved Baudelaire and Victor Hugo, and then through the blood he shed for our country," the French presidency said in a statement last year announcing the Panthéon homage.

Born in 1906 in the then-Ottoman empire, Manouchian lost both his parents during the genocide of 1.5 million Armenians by Ottoman Turks in 2015-2016.

He was sent to an orphanage in Lebanon, then a French protectorate, where he discovered French language and culture.

He came to France in 1924. Living in Paris, he wrote poetry and took literature and philosophy classes at the Sorbonne University — while working in factories and doing other odd jobs.

He joined the communist party in the early 1930s within the MOI (Immigrant Workforce Movement) group and became editor-in-chief of a newspaper for the Armenian community.

During World War II, he joined the French Resistance as a political activist with the then-underground MOI group.

In 1943, he became a military chief in the armed organization of the communist party, the FTP-MOI group of about 60 Resistance fighters that gathered many foreigners from Armenia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Italy and Spain, including many Jewish people.

Manouchian is the first foreign and first communist Resistance fighter to be inducted into the Panthéon, Peschanski noted.

His group led dozens of anti-Nazi attacks and sabotage operations in and around Paris between August and November 1943, including the assassination of a top German colonel.

Tracked down by the French police of the Vichy regime that collaborated with Nazi Germany, Manouchian was arrested on Nov. 16, 1943 along with most of the group's members. He was sentenced to death in Feb. 1944.

Nazi propaganda officers ordered a poster to be made with the photos and names of 10 Resistance fighters, including Manouchian, displayed in Paris and other French cities.

The so-called Red Poster sought to discredit them as Jews, foreigners and criminals, and Manouchian was "obviously the first target," Peschanski said. Yet the campaign didn't convince the French population, he said: The poster, while "aiming at presenting them as assassins, made them heroes."

In his last letter to his wife, Mélinée, Manouchian wrote : "At the moment of death, I proclaim that I

have no hatred for the German people ... The German people, and all other people will leave in peace and brotherhood after the war."

French poet Louis Aragon wrote a poem in 1955 inspired by the letter that singer Léo Ferré set to music under the title "L'Affiche Rouge" ("The Red Poster"), keeping the memory alive and making the song a French standard.

Mélinée, also a member of the Resistance who survived the war, will be buried alongside her husband at the Panthéon. A commemorative plaque will pay tribute to the other members of the Manouchian group.

Recent research about Manouchian also brought to light the fact that dozens of the 185 foreigners shot to death by the Nazis at Mont Valérien had not been officially declared "Morts pour la France" ("Dead for France") — "mostly because they were foreigners," Peschanski noted. The French presidency said the issue was addressed last year to give them the honor.

The Panthéon is the resting place of 83 people — 76 men and seven women — including Manouchian and his wife.

Most recently, Josephine Baker — the U.S.-born entertainer, anti-Nazi spy and civil rights activist became the first Black woman to receive France's highest honor, in 2021.

Election officials in the US face daunting challenges in 2024. And Congress isn't coming to help

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With election season already underway, some state election officials are expressing frustration that Congress has yet to allocate federal money they have come to rely on to help cover the costs of securing their systems from attacks, updating equipment and training staff.

Election officials face a long list of challenges this year, including potential cyberattacks waged by foreign governments, criminal ransomware gangs attacking computer systems and the persistence of election misinformation that has led to harassment of election officials and undermined public confidence.

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said it was "demoralizing and disappointing" that the federal government hasn't committed to investing in this year's presidential election.

"We are managing federal elections that are the foundation of who has power at the federal level and trying to manage a lot of different competing risks and challenges that have only escalated in recent years," said Benson, a Democrat. "It makes us feel like we're on our own."

Since the 2016 election and the federal government's decision to add the nation's voting systems to its list of critical infrastructure, Congress has sent \$995 million to states for election administration and security needs.

In Colorado, the money has been used to develop a system for voters to track their ballots and pay for training for election officials. Florida officials designated the money for increasing security of the state's voter registration system. Elsewhere, federal money has been used to replace voting machines and add cybersecurity staff.

Most of that was allocated ahead of the 2020 election, as states rushed to boost cybersecurity defenses, and has been exhausted. A separate \$400 million was required to be spent on pandemic-related election costs in 2020.

The last chunk of election-related funding was \$75 million approved by Congress in December 2022. State allocations ranged from \$5.8 million for California to \$1 million for Nevada.

"Los Angeles elections alone costs \$75 million," said Kathy Boockvar, the former chief elections official in Pennsylvania. "I don't think election officials have had expectations of \$400 million. People have hoped for \$75 million, and it's unclear whether even that will come."

PARTISAN BUDGET DISPUTES

Federal budget negotiations have been mired in partisan disputes, with agencies mostly operating on spending levels approved for 2023. Congress has been able to approve only temporary funding plans, which cover a few months at a time. The next deadline is March 1, when the most recent temporary

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funding plan expires for some departments and a week later for others. The government faces a potential shutdown if new funding is not approved.

Even if a deal is reached, there's no guarantee of new money for elections. House Republicans last year listed election security grants as "wasteful spending" and did not allocate money for it in their spending proposal. Instead, they have been focused on legislation that would ban private organizations from providing money to election offices.

"Americans deserve to have confidence in our elections, which means elections should be free from undue private influence," U.S. Rep. Bryan Steil, a Wisconsin Republican who chairs the Committee on House Administration, said at a recent hearing.

A \$75 million Senate proposal for election security is being negotiated as part of the final spending package.

"Administering free and fair elections is year-round work that takes planning and resources, and election officials on the front lines of our democracy need a steady stream of funding so that they can do things like replace aging equipment, strengthen cybersecurity, and keep pace with new technology," U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Democrat from Minnesota, said in a statement.

TOUGH DECISIONS

In North Carolina, state election officials have had to make some tough decisions as the needs have outpaced state and federal funding.

North Carolina's State Board of Elections has reduced its cybersecurity staff by one employee and has been forced to cut back in other areas to meet some of the needs for election security, said Karen Brinson Bell, the agency's executive director. A team of six employees that had been handling election data has been reduced to just one full-time position, with another person helping part-time. Some eliminated positions were funded by federal grants that are no longer available.

"Every effort we've put forward for cybersecurity has come through federal funding, and without that continuous funding and no new funding through the (North Carolina) legislature, it's hard to sustain a strong cyber posture," Brinson Bell said.

During its recent meeting, the National Association of Secretaries of State passed a resolution calling on Congress to provide sufficient money to help officials address cybersecurity threats.

West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner, a Republican, said he does not support federal money for elections because "typically, it comes with strings attached."

Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson, also a Republican, said he would welcome federal assistance for cybersecurity needs if there was flexibility on how states spent it.

"I don't necessarily mind a partnership there with some funding, as long as states are the ones that have the ability to spend those dollars — because what happens in Mississippi may be a little bit different than Minnesota or Maine or California," Watson said.

SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMS

Kim Wyman, the former secretary of state in Washington, said federal officials should heed the lessons of the 2000 election -- when some election offices were well-funded and others less so. She said the Help America Vote Act of 2002, approved by Congress in the aftermath of the ballot confusion in Florida, leveled the playing field with \$3.2 billion in federal money going to the states. A similar investment is needed now, she said.

Wisconsin election officials have used previous federal money to provide grants to local election offices that have helped them boost their technology support and training. They also have been able to buy new voting equipment and mail ballot envelopes, said Meagan Wolfe, the nonpartisan administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission.

New Mexico has used federal money to help cover the costs of its election security program. Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, a Democrat, said election officials need predictability.

"When we create programs, we want to be able to sustain those programs, not just for a year or for two years. We want to sustain them for the long term," she said.

In Minnesota, the state has used federal money to create grants for local election officials for voting system upgrades, including electronic pollbooks and tabulators. Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon said he was concerned about the lack of federal funding and the message that sends about the nation's priorities.

"Nobody I know is looking for Congress to fund state elections," said Simon, a Democrat. "What we are looking for -- for election security and other purposes -- is for them to be a partner in helping us to fill some gaps."

Food deliveries into northern Gaza are halted because of the war's chaos, increasing famine risk

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The World Food Program said Tuesday it has paused deliveries of food to isolated northern Gaza because of increasing chaos across the territory, hiking fears of potential starvation. A study by the U.N. children's agency warned that one in six children in the north are acutely malnourished.

Entry of aid trucks into the besieged territory has been more than halved in the past two weeks, according to U.N. figures. Overwhelmed U.N. and relief workers said intake of trucks and distribution have been crippled by Israeli failure to ensure convoys' safety amid its bombardment and ground offensive and by a breakdown in security, with hungry Palestinians frequently overwhelming trucks to take food.

The weakening of the aid operation threatens to deepen misery across the territory, where Israel's air and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, has killed over 29,000 Palestinians, obliterated entire neighborhoods and displaced more than 80% of the population of 2.3 million.

Heavy fighting and airstrikes have flared in the past two days in areas of northern Gaza that the Israeli military said had been largely cleared of Hamas weeks ago. The military on Tuesday ordered the evacuation of two neighborhoods on Gaza City's southern edge, an indication that militants are still putting up stiff resistance.

The north, including Gaza City, has been isolated since Israeli troops first moved into it in late October. Large swaths of the city have been reduced to rubble, but several hundred thousand Palestinians remain largely cut off from aid.

They describe famine-like conditions, in which families limit themselves to one meal a day and often resort to mixing animal and bird fodder with grains to bake bread.

"The situation is beyond your imagination," said Soad Abu Hussein, a widow and mother of five children sheltering in a school in Jabaliya refugee camp.

Ayman Abu Awad, who lives in Zaytoun, said he eats one meal a day to save whatever he can for his four children.

"People have eaten whatever they find, including animal feed and rotten bread," he said.

SLIDE INTO HUNGER

The World Food Program said it was forced to pause aid to the north because of "complete chaos and violence due to the collapse of civil order."

It said it had first suspended deliveries to the north three weeks ago after a strike hit an aid truck. It tried resuming this week, but convoys on Sunday and Monday faced gunfire and crowds of hungry people stripping goods and beating one driver.

WFP said it was working to resume deliveries as soon as possible. It called for the opening of crossing points for aid directly into northern Gaza from Israel and a better notification system to coordinate with the Israeli military.

It warned of a "precipitous slide into hunger and disease," saying, "People are already dying from hunger-related causes."

UNICEF official Ted Chaiban said in a statement that Gaza "is poised to witness an explosion in preventable child deaths, which would compound the already unbearable level of child deaths in Gaza."

The report released Monday by the Global Nutrition Cluster, an aid partnership led by UNICEF, found

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that in 95% of Gaza's households, adults were restricting their own food to ensure small children can eat, while 65% of families eat only one meal a day.

More than 90% of children younger than 5 in Gaza eat two or fewer food groups a day, known as severe food poverty, the report said. A similar percentage are affected by infectious diseases, with 70% experiencing diarrhea in the last two weeks. More than 80% of homes lack clean and safe water.

In Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, where most humanitarian aid enters, the acute malnutrition rate is 5%, compared to 15% in northern Gaza. Before the war, the rate across Gaza was less than 1%, the report said.

A U.N. report in December found that Gaza's entire population is in a food crisis, with one in four facing starvation.

DROP IN AID TRUCKS

Soon after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, Israel blocked entry of all food, water, fuel, medicine and other supplies into Gaza. Under U.S. pressure, it began to allow a trickle of aid trucks to enter from Egypt at the Rafah crossing, and in December opened one crossing from Israel into southern Gaza, Kerem Shalom.

The trucks have become virtually the sole source of food and other supplies for Gaza's population. But the average number entering per day has fallen since Feb. 9 to 60 a day from more than 140 daily in January, according to figures from the U.N. office for humanitarian coordination, known as OCHA.

Even at its height, U.N. officials said the flow was not enough to sustain the population and was far below the 500 trucks a day entering before the war.

The cause of the drop was not immediately clear. For weeks, right-wing Israeli protesters have held demonstrations to block trucks, saying Gaza's people should not be given aid. U.N. agencies have also complained that cumbersome Israeli procedures for searching trucks have slowed crossings.

But chaos within Gaza appears to be a major cause.

Moshe Tetro, an official with COGAT, an Israeli military body in charge of civilian Palestinian affairs, said the bottleneck was because the U.N. and other aid groups can't accept the trucks in Gaza or distribute them to the population. He said more than 450 trucks were waiting on the Palestinian side of Kerem Shalom crossing, but no U.N. staff had come to distribute them.

Eri Kaneko, a spokesperson for OCHA, said the U.N. and other aid groups have not been able to regularly pick up supplies at the crossing points because of "the lack of security and breakdown of law and order." He said the Israeli military has a responsibility to facilitate distribution within Gaza, and "aid piling up at the crossing is evidence of an absence of this enabling environment."

In a rare public criticism of Israel, a top U.S. envoy, David Satterfield, said this week that its targeted killings of Gaza police commanders guarding truck convoys have made it "virtually impossible" to distribute the goods safely.

Besides crowds of Palestinians swarming convoys, aid workers say they are hampered by heavy fighting, strikes hitting trucks and Israeli failure to guarantee deliveries' safety. The U.N. says that from Jan. 1 to Feb. 12, Israel denied access to 51% of its planned aid deliveries to north Gaza.

NO END IN SIGHT

The war began when Hamas-led militants rampaged across communities in southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostage. The militants still hold some 130 captives, around a fourth of whom are believed to be dead.

Qatar's Foreign Ministry said it had confirmation that Hamas started delivering medications to the hostages, a month after the medications arrived in Gaza under a deal mediated by the Gulf state and France. The deal provides three months' worth of medication for chronic illnesses for 45 of the hostages, as well as other medicine and vitamins, in exchange for medicines and humanitarian aid for Palestinians in Gaza.

