PRICES MAY VARY OUTSIDE METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON AREA

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### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

## Foreigners broke feds' firewalls for **COVID** aid

Business fund lost \$1.3 billion to fraud

By Stephen Dinan

Foreign criminal syndicates are estimated to have stolen tens of billions of dollars in pandemic relief money, and

light on how some of that happened. The Small Business Administration's watchdog says the agency tried to block foreign applications to its Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) one of two major programs activated to prop up businesses during the early COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns.

an inspector general's report is shedding

Still, thousands of applications filed from foreign Internet Protocol addresses got through the SBA's firewall. As a result, the agency doled out about \$1.3 billion in payments that the inspector general deemed at severe risk of being fraudulent.

Filing from overseas isn't an automatic signal of fraud or illegality, but it is a red flag, the Office of the Inspector General said.

"The numerous applications submitted from foreign IP addresses are an indication of potential fraud that may involve international criminal organizations," the inspector general said in announcing the investigation Monday evening. "OIG has ongoing investigations into international organized crime operations that applied for and stole pandemic relief funds."

The audit didn't expand on those investigations, but overseas criminal syndicates have been identified in massive amounts of fraud related to U.S. pandemic spending.

There were three major relief programs: expanded unemployment benefits, which totaled about \$900 billion; the SBA's Paycheck Protection Program, which extended about \$800 billion in forgivable loans to small businesses to keep them afloat; and the EIDL, with roughly \$342 billion in loans, grants and advance payments to businesses.

Unemployment benefits were particularly vulnerable, with few controls early on to weed out bogus applications. One estimate puts total unemployment fraud at more than \$200 billion, with international criminal syndicates likely accounting for well more than \$100 billion. Much of that went to organizations tied to U.S. adversaries in Iran and Russia.

The SBA programs were tougher to scam, though early estimates still run to tens of billions of dollars. The inspector general's report captures some of that activity.

» see **RELIEF** | **A10** 



BLOWING THE HORN: Major freight railroads are putting pressure on Washington to help derail a union strike before midnight Thursday. A shutdown of rails could affect commuters who use Maryland's MARC train and Virginia's VRE.

### **TRANSPORTATION**

# Economy running on weak track about to get hit by railroad strike

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Biden is scrambling to avert a massive railroad strike as soon as Friday that would worsen supply chain shortages, inflame high inflation and add to the rising number of walkouts under his labor-friendly administration.

The White House wouldn't commit Tuesday to legislation to prevent a strike, despite acknowledging that a rail shutdown would cause "tremendous" harm to the economy.

"We are going to encourage them to stay at the negotiation table,"

## **INSIDE Grim economy**

Report on inflation prompts stock market plummet as Biden celebrates passage of tax, spending bill. A4

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said of the major railroad companies and two holdout unions. "They've come to a resolution in the past, and that's what we're going to focus on."

She called a strike "not acceptable." Even a partial shutdown of rail traffic would compound the nation's economic woes, including persistently high inflation that fueled a

massive sell-off Tuesday on Wall Street. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell nearly 1,276 points, or just shy of 4%, its worst day since June 2020.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce said a rail shutdown would cause "economic disaster."

Union leaders have warned the White House and Congress not to

» see RAILROAD | A10

### **CAMPAIGN 2022**

# Republicans urged to focus campaigns on voter worries

Memo says Democrats 'extreme' on abortion

By SETH McLaughlin and Tom Howell Jr.

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Republican National Committee officials are advising party candidates to stay focused on the economic woes and rising crime that top voters' concerns, insisting that those are still winning issues regardless of news media cheerleading for a Democratic rebound in the midterm elections.

The RNC strategy, delivered in a memo Tuesday, also directed Republican candidates in swingdistrict races to remind voters of the Democrats' "extreme" positions on abortion such as abortion on demand up until and during birth.

"While Biden and out-of-touch Democrats refuse to address the economic peril they created, voters have made it abundantly clear that this election is about the economy and crime," RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel said in a statement accompanying the memo. "Meanwhile, Republican candidates are meeting voters where they are and discussing the issues they care about, from the economy to crime and safety.

"In November, voters will turn to the candidates who showed compassion and solutions for their concerns, which is why Republicans are in the strongest position to take back the House and Senate," she said.

The RNC is pushing for a post-Labor Day reboot after a series of updated political forecasts suggested that Democrats are in a far better position than they once were to defend their slim Senate majority and to limit casualties in the House.

According to the memo, that storyline is more wishful thinking on behalf of Democrats than a reflection of reality on the ground, particularly if Republicans sharpen their message on top issues

» see GOP | A6

## **AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

# Lawsuits challenge fairness of Biden's 'equity'

By Alex Swoyer

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The infrastructure law Congress enacted last year includes \$37 billion for small "disadvantaged" businesses — a way of getting more money into the hands of companies owned by women and racial or ethnic minorities.

Christian Bruckner, a disabled Romanian immigrant, calls it unconstitutional discrimination, and he has gone to court to try to unwind the preference program.

It's just one of the challenges to

Whites, Asians increasingly feel left out

President Biden's "equity" agenda, which is testing the boundaries of affirmative

Mr. Bruckner's case is being fought by the Equity Under the Law Project, which has battled affirmative action programs in President Biden's 2021 coronavirus relief package. In one case, a federal appeals court halted funding set aside for minority-owned restaurants. In another case, a federal judge upended a plan

to forgive debts rung up by minority

Benefits for minorities via government contracts have been on the books for decades, but critics say the Biden administration and the Democraticcontrolled Congress are increasing

"Racial equity includes racial discrimination against Whites and Asians," said Daniel Lennington, deputy counsel at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, which runs the Equity Under the Law Project.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department did not respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Bruckner owns the contracting firm Project Management Corp. in Tampa, Florida. His lawsuit says the administration's set-aside of funds in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is unlawful because it must be used for

» see BIDEN | A6

# Half of U.S. workers admit 'quiet quitting'

## Pandemic changes job interest

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Half of U.S. workers responding to a recent Gallup survey consider themselves "quiet quitters," doing the minimum necessary to keep their jobs.

The percentage of disengaged workers has risen steadily since 2019, according to Gallup.

Analysts attribute the spike to large numbers of managers quitting during the pandemic, a struggling job market and young people's unhappiness with remote work.

"Life changed dramatically with COVID, and now, as employees are returning to the physical workspace, they are having to learn how to reengage socially while having the stress of paying more for clothes, gas and food," said Karen S. Elliott, a labor and employment lawyer at Richmond, Virginia-based Eckert

The concept is also known as "working your wage" or "phoning it in." Some analysts call it the "80/20 rule," stating that 20% of

» see WORK | A10



**ON HOME GROUND:** A Russian flag was in tatters Tuesday after Ukrainian fighters pressed retreating forces deeper into occupied territory, inflicting a stunning blow to Moscow's military prestige.

## **Routs over Russians** raise hopes in Kyiv

## Military restraint now advised

By BEN WOLFGANG

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Ukraine's stunning successes on the battlefield in recent days have sparked renewed optimism in Kyiv that a lasting, decisive victory over Russia may be within reach.

Still, the rapid pace of the Ukrainian counteroffensive comes with high-stakes questions. Military analysts openly cautioned Kyiv on Tuesday to slow its attacks or risk overextending its forces and giving the shellshocked Russian army an opportunity to regain its footing.

Striking the right balance between pressing its advantage and exercising strategic restraint will be the key challenge to Ukrainian military leaders — and their U.S. and other Western military advisers — over the coming days and weeks. After months of defense against relentless Russian ground attacks and artillery barrages, Ukraine's counteroffensive campaign has quickly retaken ground, including the strategically vital northeastern city of Kharkiv, with

» see UKRAINE | A6

## **POLITICS**

**Twitter whistleblower** details infiltrations, ignored warnings. A4

## **NATION**

**California mudslides** damage homes, carry away automobiles. A8

Armenia, Azerbaijan trade deadly fire as fighting erupts. A11

Virginia Republican's House run inspired by Youngkin platform. A12

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MASSACHUSETTS

## Union, GE achieve deal for faster raises

**LYNN** | The largest union representing workers for General Electric Co. says it's reached an agreement with the company to speed up raises for workers at a Massachusetts aviation plant.

Under the deal, workers would be eligible for raises sooner and could reach the top pay rate after six years of work, instead of as many as 10 required under the old system.

