

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Friday, Nov. 22

Senior Menu: Meatballs, mashed potatoes with gravy, California blend, fruit cocktail, whole wheat bread.


School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Stromboli squares, mixed vegetables.

State Volleyball Tournament in Sioux Falls

JH GBB hosts Milbank (7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.)

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



## It's Friday

*Heavenly Father,*

You woke us up this Morning, and started us on our way...Hallelujah! Without Your Mercy and Your Grace, we wouldn't have made it to another weekend. Thank You Jesus!

We Praise You in advance for healing us, protecting us, guiding us, and for Your many Blessings and unmerited Favor. May You open doors for those seeking employment, supply financial blessings for those who are barely making it, and bring hope to the hopeless.

God's Spoken  
Word Ministries

Thank You for the Precious blood of Jesus. In His name we pray.  
Amen.

## Saturday, Nov. 23

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main  
State Volleyball Tournament in Sioux Falls

## Sunday, Nov. 24

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Congregational meeting, League Pie Auction; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m., and at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School Christmas Practice, 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

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

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

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## Ron Falk



**by Emerlee Jones**

Ron Falk was drafted into the army in March 1969. Ron had no choice on what branch he went into. He said that bootcamp was hard and they knew they would be sent to fight in the Vietnam War. The orders came on December 1, 1969, and Ron was shipped out thirty days later.

Ron did basic training in Fort Polk, Louisiana. He did advanced training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Ron was sent to Vietnam on January 2nd, 1970. He was assigned to the twenty-three-field artillery as a cook. Most of Ron's assignments were on fire support bases and his title was kitchen supervisor.

Ron's form of entertainment was playing cards. Everything else was work. Ron traveled overseas. They got their supplies and food from Vietnam. While at War, he used letters to stay in touch with his family. After Ron's service ended, he relaxed for a few months and then started working again. Ron worked in the HVAC business for twenty years. Later Ron owned a meat market where he butchered meat for twelve



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**Ron Falk (center) pictured with Legion Auxiliary Member Tami Zimney (left) and Emerlee Jones (right).** (Courtesy Photo)

years. Ron was also a part of the American Legion and V.F.W.

Ron learned a lot during his time in the military including the importance of working hard. He also learned to respect all his supervisors.

Ron and his wife of forty-five years have 4 children, two sons and two daughters. He also has seven grandchildren, six granddaughters and one grandson. One of his sons also served in the military.

Ron has one piece of advice for young adults who are now contemplating military service, he says to "go for it". He says "you won't regret it."

Ron, on behalf of the community and nation, with our deepest appreciation, we honor your service with this quilt of honor. Please give Ron a round of applause.

## FROSTY CLUE

I/My.....

22. Am a Vikings and Twins Fans





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# 1440

**Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.**

## **New Attorney General Pick**

Former Rep. Matt Gaetz (R, FL-1) removed himself from consideration for attorney general yesterday. The announcement came amid renewed scrutiny over allegations of sex trafficking, drug use, and sex with a minor. Trump announced he will nominate former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi in Gaetz's place.

President-elect Donald Trump announced Gaetz's nomination over a week ago amid a House Ethics Committee investigation into the allegations against him. Those included claims Gaetz paid a then-17-year-old girl for sex in 2017, with one sex act involving another woman. The House this week deferred releasing its report. Gaetz denies the allegations against him; the Justice Department declined to bring charges.

Separately, the announcement came as a police report this week detailed graphic sexual assault allegations a woman made against Pete Hegseth, Trump's pick for defense secretary. Hegseth maintains the encounter—at a Republican women's conference in California in 2017—was consensual.

## **ICC Issues Warrants**

The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants yesterday for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, and Hamas leader Mohammed Deif. The three are charged with alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity amid the Israel-Hamas war.

Hamas leader Deif—who Israel said was killed in a July airstrike—is accused of having a key role in the murder, rape, and torture during the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, which resulted in 1,200 deaths and over 250 hostages. Netanyahu and Gallant are accused of instigating widespread starvation by restricting food and humanitarian aid and intentionally targeting civilians in Gaza, where the death toll has passed 44,000, according to the Hamas-run Health Ministry.

The ICC, an independent court that collaborates with the United Nations, relies on countries recognizing its jurisdiction to enforce its warrants—an authority not recognized by the US and China. Other leaders who face warrants include ex-Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

## **50 Years of Lucy**

Sunday will mark 50 years since the discovery of the "Lucy" fossil in Ethiopia, a 3.2-million-year-old specimen whose rare completeness has made it the reference point for subsequent hominin fossil discoveries. The 3.5-foot-tall, 40% complete *Australopithecus afarensis* fossil is currently housed in the National Museum of Ethiopia.

Paleoanthropologists first discovered her elbow Nov. 24, 1974, at an excavation site in Hadar, Ethiopia, eventually identifying and arranging over 40 skeletal parts. Named after a Beatles song, she was the first hominin fossil to surpass 3 million years in age and proved our human ancestors evolved to walk on two legs prior to our increase in brain size. For decades, she was believed to be the earliest known ancestor of our genus and held up as the matriarch of humanity.

Older, less complete hominin specimens have since been identified, prompting debate over which species is most closely linked to modern humans.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Los Angeles Dodgers' Shohei Ohtani and New York Yankees' Aaron Judge both unanimously win MLB's 2024 NL and AL MVP award.

UConn women's basketball coach Geno Auriemma becomes NCAA's all-time leader in coaching victories with 1,217 wins.

"Empire" actor Jussie Smollett's December 2021 conviction for an alleged hate crime hoax is overturned by Illinois Supreme Court.

Percival Everett's novel "James" among five winners of the National Book Awards.

Morgan Wallen wins top prize of entertainer of the year at Country Music Association Awards.

## Science & Technology

NASA begins stacking the first stage of the Artemis II Space Launch System; mission is the second step in returning humans to the moon, target launch window is late 2025.

Astronomers capture highest-detailed image of a star outside the Milky Way.

Researchers demonstrate genetically altered version of malaria-causing bacteria, potentially paving the way for mosquitoes to spread vaccination against malaria via bites.

Scientists create the world's thinnest spaghetti, roughly 400 nanometers in diameter; demonstration validates a technique to create tiny fibers with use in medical and electronic applications.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow +1.0%, Nasdaq +0.0%).

Bitcoin notches another record intraday, reaches \$99K.

Gary Gensler, chair of Securities and Exchange Commission, to step down Jan. 20.

Alphabet shares close down over 4% after Justice Department asks judge overseeing Google antitrust case to force the tech giant to divest its Chrome browser.

Elon Musk's artificial intelligence startup xAI raises \$5B in funding round, valuing the company at \$50B.

## Politics & World Affairs

Brazilian police indict former President Jair Bolsonaro and 36 others for an alleged coup attempt on Jan. 8, 2023, following Bolsonaro's election loss in 2022.

Russia strikes Ukraine with new intermediate-range missile in response to Ukraine sending US-supplied short-range ballistic missiles into Russia.

Parts of eastern US and Great Lakes region see this winter's first snowfall, with more than 23 million people under winter weather advisories; up to a foot of snow expected in some areas.

Father of 14-year-old suspect in September mass shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder, Georgia, pleads not guilty to charges including second-degree murder.



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**Lane Tietz returns to the court in a Dakota State Trojan uniform. His former Groton Area classmates met up after the game with Northern State.** (Courtesy photo Bruce Babcock)



**Lane Tietz's proud family. L-R father Tom, sister McKenna, Lane, mother Lindsey, and brother Trey Tietz.** (Courtesy photo Bruce Babcock)



## Lane Tietz plays at NSU-Dakota State game in Aberdeen



## Lane Tietz dribbles down court against the Northern State Wolves in the Barnett Center.

(Courtesy photo Bruce Babcock)



**Former Groton seniors pose with Lane L-R Colby Dunker, Lane Tietz, Logan Ringgenberg and Jacob Zak.** (Courtesy photo Bruce Babcock)

**Left Photo: Proud grandparents, Bob and Renee Swisher.** (Courtesy photo Bruce Babcock)





## Noem's Cabinet role could be 'untenable': Former Homeland Security chief

BY STU WHITNEY

South Dakota News Watch

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's rise to secretary of the Department of Homeland Security would put her in charge of a sprawling federal network of 22 agencies and 260,000 employees tasked with keeping the United States safe from outside threats.

Whether she's prepared for that position depends on whom you ask, and she still needs to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

But most everyone agrees her potential role in President-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet comes at a pivotal time in the country's approach to illegal immigration and national security.

Jeh Johnson, who served as Homeland Security secretary under President Barack Obama from 2013-17, told News Watch that he wishes the South Dakota Republican success "in promoting the department's missions and its people."

But Johnson, former general counsel of the Department of Defense, added a note of caution as Noem prepares to join an administration that has vowed to carry out mass deportations of illegal immigrants in the country, facing likely legislative and legal hurdles along the way.

"I fear she will be placed in the untenable position of having to publicly defend the Trump Administration's most controversial and harshest immigration enforcement policies," Johnson told News Watch. "I suspect there will be many days when she wishes she were back in South Dakota."

### Serving as governor is 'training ground'

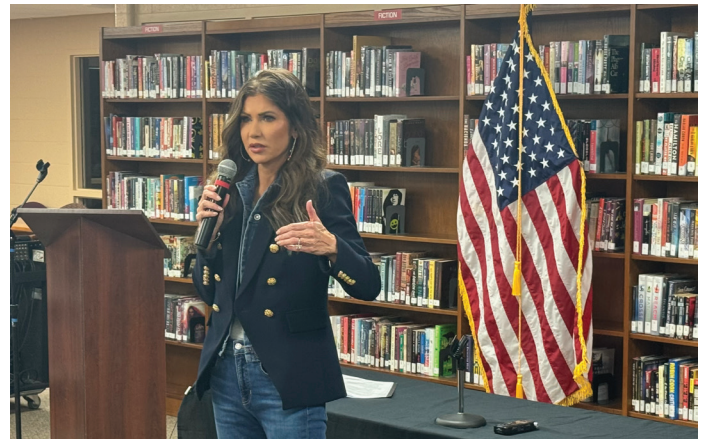
The Department of Homeland Security, formed in response to the 9/11 attacks of 2001, began operations in 2003 and is the third-largest Cabinet department behind the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs.

Though it is largely associated with immigration oversight through Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Homeland Security also oversees cybersecurity and disaster response, as well as the Secret Service and Coast Guard.

John Sandweg, who served as acting director of ICE from 2013-14, said Noem's experience as governor could help prepare her for coordinating the various agencies and supervising the budget, though DHS has a significantly larger budget and workforce than the state of South Dakota.

Sandweg noted that two other governors, Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania (2003-05) and Janet Napolitano of Arizona (2009-13) have served as Homeland Security secretary, managing a budget that reached \$108 billion for fiscal year 2025, of which \$62 billion is net discretionary funding.

"Managing an executive function and one that can be highly political (as governor) is a unique background that can serve as training ground to being secretary, dealing with a state Legislature instead of Congress,"



**South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem speaks March 13, 2024, at a town hall meeting at the high school in Mitchell, S.D.** (Photo: Stu Whitney

/ South Dakota News Watch)

said Sandweg, a national security lawyer who also served as acting DHS general counsel.

## Texas governor praises Noem choice

Noem, who didn't respond to interview requests for this story, has said that she asked Trump for the Homeland Security position and looks forward to "discussing our nation's security challenges and my commitment to addressing them head-on" during Senate confirmation hearings.

In a recent poll conducted by Echelon Insights, 27% of respondents either strongly or somewhat supported Noem as the DHS nominee, compared to 26% who strongly or somewhat oppose the choice.

That net approval of plus-1 was third-lowest of eight high-profile Trump Cabinet picks, ahead of only Matt Gaetz for attorney general (negative-11) and Pete Hegseth for Secretary of Defense (negative-2).

Noem has deployed South Dakota National Guard troops to the Southern border five times during her administration. In 2021, she drew criticism for accepting a \$1 million donation from a Republican donor to help cover the cost of a two-month deployment of 48 troops to the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas.

Noem has also made several trips to the border to support the enforcement efforts of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who praised her on the social media site X the day she was nominated as a "border hawk who has worked with me to secure the Texas border."

Sandweg, a lawyer in Washington specializing in DHS compliance and immigration, said that Noem's new role will likely be an eye-opener compared to her past brushes with border security as an Upper Midwest governor without federal oversight.

"I think she'll find that she has a lot to learn about border security," Sandweg told News Watch. "(Homeland Security) is a different type of responsibility in which she's constrained in ways she wasn't in the past by federal law, budgetary concerns and international diplomacy."

## Clashes with White House possible

Trump has tapped former ICE director Tom Homan to serve as his "border czar" at the White House, which could free up Noem to focus on other DHS agencies such as the Secret Service and FEMA.

The administration's immigration strategy will also be shaped by Stephen Miller, who was hired as deputy chief of staff for policy after working on the Muslim travel ban and other hardline initiatives during Trump's previous White House stint.

But Noem will still oversee the DHS budget, which will have to be ramped up significantly to carry out some of the deportation and enforcement policies being pushed by Trump and his team.

Trump has indicated that he plans to declare a national emergency to carry out his campaign promise of mass deportations of migrants living in the U.S. illegally, of which there are an estimated 11.7 million, according to the Center for Migration Studies based on U.S. Census Bureau data.

Finding resources for those plans could put Noem on the firing line of appropriation-based battles with Congress, where Republicans will hold a 53-47 majority in the U.S. Senate but a slimmer advantage in



**Former Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson speaks at the National Press Foundation 2024 Elections Fellowship on July 29, 2024, in Detroit. He led the department from 2013-17 under former President Barack Obama.** (Photo: Stu Whitney / South Dakota News Watch)

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the U.S. House.

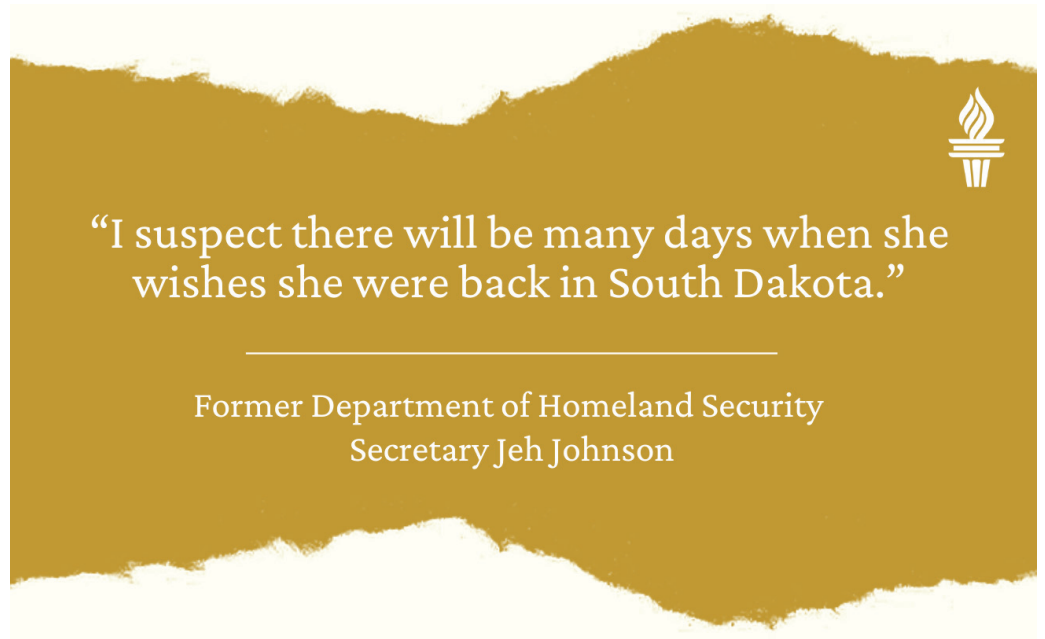
"Border and immigration issues tend to dominate the job, and she has the added wrinkle of having more seasoned policy and operational people at the White House," said Sandweg, referring to Homan and Miller.

"It will be interesting to see how that dynamic plays out. It might work out very well, but you can also have personality conflicts because (Homan and Miller) will be sitting with the president every day, but yet (Noem) is the person who's in charge and responsible for the actual border patrol agents and ICE officers executing the mission."

She'll also be answering to Trump, a notoriously volatile leader who saw 14 Cabinet members depart during his first four-year White House tenure, compared to three for Obama (eight years) and two for Biden (four years).

"It's something to keep an eye on," said Sandweg. "It's certainly not uncommon for there to be some tension between the White House and DHS."

The Associated Press contributed to this story, which was produced by South Dakota News Watch, an independent, nonprofit news organization. Read more in-depth stories at [sdnewswatch.org](http://sdnewswatch.org) and sign up for an email every few days to get stories as soon as they're published. Contact investigative reporter Stu Whitney at [stu.whitney@sdnewswatch.org](mailto:stu.whitney@sdnewswatch.org).





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## NSU Women's Basketball

### **Wolves Triumph Over Marauders with Last-Second Shot**

Aberdeen, S.D. – A last-second layup propelled the Northern State University women's basketball team to a 73-71 victory over the University of Mary. With the game on the line, Rianna Fillipi threaded a perfect pass to Madelyn Bragg, whose layup sealed the victory for the Wolves in the final seconds. Bragg led the charge for Northern State, scoring 25 points and grabbing a career-high 14 rebounds. Morgan Fiedler and Fillipi followed closely behind, contributing 17 and 14 points, respectively.

#### THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 73, MARY 71

Records: NSU 3-2 (NSIC 1-0), MARY 1-1 (NSIC 0-1)

Attendance: 1293

#### HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State notched 14 points in the first, 16 points in the second, 23 points in the third, and 20 points in the fourth quarter

They tallied 38 points in the paint, 16 points off of turnovers, nine second-chance points, and six bench points

The Wolves shot well in the contest, shooting 51.0 % from the floor and 42.9 % from beyond the three-point line

Madelyn Bragg recorded her first double-double of the year with 25 points and a career-high of 14 rebounds while shooting 45.0 % from the floor

Morgan Fiedler shot 77.8 % from the floor and 66.7 % from the three-point line and recorded 17 points

Rianna Fillipi rounded out the top scorers with 14 points on the night along with seven assists and connecting on six-of-seven shots from the floor

#### NORTHERN STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 25 points, 14 rebounds (career-high), 3 blocks, 2 assists, 45.0 FG %

Morgan Fiedler: 17 points, 2 rebounds, 77.7 FG %, 66.6 3PT %

Rianna Fillipi: 14 points, 7 assists, 4 rebounds, 85.7 FG %

Michaela Jewett: 9 points, 8 rebounds, 3 assists

#### UP NEXT

Northern State is on the road to Hawaii to take on Hawaii Hilo and California State Dominguez Hills. Tip-offs are slated for Friday, November 29th at 8 p.m. against the Vulcans and Saturday, November 30 at 5 p.m. against the Toros.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Senator Rounds introduces bill to eliminate US Department of Education

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - NOVEMBER 21, 2024 5:17 PM



**Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, speaks to reporters outside of the Senate Chambers during a vote in the U.S. Capitol on March 14, 2023, in Washington, D.C.** (Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)

Republican U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds of South Dakota introduced legislation Thursday that would eliminate the U.S. Department of Education and redistribute some of its programs across other federal agencies.

The "Returning Education to Our States Act" is the latest effort to remove the department by Rounds, who said he's been pursuing the goal "for years."

The Department of Education was established in 1979 during the administration of Democratic President Jimmy Carter. Rounds alleged in a news release that the department's budget has swollen ever since then without improving education.

"Local school boards and state departments of education know best what their students need, not unelected bureaucrats in Washington, D.C.," Rounds said.

Nevertheless, Rounds' release also said "there are several important programs housed within the Department," which the bill would redirect to other departments. The release went on to list 25 such programs.

Critics of similar proposals have raised concerns that eliminating the department could lead to inequities in education funding, oversight and access among the states.

Calls to eliminate the Department of Education have been boosted by Republican President-elect Donald Trump, who recently issued a statement supporting the idea when he announced his plan to nominate Linda McMahon for secretary of the department. McMahon is a decades-long executive with World Wrestling Entertainment and was the head of the Small Business Administration during Trump's first presidency.

"We will send Education BACK TO THE STATES, and Linda will spearhead that effort," Trump said.

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

## Man who killed transgender Native American woman in 2022 takes manslaughter plea

**Acey Morrison case drew national attention over charging delay**

**BY: JOHN HULT - NOVEMBER 21, 2024 5:41 PM**

The man who shot a transgender Native American woman to death in 2022 pleaded guilty to second-degree manslaughter this week in Pennington County.

Pennington County State's Attorney Lara Roetzel filed first-degree manslaughter, drug and firearms charges against 54-year-old Gregory Edward Landers in February, about a year and a half after he killed 30-year-old Acey Morrison in his Rapid City trailer.

The case caught national attention in LGBTQ+ circles in part because of the extended wait between the time Landers called 911 to report the killing and the date on which he was indicted by a grand jury in Rapid City. Morrison was honored in 2022 during the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance, which takes place each November in memory of transgender people who lost their lives to violence in the preceding year.

Landers pleaded guilty to the second-degree manslaughter charge on Monday in Rapid City, two days before this year's day of remembrance.

Second-degree manslaughter involves the reckless killing of another human being. The maximum penalty is 10 years in the state penitentiary.

A letter from Roetzel in the Landers case file says she intends to ask for a 10-year sentence with three years suspended at his Dec. 19 sentencing. His other charges were dismissed as part of the deal.

"This case is a tragic reminder of the consequences of reckless and violent actions," Roetzel said in a statement to South Dakota Searchlight. "By accepting responsibility through his guilty plea, Mr. Landers is being held accountable for the harm he caused. We remain committed to seeking justice for victims like Acey Morrison and ensuring our community remains safe."

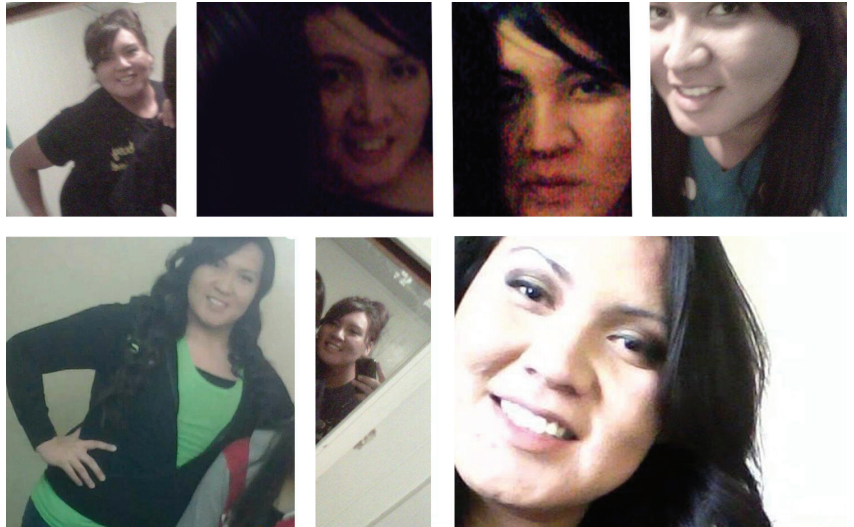
### **Court documents offer insight into self-defense arguments**

Landers told law enforcement he'd shot Morrison in self-defense when he called 911 to report the killing. He maintained that he'd acted in self-defense throughout court proceedings this year.

Most of the documents, exhibits, photos and transcripts associated with his effort to have the manslaughter charge dismissed under South Dakota's "Stand Your Ground" law are sealed.

The documents that remain public do offer some new details on the situation. Landers claimed he'd let Morrison stay the night after the two connected on a dating app, but that she wouldn't leave when he asked. He said she'd broken his ribs in an altercation over the shotgun that killed her.

Court documents say he was treated for bruised ribs and a broken hand after the homicide. The lead investigator characterized the break to Landers' hand as a "boxer's fracture," an injury typically associated with punching someone or something.



**A collage of photos of Acey Morrison at a younger age. Morrison was killed on Aug. 21, 2022 by a man who claimed self defense.** (Photos courtesy of Cheryse Hawkins, illustration by Josh Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)



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Landers argued throughout the proceedings that he'd wrestled a shotgun away from Morrison before shooting her in the chest, and had moved to hire an expert to re-check for DNA on the weapon. In a letter to Judge Heidi Linngren, Landers called himself an innocent man and wrote that he should not be convicted because of "incompetent" DNA testing.

That testing found Morrison's DNA on the weapon, including near the barrel of the gun, but it had more of Landers' DNA on it. Her left index finger was blown off in the shooting, according to a motion from Roetzel asking Judge Linngren to deny Landers' request for immunity from prosecution. That's consistent with her hands being "at the top of the barrel of the muzzle at the time of discharge."

Roetzel's arguments noted that Landers had accused Morrison of performing a factory reset of his phone, presumably to steal and sell it, but later admitted he'd wiped the phone's memory to conceal information from law enforcement. Landers also said he and Morrison hadn't had sex, despite DNA evidence to the contrary, and that the physical fight between them took place in a bedroom and a closet that were undisturbed when officers arrived.

"Defendant says he acted in self-defense, but his words have little meaning, given the number of lies he has been caught telling," Roetzel wrote.

## Lead detective resigns

Morrison's mother, Edelyn Catches of Oglala, grew frustrated with the justice system as she awaited an answer about her daughter's death.

Just over a year after Morrison's death, Catches lost her son Daniel Freeman to homicide in an incident that took place on the Pine Ridge Reservation and has yet to draw criminal charges.

The U.S. Attorney's Office prosecutes felony crimes on tribal lands. U.S. Attorney spokeswoman Ace Crawford was not immediately able to offer any information on the Freeman case Thursday afternoon.

The charges for Landers were a relief for Catches, but she said the self-defense arguments and an issue with the lead investigator in the case, Cameron Ducheneaux, had her anxious about the outcome.

Ducheneaux resigned from the Pennington County Sheriff's Office for reasons that aren't disclosed in the public court file. His resignation is noted in the file, but documents and personnel records that could shed further light on the resignation were only made available to the prosecution, defense and judge.

On Thursday, Catches said she'd been told that Ducheneaux's situation could have called his credibility into question at Landers' trial. The trial was initially set to begin this week.