Israel has vowed to expand its offensive to Rafah, where more than half of the territory's population of 2.3 million has sought refuge from fighting elsewhere.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Tuesday that the total Palestinian death toll since Oct. 7 had risen to 29,195. The ministry does not differentiate between fighters and civilians in its records, but says women and

children make up two-thirds of those killed. Over 69,000 Palestinians have been wounded, according to the ministry.

Israel says it has killed over 10,000 Palestinian militants but has provided no evidence for its count. The military blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas because the militant group fights in dense residential neighborhoods. The military says 237 of its soldiers have been killed since the start of the ground offensive in late October.

Donald Trump again compares his criminal indictments to imprisonment and death of Putin's top rival

By BILL BARROW and JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

GREENVILLE, S.C. (AP) — Donald Trump doubled down Tuesday on comparing his criminal indictments to the circumstances of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny, the top political opponent of Russia's autocratic leader Vladimir Putin who died in a remote arctic prison after being jailed by the Kremlin leader.

Appearing on a Fox News Channel town hall pre-taped before a live audience in Greenville, South Carolina, Trump bemoaned Navalny's death, which President Joe Biden and other Western leaders have blamed on Putin. Trump then pivoted to himself, repeating his assertions that the prosecutions against him are driven by politics despite no evidence that Biden or the White House ordered them.

"Navalny is a very sad situation and he's very brave, he was a very brave guy," Trump said in response to a question from Fox News Channel's Laura Ingraham. "He went back, he could have stayed away, and frankly probably would have been a lot better off staying away and talking from outside of the country as opposed to having to go back in, because people thought that could happen, and it did happen.

"And it's a horrible thing, but it's happening in our country, too," Trump continued, suggesting his criminal indictments — which include two cases stemming from his efforts to overturn his 2020 defeat — are proof that the U.S. is "turning into a communist country in many ways."

"I got indicted four times ... all because of the fact that I'm in politics," Trump said. "They indicted me on things that are so ridiculous."

He extended the comparison to his loss in a civil fraud trial last week, in which a New York judge ordered Trump to pay \$355 million in penalties after finding he lied about his wealth for years. With interest, Trump owes the state about \$454 million.

"It is a form of Navalny," Trump said. "It is a form of communism, of fascism."

He did not give a clear answer when asked whether he would post a bond covering the judgment, which is one way he'd be able to avoid having to pay the full amount while he appeals.

Trump made no mention of Putin, part of his longstanding pattern of refusing to denounce and often complimenting the Russian leader going back to when he was in the White House. But his remarks come as House Republicans have refused to provide more funding to Ukraine in its defense against Russia's invasion and as many in the Republican Party grow more accepting of Russian expansionism.

Putin recently suggested he preferred Biden in the White House to Trump. U.S. intelligence assessments of both the 2016 and 2020 elections found that Russia was behind influence operations to boost Trump at the expense of his Democratic Party opponents.

Ingraham interrupted Trump at the town hall Tuesday to ask whether he believed he could become a "potential political prisoner" for the rest of his life like Navalny. Trump sidestepped the question.

"If I were losing in the polls, they wouldn't even be talking about me and I wouldn't have had any legal fees," he answered. "If I were out, I think — although they hate me so much, I think if I got out they'd still, 'let's pursue this guy, we can't stand this guy.'"

The Fox town hall, recorded Tuesday afternoon and broadcast during Ingraham's primetime hour on the network, marked Trump's first extended remarks about Navalny since Russian officials announced his death. The town hall came four days before Trump competes against Nikki Haley in South Carolina's Republican presidential primary.

Ingraham began the discussion by offering Trump, who has praised Putin for years as a strong leader, a

chance to clarify his only previous public reference to Navalny's demise. In a social media post 72 hours after Russian officials confirmed Navalny had died, Trump broke his silence without mentioning Putin or Navalny's family.

"The sudden death of Alexei Navalny has made me more and more aware of what is happening in our Country," he wrote before blasting "CROOKED, Radical Left Politicians, Prosecutors, and Judges leading us down a path to destruction" and repeating his false claims that U.S. elections are riddled with fraud.

Nikki Haley hasn't yet won a GOP contest. But she's vowing to keep fighting Donald Trump

By STEVE PEOPLES and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

GREENVILLE, S.C. (AP) — There are no wins on the horizon for Nikki Haley.

Those close to the former United Nations ambassador, the last major Republican candidate standing in Donald Trump's path to the GOP's 2024 presidential nomination, are privately bracing for a blowout loss in her home state's primary election in South Carolina on Saturday. And they cannot name a state where she is likely to beat Trump in the coming weeks.

But in an emotional address on Tuesday, Haley declared, "I refuse to quit."

And in an interview, she vowed to stay in the fight against Trump at least until after Super Tuesday's slate of more than a dozen contests on March 5 — even if she suffers a big loss in her home state Saturday.

"Ten days after South Carolina, another 20 states vote. I mean, this isn't Russia. We don't want someone to go in and just get 99% of the vote," Haley told The Associated Press. "What is the rush? Why is everybody so panicked about me having to get out of this race?"

In fact, some Republicans are encouraging Haley to stay in the campaign even if she continues to lose — potentially all the way to the Republican National Convention in July in the event the 77-year-old former president, perhaps the most volatile major party front-runner in U.S. history, becomes a convicted felon or stumbles into another major scandal.

As Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement presses for her exit, a defiant Haley on Tuesday repeatedly likened Trump to Democratic President Joe Biden —and both as too old, too divisive and too unpopular to be the only options for voters this fall.

She also pushed back when asked if there is any primary state where she can defeat Trump.

"Instead of asking me what states I'm gonna win, why don't we ask how he's gonna win a general election after spending a full year in a courtroom?"

Haley's hurdles

History would suggest Haley has no chance of stopping Trump.

Never before has a Republican lost even the first two primary contests, as Haley has by an average of 21 points, and gone on to win the party's presidential nomination. Polls suggest she is a major underdog in her home state on Saturday and in the 16 Super Tuesday contests to follow. And since he announced his first presidential bid in 2015, every effort by a Republican to blunt Trump's rise has failed.

Yet she is leaning into the fight.

Lest anyone question her commitment, Haley's campaign is spending more than \$500,000 on a new television advertising campaign set to begin running Wednesday in Michigan ahead of the state's Feb. 27 primary, according to spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas. At the same time, the AP has obtained Haley's post-South Carolina travel schedule that features 11 separate stops in seven days across Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado, Utah, Virginia, Washington, D.C., North Carolina and Massachusetts.

The schedule also includes at least 10 high-dollar private fundraising events.

Indeed, Haley's expansive base of big- and small-dollar donors is donating at an extraordinary pace despite her underwhelming performance at the polls. That's a reflection of persistent Republican fears about Trump's ability to win over independents and moderate voters in the general election and serious concerns about his turbulent leadership should he return to the White House.

"I'm going to support her up to the convention," said Republican donor Eric Levine, who co-hosted a

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New York fundraiser for Haley earlier this month. "We're not prepared to fold our tents and pray at the altar of Donald Trump."

"There's value in her sticking in and gathering delegates, because if and when he stumbles," Levine continued, "who knows what happens."

Levine is far from alone.

Haley's campaign raised \$5 million in a fundraising swing after her second-place finish in New Hampshire that included stops in Texas, Florida, New York, and California, Perez-Cubas said. Her campaign raised \$11.5 million in January alone — her best fundraising month ever. Her allied super PAC brought in another \$12 million over the same period.

In fact, Haley's team actually outraised Trump's last month, according to federal filings released late Tuesday.

Trump's campaign raised \$8.8 million in January, with his primary super PAC taking in another \$7.3 million. A separate pro-Trump political action committee brought in another \$5 million, but spent a big chunk on the former president's legal fees.

Even with Haley's newfound financial advantage, Rep. Ralph Norman, R-S.C., the lone member of Congress who has endorsed Haley, acknowledged it may be difficult for her to win South Carolina, a state where she lives and served two terms as governor.

"Obviously, you want to win them all, but for those who say it's going to embarrass her, or end her political career, I disagree. She's willing to take that risk," Norman said in an interview. "I think it's a courageous thing she's doing."

Trump not happy

Trump, in recent days, has shown flashes of fury in response to Haley's refusal to cede the nomination. He called her "stupid" and "birdbrain" in a social media post over the weekend as part of a sustained campaign of personal insults. Some primary voters said Trump crossed the line earlier in the month when he highlighted the absence of Haley's husband, Michael, who is in the midst of a yearlong stint with the South Carolina Army National Guard to Africa.

In a rare show of emotion, Haley acknowledged the personal toll on her family.

"It was hard for us to say goodbye to him the first time when he deployed to Afghanistan. It was even harder last summer when he deployed to Africa," she said with glassy eyes, her voice cracking.

Earlier in the speech, she insisted that she has "no fear of Trump's retribution."

"I feel no need to kiss the ring," she said. "My own political future is of zero concern."

Meanwhile, Trump's campaign chiefs released a memo describing Haley's campaign as "broken down, out of ideas, out of gas, and completely outperformed by every measure, by Donald Trump."

Eager to pivot toward a general election matchup against Biden, the former president is also taking aggressive steps to assume control of the Republican National Committee, the GOP's nationwide political machine, which is supposed to stay neutral in presidential primary elections. Last week, Trump announced plans to install his campaign's senior adviser Chris LaCivita as RNC's chief operating officer and daughter-in-law Lara Trump as the committee's co-chair.

There is every expectation that current Chair Ronna McDaniel will step down after Trump wins South Carolina's primary and party officials will ultimately acquiesce to Trump's wishes. Privately, Haley's team concedes there is nothing it can do to stop the Trump takeover.

Former Republican presidential contender Ron DeSantis, the Florida governor, said it was time for the party to unite behind Trump during an unrelated South Carolina appearance Tuesday.

"As far as I'm concerned, the primary's over," said DeSantis, who suspended his presidential bid last month after a disappointing finish in Iowa and quickly endorsed Trump.

In her interview, however, Haley warned her party against letting Trump raid the RNC's coffers to pay for his legal fees while taking a short-term view of his political prospects.

Trump's standing will fundamentally change if he is a convicted felon before Election Day, Haley said, acknowledging that such an outcome is a very real possibility as Trump navigates 91 felony charges across

four separate criminal cases.

"He's going to be in a courtroom all of March, April, May and June," Haley said. "How in the world do you win a general election when these cases keep going and the judgments keep coming?"

Meanwhile, Biden was asked as he departed the White House on Tuesday whether he preferred to go up against Haley or Trump this fall.

"Oh, I don't care," the president said.

Alabama Supreme Court rules frozen embryos are 'children' under state law

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The Alabama Supreme Court has ruled that frozen embryos can be considered children under state law, a decision critics said could have sweeping implications for fertility treatment in the state.

The decision was issued in a pair of wrongful death cases brought by three couples who had frozen embryos destroyed in an accident at a fertility clinic. Justices, citing anti-abortion language in the Alabama Constitution, ruled that an 1872 state law allowing parents to sue over the death of a minor child "applies to all unborn children, regardless of their location."

"Unborn children are 'children' ... without exception based on developmental stage, physical location, or any other ancillary characteristics," Justice Jay Mitchell wrote in Friday's majority ruling by the all-Republican court.

Mitchell said the court had previously ruled that fetuses killed while a woman is pregnant are covered under Alabama's Wrongful Death of a Minor Act and nothing excludes "extrauterine children from the Act's coverage."

The ruling brought a rush of warnings about the potential impact on fertility treatments and the freezing of embryos, which had previously been considered property by the courts.

"This ruling is stating that a fertilized egg, which is a clump of cells, is now a person. It really puts into question, the practice of IVF," Barbara Collura, CEO of RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association, told The Associated Press Tuesday. The group called the decision a "terrifying development for the 1-in-6 people impacted by infertility" who need in-vitro fertilization.

She said it raises questions for providers and patients, including if they can freeze future embryos created during fertility treatment or if patients could ever donate or destroy unused embryos.

Sean Tipton, a spokesman with the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, said at least one Alabama fertility clinic has been instructed by their affiliated hospital to pause IVF treatment in the immediate wake of the decision.

Dr. Paula Amato, president of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, said a decision to treat frozen fertilized egg as the legal equivalent of a child or gestating fetus could limit the availability of modern health care.

"By insisting that these very different biological entities are legally equivalent, the best state-of-the-art fertility care will be made unavailable to the people of Alabama. No health care provider will be willing to provide treatments if those treatments may lead to civil or criminal charges," Amato said.

Gabby Goidel, 26, who is pursuing IVF treatment in Alabama after three miscarriages, said the court ruling came down on the same day she began daily injections ahead of egg retrieval.

"It just kind of took me by storm. It was like all I could think about and it was just a very stressful thing to hear. I immediately messaged my clinic and asked if this could potentially halt us. They said we have to take it one day at a time," Goidel said.

She said her clinic is continuing to provide treatment for now, but said it will let her know if they have to change course.

Goidel said she turned to IVF and preimplantation genetic testing after the multiple miscarriages related to genetic issues.

"Without IVF, I would have to probably go through several more miscarriages before I even had an option of having a baby that is my own," she said.

The plaintiffs in the Alabama case had undergone IVF treatments that led to the creation of several embryos, some of which were implanted and resulted in healthy births. The couples paid to keep others frozen in a storage facility at the Mobile Infirmary Medical Center. A patient in 2020 wandered into the area and removed several embryos, dropping them on the floor and "killing them," the ruling said.

The justices ruled that wrongful death lawsuits by the couples could proceed. The clinic and hospital that are defendants in the case could ask the court to reconsider its decision.