The tentative agreement first reported Tuesday by The Associated Press must be ratified by workers in a vote set for later this month.

Some 540 workers will see their pay go up, or become eligible for raises sooner, if the agreement is approved.

IUE-CWA Local 201, the union that negotiated the deal with GE, said workers at nonunion plants in Rutland, Vermont, and Hooksett, New Hampshire, will also receive a sped-up raise schedule as part of the agreement.

— Associated Press

FLORIDA

## State fines abortion clinic over wait period law

**TALLAHASSEE** | Florida health officials are fining an Orlando abortion clinic \$193,000 for violating a state law requiring a 24-hour waiting period before abortions are performed, according to a case assigned to an administrative judge Tuesday.

The Florida Agency for Health Care Administration filed the complaint against the Center of Orlando for Women this summer.

The mandatory 24-hour waiting period rule for abortions in Florida was signed into law in 2015 and was upheld by a judge in April after a nearly seven-year court case.

State regulators used patient records to determine the clinic performed 193 abortions that violated the 24-hour waiting period rule between late April and early May of this year, the complaint reads.

State law allows for a fine of

\$1,000 per violation of the waiting period law.

— Associated Press

NEVADA

## Elected official facing murder charge in slaying

LAS VEGAS | Arraignment was postponed Tuesday for an elected official accused of killing a Las Vegas investigative reporter who authorities say clawed and fought for his life when he was attacked outside his home.

Robert Telles stood in shackles in a Las Vegas courtroom as his lawyer requested the delay. The judge reset the hearing for Sept. 20.

Mr. Telles had been scheduled to be formally charged with murder in the Sept. 2 killing of Las Vegas Review-Journal reporter Jeff German, 69.

In a criminal complaint filed Monday, prosecutors accuse Mr. Telles of "lying in wait" for German, who was stabbed seven times.

Mr. Telles, 45, the Clark County public administrator and a Democrat, was arrested Sept. 7 after police issued a plea for public help to identify a person seen on security video wearing an orange work shirt and a wide-brim straw hat toting a shoulder bag and walking toward German's home.

— Associated Press

# Court hearing set after abortion ban takes effect

INDIANAPOLIS | A state judge won't hear arguments until next week on a lawsuit seeking to block the state's abortion ban, leaving that new law set to take effect on Thursday.

The special judge overseeing the case issued an order Monday setting a court hearing for Sept. 19, which is four days after the ban's effective date.

Indiana's Republican-dominated Legislature approved the tighter abortion restrictions during a two-week special legislative session that ended Aug. 5, making it the first state to do so since the U.S. Supreme Court eliminated federal abortion protections by overturning Roe v. Wade in June.

Indiana abortion clinic op-

erators filed the lawsuit Aug. 31, saying the ban, which includes limited exceptions, "strips

away the fundamental rights of people seeking abortion care" in violation of the Indiana Constitution.

No court action has yet taken place on the request from the American Civil Liberties Union of Indiana, which is representing the clinics, for a preliminary injunction to prevent enforcement of the law.

— Associated Press

**NEW YORK** 

## Lennon's killer denied parole for 12th time

ALBANY | The man who shot and killed John Lennon outside his Manhattan apartment building in 1980 has been denied parole for a 12th time, New York corrections officials said Monday.

Mark David Chapman, 67, appeared before a parole board at the end of August, according to the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

Chapman fatally shot Lennon on the night of Dec. 8, 1980, as Lennon and Yoko Ono were returning to their Upper West Side apartment.

Chapman is serving a

20-years-to-life sentence at Green Haven Correctional Facility, north of New York City.

cility, north of New York City. He is next due to appear before the parole board in Feb-

ruary 2024. — Associated Press

CALIFORNIA

## Monkeypox death confirmed by officials

**LOS ANGELES** | A Los Angeles County resident with a compromised immune system has died from monkeypox, local health officials announced Monday.

It's believed to be the first
U.S. fatality from the disease.
The Los Angeles County
Department of Public Health
announced the cause of death,
and a spokesperson said it was

confirmed by an autopsy.

The patient was severely immunocompromised and had been hospitalized. No other information on the person was released.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracks cases and has not confirmed any U.S. deaths from the disease. LA County officials say they worked with the CDC.

— Associated Press

# RAILROAD

From page A1

intervene. They said a strike, or the threat of a strike, is the only way to get better working conditions.

Still, House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer, Maryland Democrat, said Congress might step in and block a strike if necessary.

"There is a role for Congress if, in fact, they fail to reach an agreement," Mr. Hoyer told Bloomberg TV on Monday. "We can pass legislation if needed."

Senate Majority Leader Charles E.

Schumer, New York Democrat, dodged a question Tuesday about whether Democrats in Congress are prepared to prevent a rail strike.

"The bottom line is we're urging both sides to come together and come to an agreement, period," he said.

Despite numerous phone calls from Mr. Biden and his advisers in recent days, negotiators for both sides have been unable to reach a deal for about 115,000 freight rail workers. The deadline for avoiding a crippling strike is midnight Thursday.

Mr. Biden spoke by phone with both sides on Monday during a trip to Boston, apparently to no avail.

"The looming railroad strike is just another example of this admin's inability to act when it matters," tweeted Sen. Marsha Blackburn, Tennessee Republican. "Biden's failures surrounding our supply chain continue to pile up & many should



ASSOCIATED PRE

A strike threatened by railroad workers would cost the economy more than \$2\$ billion a day and disrupt deliveries of all kinds of goods and passenger traffic nationwide.

question why the self-proclaimed 'most pro-union president' couldn't deal with this major issue."

Eleven of the 13 unions representing railroad workers have reached a tentative deal with the major railroad companies, but two unions representing conductors and engineers have not. Those two unions represent about 60,000 railroad workers.

The main sticking point in the negotiations is time off for medical appointments. The unions say the railroads' sick time policies are being used to discipline or fire workers. The railroads say workers are abusing their sick days at a time when the companies can't afford staffing shortages.

The railroad companies include Union Pacific, CSX, Norfolk Southern, BNSE and Kansas City Southern

BNSF and Kansas City Southern.
The strike also would stop service

for commuter trains on routes that use tracks owned by impacted companies. Amtrak would sustain limited disruptions, mostly south of the nation's capital.

Maryland's MARC commuter train, which uses CSX rails, would suspend Camden and Brunswick Line service, but the Penn Line would remain in operation. Virginia commuters would have to find alternative transportation to VRE, which uses CSX and Norfolk Southern rails.

Amtrak said service would not be interrupted on the busy Northeast Corridor from Washington to Boston but some routes south of Washington would be affected. The national passenger rail service started preemptively suspending service on long-distance trips, mainly out of Chicago, on Tuesday.

In the absence of a deal, the White House acknowledged that the administration is trying to find other carriers to

transport up to one-third of the nation's freight in the event of a strike. Ms. Jean-Pierre said administration officials are "trying to figure out with other modes of transportation how to move forward."

Trucking companies, which are dealing with a shortage of about 80,000 drivers, say they couldn't pick up the slack. Truckers also would be hurt by the transportation snarls of a strike.

The trade association for retailers was among the business groups calling on the White House and Congress to intervene and prevent a strike if negotiators don't reach an agreement by the deadline.

"The negative impact of uncertainty is already being felt, and even a short strike or disruption would be disastrous," said Brian Dodge, president of the Retail Industry Leaders Association. "Jobs will be lost, and costs will go up as shortage of raw materials and consumer goods ripples throughout the economy — it will be a double whammy. And based on today's inflation report, it should be self-evident that this couldn't come at a worse time. Policymakers need to use every tool at their disposal to avoid a self-inflicted economic disaster."

The Labor Department reported Tuesday that the annual inflation rate in August was 8.3%, near a four-decade high, and that consumer prices ticked up 0.1% from July. A rail strike and more supply bottlenecks would add to inflationary pressures, economists say.

Strikes are on the rise nationwide under Mr. Biden, who calls himself labor's biggest friend in Washington.

Payday Report's Strike Tracker tallied 50 walkouts in July and 106 in August. In Minnesota this week,15,000 nurses at 16 hospitals walked out on a three-day strike, the largest private-sector nurses strike in U.S. history.