The plea deal means Ducheneaux will not be called to testify at a trial, nor would his credibility be called into question by Landers' attorney.

"Looking at what we were facing, he actually had a chance of walking," Catches said Thursday.

Tony Mangan, spokesman for the state Division of Criminal Investigation, said Ducheneaux remains a certified law enforcement officer, and that a hearing on his certification will take place during a meeting of the Law Enforcement Officers Standards and Training Commission meeting on Dec. 4.

The process of working through the self-defense arguments, seeing images of Morrison after the killing and hearing accusations leveled at Morrison throughout was stressful, Catches said.

"It was just way out of Acey's character, the way he described the altercation," Catches said.

She's glad Roetzel pursued the case, despite the wait, and that Landers has now admitted to recklessly killing Morrison.

"It was an uphill fight the whole way," Catches said. "At least he'll get something, and it will be on the record that he killed Acey."

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

## 'Forever chemicals' found in Big Sioux River, based on preliminary data

Sampling to continue, with plans for more sites around Sioux Falls

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - NOVEMBER 21, 2024 3:22 PM

SIoux FALLS — Preliminary sampling data identified “forever chemicals” in the Big Sioux River in eastern South Dakota, flagging water sampled at Falls Park in Sioux Falls as a hotspot.

The study, conducted by East Dakota Water Development District and South Dakota Mines, tested water for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) at 11 sites from northeast South Dakota to the Iowa border past Sioux Falls in September. The sampling is the first of five runs and more testing is required to draw conclusions of PFAS contamination levels in the river.

The chemicals have been used in industry and consumer products since the 1940s and don't break down easily in the environment or in the human body. Research indicates PFAS exposure may be linked to negative developmental and reproductive effects, and an increased risk of some cancers.

The federal government finalized limits on some types of PFAS in drinking water earlier this year. Those limits apply specifically to treated drinking water and will be implemented in phases.

Although the maximum contaminant levels don't apply to surface water, public drinking water systems located near the river should be aware of it, said Jay Gilbertson, district manager. An ongoing study indicates that, under the right conditions, Big Sioux River water can infiltrate wells near the river.

Researchers found 32 detections representing nine types of PFAS compounds. They detected one or more PFAS compounds at nine of the 11 sites, all below Watertown.

At Falls Park, researchers found amounts of a PFAS tied most commonly to firefighting foams at 30 parts per trillion — over seven times the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency limits for treated drinking water. Researchers found PFAS compounds at the site totaling more than 80 parts per trillion, which was the highest concentration detected.

PFAS was previously detected in wells near Ellsworth Air Force Base at Box Elder, as well as Sioux Falls Regional Airport and its co-located Air National Guard base, where the chemicals were used in firefighting foam. The forever chemical was also detected in wells at National Guard facilities near Custer and in Rapid City, and in three private wells in South Dakota.

Sioux Falls suspended 21 of its wells suspected of PFAS contamination after those earlier detections. Since then, all raw water samples — which can include the Big Sioux River at times — have been tested for PFAS compounds. The city has not detected PFAS in those sources.



**Jenny Kozak (left), a master's student at South Dakota Mines, pours Big Sioux River water into a collection bottle held by South Dakota Mines Associate Professor Lisa Kunza on Sept. 26 at Falls Park in Sioux Falls.** (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

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"We're accumulating PFAS from one source or another," said Lisa Kunza, associate professor in chemistry, biology and health sciences and director of the Center for Sustainable Solutions at South Dakota Mines in Rapid City.

The Big Sioux River is diverted above Sioux Falls, the main channel loops through the city before joining the diverted water again. Skunk Creek also pours into the Big Sioux River within the loop, which researchers didn't test. East Dakota board member Bob Kappel reminded the board of above-ground gasoline tank leaks in western Sioux Falls near Skunk Creek in 1986, which led to the closure of Hayward Elementary School and may have contaminated the creek with PFAS, he said.

A testing site just below Watertown reported the second highest concentration of PFAS compounds at just under 40 parts per trillion. All other sites between Watertown and Sioux Falls reported less than 20 parts per trillion, according to the data.

At the testing site below Falls Park, where the Big Sioux loop meets with water diverted around the city and water discharged from the city's wastewater treatment plant, concentrations of the two compounds dropped significantly due to dilution, Gilbertson said. Though, the levels were above the "very modest amounts" found at sites before running through Sioux Falls.

The Big Sioux River at the time of sampling was in the middle of a months-long drought, and its flow rate was significantly slower than normal — likely making the levels of contamination more pronounced, Kappel said. He encouraged the board to consider testing at more normal flow rates in the future.

Either way, something is contaminating the Big Sioux River in Sioux Falls, leading to elevated PFAS levels in the water even after dilution from diverted water, Gilbertson said.

Gilbertson told the board he plans to conduct follow-up sampling around Sioux Falls in the coming weeks. He also wants to add two to four sampling sites around the Sioux Falls area for future sampling next year. That would allow the board to glean more information about where the contaminants come from.

"Our current detections tell us that South Dakota is no different than anywhere else," Gilbertson said in a memo to board members. "PFAS compounds are being found in many, many places, and the sooner we look for them, the sooner we can start planning for how to deal with them."

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.*

## Trump tells U.S. Senate Republicans they 'must kill' journalism shield law

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - NOVEMBER 21, 2024 5:05 PM

President-elect Donald Trump ordered congressional Republicans on Wednesday to block a broadly popular bill to protect press freedoms, likely ending any chance of the U.S. Senate clearing the legislation.

The measure would limit federal law enforcement surveillance of journalists and the government's ability to force disclosure of journalists' sources, codifying regulations the Department of Justice has put in place under President Joe Biden.

The House Judiciary Committee unanimously approved it last year and it passed the House by voice vote in January.

"REPUBLICANS MUST KILL THIS BILL!" Trump wrote on his social media site, Truth Social, in all capital letters on Wednesday, linking to a PBS segment about the measure.

Substantial floor time is generally required in the Senate to bypass the process that allows a single member to hold up the chamber's business. With Democrats prioritizing confirmation of Biden's judicial nominees before they lose their majority in January, it is unlikely they would bring a vote on the measure without the unanimous consent of all 100 senators.



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Trump's influence within the Senate Republican Conference makes reaching unanimous consent exceedingly unlikely.

The bill's House sponsor, California Republican Kevin Kiley, accepted the bill's defeat in a statement Thursday.

"Based on the feedback we've received from Senators and President Trump, it's clear we have work to do to achieve consensus on this issue," he said. "I'm looking forward to working with the new Administration on a great many areas of common ground as we begin a new era of American prosperity."

A Kiley spokesperson declined to provide further details about senators' feedback on the measure. A spokesperson for U.S. Senate Judiciary ranking Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina did not respond to a message seeking comment.

In the House, 19 members from both parties, including Republicans Barry Moore of Alabama, Darrell Issa of California, Russell Fry of South Carolina and Kelly Armstrong of North Dakota and Democrats Jamie Raskin of Maryland, Ted Lieu of California and Rashida Tlaib and Dan Kildee of Michigan, signed on as cosponsors.



**President-elect Donald Trump speaks at a House Republican Conference meeting at the Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill on Nov. 13, 2024 in Washington, D.C.** (Photo by Allison Robbert-Pool/Getty Images)

## Protection for local journalists

Jon Schleuss, the president of The NewsGuild-CWA, a national journalists' union that has supported the bill, noted in a Thursday statement it would protect news sources across the political spectrum.

"Americans would not know about the corruption of former Democratic Senator Bob Menendez or former Republican Representative George Santos without the hard work of local journalists holding power to account," he said. "All of us depend on journalism, especially local journalism, to shine a light and protect Americans from threats, both foreign and domestic. The PRESS Act protects all voices: news sources, whistleblowers and the journalists they talk to from media outlets across the spectrum."

In a Thursday statement to States Newsroom, Gabe Rottman, policy director at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, called the bill a "reasonable and common-sense measure" that enjoyed broad bipartisan support.

"Its passage would put an end to actions the Justice Department has taken under past administrations of both parties to target reporters' confidential communications when investigating and prosecuting disclosures of government information," he wrote. "We urge Congress to recognize that there is still a need for a legislative remedy here."

Press advocacy groups have expressed worries about Trump's return to the White House, citing a record in his first term that included surveillance of and legal threats against journalists and news organizations.

## Seeking retribution

In the closing days of the presidential race, Trump fantasized aloud about reporters being shot.

Press freedom groups also worry that Trump's promises to use the federal bureaucracy to seek retribution against perceived enemies would extend to journalists.

"In his second term, Trump will make good on these anti-press threats to try to destroy any news outlet, journalist, or whistleblower who criticizes or opposes him," Seth Stern, the director of advocacy at the

Freedom of the Press Foundation, wrote in a Nov. 6 blog post.

Stern added that Trump would “almost certainly repeal” the protections against surveillance the Department of Justice had put in place during President Joe Biden’s term.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

## State board increases financial protections for Black Hills gold mine

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - NOVEMBER 21, 2024 2:12 PM

A state board approved financial assurance increases during a teleconference meeting Thursday for the operator of South Dakota’s only active, large-scale gold mine.

The Board of Minerals and Environment decided to increase the assurance — such as bonds posted by insurance companies — that Wharf Resources must maintain. If the company fails to properly close or clean up the mine, the state could use the money to do the work.

Wharf Resources, a subsidiary of Chicago-based Coeur Mining, runs an open-pit gold mine near Lead and Terry Peak in the northern Black Hills.

The board raised the total amount of required surety bonds for reclamation — restoring the mine to a natural-looking state — from \$72 million to \$74 million.

The board also increased the required surety bond amount for long-term monitoring, water treatment and maintenance after the mine closes from \$53 million to \$65 million.

Eric Holm, with the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, said the increases account for inflation, new facility additions and the construction of a selenium treatment plant to prevent water contamination.

The mine has operated since 1982 and has produced more than 3 million ounces of gold. In 2023, the mine produced 93,502 ounces of gold and 267,786 ounces of silver, generating \$82 million in free cash flow, according to Coeur financial reports. The Wharf Mine employs 245 workers with an annual payroll of \$32 million, and the company paid \$6.3 million in gold severance taxes to the state last year.

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



**A May 2023 aerial view of the Wharf Mine near Lead.**

(Courtesy of EcoFlight)



## Matt Gaetz bows out as Trump's pick for attorney general

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT AND ARIANA FIGUEROA - NOVEMBER 21, 2024 12:04 PM

WASHINGTON — Former Florida Congressman Matt Gaetz announced Thursday he's withdrawing as President-elect Donald Trump's planned nominee for attorney general days after securing the appointment.

Gaetz's path to Senate confirmation was highly unlikely following years of investigations about alleged drug usage and payments for sex, including with an underage girl. He submitted his resignation to Congress last week.

"While the momentum was strong, it is clear that my confirmation was unfairly becoming a distraction to the critical work of the Trump/Vance Transition," Gaetz wrote in a social media post. "There is no time to waste on a needlessly protracted Washington scuffle, thus I'll be withdrawing my name from consideration to serve as Attorney General. Trump's DOJ must be in place and ready on Day 1."

Trump posted on social media afterward that he "greatly" appreciated "the recent efforts of Matt Gaetz in seeking approval to be Attorney General."

"He was doing very well but, at the same time, did not want to be a distraction for the Administration, for which he has much respect," Trump wrote. "Matt has a wonderful future, and I look forward to watching all of the great things he will do!"

When asked if the Trump-Vance transition team had another nominee choice lined up, and whether they viewed the Gaetz withdrawal as a setback, spokesperson Karoline Leavitt did not provide details.

"President Trump remains committed to choosing a leader for the Department of Justice who will strongly defend the Constitution and end the weaponization of our justice system. President Trump will announce his new decision when it is made," Leavitt told States Newsroom in an emailed statement.

The House Ethics Committee voted along party lines Wednesday not to release its report on Gaetz, following more than three years of investigation. Gaetz has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, including the allegations that he had sex with a minor.

### Meetings with senators

Trump's running mate, Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance, spent Wednesday shuffling Gaetz between meetings with Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee, which would have held his confirmation hearing. Republicans will control the Senate in the new session of Congress beginning in January.

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee, wrote on social media that he respected Gaetz's decision to withdraw his name from consideration as AG.

"I look forward to working with President Trump regarding future nominees to get this important job up and running," Graham said.

GOP Sen. Chuck Grassley, incoming Judiciary Committee chair, posted the following on X: "I respect Gaetz decision & look fwd 2helping PresTrump confirm qualified noms 2reform Dept of Justice & bring TRANSPARENCY/ACCOUNTABILITY Trump's mission = DRAIN THE SWAMP& I would add get some1 who



**Former U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz leaves a House Republican Conference meeting at the U.S. Capitol on Oct. 3, 2023 in Washington, D.C.** (Photo by Drew Angerer/Getty Images)



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will answer my hundreds of outstanding oversight letters sitting at Biden DOJ/FBI.”

Grassley’s staff referred States Newsroom to the social media post when the outlet reached out for comment.

The offices of Sens. John Kennedy of Louisiana and Tom Cotton of Arkansas, fellow Senate Judiciary Committee Republicans, declined to comment.

Gaetz’s future is unclear, given that he resigned from the U.S. House last week and notified the chamber he didn’t plan to take the oath of office for the upcoming 119th Congress.

He first joined the House in January 2017 and led efforts to remove former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy from that role last year, setting off a month-long stalemate within the House Republican Conference over who should lead the party.

The race to fill his empty seat in a special election has already attracted six candidates, mostly Republicans in a heavily conservative-leaning district.

Gaetz could jump into the race for his old seat, possibly winning a place back in the House of Representative next year following the special election.

He could also try to take the oath of office when the next session of Congress begins on Jan. 3, since he wrote in his resignation letter that he did “not intend to take the oath of office for the same office in the 119th Congress, to pursue the position of Attorney General in the Trump Administration.”

That would give the House Ethics Committee jurisdiction to complete its report on Gaetz and release it publicly.

## **AG oversees Department of Justice**

The attorney general is responsible for overseeing the Department of Justice, which includes the federal government’s top law enforcement agencies as well as prosecutors.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, or ATF, Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office for Victims of Crime, Office on Violence Against Women and U.S. Attorneys’ offices are among the 40 entities within the DOJ and its 115,000-person workforce.

Congress approved \$37.52 billion for the Department of Justice in the most recent full-year spending bill.

Trump had two attorneys general during his first term as president. He first nominated former Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions, whom Trump later fired amid disputes, and then Bill Barr.

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

*Ariana covers the nation’s capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.*

## Feds roll out 2025-26 college financial aid form ahead of planned date

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - NOVEMBER 21, 2024 11:37 AM

WASHINGTON — The 2025-26 form to apply for federal student aid is now available to all students and families, the U.S. Department of Education said Thursday.

The department used a staggered approach to launch the 2025-26 Free Application for Federal Student Aid — better known as FAFSA — to address any issues before the form became available to everyone at a later date.

Though the department beat its Dec. 1 full launch deadline by 10 days, the form is fully available roughly two months later than the typical Oct. 1 date.

The department gradually ramped up the number of people able to complete the form since early October through four testing rounds that have featured more than 167,000 FAFSA submissions.

Meanwhile, a bill to ensure the federal student aid form is available by Oct. 1 annually has passed both the House and Senate with sweeping bipartisan support. It's now up to President Joe Biden to sign the measure into law.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment Thursday on the bill.

Senior department officials said they do not have a position on the legislation but reiterated that they are on track to launch the 2026-27 FAFSA by Oct. 1, 2025.



**A sign reminding people to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid — better known as FAFSA — appears on a bus near Union Station in Washington, D.C.** (Shauneen

Miranda/States Newsroom)

### 2024-25 FAFSA mishaps

The decision for a phased rollout came after the 2024-25 form — which got a makeover after Congress passed the FAFSA Simplification Act in December 2020 — witnessed its fair share of glitches and errors, which prompted processing delays and left students and families feeling frustrated and confused.

The department worked to fix these errors as well as issues that prevented parents without Social Security numbers from completing the form.

"We recognize that the FAFSA challenge required an overhaul at the (Office of) Federal Student Aid, so we got to work," U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said on a call with reporters Thursday.

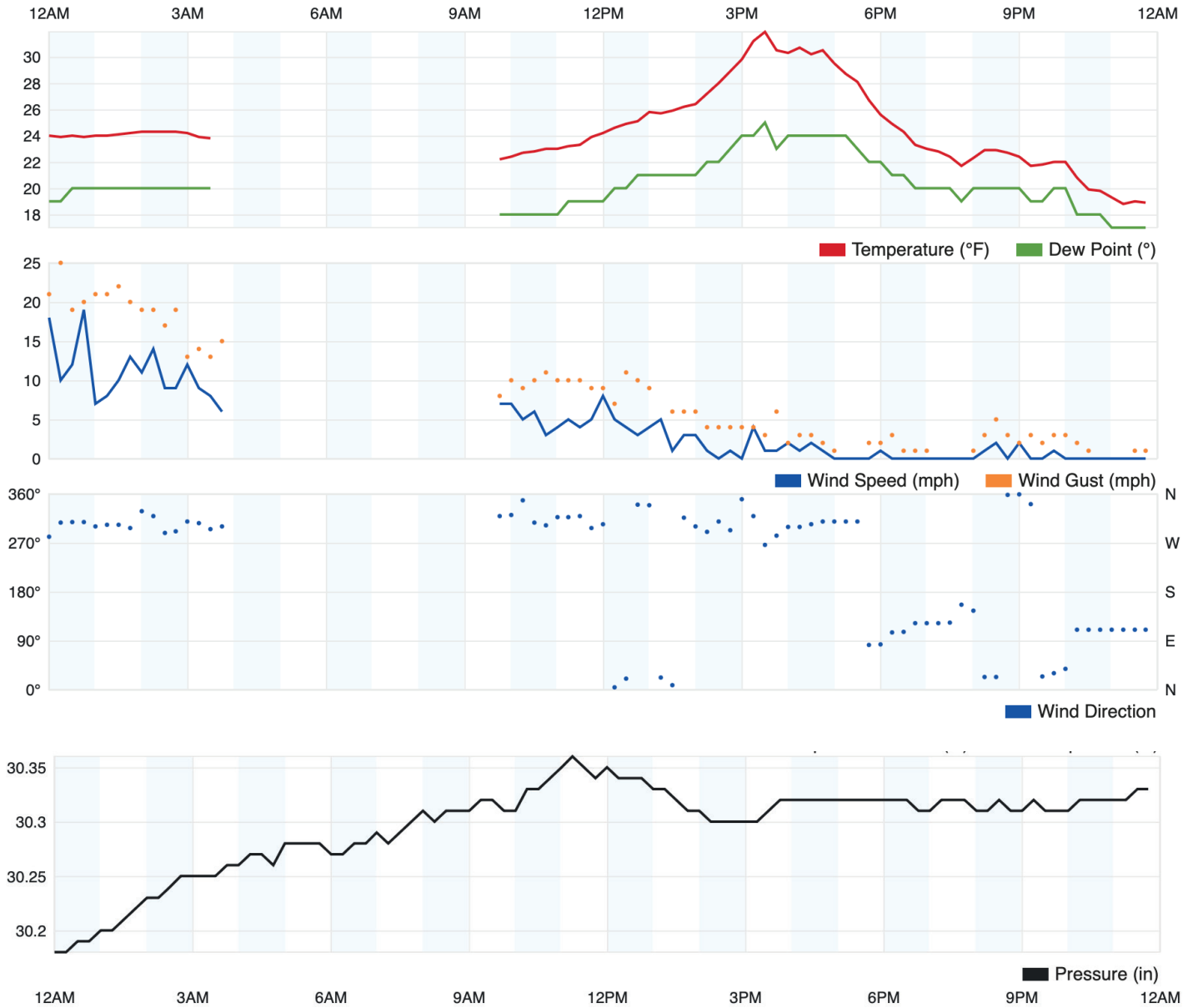
"We made key changes at FSA, including better accountability and an increase in outside technical expertise — we held listening sessions, engaging 300 organizations, and we incorporated the feedback from our students, from parents, schools, software vendors, state agencies and other partners," he said.

*Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom's Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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Today



High: 33 °F

Mostly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 19 °F

Patchy Fog

Saturday



High: 32 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Saturday Night



Low: 22 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Sunday

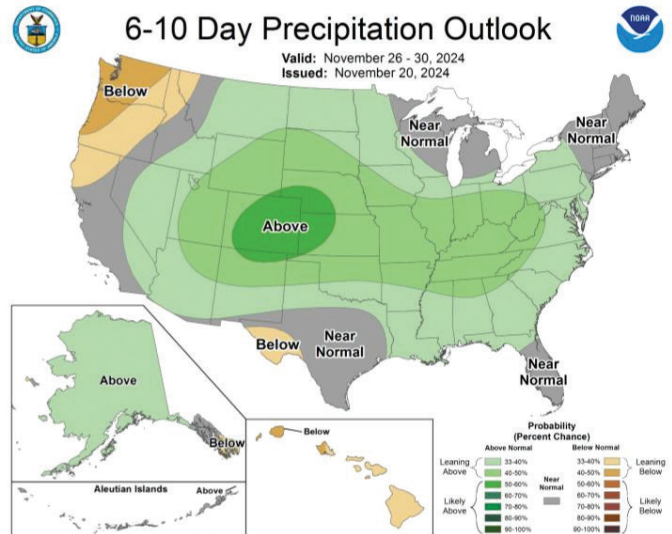
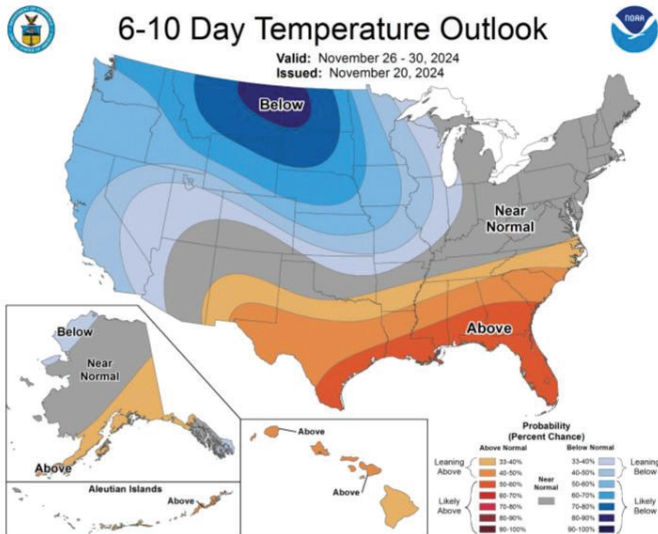


High: 32 °F

Mostly Cloudy  
then Slight  
Chance  
Rain/Snow

## Thanksgiving Week Outlook

The large-scale weather pattern will continue to favor cooler than normal temperatures during the week of Thanksgiving. The odds are also leaning towards normal or above normal precipitation. The maps below show the probability (percent chance) for this. Normal highs during this time range are in the mid to upper 30s.



National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

Updated: November 21, 2024

The large-scale weather pattern will continue to favor cooler than normal temperatures during the week of Thanksgiving. The odds are also leaning towards normal or above normal precipitation. The maps below show the probability (percent chance) for this. Normal highs during this time range are in the mid to upper 30s.

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## Chance of Low Temperatures Less Than 0°F

Friday Morning, Nov 22 - Monday Morning, Dec 2

	Fri 11/22	Sat 11/23	Sun 11/24	Mon 11/25	Tue 11/26	Wed 11/27	Thu 11/28	Fri 11/29	Sat 11/30	Sun 12/1	Mon 12/2
Aberdeen	2%	0%	0%	1%	30%	25%	10%	40%	50%	60%	55%
Miller	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	5%	4%	10%	25%	40%	40%
Mobridge	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	5%	4%	20%	30%	45%	40%
Murdo	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%	15%	30%	30%
Ortonville	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	1%	0%	15%	30%	30%
Pierre	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	5%	4%	20%	30%	45%	40%
Sisseton	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	3%	5%	20%	35%	35%
Watertown	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	10%	5%	15%	25%	45%	40%

Percent Chance (%)

### Information:

The table displays the percent chance of a weather event occurring based on model predictions from the National Blend of Models. A higher number means greater certainty.

### Additional Details

#### Cold Temperatures Overview:

- Cold air may spill into the area after Thanksgiving, bringing the first opportunity for below zero temperatures
- Probabilities of below zero temperatures increase to 30-50% at the beginning of December

#### When do we normally see our first Below Zero Temperature?

- Usually in late November to the first week of December, so we may be right on time

Valid: Fri 06 am CST - Mon 06 am CST  
 Issued: Thu, Nov 21, 2024, 11 am CST



Cold air may spill into the area after Thanksgiving with probabilities of below zero temps increase to 30-60% at the beginning of December.