Michael Upchurch, a lawyer for the fertility clinic in the lawsuit, Center for Reproductive Medicine, said they are "evaluating the consequences of the decision and have no further comment at this time."

An anti-abortion group cheered the decision. "Each person, from the tiniest embryo to an elder nearing the end of his life, has incalculable value that deserves and is guaranteed legal protection," Lila Rose, president and founder of Live Action said in a statement.

Chief Justice Tom Parker issued a concurring opinion in which he quoted the Bible in discussing the meaning of the phrase "the sanctity of unborn life" in the Alabama Constitution.

"Even before birth, all human beings bear the image of God, and their lives cannot be destroyed without effacing his glory," Parker said.

Justice Greg Cook, who filed the only full dissent to the majority opinion, said the 1872 law did not define "minor child" and was being stretched from the original intent to cover frozen embryos.

"No court — anywhere in the country — has reached the conclusion the main opinion reaches," he wrote, adding the ruling "almost certainly ends the creation of frozen embryos through in vitro fertilization (IVF) in Alabama."

The Alabama Supreme Court decision partly hinged on anti-abortion language added to the Alabama Constitution in 2018, stating it is the "policy of this state to ensure the protection of the rights of the unborn child."

Supporters at the time said it would have no impact unless states gained more control over abortion access. States gained control of abortion access in 2022.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the Alabama decision reflected the consequences of the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade* and blamed Republican elected officials from blocking access to reproductive and emergency care to women.

"This president and this vice president will continue to fight to protect access to reproductive health care and call on Congress to restore the protections of *Roe v. Wade* in federal law for all women in every state," Jean-Pierre told reporters aboard Air Force One.

Biden wants people to know most of the money he's seeking for Ukraine would be spent in the US

By JAMIE STENGLE and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

MESQUITE, Texas (AP) — At a bustling construction site outside of Dallas, there are hopes that Congress can finally pass nearly \$95 billion in foreign aid including funding for Ukraine — because factory jobs in the United States depend on that money.

Aerospace and defense company General Dynamics' new factory in the Dallas suburb of Mesquite is expected to initially employ 150 people to produce munitions. Set to open in June, construction is nearing completion, with newly planted trees and shrubs already in place at the complex overlooking one of the area's busiest interstates.

"We want to increase our wages and increase our skill levels and job opportunities," said Kim Buttram, Mesquite's director of economic development, who added that the factory is expected to have over 300 jobs when it's at full production.

As President Joe Biden pushes House Republicans to pass needed aid, he wants voters to understand that nearly two-thirds — or nearly \$40 billion — of the money for Ukraine would actually go to U.S. fac-

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ories spread out across the country including plants in Lima, Ohio and Scranton, Pennsylvania as well as Mesquite.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has refused to put the bill up for a vote on the House floor on the premise that it does not meet the needs of the American public.

The supplemental spending measure contains a total of \$95 billion in foreign aid, including money for Ukraine, Israel and other countries. Of the \$60.7 billion for Ukraine, \$38.8 billion would go to U.S. factories that make missiles, munitions and other gear, according to figures provided to The Associated Press by the Biden administration.

"While this bill sends military equipment to Ukraine," Biden said Tuesday, "it spends the money right here in the United States of America in places like Arizona, where the Patriot missiles are built; and Alabama, where the Javelin missiles are built; and Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Texas, where artillery shells are made."

The president's argument challenges criticism by some Republican lawmakers that the federal government should be spending more money at home instead of supporting overseas wars.

In this case, most of the money goes to U.S. companies and workers, funding assembly lines to refill depleted stockpiles of weapons and gear that have already gone to Ukraine.

The Democratic president is openly channeling Franklin Delano Roosevelt and resurrecting the World War II-era concept that America is the "arsenal of democracy." His sales pitch to the public is that his foreign policy is also about jobs for the U.S. middle class.

But Biden is brushing up against opposition from former President Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner who ascended to the White House in 2016 on the promise of reviving U.S. manufacturing.

Trump opposes the U.S. package to help Ukraine and has openly expressed a willingness to let Russia invade NATO allies who do not spend enough of their own budgets on defense.

Many Republicans in Congress have taken their lead from Trump, with the party's right flank increasingly questioning the value of U.S. interventions around the world and long-standing alliances built in the aftermath of World War II.

Johnson has refused to bring the foreign aid bill up for a vote because it also lacks provisions to secure the U.S. southern border where immigrants are crossing illegally. But he previously rejected a bipartisan Senate bill that did provide funding to address immigration challenges, saying that the border measures would not solve the problem in the way that he wanted.

"The Republican-led House will not be jammed or forced into passing a foreign aid bill that was opposed by most Republican senators," Johnson said at a news conference last week. "It's time for Washington to start showing some love to Americans."

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, in contrast, has repeatedly implored his colleagues to understand that the funds from the package are for historic investments "right here in America."

"This is about rebuilding the arsenal of democracy," McConnell, R-Kentucky, said in a floor speech during the long days of debate, "and demonstrating to our allies and adversaries alike that we're serious about exercising American strength."

The Mesquite factory sits in the congressional district of Rep. Lance Gooden, R-Texas, who told Fox Business News in a December interview that he couldn't tell his constituents that he voted for money for Ukraine without also getting money to secure the U.S. southern border.

"I will never support any funding for Ukraine that does not include major measures of security at our own southern border," said Gooden. His office did not respond to questions sent over email from The Associated Press for this story.

U.S. factories shipped out nearly \$162 billion worth of military goods last year, according to the Census Bureau. The shipments increased 8.1% compared to 2022. The supplemental funding could further drive factory production upward this year.

But defense manufacturing can be volatile. Spending declined between 2010 and 2015. It then grew over the next four years, only to dip in 2021 and then climb again after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

The Biden administration has made an increase in the manufacturing capacity of defense contractors a priority, with a plan to increase the production of 155-millimeter artillery shells six-fold over three years.

The supplemental bill stalled in the House would expand these efforts by making new investments in production lines for weapons and revitalizing the industrial base for submarine production, according to the White House.

But on Friday, after news of the death of imprisoned Russian dissident Alexei Navalny, Biden again pushed House Republicans to pass aid to Ukraine and take a stand against Russian leader Vladimir Putin. But the House had gone into recess on Thursday afternoon.

"It's about time they step up — don't you think? — instead of going on a two-week vacation," Biden said. "What are they thinking? My God, this is bizarre."

Putin says Russia has no intention of putting nuclear weapons in space, denying US claims

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Tuesday that Moscow has no intention of deploying nuclear weapons in space, claiming that the country has only developed space capabilities similar to those of the U.S.

Putin's statement follows the White House confirmation last week that Russia has obtained a "troubling" anti-satellite weapon capability, although such a weapon is not operational yet. White House national security spokesman John Kirby said it would violate the international Outer Space Treaty, but declined to comment on whether the weapon is nuclear-capable.

The treaty signed by more than 130 countries, including Russia, prohibits the deployment of "nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction" in orbit or the stationing of "weapons in outer space in any other manner." The White House said it would look to engage the Russians directly on the concerns.

"Our position is quite clear and transparent: we have always been and remain categorically opposed to the deployment of nuclear weapons in space," Putin said. "Just the opposite, we are urging everyone to adhere to all the agreements that exist in this sphere."

Speaking during a meeting with his defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, Putin noted that Russia has only developed space capabilities that "other nations, including the U.S. have."

"And they know it," he added.

"We haven't deployed any nuclear weapons in space or any elements of them to use against satellites or to create fields where satellites can't work efficiently," Shoigu said.

Shoigu alleged that the White House could have made the allegations of a new Russian space capability in order to force Congress to support aid for Ukraine and also encourage Moscow to reenter nuclear arms control talks that Russia has suspended amid the tensions with the U.S. over Ukraine.

Putin didn't rule out possible future contacts with the U.S., but reaffirmed his view that Washington's push for Russia's defeat in Ukraine makes them impossible for now.

"The U.S. and the West, for one thing, are calling for Russia's strategic defeat, while, on the other hand, they would like to have a dialogue on strategic stability, pretending that those things aren't connected," he said. "It won't work."

Ex-FBI informant charged with lying about Bidens had Russian intelligence contacts, prosecutors say

By RIO YAMAT and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A former FBI informant charged with making up a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden, his son Hunter and a Ukrainian energy company had contacts with Russian intelligence-affiliated officials, prosecutors said Tuesday.

Prosecutors revealed the alleged contact as they urged a judge in Las Vegas to keep Alexander Smirnov behind bars while he awaits trial. But U.S. Magistrate Judge Daniel Albregts allowed Smirnov to be released from custody on electronic GPS monitoring.

He is accused of falsely telling his FBI handler that executives with the Ukrainian energy company Burisma paid Hunter and Joe Biden \$5 million each around 2015 — a claim that became central to the Republican impeachment inquiry in Congress.

Smirnov, 43, hid his face and did not speak to reporters Tuesday night when he walked out of the courthouse with his lawyers and girlfriend at his side. He wore a GPS monitor on his left ankle and had changed into street clothes and out of the yellow jail garb he had worn in court.

Defense attorney David Chesnoff said he looks forward to defending Smirnov at trial.

According to prosecutors, Smirnov admitted in an interview after his arrest last week that “officials associated with Russian intelligence were involved in passing a story” about Hunter Biden. They said Smirnov’s contacts with Russian officials were recent and extensive, and said Smirnov had planned to meet with one official during an upcoming overseas trip.

The White House didn’t immediately comment Tuesday.

Prosecutors said Smirnov, who holds dual U.S.-Israeli citizenship, falsely reported to the FBI in June 2020 that executives associated with Burisma paid millions of dollars to Hunter and Joe Biden in 2015 or 2016.

But Smirnov had only routine business dealings with the company starting in 2017 and made the bribery allegations after he “expressed bias” against Joe Biden while he was a presidential candidate, according to prosecutors.

He is charged with making a false statement and creating a false and fictitious record. The charges were filed in Los Angeles, where he lived for 16 years before relocating to Las Vegas two years ago.

Smirnov’s claims have played a major part in the Republican effort in Congress to investigate the president and his family, and helped spark what is now a House impeachment inquiry into Biden. Democrats called for an end to the probe after the Smirnov indictment came down last week, while Republicans distanced the inquiry from his claims and said they would continue to “follow the facts.”

Hunter Biden is expected to give a deposition next week.

The Burisma allegations became a flashpoint in Congress as Republicans pursuing investigations of President Biden and his family demanded the FBI release the unredacted form documenting the allegations. They acknowledged they couldn’t confirm if the allegations were true.

Divers find body in Texas river of Audrii Cunningham, 11-year-old girl missing since last week

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

Divers have recovered the body of 11-year-old Audrii Cunningham from a Texas river days after the girl went missing, and authorities are preparing to file a murder charge against a friend of her father who lived on her family’s property, a sheriff said Tuesday afternoon.

Polk County Sheriff Byron Lyons said Audrii’s body was found by divers during a search in the Trinity River in a rural area north of Houston. Her body was located about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from her home near Lake Livingston.

“My heart aches with this news,” Lyons said.

Audrii’s family had reported her missing on Thursday after she failed to return after school to her home in Livingston. After she was reported missing, investigators discovered that she never got on the bus to go to school that morning.

Polk County District Attorney Shelly Sitton said officials were preparing an arrest warrant for Don Steven McDougal, 42, on a recommended charge of capital murder. She said they do not yet know if they would seek the death penalty in the case.

Lyons said there is “substantial evidence” in the case, and that cell phone data and videos helped identify places to search. He added that the Trinity River Authority lowered water levels on the river, which led to the discovery of her body.

Authorities have said McDougal is a friend of the girl’s father and lived in a camper on the family’s property. Audrii lived with her father, grandparents and other family members, authorities said.

Lyons has said that in the past, McDougal had taken Audrii to the bus stop or would take her to school if she missed the bus.

A backpack that authorities believe belonged to the child was found Friday near the dam on Lake Livingston, one of the state's largest lakes.

As authorities investigated Audrii's disappearance last week, they had named McDougal as a person of interest and he was arrested Friday on an unrelated assault charge. He remained in jail Tuesday on that charge. Jail records did not list an attorney for him.

Court records from Brazoria County, south of Houston, show McDougal pleaded no contest to two felony counts of enticing a child stemming from a 2007 incident and was sentenced to two years in prison.

The sheriff said that the girl's body has been taken to the Harris County medical examiner's office in Houston to determine the cause of death.

Hunter Biden's lawyers suggest his case is tainted by claims of ex-FBI informant charged with lying

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hunter Biden's lawyers suggested Tuesday that claims made by a former FBI informant charged with fabricating a bribery scheme involving the presidential family may have tainted the case against the president's son.

The gun and tax charges against Hunter Biden are separate from the claims made by the informant, Alexander Smirnov, who has been charged with making up a bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden, his son and a Ukrainian energy company.

But Hunter Biden's attorneys say the chatter over the informant contributed to the collapse of the plea deal offered to Hunter Biden last summer.

The filing comes as Hunter Biden continues his public offensive over claims about his professional life and drug use that have been central to congressional investigations and an impeachment inquiry that seeks to tie his business dealings to his father.

The president's son is charged with lying on a form about his drug use to buy a gun in 2018. He has pleaded not guilty, and his lawyers say one photo that prosecutors used as evidence of cocaine use was actually a photo of sawdust sent by his therapist to encourage him to stay clean.

The Justice Department special counsel overseeing the case against him also filed the charges against Smirnov last week. He is accused of falsely reporting to the FBI in June 2020 that executives associated with the Ukrainian energy company Burisma paid Hunter and Joe Biden \$5 million each in 2015 or 2016.