Mr. Biden prevented a railroad strike in July by imposing a 60-day cooling-off period and appointing a presidential emergency board to review the issues and recommend a settlement. The eventual recommendations called for 24% raises over five years dating back to July 2020, \$5,000 in bonuses and one extra day of paid leave per year.

The cooling-off period will expire at 12:01 a.m. Friday. Only Congress can prevent a strike under the century-old Railway Labor Act, either by imposing the terms on both sides or extending the cooling-off period.

The Association of American Railroads trade group has estimated that shutting down the railroads would cost the economy \$2 billion per day.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is among dozens of business and trade groups urging Congress to step in and block a strike if the two sides can't reach an agreement by the deadline. It said Congress should impose the terms recommended by the presidential board.

"A national rail strike would be an economic disaster — freezing the flow of goods, emptying shelves, shuttering workplaces and raising prices for families and businesses alike," said Suzanne Clark, president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

## RELIEF

From page **A1** 

The audit found that the SBA weeded out "millions of attempts" to submit EIDL applications from foreign IP addresses.

It also found that SBA officials were aware of the potential and took steps to combat it with a four-layer defense.

The first layer was a firewall that was supposed to block applications from six countries with histories of fraud. The second layer was another firewall that was supposed to block any application with a foreign IP address altogether.

Layer three was supposed to flag any foreign IP addresses that still made it through, and layer four was a personal

review by a loan officer.

The audit found that foreign IP addresses were able to access the loan system more than 233,000 times.

Nearly 42,000 applications from foreign addresses made it all the way through the security layers and were granted, resulting in fraudulent loans, grants and advance payments totaling \$1.3 billion.

When auditors reviewed 50 applications that got through the firewall despite coming from foreign addresses, they found 16 weren't flagged by the third layer of defense. Of the 34 that were flagged, the in-person loan officer review bungled 15 of them.

SBA and the contractor it hired to process applications pronounced

themselves stumped at how foreign IP addresses were able to circumvent the firewalls, the audit said.

The audit didn't name the contractor, but a congressional report this summer said the Trump administration awarded RER Solutions a \$750 million contract to handle the applications despite being unable to "perform core contract tasks."

the SBA oversaw may have been approved without an agency employee conducting a review, the investigation found.

In an official response to the audit,

More than 40% of all pandemic loans

In an official response to the audit, SBA Associate Administrator Patrick Kelley sought to put the numbers in context.

He said successful foreign IP applications were just 1% of all approved EIDL

cases and the SBA did a particularly good job of weeding out applications from the six high-risk nations, which the report did not identify.

The \$1.3 billion in overseas payouts was less than half a percent of total EIDL spending.

Mr. Kelley said the system was set up in the early days of the pandemic shutdown, when experts warned of a looming economic collapse.

"As a result, the initial focus of SBA's COVID relief programs had to be on providing financial assistance as quickly as possible to respond to the crisis," Mr. Kelley wrote. "While it is true that great speed was needed when developing the COVID EIDL program and to deliver this economic assistance to millions of small

businesses impacted by the pandemic; we do not believe there is a tradeoff

between speed and fraud controls."

The SBA generally agreed with the inspector general's recommendation to review all foreign IP address applications that got through the system and figure out which ones were bogus. The agency

said it will try to recover the money.

Nigeria, known for being home to sophisticated and determined fraudsters, led the way among foreign IP address applications with 33,477 submitted. Of those, 241 totaling nearly \$20 million were approved.

Canada led the way in dollar amount, with \$183 million paid out on 3,755 applications. A total of 20,500 were submitted from Canadian addresses.

## WORK

From page **A1** 

employees do 80% of the work.

Economists say it's an old labor market trend poised for a comeback because more Americans had been seeking better work-life balance even before the pandemic.

James E. Hartley, an economics professor at Mount Holyoke College, said Herman Melville wrote about the concept in his 1853 short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

"There is nothing new about the phenomenon," Mr. Hartley said. "Bartleby'quietquits' by responding 'I would prefer not to' anytime he is asked to do anything at his job. He never formally quits or leaves the office; he just stops doing work."

Cartoonist Scott Adams satirized the attitude in a 1990s "Dilbert" comic strip that depicted office slob Wally taking an "in-cubicle sabbatical."

When the titular Dilbert asks him how long he has been doing this, Wally replies, "Two years. You're the first person to notice."

on to notice."

Sean Higgins, a research associate at

the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute, said quiet quitters don't even share Wally's concern to "look busy" when the boss is present.

"With so many more people working

remotely now and therefore not being

watched by management, they feel more

freedom to put work aside when they feel like it," Mr. Higgins said. "If you're working from home, you feel less attached to your job, so why work as hard?"

Daniel Lacalle, a professor of global economics at IE Business School in Spain, said the labor participation rate,

its February 2020 level, confirms the decline in motivation.

Although the unemployment rate stayed low at 3.7% last month, the economist said, Americans are still experienc-

remaining at 1 percentage point below

ing negative growth in real wages.

"Also, private wealth is falling with equity and bond markets," Mr. Lacalle

said in an email.

Industry analysts believe the trend will last longer at companies that rely on remote and hybrid work.

"Remote working means distractions at home, lack of subtle but important nonverbal clues and a depressing absence of interpersonal relationships," said business consultant Hans Dau, CEO of the Mitchell Madison Group. "The image of the information worker with a laptop on the beach may not be so desirable after all."

It falls to managers to figure out how to motivate employees again, the analysts said. Jeff Safenowitz, CEO of the dog grooming company Barkbus, said pet-

friendly policies could make offices more appealing.

In a survey last month, Barkbus found that 86% of employees said they would look forward to working more and

50% said they made new friends if they brought their pets to work.

"Pets promote productivity," Mr. Safenowitz said.

Meagan E. Brock Baskin, an associate professor of management at Florida Gulf Coast University, said workers need time to reengage.

"Specifically, the pandemic triggered a shattering of assumptions about the way the world works and how life should be lived," Ms. Brock Baskin said. "When something shatters, we have to put it back together, and employees all over the world are putting their lives and priorities back together in different ways."

## **DEATH NOTICE**

### Clark, Thomas Alan

Thomas Alan Clark passed away on August 24 after a two-year battle with pancreatic cancer. Tom was born in 1954 in Wilmington, Delaware, the youngest of the four children of Joseph Ralph Clark and Mary June Almon. Tom is survived by Sheila, his wife of 26 years; daughter Jennifer (Mark Platenberg); brother Jim (Janice); sister Nancy Drake; brother-in-law Terry Payne; sisters-in-law Janet Clark and Patricia Burke; and numerous nieces, nephews and extended family and friends. His brother,

Steve, and his parents pre-deceased him.

Following his graduation from Seaford High School in Seaford, Delaware, Tom enlisted in the Army, serving three years in Germany. Returning to the states, Tom earned his bachelor's degree in business from the University of Maryland and had a very successful and wide-ranging career in financial services.

Tom was known by many for his enthusiasm, warmth and love of humor, fun, friends and family. Tom's charisma enriched his relationships, including his lifelong entrepreneurial pursuits and many personal interests including golf and University of Maryland sports.



A Celebration of Life will be held at a future date. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions in Tom's name may be made to your local chapter of the First Tee, P.O. Box 3055, Ponte Vedra Beach, FL 32004 or https://firsttee.org.

Please sign the Guestbook at www.legacy.com/washingtontimes

### **CAMPAIGN 2022**

# Republicans push midterm battles into Biden districts

## Stung by endorsement of Ohio candidate, 'original' supporters write letter to Trump

By SETH McLaughlin

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Former President Donald Trump's endorsement of J.D. Vance's bid for the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate in Ohio has left some "original and proud 'Trumpers'" feeling so betrayed that they are calling on him to rescind his support.

More than half of the Ohio delegates who represented Mr. Trump at the 2015 Republican National Convention have signed an open letter urging him to withdraw his



**BAD ADVICE?** Former President Donald Trump is supporting onetime critic J.D. Vance in a Senate primary.

support for Mr. Vance.

"We would respectfully request you reconsider your endorsement of JD Vance

to show your supporters in Ohio and across our great states why we first believed in you back in 2016," reads the letter, released Wednesday. "That it really was about the We the People, America First and Making America Great Again not supporting a political chameleon and snake oil salesman like JD Vance!"

The Vance campaign dismissed the letter.