## Into the Weekend

### Today



Highs: 29-46°F  
 Lows: 17-20°F

Areas of morning fog

### Saturday



Highs: 30-40°F  
 Lows: 19-27°F

Areas of morning fog possible

### Sunday



Highs: 30-37°F  
 Lows: 8-17°F

Slight chance of light snow along ND/SD border



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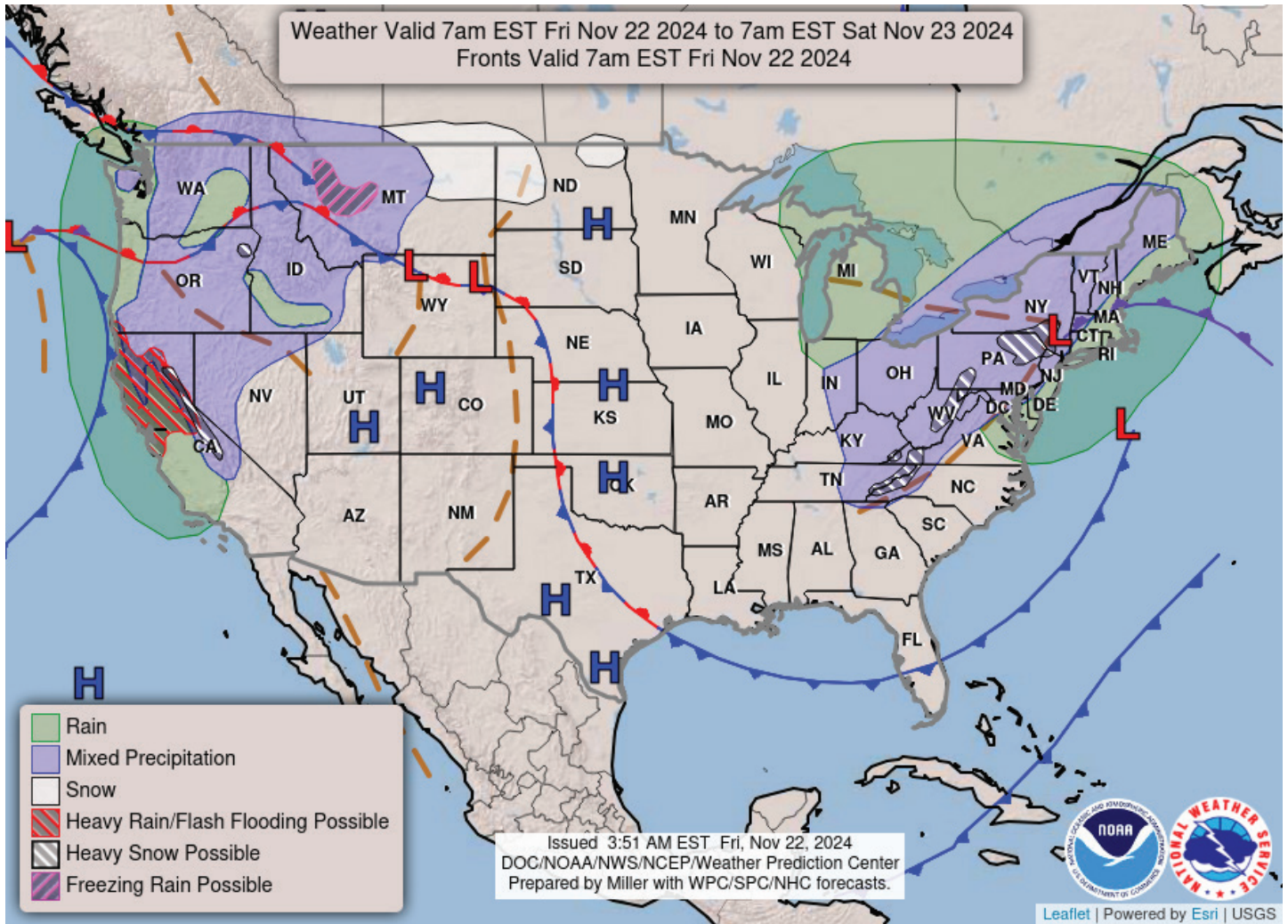
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 32 °F at 3:32 PM**  
**Low Temp: 19 °F at 11:24 PM**  
**Wind: 25 mph at 12:16 AM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 9 hours, 17 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 66 in 1904  
Record Low: -14 in 1895  
Average High: 39  
Average Low: 17  
Average Precip in Nov.: 0.58  
Precip to date in Nov.: 1.83  
Average Precip to date: 21.05  
Precip Year to Date: 21.71  
Sunset Tonight: 4:57:23 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:41:19 am





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## Today in Weather History

November 22, 1979: Snow began falling during the morning hours on the 21st and continued until the evening hours on the 22nd. Snowfall totals were in the 6 to 13-inch range with thirteen inches at Sioux Falls being the largest amount reported. Moderate winds of 20 to 35 mph made travel tough. Approximately 50 percent of the corn remained in the fields. The snow did not harm the corn, so most of it was still harvested.

November 22, 1985: Extreme cold temperatures occurred over South Dakota from November 22nd through the 28th, with low temperatures dropping well below zero. Record low temperatures were set in most areas, and Aberdeen set a record low for five of the seven days. Three of those five record lows still stand today: -17 on the 23rd, -18 on the 27th, and -21 on the 28th. The other records set at the time (-16 on both the 24th and 26th), were both broken in November 1996.

November 22, 2003: Heavy snow of 6 to 10 inches fell across Big Stone and Traverse counties in Minnesota, as well as northeastern South Dakota, from the evening of the 22nd to the afternoon of the 23rd. Dumont received 6 inches of snow, with 10 inches reported in Ortonville. Six inches of snow was also reported in Wilmot, White Rock, Estelline, and near Stone Bridge; 7 inches was reported Toronto; 8 inches in Big Stone City; and 9 inches at Clear Lake. Heavy snow of 6 to 9 inches also fell in Corson and Lyman counties in South Dakota. Some other snowfall amounts included 8 inches northwest of Presho, Kennebec, and near Iona; and 9 inches southwest of Keldron.

1992: 45 tornadoes touched down in the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys. Georgia was hard hit with two F4, one F3 and three F2 tornadoes that killed six people and injured 144. Indiana had a total of 15 tornadoes on this day to set a record for an outbreak in November and for the month of November. One, an F4 multiple-vortex type, cut a 22-mile path through extreme southeastern Indiana and northern Kentucky. This tornado debunked the myth that twisters don't cross rivers, as this devastating tornado crossed the Ohio River twice. Indiana had a total of 15 tornadoes on this day to set two state records, the largest November tornado outbreak, and the most tornadoes in November. This tornado outbreak made a significant contribution to what was to become the biggest November ever for the U.S. concerning the number of tornadoes.

2010: A rare November ice storm prompts Fairbanks officials to advised residents to stay off the roads. Ice storm advisories are hoisted across a 950 mile stretch of the state that extends from Anchorage to Nome. The 0.39 inches of rain which fall at Fairbanks rates as that city's greatest November rainfall since November 1936.

2010: A strong cold front sweeping through the Midwest brought severe storms, including tornadoes to northern Illinois and southwest Wisconsin. Caledonia, Illinois was hit hard by an EF2 tornado.



## PRAY OR WORRY: WHICH?

Each morning Josie and her Mom prayed together before she left for school. One morning after they prayed, Josie noticed a look of distress and concern on her Mom's face.

Concerned, she said, "Mom, we just prayed together and thanked the Lord for everything we had and then told Him about everything we needed. I thought that if we prayed we wouldn't have to worry. I didn't know that we could do both."

Worry and faith are actually incompatible. If we have faith, there is no need to worry, and if we worry, we do not need to pray. One seems to cancel out the other.

Many would argue that it is impossible not to worry at least some of the time. But listen to Paul: "Don't worry about anything," he said. "Instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and then thank Him for all He has done."

Maybe that's the key to not worrying: When we thank God for all that He has done for us, we can see His hand at work in our lives. And rather than worrying about what might or might not happen, we can see what has happened and know that God is protecting us and providing for our every need.

Paul advised the church members at Philippi to turn their worries into prayers. He wanted them to have a strong faith and trust and believe in the Lord for all things. If our faith and trust is weak, worrying won't help.

Prayer: Lord, increase our faith to exceed the size of our fears and our trust to be large enough to combat the uncertainties of life. May we become steadfast and sure. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6

*We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him*

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
11.19.24

5 35 50 51 59 8

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$453,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 29 Mins  
DRAW: 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
11.20.24

11 17 25 38 47 9

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$15,670,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 44  
DRAW: Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
11.21.24

4 11 13 45 47 18

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 59 Mins  
DRAW: 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
11.20.24

17 22 26 30 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$112,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 59  
DRAW: Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
11.20.24

3 10 37 40 68 1

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 28  
DRAW: Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
11.20.24

16 30 60 62 64 25

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$171,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 28  
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## Upcoming Groton Events

07/04/2024 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/09/2024 FREE SNAP Application Assistance 1-6pm at the Community Center  
07/14/2024 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm  
07/17/2024 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm  
07/17/2024 Pro Am Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/25/2024 Dairy Queen Miracle Treat Day  
07/25/2024 Summer Downtown Sip & Shop 5-8pm  
07/25/2024 Treasures Amidst The Trials 6pm at Emmanuel Lutheran Church  
07/26/2024 Ferney Open Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start  
07/27/2024 1st Annual Celebration in the Park 1-9:30pm  
08/05/2024 School Supply Drive 4-7pm at the Community Center  
**Cancelled:** Wine on 9 at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm  
08/08/2024 Family Fun Fest 5:30-7:30pm  
08/9-11/2024 Jr. Legion State Baseball Tournament  
08/12/2024 Vitalant Blood Drive at the Community Center 1:15-7pm  
09/07/2024 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
09/07-08/2024 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport  
09/08/2024 Sunflower Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am  
10/05/2024 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm  
10/11/2024 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am  
10/31/2024 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
10/31/2024 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm  
11/16/2024 Groton American Legion "Turkey Raffle" 6:30-11:30pm  
11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm  
12/01/2024 Groton Snow Queen Contest, 4:30 p.m.  
12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close  
12/14/2024 Santa Day at Professional Management Services, downtown Groton  
04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp  
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm  
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary Salad Luncheon  
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm  
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
09/20/2025 NSU Gypsy Day  
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm

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## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

PREP VOLLEYBALL

SDHSAA Playoffs

#### **Class AA Quarterfinal**

Harrisburg def. Aberdeen Central High School, 25-16, 25-18, 25-14

Sioux Falls Jefferson def. Brandon Valley, 20-25, 25-18, 25-21, 25-23

Sioux Falls O'Gorman def. Watertown, 25-20, 25-23, 25-19

Sioux Falls Washington def. Sioux Falls Roosevelt, 20-25, 25-21, 25-19, 23-25, 15-10

#### **Class A Quarterfinal**

Dakota Valley def. Mt. Vernon/Plankinton, 19-25, 25-22, 25-18, 25-14

Dell Rapids def. Winner, 25-8, 25-18, 25-11

Hamlin def. Sioux Valley, 25-15, 24-26, 25-15, 25-23

Sioux Falls Christian def. Miller, 25-14, 25-17, 25-11

#### **Class B Quarterfinal**

Burke def. Kadoka, 25-16, 25-12, 25-13

Chester def. Castlewood, 25-9, 25-19, 25-13

Hitchcock-Tulare def. Gayville-Volin High School, 18-25, 25-13, 25-21, 23-25, 15-7

Warner def. Colman-Egan, 25-27, 25-13, 25-20, 22-25, 15-13

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

## **New study shows voting for Native Americans is harder than ever**

By GRAHAM LEE BREWER Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY, Okla. (AP) — A new study has found that systemic barriers to voting on tribal lands contribute to substantial disparities in Native American turnout, particularly for presidential elections.

The study, released Tuesday by the Brennan Center for Justice, looked at 21 states with federally recognized tribal lands that have a population of at least 5,000 and where more than 20% of residents identify as American Indian or Alaska Native. Researchers found that between 2012 and 2022, voter participation in federal elections was 7 percentage points lower in midterms and 15 percentage points lower in presidential elections than among those living off tribal lands in the same states.

Earlier studies show voter turnout for communities of color is higher in areas where their ethnic group is the majority, but the latest research found that turnout was the lowest on tribal lands that have a high concentration of Native Americans, the Brennan Center said.

"There's something more intensely happening in Native American communities on tribal land," said Chelsea Jones, a researcher on the study.

Jones said the study suggests some barriers may be insurmountable in predominately Native communities due to a lack of adequate polling places or access to early and mail-in ballots. Many residents on tribal lands have nontraditional addresses, meaning they don't have street names or house numbers, making mail-in voting even more difficult. As a result, many Native American voters rely on P.O. boxes, but the study notes that several jurisdictions will not mail ballots to P.O. boxes.

Long distances to the polls that do exist on tribal lands and little to no public transportation creates additional hurdles for Native American voters. In far-flung Alaska Native villages, polling places sometimes simply don't open if there's no one available to run an election, and severe weather can make absentee voting unreliable, The Associated Press reported last month.

"When you think about people who live on tribal lands having to go 30, 60, 100 miles (up to 160 kilo-



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meters) to cast a ballot, that is an extremely limiting predicament to be in," Jones said. "These are really, truly severe barriers."

Additionally, Jones said they found Native American voters were denied the ability to vote using their tribal IDs in several places, including in states where that is legally allowed. All of these roadblocks to the ballot can create a sense of distrust in the system, which could contribute to lower turnout, Jones said.

The Brennan Center study also highlights an ongoing issue when it comes to understanding how or why Native Americans vote: a lack of good data.

"There are immense data inequities when it comes to studying Native American communities, especially as it pertains to politics," Jones said.

Native American communities are often overlooked when it comes to polling data and sometimes when they are included those studies do not reflect broader trends for Indigenous voters, said Stephanie Fryberg, the director of the Research for Indigenous Social Action & Equity Center, which studies systemic inequalities faced by Indigenous people.

"Generally speaking, polling is not well positioned to do a good job for Indian Country," said Fryberg, who is also a professor of psychology at Northwestern University. "There are ideas that are held up as the gold standard about how polling works that don't work for Indian Country because of where we live, because of how difficult it is to connect to people in our community."

Fryberg, a member of the Tulalip Tribe in Washington State, was one of several Indigenous researchers who denounced a recent exit poll conducted by Edison Research that found 65% of Native American voters who participated said they voted for Donald Trump. The poll only surveyed 229 self-identified Native Americans, a sample size that she said is too small for an accurate reading, and none of the jurisdictions in the poll were on tribal lands.

"Right there, you're already eliminating a powerful perspective," Fryberg said.

The Indigenous Journalists Association labelled that polling data as "highly misleading and irresponsible," saying it has led "to widespread misinformation."

In a statement to the Associated Press, Edison Research acknowledged that the polling size is small, but said the "goal of the survey is to represent the national electorate and to have enough data to also examine large demographic and geographic subgroups." The survey has a potential sampling margin of error of plus or minus 9%, according to the statement.

"Based on all of these factors, this data point from our survey should not be taken as a definitive word on the American Indian vote," the statement reads.

Native Americans are not just part of an ethnic group, they also have political identities that come with being citizens of sovereign nations. Fryberg said allowing those surveyed to self-identify as Native Americans, without follow-up questions about tribal membership and specific Indigenous populations, means that data cannot accurately capture voting trends for those communities.

Both Fryberg and Jones said that in order to create better data on and opportunities for Native Americans to vote, researchers and lawmakers would have to meet the specific needs of Indigenous communities. Jones said passage of the Native American Voting Rights Act, a bill that has stalled in Congress, would ensure equitable in-person voting options in every precinct on tribal lands.

"This is not an issue that we see across the country," Jones said. "It's very specific to tribal lands. So we need provisions that address that uniquely."

## The FBI and DHS leaders won't testify publicly about national security threats before the Senate

By ERIC TUCKER and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The leaders of the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security declined to testify publicly at a scheduled Senate committee hearing Thursday on global threats to national security, a break from standard protocol of open testimony before the panel.

"Their choice to not provide public testimony about their departments' efforts to address wide-ranging

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national security threats robs the American people of critical information and the opportunity for public accountability of what the federal government is doing to keep Americans safe," Sen. Gary Peters, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee, said in a statement.

The Michigan Democrat said it was the first time in more than 15 years that an FBI director and Homeland Security secretary had together refused to offer public testimony at the annual committee hearing focused on threats to the homeland, calling it a "shocking departure" from tradition.

A separate hearing scheduled for Wednesday before the House Homeland Security committee also was postponed.

The hearings were to have taken place at a time of significant political transition as Trump is interviewing candidates to replace FBI Director Christopher Wray and has named South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to succeed Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

The threats hearings are an opportunity for members of Congress to hear from these agencies about what they see as key threats facing the nation ranging from weapons of mass destruction to natural disasters.

It's usually the head of the agency that appears although not always. During the first Trump administration when there was frequent turnover at the Department of Homeland Security, DHS Under Secretary David Glawe appeared 2019. Acting Deputy Secretary Kenneth Cuccinelli appeared in 2020 during the pandemic when some members of the panel appeared virtually.

The Senate committee usually starts scheduling its annual hearing months in advance, and previous hearings have always included a public component. The committee was informed Monday that Mayorkas and Wray would not be appearing.

In a statement Thursday, the FBI said it had "repeatedly demonstrated our commitment to responding to Congressional oversight and being transparent with the American people" and remained "committed to sharing information about the continuously evolving threat environment facing our nation.

"FBI leaders have testified extensively in public settings about the current threat environment and believe the Committee would benefit most from further substantive discussions and additional information that can only be provided in a classified setting," the statement said.

The Department of Homeland Security said in a statement that they and the FBI offered to speak to the committee in a classified setting and emphasized the amount of unclassified information they've already shared publicly.

"DHS and the FBI already have shared with the Committee and other Committees, and with the American public, extensive unclassified information about the current threat environment, including the recently published Homeland Threat Assessment. DHS takes seriously its obligation to respond to Congressional requests for testimony," the department said.

The agency also noted that Mayorkas has testified in Congress 30 times during the nearly four years he's held his job.

## **Second Australian teen dies in tainted alcohol case in Laos that has killed 6 tourists**

By JINTAMAS SAKSORNCHAI and DAVID RISING Associated Press

VANG VIENG, Laos (AP) — A second Australian teenager who fell critically ill after drinking tainted alcohol in Laos has died in a hospital in Bangkok, her family said Friday, bringing the death toll in the mass poisoning of foreign tourists to six.

Holly Bowles, 19, had been in critical condition on life support following the poisoning in Laos more than a week ago.

"We are so sad to say that our beautiful girl Holly is now at peace," her family said in a statement sent to Australian Network 10 and other Australian media. "We find comfort and solace in knowing that Holly brought so much joy and happiness to so many people."

An officer at Vang Vieng's Tourism Police office, who refused to give his name, told The Associated Press on Friday that a "number of people" had been detained in the case but that no charges have yet

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been filed. Staff at the Nana Backpacker Hostel, which was still operating but not accepting new guests, confirmed that the manager and owner were among those taken in for questioning.

Tourist police offices are common in Southeast Asia and are set up specifically to help with incidents involving tourists and other foreigners.

The U.S. State Department on Friday issued a health alert for citizens traveling in Laos, warning of "suspected methanol poisoning in Vang Vieng, possibly through the consumption of methanol-laced alcoholic drinks," following similar alerts from other countries whose citizens were involved.

Australia's prime minister announced Thursday that a 19-year-old citizen, Bianca Jones, had died in a Thai hospital where she had been evacuated for emergency treatment, and that her friend — Bowles — remained in a hospital "fighting for her life." A 28-year-old British woman, Simone White, also died from suspected methanol poisoning in Laos, the British Foreign Office said.

An American and two Danish tourists also died, though specifics about the causes of death have not been released.

New Zealand's Foreign Ministry said one of its citizens was sickened in Laos and was a possible victim of methanol poisoning.

Laos is a one-party communist state with no organized opposition and the government keeps a tight lid on information. In this case, officials have released almost no details.

The Foreign Ministry has refused to comment, and in Vang Vieng the small hospital where some of the victims are believed to have been treated initially referred all questions to the town's health office on the hospital grounds. The town health officials refused to comment, saying they lacked proper permission.

Methanol is sometimes added to mixed drinks at disreputable bars as a cheaper alternative to ethanol, but can cause severe poisoning or death. It is also a byproduct of poorly distilled homebrew liquor, and could have found its way into bar drinks inadvertently.

Landlocked Laos is one of Southeast Asia's poorest nations and a popular tourist destination. Vang Vieng is particularly popular among backpackers seeking partying and adventure sports.

Neil Farmiloe, a New Zealander who owns the Kiwi Kitchen restaurant in town, said a lot of his customers were very worried about the incident.

"I think it's never happened before, so it is hopefully just a one-off incident," said Farmiloe, who has lived in Vang Vieng for 20 years. "It's very sad all around. I'm sure nobody intended to cause injury, but it's happened."

The two 19-year-old Australian women who have both now died fell ill on Nov. 13 following a night out drinking with a group.

They failed to check out from the Nana Backpacker Hostel as planned and were found sick in their room and then taken to Thailand for emergency treatment.

Thai authorities confirmed that Jones had died by "brain swelling due to high levels of methanol found in her system."

Duong Duc Toan, the manager of the Nana Backpacker Hostel, told the AP the day before he was detained that the two women had joined other guests for free shots of Laotian vodka before heading elsewhere and returning in the early hours of the morning.

## **Iran's vast collection of Western art, much long hidden, re-emerges despite high tensions with US**

By MEHDI FATTAHI and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — As Iran faces increasing tensions with the West and turmoil at home, a new exhibition at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is displaying Western artwork including pieces not seen by the public in at least a decade.

The unveiling of the exhibition "Eye to Eye" has drawn numerous women, their hair uncovered, to the underground galleries of the museum in Tehran's Laleh Park. Their presence, while unacknowledged by authorities, shows the way life has changed inside Iran just in the last few years even as the country's



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theocracy presses forward with enriching uranium to near-weapons grade levels and launching attacks on Israel during the ongoing Mideast wars.

"The first feeling that came to me, and I told my parents, was that I can't believe I'm seeing these works, which have always been kept far from our eyes," said Aida Zarrin, a young woman at the museum.

"If such events are held here and we can see artworks like the rest of the world, it's enough. They are really precious."

The government of Iran's Western-backed shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and his wife, the former Empress Farah Pahlavi, built the museum and acquired the vast collection in the late 1970s, when oil boomed and Western economies stagnated. Upon opening, it showed sensational works by Pablo Picasso, Mark Rothko, Claude Monet, Jackson Pollock and other heavyweights, enhancing Iran's cultural standing on the world stage.

But just two years later, in 1979, Shiite clerics ousted the shah and packed away the art in the museum's vault. Some paintings — cubist, surrealist, impressionist and even pop art — sat untouched for decades to avoid offending Islamic values and the appearance of catering to Western sensibilities. Nearly everything is believed still to be there, though an Andy Warhol print of the empress was slashed during the revolution.

Today, the collection is likely worth billions of dollars. Even with Iran now cash-strapped under Western sanctions, officials with the museum have been able to advocate for keeping the collection, though there have been occasional trades in the past for items from Persian history. Those sanctions may increase under the next administration of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump.

As Iranian politics have thawed, re-frozen and thawed again, the collection resurfaces along with those changes.

Among the over 120 works being shown are ones from Picasso, Andy Warhol and Francis Bacon, along with celebrated Iranian artists. One of the Warhols, "Jacqueline Kennedy II," is a silkscreen double image of the former U.S. first lady in mourning after the 1963 assassination of her husband, President John Kennedy. Another Warhol portrait of Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger also garnered attention from the cellphone photo snappers.

"A lot of these works are important works in the history of art, and that's why this show distinguishes itself from others," said Jamal Arabzadeh, the exhibition's curator. "A lot of people with less exposure to art have discovered the museum for the first time. ... We are seeing a part of the community that are discovering art and the museum and see the potential of this place, and this is something to be proud of."

The presence of Western art comes as Iran's government has long fought against items like Barbie dolls and depictions of cartoon characters from "The Simpsons." Such Western influences have been deemed un-Islamic in the past and have been seen as part of a "soft" cultural war against the Islamic Republic.

With a ticket costing the equivalent of 14 U.S. cents, the exhibition offers a rare government-sanctioned event not involving the country's politics or Shiite religion.

Among the visitors were many women defying the country's mandatory headscarf, or hijab, law. Crack-downs over the hijab have slowed down after Iran's presidential election in July that elected reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, though individual cases of arrest continue to draw anger.

And for many, the cost of tickets to travel abroad given Iran's collapsing rial currency keep foreign museums out of reach.

"This is very attractive for art enthusiasts because not everyone can go and see museums abroad. It's extremely exciting to see the works here," said a woman who only gave her last name, Dolatshahi. "I had no idea I could see works by van Gogh and Picasso here."

## In a board game, climate experts work to save the world, which diplomats at COP29 try in real life

BY SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

BAKU, Azerbaijan (AP) — Activists and experts who are pushing world leaders to save an overheating planet learned it's not so easy, even in a simulated world.

The Associated Press brought the board game Daybreak to the United Nations climate negotiations in Baku, Azerbaijan. Experts from three countries were asked to play the game, which involves players working together to curb climate change, caused by the release of greenhouse gas emissions when fuels like gasoline, natural gas and coal are burned. The goal of the game is to prevent the world from getting too hot or overrun by devastating extreme weather events.

Three times activists, analysts and reporters took turns being the United States, China, Europe and the rest of the world, coping with weather disasters, trying to reduce emissions with projects like wetlands restoration and fighting fossil fuel interests, all according to the cards dealt.

The yellow-red crisis cards are the ones that set players back the most. And every round comes with a new card, such as, "Storms: Every player adds 1 Community in Crisis" per 0.1 degrees Celsius (0.2 degrees Fahrenheit) temperature rise, or "Sea Level Rise: Every player loses 1 Infrastructure Resilience."

Those are tempered by blue cards that represent local projects, such as around fertilizer efficiency, which eliminates one game token of methane-spewing livestock, or universal public transport, which eliminates a token of polluting car emissions.

In each game, the temperature went beyond the limit that the world set in the 2015 Paris Agreement: 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) since preindustrial times, roughly the mid-1800s. Technically, the game isn't lost until a temperature rise of 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) is reached. However, 1.5 degrees has been ingrained as a threshold in climate circles, so the shoulders of players drooped in defeat when their fictional world blew past it.

After just one round of play, which lasted about 20 minutes in the second game, the global thermometer rose to 1.45 degrees Celsius (2.61 degrees Fahrenheit).

"How did that happen? It happened so quickly," said Borami Seo, head of food and agriculture at Solutions for Our Climate in South Korea. She purposely chose Europe, arguably the world leader in climate policy and financial aid, so she would be in a position to help the rest of the world.

She couldn't.

"I thought this game was supposed to give us hope. I'm not gaining any hope," Seo said in a voice somewhere between curiosity and frustration.

The first two games were cut short because players had to go elsewhere during busy climate negotiations.

But the third game went 47 minutes and three rounds. Jake Schmidt, spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, was playing in the "majority of the world" role and a hurricane hit at a time that average global temperature rise was 1.8 degrees Celsius (3.2 degrees Fahrenheit). For every tenth of a degree above 1.2 degrees Celsius, players had to add a "communities in crisis" game token.

Schmidt had more cities in crisis than the 12 that the game permits: "All my communities are gone."

The game and world were lost.

"I'm sad," Schmidt said. "We very quickly got toast. That was only three rounds and my communities were toast. And we were already at 1.8. I think they need a little slower way, start at a lower base."

The game starts at 1.2 degrees Celsius (2.2 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial times. The real world is now 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.3 degrees Fahrenheit) higher, according to the United Nations.

"Getting rid of the emissions was really hard," Schmidt said, adding that it seemed realistic. But it made him more pessimistic about climate change, he said. It reminded him of how hard the problem is.