But before that case was filed, the prosecution followed the informant "down his rabbit hole of lies," defense attorneys said in court documents. The special counsel's office started investigating Smirnov's claims in July 2023, three years after he originally reported them to his handler. The plea deal imploded around the same time, after prosecutors indicated that an investigation into bribery allegations remained open, defense attorneys said in court documents.

He has not yet entered a plea, but his defense attorneys said they successfully pushed for his release ahead of trial "so he can effectively fight the power of the government."

A spokesperson for special counsel David Weiss declined to comment. Prosecutors have previously said that the evidence against Hunter Biden is "overwhelming," including cocaine residue found on the pouch used to hold his gun, and rejected the defense contention that the charges were politically motivated.

Hunter Biden is also charged in Los Angeles, accused of failing to pay \$1.4 million in taxes while living an "extravagant lifestyle." Both cases stem from the time when he acknowledged being addicted to drugs. Defense attorneys also pushed for dismissal of that case in a flurry of motions, including arguments his personal tax information was wrongly shared by IRS agents who alleged in congressional testimony the probe was mishandled.

The cases were filed by special counsel David Weiss, who also charged Smirnov with lying to the FBI in an indictment filed last week. Smirnov's defense attorneys are pressing for his release from custody.

The charges against Hunter Biden were filed after the collapse of a plea deal that would have avoided the possibility of a trial while his father is campaigning for another term as president. The deal imploded, though, during a hearing in July, around the same time prosecutors from the special counsel's office started looking into the informant's claims at the request of the FBI, according to court documents.

YouTube mom Ruby Franke apologizes at sentencing in child abuse case

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Ruby Franke, a Utah mother of six who gave parenting advice to millions via a once-popular a YouTube channel, shared a tearful apology to her children for physically and emotionally abusing them before a judge delivered a sentence that could put her in prison for years, if not decades.

Franke also claimed that she had been "manipulated" by her fellow YouTuber and business partner.

Franke told the judge that she would not argue for a shorter sentence before she stood to thank local police officers, doctors and social workers for being the "angels" who saved her children from her at a time when she says she was under the influence of her business partner, Jodi Hildebrandt. The Utah mental health counselor, who had been hired to work with Franke's youngest son before going into business with her, also received four consecutive prison sentences of one to 15 years.

However, the women will only serve up to 30 years in prison due to a Utah state law that caps the sentence duration for consecutive penalties. The Utah Board of Pardons and Parole will consider their behavior while incarcerated and determine how much of that time each will spend behind bars.

"I'll never stop crying for hurting your tender souls," Franke said to her children, who were not present at the sentencing hearing in St. George. "My willingness to sacrifice all for you was masterfully manipulated into something very ugly. I took from you all that was soft and safe and good."

Franke, 42, and Hildebrandt, 54, had each pleaded guilty to four counts of aggravated child abuse for trying to convince Franke's two youngest children that they were evil, possessed and needed to be punished to repent. The women were arrested at Hildebrandt's house in the southern Utah city of Ivins last August after Franke's 12-year-old son escaped through a window and asked a neighbor to call the police, according to a 911 call released by the St. George Police Department.

The boy was thin, covered in wounds and had duct tape around his ankles and wrists. He told investigators that Hildebrandt had put ropes on his limbs and used cayenne pepper and honey to dress his cuts, according to a search warrant.

State prosecuting attorney Eric Clarke described the environment in which Franke and Hildebrandt had kept the kids as "a concentration camp-like setting," a term most strongly associated with the camps established by the Nazis to starve, overwork and execute Jewish people and other minorities across Europe during the Holocaust.

While Franke has shown remorse and cooperated with attorneys, Clarke said, Hildebrandt has not and continues to place blame on the children. Hildebrandt's attorney, Douglas Terry, said during the livestreamed hearing that his client is not the remorseless woman she has been portrayed to be and accepts responsibility for her actions.

In a brief statement, Hildebrandt stopped short of apologizing but said she loves the children and wants them to heal. She reminded Judge John J. Walton that she accepted her plea deal instead of going to trial because she did not want the children to have to relive their trauma by testifying.

The mental health counselor pleaded guilty in December to four of her six counts of aggravated child abuse, and two counts were dismissed as part of her plea deal. Franke also pleaded guilty to four of her six charges and not guilty to two.

Franke and her husband, Kevin Franke, launched "8 Passengers" on YouTube in 2015 and amassed a large following as they documented their experiences raising six children. She later began working with Hildebrandt's counseling company, ConneXions Classroom, offering parenting seminars, launching another

YouTube channel and publishing content on their shared Instagram account, "Moms of Truth."

Franke admitted in her plea deal to kicking her son while wearing boots, holding his head under water and closing off his mouth and nose with her hands. She and Hildebrandt said they also forced him into hours of physical labor in the summer heat without much food or water, causing dehydration and blistering sunburns. The boy was told that everything being done to him was an act of love, according to the plea agreements.

Hildebrandt also has admitted to coercing Franke's youngest daughter, who was 9 at the time, to jump into a cactus multiple times and run barefoot on dirt roads until her feet blistered. The boy and girl were taken to the hospital after the arrests and placed in state custody along with two more of their siblings.

Prior to her 2023 arrest, Ruby Franke was already a divisive figure in the parent vlogging world. The Franke parents were criticized online for certain parenting decisions, including for banning their oldest son from his bedroom for seven months for pranking his younger brother. In other videos, Ruby Franke talked about refusing to take lunch to a kindergartener who forgot it at home and threatening to cut the head off a young girl's stuffed toy to punish her for cutting things in the house.

The "8 Passengers" YouTube channel has since ended, and Kevin Franke has filed for divorce.

Both Franke and Hildebrandt have 30 days to appeal their sentences.

2 men are charged with murder in the deadly shooting at Kansas City's Super Bowl celebration

By NICK INGRAM and MARGERY A. BECK Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Two men charged with murder in last week's shooting after the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl parade were strangers who pulled out guns and began firing within seconds of starting an argument, according to court documents released Tuesday.

Missouri prosecutors said at a news conference that Lyndell Mays, of Raytown, Missouri, and Dominic Miller, of Kansas City, Missouri, have been charged with second-degree murder and several weapons counts in the shooting that left one person dead and roughly two dozen others injured.

Both men were shot during the melee, according to probable cause affidavits. Both have been hospitalized since, Jackson County prosecutor Jean Peters Baker said during a news conference.

The argument began when two groups of people grew agitated over the belief that people in the other group were staring at them, according to affidavits from police. Surveillance video shows Mays and someone with him aggressively approached the other group, police say.

The video showed Mays was the first to begin shooting despite being surrounded by crowds of people, including children, according to one of the affidavits.

Mays told detectives "he hesitated shooting because he knew there were kids there," according to the affidavit. He told investigators he began firing after someone in the other group said, "I'm going to get you," which he took to mean they would try to kill him. He said he chose a random person from the other group to shoot at as that person was running away, the affidavit says.

Miller initially told investigators that he and his friends began running after hearing gunfire and that he was shot in the back, one affidavit says. When investigators told Miller they had video of him chasing someone in Mays' group and shooting, Miller admitted to firing four to five shots, the affidavit said.

A bullet from Miller's gun killed Lisa Lopez-Galvan, officials said Tuesday. Lopez-Galvan was in a nearby crowd of people watching the Chiefs rally, according to one of the affidavits.

Online court records did not list attorneys who could comment on the men's behalf. The Missouri State Public Defender's Office said applications for public defenders for the men had not yet been received by the Kansas City office.

Messages left with a possible relative of Miller were not immediately returned. The Associated Press could not find phone numbers for members of Mays' family.

Authorities did not release ages for either man, but court records show Mays is in his early 20s and

Miller is 18 or 19.

Authorities also detained two juveniles last week on gun-related and resisting arrest charges. They said Tuesday that more charges were still possible.

"I do want you to understand: We seek to hold every shooter accountable for their actions on that day. Every single one," Peters Baker said. "So while we're not there yet on every single individual, we're going to get there."

The shooting on Feb. 14 outside the city's historic Union Station was a tragic end to the happy occasion that brought an estimated 1 million people to the city. It happened even as 800 police officers patrolled the celebration. The people injured range in age from 8 to 47, according to police.

The woman who was killed, Lopez-Galvan, was mother of two and the host of a local radio program called "Taste of Tejano."

"It is reassuring for our family and the entire community to know that this joint team effort has resulted in the identification of the suspects involved," her family said in a statement after Tuesday's announcement.

The shooting was the latest at a sports celebration in the U.S. A shooting wounded several people last year in Denver after the Nuggets' NBA championship.

That led Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas to wonder whether it's time to rethink championship celebrations, even as he promised last week that the city will continue to celebrate its victories. Next month's St. Patrick's Day parade will go on as scheduled, Lucas said.

The Kansas City shooting occurred in a state with few gun regulations and a city that has struggled with gun violence. In 2020, Kansas City was among nine cities chosen by the U.S. Justice Department in an effort to crack down on violent crime. In 2023, the city matched its record with 182 homicides, most of which involved guns.

On Monday, Missouri's Republican-led House passed a ban on celebratory gunfire in cities following debate that ranged from tearful to angry. It now goes to the Missouri Senate for consideration.

GOP Gov. Mike Parson vetoed a sweeping crime-related bill last year that included a similar measure, citing issues with other provisions.

College Football Playoff approves 5+7 format and reduces spots for conference champions

By RALPH D. RUSSO and STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writers

The field for the 12-team College Football Playoff beginning next season will comprise five conference champions and seven at-large selections after the university presidents who oversee the CFP voted unanimously Tuesday to tweak the format.

The move to decrease the number of spots reserved for conference champions from six to five was prompted by realignment and the disassembling of the Pac-12. An expected vote last month was delayed at the Pac-12's request.

The original plan for the 12-team format was to have the six highest-ranked conference champions, with the top four receiving first-round byes, and six at-large selections. But with one fewer so-called power conference after the Pac-12's demise, the commissioners who manage the CFP recommended the change from the 6-6 format to 5-7.

No conference will have automatic access. Those five slots will go to the highest-ranked conference champs as determined by the CFP selection committee, ensuring at least one team from outside the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten, Big 12 and Southeastern Conference will make the 12-team field.

The selection committee's rankings also will determine the seven at-large bids. There will be no limit to how many teams can come from the same league.

"It basically confirms the spirit of the original 6-6, and that was done when you had five A5 conferences," American Athletic Conference Commissioner Mike Aresco said Tuesday. "To have a fifth (champion) is good, and it's not a four-plus-one, which is good. It's the best five. ... It's a merit-based system."

The coming season will be the first with a 12-team playoff after 10 years of it being a four-team event.

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"This is a very logical adjustment for the College Football Playoff based on the evolution of our conference structures since the board first adopted this new format in September 2022," said Mark Keenum, president of Mississippi State and chairman of the CFP Board of Managers. "We all will be pleased to see this new format come to life on the field this postseason."

During the decade of four-team playoffs, the only team from outside a power conference to make the final four was Cincinnati after being 13-0 following the American championship game in 2021. The Bearcats, now in the Big 12, lost to Alabama in their semifinal at the Cotton Bowl.

While the four highest-ranked conference champions will get a first-round bye in the new format, teams seeded fifth through 12th will open the postseason on the home field of the higher-ranked team — No. 5 vs. No. 12; No. 6 vs. No. 11; No. 7 vs. No. 10; and No. 8 vs. No. 9. The first of those four games will be on Dec. 20, a Friday night, with the remaining first-round contests played the next day.

New Year's Six bowl games will host the quarterfinals and semifinal playoff games. The first quarterfinal game next season will be New Year's Eve in the Fiesta Bowl, followed on New Year's Day by the Peach Bowl, Rose Bowl and Sugar Bowl. The semifinal sites will be the Orange Bowl on Jan. 9, and the Cotton Bowl on Jan. 10.

The national championship will remain at a neutral site, with next season's title game Jan. 20 in Atlanta.

The CFP management committee, which is composed of 10 conference commissioners and Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick, is scheduled to meet in person Wednesday in the Dallas area. Topics could include the still-pending six-year deal worth \$1.3 billion annually between ESPN and the CFP that would allow the network to keep exclusive rights to the 12-team playoff through the 2031 season.

Americans' reliance on credit cards is the key to Capital One's bid for Discover

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Americans have become increasingly reliant on their credit cards since the pandemic. So much so that Capital One is willing to bet more than \$30 billion that they won't break the habit.

Capital One Financial announced Monday that it would buy Discover Financial Services for \$35 billion. The combination could potentially shake up the payments industry, which is largely dominated by Visa and Mastercard.

For customers of the companies, it might eventually mean bigger perks and more merchant acceptance of Discover cards, and potentially lead to more competition in the payments industry. But most of the benefits will be going to the companies themselves, as well as the merchants who accept these cards.

Why is the deal important?

Some of the biggest issuers of credit cards are banks, like JPMorgan Chase and Citigroup. But Capital One and Discover are first and foremost credit card companies — like American Express, but with different clientele. They have tens of millions of customers and target their products at Americans who do not travel heavily outside the U.S. and would like to get more value out of their everyday purchases like gas, groceries and domestic travel. In other words, people who typically don't carry premium credit cards.

The combined company will have more loans to customers on its credit cards than JPMorgan and Citigroup combined. The merger also gives the Discover network the ability to fight on more equal footing with Mastercard and American Express in a way that it simply hasn't been able to in its 40-year history.

"You want the customer or merchant to choose you as a company, either for your products or for your brand, and this deal gives them plenty of opportunity to make that case," said Sanjay Sakhrani, a payments industry analyst with Keefe, Bruyette & Woods.

Who uses Capital One and Discover?

