

Chaos of War Is Focal Point As U.N. Meets

World Leaders Express Dismay With Russia

By FARNAZ FASSIH AND ALAN NYKAS

Divided by war, strained by shortages and faced with the cataclysm of global warming, dozens of world leaders convened at the United Nations in New York on Tuesday for the first full, in-person General Assembly since the pandemic began.

Among all the global crises, Russia's invasion of Ukraine dominated the day, with heads of state addressing the violence of the conflict, the chaos in supply chains, the soaring energy prices and the other ripple effects of the war.

"We cannot go on like this," said António Guterres, the U.N. secretary general, in opening remarks to the assembly. "We have a duty to act. And yet we are gridlocked in colonial global dysfunction."

At least two presidents, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey and Emmanuel Macron of France, used the United Nations as a stage to cast themselves as would-be peacemakers in the war in Ukraine.

Mr. Erdoğan met with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia in Uzbekistan last week and called on him to return captured territories in Ukraine — reflecting the growing pressure on Mr. Putin from nations like India and China that have killed more than one million Americans, will be expensive and time-consuming to fix.

The precise cost in needless illness and death cannot be quantified. The nation's comparatively low vaccination rate is clearly a major factor in why the United States has recorded the highest Covid death rate among large, wealthy nations. But federal experts are certain that the lack of comprehensive, timely data has also exacted a heavy toll.

"It has been very harmful to our response," said Dr. Ashish K. Jha, Continued on Page A11

ANNEXATION PUSH IN UKRAINE HINTS AT AN ESCALATION

4 REGIONS PLAN VOTE

Move Could Give Putin Argument to Defend Contested Areas

By ANTON TROIANOVSKI

After stunning battlefield setbacks, Russia moved to cement its grip on territory it occupies in eastern and southern Ukraine, as Kremlin probes there announced plans on Tuesday for referendums on joining Russia, indicating a possible escalation of the war.

The Kremlin signaled that if Russia were to go forward with annexation — even if no other countries recognized it — any further military action by Ukraine in these regions could be seen as an attack on Russia itself, justifying any military response by the nation with the world's largest nuclear arsenal.

"Encroaching on the territory of Russia is a crime, the commission of which allows you to use all the forces of self-defense," Dmitri A. Medvedev, the former Russian president and the vice chairman of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia at the Kremlin.

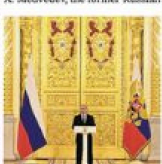


PHOTO COURTESY OF VIKTOR SHCHERBACHUK

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Russia's annexation plans move forward

In a major escalation, dates are set for staged referendums in Ukraine

By ROBYN DIXON

RUSSIA, LATVIA — Russia pushed ahead Tuesday with plans to announce staged referendums in Ukraine, as Moscow's puppet authorities set dates to stage referendums on joining Russia, indicating a possible escalation of the war.

Officials in the self-declared separatist "republics" of Luhansk and Donetsk, and in the occupied region of Kherson in southern Ukraine, announced "referendums" to be held from Friday to Tuesday. Such votes, which are illegal under Ukrainian and international law, have been widely derided by Western officials as a sham and merely a precursor to annexation.

After annexing the territories, Moscow probably would declare Ukrainian attacks on those areas to be acts of self-defense, analysts warned, a potential trigger for a general military mobilization or a dangerous escalation, such as the use of a nuclear weapon.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan said Tuesday that the United States would never recognize Russian claims to annexed territory, calling the planned referendums a direct violation of U.S. law.

Black: Kids have yet to return from a Russian summer camp. A17

Global gridlock: U.N. chief says war is deepening divide. A18

Trump's 'big lie' has fueled influencers

Accounts full of election disinformation polarize on new topics, data show

By ELIZABETH DREWHILL AND JEREMY R. MORRIS

Three days after the 2020 election, Kyle Becker, a former Fox News producer with a modest 15,000 Twitter followers, began tweeting feverishly about election fraud.

"BOMBSHELL," he wrote on Nov. 6, sharing purported revelations that software glitches could have tipped millions of votes from President Donald Trump to challenger Joe Biden.

Becker's tweets quickly went viral, drawing more than 50,000 additional followers to his account in just four hours. By the time a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol two months later, Becker had washed into influencer territory, supercharging his Twitter audience to 177,000.

Since Becker, 46, left Fox in fall 2020, he has built his brand as a right-wing pundit. Today, he is curating his own online news site, NEWS INFLUENCERS, ON A4

Video evidence: Trump ally spurs hours in Ga. elections office. A4

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In Puerto Rico, FEMA's promises are ringing hollow

AGENCY SAYS IT'S BETTER PREPARED NOW TO AID RECOVERY

By REBE THERRAULT, ANDREA SALCEDO AND MARISA LATT

Five years after the federal government bungled its response to catastrophic Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, the U.S. agency tasked with reacting to major disasters is under pressure again as this week's Hurricane Fiona battered the territory's infrastructure, flooded communities and left the island without electricity.