That's the point, said game co-designer Matt Leacock, who first created the board game Pandemic — long before the real one beset the world.

"I wouldn't want most people to win the game the first time they play. I don't think that's a productive message," Leacock said. "I want most people to lose, but to blame themselves and to learn from their

experience and then really want to play again and be like, 'I see what we did wrong. I've got an idea of what we can do better. Let's try again and see if we can see if we can pull it off.'"

There is a political message to the game that the world needs saving, Leacock said. Winning, or stopping the world from runaway temperature rise, is doable but hard and requires dramatic early action, he said. That's what experts say is required in real life.

Leacock, who researched the science and politics of climate change negotiations and consulted with the World Resources Institute, said it was the middle of the real-life pandemic lockdown a few years ago when he decided to turn what many call an existential crisis into a board game — one where people work together instead of against each other.

He wanted a game "that could make a difference."

In the first game, Courtney Howard of the Global Climate and Health Alliance took that to heart and felt the weight of the world as temperatures rose and disasters multiplied.

"You feel the anxiety rising as you're getting farther away from your goal and the crisis points are increasing," said Howard. "So I think we're going to need to anticipate increasing anxiety. And what's that going to do to human behavior on the local and global stage?"

A Canadian emergency room doctor, Howard was playing the role of the United States and was doing whatever she could to help Nathan Cogswell of the World Resources Institute, who was playing "the majority of the world" and getting bogged down by troubles.

Howard was then dealt a "debt reparations" card that allowed her to give Cogswell anything out of her hand. She wasn't going to pass that up, saying, "I feel very guilty for my historical emissions." The U.S. has contributed the most emissions of any country in the world.

As most of the developing world, Cogswell jumped at the offer from Howard, who then added a political and medical perspective to what was happening on the board.

"I'm feeling like this real glow of goodwill," Howard said. "Did you know that giving actually increases wellbeing more than receiving? And I'm feeling that right now."

But it didn't help. The players couldn't quite save the world — this time.

## Trump chooses loyalist Pam Bondi for attorney general pick after Matt Gaetz withdraws

By ERIC TUCKER, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump said Thursday he will nominate former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi to lead the Justice Department, turning to a longtime ally after his first choice, Matt Gaetz, withdrew his name from consideration amid scrutiny over sex trafficking allegations.

Bondi has been an outspoken defender of Trump. She was one of his lawyers during his first impeachment trial, when he was accused — but not convicted — of abusing his power as he tried to condition U.S. military assistance to Ukraine on that country investigating then-former Vice President Joe Biden. And she was among a group of Republicans who showed up to support Trump at his New York hush money criminal trial that ended in May with a conviction on 34 felony counts.

"For too long, the partisan Department of Justice has been weaponized against me and other Republicans - Not anymore," Trump said in a social media post. "Pam will refocus the DOJ to its intended purpose of fighting Crime, and Making America Safe Again."

Gaetz stepped aside amid continued fallout over a federal sex trafficking investigation that cast doubt on his ability to be confirmed as the nation's chief federal law enforcement officer. Gaetz's vehemently denied the allegations, but his nomination stunned many career lawyers inside the Justice Department. Gaetz, who passed the bar but barely worked as a lawyer, had very little relevant experience for the job. Bondi comes with years of legal work under her belt and that other trait Trump prizes above all: loyalty.

The hasty withdrawal by Gaetz and quick pivot to Bondi were the latest examples of Trump's tumultuous decision-making as he rushes out nominations — some of questionable character and credentials — at a breakneck pace without the government vetting that is typical of presidential transitions. It's an omen that



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despite running his most organized campaign for the White House this year, his return to the Oval Office might feature the same sort of drama that permeated his first term.

Trump's son Donald Trump Jr. told Fox News' "Sunday Morning Futures" that the transition team had backups in mind for his controversial nominees should they fail to get confirmed.

Still, even in Trump's world, things moved fast. Trump had been seeking to capitalize on his decisive election win to force Senate Republicans to accept provocative selections like Gaetz. The decision could heighten scrutiny on other controversial Trump nominees, including Pentagon pick Pete Hegseth, who faces sexual assault allegations that he denies.

"While the momentum was strong, it is clear that my confirmation was unfairly becoming a distraction to the critical work of the Trump/Vance Transition," Gaetz said in a statement one day after meeting with senators in an effort to win their support.

"There is no time to waste on a needlessly protracted Washington scuffle, thus I'll be withdrawing my name from consideration to serve as Attorney General. Trump's DOJ must be in place and ready on Day 1," he added.

Trump, in a social media post, said: "I greatly appreciate the recent efforts of Matt Gaetz in seeking approval to be Attorney General. He was doing very well but, at the same time, did not want to be a distraction for the Administration, for which he has much respect. Matt has a wonderful future, and I look forward to watching all of the great things he will do!"

Bondi is a well-known figure in Trump's circle, and has been a chair at the America First Policy Institute, a think tank set up by former Trump administration staffers. She's been a vocal critic of the criminal cases against Trump. In one recent radio appearance, she called Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith and other prosecutors who have charged Trump "horrible" people she said were trying to make names for themselves by "going after Donald Trump and weaponizing our legal system."

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham predicted in a social media post that Bondi "will be confirmed quickly," calling her selection a "grand slam, touchdown, hole in one, ace, hat trick, slam dunk, Olympic gold medal pick."

If confirmed by the Republican-led Senate, Bondi would instantly become one of the most closely watched members of Trump's Cabinet given the Republican's threat to pursue retribution against perceived adversaries and concern among Democrats that he will look to bend the Justice Department to his will. A recent Supreme Court opinion not only conferred broad immunity on former presidents but also affirmed a president's exclusive authority over the Justice Department's investigative functions.

As president, he demanded investigations into political opponents like Hillary Clinton and sought to use the law enforcement powers of the Justice Department to advance his own interests, including in trying to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

Bondi would inherit a Justice Department expected to pivot sharply on civil rights, corporate enforcement and the prosecutions of hundreds of Trump supporters charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol — defendants whom Trump has pledged to pardon.

It's unlikely that Bondi would be confirmed in time to overlap with Smith, who brought two federal indictments against Trump that are both expected to wind down before the incoming president takes office. Special counsels are expected to produce reports on their work that historically are made public, but it remains unclear when such a document might be released.

Bondi was accused by a Massachusetts attorney of bribery over a \$25,000 campaign contribution she received from Trump in 2013. Bondi asked for the donation near the same time that her office was being asked about a New York investigation of alleged fraud at Trump University. In 2017, that complaint was found to have lacked enough evidence to move forward.

In 2013, while serving as Florida attorney general, she publicly apologized for asking that the execution of a man convicted of murder be delayed because it conflicted with a campaign fundraiser. She said she was wrong and sorry for requesting that then-Gov. Rick Scott push back the execution of Marshall Lee Gore by three weeks.

While Gaetz sought to lock down Senate support this week, concern over the sex trafficking allegations

showed no signs of abating.

In recent days, an attorney for two women said his clients told House Ethics Committee investigators that Gaetz paid them for sex on multiple occasions beginning in 2017, when Gaetz was a Florida congressman. One of the women testified she saw Gaetz having sex with a 17-year-old at a party in Florida in 2017, according to the attorney, Joel Leppard.

Gaetz's political future is uncertain. In a social media post, pointed at the incoming vice president, Gaetz wrote: "I look forward to continuing the fight to save our country. Just maybe from a different post."

## **India's Adani Group shares show some recovery despite uncertainty over US bribery and fraud charges**

By KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian tycoon and one of Asia's richest men, Gautam Adani, may be facing his biggest challenge yet with an indictment by U.S. prosecutors for alleged fraud and bribery. But it was unclear just how far the implications will affect his businesses and own future — as well as the Indian economy and government.

On Friday, shares in the Adani Group's companies began ticking back up after they plunged a day earlier following the announcement of the charges in New York. The stock prices of most of his 10 listed companies were up between 1% to 4% by midday.

Adani, a major power player in India perceived as close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was charged with securities fraud and conspiracy to commit securities and wire fraud at a court in Brooklyn, New York.

The test for Adani, whose multibillion dollar empire spawning everything from energy and ports to media and agriculture, comes just after the 62-year-old founder and his sprawling business empire had bounced back after losing more than \$60 billion in market value in early 2023 following allegations of stock price manipulation and fraud by the short-selling firm Hindenburg Research.

Prosecutors on Wednesday alleged that Adani duped investors in a massive solar project in India by concealing that it was being facilitated by bribes. Seven other executives connected to Adani's sprawling business empire also face charges. The indictment alleges a scheme to pay about \$265 million in bribes to government officials in India.

The Adani group denied the allegations against directors of Adani Green Energy, its renewable energy arm, as "baseless" and said they will be seeking legal recourse. None of the people charged in the U.S. have been arrested.

"For Adani, this hits hard, no matter how you slice it. His public relations machine was in overdrive for nearly two years rehabilitating his image following the Hindenburg allegations. This indictment came like a bolt from the blue and instantly reversed all recent progress in salvaging his reputation and business empire," said Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center.

Adani's imprint across the Indian economy runs deep. He is the country's largest operator of coal mines and infrastructure developer, operating several ports and airports, and employs tens of thousands of people. Despite his fossil fuel roots, Adani has ambitions to become the world's largest player in renewable energy by 2030.

Analysts say a key factor in his meteoric rise over the years has been his knack for aligning his group's priorities with those of the Modi government, investing in key industries like renewable energy, defense and agriculture. Before Modi, Adani was friendly with other parties in power.

The latest controversy is likely to put Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, seen as close to Adani, in an awkward spot. Amit Malviya, the BJP's IT head, said in a post on X that the U.S. charges are "allegations and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty," which critics interpreted as a show of support for the Adani group.

The main opposition party seized on the controversy, demanding Adani's arrest and accusing Modi, who has at times campaigned using an Adani jet, of protecting him. Opposition lawmakers are likely to escalate

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pressure on Modi when the winter session of parliament begins next week.

Since the U.S. indictment on Wednesday, the controversy has already affected Adani's interests overseas. Kenya's president canceled multimillion dollar deals with the Adani group for airport modernization and energy projects. Adani is likely to also face scrutiny in Bangladesh, where a court on Tuesday ordered an inquiry into an energy project.

Adani's troubles also might prove a challenge for Indian government ties with other countries, such as Sri Lanka, where New Delhi is competing with rival Beijing for a strategically important markets.

There's no doubt this is "bad timing for New Delhi," said Kugelman, as it comes at a moment "when it's trying to capitalize on the business world's desire to move production out of China and find alternate investment destinations."

The news also highlights business risks in India that could spook investor, though experts believe the impact will be localized and mostly restricted to the Adani group and its reputation.

"There are no fears of a financial contagion -- at this point, the effect is centered on the group rather than the market. It could slow down the group's expansion and growth as it will become more difficult for Adani to raise funds," said Ambareesh Baliga, an independent market analyst.

Still, for many in India, the news isn't that startling. Business people and the public here know that "there is a rate card for everything," he said. Investors already know "just how ingrained this (bribes and corruption) is in the fabric of the Indian economy -- you can't miss it."

"Initially, investors may stay away for a while - but at the end of the day, they will come back (to Adani). This isn't some small or medium sized group they can ignore," Baliga said.

## Australia rejects Elon Musk's claim that it plans to control access to the internet

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — An Australian Cabinet minister on Friday rejected X Corp. owner Elon Musk's allegation that the government intended to control all Australians' access to the internet through legislation that would ban young children from social media.

Treasurer Jim Chalmers said Musk's criticism was "unsurprising" after the government introduced to Parliament on Thursday legislation that would fine platforms including X up to 150 million Australian dollars (\$133 million) if they allow children under age 16 to hold social media accounts.

"The idea that Elon Musk is not delighted with our steps to try and protect kids online is not an especially big surprise to us, nor does it trouble us greatly," Chalmers told reporters.

The spat continues months of open hostility between the Australian government and the tech billionaire over regulators' efforts to reduce public harm from social media.

Parliament could pass legislation as soon as next week that would oblige X, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, Reddit and Instagram to ban young children from their platforms.

The legislation introduced on Thursday will be debated by lawmakers in Parliament on Monday.

Musk responded to the legislation's introduction by posting on his platform, "Seems like a backdoor way to control access to the Internet by all Australians."

Asked if that was the government's intention, Chalmers replied, "Of course not."

"Elon Musk having that view about protecting kids online is entirely unsurprising to us. He's expressed similar views before," Chalmers said.

"Our job is not to come up with a social media policy to please Elon Musk. Our job is to put in place the necessary protection for kids online," Chalmers added.

In April, Musk accused Australia of censorship after an Australian judge temporarily ruled that X must block users worldwide from accessing a video of a bishop being stabbed in a Sydney church.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese responded by describing Musk as an "arrogant billionaire" who considered himself above the law and was out of touch with the public.

Australian eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant, the online safety watchdog who brought the court



case against X, has said the legal battle led to online attacks against her and her family, including the release online of personal information without her permission, known as doxxing.

She said Musk had "issued a dog whistle to 181 million users around the globe" which resulted in her receiving death threats.

## **South Korea says Russia supplied air defense missiles to North Korea in return for its troops**

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Russia has supplied air defense missiles to North Korea in exchange for sending its troops to support Russia's war efforts against Ukraine, a top South Korean official said Friday.

The U.S., South Korea and Ukraine say North Korea sent more than 10,000 troops to Russia in October, some of whom have recently begun engaging in combat. It has been unclear what Russia would give North Korea in return.

Shin Wonsik, national security adviser for President Yoon Suk Yeol, told a SBS TV program Friday that South Korea has found Russia provided missiles and other equipment to reinforce its air defense network for Pyongyang, the capital.

Many observers say North Korea likely feels the urgent need to boost its air defense capabilities for the capital after the North last month accused South Korea of dropping propaganda leaflets over Pyongyang. North Korea threatened to take military action if leaflets were again dropped. South Korea's military has refused to confirm whether or not it was behind the alleged drone flights.

Shin says Russia has also give economic assistance to North Korea and various military technologies, including those needed to help the North build a reliable space-based surveillance system.

During a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin already said that Moscow was willing to help the North build satellites. North Korea put its first spy satellite into orbit in November last year, but foreign experts question whether that satellite can produce militarily meaningful imagery. The North's attempt to launch a second spy satellite failed in May.

Seoul and Washington have voiced worries about possible Russian transfers of sensitive nuclear and missile technology to North Korea. Shin didn't say whether Russia has already transferred such technology. Many experts said it is unlikely for Russia to do so in the initial stage of the North's troop deployment.

South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers Wednesday that North Korea had recently sent additional artillery systems to Russia as well. Last month, the National Intelligence Service said that North Korea had sent more than 13,000 containers of artillery, missiles and other conventional arms to Russia since August 2023 to replenish its dwindling weapons stockpiles.

Earlier this week, North Korea and Russia reached a new agreement for expanding economic cooperation following high-level talks in Pyongyang this week, according to the countries' state-run media.

## **Countries at UN climate summit under pressure with no finance deal entering final day**

By SIBI ARASU, MELINA WALLING, SETH BORENSTEIN and MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

BAKU, Azerbaijan (AP) — Countries at the United Nations climate summit amped up the pressure on themselves Friday by entering the last scheduled day of talks with no visible progress on their chief goals.

From the start, COP29 has been about climate finance — money that wealthy nations are obligated to pay to developing countries to cover damages resulting from extreme weather and to help those nations adapt to a warming planet. Experts put the figure at \$1 trillion or more, but draft texts that emerged Thursday after nearly two weeks of talks angered the developing world by essentially leaving blank the financial commitment.

The talks often run into overtime as wealthier nations are pressed to pay for impacts caused largely by

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their emissions from centuries of burning fossil fuels. The late finish also adds pressure on Azerbaijan, the oil-rich nation presiding over this year's COP, or Conference of Parties.

In a statement late Thursday, the presidency struck an optimistic tone, saying the outlines of a financial package "are starting to take shape" and promised new draft texts on Friday.

Frustrated delegates wait to see a new draft deal

As negotiators, observers and civil society organization representatives waited for a new draft text to be released on Friday, many said they were frustrated and disappointed with the talks so far.

"This is the worst COP in recent memory," said Mohamed Adow of the think tank Power Shift Africa. "The way this COP is going, developing countries actually being forced and held hostage to accept a deal that isn't going to add up to get the job done to help put the world on a safe pathway," he said.

"No deal is better than a bad deal," said Harjeet Singh of the climate advocacy group, Fossil Fuel Non Proliferation Treaty.

Singh said the key bottleneck is rich countries' reluctance to say how much they are willing to pay for countries to transition away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy, adapt to the drought, storms an extreme heat and pay for losses and damages caused by climate change. Independent experts put the figure needed at \$1 trillion per year.

"Things are absolutely stuck," he said. "It's negotiation in bad faith by developed countries."

Bryton Codd, part of Belize's negotiating team, said there is a lot of frustration felt by participants at the climate talks.

"I'm just waiting to see if that (climate finance goal) will actually be presented," he said.

"Year after year our people come here and we dance this dance and play this game. No one comes here out of excitement, we come because we have no choice. Because we cannot let this process fail," said Tongan climate activist Joseph Sikulu with the environmental group 350.org. "Nothing less than \$1 trillion in grants per year will be enough to see those most impacted by climate change on a just transition towards a safe, equitable future."

'Slap in the face' for text to have no financial figure

On Thursday, COP29 President Mukhtar Babayev convened a Qurultay — a traditional Azerbaijani meeting — where negotiators spoke to hear all sides. He promised to find "a way forward regarding future iterations" of the deal.

Panama's Juan Carlos Monterrey Gomez said the "lack of commitment transparency feels like a slap in the face to the most vulnerable."

"It is just utter disrespect to those countries that are bearing the brunt of this crisis," he said. "Developed countries must stop playing games with our life and put a serious quantified financial proposal on the table."

Other areas that are being negotiated include commitments to slash planet-warming fossil fuels and how to adapt to climate change. But they've seen little movement.

European nations and the United States criticized the package of proposals for not being strong enough in reiterating last year's call for a transition away from fossil fuels.

U.S. climate envoy John Podesta said he was surprised that "there is nothing that carries forward the ... outcomes that we agreed on last year in Dubai." The United States, the world's biggest historic emitter of greenhouse gases, has played little role in the talks as it braces for another presidency under Donald Trump.

Days earlier, the 20 largest economies met in Brazil and didn't mention the call for transitioning away from fossil fuels. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who was at that meeting, said official language is one thing, but reality is another.

"There will be no way" the world can limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius "if there is not a phase out of fossil fuels," Guterres said at a Thursday news conference.

## Storm dumps record rain and heavy snow on Northern California. Many in Seattle still without power

By GODOFREDO A. VÁSQUEZ, JANIE HAR and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

FORESTVILLE, Calif. (AP) — A major storm moving through Northern California on Thursday dropped heavy snow and record rain, flooding some areas, after killing two people and knocking out power to hundreds of thousands in the Pacific Northwest.

Forecasters warned the risk of flash flooding and rockslides would continue, and scores of flights were canceled at San Francisco's airport.

In Washington, more than 204,000 people — mostly in the Seattle area — remained without power as crews worked to clear streets of electrical lines, fallen branches and debris. Utility officials said the outages, which began Tuesday, could last into Saturday.

Meanwhile on the East Coast, where rare wildfires have raged, New York and New Jersey welcomed much-needed rain that could ease the fire danger for the rest of the year.

The National Weather Service extended a flood watch into Saturday for areas north of San Francisco as the region was inundated by this season's strongest atmospheric river — a long plume of moisture that forms over an ocean and flows through the sky over land.

The system roared ashore Tuesday as a "bomb cyclone," which occurs when a cyclone intensifies rapidly. It unleashed fierce winds that toppled trees onto roads, vehicles and homes, killing at least two people in Washington.

Communities in Washington opened warming centers offering free internet and device charging. Some medical clinics closed because of power outages.

"I've been here since the mid-'80s. I haven't seen anything like this," Trish Bloor, a city of Issaquah official, said while surveying damaged homes.

Up to 16 inches (about 41 centimeters) of rain was forecast in southwestern Oregon and California's northern counties through Friday.

Santa Rosa saw 6.5 inches (16.5 centimeters) of rain in the last 24 hours, marking the wettest day on record since 1998.

The Sonoma County Airport, in the wine country north of San Francisco, got more than 11 inches (28 centimeters) within the last 48 hours and the unincorporated town of Venado had about 12.7 inches (32.3 centimeters) in the same period.

Meghan Nelson, her fiancé and their corgi had to escape to a hotel Thursday after their home's basement and the street it's on in Fulton, California, flooded. She said they moved their belongings upstairs and put their furniture on bricks, but they don't know if they'll be able to get back tomorrow if there's more rain.

"Luckily we're safe for right now. So that's a good thing," she said.

In nearby Forestville, one person was hurt when a tree fell on a house. Small landslides were reported across the North Bay, including one on State Route 281 on Wednesday that caused a car crash.

Daniela Alvarado said calls to her and her father's Sonoma County-based tree business have nearly tripled in recent days, with people reaching out about trimming or removing trees.

"We feel sad, scared, but also ready for action," Alvarado said.

Rain slowed somewhat, but "persistent heavy rain will enter the picture again by Friday morning," the weather service said. "We are not done!"

Flash flooding, rockslides and debris flows were possible, especially where hillsides were loosened by recent wildfires, officials warned. Scott Rowe, a hydrologist with the weather service in Sacramento, said so far the ground has been able to absorb the rain in areas where the Park Fire burned this summer.

"It's not necessarily how much rain falls; it's how fast the rain falls," Rowe said.

Santa Rosa Division Chief Fire Marshal Paul Lowenthal said 100 vehicles were stuck for hours in the parking lot of a hotel and medical center after being swamped by thigh-high waters from a flooded creek.

A winter storm watch was in place for the northern Sierra Nevada above 3,500 feet (1,070 meters), with 15 inches (38 centimeters) of snow possible over two days. Wind gusts could top 75 mph (121 kph) in



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mountain areas, forecasters said.

Sugar Bowl Resort, north of Lake Tahoe near Donner Summit, picked up a foot (30 centimeters) of snow overnight, marketing manager Maggie Eshbaugh said Thursday. She said the resort will welcome skiers and boarders on Friday, the earliest opening date in 20 years, "and then we're going to get another whopping of another foot or so on Saturday, so this is fantastic."

Another popular resort, Palisades Tahoe, said it is also opening Friday, five days ahead of schedule.

The storm already dumped more than a foot of snow along the Cascades in Oregon by Wednesday night, according to the weather service.

More than a dozen schools closed in the Seattle area Wednesday, and some opted to extend the closures through Thursday.

Covington Medical Center southeast of Seattle postponed elective surgeries and diverted ambulances after losing power and having to rely on generators Tuesday night into Wednesday, according to Scott Thompson, spokesperson for MultiCare Health System. Nearby MultiCare clinics closed Wednesday and Thursday after losing power.

Ben Gibbard, lead singer of the indie rock bands Death Cab for Cutie and Postal Service, drove from his Seattle neighborhood Thursday morning to the woods of Tiger Mountain for his regular weekday run, but trees were blocking the trail.

"We didn't get hit that hard in the city," he said. "I just didn't assume it would be this kind of situation out here. Obviously you feel the most for people who had their homes partially destroyed by this."

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee thanked utility crews for toiling around the clock. It could take weeks to assess the scope of the damage and put a dollar figure on it, he said in a statement, and after that "we'll know whether we will be able to seek federal assistance."

In California, there were reports of more than 8,000 power outages.

Authorities limited vehicle traffic on part of northbound Interstate 5 between Redding and Yreka due to snow, according to California's Department of Transportation. Officials also shut down a 2-mile (3.2-kilometer) stretch of the scenic Avenue of the Giants, named for its towering coast redwoods, due to flooding.

About 550 flights were delayed and dozens were canceled Thursday at San Francisco International Airport, according to tracking service FlightAware.

The Northeast, meanwhile, got a much-needed shot of precipitation, providing a bit of respite in a region plagued by wildfires and dwindling water supplies. More than 2 inches (5 centimeters) was expected by Saturday morning north of New York City, with snow mixed in at higher elevations.

Weather service meteorologist Brian Ciemnecki in New York City, which this week saw its first drought warning in 22 years, said "any rainfall is going to be significant" but the storm won't be enough to end the drought.

## Many in Gaza are eating just once a day, as hunger spreads amid aid issues

BY WAFAA SHURAFU and FATMA KHALED Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, The Gaza Strip (AP) — Yasmin Eid coughs and covers her face, cooking a small pot of lentils over a fire fed with twigs and scrap paper in the tent she shares with her husband and four young daughters in the Gaza Strip.

It was their only meal Wednesday — it was all they could afford.

"My girls suck on their thumbs because of how hungry they are, and I pat their backs until they sleep," she said.

After being displaced five times, the Eids reside in central Gaza, where aid groups have relatively more access than in the north, which has been largely isolated and heavily destroyed since Israel began waging a renewed offensive against the militant group Hamas in early October. But nearly everyone in Gaza is going hungry these days. In the north experts say a full-blown famine may be underway.

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On Thursday, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defense minister, accusing them of using "starvation as a method of warfare" — charges Israel adamantly denies.

In Deir al-Balah, the Eids are among hundreds of thousands sheltering in squalid tent camps. The local bakeries shut down for five days this week. The price of a bag of bread climbed above \$13 by Wednesday, as bread and flour vanished from shelves before more supplies arrived.

The United Nations humanitarian office warned of a "stark increase" in the number of households experiencing severe hunger in central and southern Gaza. It appeared to be linked to the robbery at gunpoint of nearly 100 aid trucks last weekend in southern Gaza, close to Israeli military positions. Israel blamed Hamas but appears to have taken no action to stop the looting, while Hamas said it was the work of local bandits.

Aid groups say the looting is one of many obstacles to getting food and other vital aid to the territory's 2.3 million Palestinians. They also have to contend with Israeli movement restrictions, ongoing fighting, and heavy damage wreaked by the Israeli bombardment of roads and critical infrastructure.

For the Eids, hunger is the daily routine

For months, Yasmin and her family have gone to bed hungry.

"Everything has increased in price, and we cannot buy anything," she said. "We always go to sleep without having dinner."