Capital One is one of the biggest credit card companies and banks in the country. It typically operates what is known in the credit card industry as a "barbell" business model — it issues credit cards to those with less-than-great credit as well as with super high credit, and little in between. The one group keeps

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a balance, bringing the company interest revenue, while the high-end customers spend heavily on their cards, bringing in fee revenue from merchants.

Discover's customers are fewer but intensely loyal to the company. The company consistently wins customer service awards, and its cash-back cards are considered among the most lucrative in the industry.

But Discover suffers from a perception that because its payment network is smaller than Visa, Mastercard or AmEx, it is less desirable. Also, Discover is largely unavailable outside the U.S. as a payment option.

Capital One executives said Tuesday that they would start allowing customers to use the Discover payment network shortly after the deal closes, which could happen by the end of the year. Capital One also plans to keep the Discover brand along with its cards, although the cards could be co-branded.

What does this deal say about credit card spending?

This deal, at its core, is a big bet that Americans will keep running up their credit card balances.

Americans have been increasing their card balances quickly amid two years of high inflation. In the fourth quarter of 2023, Americans held \$1.13 trillion on their credit cards, and aggregate household debt balances increased by \$212 billion, up 1.2%, according to the latest data from the New York Federal Reserve.

Consumers are also paying higher interest rates on those balances. The average interest rate on a bank credit card is roughly 21.5%, the highest it's been since the Federal Reserve started tracking the data in 1994.

Critics of Capital One have long said the company relies heavily on those who can least afford to be carrying high interest balances on their credit cards. Historically Capital One has had higher default rates and higher 30-day delinquency rates than JPMorgan, Citi, Discover and American Express.

What's so valuable about Discover?

It's virtually impossible to build a credit and debit card network from scratch in today's market. Capital One executives described previous efforts to do so as a "chicken or egg" problem, where it's hard to get merchants to sign up for a payment network when there are few customers, and vice versa.

Chicago-based Discover may be small but its infrastructure makes it poised to grow, particularly as more transactions move away from cash. The U.S. credit card industry is dominated by the Visa-Mastercard duopoly with AmEx being a distant third place and Discover an even more distant fourth place. Roughly \$6.8 trillion is run on Visa's credit and debit network compared to the only \$550 billion on Discover's network.

Owning Discover's network would enable Capital One to get revenue from fees charged for every merchant transaction that runs on the network.

It also turns Capital One into the rare credit card company that controls the cards, the payment network and the bank that issues the card. There's only one other company that has accomplished this to scale: American Express.

Will regulators approve the deal?

It's unclear whether the deal will pass regulatory scrutiny. Nearly every bank issues a credit card to customers but few companies are credit card companies first, and banks second. Both Discover — which was long ago the Sears Card — and Capital One started off as credit card companies that expanded into other financial offerings like checking and savings accounts.

Bank regulators have signaled for some time that they want to give more scrutiny to large mergers in the financial services sector. The combined Discover-Capital One company will have more than \$600 billion in assets, making it bigger than most large regional banks in the country.

Consumer groups are expected to put heavy pressure on the Biden Administration to make sure the deal is good for consumers as well as shareholders. Left-leaning politicians like Sen. Sherrod Brown, the powerful Democratic chair of the Senate Banking Committee, are already calling for close scrutiny of the deal.

"The deal also poses massive anti-trust concerns, given the vertical integration of Capital One's credit card lending with Discover's credit card network," said Jesse Van Tol, president and CEO of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition.

The US vetoes an Arab-backed UN resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The United States on Tuesday vetoed an Arab-backed and widely supported U.N. resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war in the embattled Gaza Strip, saying it would interfere with negotiations on a deal to free hostages abducted in Israel.

The vote in the 15-member Security Council was 13-1 with the United Kingdom abstaining, reflecting the strong support from countries around the globe for ending the war, which started when Hamas militants invaded southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing about 1,200 people and taking 250 others hostage. Since then, more than 29,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's military offensive, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which says the vast majority were women and children.

It was the third U.S. veto of a Security Council resolution demanding a cease-fire in Gaza and came a day after the United States circulated a rival resolution that would support a temporary cease-fire linked to the release of all hostages.

Virtually every council member — including the United States — expressed concern at the impending catastrophe in Gaza's southern city of Rafah, where some 1.5 million Palestinians have sought refuge, if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu goes ahead with his plan to evacuate civilians and move Israel's military offensive to the area bordering Egypt, where Israel says Hamas fighters are hiding.

Before the vote, Algeria's U.N. Ambassador Amar Bendjama, the Arab representative on the council, said: "A vote in favor of this draft resolution is a support to the Palestinians right to life. Conversely, voting against it implies an endorsement of the brutal violence and collective punishment inflicted against them."

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield countered by saying the United States understands the desire for urgent action but believes the resolution would "negatively impact" sensitive negotiations on a hostage deal and a pause in fighting for at least six weeks. If that happens, "we can take the time to build a more enduring peace," she said.

The proposed U.S. resolution, she said, "would do what this text does not — pressure Hamas to take the hostage deal that is on the table and help secure a pause that allows humanitarian assistance to reach Palestinian civilians in desperate need."

She told reporters the Arab draft did not link the release of the hostages to a cease-fire, which would give Hamas a halt to fighting without requiring it to take any action. That would mean "that the fighting would have continued because without the hostage releases we know that the fighting is going to continue," she said.

Israel's U.N. Ambassador Gilad Erdan said the word cease-fire is used in the Security Council, the General Assembly and by U.N. officials "as if it is a silver bullet, a magical solution to all of the region's problems."

He called that "an absurd notion," warning that a cease-fire in Gaza would enable Hamas to rearm and regroup and "their next attempted genocide against Israelis will only be a question of when, not if."

Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian U.N. ambassador, shot back that the "message given today to Israel with this veto is that it can continue to get away with murder."

He warned that more babies will be killed and orphaned, more children will die of hunger, cold and disease, more families will be threatened with further forced displacement, and Gaza's entire 2.3 million population will be left without food, water, medicine and shelter.

And in a sharply critical message to the United States, Israel's closest ally, Mansour said: "It means that human lives that could have been saved are instead being forsaken to Israel's genocidal war machine, deliberately, knowingly, by those who oppose a cease-fire."

What happens next remains to be seen.

The 22-nation Arab Group could take its resolution to the U.N. General Assembly, which includes all 193 U.N. member nations, where it is virtually certain to be approved. But unlike Security Council resolutions, assembly resolutions are not legally binding.

The Arab-backed resolution would have demanded an immediate humanitarian cease-fire to be respected

by all parties, which implies an end to the war.

By contrast, the U.S. draft resolution would support a temporary cease-fire "as soon as practicable, based on the formula of all hostages being released," and call for "lifting all barriers to the provision of humanitarian assistance at scale."

It is the first time the U.S. has used the word "cease-fire," as opposed to cessation of hostilities.

The Arab draft would also have demanded the immediate release of all hostages, rejected the forced displacement of Palestinian civilians and called for unhindered humanitarian access throughout Gaza.

Without naming either party, it would have condemned "all acts of terrorism" and reiterated the council's "unwavering commitment" to a two-state solution with two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace.

In measures sure to anger Israel — and reinforce differences and tensions between U.S. President Joe Biden and Israel's Netanyahu — the U.S. draft resolution reiterates the same unwavering commitment to a two-state solution, which the Israeli leader opposes.

Biden has repeatedly called on Israel to protect Palestinian civilians, and the draft resolution says Israel's planned major ground offensive in Rafah "should not proceed under current circumstances."

In another criticism directed at Israel, the U.S. draft "condemns calls by government ministers for the resettlement of Gaza and rejects an attempt at demographic or territorial change in Gaza that would violate international law."

Thomas-Greenfield said the United States was not setting a deadline for a vote on its proposed resolution

Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused the United States of "duplicitous and hypocritical calls" for the council to wait for diplomacy to produce results on a hostage deal.

"It could not yield any results because the real goal of Washington is not to achieve peace in the Middle East, not to protect civilians, but rather to advance their geopolitical agenda, demanding at any cost for their closest Middle East ally to be shielded," Nebenzia told the council, claiming that the U.S. has given "an effective license for Israel to kill Palestinians."

While this was the third U.S. veto of a Security Council resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire, the council has adopted two resolutions on Gaza where the U.S. abstained.

Its first resolution, on Nov. 15, called for humanitarian pauses to address the escalating crisis for Palestinian civilians. In late November, a seven-day pause led to the release of 120 hostages held by Hamas in exchange for Israel's release of 200 Palestinian prisoners.

On Dec. 22, the council adopted a watered-down resolution calling for immediately speeding aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza, but without the original plea for an "urgent suspension of hostilities" between Israel and Hamas.

It did call for "creating the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities." The steps were not defined, but diplomats said it was the council's first reference to stopping fighting. Because of ongoing fighting and no new humanitarian pause, little aid has gotten into Gaza.

Navalny's mother appeals to Putin to release her son's body so she can bury him with dignity

By EMMA BURROWS and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

The mother of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny appealed Tuesday to President Vladimir Putin to intervene and turn her son's body over to her so she can bury him with dignity.

Lyudmila Navalnaya, who has been trying to get his body since Saturday, appeared in a video outside the Arctic penal colony where Navalny died on Friday.

"For the fifth day, I have been unable to see him. They wouldn't release his body to me. And they're not even telling me where he is," a black-clad Navalnaya said in the video, with the barbed wire of Penal Colony No. 3 in Kharp, about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow.

"I'm reaching out to you, Vladimir Putin. The resolution of this matter depends solely on you. Let me finally see my son. I demand that Alexei's body is released immediately, so that I can bury him like a hu-

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man being," she said in the video, which was posted to social media by Navalny's team.

Russian authorities have said the cause of Navalny's death is still unknown and refused to release his body for the next two weeks as the preliminary inquest continues, members of his team said.

They accused the government of stalling to try to hide evidence. On Monday, Navalny's widow, Yulia, released a video accusing Putin of killing her husband and alleged the refusal to release his body was part of a cover-up.

"They are cowardly and meanly hiding his body, refusing to give it to his mother and lying miserably," she said.

Lyudmila Navalnaya and her son's lawyers went to law enforcement agencies and the morgue where the body is believed to be held in the Arctic region, but were unable to get them to turn it over or say where it is.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected the allegations of a cover-up, telling reporters that "these are absolutely unfounded, insolent accusations about the head of the Russian state."

Putin hasn't commented publicly on Navalny's death. On Monday, he signed a decree promoting a number of law enforcement and military officials, including Valery Boyarinev, the first deputy chief of the State Penitentiary Service. Boyarinev, who received the rank of colonel-general, has been accused by Navalny's team of personally ordering restrictions on the opposition leader.

Peskov denied there was any connection between Navalny's death and the new rank for Boyarinev.

Navalny's death has deprived the Russian opposition of its best-known and inspiring politician less than a month before an election that is all but certain to give Putin another six years in power. Many Russians had seen Navalny as a rare hope for political change amid Putin's unrelenting crackdown on the opposition.

In her Monday video, Yulia Navalnaya vowed to continue his fight against the Kremlin. On Tuesday, her account on X, where she had posted the video, was briefly suspended by the platform without explanation but later restored.

In a speech Monday to the European Union's Foreign Affairs Council, she urged EU leaders not to recognize the results of next month's election, to sanction more Putin allies and to help Russians who flee the country. A copy of her remarks was released Tuesday by Navalny spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh.

The White House said it is preparing additional "major sanctions" on Russia in response to Navalny's death, with National Security Council spokesman John Kirby saying the new package would be unveiled Friday. He declined to detail them or share how they would expand on the already stiff measures the U.S. and its allies have put on Russia.

Kirby said only that the sanctions, which coincide with the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, will be "specifically supplemented with additional sanctions regarding Mr. Navalny's death."

Navalny, 47, was imprisoned since January 2021, when he returned to Moscow after recuperating in Germany from a nerve agent poisoning he blamed on the Kremlin. He received three prison terms since then, on charges he rejected as politically motivated.

Josep Borrell, the European Union's foreign policy chief, called for an international investigation of Navalny's death, but Peskov said the Kremlin would not agree to such a demand.

Since Navalny's death, about 400 people have been detained across in Russia as they tried to pay tribute to him with flowers and candles, according to OVD-Info, a group that monitors political arrests. Authorities cordoned off some of the memorials to victims of Soviet repression across the country that were being used as sites to leave makeshift tributes to Navalny. Police removed the flowers at night, but more keep appearing.

Peskov said police were acting "in accordance with the law" by detaining people paying tribute to Navalny.

Over 60,000 people have submitted requests to the government asking for Navalny's remains to be handed over to his relatives, OVD-Info said.

After the last verdict that resulted in a 19-year term, Navalny said he understood he was "serving a life sentence, which is measured by the length of my life or the length of life of this regime."

In Monday's video, his widow said: "By killing Alexei, Putin killed half of me, half of my heart and half of my soul."

"But I still have the other half, and it tells me that I have no right to give up. I will continue the work of Alexei Navalny," Yulia Navalnaya said.

WikiLeaks founder Assange faces his last legal roll of the dice in Britain to avoid US extradition

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Julian Assange's lawyers opened a final U.K. legal challenge Tuesday to stop the WikiLeaks founder from being sent to the United States to face spying charges, arguing that American authorities are seeking to punish him for exposing serious criminal acts by the U.S. government.

Lawyer Edward Fitzgerald said Assange may "suffer a flagrant denial of justice" if he is sent to the U.S. At a two-day High Court hearing, Assange's attorneys are asking judges to grant a new appeal, his last legal roll of the dice in Britain.

Assange himself was not in court. Judge Victoria Sharp said he was granted permission to come from Belmarsh Prison for the hearing, but had chosen not to attend. Fitzgerald said the 52-year-old Australian was unwell.