"Conservative outsiders like Donald Trump and JD Vance will always be fought

» see OHIO | A4



**OPTIMISTIC:** Rep. Tom Emmer, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, is confident of winning a seat in New England.

- ► Biden, Democrats losing grip on young voters. A3
- ► Election forecasters shift 16 House races to GOP. A3

## Election forecasts boost hopes for flipping seats in Congress

By Susan Ferrechio

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

House and Senate Republicans are increasingly confident that a predicted red wave in November will sweep into blue districts that supported President Biden in 2020.

Bolstering that optimism, two prominent election forecasters on Wednesday shifted 16 congressional races across the nation toward Republicans' favor.

Larry Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics shifted 11 House races toward Republicans. Six of the incumbent House Democrats whose prospects were downgraded by the Cook Political Report and the Crystal Ball were elected in 2018 or 2020.

Growing optimism has propelled House Republicans' campaign effort into New England, whose voters rarely elect Republicans to Congress.

"We're going to get a seat in New England, I'm telling you right now," Rep. Tom Emmer of Minnesota said during a recent briefing with reporters. He is chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, the House Republicans' campaign arm.

Senate Republicans also are setting an ambitious campaign agenda.

The Senate Leadership Fund, the political action committee

» see **WAVE** | **A4** 



EYES ON A PRIZE: After relentless bombardment in a 2-month-old war, the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol is on the brink of falling to Russia.

## **UKRAINE**

# Supplies critically low for Mariupol defense

## Putin shows off advanced new weapons system to Ukraine, allies

By BEN WOLFGANG

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Defenders in Mariupol are desperately short on supplies and may lose control of the city within days, Ukrainian military officials said Wednesday as Russian invaders ramped up a nonstop bombardment of the strategically vital port city and inched closer to what would be the first major prize in Moscow's 2-month-old war.

Ukrainian troops remained holed up deep inside the city's sprawling steel plant complex and its network of underground tunnels, refusing to surrender despite slim chances for victory. Russian troops pounded the facility throughout the day as President Vladimir Putin issued stark warnings to Ukraine and its Western allies about an intercontinental ballistic missile system that he said is the most advanced in the world.

The stubborn resistance in Mariupol is giving Ukrainian forces time to entrench and reinforce troops in defensive lines in the country's Donbas region, where Ukrainian and pro-Russian separatist forces have been battling to a stalemate for eight years. Russian forces have turned their full attention to the campaign in the south and east of Ukraine. The first forays after the Feb. 24 invasion failed to take the capital of Kyiv or other major urban

Facing the full weight of the Russian war machine, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his personnel need heavier weapons to stand a fighting chance. Mr. Zelenskyy said there are two ways the standoff

» see UKRAINE | A10

Ukraine still transporting Russian gas despite war. **A8** 

# DeSantis proposal makes Disney perks magically disappear

Bill to end special taxing district works way through Legislature

By Susan Ferrechio

The Florida Senate voted Wednesday to end Disney's special taxing district in a battle over the state's new sex education law, pushing the theme park giant a step closer to losing the unique autonomy it has functioned under since the park was built more than five decades ago.

The Republican-led Senate voted to end the Reedy Creek Improvement District just one day after Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, announced he was calling on the Legislature, meeting this week in a special session, to take up a measure.

The Republican-led House is expected to pass the bill Thursday and send it to Mr. DeSantis for his signature.

Disney is in a public battle with the governor over the state's Parental Rights in Education law, which prohibits sex education in early elementary school. Critics call it the "Don't Say Gay" bill. Disney executives, under pressure from park employees and other opponents, urged Mr. De-Santis not to sign it. When the bill became law, Disney responded by pledging to end contributions to Florida political candidates.

The bill approved by the state Senate on Wednesday specifically targets Disney's one-of-a-kind special taxing and governing



TO KINGDOM COME: Disney's fresh paint on Cinderella Castle would be subject to taxes and fees under Florida legislation.

district approved in 1967 at the behest of Walt Disney, who sought independence from state and local governance to build and expand his theme park empire in Central Florida.

Although the government has authorized many special districts elsewhere in the state, none is controlled by a company.

Disney's Reedy Creek Improvement District, controlled entirely by the theme park, has special autonomy and authority

» see **DISNEY** | A4

## **EDUCATION**

# Conservatives give woke textbook publishers lessons in subtraction

By SEAN SALAI

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Conservatives are fighting to remove "woke" public school textbooks that present mathematics as a tool of White supremacy.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, announced Monday that the state Department of

Education had rejected 41% of the math textbooks submitted for its K-12 curriculum next year, including 71% of K-5 math textbooks, because they include "references to critical race theory" or "social emotional learning."

"Reveal Math K-5," one of several textbooks from McGraw Hill that Florida rejected, encourages students to discuss how they feel about solving problems. Conservatives see the language as a Trojan horse for liberals to revive efforts to "decolonize" mathematics of a perceived bias against multicultural students.

"Every lesson integrates a social and emotional learning objective along with the math and language objectives," Reveal Math K-5 states on page 52.

In addition, conservatives objected this week to the Iowa City Community School District's invitation for staff to attend a recent series of "equity courses" on race, gender and sexual orientation. One training session: "Ethnomathematics: The Study of Math as a Cultural Activity."

"Educators will approach the mathematics classroom as ethnographers, exploring the origins of our current practices and questioning the hierarchies they produce," a description of the training session states.

Nicole Neily, the founder of the conservative Parents Defending

Education, said the Iowa training series shows how teachers can embrace "toxic ideologies" that impart a victim mentality rather than prepare students to succeed.

"They need to be able to teach students the math they need to know to pursue and succeed in the future, whether in higher ed or career paths that require that knowledge," Ms. Neily said.

Critical race theory has increasingly been covered in the

» see **BOOKS** | **A5** 

## **POLITICS**

DOJ appeals judge's mask mandate ruling at urging of CDC. A3

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## **COMMENTARY**

**Gingrich: GOP needs** to think broadly about language, actions. **B1** 

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tied to Minority Leader and Kentucky Republican Mitch McConnell, is spending \$141 million on fall campaign advertising in states that Republicans hope to flip in November.

The list includes Arizona, Georgia and Nevada, where Democratic incumbents are battling voter dissatisfaction with Mr. Biden and the Democratic agenda. The Senate Leadership Fund plans to spend a staggering \$37.1 million in Georgia alone in a bid to win back a seat flipped by Democrat Raphael Warnock in a January 2021 runoff, officials announced Monday.

House Republicans are targeting an ambitious 60 seats in districts carried by Mr. Biden in 2020, including six seats held by Democrats in New England: two in New Hampshire, two in Connecticut and one each in Maine and Rhode Island.

The House list includes 32 districts that Mr. Biden won by at least 10 points.

Two of the targeted seats are in Connecticut, where Reps. Joe Courtney and Jahana Hayes are running for reelection. One is in Rhode Island, where Republicans hope to win a seat left open by Rep. Jim Langevin, who is retiring.

Connecticut has not sent a Republican to the House since Rep. Nancy Johnson was reelected to a second and final term in 2005.

Rhode Island has not elected a Republican to the House in three

Nathan Gonzales, editor and publisher of the nonpartisan race analysis website Inside Elections, told The Washington Times that the 2021 elections that put Republican Glenn Youngkin in the Virginia governor's mansion and nearly defeated New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy should have sent a signal to Democrats that Republicans would add many Biden-won districts to their 2022 target list.

"Republicans should be trying to get as many credible challengers in as many districts as possible to take advantage of opportunities as they surface," Mr. Gonzales said. "It will be at least a few months before Republicans will have to narrow the list a bit and decide where they are going to spend money. For now, they might as well try to shoot the moon."

Some seats on the Republican target list are wildly ambitious. Mr. Gonzales lists only two Democratic-held New England seats, Mr. Hayes in Connecticut and Rep. Jared Golden in Maine, as competitive. Mr. Hayes' seat is listed as "likely" to remain in Democratic control.

The district in Rhode Island left open by Mr. Langevin's retirement voted for Mr. Biden over President Trump by nearly 14 percentage points. New Hampshire House districts represented by Democrats Chris Pappas and Ann Kuster went for Mr. Biden by 6 points and nearly 9 points, respectively.

Republicans' hopes for an extended red wave are fueled by polling that indicates voters are fed up with Mr. Biden and the Democratic agenda in Congress, which has centered on tax-and-spend policies and climate change initiatives that many blame for high inflation rates and rising energy prices.