She misses coffee, but a single packet of Nescafe goes for around \$1.30. A kilogram (2 pounds) of onions goes for \$10, a medium bottle of cooking oil for \$15 — if available. Meat and chicken all but vanished from the markets months ago, but there are still some local vegetables. Such sums are astronomical in an impoverished territory where few people earn regular incomes.

Crowds of hundreds wait hours to get food from charities, which are also struggling.

Hani Almadhoun, co-founder of the Gaza Soup Kitchen, said his teams can offer only small bowls of rice or pasta once a day. He said they "can go to the market on one day and buy something for \$5, and then go back in the afternoon to find it doubled or tripled in price."

Its kitchen in the central town of Zuweida operated on a daily budget of around \$500 for much of the war. When the amount of aid entering Gaza plummeted in October, its costs climbed to around \$1,300 a day. It can feed about half of the 1,000 families who line up each day.

The sharp decline in aid, and a U.S. ultimatum

Israel says it places no limits on the amount of aid entering Gaza and has announced a number of measures it says are aimed at increasing the flow in recent weeks, including the opening of a new crossing. It blames U.N. agencies for not retrieving it, pointing to hundreds of truckloads languishing on the Gaza side of the border.

But the military's own figures show that the amount of aid entering Gaza plunged to around 1,800 trucks in October, down from over 4,200 the previous month. At the current rate of entry, around 2,400 trucks would come into Gaza in November. Around 500 trucks entered each day before the war.

The U.N. says less than half the truckloads are actually distributed because of ongoing fighting, Israeli denial of movement requests, and the breakdown of law and order. Hamas-run police have vanished from many areas after being targeted by Israeli airstrikes.

The war started Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas-led fighters stormed into Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are dead, and Hamas militants have repeatedly regrouped after Israeli operations, carrying out hit-and-run attacks from tunnels and bombed-out buildings.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 44,000 Palestinians, more than half of them women and children, according to local health authorities, who do not say how many of the dead were fighters.

The United States warned Israel in October that it might be forced to curtail some of its crucial military support if Israel did not rapidly ramp up the amount of aid entering Gaza. But after the 30-day ultimatum expired, the Biden administration declined to take any action, saying there had been some progress.

Israel meanwhile passed legislation severing ties with UNRWA. Israel accuses the agency of allowing

itself to be infiltrated by Hamas — allegations denied by the U.N.

Israeli news outlets have reported that officials are considering plans for the military to take over aid distribution or contract it out to private security companies. Asked about such plans Wednesday, government spokesman David Mercer said "Israel is looking at many creative solutions to ensure a better future for Gaza."

Yoav Gallant, the former defense minister who was seen as a voice of moderation in the far-right government before being fired this month, warned on X that handing over aid distribution to a private firm was a "euphemism for the beginning of military rule."

As that debate plays out in Jerusalem, less than 100 kilometers (60 miles) away from central Gaza, most Palestinians in the territory are focused on staying alive in a war with no end in sight.

"I find it difficult to talk about the suffering we are experiencing. I am ashamed to talk about it," said Yasmin's husband, Hani. "What can I tell you? I'm a person who has 21 family members and is unable to provide them with a bag of flour."

## **A growing number of Oregon cities vote to ban psychedelic mushroom compound psilocybin**

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Drug reform advocates hailed Oregon as a progressive leader when it became the first in the nation to legalize the therapeutic use of psilocybin, the compound found in psychedelic mushrooms.

But four years later, voters in a growing list of its cities have banned the substance.

Four cities, spanning Portland suburbs and rural and coastal towns, added new voter-approved prohibitions for the federally illegal compound in the Nov. 5 election. A dozen other communities that approved two-year moratoriums in 2022, when a majority of Oregon counties and over 100 cities voted to temporarily or permanently ban psilocybin, voted in this election to make the restrictions permanent.

In the wake of the fentanyl crisis, the rejection of drug liberalization measures in Oregon and states across the country this election has some experts questioning whether voters are rethinking their appetite for such policies.

In Massachusetts, for example, voters rejected a measure that would have allowed residents over 21 to grow and use plant-based psychedelic drugs in certain circumstances. All three states that had measures to legalize recreational marijuana voted against it.

Oregon voters, in particular, appear to have soured on drug reform. A law passed by voters four years ago that decriminalized the possession of small amounts of hard drugs, including heroin and methamphetamine, was rolled back by the state legislature earlier this year after heated debate over whether it played a role in a spike in public drug use and deaths.

"Perhaps the fact that the drug policy reform pendulum appears to be swinging back towards prohibition is part of a broader trend toward a preference for 'law and order' among American voters," said Josh Hardman, founder of Psychedelics Alpha, a consulting firm and newsletter on psychedelic research, business and policy. "Oregon, specifically, has been touted as an example of liberal drug policies gone wrong."

Despite the local bans, psilocybin remains accessible in over 30 licensed centers spanning the state's most populous cities, like Portland, and a handful of small towns. Some rural counties also have voted to stay in the program.

However, access to therapeutic psilocybin is further complicated by high costs: One session can be up to \$2,000 out of pocket. That is largely because center owners and facilitators have to pass on licensure expenses to consumers in order to stay afloat.

MJ Wilt, who just opened a licensed center in the Portland suburb of Gresham, spent tens of thousands of dollars of her own savings to get licensed and establish her center. It has been hard, she said, because her own experience with psilocybin changed her life for the better and she wants to bring that experience to others.



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"The cost for the program has been astronomical and is not accessible to people across the socioeconomic spectrum," Wilt said. "It's certainly not the cash cow that people think or thought it was going to be."

In 2020, roughly 56% of Oregon voters approved Measure 109, which allowed for the manufacture and controlled, therapeutic use of psilocybin at licensed facilities for those over 21. But the measure allowed counties and cities to vote to opt out, resulting in a patchwork of regulations across the state.

Adding to the complexity, some cities have voted to allow psilocybin despite being in counties that banned it, as cities control the land incorporated within their borders while counties control unincorporated land.

The regulatory patchwork resembles that of cannabis law. In half of the 24 states that have legalized recreational cannabis, including Oregon, localities may opt out of most types of cannabis businesses, according to Kate Bryan, a policy specialist on criminal and civil justice at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Colorado in 2022 became the only other state to legalize psilocybin for therapeutic use. It will begin accepting license applications for "healing centers" at the end of December, a spokesperson for the state's natural medicine division said in an email. The law allows localities to adopt certain regulations regarding how the centers operate, but it does not allow them to ban such centers entirely.

Multiple cities across the country also have voted to decriminalize psilocybin, meaning a person cannot be arrested or prosecuted for possessing limited amounts of plant-based hallucinogens.

Psilocybin, found in several species of mushrooms, can cause hours of vivid hallucinations. Indigenous people have used it in healing rituals, and scientists are exploring whether it can help treat depression, addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder. Researchers and military veterans are among those who have advocated for the study of the substance for therapeutic use.

Kat Thompson, the founder and CEO of Fractal Soul, a licensed psilocybin center in the Portland suburb of Beaverton, said her center has served 400 people in its first year and that the "vast majority" have had positive outcomes. Many come seeking help for depression, anxiety, trauma and addiction after years of trying talk therapy and medication, she said, while others come to process grief or explore their spirituality.

But she said a lack of public awareness about the state's psilocybin program has led many to confuse it with Measure 110, the separate ballot measure also passed in 2020 that decriminalized the possession of small amounts of drugs. The botched implementation of the law — also a first of its kind in the nation — and rising overdose deaths amid the fentanyl crisis fueled pushback that prompted state lawmakers to backtrack on it earlier this year.

"We actually got lots of calls from people who had booked sessions with us who heard about the roll back of 110 and thought that that meant that we were closing," Thompson said. "So we've had to explain and educate the public that Measure 110 was really just about decriminalization for personal use. It has nothing to do with the professional therapeutic model."

Some people also confuse the model of the psilocybin center with cannabis dispensaries. At dispensaries, people buy cannabis and leave to consume it elsewhere. People who want to use psilocybin, meanwhile, must consume it at a licensed service center under the supervision of a licensed facilitator who administers it to them and remains with them for the duration of the trip, Thompson said.

"This is essentially a mental health clinic where someone is here all day with us," she said. "By and large, it is extremely safe."

Of the over 16,000 doses that have been administered since the first licensed center opened in June 2023, staff at such centers have called 911 or taken a patient to a hospital five times, an Oregon Health Authority spokesperson confirmed in an email. There are roughly 350 licensed facilitators and a dozen psilocybin manufacturers in the state, according to the agency's most recent figures.

Joe Buck, the mayor of Lake Oswego, a Portland suburb that just passed a psilocybin ban, said he wasn't surprised by the outcome, even though a majority of the city's residents supported Measure 109 in 2020.

"Oregon really has not done a great job managing its drug policy," he said. "So I can understand how some people may be wary of the promises that are now being made around psilocybin."

But further research on psilocybin, he said, could change voters' perspective in the future.

"It really is up to state leaders, leaders in the federal government, to work these drugs through a good system that builds community trust."

## **Brazilian police indict Bolsonaro for alleged attempted coup, threatening his political career**

By GABRIELA SÁ PESSOA and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Police indicted Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro and 36 others for allegedly attempting a coup to keep the right-wing leader in office after his defeat in the 2022 election. Already barred from running again in 2026 for a different case, he could now land in jail and see his influence further diminished.

Brazil's federal police said the sealed findings in Thursday's indictment were being delivered to Brazil's Supreme Court, which will refer them to Prosecutor-General Paulo Gonet, who will decide whether to formally charge Bolsonaro and put him on trial, or toss the investigation.

Gonet is already under pressure from his legal peers to move forward with the various investigations related to the ex-president, local media have reported. And politicians say if Bolsonaro does stand trial at the Supreme Court there will be a race among his allies and rivals to seize his influence with voters.

"Bolsonaro is no longer the sole leader of the right-wing. He is coming out of mayoral elections in which most of his candidates lost. All these probes don't help him at all," said Carlos Melo, a political science professor at the Insper university in Sao Paulo.

Melo added that "the governor of Sao Paulo, Tarcisio de Freitas, the radical candidate for Sao Paulo mayorship Pablo Marcal, the governor of Goias state, Ronaldo Caiado ... There are politicians lining up to court Bolsonaro voters."

Bolsonaro told the website Metropoles that he was waiting for his lawyer to review the indictment, reportedly about 700 pages long. But he said he would fight the case and dismissed the investigation as being the result of "creativity."

The former president has denied all claims he tried to stay in office after his narrow electoral defeat in 2022 to leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Bolsonaro has faced a series of legal threats since then.

Police said in a brief statement that the Supreme Court had agreed to reveal the names of all 37 people who were indicted "to avoid the dissemination of incorrect news."

Dozens of former and current Bolsonaro aides also were indicted, including Gen. Walter Braga Netto, who was his running mate in the 2022 campaign; former Army commander Gen. Paulo Sérgio Nogueira de Oliveira; Valdemar Costa Neto, the chairman of Bolsonaro's Liberal Party; and his veteran former adviser, Gen. Augusto Heleno.

Other investigations led to indictments for Bolsonaro's alleged roles in smuggling diamond jewelry into Brazil without properly declaring them and in directing a subordinate to falsify his and others' COVID-19 vaccination statuses. Bolsonaro has denied any involvement in either.

Another probe found that he had abused his authority to cast doubt on the country's voting system, and judges barred him from running again until 2030.

Still, he has insisted that he will run in 2026, and many in his orbit were heartened by the recent U.S. election win of Donald Trump, despite his own swirling legal threats.

Creomar de Souza, a political analyst of Dharma Political Risk and Strategy, said the indictment is "obviously bad" for Bolsonaro, but added the right-wing leader could still continue his bid to run again sooner than he is currently allowed to. He is barred from running in the 2026 elections.

"The idea of due legal course is a struggling one in the political arena these days. This could give those targeted a chance to portray themselves as being persecuted," de Souza told the AP. "We can't rule out that the tension from indictments like this might well favor Bolsonaro to some extent."

An indictment over the alleged coup attempt means the investigation has gathered evidence of "a crime and its author," said Eloísa Machado de Almeida, a law professor at Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university in Sao Paulo. She said she believed there was enough legal grounds for the prosecutor-general to file charges.

Bolsonaro's allies in Congress have been negotiating a bill to pardon individuals who stormed the Brazilian capital and rioted on Jan. 8, 2023, in a failed attempt to keep the former president in power. Analysts

have speculated that lawmakers want to extend the legislation to cover the former president himself.

However, efforts to push a broad amnesty bill may be “politically challenging” given recent attacks on the judiciary and details emerging in investigations, Machado said.

On Tuesday, Federal Police arrested four military and a Federal Police officer, accused of plotting to assassinate Lula and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes as a means to overthrow the government following the 2022 elections.

And last week, a man carried out a bomb attack in the capital Brasilia. He attempted to enter the Supreme Court and threw explosives outside, killing himself.

## Gaetz’s withdrawal highlights how incoming presidents often lose Cabinet nominees

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

MARTIN, Tenn. (AP) — Losing a Cabinet nominee to the confirmation process isn’t unheard of for incoming presidents — including for Donald Trump when he was elected the first time.

Matt Gaetz’s decision to pull his name Thursday from consideration for attorney general — amid continued fallout over a federal sex trafficking investigation — represents the first indication of resistance that the president-elect could face from his own party, including picks facing allegations of sexual misconduct or other questions.

Here’s a look at some recent difficulties with presidential Cabinet picks and some of the criticism for Trump’s current slate:

Republicans voicing their doubts

After Gaetz was chosen last week, Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Judiciary Committee member who is among Trump’s top Senate allies, predicted Gaetz would “have to answer some tough questions” in a confirmation hearing.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, a Trump critic, said of Gaetz, “I do not see him as a serious candidate.”

Other Trump picks face questions, too.

Pete Hegseth, Trump’s pick for defense secretary, was accused by a woman of sexually assaulting her in 2017. Hegseth has denied her allegations.

Tulsi Gabbard, the former Democratic congresswoman chosen to be director of national intelligence, has expressed sympathy for Russia and repeated false Russian theories about Ukrainian bioweapons. Gabbard, a military veteran who became one of Trump’s top 2024 surrogates, has attracted criticism for meeting with Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and has voiced skepticism that Assad was behind chemical attacks on his own people.

Nikki Haley, who was the last major GOP opponent against Trump for this year’s presidential nomination, argued against confirming Gabbard, saying the post was “not a place for a Russian, Iranian, Syrian, Chinese sympathizer.”

Haley also said Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — Trump’s pick to lead the Department of Health and Human Services — should face “hard questions” from senators due to his opposition to vaccines and other views decried by public health officials.

“He’s a liberal Democrat, environmental attorney trial lawyer who will now be overseeing 25% of our federal budget and has no background in healthcare,” Haley said. “So some of you may think RFK is cool, some of you may like that he questions what’s in our food and what’s in our vaccines, but we don’t know, when he is given reins to an agency, what decisions he’s going to make behind the scenes.”

Republicans will have 53 votes in the Senate in January and can break 50-50 ties with Vice President-elect JD Vance. That means four Republicans would have to break ranks to defeat any nominee if all Democrats oppose a Trump pick.

This has happened before — including to Trump

Every recent president has had some doomed Cabinet nominations — including Trump himself.

In early 2017, Trump’s choice for labor secretary was the first Trump nominee to withdraw his name



from consideration. Fast food CEO Andrew Puzder's exit came after Republicans expressed concern over his failure to pay taxes promptly on a former housekeeper who wasn't authorized to work in the U.S., and Democrats had complaints about Puzder's business record and remarks about women and workers at his company, which owns Hardee's and Carl's Jr.

Puzder's name has been floated recently again as a possible pick in Trump's second administration.

Trump also ousted his first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, after just weeks on the job because Flynn wasn't truthful about his contacts with Russian officials during the transition.

The first year of Trump's first term, Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price resigned after his costly travel triggered investigations that overshadowed the administration's agenda and angered his boss, serving less than eight months. According to the Brookings Institution, which tracks presidential administration turnover, Trump's first term resulted in the turnover of a total of 14 people, nearly twice the amount — 8 people — of President George H.W. Bush's term in office, a distant second place.

Other presidents' picks

Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and both Bush and his son George W. Bush all had to come up with new names after nominees for their Cabinets ran into trouble.

Obama took three tries to find a secretary of commerce. New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson withdrew his name after the word surfaced that a grand jury was investigating allegations of wrongdoing in the awarding of contracts in his state. Republican Sen. Judd Gregg of New Hampshire backed out citing "irresolvable differences" with the policies of the Democratic president.

In 2001, Linda Chavez — George W. Bush's pick for labor secretary — swiftly withdrew after it emerged that she had housed an immigrant living in the country illegally.

Bill Clinton went through several attempts at selecting an attorney general, nominating Janet Reno after both of his first two choices withdrew over word that they had hired people who had been in the U.S. illegally for household work and babysitting.

The Senate rejected George H.W. Bush's defense secretary pick, former Texas Sen. John Tower, in 1989 after several waves of reports over allegations of alcohol abuse and womanizing.

## Alabama carries out nation's third nitrogen gas execution on a man for a hitchhiker's killing

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

ATMORE, Ala. (AP) — An Alabama man convicted in the 1994 killing of a hitchhiker cursed at the prison warden and made obscene gestures with his hands shortly before he was put to death Thursday evening in the nation's third execution using nitrogen gas.

Carey Dale Grayson, 50, was executed at the William C. Holman Correctional Facility in southern Alabama. He was one of four teenagers convicted of killing Vickie DeBlieux, 37, as she hitchhiked through the state on the way to her mother's home in Louisiana. The woman was attacked, beaten and thrown off a cliff.

Alabama began using nitrogen gas earlier this year to carry out some executions. The method involves placing a respirator gas mask over the face to replace breathable air with pure nitrogen gas, causing death by lack of oxygen.

Alabama Corrections Commissioner John Q. Hamm said the nitrogen flowed for 15 minutes and an electrocardiogram showed Grayson no longer had a heartbeat about 10 minutes after the gas began flowing.

Like two others previously executed by nitrogen, Grayson shook at times before taking a periodic series of gasping breaths.

The victim's daughter told reporters afterward that her mother had her future stolen from her. But she also spoke out against the decision to execute Grayson and "murdering inmates under the guise of justice."

The curtains to the execution room were opened shortly after 6 p.m. Strapped to a gurney with a blue-rimmed gas mask on his face, Grayson responded with an obscenity when the warden asked if he had any final words. Prison officials turned off the microphone. Grayson appeared to speak toward the witness

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room where state officials were present, but his words could not be heard. He raised both middle fingers at the start of the execution.

It was unclear when the gas began flowing. Grayson rocked his head, shook and pulled against the gurney restraints. He clenched his fist and appeared to struggle to try to gesture again. His sheet-wrapped legs lifted off the gurney into the air at 6:14 p.m. He took a periodic series of more than a dozen gasping breaths for several minutes. He appeared to stop breathing at 6:21 p.m., and then the curtains to the viewing room were closed at 6:27 p.m.

Grayson was pronounced dead at 6:33 p.m.

DeBlieux's mutilated body was found at the bottom of a bluff near Odenville, Alabama, on Feb. 26, 1994. She was hitchhiking from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to her mother's home in West Monroe, Louisiana, when the four teens offered her a ride. Prosecutors said the teens took her to a wooded area and attacked and beat her. They returned to mutilate her body.

A medical examiner testified that her face was so fractured that she was identified by an earlier X-ray of her spine. Investigators said the teens were identified as suspects after one of them showed a friend one of DeBlieux's severed fingers and boasted about the killing.

DeBlieux's daughter Jodi Haley spoke with reporters at the media center on prison property after the execution. Haley was 12 when her mother was killed. She said her mother had her life and future stolen from her.

"She was unique. She was spontaneous. She was wild. She was funny. She was gorgeous to boot," Haley said of her mother.

She said Grayson was abused in every possible way in his youth but "society failed this man as a child, and my family suffered because of it."

"Murdering inmates under the guise of justice needs to stop," she said, adding that "no one should have the right to take a person's possibilities, days, and life."

Gov. Kay Ivey said afterward she was praying for the victim's loved ones to find closure and healing.

"Some thirty years ago, Vicki DeBlieux's journey to her mother's house and ultimately, her life, were horrifically cut short because of Carey Grayson and three other men," Ivey said in a statement. "She sensed something was wrong, attempted to escape, but instead, was brutally tortured and murdered."

Grayson's crimes "were heinous, unimaginable, without an ounce of regard for human life and just unexplainably mean. An execution by nitrogen hypoxia (bears) no comparison to the death and dismemberment Ms. DeBlieux experienced," she added.

Grayson was the only one of the four teenagers who faced a death sentence since the other teens were under 18 at the time of the killing. Grayson was 19.

The execution was carried out hours after the U.S. Supreme Court turned down Grayson's request for a stay. His final appeals had focused on a call for more scrutiny of the nitrogen gas method. His lawyers argued the execution method causes "conscious suffocation" and that the first two nitrogen executions did not result in swift unconsciousness and death as the state had promised.

Hamm said he thought some of Grayson's initial movements were "all show" but maintained other movements exhibited by Grayson and the two others executed by nitrogen gas were expected involuntary movements, including the breathing at the end.

No state other than Alabama has used nitrogen hypoxia to carry out a death sentence. In 2018, Alabama became the third state — along with Oklahoma and Mississippi — to authorize the use of nitrogen gas to execute prisoners.

## What to know about Pam Bondi, Trump's new pick for attorney general

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Pam Bondi, the former Florida attorney general, was chosen Thursday by Donald Trump to serve as U.S. attorney general hours after his first choice, Matt Gaetz, withdrew from consideration after a federal sex trafficking investigation and ethics probe made his ability to be confirmed dubious.

The 59-year-old has long been in Trump's orbit and her name had been floated during his first term as a potential candidate for the nation's highest law enforcement role.

If confirmed by the Republican-led Senate, Bondi would instantly become one of the most closely watched members of Trump's Cabinet given the Republican's threat to pursue retribution against perceived adversaries and concern among Democrats that he will look to bend the Justice Department to his will.

Here's a few things to know about Bondi:

She's long been a fixture in Trump's world

Bondi has been a longtime and early ally. In March 2016, on the eve of the Republican primary in Florida, Bondi endorsed Trump at a rally, picking him over the candidate from her own state, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio.

She gained national attention with appearances on Fox News as a defender of Trump and had a notable speaking spot at 2016 Republican National Convention as Trump became the party's surprising nominee. During the remarks, some in the crowd began chanting "Lock her up" about Trump's Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

Bondi responded by saying, "Lock her up, I love that."

As Trump prepared to move into the White House, she served on his first transition team.

When Trump's first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, was ousted in 2018, Bondi's name was floated as a possible candidate for the job. Trump at the time said he would "love" Bondi to join the administration. He ultimately selected William Barr instead.

She kept a toehold in Trump's orbit thereafter, including after he left office. She served as a chairwoman of America First Policy Institute, a think tank set up by former Trump administration staffers to lay the groundwork if he won a second term.

She was Florida's first female attorney general

Bondi made history in 2010 when she was elected as Florida's first female attorney general. Though the Tampa native spent more than 18 years as a prosecutor in the Hillsborough County State Attorney's Office, she was a political unknown when she held the state's top law enforcement job.

Bondi was elevated in the primary after she was endorsed by former Alaska governor and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin.

She campaigned on a message to use the state's top legal office in a robust way, challenging then-President Barack Obama's signature health care law. She also called for her state to adopt Arizona's "show me your papers" immigration law that sparked national debate.

As Florida's top prosecutor, Bondi stressed human trafficking issues and urged tightening state laws against traffickers. She held the job from 2011 to 2019.

She worked as a lobbyist for both U.S. and foreign clients

Bondi worked as a lobbyist for Ballard Partners, the powerful Florida-based firm where Trump's campaign chief and incoming chief of staff Susie Wiles was a partner. Her U.S. clients have included General Motors, the commissioner of Major League Baseball and a Christian anti-human-trafficking advocacy group.

She also lobbied for a Kuwaiti firm, according to Justice Department foreign agent filings and congressional lobbying documents. She registered as a foreign agent for the government of Qatar; her work was related to anti-human-trafficking efforts leading up to the World Cup, held in 2022.

Bondi also represented the KGL Investment Company KSCC, a Kuwaiti firm also known as KGLI, lobbying the White House, National Security Council, State Department and Congress on immigration policy, human rights and economic sanctions issues.



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She defended Trump during his first impeachment trial  
Bondi stepped away from lobbying to serve on Trump's legal team during his first impeachment trial in 2020.

He was accused — but not convicted — of abuse of power for allegedly pressuring the president of Ukraine to investigate his Democratic rivals while crucial U.S. security aid was being withheld. He was also charged with obstruction of Congress for stonewalling investigative efforts.

Trump wanted Ukraine's president to publicly commit to investigating Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden, who served on the board of a Ukrainian gas company. He pushed for the investigation while holding up nearly \$400 million in military aid.

Bondi was brought on to bolster the White House's messaging and communications. Trump and his allies sought to delegitimize the impeachment from the start, aiming to brush off the whole thing as a farce.

She's been critical of the criminal cases against Trump

Bondi has been a vocal critic of the criminal cases against Trump as well as Jack Smith, the special counsel who charged Trump in two federal cases. In one radio appearance, she blasted Smith and other prosecutors who have charged Trump as "horrible" people she said were trying to make names for themselves by "going after Donald Trump and weaponizing our legal system."

It's unlikely that Bondi would be confirmed in time to overlap with Smith, who brought two federal indictments against Trump that are both expected to wind down before the incoming president takes office. Special counsels are expected to produce reports on their work that historically are made public, but it remains unclear when such a document might be released.

Bondi was also among a group of Republicans who showed up to support Trump at his hush money criminal trial in New York that ended in May with a conviction on 34 felony counts.

As president, Trump demanded investigations into political opponents like Hillary Clinton and sought to use the law enforcement powers of the Justice Department to advance his own interests, including in trying to overturn the results of the 2020 election. Bondi appears likely to oblige him.

She would inherit a Justice Department expected to pivot sharply on civil rights, corporate enforcement and the prosecutions of hundreds of Trump supporters charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol — defendants whom Trump has pledged to pardon.

She's had a few of her own political issues

Bondi issued a public apology in 2013 while serving as attorney general after she sought to delay the execution of a convicted killer because it conflicted with a fundraiser for her reelection campaign.