Stella Assange, his wife, said Julian had wanted to attend, but that his health was "not in good condition." "He was sick over Christmas, he's had a cough since then," she told The Associated Press. She said The WikiLeaks founder was following proceedings through his lawyers.

Assange's family and supporters say his physical and mental health have suffered during more than a decade of legal battles, including seven years in self-exile in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and the last five years in the high-security prison on the outskirts of the British capital.

He has been indicted on 17 charges of espionage and one charge of computer misuse over his website's publication of classified U.S. documents almost 15 years ago. American prosecutors say Assange helped U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal diplomatic cables and military files that WikiLeaks later published, putting lives at risk.

To his supporters, Assange is a secrecy-busting journalist who exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan. They argue that the prosecution is politically motivated and he won't get a fair trial in the U.S.

Hundreds of supporters holding "Free Julian Assange" signs and chanting "there is only one decision — no extradition" held a noisy protest outside the neo-Gothic High Court in London. Rallies were also held in cities around the world, including Rome, Brussels and Berlin.

"If Julian Assange is successfully extradited to the U.S., journalists the world over are going to have to watch their back," said Simon Crowther, legal advisor to human rights group Amnesty International.

Stella Assange told the crowd the case was about "the right to be able to speak freely without being put in prison and hounded and terrorized by the state."

Referring to the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died in prison last week, she said: "What happened to Navalny can happen to Julian, and will happen to Julian if he is extradited."

Stella Assange, who married the WikiLeaks founder in prison in 2022 — said last week that his health has deteriorated during years of confinement and "if he's extradited, he will die."

If the judges rule against Assange, he can ask the European Court of Human Rights to block his extradition — though supporters worry he could be put on a plane to the U.S. before that happens, because the British government has already signed an extradition order.

Assange's lawyers say he could face up to 175 years in prison if convicted, though American authorities have said the sentence is likely to be much shorter.

While several of Assange's arguments against extradition have already been rejected by British courts, his lawyers are trying to make new points to secure an appeal.

Assange's attorneys argued that the prosecution is politically motivated retaliation for WikiLeaks' "exposure of criminality on the part of the U.S. government on an unprecedented scale," including torture and killings.

"The U.S. was prepared to go to any lengths (including misusing its own criminal justice system) to

sustain impunity for U.S. officials in respect of the torture/war crimes committed in its infamous 'war on terror,' and to suppress those actors and courts willing and prepared to try to bring those crimes to account," Assange's lawyers said in written arguments. "Mr. Assange was one of those targets."

Assange's lawyers also want judges to reconsider allegations that the CIA developed plans to kidnap or kill Assange while he was in the Ecuadorian Embassy. A lower-court judge has dismissed the claims, but Assange attorney Mark Summers said Tuesday that there's evidence "the plot was real."

"There was a plot to kidnap Mr. Assange, to rendition him to America, or else straightforwardly murder him," he claimed.

Fitzgerald added that "there is a real possibility of the return of a Trump administration" prepared to consider "extrajudicial attack, or worse" against Assange.

Lawyers for the U.S. government will set out their case on Wednesday. James Lewis, representing the U.S., said Assange was being prosecuted "because he is alleged to have committed serious criminal offences."

He argued in written submissions that Assange's actions "threatened damage to the strategic and national security interests of the United States" and put individuals named in the documents — including Iraqis and Afghans who had helped U.S. forces — at risk of "serious physical harm."

Assange's legal troubles began in 2010, when he was arrested in London at the request of Sweden, which wanted to question him about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women. In 2012, Assange jumped bail and sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian Embassy.

The relationship between Assange and his hosts eventually soured, and he was evicted from the embassy in April 2019. British police immediately arrested and imprisoned him for breaching bail in 2012. Sweden dropped the sex crimes investigations in November 2019 because so much time had elapsed.

A U.K. district court judge rejected the U.S. extradition request in 2021 on the grounds that Assange was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions. Higher courts overturned that decision after getting assurances from the U.S. about his treatment. The British government signed an extradition order in June 2022.

Meanwhile, the Australian parliament last week called for Assange to be allowed to return to his homeland.

The judges, Sharp and Jeremy Johnson, could deliver a verdict at the end of the hearing on Wednesday, but they're more likely to take several weeks to consider their decision.

White House promises 'major sanctions' on Russia in response to Alexei Navalny's death

By ZEKE MILLER and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House said Tuesday it is preparing additional "major sanctions" on Russia in response to opposition leader Alexei Navalny's death last week in an Arctic penal colony.

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said the sanctions, on the eve of the two-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, "will be a substantial package covering a range of different elements of the Russian defense industrial base, and sources of revenue for the Russian economy that power Russia's war machine, that power Russia's aggression, and that power Russia's repression."

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. had not determined how Navalny had died, but insisted that the ultimate responsibility lay with Putin.

"Regardless of the scientific answer, Putin's responsible for it," he told reporters.

Russian authorities have said the cause of Navalny's death is still unknown and have refused to release his body for the next two weeks as the preliminary inquest continues, members of his team said.

The Treasury Department declined to comment on the details of the upcoming sanctions. Brian Nelson, the department's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, is in Europe this week to continue working on Russia sanctions ahead of the invasion's two-year anniversary.

"The global coalition imposing unprecedented sanctions on Russia's war machine has thrown sand in the gears of the Kremlin's efforts to equip and supply its military. President Biden recently expanded Treasury's authorities to target those funding Russia's war production efforts — even if they're located in

third countries – and Treasury is aggressively pursuing those who attempt to evade our sanctions,” the Treasury department said last week. “Multilateral sanctions and export controls have forced hard tradeoffs for Putin and damaged his ability to project power now and in the future.”

So far, the U.S. and its allies have sanctioned thousands of Russian people and firms, frozen Russian Central Bank funds, banned certain Russian goods, restricted Russian banks’ access to SWIFT — the dominant system for global financial transactions — and imposed a \$60-per-barrel price cap on Russian oil and diesel, among other measures.

Policy experts have advanced an array of proposals meant to further starve Russia of the money it needs to continue its invasion — from seizing the nation’s Central Bank funds housed largely in Europe to lowering the Group of Seven price cap in Russian oil.

A February working paper from the International Working Group on Russian Sanctions at Stanford University calls for heavier sanctions in Russia’s energy market – from lowering the current \$60 price cap on Russian-produced oil to \$30, as well as completing the EU and G7 ban on Russian hydrocarbons.

Asked about more sanctions on Russia during a Council on Foreign Relations media briefing Tuesday, Stephen Sestanovich, a senior fellow for Russian and Eurasian studies at the organization, said “the choices are rather limited — but it’s not zero.”

Sestanovich said it is also possible that the U.S. and allies could lower the price cap on Russian oil, since it is an area where “the U.S. and EU have not been particularly aggressive.”

“They could try to go lower and put the squeeze on and force the Russians to sell more oil at a discount,” he said, adding that he anticipates the U.S. to impose more personal sanctions on Russian officials.

Charles Kupchan, also a CFR senior fellow and professor of international affairs at Georgetown University said, “sanctions are always in the quiver, but they’re not going to matter that much — because let’s be honest, the sanctions have not had a huge impact on the Russian economy.”

“What will make a big difference is military and economic assistance to Ukraine, full stop,” Kupchan said.

First federal trial for a hate crime based on gender identity starts over trans woman’s killing

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — The first federal trial over a hate crime based on gender identity began Tuesday in South Carolina, where a man faces charges that he killed a Black transgender woman and then fled to New York.

The U.S. Department of Justice alleges that in August 2019, Daqua Lameek Ritter lured the woman — who is referred to as Dime Doe in court documents — into driving to a sparsely populated rural county in South Carolina. Ritter then shot her three times in the head with a .22 caliber handgun after they reached an isolated area near his uncle’s home, according to Ben Garner, an assistant U.S. attorney for the district of South Carolina.

In recent years there has been a surge in attacks on the LGBTQ+ community. For decades, transgender women of color have faced disproportionately high rates of violence and hate crimes, according to the Department of Homeland Security. In 2022, the number of gender identity-based hate crimes reported by the FBI increased by 37% compared to the previous year.

And until 2009, federal hate crime laws did not account for offenses motivated by the victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity. The first conviction involving a victim targeted for their gender identity came in 2017. A Mississippi man received a 49-year prison sentence as part of a plea deal after he admitted to killing a 17-year-old transgender woman.

But Tuesday marks the first time that such a case has ever been brought to trial, according to Brook Andrews, an assistant U.S. attorney for the District of South Carolina. Never before has a federal jury decided whether to convict and further punish someone for a crime based on the victim’s gender identity.

During opening arguments, Garner portrayed Ritter as someone working vigilantly to avoid the ridicule he’d face if his secret relationship was exposed. They’d met during his teenage years when he traveled

from his grandmother's Brooklyn home to visit family property in Allendale, South Carolina. The two had been close friends, according to the defense, and were related through Ritter's aunt and the woman's uncle.

But Ritter became "enraged" when he learned that one of Doe's friends knew about their sexual relationship, according to Garner. Ritter threatened to beat her for sharing that information with anyone — something he had repeatedly instructed her not to do, Garner said.

The government has said that Ritter's girlfriend learned about the affair between Ritter and Doe in the month before the killing. Prosecutors believe the revelation, which they say prompted Ritter's girlfriend to hurl a homophobic slur, made Ritter "extremely upset."

Garner cited text messages purporting to show that Ritter complained to Doe about the mockery less than one week before her death.

"He killed her to silence her," Garner told the jury.

They say that Ritter lied about his whereabouts in an interview with state police later that day. A "nervous" Ritter walked to his uncle's house about half a mile away from the crime scene and asked for a ride home, according to Garner. Prosecutors say that Ritter enlisted others to help burn his clothes, hide the weapon and mislead police about his location on the day of the murder.

Ritter is said to have been splitting time between South Carolina, where he had a job and driver's license, and New York, where he lived with family and was eventually arrested.

Government lawyers plan to present witness testimony about Ritter's location and text messages with the woman, in which he allegedly persuaded her to take the ride. Evidence includes video footage taken at a traffic stop around 3 p.m. on the day of Doe's death that shows Ritter's "distinctive" left wrist tattoo, but not his face, in the passenger seat of her car.

Other evidence includes DNA from the woman's car and testimony from multiple people who say that Ritter privately confessed to them about the fatal shooting.

Ritter's lawyers have emphasized that the trial is not about their sexual relationship, but whether Ritter killed Doe. Lindsey Vann, one of the defense attorneys, argued Tuesday that no physical evidence points to Ritter as the perpetrator. Notably, Vann said the State Law Enforcement Division never processed a gunshot residue test that Ritter voluntarily took the day of the killing.

The defense has said it is no surprise that Ritter might have been linked to Doe's car, considering their intimate ties. Further, Vann said the traffic stop footage could have been taken as early as three hours before her death.

The defense added that witnesses' claims regarding the disposal of evidence are inconsistent. Vann said Ritter's friends have given conflicting interviews about details like the alleged burning of Ritter's clothes while facing the threat of federal prosecution if they failed to cooperate.

Any lies that Ritter told investigators were the result of his deep-seated fear of being considered a suspect and adding more fuel to the local gossip about the relationship, Vann said.

Prosecutors don't plan to seek the death penalty, but Ritter could receive multiple life sentences if convicted by a jury. In addition to the hate crimes charge, Ritter faces two other counts that he committed murder with a firearm and misled investigators.

Attorneys for Georgia slave descendants urge judge not to throw out their lawsuit over island zoning

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — Attorneys suing a Georgia county over zoning changes that they say threaten one of the South's last Gullah-Geechee communities of Black slave descendants asked a judge Tuesday to let them correct technical problems with their civil complaint to avoid having it dismissed.

A lawyer for coastal McIntosh County argued the judge must throw out the lawsuit because it clashes with a 2020 amendment to Georgia's state constitution dealing with legal immunity granted to state and local governments.

Residents of the tiny Hogg Hummock community sued in October after county commissioners voted to

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weaken zoning restrictions that for decades helped protect the enclave of modest homes along dirt roads on largely unspoiled Sapelo Island.

The zoning changes doubled the size of houses allowed in Hogg Hummock. Black residents say larger homes in the community will lead to property tax increases that they won't be able to afford. Their lawsuit asks a judge to declare the new law discriminates "on the basis of race, and that it is therefore unconstitutional, null, and void."

The legal arguments Superior Court Judge Jay Stewart heard Tuesday didn't touch on the merits of the case. Instead, they dealt purely with technical flaws in the lawsuit filed by attorneys from the Southern Poverty Law Center and whether those problems warrant a complete dismissal.

Georgia voters in 2020 amended the state constitution to weaken the broad immunity from lawsuits granted to the state and local governments. While the amendment enabled citizens to sue Georgia governments for illegal acts, it also stated that such lawsuits could no longer list individual government officers as defendants.

The lawsuit filed on behalf of the Hogg Hummock residents not only names McIntosh County as a defendant, but also its five individual commissioners.

Ken Jarrard, an attorney for McIntosh County, told the judge that such errors require an "absolute, iron-clad dismissal as a matter of law" based on the Georgia Supreme Court's ruling in a similar case last year.

"It's a tough rule," Jarrard said, "but it is the rule."

Miriam Gutman, an attorney for the Sapelo Island residents, argued that they should be allowed to make changes to the lawsuit, namely dropping the five commissioners as defendants, to make it comply.

"Courts routinely allow amendments, sometimes numerous times on many different parts of a complaint, to move a case forward," Gutman said.

Gutman asked the judge, if he decides to throw out the case, to dismiss it "without prejudice." That would allow the Hogg Hummock residents to file a new lawsuit on the same issues.

The judge didn't make a decision Tuesday. He gave both sides until March 1 to file proposed orders reflecting how they would like him to rule.