The extended coronavirus lockdowns and mandates, as well as the influx of tens of thousands of illegal immigrants along the southern border for months on end, have pushed Mr. Biden's approval ratings in some surveys down into the upper 30s.

The Republican Party is also riding a wave of dissatisfaction with the vocal and influential liberal wing of the Democratic Party, which has promoted

defunding the police and implementing "woke" school curricula such as critical race theory and LGBTQ issues.

"Frankly, the Democrats are seeing the same thing we are," Mr. Emmer said. "Voters want no part of their radical left-wing agenda that has created higher prices, soaring crime and a crisis at our southern border."

Democratic campaign officials scoffed at the Republicans' confidence. They noted that Democratic House candidates often outperform the top of the ticket, although Mr. Biden's name won't be on the ballot in November.

Chris Taylor, a spokesman for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said Democrats have an \$80 million cash-on-hand advantage over Republican challengers in some of the most vulnerable districts.

Mr. Taylor said the party will use the money to promote economic growth during the Biden administration and expose the Republican agenda, in particular a proposal by Sen. Rick Scott of Florida. Mr. Scott, chairman of the Senate Republican campaign arm, has offered a plan that would require even those at the lowest income levels to pay taxes and would end all federal laws every

five years. Even the Republican leadership opposes the plan.

"Democrats in Congress have the war chest needed to expose their dangerous agenda for America and remind voters it was Democrats who rebooted the economy and created 7.9 million jobs," Mr. Taylor said.

Democrats point to infighting in primaries where Trumpendorsed candidates are facing off against more traditional Republicans.

In Wisconsin's 3rd Congressional District, retired Navy SEAL Derrick Van Orden is poised to win the Republican primary for a House seat long held by Rep. Ron Kind, a Democrat who is retiring.

Mr. Van Orden, endorsed by Mr. Trump, was outside the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6, 2021, riot. Democrats have filed a complaint with the Federal Election Commission accusing Mr. Van Orden of improperly using campaign funds to pay for his trip to the Capitol.

"You're going to run that candidate in the suburbs of Wisconsin?" a top Democratic operative

Mr. Van Orden acknowledged that he was at the Capitol but said he left when the crowd began pushing back police and stormed the building.

The political outlook for Democrats has brightened in Texas, where Republicans have been eyeing the 28th Congressional District, long held by a popular moderate Democrat, Rep. Henry Cuellar.

The FBI raided Mr. Cuellar's residence in January as part of an investigation tied to Azerbaijan. A few weeks later, Mr. Cuellar was unable to clear 50% of the vote in the state's Democratic primary, forcing him into a runoff with Jessica Cisneros.

Ms. Cisneros, who embraces far-left ideas such as the Green New Deal, would be a much easier candidate for Republicans to challenge in November in the moderate district. She campaigned heavily on the FBI raid and accused Mr. Cuellar of failing to serve the district's interests.

Mr. Cuellar's attorney announced last week that the FBI had cleared the lawmaker and he was not the subject of the agency's investigation.

Mr. Cuellar faces Ms. Cinsneros in a May 24 runoff.

"He's got the loyalty there with him and his relationship with the district," a Democratic source told The Washington Times. "I think he's going to be fine."

• Kerry Picket contributed to this report.

over 39 square miles in Orange and Osceola counties. The district includes the Disney theme parks and resorts as well as the Downtown Disney shopping area and surrounding hotels. It encompasses the cities of Bay Lake and Lake Buena Vista, where about four dozen residents handpicked by Disney live and vote on matters related to the park and district.

Ending the special taxing district would subject Disney to Osceola and Orange County planning and zoning laws, as well as building inspections, for the first time.

The park also would lose its tax and fee exemption as an improvement district when it expands or builds on the property.

The legislation would put the two counties and two incorporated cities in charge of the district's 137 miles of roadway, a fire department and \$1 billion in municipal debt held by the company.

The change would not take effect until next year, and the Legislature could vote to reconstitute the special district.

Senate Democrats called the measure a form of "extortion" and "bullying" meant to force Disney to back down from its sparring match with Mr. DeSantis.

"Let's call this what it is," said Sen. Gary Farmer, a Democrat.



Sen. Gary Farmer and other Democrats took issue with the bill. "Let's call this what it is," he said. "It's the punitive, petulant, political payback to a corporation that dared to say the emperor has no clothes."

"It's the punitive, petulant, political payback to a corporation that dared to say the emperor has no clothes. But if they behave this next election cycle, maybe we'll put it all back together."

Mr. DeSantis began to publicly been able to wield a lot of power." question Disney's special status this month after accusing the company of practicing "woke" politics while ignoring its ties to China despite the nation's human rights violations.

"Should you retaliate against them, for them coming out and demagoguing this bill?" Mr. De-Santis said at a press event when he was asked about Disney's

perks in the state. "I don't believe you retaliate, but I think what I would say is, as a matter of first principle, I don't support special privileges in law just because a company is powerful, and they've

Democrats, who voted against the measure, excoriated Republican lawmakers and Mr. DeSantis for pushing the legislation as a last-minute addition to the special session, which was initially called to approve new congressional districts after a court struck down a prior plan.

"If you truly believe independent, special districts need to be



Florida Sen. Jennifer Bradley, a Republican sponsor of the bill to end Disney World's unique tax status said, "It would not be controversial to say we need to stop and have a little oversight over this process."

reviewed, then review that," said Sen. Tina Polsky, a Democrat representing parts of Broward and Palm Beach counties. "This is why we so often turn to studies and we make thoughtful decisions on billion-dollar issues. We don't rush them with no testimony and, admittedly, not even speaking to stakeholders, in a matter of two days with no notice during a special session about redistricting."

A Disney spokesperson did not respond to a request for com-

ment about the legislation. Although the measure appears to target Disney, it sweeps in four additional special improvement districts constituted in the state before 1968.

Disney is the only company with the special status, and Republican lawmakers highlighted the park's unusual autonomy during the Senate floor debate.

"The process has been swift, but it is a bill that is incredibly important," said Sen. Jennifer Bradley, a sponsor of the bill. "The districts that are affected have not had any legislative oversight in 50 years, and some of the districts have incredibly sweeping powers, such that a single company could start construction on a nuclear reactor at any time. It would not be controversial to say we need to stop and have a little oversight over this process."

Democrats said the bill is pure political brinkmanship.

"Everyone in this room knows this is not going to happen," Sen. Jason Pizzo, a Democrat who represents part of Miami, said during the debate on the bill. "Two counties and two cities are not going to assume a billion dollars in debt. We're not going to do that."

Republicans argued that the delay would give the surrounding governments enough time to take over Reedy Creek.

The district spent \$178 million to operate in 2021, raising the funds by taxing landowners on the property.

State Rep. Randy Fine, a Republican who represents Melbourne Beach, said the counties could take over the district and fund it with the same revenue

"They could operate it exactly how it is being done today except they would have the home rule control," Mr. Fine said.

Disney provides hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenue to the two counties and the state, but it is also the recipient of massive tax breaks.

A plan to move 2,000 Disney jobs from California to a new campus in Orlando, for example, would provide the company with a \$578 million tax credit.

by the Republican establishment and party insiders," said Vance campaign spokesman Taylor Van Kirk. "We look forward to winning them over like President Trump did."

The letter's 33 signatories include Rob Scott, state director of the Trump 2016 campaign, and Ralph King, a longtime tea party activist.

"We are NOT the Establishment or RINOs and will not be dismissed as such — we are the original Trump supporters in Ohio," Mr. King told The Washington Times.

He said he suspects Mr. Trump is getting bad advice from the party establishment and socalled Republicans in name only. "They are pushing this Vance down Donald Trump's throat," Mr. King said.

Mr. Trump's star power remains unmatched with the base of the Republican Party, and he has sought to play kingmaker in numerous races across the country.

Things have not always gone swimmingly. Mr. Trump's preferred candidate in Pennsylvania's race for Senate, Sean Parnell, pulled out of the contest after his estranged wife won custody of their children.

Mr. Trump also withdrew his support for Rep. Mo Brooks in the Alabama Senate race after the candidate urged Republicans to stop obsessing over the 2020 election and lagged in the polls.

Other high-profile Trump endorsements are facing blowback.