The attorney general, representing the state in death row appeals, typically remains available on the date of execution cases in case of any last-minute legal issues.

Bondi later said she was wrong and sorry for requesting then-Gov. Rick Scott push back the execution of Marshall Lee Gore by three weeks.

Bondi personally solicited a 2013 political contribution from Trump as her office was weighing whether to join New York in suing over fraud allegations involving Trump University.

Trump cut a \$25,000 check to a political committee supporting Bondi from his family's charitable foundation, in violation of legal prohibitions against charities supporting partisan political activities. After the check came in, Bondi's office nixed suing Trump's company for fraud, citing insufficient grounds to proceed. Both Trump and Bondi denied wrongdoing.

Two days before being sworn in as president in January 2017, Trump paid \$25 million to settle three lawsuits alleging Trump University defrauded its students.

Trump also paid a \$2,500 fine to the IRS over the illegal political donation to support Bondi from the Donald J. Trump Foundation, which he was forced to dissolve amid an investigation by the state of New York.

A Florida prosecutor assigned by then-GOP Gov. Rick Scott later determined there was insufficient evidence to support bribery charges against Trump and Bondi over the \$25,000 donation.

## Shohei Ohtani wins third MVP award, first in NL. Aaron Judge earns second AL honor in 3 seasons

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Shohei Ohtani keeps setting records, even after the season is over.

The Los Angeles Dodgers star added his third Most Valuable Player award to his collection and first in the National League when he was chosen unanimously by the Baseball Writers' Association of America on Thursday. Aaron Judge of the New York Yankees won the American League award for the second time, also unanimously.

Ohtani last year became the first two-time unanimous MVP. He won the AL award in 2021 and 2023 as a two-way star for the Los Angeles Angels and finished second to Judge in 2022 voting.

He didn't pitch in 2024 following elbow surgery and signed a record \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers last December. Ohtani became the first player to reach 50 home runs and 50 stolen bases in a season, then helped the Dodgers beat the Yankees in the World Series.

"The fact that I knew I wasn't going to be able to pitch this season just made me focus more on my offensive game and fortunately I was able to produce and get this award," Ohtani said through a translator.

Ohtani sat on a red sofa with his wife and dog Decoy as teammate Clayton Kershaw announced the award on the MLB Network. The Nederlandse kooikerhondje immediately jumped away.

Ohtani received all 30 first-place votes and 420 points. New York Mets shortstop Francisco Lindor was second with 263 points and Arizona second baseman Ketel Marte third with 229.

Judge was a unanimous pick for the first time. Kansas City shortstop Bobby Witt Jr. got all 30 second-place votes for 270 points, and Yankees outfielder Juan Soto was third with 21 third-place votes and 229 points.

Ohtani hit .310, stole 59 bases and led the NL with 54 homers and 130 RBIs exclusively as a designated hitter, becoming the first player with 50 or more homers and 50 or more stolen bases in a season.

A highlight of the season was during the dog days. Ball in mouth, Decoy delivered the ceremonial first pitch to his owner at Dodger Stadium's home plate before an Aug. 28 game against Baltimore.

"The most nerve-wracking game that I had, the most nervous I was when we had that Decoy throw out the first pitch," he said.

Ohtani played the final three games of the World Series with a torn labrum in his left shoulder. Still recovering from right elbow surgery in September 2023, Ohtani had another operation on Nov. 5 to repair the shoulder and has been working on range of motion and started Thursday on core and lower body work.

"The goal is to be ready for opening day and that includes hitting and pitching," Ohtani said. "But we are kind of taking our time."

When Ohtani resumes pitching, could he win MVP and the Cy Young Award in the same year?

"That would obviously be great, but right now my focus is just to get to get back healthy, come back stronger, get back on the mound and show everybody what I can do," Ohtani said.

Ohtani became the first primary designated hitter and first player who didn't appear defensively for a single inning to win an MVP. His season started with the revelation longtime interpreter and friend, Ippei Mizuhara had stolen nearly \$17 million from the star to fund gambling.

Ohtani is the 12th player with three or more MVPs, joining Barry Bonds (seven) and Jimmie Foxx, Joe DiMaggio, Stan Musial, Roy Campanella, Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle, Mike Schmidt, Alex Rodriguez, Albert Pujols and Mike Trout (three each).

Balloting was conducted before the postseason.

"Moving forward, I think now we do have a target on our back," Ohtani said. "We are going to be expected to maybe even do — possibly even do more."

Judge led the major leagues with 58 homers, 144 RBIs and 133 walks while hitting .322. Witt topped the big leagues with a .332 average, hitting 32 homers with 31 stolen bases and 109 RBIs. Soto batted .288 with 41 homers and 109 RBIs.

When Judge won his first MVP award in 2022, he received 28 first-place votes while Ohtani got the other two. Judge had discussed the MVP award with Philadelphia's Bryce Harper, the NL winner in 2015 and '21.

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"I was telling him, 'Man, I'm going to try to catch up to you with these MVPs here, man,'" Judge recalled. "He'd say, hopefully, he could stay a couple ahead of me, which I think he'll do."

When Judge won his first MVP award in 2022, he received 28 first-place votes while Ohtani got the other two. He is the Yankees' 22nd MVP winner, four more than any other team.

Judge was hitting .207 with six homers and 18 RBIs through April, then batted .352 with 52 homers and 126 RBIs in 127 games.

"March and April were not my friend this year." Judge said. "Just keep putting in the work and things are going to change. You can't mope. You can't feel sorry for yourself. Especially in New York, nobody's going to feel sorry for you. So you just got to go out there and put up the numbers."

## Death toll in Gaza from Israel-Hamas war passes 44,000, Palestinian officials say

By WAFAA SHURAFU and FATMA KHALED Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The death toll in the Gaza Strip from the 13-month-old war between Israel and Hamas has surpassed 44,000, local health officials said Thursday.

The Gaza Health Ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count, but it has said that more than half of the fatalities are women and children. The Israeli military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The Health Ministry said 44,056 people have been killed and 104,268 wounded since the start of the war. It has said the real toll is higher because thousands of bodies are buried under rubble or in areas that medics cannot access.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting another 250. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead. Most of the rest were released during a cease-fire last year.

In Lebanon, the death toll from Israeli strikes and combat has surpassed 3,580 people, with more than 15,000 wounded, according to Lebanon's Health Ministry. At least 51 people were killed Thursday in Israeli strikes on towns and villages across Lebanon.

The Israeli offensive in Gaza has caused heavy destruction across wide areas of the coastal territory, leading many to wonder when or how it will ever be rebuilt. Around 90% of the population of 2.3 million people have been displaced, often multiple times, and hundreds of thousands are living in squalid tent camps with little food, water or basic services.

Israel says it tries to avoid harming civilians and blames their deaths on Hamas because the militants operate in residential areas, where they have built tunnels, rocket launchers and other military infrastructure.

Palestinian officials and rights groups accuse Israeli forces of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the United Nations' top court is considering allegations of genocide brought by South Africa. The Israeli government adamantly denies the allegations, accusing critics of being biased against it.

In recent weeks, the amount of humanitarian aid entering Gaza has plummeted, prompting the United States to threaten to reduce its military support for Israel before backing down, citing limited progress. Experts have warned that isolated, war-ravaged northern Gaza could already be experiencing famine.

The United States, Egypt and Qatar spent months trying to broker a cease-fire agreement in which Hamas would release the remaining hostages in exchange for an end to the war. Those talks ground to a halt over the summer, with Israel and Hamas each accusing the other of making unacceptable demands.

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to end the wars in the Middle East without saying how. His previous administration gave unprecedented support to Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hard-line policies toward the Palestinians.



## UN nuclear agency's board condemns Iran for the 2nd time this year for failing to fully cooperate

By STEPHANIE LIECHTENSTEIN Associated Press

VIENNA (AP) — The U.N. nuclear watchdog's board on Thursday condemned Iran for failing to cooperate fully with the agency, the second time it has done so in just five months.

The International Atomic Energy Agency also called on Tehran to provide answers in a long-running investigation into uranium particles found at two locations that Tehran has failed to declare as nuclear sites.

Nineteen members of the IAEA board voted for the resolution, while Russia, China and Burkina Faso opposed it, and 12 abstained and one did not vote, according to diplomats who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the outcome of the closed-doors vote.

The resolution was put forward by France, Germany and Britain, supported by the United States. It comes at a critical time, ahead of Donald Trump's return to the White House.

Trump's first term in office was marked by a particularly tense period with Iran, when the U.S. president pursued a policy of "maximum pressure" against Tehran. In 2018, Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers, and imposed even harsher sanctions that have since hobbled Iran's economy further.

The resolution comes on the heels of a confidential report earlier this week in which the IAEA said Iran has defied international demands to rein in its nuclear program and has increased its stockpile of uranium enriched to near weapons-grade levels.

That report, seen by the AP on Tuesday, said that as of Oct. 26, Iran has accumulated 182.3 kilograms (401.9 pounds) of uranium enriched up to 60%, an increase of 17.6 kilograms (38.8 pounds) since the last IAEA report in August. Uranium enriched at 60% purity is just a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

The resolution approved on Thursday requires the IAEA to now produce a "comprehensive and updated assessment" of Iran's nuclear activities, which could eventually trigger a referral to the U.N. Security Council to consider more sanctions on Tehran.

In a joint statement issued after the approval of the resolution, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and the Iranian foreign ministry condemned the passing of the resolution, saying that Iran's nuclear chief Mohammad Eslami has issued orders to launch new and advanced centrifuges, powerful machines that spin rapidly to enrich uranium.

In the past, the IAEA has named two locations near Tehran — Varamin and Turqzabad — where there have been traces of processed uranium, according to IAEA inspectors. Thursday's resolution honed in on those locations, asking Tehran to provide "technically credible explanations" for the presence of the uranium particles at the sites.

The IAEA has urged Iran to also provide answers about the origin and current location of that nuclear material in order for it "to be in a position to provide assurance that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively peaceful."

Western officials suspect that the uranium traces discovered by the IAEA could provide evidence that Iran had a secret nuclear weapons program until at least 2003. Tehran insists its program is peaceful.

One of the sites became known publicly in 2018 after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed it at the United Nations and called it a clandestine nuclear warehouse hidden at a rug-cleaning plant.

Iran denied that, though IAEA inspectors later found the man-made uranium particles there.

While the number of sites about which the IAEA has questions has been reduced from four to two since 2019, lingering questions have been a persistent source of tensions.

On the subject of Varamin, the IAEA said that inspectors believe Iran used the site from 1999 until 2003 as a pilot project to process uranium ore and convert it into a gas form, which then can be enriched through spinning in a centrifuge. The IAEA said buildings at the site had been demolished in 2004.

Turqzabad, the second location, is where the IAEA believes Iran brought some of the material from Varamin amid the demolition, though it said that alone cannot "explain the presence of the multiple types

of isotopically altered particles" found there.

Thursday's resolution before the 35-member board at the IAEA headquarters in Vienna, called on Tehran to explain the presence of the uranium particles at Varamin and Turqzabad, inform the U.N. nuclear watchdog about the current whereabouts of that nuclear material, and grant access to IAEA inspectors to all Iranian nuclear locations.

A draft of the resolution was seen by the AP.

Tehran continues to maintain that its nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes and has told the IAEA that it has declared all of the nuclear material, activities and locations required under a so-called Safeguard Agreement it has with the IAEA.

Iranian officials have vowed to retaliate immediately if a resolution is passed. In the past, Tehran has responded to IAEA resolutions by stepping up its nuclear activities.

The resolution also requires IAEA director general Rafael Grossi to provide an updated assessment of Iran's nuclear program — including the possible presence of undeclared nuclear material at the two locations — by spring 2025 at the latest.

The assessment could be a basis for possible further steps by European nations, diplomats said, leading to potential escalation in tensions between Iran and the West. It could also provide a basis for European countries to trigger sanctions against Iran ahead of October 2025, when the original 2015 Iran nuclear deal expires, the diplomats said.

## **Trump convinced Republicans to overlook his misconduct. But can he do the same for his nominees?**

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the two weeks since Donald Trump won the presidency, he's tried to demonstrate his dominance by naming loyalists for top administration positions, even though many lack expertise and some face sexual misconduct accusations. It often seems like he's daring Congress to oppose his decisions.

But on Thursday, Trump's attempt to act with impunity showed a crack as Matt Gaetz, his choice for attorney general, withdrew from consideration.

Trump had named Gaetz, a Florida congressman, to be the country's top law enforcement official even though he was widely disliked by his colleagues, has little legal experience and was accused of having sex with an underage girl, an allegation he denied. After being plagued by investigations during his first presidency, Trump wanted a devoted ally in charge of the Justice Department during his second.

However, it was never obvious that Gaetz could win enough support from lawmakers to get confirmed as attorney general. Trump chose for a replacement Pam Bondi, a former Florida attorney general who defended him during his first impeachment trial and supported his false claims of voter fraud.

Now the question is whether Gaetz was uniquely unpalatable, or if Trump's other picks might exceed his party's willingness to overlook concerns that would have sunk nominees in a prior political era.

The next test will likely be Pete Hegseth, who Trump wants to lead the Pentagon despite an allegation of sexual assault that he's denied. So far, Republicans are rallying around Hegseth, an Army veteran and former Fox News host.

Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican who serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said the controversy over Gaetz would have little bearing on Trump's other choices. He said they would be considered "one at a time."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat, suggested otherwise, claiming "the dominoes are falling."

"The drip drip of evidence and truth is going to eventually doom some others," he said.

Trump's election victory was a sign that there may not be many red lines left in American politics. He won the presidential race despite authoritarian, racist and misogynist rhetoric, not to mention years of lies about election fraud and his role in sparking the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. He was also criminally convicted of falsifying business records to pay hush money, and he was found liable for sexual

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abuse in a civil case.

Empowered by voters who looked past his misconduct and saw him as a powerful agent of change, Trump has shown no deference to Washington norms while working to fill his second administration. The transition team hasn't pursued federal background checks for Trump's personnel choices. While some of his selections have extensive experience in the areas they've been chosen to lead, others are personal friends and Fox News personalities who have impressed and flattered Trump over the years.

Several have faced allegations involving sexual misconduct.

Hegseth is facing the most scrutiny after Gaetz. Once Trump announced Hegseth as his nominee for Pentagon chief, allegations emerged that he sexually assaulted a woman in California in 2017.

The woman said he took her phone, blocked the door to the hotel room and refused to let her leave, according to a police report made public this week.

Hegseth told police at the time that the encounter had been consensual and denied any wrongdoing, the report said. However, he paid the woman a confidential settlement in 2023. Hegseth's lawyer said the payment was made to head off the threat of a baseless lawsuit.

Trump's choice for secretary of health and human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has faced allegations of misconduct too. A woman who babysat for him and his second wife told Vanity Fair magazine that Kennedy groped her in the late 1990s, when she was 23.

Kennedy did not deny the allegation and texted an apology to the woman after the article was published. That isn't the only hurdle for Kennedy; he's spent years spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about vaccines, raising fears about making him a top health official in the new administration.

Linda McMahon, chosen by Trump to be education secretary, is fighting a lawsuit connected to her former company, World Wrestling Entertainment. She's accused of knowingly enabling sexual exploitation of children by an employee as early as the 1980s, and she denies the allegations.

Tulsi Gabbard is another person who could face a difficult confirmation battle, but for very different reasons. The former Democratic representative from Hawaii has been a vocal Trump ally, and he chose her to be national intelligence director. But there's grave concern by lawmakers and national security officials over Gabbard's history of echoing Russian propaganda. Critics said she would endanger relationships with U.S. allies.

Gaetz was investigated by federal law enforcement for sex trafficking, but the case was closed without charges and Republicans have blocked the release of a related report from the House Ethics Committee.

However, some allegations leaked out, including that Gaetz paid women for sex. One of the women testified to the committee that she saw Gaetz having sex with a 17-year-old girl, according to a lawyer for the woman.

As Gaetz met with senators this week, it became clear that he would face stubborn resistance from lawmakers who were concerned about his behavior and believed he was unqualified to run the Justice Department.

"While the momentum was strong, it is clear that my confirmation was unfairly becoming a distraction," Gaetz wrote on social media when announcing his withdrawal.

Sen. Mike Braun, an Indiana Republican, said he believed there were four to six members of the caucus who would have voted against Gaetz, likely dooming his nomination, and "the math got too hard."

He said some of the issues and allegations around Gaetz were "maybe beyond the pale."

"I think there were just too many things, it was like a leaky dike, and you know, it broke," Braun said.

Trump thanked Gaetz in a post on Truth Social, his social media website, without addressing the substance of the allegations against him.

"He was doing very well but, at the same time, did not want to be a distraction for the Administration, for which he has much respect," Trump wrote.



## Jussie Smollett's conviction in 2019 attack on himself is overturned

By JOHN O'CONNOR and SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) — The Illinois Supreme Court on Thursday overturned actor Jussie Smollett's conviction on charges of staging a racist and homophobic attack against himself in 2019 and lying to Chicago police, saying he should not have been charged a second time after reaching a deal with prosecutors.

The ruling, which did not address Smollett's continued claims of innocence, was the latest twist in a yearslong saga. Smollett, who is Black and gay, made headlines around the world after he told police in January 2019 that two men assaulted him in his downtown Chicago neighborhood, spouting slurs, tossing a noose around his neck, and yelling that he was in "MAGA country," an apparent reference to Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" presidential campaign slogan. The report prompted a massive search for suspects by Chicago police before investigators announced that they believed the attack was a hoax.

The state's highest court found that a special prosecutor should not have been allowed to intervene after Smollett reached a deal with the Cook County state's attorney in which charges against him were dropped in exchange for him forfeiting his \$10,000 bond and performing community service. The deal prompted outrage in part because it did not include any condition that Smollett apologize or admit he staged the attack.

"We are aware that this case has generated significant public interest and that many people were dissatisfied with the resolution of the original case and believed it to be unjust," Justice Elizabeth Rochford wrote in the court's 5-0 opinion. "Nevertheless, what would be more unjust than the resolution of any one criminal case would be a holding from this court that the state was not bound to honor agreements upon which people have detrimentally relied."

Smollett was on the television drama "Empire," which filmed in Chicago, and prosecutors alleged he staged the attack because he was unhappy with the studio's response to hate mail he received. Testimony at trial indicated he paid \$3,500 to two men whom he knew from "Empire" to carry it out. Smollett testified that "there was no hoax" and that he was the victim of a hate crime.

Smollett declined to comment Thursday through a publicist. His attorney, Neny Uche, said Smollett was happy and relieved but also disappointed to have been "dragged through an unfair process."

"Even though this is over now and Jussie just absolutely wants to move his life forward, people should start asking questions. How did this happen? Why should this even happen? What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again?" Uche said at a news conference in Chicago.

The special prosecutor, former U.S. Attorney Dan Webb, said he disagreed with the court's ruling while noting that it "has nothing to do with Mr. Smollett's innocence."

"The Illinois Supreme Court did not find any error with the overwhelming evidence presented at trial that Mr. Smollett orchestrated a fake hate crime and reported it to the Chicago Police Department as a real hate crime, or the jury's unanimous verdict that Mr. Smollett was guilty of five counts of felony disorderly conduct," Webb said.

After Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx's office dropped the initial 16 counts of disorderly conduct, the backlash was swift, with then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel calling it "a whitewash of justice." Webb was appointed special prosecutor and a grand jury restored charges, leading to Smollett's 2021 conviction on five counts of disorderly conduct.

Smollett was sentenced to 150 days in jail — six of which he served before he was freed pending appeal — and was ordered to pay about \$130,000 in restitution. Chicago officials are pursuing reimbursement for that amount in police overtime through a civil case.

Foxx told The Associated Press that she was not surprised that the high court found her handling of the case "proper — if unpopular, proper." She criticized Webb's ensuing "legal machinations," which she said ignored the tenet of prosecutorial discretion and landed the issue in the "same position we were in in March 2019."

"What they were doing in going to the court to re-prosecute someone because you didn't like the out-

come would have set a horrendous precedent, in which anyone could come in and undermine the work of a prosecutor's office," said Foxx, who did not seek a third term this year.

Eileen O'Neill Burke, the incoming Cook County state's attorney, declined to comment.

Smollett, a child actor who appeared in 1992 movie "The Mighty Ducks," has credited his role as a singer on the hip-hop drama "Empire" for turbocharging his career. This year, he starred in the movie "The Lost Holliday" with Vivica A. Fox.

Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Mary Jane Theis and Justice Joy Cunningham took no part in Thursday's decision.

## Top war-crimes court issues arrest warrants for Netanyahu and others in Israel-Hamas fighting

By MOLLY QUELL Associated Press

THE HAGUE (AP) — The world's top war-crimes court issued arrest warrants Thursday for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his former defense minister and Hamas' military chief, accusing them of crimes against humanity in connection with the 13-month war in Gaza.

The warrants said there was reason to believe Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant have used "starvation as a method of warfare" by restricting humanitarian aid and have intentionally targeted civilians in Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza — charges Israeli officials deny.

The action by the International Criminal Court came as the death toll from Israel's campaign in Gaza passed 44,000 people, according to local health authorities, who say more than half of those killed were women and children. Their count does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

Experts say hunger has become widespread across Gaza and may have reached famine levels in the north of the territory, which is under siege by Israeli troops. Israel says it has been working hard to improve entry of aid, though the trickle of supplies into Gaza remains near the lowest levels of the war.

Netanyahu condemned the warrant against him, saying Israel "rejects with disgust the absurd and false actions" by the court. In a statement released by his office, he said: "There is nothing more just than the war that Israel has been waging in Gaza."

Gallant, in a statement, said the decision "sets a dangerous precedent against the right to self-defense and moral warfare and encourages murderous terrorism."

The warrant marked the first time that a sitting leader of a major Western ally has been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity by a global court of justice. The decision turns Netanyahu and the others into internationally wanted suspects, putting them at risk of arrest when they travel abroad and potentially further isolating them.

Israel and its top ally, the United States, are not members of the court. But others of Israel's allies, including some of its close European friends, are put in an awkward position. Several, including France, welcomed the court's decision and signaled they might arrest Netanyahu if he visited.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said President Joe Biden's administration was "deeply concerned by the prosecutor's rush to seek arrest warrants and the troubling process errors that led to this decision."

The warrants represent "the most dramatic step yet in the court's involvement in the conflict between Israel and Hamas," said Anthony Dworkin, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Israeli leaders, politicians and officials across the spectrum denounced the warrants and the ICC. The new defense minister, Israel Katz, who replaced Gallant earlier this month, said Thursday's decision is "a moral disgrace, entirely tainted by antisemitism, and drags the international judicial system to an unprecedented low."

Human rights groups applauded the move.

The warrants against both sides "break through the perception that certain individuals are beyond the reach of the law," the associate international justice director at Human Rights Watch, Balkees Jarrah, said in a statement.

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The decision came six months after ICC Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan requested the warrants.

The court issued a warrant for Mohammed Deif, head of Hamas' armed wing, over the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks that triggered Israel's offensive in Gaza. It said it found reasonable grounds to believe Deif was involved in murder, rape, torture and the taking of hostages amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In the Hamas-led attack, militants stormed into southern Israel, killing 1,200 people — mostly civilians — and taking some 250 others hostage. Around 100 Israelis remain captive in Gaza, around a third of them believed to be dead.

Khan withdrew requests for warrants for two other senior Hamas figures, Yahya Sinwar and Ismail Haniyeh, who have both since been killed. Israel says it also killed Deif in an airstrike, but Hamas has never confirmed his death.

The warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant were issued by a three-judge panel in a unanimous decision. The panel said there were reasonable grounds to believe that both men bear responsibility for the war crime of starvation and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution and other inhumane acts.

The judges said the lack of food, water, electricity, fuel and specific medical supplies created conditions "calculated to bring about the destruction of part of the civilian population in Gaza," including the deaths of children due to malnutrition and dehydration.

They also found that by preventing hospital supplies and medicine from getting into Gaza, doctors were forced to operate, including performing amputations, without anesthesia or with unsafe means of sedation that led to "great suffering."

Israeli diplomatic officials said the government is lobbying the international community to speak out against the warrants and is considering an appeal to the court. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity pending a formal decision on how the government will proceed.

Despite the warrants, none of the suspects is likely to face judges in The Hague anytime soon. Member countries are required to detain suspects facing a warrant if they set foot on their soil, but the court has no way to enforce that.

For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin, wanted on an ICC warrant for alleged war crimes in Ukraine, recently visited Mongolia, a member state in the court but also a Russian ally. He was not arrested.

Still, the threat of arrest now complicates any travel abroad by Netanyahu and Gallant. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the warrants are binding on all 27 member countries of the European Union.

France signaled it could arrest Netanyahu if he came to its territory. Foreign Ministry spokesman Christophe Lemoine called it a "complex legal issue" but said France supports the court's actions.

"Combating impunity is our priority," he said. "Our response will align with these principles."

Hamas in a statement welcomed the warrants against Netanyahu and Gallant but made no mention of the one against Deif.

Israel's opposition leaders fiercely criticized the ICC's move. Benny Gantz, a retired general and political rival to Netanyahu, said it showed "moral blindness" and was a "shameful stain of historic proportion that will never be forgotten."

Israel's campaign has caused heavy destruction across Gaza and driven almost the entire population of 2.3 million people from their homes, leaving most dependent on aid to survive.

Two days after Hamas' attack on southern Israel, Gallant announced a total seal on Gaza, vowing not to let in food, fuel or other supplies. Under U.S. pressure, Israel began allowing a trickle of humanitarian aid to enter a few weeks later.

Israel now says it puts no limit on the supplies permitted into Gaza, and it blames the U.N. distribution system. But Israel's official figures show the amount of aid it has let in has plunged since the beginning of October. The U.N. has blamed Israeli military restrictions, along with widespread lawlessness that has led to theft of aid shipments.

The case at the ICC is separate from another legal battle Israel is waging at the top U.N. court, the International Court of Justice, in which South Africa accuses Israel of genocide, an allegation Israeli leaders staunchly deny.

Lawyers for Israel argued in court that the war in Gaza was a legitimate defense of its people and that it was Hamas militants who were guilty of genocide.



## What to know about a storm bringing high winds, heavy rain, snow to California and Pacific Northwest

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — One of the strongest storms on the West Coast in decades knocked out power for thousands of people, unleashed strong winds that toppled trees and left two dead in Washington before making its way through Oregon to Northern California where on Thursday it dropped heavy snow and record amounts of rain.