"The significance of this case is not lost on me," Stewart said from the bench. He added that he has visited Hogg Hummock "and I know what it means to the people who live there."

Hogg Hummock, also known as Hog Hammock, sits on less than a square mile (2.6 square kilometers) on Sapelo Island, about 60 miles (95 kilometers) south of Savannah. Reachable only by boat, the island is mostly owned by the state of Georgia.

About 30 to 50 Black residents still live in Hogg Hummock, founded by former slaves who had worked the island plantation of Thomas Spalding. Descendants of enslaved island populations in the South became known as Gullah, or Geechee in Georgia. Their long separation from the mainland meant they retained much of their African heritage.

The residents' lawsuit accuses McIntosh County of violating Georgia laws governing zoning procedures and public meetings, as well as residents' constitutional rights to due process and equal protection. It says county commissioners intentionally targeted a mostly poor, Black community to benefit wealthy, white land buyers and developers.

McIntosh County officials denied wrongdoing in a legal response filed in court.

Outside of court, Hogg Hummock residents have been gathering petition signatures in hopes of forcing a special election that would give McIntosh County voters a chance to override the zoning changes.

The Supreme Court leaves in place the admissions plan at an elite Virginia public high school

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Tuesday left in place the admissions policy at an elite public high school in Virginia that some parents claimed discriminates against highly qualified Asian Americans.

The court's order, over the dissent of Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas, ended a legal challenge to a policy that was overhauled in 2020 to increase diversity, without taking race into account.

A panel of the federal appeals court in Richmond had earlier upheld the constitutionality of the admissions policy at the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a school frequently cited among the best in the nation.

The high court's consideration of the case followed its decision in June that struck down admissions policies at colleges and universities that took account of the race of applicants.

The Fairfax County School Board overhauled the Thomas Jefferson admissions process in 2020, scrapping a standardized test. The new policy gives weight in favor of applicants who are economically disadvantaged or still learning English, but it does not take race into account.

The effect in the first freshman class admitted under it was to increase the percentage of Black students from 1% to 7% and Hispanic students from 3% to 11%. Both groups have been greatly underrepresented for decades. Asian American representation decreased from 73% to 54%.

For the current school year, Black and Hispanic students made up 6.7% and 6%, respectively, of those offered admission, the school board said. Asian Americans represented 61.6% of those admitted, the board said.

"We have long believed that the new admissions process is both constitutional and in the best interest of all of our students. It guarantees that all qualified students from all neighborhoods in Fairfax County have a fair shot at attending this exceptional high school," said Karl Frisch, Fairfax County School Board chair.

In 2022, a federal judge found the school board engaged in impermissible "racial balancing" when it overhauled admissions. The appeals court reversed that ruling.

Alito wrote that the district court got it right. The appeals court essentially ruled that "intentional racial discrimination is constitutional so long as it is not too severe," he wrote.

The parents who challenged the policy say it discriminates against Asian American applicants who would have been granted admission if academic merit were the sole criteria, and that efforts to increase Black and Hispanic representation necessarily come at the expense of Asian Americans.

"The Supreme Court missed an important opportunity to end race-based discrimination in K-12 admissions," said Pacific Legal Foundation senior attorney Joshua Thompson, who represents the parents who challenged.

Capital One's bid for Discover carries expectation that Americans won't slow credit card use

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Capital One Financial is betting that Americans will keep shopping and use a credit card to pay for their purchases at stores and on the internet.

Capital One announced Monday that it would buy Discover Financial Services for \$35 billion. The combination could potentially shake up the payments industry, which is largely dominated by Visa and Mastercard.

The deal marries two of the largest credit card companies that aren't banks first, like JPMorgan Chase and Citigroup, with the notable exception of American Express. It also brings together two companies whose customers are largely similar: often Americans who are looking for cash back or modest travel rewards, compared to the premium credit cards dominated by AmEx, Citi and Chase.

"This marketplace that's dominated by the big players is going to shrink a little bit more now," said Matt Schulz, chief credit card analyst at LendingTree.

In a call with investors Tuesday morning, Capital One executives said they planned to invest heavily into

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expanding the acceptance of Discover by consumers. While Discover is "almost universally" accepted by merchants, there's a perception by consumers that Discover is less accepted in the U.S.

Capital One expects Americans to keep using their credit cards and maintain balances on those accounts to collect interest. In the fourth quarter of 2023, Americans held \$1.13 trillion on their credit cards, and aggregate household debt balances increased by \$212 billion, up 1.2%, according to the latest data from the New York Federal Reserve.

As they run up their card balances, consumers are also paying higher interest rates. The average interest rate on a bank credit card is roughly 21.5%, the highest it's been since the Federal Reserve started tracking the data in 1994.

Capital One has long has a business model looking for customers who will keep a balance on their cards, aiming for customers with lower credit scores than American Express or even Discover. Once combined, the two companies will have more loans to customers on their credit cards than the much larger JPMorgan and Citigroup combined.

The deal also gives Discover's payment network a major credit card partner in a way that could make the payment network a major competitor once again. The U.S. credit card industry is dominated by the Visa-Mastercard duopoly with AmEx being a distance third place and Discover an even more distant fourth place. Roughly \$6.8 trillion is run on Visa's credit and debit network compared to the only \$550 billion on Discover's network.

Owning Discover's network would enable Capital One to get revenue from fees charged for every merchant transaction that runs on the network.

The run-up in consumers' credit card balances is not all good news. After battling inflation for more than two years, many lower- and middle-income Americans have run through their savings and are increasingly running up their credit card balances and taking on personal loans.

As a result the two lenders have added to the pool of money set aside to guard against defaults. Last year, Capital One's provisions for loan losses rose 78% to \$10.4 billion. At Discover, such provisions more than doubled to \$6.02 billion. Profits at both companies slumped more than 30%.

Discover's customers are carrying \$102 billion in balances on their credit cards, up 13% from a year earlier. Meanwhile, the charge-off rates and 30-day delinquency rates have climbed.

Consumer groups are expected to put heavy pressure on the Biden Administration to make sure the deal is good for consumers as well as shareholders.

"The deal also poses massive anti-trust concerns, given the vertical integration of Capital One's credit card lending with Discover's credit card network," said Jesse Van Tol, president and CEO of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition.

It's unclear whether the deal will pass regulatory scrutiny. Nearly every bank issues a credit card to customers but few companies are credit card companies first, and banks second. Both Discover — which was long ago the Sears Card — and Capital One started off as credit card companies that expanded into other financial offerings like checking and savings accounts.

"The path to approval is a key question mark as banking regulators are scrutinizing large bank transactions closely and this transaction would create a banking institution with over \$600 billion of assets," said Saul Martinez, an analyst with HSBC, in a note to investors.

Under the terms of the all-stock transaction, Discover Financial shareholders will receive Capital One shares valued at nearly \$140. That's a significant premium to the \$110.49 that Discover shares closed at Friday. Discover shares rose nearly 14% to \$125.78 in morning trading.

She's not quitting. Takeaways from Nikki Haley's push to stay in the GOP contest against Trump

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

KIAWAH ISLAND, S.C. (AP) — Nikki Haley's team is bracing for a home state embarrassment in South Carolina's Republican presidential primary on Saturday. Conventional wisdom suggests she'll be forced to drop out. But that may not apply in 2024.

Ahead of a major speech on Tuesday, Haley told The Associated Press that she's staying in the race no matter what at least until after another 20 states vote through Super Tuesday on March 5. That's even as Donald Trump's MAGA movement is furious that she's refusing to drop out. After all, she's the last major candidate standing in his path to the nomination.

The Associated Press spoke with Haley and several senior campaign officials and donors about her strategy ahead of the big speech. Here are some takeaways about how and why she plans to stay in the race:

SHE'S NOT QUITTING

Haley knows there is speculation she may drop out on Tuesday. But she told The Associated Press that she's not going anywhere until at least after Super Tuesday. Yes, that's even if she's blown out by Donald Trump in her home state in Saturday's South Carolina primary.

"Ten days after South Carolina, another 20 states vote. I mean, this isn't Russia. We don't want someone to go in and just get 99% of the vote," Haley said. "What is the rush? Why is everybody so panicked about me having to get out of this race?"

In case you don't believe her, her team provided new details about her plans post-South Carolina.

She's spending more than \$500,000 on a new television advertising campaign set to begin running Wednesday in Michigan. Her post-South Carolina travel schedule features 11 separate stops in seven days across Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado, Utah, Virginia, Washington, D.C., North Carolina and Massachusetts.

The schedule also includes at least 10 high-dollar private fundraising events.

THE LOSSES MAY PILE UP

Just don't ask Haley which primary state she's going to win.

It's a fair question for someone who says she has a legitimate path to winning the Republican president nomination. But Haley and her team aren't willing to answer that question specifically. Or maybe they can't. That's because polls suggest she's a major underdog in virtually every state — even the state where she lives and was elected twice as governor — given Trump's grip on the Republican Party.

Remember, Republican primary elections are typically decided by the party's most energized partisans — not the broader swath of moderates and independents that are more influential in general elections.

Haley had a fiery answer when pressed on her specific prospects for victory during the AP interview.

"Instead of asking me what states I'm gonna win, why don't we ask how he's gonna win a general election after spending a full year in a courtroom?" she said.

Still, Haley's team says there are several states where she can be competitive with Trump — especially those with open or semi-open primaries that allows a broader collection of voters to participate instead of just hardcore Republicans.

By the way, one of them is South Carolina, which allows voters to participate in whichever presidential primary they want — as long as they only vote once.

MONEY IS NOT A PROBLEM

Stop us if you've heard this before, but most presidential candidates do not drop out when they lose; they drop out when they run out of money. The conditions are related, of course. Who wants to waste money on a loser?

But somehow, even as the losses begin to pile up, Haley is raising money at the strongest rate of her political career.

Traditional Republican donors like Eric Levine, who hosted a New York fundraiser for Haley earlier this month, said he's betting big that Haley will somehow find an opening if she stays patient given Trump's legal baggage and propensity for major gaffes and scandal.

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There's also a more emotional appeal. Many in the party just aren't ready to surrender to Trump's MAGA politics even if the math is on his side.

Or as Levine puts it, "We're not prepared to fold our tents and pray at the altar of Donald Trump."

Haley's campaign raised \$5 million in a fundraising swing after her second-place finish in New Hampshire that included stops in Texas, Florida, New York, and California, according to campaign spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas. Her campaign raised \$16.5 million in January alone — her best fundraising month ever. She raised another \$1 million last week in the 24 hours after Trump attacked her husband, a military serviceman currently serving overseas.

LEANING INTO TRUMP LEGAL ISSUES

As Trump calls Haley names like "stupid" and "birdbrain," Haley is sharpening her focus on the Republican former president's legal troubles.

Again and again, she attacked Trump for spending as much — or more — time in the courtroom as on the campaign trail. She predicted that Trump's political standing would change dramatically if he's a convicted felon before Election Day, while worrying aloud that the Republican National Committee would become a personal "piggy bank" for his legal fees.

"People are not looking six months down the road when these court cases have taken place," Haley said. "He's going to be in a courtroom all of March, April, May and June. How in the world do you win a general election when these cases keep going and the judgments keep coming?"

And she didn't exactly agree with Trump that every one of the 91 felony charges against him are all politically motivated.

"Some, I think, are very politically motivated. Some, he's going to have to defend himself," she said in drawing a clear distinction.

LONG TERM OUTLOOK HAZY

Some Republicans want Haley to stay in the race all the way to the party's July national convention. But Haley said she isn't yet thinking much about her strategy beyond Super Tuesday. She also declined to say whether she'd drop out of the race if and when Trump hit the 50% delegate threshold to formally become the party's presumptive nominee.

At the current rate, that's likely to happen sometime in March.

She was also non-committal when asked if she'd help Trump on the campaign trail this fall if he ultimately secures the GOP nomination.

"I don't know what actions I'm gonna take in terms of that, but I always said that even though I have problems with President Trump, I have more problems with Joe Biden," Haley said.

And finally, we asked her if she could 100% rule out running on a presidential ticket with No Labels, a centrist third-party group that is actively courting potential candidates. She came close to taking herself out of contention, but this didn't feel like the kind of answer that would put the question to bed for good.

You be the judge.

"I have not had one conversation with No Labels. They have sent signals to me that they want to talk. I have told them I am not interested in talking," Haley said. "I'm running as a Republican. That's my focus is to stay in this as a Republican nominee and to win as a Republican."

Building collapse in Beirut suburb kills 4 and rescuers are searching for others

BEIRUT (AP) — A building collapsed in a southern suburb of Beirut late Monday, killing four people and injuring three others as rescuers searched for more people under the rubble, a paramedic official said.

The building in the suburb of Choueifat crumbled after days of heavy rain. Local officials said the four-story building was not considered safe and the municipality had ordered it evacuated two years ago out of concerns its foundation was weak. Despite the order, the owner of the building rented apartments to Syrian families.

Most of the people living in the building are Syrian citizens, according to Raja Zreik of the Islamic Health Society that was taking part in rescue operations. He said four people were killed.

State-run National News Agency also reported two women, a man and a child were killed.

Zreik told The Associated Press that two women and a boy were pulled out from under the rubble and rushed to a hospital.

A member of the Lebanese Red Cross told the local Al-Jadeed TV at the scene that 17 people are still believed to be under the rubble.

Lebanon hosts some 805,000 United Nations-registered Syrian refugees, but officials estimate the actual number is far higher: between 1.5 million and 2 million.

Supreme Court rejects appeal from Trump-allied lawyers over 2020 election lawsuit in Michigan

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Tuesday rejected an appeal from Sidney Powell and other lawyers allied with former President Donald Trump over \$150,000 in sanctions they were ordered to pay for abusing the court system with a sham lawsuit challenging the 2020 election results in Michigan.