MAGA supporters in Pennsylvania voiced outrage over Mr. Trump's endorsement of television personality Mehmet Oz.

In Georgia, there is bub-

president's support for Herschel Walker's Senate bid is misguided because of the personal baggage the Heisman Trophy winner brings to the table.

Mr. Trump's bet that former Sen. David Perdue can unseat Gov. Brian Kemp in the Republican primary is looking iffy.

Others are sure to question Mr. Trump's endorsement of Morgan Ortagus, a former State Department spokesperson, in her bid for Tennessee's 5th Congressional District after the state Republican Party booted her from the primary ballot this

Mr. Trump threw his support behind Mr. Vance last week, ending months of speculation over whether he would stay on the sidelines in a race in which four of the top five candidates spent months falling over one another to show their fealty to him.

Billionaire entrepreneur Peter bling concern that the former Thiel donated \$3.5 million to a

super PAC backing Mr. Vance after he landed the Trump endorsement, according to Politico. Mr. Thiel has now donated \$13.5 million to the pro-Vance group.

The former president is set to headline a rally in Delaware, Ohio, this weekend featuring Mr. Vance and other candidates he has endorsed: Rep. Mike Carey, Max Miller and Madison Gesiotto Gilbert.

Asked about the letter, Trump spokesman Taylor Budowich said the former president is "looking forward to rallying with J.D. Vance and tens of thousands of MAGA patriots this Saturday in

"J.D. is the strongest candidate in the race to beat [Democrat] Tim Ryan and will be a tough, America First fighter in the U.S. Senate," Mr. Budowich said.

Donald Trump Jr., meanwhile, is scheduled to headline a townhall-style forum Wednesday with Mr. Vance in the Cleveland

Mr. Vance, a venture capitalist, Yale University graduate and the bestselling author of "Hillbilly Elegy," was a major critic of Mr. Trump during his rise and early

on in his presidency. Mr. Vance eventually changed his view. He said on numerous occasions that he was wrong about Mr. Trump and regretted his remarks.

It proved to be enough.

"Like some others, J.D. Vance may have said some not so great things about me in the past, but he gets it now, and I have seen that in spades," Mr. Trump said in his endorsement statement. "He is our best chance for victory in what could be a very tough race."

The highly coveted Trump endorsement has been widely viewed as a major victory for Mr. Vance in his quest to replace retiring Sen. Rob Portman, who is backing former Ohio Republican Party Chair Jane Timken.

Ms. Timken, former state Treasurer Josh Mandel and businessman Mike Gibbons also had sought Mr. Trump's support. State Sen. Matt Dolan, who also is running, did not court Mr. Trump's backing.

The letter from the early Ohio Trump supporters says Mr. Vance was working against Mr. Trump when they were working for him and that Mr. Vance has not developed relationships with the grassroots activists.

"While JD Vance may have apologized and now says nice things about you (as candidate Vance) — the fact is JD Vance never once apologized for working against our movement and most importantly calling us your original supporters — racist," the letter says. "This endorsement of JD Vance is a betrayal to not only your Ohio supporters but Trump supporters across our great nation!"



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### **IMMIGRATION**

## Afghanistan evacuees find clashes with U.S. laws

## Records show sex, violence offenses

By Stephen Dinan

The 77,000 Afghans evacuated to the U.S. have all been processed and released from military bases, but not before racking up a striking number of criminal entanglements including violence against women and sexual assaults on children.

Federal prosecutors in Virginia charged a man with molesting a 14-yearold girl. As investigators dug into his phone, they said, they found child pornography among thousands of photos he kept. They have now charged him with that offense, too.

Another evacuee stands accused of bashing his wife with a cellphone charger and slashing her wrists with a razor blade. Investigators say he was mad at his wife for taking one of the seats at an evacuee meeting, while his brother had to stand.

Still another evacuee is awaiting sentencing after a jury found him guilty of groping a child. He defended his actions to investigators, saying it was part of his culture to hug and kiss children.

In New Jersey, Khan Wali Rahmani was charged with assault with a dangerous weapon. According to court documents, he became upset when he thought another evacuee was "staring" at him during religious rites. He told investigators he grabbed a metal pipe and smashed the man in the back of the head.

Mr. Rahmani claimed self-defense, though the federal investigator who wrote the criminal complaint dryly noted that he attacked "while Victim #1 kneeled in prayer."

» see **EVACUATE** | **A6** 

## **BACK TOGETHER IN EASTER PRAYER**



Pope Francis (above) delivered the traditional Easter Sunday Mass as Catholics worldwide celebrated communally for the first time in two years. The pandemic, which erupted just ahead of the holiday in 2020, and a deadly wave of COVID-19 cases last year kept Christian worshippers home watching services on television or online. More churches opened their doors this year with fewer coronavirus restrictions, in line with broader societal trends. Story, A7.

**INVESTIGATION** 

# **CIA** doubts began early on Trump, Russia ties

# Clinton attorney wants evidence out of trial

By Jeff Mordock

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The CIA concluded in early 2017 that Clinton campaign attorney Michael Sussmann's dirt tying President Trump to Russia was "not technically plausible," special counsel John Durham said in a court filing posted Saturday.

Mr. Durham said Mr. Sussmann met with a second government agency in February 2017 and presented evidence purportedly linking Mr. Trump to Russia. Although Mr. Durham didn't name the agency, reports confirmed that Mr. Sussmann met with the CIA around this time.

During the meeting, Mr. Sussmann presented the CIA with accusations of a secret communications channel between the Trump Organization and Russia's Alfa Bank, according to the court filing. He also passed along information about suspicious internet data related to Russian-made phones used near the White House, Mr. Durham said.

In his filing, Mr. Durham says the CIA concluded that the accusations were untrue.

"Agency 2 concluded in early 2017 that Russian Bank 1 data and Russian Phone Provider 1 data was not 'technically plausible,' did not 'withstand technical scrutiny, 'contained gaps,' 'conflicted with [itself], and was 'user-created and not machine/tool generated," Mr. Durham wrote.

Both accusations were later debunked, including by special counsel Robert Mueller.

The court document was filed late Friday in response to Mr. Sussmann's bid to exclude evidence from his trial, scheduled to begin on May 16.

Mr. Sussmann has been charged with one count of lying to the FBI. He is accused of telling a top FBI

» see CAMPAIGN | A6

# Flood of tax returns adds to 2020 backlog, delayed refunds

By Haris Alic

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Internal Revenue Service is bracing for a flood of tax returns Monday, the official deadline, in a system beleaguered with delays

As of March, the IRS had not processed more than 12 million returns from the 2020 tax year. The backlog will significantly hamper the agency's ability to process this year's returns.

IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig warned Congress this month that the

## Agency defends telework, blames staffing and paper filings

agency was laboring with a personnel shortage and a growing document backlog during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The IRS is serving more people and entities in a global environment than ever before while handling new and bigger responsibilities," said Mr. Rettig. "At the same time, we have experienced delays in updating our IT systems, which means the IRS and taxpayers must continue to use certain paper-based

Individuals are likely to face more delays in receiving refunds, and the slowdown may cost taxpayers billions of dollars overall. A Government Accountability Office audit published last week found that the IRS shelled out more than \$3 billion last year in interest payments for delayed refunds.

To reduce the backlog, IRS officials say, they have implemented mandatory

overtime for staff. The agency is also using funding from President Biden's budget to hire an additional 10,000 people to help process returns.

Even with additional staff, however, the IRS does not expect to clear the document backlog until the end of this year.

Republicans say that is simply too long to wait and that a large portion of IRS employees working from home has likely contributed to the delay.

"One of the fastest ways to eliminate the backlog of millions of unprocessed tax returns is to have the IRS bring all of their employees back to the office," said Rep. Mike Kelly, Pennsylvania Republican. "Their telework policy won't end until June - well after [the 2021] tax filing deadline."

IRS officials defended the lenient teleworking guidelines. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, they said, a portion of the agency's workforce was not

» see TAX | A6

## **FOREIGN RELATIONS**

# War puts Arctic Council decisions in deep freeze

## Russia sits at helm of 8-nation forum

By BEN WOLFGANG

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The fallout from Russia's attack on Ukraine has reached the top of the world. The West's cooperation with Mos-

cow in the Arctic, already strained after years of Russian military buildup, has ground to a halt because of the conflict in Ukraine. The eight-member Arctic Council, which Russia currently chairs, has effectively paused operations, shelving a crucial forum for Washington, Moscow and the six other member nations to tackle and sidestep clashes over issues such as climate change, energy and economic resources, and military

activity in the high north.