The National Weather Service extended a flood watch into Saturday for areas north of San Francisco as the region was inundated by the strongest atmospheric river — a long and wide plume of moisture that forms over an ocean and flows over land — so far this season.

The storm system roared ashore Tuesday as a “bomb cyclone,” which occurs when a cyclone intensifies rapidly, and it’s expected to bring moderate to heavy rain through Saturday, increasing the risk of flash flooding and rockslides, forecasters said.

Here are some things to know about the storm:

Strong winds bring power outages and topple trees

About 285,000 homes and businesses remain without power Thursday in Washington, where falling trees struck homes and littered roads across the western portion of the state, killing at least two people. One woman in Lynnwood died when a large tree fell on a homeless encampment, while another woman in Bellevue was killed when a tree fell on a home.

Cities began opening warming centers offering free internet and device charging. In the hardest hit areas east of Seattle, power wasn’t expected to be fully restored until midday Saturday, Puget Sound Energy said.

At least a dozen schools were closed in the Seattle area Wednesday and some opted to extend those closures through Thursday. In Enumclaw, east of Seattle, residents were cleaning up after their town clocked the highest winds in the state on Tuesday night: 74 mph (119 kph).

Meanwhile, in Northern California, there were reports of power outages Thursday affecting more than 20,000 customers. Several districts in Sonoma County closed their schools Thursday due to the storm, county officials said.

Officials warn of hazardous travel conditions

About 150 flights were delayed and another two dozen were canceled Thursday at San Francisco International Airport, after hundreds were delayed and dozens were canceled on Wednesday, according to the flight tracking service FlightAware.

Transportation officials shut down a 2-mile (3.2 kilometer) stretch of Northern California’s famed Avenue of the Giants, a scenic drive named for the towering coast redwoods along the route, due to flooding. The National Weather Service warned road travel conditions would be hazardous in the Sierra Nevada.

“The hazardous conditions could impact the Friday evening and Monday morning commutes as roads become slick and snow covered,” the service said. “Gusty winds could bring down tree branches.”

A winter storm watch was in place for the northern Sierra Nevada above 3,500 feet (1,100 meters), where 15 inches (38 cm) of snow was possible over two days. Wind gusts could top 75 mph (120 kph) in mountain areas, forecasters said.

Maggie Eshbaugh, marketing manager at Sugar Bowl Resort, northwest of Lake Tahoe, said about a foot (30 centimeters) of snow fell there Wednesday night. She said they’re excited to welcome customers Friday, which is the earliest the ski resort has opened in 20 years.

Interstate 5 was closed for an 11-mile (18-kilometer) stretch from Ashland, Oregon, to the California border on Wednesday morning due to extreme winter weather conditions in Northern California, according to the Oregon Department of Transportation. It was reopened by Wednesday night.

The storm also caused some damage on State Highway 6 near Oregon’s coast but it seemed to largely spare the state where no major damage was reported as of Thursday.

Rain and snow could linger into next week

A second, lighter wave of the storm is expected Saturday through Tuesday in Northern California, said

meteorologist Courtney Carpenter, with the National Weather Service Sacramento. It will bring lighter rain in the lower elevations, but heavier mountain snow that will reach lower levels than the first wave, she said.

Dangerous flash flooding, rockslides and debris flows were possible, especially where hillsides were loosened by recent wildfires, officials warned. Scott Rowe, a hydrologist with the weather service in Sacramento, said so far the ground has been able to absorb the rain in California's Butte and Tehama counties where the Park Fire burned over the summer.

"It's not necessarily how much rain falls; it's how fast the rain falls," Rowe said Thursday.

## **Brazilian police indict former President Bolsonaro and aides over alleged 2022 coup attempt**

By GABRIELA SÁ PESSOA and MAURÍCIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazil's federal police said Thursday they indicted former President Jair Bolsonaro and 36 other people for allegedly attempting a coup to keep him in office after his defeat in the 2022 elections.

Police said their sealed findings were being delivered Thursday to Brazil's Supreme Court, which will refer them to Prosecutor-General Paulo Gonet, who decides either to formally charge Bolsonaro and put him on trial, or toss the investigation.

Bolsonaro told the website Metropoles that he was waiting for his lawyer to review the indictment, reportedly about 700 pages long. But he said he would fight the case and dismissed the investigation as being the result of "creativity."

The former right-wing president has denied all claims he tried to stay in office after his narrow electoral defeat in 2022 to his rival, leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Bolsonaro has faced a series of legal threats since then.

Police said in a brief statement that the Supreme Court had agreed to reveal the names of all 37 people who were indicted "to avoid the dissemination of incorrect news."

Dozens of former and current Bolsonaro aides also were indicted, including Gen. Walter Braga Netto, who was his running mate in the 2022 campaign; former Army commander Gen. Paulo Sérgio Nogueira de Oliveira; Valdemar Costa Neto, the chairman of Bolsonaro's Liberal Party; and his veteran former adviser, Gen. Augusto Heleno.

Other investigations produced indictments for Bolsonaro's roles in smuggling diamond jewelry into Brazil without properly declaring them and in directing a subordinate to falsify his and others' COVID-19 vaccination statuses. Bolsonaro has denied any involvement in either.

Another probe found that he had abused his authority to cast doubt on the country's voting system, and judges barred him from running again until 2030.

Still, he has insisted that he will run in 2026, and many in his orbit were heartened by the recent U.S. election win of Donald Trump, despite his own swirling legal threats.

But the far-reaching investigations already have weakened Bolsonaro's status as a leader of Brazil's right wing, said Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in Sao Paulo.

"Bolsonaro is already barred from running in the 2026 elections," Melo told the The Associated Press. "And if he is convicted he could also be jailed by then. To avoid being behind bars, he will have to convince Supreme Court justices that he has nothing to do with a plot that involves dozens of his aides. That's a very tall order," Melo said.

An indictment over the alleged coup attempt means the investigation has gathered indications of "a crime and its author," said Eloísa Machado de Almeida, a law professor at Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university in Sao Paulo. She said she believed there was enough legal grounds for the prosecutor-general to file charges.

Bolsonaro's allies in Congress have been negotiating a bill to pardon individuals who stormed the Brazilian capital and rioted on Jan. 8, 2023 in a failed attempt to keep the former president in power. Analysts have speculated that lawmakers want to extend the legislation to cover the former president himself.

However, efforts to push a broad amnesty bill may be "politically challenging" given recent attacks on the judiciary and details emerging in investigations, Machado said.

On Tuesday, Federal Police arrested four military and a Federal Police officer, accused of plotting to assassinate Lula and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes as a means to overthrow the government following the 2022 elections.

And last week, a man carried out a bomb attack in the capital Brasilia. He attempted to enter the Supreme Court and threw explosives outside, killing himself.

## **Warrants put Israeli PM and others in a small group of leaders accused of crimes against humanity**

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

The decision by the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for the Israeli prime minister and a top Hamas official puts them in a small group of leaders to be accused of crimes against humanity.

The court issued warrants Thursday for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his former defense minister, Yoav Gallant, and Mohammed Deif, a Hamas leader Israel claims it killed.

A three-judge panel from the court said the warrants were based on "reasonable grounds" that Netanyahu and Gallant bear responsibility for a war crime and crimes against humanity in the Gaza Strip, where more than 44,000 people have reportedly been killed and more than 104,000 wounded in the 13-month war between Israel and Hamas.

Netanyahu condemned the warrant, saying Israel "rejects with disgust the absurd and false actions."

The warrant against Deif said there was reason to believe he was involved in murder, rape, torture and the taking of hostages amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity for the militant group's Oct. 7, 2023, attacks on Israel. Some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed in those attacks, and another 250 were abducted.

Hamas said it welcomed the warrants against Netanyahu and Gallant after what it called decades of injustice by a "fascist occupation."

The Hamas statement did not refer to the warrant for Deif. Israel claims it killed him in an airstrike, but Hamas has never confirmed his death.

Here's a closer look at the ICC and its accusations against Israeli and Hamas leaders:

What is the ICC?

The ICC is the permanent court of last resort, established in 2002 to prosecute individuals for war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and aggression.

The court's 124 member states have signed on to the treaty that created the court. Dozens of countries did not sign and do not accept the court's jurisdiction. They include Israel, the United States, Russia and China.

The ICC becomes involved when nations are unable or unwilling to prosecute crimes on their territory. Israel argues that it has a functioning court system, and disputes over a nation's ability or willingness to prosecute have fueled past disputes between the court and individual countries.

While the warrants could complicate travel abroad for Netanyahu and Gallant, they are unlikely to face judges in The Hague anytime soon. Member countries are required to detain suspects facing a warrant if they set foot on their soil, but the court has no way to enforce that.

ICC judges have issued about 60 arrest warrants, and 21 people have been detained and appeared in court, according to its website. Some 30 people remain at large. The court has issued 11 convictions and four acquittals.

What are the Israeli warrants about?

The court said there are reasonable grounds to believe Netanyahu and Gallant, who was replaced earlier this month, bear responsibility as co-perpetrators of the war crime of starvation and crimes against humanity, including murder, persecution and other inhumane acts.

The court said that while it couldn't reach a finding on the crime against humanity of extermination, it

said the murder accusation was supported by allegations that Gaza residents were deprived of basic necessities such as food, water, electricity and medical supplies. That created conditions “calculated to bring about the destruction of part of the civilian population in Gaza,” that led to deaths of children and others from malnutrition and dehydration.

The court also found that by preventing hospital supplies and medicine from getting into Gaza, doctors were forced to operate and carry out amputations without anesthesia or unsafe means of sedation that led to “great suffering.”

The court said it found two incidents in which evidence provided by the prosecution allowed it to make a finding that attacks were intentionally directed against civilians. It said there were reasonable grounds to believe that Netanyahu and Gallant failed to prevent those attacks.

While the arrest warrants are classified as secret to protect witnesses, the court said it provided some information because the conduct that inspired the warrants appeared to be ongoing. It also said it wanted victims and their families to be notified of the warrants.

What’s behind the Hamas warrant?

Deif, who had been highest-ranking commander of Hamas’ military wing, was alleged to have ordered the Oct. 7 attack and failed to prevent it.

The court said the mass slaughter of people at several Israeli settlements and an outdoor concert amounted to a crime against humanity and the war crime of murder. It also found that those attacks qualified as the war crime of intentionally directing attacks against civilians.

In addition, the judges found that allegations of sexual assault of captives and hostages — mostly women — provided reasonable grounds for crimes against humanity and the war crimes of both torture and rape.

What has happened with other arrest warrants?

Last year, the court issued a warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin on charges that he was responsible for the abductions of children from Ukraine. Russia responded by issuing its own arrest warrants for Khan and ICC judges.

The chances of Putin facing trial at the ICC are highly unlikely because Moscow does not recognize the court’s jurisdiction or extradite its nationals.

Former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi was captured and killed by rebels shortly after the ICC issued a warrant for his arrest on charges linked to the brutal suppression of anti-government protests in 2011.

One of Africa’s most notorious warlords, Joseph Kony, was issued an arrest warrant from the ICC in 2005. As the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda, he faces 12 counts of crimes against humanity including murder, sexual enslavement and rape, and 21 counts of war crimes. Despite an internationally backed manhunt and a \$5 million reward, Kony remains at large.

Sudan’s former President Omar al-Bashir is wanted by the ICC over accusations related to the conflict in Darfur. Al-Bashir was served with arrest warrants in 2009.

## **Putin touts Russia’s new missile and delivers a menacing warning to NATO**

By The Associated Press undefined

The new ballistic missile fired by Russia struck a military-industrial facility in the central Ukrainian city of Dnipro, but its real mission was delivering a deadly new message to NATO.

Hours after Thursday’s strike touched off a debate over whether the Ukrainian plant was hit by an intercontinental ballistic missile, President Vladimir Putin made a rare and surprise appearance on Russian television to clear up the mystery.

He described it as a new, intermediate-range ballistic missile that raced to its target at 10 times the speed of sound.

“Modern air defense systems that exist in the world and anti-missile defenses created by the Americans in Europe can’t intercept such missiles,” Putin declared in an icy and menacing tone.



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The attack marked the first time that such a missile was used in the war — or in any conflict.

The dramatic events came in a week of soaring tensions as Ukraine struck targets in Russia with American-made longer-range missiles after the U.S. eased restrictions on their use and Putin responded by lowering the threshold for using Moscow's nuclear arsenal.

What is the new missile?

Putin said the missile was called "Oreshnik," which in Russian means "hazelnut tree," and that this first combat test of it "has gone successfully."

He said in July that Russia would start producing intermediate-range missiles to "mirror" U.S. plans to deploy such weapons. In his speech Thursday, he said Russia developed Oreshnik in response to the U.S. development and deployment of missiles with a similar range.

Intermediate-range missiles, or IRBMs, can fly between 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,400 miles). Ukrainian military officials said the missile was launched from the Russian region of Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea, 800 kilometers (500 miles) to the east.

While Russia has launched cruise missiles at Ukraine from even longer ranges, the new intermediate range missile marked the first such use of this kind of ground-launched ballistic missile, which can carry a much heavier conventional payload and could also be fitted with multiple nuclear warheads.

Putin boasted that the missile, the latest in Russia's arsenal of hypersonic weapons, reaches its target at speeds of Mach 10, rendering Western missile defenses useless.

Matthew Savill, director of military sciences at the Royal United Services Institute, noted that the missile used Thursday has a range "way beyond any of that seen in this conflict so far and possibly the first ever use in combat."

He said the missile was capable of releasing multiple warheads at extremely high speeds, even though they are less accurate than cruise missiles or short-range ballistic missiles.

Video of the strike showed six fiery trails followed by powerful explosions — an apparent sign of the multiple warheads being used. The authenticity of the videos couldn't be independently confirmed.

As for Putin's claim that the Western systems could not intercept the missile, Savill said "these are quite hard to defend against" even for advanced U.S. Patriot systems.

"You're dropping multiple independently targetable warheads, MIRVs, at extremely high speed, so even Patriot will struggle to basically intercept those," he said.

What's Putin's message to the West?

Putin has described Thursday's use of the Oreshnik as a response to Ukrainian strikes on Russian military facilities in Bryansk and Kursk regions earlier this week with Western-supplied weapons.

One of those strikes killed and wounded an unspecified number of Russian servicemen, which the Kremlin leader said added "elements of a global character" to the conflict.

Putin has warned previously that use of the Western weapons would mean that Russia and NATO are at war.

"We believe that we have the right to use our weapons against military facilities of the countries that allow to use their weapons against our facilities," he said. "And in case of escalation of aggressive actions we will respond resolutely in a mirror way."

If Russia launches more strikes on Ukraine with the new missile, it will warn of its use in advance to allow civilians to reach safety as a "humanitarian" gesture, Putin said, adding that Moscow isn't worried about tipping off the enemy since it cannot stop the attack.

"I would recommend the ruling elites of the countries that are hatching plans to use their military contingents against Russia to seriously think about it," Putin said.

Savill said the new missile is sending a fear-inducing signal from Russia that "we've got stuff that outrages you."

The larger message to the West is that "we're happy to enter into a competition around intermediate-range ballistic missiles. P.S. These could be nuclear tipped. Do you really want to take that risk?"

Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council that is chaired by Putin, stepped up the rhetoric by posting a video of the missile attack on Ukraine and chastising the West.

"So, that's what you wanted? Well, you've damn well got it! A hypersonic ballistic missile attack," he posted on X.

What was the response of Ukraine and the West?

In a speech to the nation, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy denounced the attack and accused Moscow of using Ukraine as a testing ground for its new weapon.

"Today, our insane neighbor has once again shown what they truly are, and how they despise dignity, freedom, and human life itself. And how terrified they are," he said.

Two U.S. officials who were not authorized to comment publicly about the sensitive matter and thus spoke on condition of anonymity said Russia only has a few of this type of experimental missile in its possession and it is not a capability that is expected to be regularly deployed against Ukraine.

U.K. Defense Secretary John Healey told lawmakers that the war was at "a serious moment," and "the front line is now less stable than at any time" since the conflict began.

"We have seen in recent weeks a very clear escalation from Putin and his forces," he said. "They have stepped up attacks on the energy system in Ukraine ahead of winter, they have stepped up attacks on civilian centers killing children, they have deployed at least 10,000 North Korean troops to the battle front line."

## **SEC Chair Gary Gensler, who led US crackdown on cryptocurrencies, to step down**

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN and STAN CHOE AP Business Writers

Securities and Exchange Commission Chair Gary Gensler, who was aggressive in his oversight of cryptocurrencies and other financial markets, will step down from his post on Jan. 20.

Gensler pushed changes that he said protected investors, but the industry and many Republicans bristled at what they saw as overreach.

President-elect Donald Trump had promised during his campaign that he would remove Gensler. But Gensler on Thursday announced that he would be stepping down from his post on the day that Trump is inaugurated.

Bitcoin has jumped 40% since Trump's victory. It hit new highs Thursday and was nearing \$100,000. Bitcoin moved notably higher still after Gensler's resignation was announced.

Gensler's stance on the rise of cryptocurrencies was captured during a speech he gave during the first year of his chairmanship in 2021 where he described the market as "the Wild West."

"This asset class is rife with fraud, scams, and abuse in certain applications," he said in a speech at the Aspen Security Forum. "There's a great deal of hype and spin about how crypto assets work. In many cases, investors aren't able to get rigorous, balanced, and complete information."

Under Gensler, the SEC brought actions against players in the crypto industry for fraud, wash trading and other violations, including as recently as last month when the commission brought fraud charges against three companies purporting to be market makers, along with nine individuals for trying to manipulate various crypto markets.

Yet access to cryptocurrencies became more widespread under Gensler. In January, the SEC approved exchange-traded funds that track the spot price of bitcoin. With such ETFs, investors could get easier access to bitcoin without the huge overlays required to buy it directly.

Gensler, however, acknowledged the SEC had denied earlier, similar applications for such ETFs, including Grayscale Bitcoin Trust, among the first to eventually be approved by the SEC.

"Circumstances, however, have changed," Gensler said, pointing to a ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia that said the SEC failed to adequately explain its reasoning in rejecting Grayscale's proposal.

Even there, Gensler made sure not to endorse the merits of bitcoin. He pointed to how ETFs that hold precious metals are tracking prices of things that have "consumer and industrial users, while in contrast bitcoin is primarily a speculative, volatile asset that's also used for illicit activity including ransomware,

money laundering, sanction evasion, and terrorist financing.”

Gensler was tested early in his tenure with the rise of the meme stock phenomenon that shocked the financial system in early 2021. Earlier this year, the SEC under Gensler pushed Wall Street to speed up how long it takes for trades of stocks to settle, one of the areas where the commission’s staff recommended changes following the reckoning created by GameStop, one of the first meme stocks.

In the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, hordes of smaller-pocketed and novice investors suddenly piled into the stock of the struggling video-game retailer. During the height of the frenzy, several brokerages barred customers from buying GameStop after the clearinghouse that settles their trades demanded more cash to cover the increased risk created by its highly volatile price.

In May 2024, new rules meant broker-dealers have to fully settle their trades within one business day of the trade date, down from the previous two.

Critics of the SEC under Gensler have called many of the agency’s proposals overly burdensome.

The investment industry, for example, is pushing against a proposal to force some advisers and companies disclose more about their environmental, social and governance practices, otherwise known as ESG. Critics say the proposal is overly complex and increases the risk of investor confusion, while imposing unnecessary burdens and costs on funds.

On Thursday, Gensler stood by the SEC’s track record under his direction.

“The staff and the Commission are deeply mission-driven, focused on protecting investors, facilitating capital formation, and ensuring that the markets work for investors and issuers alike,” Gensler said in prepared remarks. “The staff comprises true public servants.”

Gensler previously served as Chair of the U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission, leading the Obama Administration’s reform of the \$400 trillion swaps market. He also was senior advisor to U.S. Senator Paul Sarbanes in writing the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (2002) and was undersecretary of the Treasury for Domestic Finance and assistant secretary of the Treasury from 1997-2001.

## **Several of Trump’s Cabinet picks — and Trump himself — have been accused of sexual misconduct**

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — While Matt Gaetz has withdrawn from the nomination process for attorney general, President-elect Donald Trump has picked several other people for his Cabinet and key staff positions who have been accused of some form of sexual misconduct.

Trump himself has long been accused of abusing or mistreating women and once was caught bragging about grabbing women by the genitals. He was found liable by a New York City jury for sexual abuse and defamation and eventually ordered to pay the woman, E. Jean Carroll, \$83 million in damages.

Taken together, there are a striking number of incidents in which potential high-ranking government officials in Trump’s second administration face allegations of sexual abuse. Trump and all of his picks for government have denied the claims against them, with some of the people accused arguing the cases are driven by politics.

Here’s a look at what’s known about the cases:

President-elect Donald Trump

Jurors in New York last year found Trump liable for sexually abusing Carroll, an advice columnist, in 1996.

The verdict was split: Jurors rejected Carroll’s claim that she was raped, finding Trump responsible for a lesser degree of sexual abuse. Jurors also found Trump liable for defaming Carroll over her allegations. Trump did not attend the civil trial and was absent when the verdict was read.

Carroll was one of more than a dozen women who have accused Trump of sexual assault or harassment. She went public in a 2019 memoir with her allegation that the Republican raped her in the dressing room of a posh Manhattan department store.

Trump denied it, saying he never encountered Carroll at the store and did not know her. He has called her a “nut job” who invented “a fraudulent and false story” to sell a memoir. He has similarly denied claims

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by other women.

Pete Hegseth, nominee for secretary of defense

A woman told police that she was sexually assaulted in 2017 by Hegseth after he took her phone, blocked the door to a California hotel room and refused to let her leave, according to a detailed investigative report made public this week.

Hegseth told police at the time that the encounter had been consensual and denied any wrongdoing, the report said.

News of the allegations surfaced last week when local officials released a brief statement confirming that a woman had accused Hegseth of sexual assault in October 2017 after he had spoken at a Republican women's event in Monterey.

Hegseth's lawyer, Timothy Parlatore, said in a statement that the police report confirms "what I have said all along that the incident was fully investigated and police found the allegations to be false, which is why no charges were filed."

Parlatore said a payment was made to the woman as part of a confidential settlement a few years after the police investigation because Hegseth was concerned that she was prepared to file a lawsuit that he feared could have resulted in him being fired from Fox News, where he was a popular host. Parlatore would not reveal the amount of the payment.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., nominee for secretary of health and human services

A woman who babysat for Kennedy and his second wife told Vanity Fair magazine that he groped her in the late 1990s, when she was 23. Kennedy did not deny the allegation, telling a podcast: "I had a very, very rambunctious youth." He texted the woman an apology after the story was published.

According to an interview the woman gave this week with USA Today, she said she was babysitting for his children at Kennedy's home in Mount Kisco, New York. She said that the assault happened soon after she began working there. During a kitchen table meeting with Kennedy and another person, she said she felt him rubbing her leg under the table.

She told the newspaper that another time, Kennedy, then 46, asked her to rub lotion on him when he was shirtless and she obliged because she wanted to get it over with. And he grabbed her in a kitchen pantry and groped her, blocking her exit. She stayed on the job for a few more months before leaving.

Linda McMahon, nominee for secretary of education

A lawsuit filed last month alleges that McMahon knowingly enabled sexual exploitation of children by a World Wrestling Entertainment employee as early as the 1980s. She denies the allegations.

The suit was filed in October in Maryland, where a recent law change eliminated the state's statute of limitations for child sex abuse claims, opening the doors for victims to sue regardless of their age or how much time has passed.

The complaint alleges that Melvin Phillips, who died in 2012, would target young men from disadvantaged backgrounds and hire them as "ring boys" to help with the preparations for wrestling matches. Phillips would then assault them in his dressing room, hotels and even in the wrestlers' locker room, according to the complaint, which was filed on behalf of five men.

The abuse detailed in the lawsuit occurred over several years during Phillips' long tenure with the organization spanning from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Because of his death, Phillips is not among the named defendants.

Instead, the complaint targets WWE founders Linda McMahon and her husband Vince, who grew the organization into the powerhouse it is today. The couple was well aware of Phillips' brazen misconduct but did little to stop him, according to the complaint.

"This civil lawsuit based upon thirty-plus year-old allegations is filled with scurrilous lies, exaggerations, and misrepresentations regarding Linda McMahon," said Laura Brevetti, Linda McMahon's lawyer, in a statement. "The matter at the time was investigated by company attorneys and the FBI, which found no grounds to continue the investigation. Ms. McMahon will vigorously defend against this baseless lawsuit and without doubt ultimately succeed."

Brevetti confirmed Linda and Vince McMahon are separated.



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Elon Musk, Trump's choice to lead the new Department of Government Efficiency  
Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk was accused of sexual misconduct by a flight attendant contracted by SpaceX who worked on his private jet in 2016. He denied the claim.

A 2022 report by Business Insider said SpaceX paid the woman \$250,000 in severance in 2018 in exchange for her agreeing not to file a lawsuit over her claim.

The Business Insider report was based on an account by the flight attendant's friend, who said the flight attendant told her about the incident shortly after it happened. The report also said the flight attendant was required to sign a non-disclosure agreement that prohibits her from discussing the payment or anything else about Musk and SpaceX.

SpaceX didn't respond to emails seeking comment Friday.

Musk responded to the allegations on Twitter, which he was in the process of buying at the time they surfaced.

"And, for the record, those wild accusations are utterly untrue," he wrote in response to one user who tweeted in support of him.

He replied to another: "In my 30 year career, including the entire MeToo era, there's nothing to report, but, as soon as I say I intend to restore free speech to Twitter & vote Republican, suddenly there is ..."

Matt Gaetz, who withdrew as Trump's choice for attorney general

The former Florida congressman was embroiled in a sex trafficking investigation by the Justice Department he had been tapped to lead. He also was under scrutiny by the House Ethics Committee over allegations including sexual misconduct — until he resigned from Congress this week. He then withdrew his name for consideration.

Gaetz has vehemently denied any wrongdoing and said last year that the Justice Department's investigation into sex trafficking allegations involving underage girls had ended with no federal charges against him.