The justices did not comment in leaving in place the sanctions against seven lawyers who were part of the lawsuit filed on behalf of six Republican voters after Joe Biden's 154,000-vote victory over Trump in the state.

Among the lawyers is L. Lin Wood, whose name was on the lawsuit. Wood has insisted he had no role other than to tell Powell he would be available if she needed a seasoned litigator.

The money is owed to the state and Detroit, for their costs in defending the lawsuit. The sanctions initially totaled \$175,000, but a federal appeals court reduced them by about \$25,000.

In October, Powell pleaded guilty to state criminal charges in Georgia over her efforts to overturn Trump's loss in the state. She pleaded guilty to six misdemeanors accusing her of conspiring to intentionally interfere with the performance of election duties.

Powell gained notoriety for saying in November 2020 that she would "release the Kraken," invoking a mythical sea monster when talking about a lawsuit she planned to file to challenge the results of the presidential election.

The Vatican's problematic process to address clergy sex abuse cases, explained

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — One afternoon in mid-December, Pope Francis had a meeting that wasn't on his official agenda or otherwise recorded, that underscored the utter dysfunction of the Catholic Church's response to the global clergy sex abuse scandal.

In the main reception room of the Vatican hotel where he lives, Francis met for more than an hour with a Spaniard who as a young seminarian was molested by his spiritual director. The former seminarian was desperate.

He had lodged a complaint with the Toledo, Spain Archdiocese in 2009, and visited Vatican offices multiple times to deposit damning documents and demand action be taken against his abuser and the bishops who allegedly covered for him. But for 15 years, he had received no justice from the church.

While Francis' decision to hear his story was laudable and pastorally sensitive, it was also evidence that the church's in-house system to deal with abuse isn't working — from the laws available to punish abusers to its policies for helping survivors. For every victim who has enough well-connected friends at the Vatican who can arrange a papal audience, countless others will never feel that the church cares for them or will provide them justice.

Five years ago this week, Francis convened an unprecedented summit of bishops from around the world to impress on them that clergy abuse was a global problem and they needed to address it. Over four

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days, these bishops heard harrowing tales of trauma from victims, learned how to investigate and sanction pedophile priests, and were warned that they too would face punishment if they continued to cover for abusers.

Yet five years later, despite new church laws to hold bishops accountable and promises to do better, the Catholic Church's in-house legal system and pastoral response to victims has proven still incapable of dealing with the problem.

STAKEHOLDERS WARN CHURCH'S EVOLVING RESPONSE STILL HARMS VICTIMS

In fact, victims, outside investigators and even in-house canon lawyers increasingly say the church's response, crafted and amended over two decades of unrelenting scandal, is damaging to the very people already harmed — the victims. They are often retraumatized when they summon the courage to report abuse in the face of the church's silence, stonewalling and inaction.

"It's a horrific experience. And it's not something that I would advise anyone to do unless they are prepared to have not just their world, but their sense of being turned upside down," said Brian Devlin, a former Scottish priest whose internal, and then public accusations of sexual misconduct against the late Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien marked O'Brien's downfall.

"You become the troublemaker. You become the whistleblower. And I can well understand that people who go through that process end up with bigger problems than they had before they started it. It's a hugely, hugely, destructive process."

Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger revolutionized the way the Catholic Church dealt with abusive clergy in 2001, when he persuaded St. John Paul II to order all abuse cases be sent to his office for review.

Ratzinger acted because, after nearly a quarter century at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he had seen that bishops weren't following the church's own laws and were moving predators around from parish to parish rather than sanctioning them.

At the end of his 2019 summit, Francis vowed to confront abusive clergy with "the wrath of God." Within months, he passed a new law requiring all abuse to be reported in-house to church authorities (but not to police) and mapped out procedures to investigate bishops who abused or protected predator priests.

But five years later, the Vatican has offered no transparency or statistics on the number of bishops investigated or sanctioned. Even the pope's own child protection advisory commission says structural problems built into the system are harming victims and preventing basic justice.

"Recent publicly reported cases point to tragically harmful deficiencies in the norms intended to punish abusers and hold accountable those whose duty is to address wrongdoing," the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors said after its last assembly. "We are long overdue in fixing the flaws in procedures that leave victims wounded and in the dark both during and after cases have been decided."

At the 2019 summit, the norms enacted by the U.S. Catholic Church for sanctioning priests and protecting minors were touted as the gold standard. The U.S. bishops adopted a get-tough policy after the U.S. abuse scandal exploded with the 2002 Boston Globe "Spotlight" series.

SOME SAY VICTIMS SHOULD SKIP PURSUING JUSTICE FROM THE CHURCH

But even in the U.S., victims and canon lawyers say the system isn't working, and that's not even taking into consideration the new frontier of abuse cases involving adult victims. Some call it "charter fatigue," that the hierarchy simply wants to move on beyond the scandal that spawned the 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

The Rev. Thomas Doyle, a U.S. canon lawyer who worked for the Vatican embassy in Washington and now provides consulting for victims, says he no longer advises they pursue church justice.

Why? Because "the church will screw them every which way from Sunday," he said.

"Don't waste your time," Doyle says he tells victims. "The only justice, or semblance of justice that has been meted out is in civilian courts because the church can't screw them up."

Nearly every investigation into abuse in the Catholic Church that has been published in recent years has identified the church's in-house legal system as a big part of the problem, from church-commissioned reports in France and Germany to government inquests in Australia, parliamentary-mandated studies in

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Spain and law enforcement investigations in the U.S.

While some reforms have occurred, including Francis' lifting of the official secrecy covering abuse cases in 2019, core issues remain.

Part of the problem is that canon law was never meant to address the needs of abuse survivors or to help them heal: The official goal of the system is entirely institution-centric: to "restore justice, reform the offender and repair scandal."

REPORTS IDENTIFY SPECIFIC ISSUES WITH CHURCH'S LATEST POLICIES

Even after the Vatican announced a revised penal code, more than a decade in the making, the outside reports were remarkably uniform in identifying:

—The structural conflict of interest built into the system. According to church procedures, a bishop or religious superior investigates an allegation that one of his priests raped a child and then renders judgment. And yet the bishop or superior has a vested interest, since the priest is considered to be a spiritual son in whom the bishop has invested time, money and love.

It is difficult to think of any other legal system in the world where someone with such a personal, paternal relationship with one party in a dispute could be expected to objectively and fairly render judgment in it.

The independent commission that investigated the French church's abuse scandal said such a structural conflict of interest "appears, humanly speaking, untenable."

Even the pope's own Synod of Bishops came to a similar conclusion. In their November synthesis document after a monthlong meeting, the world's bishops identified conflict of interest as an ongoing problem.

"The sensitive issue of handling abuse places many bishops in the difficult situation of having to reconcile the role of father with that of judge," they said, suggesting that the task of judgment be assigned to "other structures."

—The lack of fundamental rights for victims. In canonical abuse investigations, victims are mere third-party witnesses to their cases. They cannot participate in any of the secret proceedings, they have no access to case files and no right to even know if a canonical investigation has been started, much less its status.

Only due to a Francis reform in 2019 are victims allowed to know the ultimate outcome of their case, but nothing else.

The Spanish ombudsman, tasked by the country's congress of deputies to investigate abuse in the Spanish Catholic Church, said victims are often retraumatized by such a process.

"Despite the regulations enforced over the last few years, if we take into account international and national standards on the minimum rights of victims in criminal proceedings, the rights and needs of victims in canon law proceedings continue to be neglected," the report found.

The French experts went further, arguing that the Vatican is essentially in breach of its obligations as a U.N. observer state and member of the Council of Europe, which requires upholding the basic human rights of victims.

Citing the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, the French report noted that a fundamental right includes access to a fair trial "which guarantees, in particular, the right of access to independent justice and an adversarial procedure, and, for the victim, the right to an effective remedy."

"Canon law will only be able to provide a genuine response to the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable persons in the Catholic Church if it meets the universally recognized requirements of justice and if it is implemented more effectively," the French commission concluded.

—No published case law. Unlike the Vatican tribunal known as the Roman Rota, which publishes redacted marriage annulment cases, the Vatican's sex abuse office doesn't publish any of its decisions about how clergy sexual abuse cases have been adjudicated.

That means that a bishop investigating an accusation against one of his priests has no way of knowing how the law has been applied in a similar case. It means canon law students have no case law to study or cite. It means academics, journalists and even victims have no way of knowing what types of behavior gets sanctioned and whether penalties are being imposed arbitrarily or not at all.

Independent legal experts who investigated clergy abuse in Munich, Germany, said the publication of

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canonical decisions would help eliminate uncertainties for victims in how church law was being applied. Australia's Royal Commission, the highest form of inquest in the country, similarly called for the publication of abuse decisions, in redacted form, and to provide written reasons for decisions "in a timely manner."

In-house, canon lawyers for years have complained that the lack of published cases was deepening doubts about the credibility and effectiveness of the churches' response to the church scandal.

"This lack of systematic publication of the jurisprudence of the highest courts in the church is unworthy of a true legal system," Kurt Martens, a professor at Catholic University of America told a canon law conference in Rome late last year.

Monsignor John Kennedy, who heads the Vatican office investigating abuse cases, said his staff was working diligently to process cases and had received praise from individual bishops, entire conferences who visit and religious superiors.

"We don't talk about what we do in public but the feedback we receive and the comments from our members who recently met for the Plenaria are very encouraging," he wrote to The Associated Press. "The pope also expressed his gratitude for the great work that is done in silence."

But such praise comes from the hierarchy, not those who have been harmed: the victims.

They are left to languish, even if — as now advised by the church — they report their abuse. The Spanish seminarian who met with the pope first filed his complaint against his abuser with the Toledo Archdiocese in 2009. But the Toledo archbishop only launched an internal investigation in 2021 and informed the Vatican, after Spain's El Pais newspaper reported on the case.

The AP does not identify sexual abuse victims unless they choose to go public.

In October, a Spanish criminal court convicted the priest and sentenced him to seven years. An appeals court recently voided the sentence on a technicality.

The seminarian has remained in touch with Francis and recently wrote him saying he was "exhausted" with the process but had nevertheless appealed to Spain's Supreme Court.

Francis called him right back and encouraged him to keep fighting, he said.

Today in History: February 21, Malcolm X shot and killed at age 39

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 21, the 52nd day of 2024. There are 314 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 21, 1965, minister and civil rights activist Malcolm X, 39, was shot to death inside Harlem's Audubon Ballroom in New York. (Three men identified as members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of murder and imprisoned; all were eventually paroled. The convictions of two of the men were dismissed in November 2021; prosecutors said new evidence had undermined the case against them.)

On this date:

In 1437, James I, King of Scots, was assassinated; his 6-year-old son succeeded him as James II.

In 1885, the Washington Monument was dedicated.

In 1911, composer Gustav Mahler, despite a fever, conducted the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall in what turned out to be his final concert (he died the following May).

In 1964, the first shipment of U.S. wheat purchased by the Soviet Union arrived in the port of Odessa.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon began his historic visit to China as he and his wife, Pat, arrived in Beijing.

In 1973, Israeli fighter planes shot down Libyan Arab Airlines Flight 114 over the Sinai Desert, killing all but five of the 113 people on board.

In 1975, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former White House aides H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman were sentenced to 2 1/2 to 8 years in prison for their roles in the Watergate cover-up (each ended up serving 1 1/2 years).

In 1992, Kristi Yamaguchi of the United States won the gold medal in ladies' figure skating at the Albert-

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ville Olympics; Midori Ito of Japan won the silver, Nancy Kerrigan of the U.S. the bronze.

In 1995, Chicago adventurer Steve Fossett became the first person to fly solo across the Pacific Ocean by balloon, landing in Leader, Saskatchewan, Canada.

In 2018, the Rev. Billy Graham, a confidant of presidents and the most widely heard Christian evangelist in history, died at his North Carolina home at age 99.

In 2019, teachers in Oakland, California, went on strike in the latest in a wave of teacher activism that had included walkouts in Denver, Los Angeles and West Virginia.

In 2020, a temporary truce between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan took effect, setting the stage for the two sides to sign a peace deal the following week.

Today's birthdays: Actor Gary Lockwood is 87. Actor-director Richard Beymer is 85. Actor Peter McEnery is 84. Film/music company executive David Geffen is 81. Actor Tyne Daly is 78. Actor Anthony Daniels is 78. Tricia Nixon Cox is 78. Former Sen. Olympia J. Snowe, R-Maine, is 77. Rock musician Jerry Harrison (Talking Heads) is 75. Actor Christine Ebersole is 71. Actor William Petersen is 71. Actor Kelsey Grammer is 69. Singer/guitarist Larry Campbell is 69. Country singer Mary Chapin Carpenter is 66. Actor Kim Coates is 66. Actor Jack Coleman is 66. Actor Christopher Atkins is 63. Actor William Baldwin is 61. Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Ariz., is 60. Rock musician Michael Ward is 57. Actor Aunjanue Ellis is 55. Blues musician Corey Harris is 55. Country singer Eric Heatherly is 54. Rock musician Eric Wilson is 54. Rock musician Tad Kinchla (Blues Traveler) is 51. Singer Rhiannon Giddens (Carolina Chocolate Drops) is 47. Actor Tituss Burgess is 45. Actor Jennifer Love Hewitt is 45. Comedian-actor Jordan Peele is 45. Actor Brendan Sexton III is 44. Singer Charlotte Church is 38. Actor Ashley Greene is 37. Actor Elliot Page is 37. Actor Corbin Bleu is 35. Actor Hayley Orrantia is 30. Actor Sophie Turner is 28.