Still, Russian President Vladimir Putin said his military campaign in Ukraine wouldn't sidetrack the Kremlin's quickly expanding Arctic ambitions. Long before the unprovoked Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin saw the region as crucial to Russia's economic development. The crushing Western sanctions imposed on Moscow in response to its invasion of Ukraine have made the Arctic even more pivotal for Russia's financial future.

"Taking into account all kinds of external restrictions and sanctions

» see ARCTIC | A6



**'FIGHT TO THE END'** Ukrainian troops in Mariupol are refusing to lay down their arms despite a lack of food, water, heat and electricity — and a Russian warning.

## Russians failing to starve troops out of Mariupol

## No surrender after dire ultimatum

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Ukrainian forces inside the besieged city of Mariupol on Sunday rejected an offer from Russian military officials to spare their lives if they lay down their arms and surrender.

The deadline for the surrender-or-die ultimatum passed with no indication that Ukrainian troops in the city were interested in handing over their weapons.

Officials said the situation in Mariupol is dire. A critical port city in southeastern Ukraine along the Sea of Azov, Mariupol has been under bombardment since Russian President Vladimir Putin

launched the invasion in late February.

"The city has not fallen," Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said on ABC's "This Week." "There is still our military forces — our soldiers — who will fight to the end."

Russian officials claimed to have intercepted radio communications between the defenders inside Mariupol and Ukrainian officials in Kyiv, according to the Russian news agency Tass.

"The militants offering resistance are in a hopeless situation, practically without food and water," said Mikhail Mizintsev, chief of Russia's National

» see UKRAINE | A10

## **POLITICS**

**GOP** challengers take lead in Nevada races for governor, Senate. **A5** 

### **NATION**

Suspect arrested after shopping mall shooting in South Carolina. A7

**North Korea tests new** weapon ahead of U.S. drill with South. A9

## **SPORTS**

**Backcourt needs put** Wall, Westbrook back in mix for Wizards. **B10**  VOLUME 40, NUMBER 76





The Internal Revenue Service has imposed mandatory overtime for staff and is hiring an additional 10,000 people to help process tax returns going back to 2020. Still, the agency does not expect to clear its document backlog until the end of this year.

mandated to go into the office.

"Before the pandemic, a significant percentage of IRS employees were teleworking," said Mr. Rettig. "We have a union contract ... and we follow the terms of that contract, and it requires telework-eligible positions to be teleworking."

Agency executives blame the backlog largely on the number of taxpayers who file their returns in paper format rather than electronically. Paper returns have to be reviewed by staff and hand-scanned into the agency's system before refunds are processed.

COVID-19 is also a contributing

factor. Mr. Rettig told Congress that the agency could not properly hire staff during the height of the pandemic. Even now, the IRS has been able to hire only 2,000 out of the 10,000 additional staff members approved.

"The pandemic caused significant hiring challenges, including low applicant pools in some locations, delays in fingerprinting due to closed facilities, and delays in processing applicants virtually," Mr. Rettig said.

Republicans said the issues afflicting the agency are not results of the pandemic but rather mismanagement and poor planning.

"This is not simply a problem of taxpayers choosing to deluge the IRS with paper-filed returns," said Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho, the top Republican

on the Senate Finance Committee. "In many cases, IRS forms and schedules simply cannot be electronically filed, including where a taxpayer could e-file and attempts to do so, but is rejected by the IRS's confusing digital signature process."

Democrats said the IRS is not to blame for circumstances wracking its ability to deliver tax refunds promptly. They blamed Republican budgets in the past decade for hamstringing the agency's performance.

"If you're frustrated by poor customer service from the IRS, you have years and years of Republican cuts that have contributed mightily to the ability of the agency to meet your expectations," said Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden, Oregon Democrat.

## **EVACUATE**

From page **A1** 

The bad behavior extends beyond the camps, too.

In Missoula, Montana, prosecutors have charged an evacuee with raping an 18-year-old girl in his hotel room.

In Wisconsin, an evacuee who arrived with his wife and six children and held himself out as a liaison to the community where they settled now stands charged with sexual assault. A woman who had been working with the family said the evacuee told her he had never talked to a woman like her before, said they should act like brother and sister and then tried to get her to fondle him.

Rep. Thomas P. Tiffany, a Wisconsin Republican who has been keeping an eye on evacuees who were sent to Fort McCoy in his state, said, "The cultural differences are stark."

"It's part of the reason you have to go slow with any type of immigration situation. We should expect assimilation into our country, and when you just wave in almost 80,000 people of a very different culture than America, you're inviting real upheaval in local communities," the congressman told The Washington Times.

Evacuees were supposed to be allies those who assisted the American war effort and who usually had some English ability and acculturation with Americans. In reality, a majority lack those ties. Who got out was determined more by who was able to make it to the airport.

Once in the U.S., the Afghans were spread out among eight camps run by military bases.

Experts said many of the people who arrived lack the acculturation that authentic allies, who worked with U.S. troops for years, would have had, and that is contributing to difficulties in resettling.

American communities have opened their doors and their wallets to help resettle evacuees. The military has won

rave reviews for its ability to stand up the evacuee camps at eight bases across the country.

The vast majority appear to be settling in without criminal entanglements, and some have even started to look for ways to return the generosity of their hosts. In one stirring story, an evacuee in Indiana made headlines after he signed up for the Indiana National Guard, saying he was "grateful" for the opportunities the U.S. had given him.

But there have also been some significant hiccups with the evacuee population, many of which have gone unreported.

New Mexico State Police told The Times that they responded to 85 service calls from the Afghan camp at Holloman Air Force Base. Among them were more than a dozen battery accusations, six domestic violence calls, two prostitution alerts, three disorderly callouts, two child abuse accusations, one indecent exposure and 13 suspicious circumstances reports.

When the Defense Department's inspector general conducted a review of the base's handling of Afghan evacuees, the entire section on security was

Reports on some of the other seven bases that house evacuees exposed serious hiccups and challenges.

At Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey, investigators said military and federal law enforcement officers found Afghan leaders in the evacuee camp were hushing up crime reports, particularly domestic violence incidents.

At Fort Pickett in Virginia, base security said they received reports of abuse of women and children, as well as some thefts, but the military police felt they had "limited law enforcement authority" over the evacuees. State and local police, meanwhile, were stretched too thin to be of much assistance.

Even when law enforcement recommended felony charges —in one incident of a stolen vehicle and another case of physical abuse — local magistrates lowered the charges to misdemeanors and the evacuees were "quickly" sent back to the camp, the inspector general said.

The crime reports also never got attached to the culprits' files. Security personnel told the inspector general that meant families that might choose to sponsor Afghans — helping them find jobs, locate housing or connect to services - would never know of their troubles while at Fort Pickett.

At Fort McCoy in Wisconsin, the inspector general said security personnel found they had "limited options" when dealing with misdemeanors such as thefts or simple assaults. They tried to get the U.S. attorney's office to prosecute, but in most cases, the federal prosecutor declines.

Base officials' normal recourse for anyone else in that situation would be to restrict access to the installation, but officials decided that would contradict the welcoming posture the U.S. was trying to maintain to the evacuees.

Instead, they issued warning letters. Over the first two months, the base had to issue 12 warning letters.

The U.S. attorney's office for western Wisconsin declined to discuss its specific reasons. "We base all of our charging decisions on facts and law and the principles of federal prosecution," spokesperson Myra Longfield said.

Mr. Tiffany, the congressman from Wisconsin, said prosecutors faced tricky decisions about how to handle the evacuee population.

He said the blame lies on the Biden administration for the way the evacuees were brought in the first place, under the homeland security secretary's power of parole, rather than a formal immigrant visa or refugee status.

"It goes back to the ham-handed way in which our federal government — in particular the Department of Homeland Security — has dealt with this issue, and

it was we're just going to put these people on the planes and get them out of Kabul and to America rather than sorting out their immigration status first," he said.

Among the cases that have emerged from the camps is that of Alif Jan Adil, accused of molesting a teenage girl under a blanket. According to investigators, he said they were in love, but when confronted by an Afghan translator who said it was against his culture, he became remorseful and admitted guilt.