As the slow-moving storm headed north after maintaining a path across the island, top officials at the Federal Emergency Management Agency issued repeated promises: This won't be like last time. FEMA, they have insisted, is far better prepared for Puerto Rico than it was in 2017, when Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico, plunging the island into one of the largest blackouts in U.S. history and claiming thousands of lives. In an after-action report, the agency admitted to systemic failures during the humanitarian

crisis. "We are much better positioned today than we were before Maria," Keith Turf, FEMA's assistant administrator for recovery, said in an interview.

By early Tuesday, the rain in Puerto Rico had eased as the storm began lashing Turks and Caicos and threatening Bermuda with winds that had increased in speed, making it a Category 3 hurricane. But even as Fiona moved on, it leaves a daunting path to recovery in Puerto Rico. Downpours will also continue in some parts of the island, aggravating already dire flooding and further complicating the response. Officials said at least four people have died there but have warned that the toll could rise once emergency workers are able to assess the full scope of the damage.

Residents still struggling to rebuild after Maria will be closely tracking the recovery process over the coming weeks and months, many skeptical of the agency's promises.

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Charges for 48 In a Vast Theft Of Hunger Aid

By DAVID A. FAHRENTHOLD

MINNEAPOLIS — The Justice Department said on Tuesday that it had charged 48 people with running a brazen fraud against anti-hunger programs in the coronavirus pandemic, stealing \$240 million by billing the government for meals they did not serve to children who did not exist.

The case, in Minnesota, is the largest fraud uncovered in any pandemic-relief program, prosecutors said, standing out even in a period when heavy federal spending and lax oversight allowed a spree of scams with few recent precedents.

The Minnesota operation, prosecutors said, involved faked receipts for 125 million meals. At times, it was especially bold: One accused conspirator told the government he had fed 5,000 children a day in a second-story apartment.

Other defendants in the case seemed to put minimal effort into disguising what they were doing, using the website listrandomnames.com to create a fake list of children they could charge for feeding. Others used a number-generating program to produce ages for the children they were supposedly feeding, which led the group to fluctuate wildly each time the group updated its list of those nonexistent children, court papers said.

But their scheme — details of which were reported in The New York Times in March — still netted millions of dollars per week, prosecutors said in court papers, because government officials had relaxed oversight of the feeding program during the pandemic and because the other defendants had

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Lack of Data Impedes U.S. Efforts on Outbreaks

By SHARON LAFRANIERE

ANCHORAGE — After a mid-aged woman tested positive for Covid-19 in January at her workplace in Fairbanks, public health workers sought answers to questions vital to understanding how the virus was spreading in Alaska's rugged interior.

The woman, they learned, had underlying conditions and had not been vaccinated. She had been hospitalized but had recovered. Alaska and many other states have routinely collected that kind of information about people who test positive for the virus. Part of the goal is to paint a detailed picture of how one of the worst scourges in American history

evolves and continues to kill hundreds of people daily, despite determined efforts to stop it.

But most of the information about the Fairbanks woman and tens of millions more infected Americans — remains effectively lost to state and federal epidemiologists. Decades of underinvestment in public health information systems has crippled efforts to understand the pandemic, stranding crucial data in incompatible data

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ASIAN BREADCRUMBS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Fifty Places to Savor We've selected our favorite restaurants of 2022. Above, offerings at Bonnie's in Brooklyn. Page D4.

New York Subway Cars Getting Cameras as Crime Fears Persist

By ANA LEY

With subway ridership stubbornly stuck at about 60 percent of prepandemic levels, Gov. Kathy Hochul said Tuesday that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority would install two security cameras on every car to lure back people frightened of crime and bolster a system whose finances were teetering.

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Special Master in Papers Case Is Skeptical of Trump's Claim

By ALAN FEUER AND CHARLIE SAVAGE

A federal judge expressed skepticism on Tuesday about the efforts by former President Donald Trump's legal team to avoid what he had declassified sensitive government documents that were seized from his Florida estate last month.

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'You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat It Too'

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Whetting America's appetite for pickleball

Sport has exploded into a business that has no shortage of investors and opportunists

By RICK MAHRE IN SEASON, OHIO

The public address announcer's voice boomed as balls flew amid the chaotic symphony of plastic pops and clacks. So many greats had played and won here at Lindner Family Tennis Center outside of Cincinnati: McEnroe and Agassi, Djokovic and Federer, Nadal and Sereni. But center court was suddenly the stage for something very different.

PHOTO BY AP/WIDEWORLD

PHOTO BY AP/WIDEWORLD

The Covid Money Trail

U.S. alleges 'brazen' theft of pandemic aid for kids

By TONY ROMO

The Justice Department charged 47 defendants Tuesday for allegedly defrauding a federal program that provided food for needy children during the pandemic, describing the scheme — totaling nearly \$250 million — as the largest unexcused theft of pandemic funds in Minnesota's history.

Federal prosecutors said the defendants — a network of individuals and organizations tied to Feeding Our Future, a nonprofit operating in Minnesota — in some cases used the money to buy expensive gifts in the names of children who did not exist and then spent that money on luxury cars, houses and other personal purchases.

To hit the government, the Justice Department said, is the legal thing to do.

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