When investigators went through Mr. Adil's phone, they said, they also found child pornography. He now stands charged with that crime in addition to aggravated sexual battery involving the girl.

The girl told authorities her mother threatened to kill her "because she had brought negative attention to their family for making these allegations."

In another case from Wisconsin, investigators said an evacuee struck his children, choked his wife and threatened to kill her.

"He beat me many times in Afghanistan to the point I lost vision in both eyes," the woman told authorities. She said her husband also threatened to send her back to Afghanistan for the Taliban to "deal with."

Mohammad Imaad was convicted of disorderly conduct and was sentenced to time served.

Every criminal prosecution The Times has reviewed involved a male defendant. In nearly every case, the victim was a woman.

One exception was in New Jersey, where Mr. Rahmani is accused of beating a man he thought was staring at him during prayers.

Another exception was in Wisconsin, where a man was charged with attempted sexual assault of two young teen boys.

There could be other cases under investigation. Federal prosecutors said they can't talk about referrals that haven't been charged.

One high-profile case out of Fort Bliss involved a female soldier who said she was assaulted by a "small group" of male evacuees. No charges have been filed in that case.

As the first charges emerged in September, Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck, head of U.S. Northern Command, said the numbers were still comparatively low.

"I've done some research," the general said. "What we're seeing is law enforcement violations that are on par, and in most cases significantly lower than, similarly sized populations across

He also pointed out that cases were reported to authorities by fellow evacuees.

At the time the general made his remarks, he said, eight cases were under investigation.

Neither the Homeland Security Department nor U.S. Northern Command would divulge final criminal investigation numbers, but Northern Command said it sticks by the general's evaluation.

"From DoD's perspective, due to efforts at each task force to provide cultural training and education, incidents of crime dramatically reduced over time to average well below most similarly sized populations across the country," Northern Command told The Times in

Homeland Security, in its response to questions about criminal behavior by evacuees, detailed the database screening Afghans went through before being brought to the U.S. and warnings delivered to Afghans about breaking the law once they were in the country.

"If individuals engage in criminal activity or additional information becomes available that raises a concern, the U.S. government takes action, which can include prosecution, revocation of parole, and placement into removal proceedings," the department said.

The Times reached out to several Afghan American organizations for this article but received no response.

pressure, special attention must be paid to all projects and plans related to the Arctic," Mr. Putin said last week, according to the state-run Tass news agency. "Not to postpone them, not to shift them right, but instead, we must respond to attempts to curb our development with maximum increase of the pace of work both on current and upcoming tasks."

The Arctic region is a vital economic hub in the 21st century as sea ice melts and shipping lanes open for the first time in centuries. As Russia forges ahead in the Arctic despite widespread condemnation over its actions in Ukraine, global leaders say the security situation is much more fragile. Russia's willingness to launch a full-blown military assault on a neighbor could signal that it is also willing to use force to achieve its strategic goals in the Arctic, including claiming sea routes as its own and exploiting the region's vast energy supplies, officials say.

"Russia's war against Ukraine is a watershed moment. It is a new normal for European security — and also for Arctic security," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in a speech after the invasion of Ukraine. Mr. Stolenberg's home country of Norway is a prime competitor of Moscow in the race to exploit Arctic opportunities.

"In the last few years, we have seen a significant increase in Russian military activity here. Russia has reestablished Soviet-era Arctic bases. This is a test bed for many of Russia's novel weapon systems. It is the home of Russia's strategic submarine fleet," he said. "Russia's military buildup is the most serious challenge to stability and allied security in the high north."

Indeed, global security analysts say Russia has built or reactivated 13 air bases and other military facilities in the Arctic. The Russian military has the world's largest fleet of icebreakers and has invested heavily in submarines able to operate in the icy

polar waters. The U.S. and its NATO allies are



Russia has effectively been frozen out of the Arctic Council by the U.S., Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway over "flagrant violation" of the group's principles. Moscow is still flexing its muscle in the competition for the region's vast resources.

racing to catch up. Although U.S. military budgets have invested heavily in the Arctic, the balance of wartime power remains roughly equal, according to a comprehensive study by the Londonbased Royal United Services Institute.

"In high-intensity conflict scenarios, there exists a balance of power in the [Arctic] between Russia and NATO," the study says.

There also exists a significant risk for the peaceful competition so far in the Arctic to quickly spiral out of control.

"This balance is, however, highly offense dominated," RUSI said in a summary of its report. "In other words, both sides are effective on the offensive but suffer from defensive vulnerabilities that make a reactive posture difficult to execute. This creates the potential for NATO to offset its lack of mass in theaters like the Baltics through horizontal escalation, but also raises the risks of mutual miscalculation in a crisis."

## A new reality

Against that backdrop, tensions among Arctic nations are rising fast. Sweden and Finland, which are members of the Arctic Council, signaled last week that they might announce plans to join NATO within weeks. Russia responded by making thinly veiled threats to both countries.

The Arctic Council virtually froze its operations last month as a result of "Russia's flagrant violation" of the council's principles, said the other seven members: the U.S., Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway.

Representatives from those nations met recently in Anchorage, Alaska, to map out a future without Russia.

"The Russia we see today is an aggressive, violent war machine," Anniken Ramberg Krutnes, Norway's ambassador to the U.S., said at the gathering.

"We have to admit that [Moscow's partnership is] over now," she told Arctic Today. "Now we have to proceed without them."

It's unclear when the council could resume full operations. Last year, before Russia's two-year chairmanship began, officials in Moscow vowed to use the international body as a forum to discuss "national security" matters. The council's 1996 charter says that "the Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security."

Although Arctic nations say there are some areas where cooperation with Russia remains vital, Mr. Putin's willingness to launch an unprovoked war against an Eastern European neighbor inevitably colors what he might do in a clash of interests in the Arctic, Andreas Osthagen,

a senior fellow at the Arctic Institute's Center for Circumpolar Security Studies and a senior research fellow at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Norway. told Scientific American last month.

"We have to be prepared, and we have to assume that there might be deliberate attempts by Russia to undermine Arctic cooperation or NATO's cooperation in the Arctic, and use the Arctic to gain some sort of benefit that we are probably unable to see," Mr. Osthagen said.

Russian officials say it is the West that is weakening Arctic security by suspending council operations and that work should resume despite the military activity in Ukraine.

"The council's mandate explicitly excludes matters related to military security," Nikolay Korchunov, Russia's ambassador-at-large to the council, recently told Newsweek. "It is enshrined in all its founding and strategic documents that the Arctic should remain as the territory of peace, stability and constructive cooperation. Therefore, this unique format should not be subject to the spillover effect of any extraregional events."

The suspension, "initiated by the Western states, could lead to the accumulation of the risks and challenges to soft security in the region, which the council has been addressing effectively," he said.

lawyer that he was not representing a client when he turned over evidence supposedly linking Mr. Trump to Alfa Bank when he was really attending the meeting on behalf of the Clinton campaign, which he later billed for the meeting.

Ahead of his trial, Mr. Sussmann is seeking to exclude evidence related to the gathering of domain name system data by a technology executive, identified as Rodney Joffe, who worked with the Clinton campaign attorney.

In an earlier filing, Mr. Durham said the DNS traffic was "exploited" by Mr. Sussmann and Mr. Joffe to dig up dirt on Mr. Trump by monitoring internet traffic flowing from his residences and even the White House.

Attorneys for Mr. Sussmann say the data is irrelevant to their client's charges.

Mr. Durham, in the filing posted Saturday, argued that the DNS evidence is "a necessary factual backdrop to the charged conduct." He wrote that the data will "prove the existence of the defendant's attorney-client relationships with" both Mr. Joffe and the Clinton campaign.

He also wrote that the information will reveal the steps the FBI and CIA took to investigate the accusations Mr. Sussmann presented.

That matters because it establishes "materiality," meaning it will show that investigators used government resources to look into Mr. Sussmann's claims without knowing it came from a rival political campaign.

"Evidence concerning the steps the FBI and Agency-2 took to investigate these matters is critical to establishing materiality because it will enable the jury to evaluate those steps, which, in turn, will inform their conclusions about whether the defendant's alleged false statements were material and could tend to influence or impair government functions," Mr. Durham wrote.

The special prosecutor said he intends to call a witness from at least one of the companies who maintained the Trump server that was the subject of the Alfa Bank accusations.