Federal investigators scrutinized a trip that Gaetz took to the Bahamas with a group of women and a doctor who donated to his campaign, and whether the women were paid or received gifts to have sex with the men, according to people familiar with the matter who were not allowed to publicly discuss the investigation.

Two women House investigators that Gaetz paid them for sex and one of the women testified she saw him having sex with a 17-year-old, according to an attorney for the women.

The committee began its review of Gaetz in April 2021, deferred its work in response to a Justice Department request, and renewed its work shortly after Gaetz announced that the Justice Department had ended a sex trafficking investigation.

## **The FBI and DHS leaders won't testify publicly about national security threats before the Senate**

By ERIC TUCKER and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The leaders of the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security declined to testify publicly at a scheduled Senate committee hearing Thursday on global threats to national security, a break from standard protocol of open testimony before the panel.

"Their choice to not provide public testimony about their departments' efforts to address wide-ranging national security threats robs the American people of critical information and the opportunity for public accountability of what the federal government is doing to keep Americans safe," Sen. Gary Peters, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee, said in a statement.

The Michigan Democrat said it was the first time in more than 15 years that an FBI director and Homeland Security secretary had together refused to offer public testimony at the annual committee hearing focused on threats to the homeland, calling it a "shocking departure" from tradition.

A separate hearing scheduled for Wednesday before the House Homeland Security committee also was postponed.

The hearings were to have taken place at a time of significant political transition as Trump is interview-

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ing candidates to replace FBI Director Christopher Wray and has named South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to succeed Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

The threats hearings are an opportunity for members of Congress to hear from these agencies about what they see as key threats facing the nation ranging from weapons of mass destruction to natural disasters.

It's usually the head of the agency that appears although not always. During the first Trump administration when there was frequent turnover at the Department of Homeland Security, DHS Under Secretary David Glawe appeared 2019. Acting Deputy Secretary Kenneth Cuccinelli appeared in 2020 during the pandemic when some members of the panel appeared virtually.

The Senate committee usually starts scheduling its annual hearing months in advance, and previous hearings have always included a public component. The committee was informed Monday that Mayorkas and Wray would not be appearing.

In a statement Thursday, the FBI said it had "repeatedly demonstrated our commitment to responding to Congressional oversight and being transparent with the American people" and remained "committed to sharing information about the continuously evolving threat environment facing our nation.

"FBI leaders have testified extensively in public settings about the current threat environment and believe the Committee would benefit most from further substantive discussions and additional information that can only be provided in a classified setting," the statement said.

The Department of Homeland Security said in a statement that they and the FBI offered to speak to the committee in a classified setting and emphasized the amount of unclassified information they've already shared publicly.

"DHS and the FBI already have shared with the Committee and other Committees, and with the American public, extensive unclassified information about the current threat environment, including the recently published Homeland Threat Assessment. DHS takes seriously its obligation to respond to Congressional requests for testimony," the department said.

The agency also noted that Mayorkas has testified in Congress 30 times during the nearly four years he's held his job.

## US towns plunge into debates about fluoride in water

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For about 50 years, adding cavity-preventing fluoride to drinking water was a popular public health measure in Yorktown, a leafy town north of New York City.

But in September, the town's supervisor used his emergency powers to stop the practice.

The reason? A recent federal judge's decision that ordered U.S. regulators to consider the risk that fluoride in water could cause lower IQ in kids.

"It's too dangerous to look at and just say 'Ah, screw it. We'll keep going on,'" said the town supervisor, Ed Lachterman.

Yorktown isn't alone. The decision to add fluoride to drinking water rests with state and local officials, and fights are cropping up nationwide.

Communities in Florida, Texas, Oregon, Utah, Wyoming and elsewhere have debated the idea in recent months — the total number is in the dozens, with several deciding to stop adding it to drinking water, according to Fluoride Action Network, an advocacy organization against water fluoridation. In Arkansas, legislators this week filed a bill to repeal the state's fluoridation program.

The debates have been ignited or fueled by three developments:

—In August, a federal agency reported "with moderate confidence" that there is a link between high levels of fluoride exposure — more than twice the recommended limit — and lower IQ in kids.

—In September, the federal judge ordered the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to further regulate fluoride in drinking water because high levels could pose a risk to the intellectual development of children.

—This month, just days before the election, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. declared that Donald Trump would push to remove fluoride from drinking water on his first day as president. Trump later picked Kennedy to run the Department of Health and Human Services.

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In Durango, Colorado, there was an unsuccessful attempt to stop fluoridating the water during Trump's first term in office. A new push came this year, as Trump saw a surge of political support.

"It's just kind of the ebb and flow of politics on the national level that ultimately affects us down here," said city spokesman Tom Sluis.

Fluoride is a public health success story but opposition persists

Fluoride strengthens teeth and reduces cavities by replacing minerals lost during normal wear and tear, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 1950, federal officials endorsed water fluoridation to prevent tooth decay, and the addition of low levels of fluoride to drinking water has long been considered one of the greatest public health achievements of the last century.

Fluoride can come from a number of sources, but drinking water is the main source for Americans, researchers say. Nearly two-thirds of the U.S. population gets fluoridated drinking water, according to CDC data.

There is a recommended fluoridation level, but many communities exceed that, sometimes because fluoride occurs naturally at higher levels in certain water sources.

Opposition is nothing new, though for decades it was considered a fringe opinion. Adherents included conspiracy theorists who claimed fluoridation was a plot to make people submissive to government power.

Health officials could point to studies that showed that cavities were less common in communities with fluoridated water, and that dental health worsened in communities without it.

But fluoride isn't just in water. Through the years it became common in toothpaste, mouthwash and other products. And data began to emerge that there could be too much of a good thing: In 2011, officials reported that 2 out of 5 U.S. adolescents had at least mild tooth streaking or spottiness because of too much fluoride.

In 2015, the CDC recommended that communities revisit how much they were putting in the water. Beginning in 1962, the government recommended a range of 0.7 milligrams per liter for warmer climates where people drink more water to 1.2 milligrams in cooler areas. The new standard became 0.7 everywhere.

Over time, more studies pointed to a different problem: a link between higher levels of fluoride and brain development. The August report by the federal government's National Toxicology Program — summarizing studies conducted in Canada, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Mexico — concluded that drinking water containing more than 1.5 milligrams of fluoride per liter was associated with lower IQs in kids.

"There's no question that fluoride prevents cavities," said Dr. Tom Frieden, who was director of the CDC when the agency changed the recommended fluoride levels. "There's also no question we're getting more fluoride than we were 50 years ago, through toothpaste and other things."

Frieden said "a legitimate question" has been raised about whether fluoride affects brain development, and studies making that link "need to be looked at carefully."

U.S. towns wrestle with what to do

Many people in health care strongly embrace water fluoridation. The American Dental Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirmed their endorsement of current CDC recommendations in the wake of the federal report and the judge's ruling.

Colorado's health department, which weighed in during a Nov. 5 Durango city council meeting, said in a statement that it "seeks to align its public health recommendations with the latest scientific research. The facts of this court ruling are not sufficient" to revise current fluoridation levels.

Durango officials are waiting to see what the EPA does in reaction to the recent court decision, said Sluis, the city spokesman.

"We follow the science," he said. "It wouldn't be in the best interest of the city to stop fluoridation based on one judge's interpretation."

In Yorktown, Lachterman concluded the judge's decision was enough to halt fluoridation. He recalled a community discussion several years ago in which most people in the room clearly favored fluoridation, but recently it seems public comment has reversed.

"It's like a total 180," he said.

But not all public pressure these days is against the idea.

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In September, Buffalo, New York, announced it would resume water fluoridation after not having it for nearly a decade. News reports had described an increase in tooth decay and families sued, seeking damages for dental costs.

The Buffalo Sewer Authority's general manager, Oluwole McFoy declined to discuss the decision with The Associated Press, citing the litigation.

For its part, the EPA "is in the process of reviewing the district court's decision," spokesman Jeff Landis said this week.

Debates have become heated

In Monroe, Wisconsin, fluoridation "has become a very hot issue," said its mayor, Donna Douglas.

The small city, near Madison, started fluoridating its drinking water in the early 1960s. But in the late summer, some residents began calling and emailing Douglas, saying she needed to do something about what they saw as a public health danger. The first call "was more like a threat," she recalled.

Douglas said she did not take a position on whether to stop, but decided to raise it to the city council for discussion. The discussions were unusually emotional.

Few people tend to speak during public comment sessions at council meetings, said Douglas. But more than two dozen people spoke at a city council meeting last month, most of them in favor of fluoridation. At a subsequent meeting, about a dozen more people — all opposed to fluoridation — came out to speak.

"This is the first time we've had any debates at all" like this, Douglas said. "I didn't realize it would be such a heated discussion."

## Shares in India's Adani Group plunge 20% after US bribery, fraud indictments

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — One of Asia's richest men, Indian tycoon Gautam Adani, is again in the spotlight. His companies' stocks plunged up to 20% in value Thursday after he was indicted by U.S. prosecutors on charges that he duped investors in a massive solar energy project in India by concealing that it was being facilitated by bribes.

In an indictment unsealed in New York, Adani, 62, was charged with securities fraud and conspiracy to commit securities and wire fraud. Seven other executives connected to Adani's business empire also face charges. The indictment alleges a scheme to pay about \$265 million in bribes to government officials in India.

The full impact of the case on Adani's businesses is not yet known. Kenya's president on Thursday canceled the tycoon's multimillion dollar deals for airport modernization and energy projects.

The Adani group, meanwhile, decided not to proceed with a proposed U.S. dollar-denominated bond offering. Adani Renewables announced the decision in letters to the Bombay Stock Exchange and the National Stock Exchange of India.

In a statement, the group said the allegations against directors of Adani Green "are baseless and denied."

U.S. prosecutors said they brought the charges to protect investors. Deputy Assistant Attorney General Lisa Miller said in statement that the Department of Justice "will continue to aggressively prosecute corrupt, deceptive, and obstructive conduct that violates U.S. law, no matter where in the world it occurs."

None of the people charged in the U.S. have been arrested, prosecutors said.

Who is Gautam Adani?

Adani is the son of a middle-class family in Ahmedabad in western India's Gujarat state. He quit college to become a diamond trader in Mumbai, India's financial capital. In the 1980s, he started importing plastics before establishing Adani Enterprises, which traded in everything from shoes to buckets and remains his flagship company.

India opened up its economy in the 1990s and a new middle class emerged as tens of millions of people escaped poverty, prompting Adani to bet on infrastructure and coal.

Adani's first big project, the Mundra port in Gujarat, opened in 1998 and is now India's largest. Adani Ports



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and Special Economic Zone Ltd. is India's biggest private port operator. Within a decade, Adani became India's largest developer and operator of coal mines. According to Adani Power's website, it has expanded to Australia and Indonesia and has ambitions to become one of the world's largest mining groups.

India's second-largest conglomerate operates airports in major cities, builds roads, generates electricity, manufactures defense equipment, develops agricultural drones, sells cooking oil and runs a media outlet.

How Adani became Asia's richest man

Adani's net worth shot up about 2,000% in recent years as share prices for his listed companies soared.

Before Modi took office, Adani was friendly with the rival Congress Party, which governed Gujarat state when many of his early projects began. Adani has been "close to every politician in power," R N Bhaskar, a journalist who wrote a biography on Adani, told The Associated Press.

Adani's supporters say he has cleverly aligned the group's priorities with those of the government by investing in key industries like renewable energy, defense, and agriculture. His projects overseas, in strategically important countries like neighboring Sri Lanka, help New Delhi compete with rival Beijing in the region.

Why is Adani controversial?

Adani is considered close to the Hindu nationalist government. The political opposition has long accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of having close ties with the tycoon. They both hail from the western state of Gujarat.

The businessman's critics say much of his success stems from his close ties to the government and Modi. For example, they have accused the government of adjusting bidding rules to make it easier for Adani to win contracts to operate airports. The company denies this, saying contracts were won fairly.

Opposition Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi called for Adani's arrest and has accused Modi of protecting him.

India's main opposition also demanded a parliamentary committee probe into Adani Group dealings, which Jairam Ramesh, a leader of the Congress Party, said are causing "growing monopolization in key sectors of the Indian economy, fueling inflation, and posing huge foreign policy challenges as well."

When did allegations of wrongdoing surface?

Last year, the Adani companies lost \$68 billion in market value after short-selling firm Hindenburg Research accused Adani of "pulling the largest con in corporate history," triggering a massive sell-off of the group's stocks.

U.S.-based Hindenburg accused Adani companies of stock price manipulation and fraud just as the group began a share offering meant to raise \$2.5 billion.

The Adani group dismissed Hindenburg's allegations, saying none were "based on independent or journalistic fact finding." Adani's response included documents and data tables and it said the group had made all necessary regulatory disclosures and has abided by local laws.

What happens next?

Adani and five of the six other defendants live in India, which has an extradition treaty with the U.S. The other lives in Singapore, which also has an extradition treaty.

The indictment charging Adani and his co-defendants was returned on Oct. 24, but it remained under seal and out of public view until Wednesday.

On Oct. 31, court records show, U.S. prosecutors asked, and a judge agreed, to partially unseal Gautam Adani's indictment and arrest warrant "for the limited purpose of providing these documents to foreign law enforcement."

The arrest warrants are not yet publicly available.

U.S. officials could ask their foreign counterparts to detain the defendants and then send them to New York, where they would have to appear in a federal court for arraignment and other proceedings. As of Thursday, no court hearings had been scheduled.

## What you need to know about the proposed measures designed to curb Google's search monopoly

U.S. regulators are proposing aggressive measures to restore competition to the online search market after a federal judge ruled Google maintained an illegal monopoly for the last decade.

The sweeping set of recommendations filed late Wednesday by the U.S. Department of Justice could radically alter Google's business, including possibly spinning off the Chrome web browser and syndicating its search data to competitors. Even if the courts adopt the blueprint, Google isn't likely to make any significant changes until 2026 at the earliest, because of the legal system's slow-moving wheels.

Here's what it all means:

What is the Justice Department's goal?

Federal prosecutors are cracking down on Google in a case originally filed during near the end of then-President Donald Trump's first term. Officials say the main goal of these proposals is to get Google to stop leveraging its dominant search engine to illegally squelch competition and stifle innovation.

"The playing field is not level because of Google's conduct, and Google's quality reflects the ill-gotten gains of an advantage illegally acquired," the Justice Department asserted in its recommendations. "The remedy must close this gap and deprive Google of these advantages."

Not surprisingly, Google sees things much differently. The Justice Department's "wildly overbroad proposal goes miles beyond the Court's decision," Kent Walker, Google's chief legal officer, asserted in a blog post. "It would break a range of Google products — even beyond search — that people love and find helpful in their everyday lives."

It's still possible that the Justice Department could ease off on its attempts to break up Google, especially if President-elect Donald Trump takes the widely expected step of replacing Jonathan Kanter, who was appointed by President Joe Biden to oversee the agency's antitrust division.

Why focus on Chrome?

Regulators want Google to sell off its industry-leading Chrome web browser, though the filing did not specify who would ultimately buy the business or how that process would work.

Justice lawyers called Chrome a "gateway to the internet" that provides the search giant with data it then uses for targeted advertising. Regulators believe that asking Google to divest Chrome would create a more equal playing field for search competitors.

Chrome also is included in the set of apps bundled with Android on phones as part of a mobile device ecosystem that regulators say gives Google a big edge.

Chrome is the world's most popular mobile web browser, with about 67% adoption globally, according to StatCounter. Apple's Safari browser has the next highest adoption at 18%.

Although it could be years before we see any practical effects of this case on the market, it could mean users would see more search engine options when selecting a default one to use on their favored devices.

Does any of this affect Android?

While federal regulators aren't going as far as to demand Google spin off Android, they are leaving the door open.

The government asked the judge to impose behavioral limitations that would essentially blunt Android from favoring Google's own general search services.

Regulators asserted U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta should make it clear that Google could still be required to divest its smartphone operating system if the other proposed measures prove ineffective at restoring competition to the search market.

Android is the world's most popular smartphone operating system, found on 71% of mobile phones, Statcounter says. It's free to use, so many devices by Samsung and many other tech companies — aside from Apple — have it pre-installed.

What else?

The Justice Department outlined a range of behavioral measures to give rival search engines a better chance at competing with Google.

The core remedy is a ban on Google from cutting deals worth billions of dollars to lock in its search engine as the default option on Apple's iPhone and other popular devices. This could potentially impact the bottom line at companies receiving such packages.

Other key recommendations:

1. Prohibiting Google from using search results to favor its own services, such as YouTube or its recently-launched artificial intelligence platform, Gemini.
2. Forcing Google to license the search index data to its rivals.
3. Requiring Google to be more transparent about how it sets the prices advertisers pay to be listed near the top of some targeted search results.
4. Giving publishers, websites and content creators the right to opt out of having their data indexed for Google's search results or to train its artificial intelligence models.

What comes next?

Google has the chance to submit its own list of proposed fixes in December, and federal regulators will file a revised version of their proposals in early March. Court hearings on these proposed measures are scheduled to begin in April and Mehta is expected to issue a final decision before Labor Day.

The remedies trial will take place after the Trump administration takes over from Biden in January and assumes oversight of the Department of Justice, which could impact the punishments it ultimately pursues.

Although Trump has made comments suggesting a breakup of Google isn't in the U.S. national interest, recent nominations put forward by his transition team have favored those who have been critical of Big Tech companies. And the case was originally filed during Trump's first term, which suggests Google won't be entirely off the hook.

Google is expected to appeal the case after the remedy hearings, which means the case could drag on for years in the courts.

## **Elon Musk's budget crusade could cause a constitutional clash in Trump's second term**

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Elon Musk first suggested a new effort to cut the size of government, Donald Trump didn't seem to take it seriously. His eventual name for the idea sounded like a joke too. It would be called the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, a reference to an online meme featuring a surprised-looking dog from Japan.

But now that Trump has won the election, Musk's fantasy is becoming reality, with the potential to spark a constitutional clash over the balance of power in Washington.

Trump put Musk, the world's richest man, and Vivek Ramaswamy, an entrepreneur and former Republican presidential candidate, in charge of the new department, which is really an outside advisory committee that will work with people inside the government to reduce spending and regulations.

This week, Musk and Ramaswamy said they would encourage Trump to make cuts by refusing to spend money allocated by Congress, a process known as impounding. The proposal goes against a 1974 law intended to prevent future presidents from following in the footsteps of Richard Nixon, who held back funding that he didn't like.

"We are prepared for the onslaught from entrenched interests in Washington," Musk and Ramaswamy wrote in an opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal*. "We expect to prevail. Now is the moment for decisive action."

Trump has already suggested taking such a big step, saying last year that he would "use the president's long-recognized impoundment power to squeeze the bloated federal bureaucracy for massive savings."

It would be a dramatic attempt to expand his powers, when he already will have the benefit of a sympathetic Republican-controlled Congress and a conservative-majority U.S. Supreme Court, and it could swiftly become one of the most closely watched legal fights of his second administration.

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"He might get away with it," said William Galston, a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based think tank. "Congress' power of the purse will turn into an advisory opinion."

Musk and Ramaswamy have started laying out their plans

Right now, plans for the Department of Government Efficiency are still coming into focus. The nascent organization has put out a call for "super high-IQ small-government revolutionaries willing to work 80+ hours per week on unglamorous cost-cutting." Applicants are encouraged to submit their resumes through X, the social media company that Musk owns.

In the Wall Street Journal, Musk and Ramaswamy provided the most detailed look yet at how they would operate and where they could cut. Some are longtime Republican targets, such as \$535 million for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Other plans are more ambitious and could reshape the federal government. The two wrote that they would "identify the minimum number of employees required at an agency for it to perform its constitutionally permissible and statutorily mandated functions," leading to "mass head-count reductions across the federal bureaucracy."

Civil service protections wouldn't apply, they argue, because they wouldn't be targeting specific people for political purposes.

Some employees could choose "voluntary severance payments to facilitate a graceful exit." But others would be encouraged to quit by mandating that they show up at the office five days a week, ending pandemic-era flexibility about remote work. The requirement "would result in a wave of voluntary terminations that we welcome."

Everett Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees, said such cutbacks would harm services for Americans who rely on the federal government, and he suggested that Musk and Ramaswamy were in over their heads.

"I don't think they're even remotely qualified to perform those duties," he said. "That's my main concern."

Kelley said his union, which represents 750,000 employees for the federal government and the city of Washington, D.C., was ready to fight attempts to slash the workforce.

"We've been here, we've heard this kind of rhetoric before," he said. "And we are prepared."

Federal regulations would be targeted for elimination

There was no mention in the Wall Street Journal of Musk's previously stated goal of cutting \$2 trillion from the budget, which is nearly a third of total annual spending. Nor did they write about "Schedule F," a potential plan to reclassify federal employees to make them easier to fire. Ramaswamy once described the idea as the "mass deportation of federal bureaucrats out of Washington, D.C."

However, Musk and Ramaswamy said they would reduce regulations that they describe as excessive. They wrote that their department "will work with legal experts embedded in government agencies, aided by advanced technology," to review regulations that run counter to two recent Supreme Court decisions that were intended to limit federal rulemaking authority.

Musk and Ramaswamy said Trump could "immediately pause the enforcement of those regulations and initiate the process for review and rescission."

Chris Edwards, an expert on budget issues at the Cato Institute, said many Republicans have promised to reduce the size and role of government over the years, often to little effect. Sometimes it feels like every budget item and tax provision, no matter how obscure, has people dedicated to its preservation, turning attempts at cuts into political battles of attrition.

"Presidents always seem to have higher priorities," he said. "A lot of it falls to the wayside."

Although DOGE is scheduled to finish its work by July 4, 2026, Edwards said Musk and Ramaswamy should move faster to capitalize on momentum from Trump's election victory.

"Will it just collect dust on a shelf, or will it be put into effect?" Edwards said. "That all depends on Trump and where he is at that point in time."

Ramaswamy said in an online video that they're planning regular "Dogecasts" to keep the public updated on their work, which he described as "a once-in-a-generation project" to eliminate "waste, fraud and abuse."



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"However bad you think it is, it's probably worse," he said.

Musk and Ramaswamy will have allies in Congress

House Republicans are expected to put Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Trump ally from Georgia, in charge of a subcommittee to work with DOGE, according to two people with knowledge of the plans who were not authorized to discuss them publicly. Greene and Rep. James Comer, the Kentucky Republican who chairs the House Oversight Committee, have already met with Ramaswamy, the two people said.

Musk brought up the idea for DOGE while broadcasting a conversation with Trump on X during the campaign.

"I think we need a government efficiency commission to say like, 'Hey, where are we spending money that's sensible. Where is it not sensible?'" Musk said.

Musk returned to the topic twice, volunteering his services by saying "I'd be happy to help out on such a commission."

"I'd love it," Trump replied, describing Musk as "the greatest cutter."

Musk has his own incentives to push this initiative forward. His companies, including SpaceX and Tesla, have billions of dollars in government contracts and face oversight from government regulators.

After spending an estimated \$200 million to support Trump's candidacy, he's poised to have expansive influence over the next administration. Trump even went to Texas earlier this week to watch SpaceX test its largest rocket.

DOGE will have an ally in Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican who has railed against federal spending for years. He recently told Fox News that he sent "2,000 pages of waste that can be cut" to Musk and Ramaswamy.

"I'm all in and will do anything I can to help them," Paul said.

## Was it all a joke? How stand-up comedy helped reelect Trump

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

Did stand-up comedians help reelect Donald Trump?

Not a joke, as outgoing President Joe Biden might say.

Trump has been the butt of countless late-night monologues and "Saturday Night Live" sketches for the better part of a decade, as much of Hollywood tracked the highs and lows of his political career with revulsion and ridicule.

But in the weeks leading up to Election Day, he sat for interviews with podcasting comedians who occupy an increasingly popular space where political discourse is mediated through roast-style insults, right-leaning conspiracy theories and mockery of the left.

"They're all sort of simultaneously entertainers and influencers and pundits and — I've argued, propagandists — who have massive, loyal fanbases," said Seth Simons, a journalist who writes a newsletter about the comedy industry's darker side.

The Trump era has coincided with the rise of the hourlong Netflix special and comedy podcast. And while the world of stand-up is as diverse as the nation itself, some of its hottest acts have punched left.

Dave Chappelle has repeatedly courted controversy by mocking transgender activists. Bill Burr has roasted feminists with relish, most recently in his post-election "SNL" monologue ("All right, ladies, you're 0-2 against this guy"). Even Michelle Wolf, who famously roasted Trump at the 2018 White House Correspondents Dinner, has an extended riff in her 2022 special critiquing #MeToo, calling it "the worst-run movement I've ever seen."

None of these comics publicly supported Trump, but nonetheless trained their fire on the so-called woke left, a bogeyman of Trump's campaign.

Trump got a warm welcome — but not everyone was amused

That's what seems to have brought Trump, a veteran TV entertainer himself, into the studios of Joe Rogan, the nation's most listened-to podcaster, and other comedians.

He discussed addiction and the opioid crisis with Theo Von, who told the past and future president that

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"cocaine will turn you into a damn owl, homie." On another podcast, Andrew Schulz and Akaash Singh laughed out loud as Trump went through his nicknames for political rivals — like "Comrade Kamala" Harris — and recounted his near-assassination.

Politicians have long sought to reach voters on alternative platforms. Former President Barack Obama slow jammed the news with Jimmy Fallon, who ruffled Trump's hair in 2016. Both Obama and Hillary Clinton appeared on Zach Galifianakis' web series "Between Two Ferns." Harris appeared on "SNL" days before the election and sat with an array of more earnest podcasters, with less evident success.

For Trump, the podcasts were part of a larger effort to reach young male voters — a tactic he says his son Barron, 18, suggested. More than half of male voters ages 18-44 supported Trump, and 45% supported Harris, although Biden won this group in 2020, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters.

While politicians' late-night appearances tend to be carefully scripted affairs, Rogan interviewed Trump for a whopping three hours in a conversation that veered from false claims about the 2020 election to speculation about UFOs and John F. Kennedy's assassination. Rogan, who supported Bernie Sanders in 2020, subsequently endorsed Trump this cycle.

Trump's interviewers aren't political comedians; they're just as likely to chat about internet curiosities, mixed martial arts or weightlifting. Their views seem primarily rooted in suspicion of the establishment, devotion to free speech and openness to alternative — and often unfounded — theories about things like vaccines and immigration.

That may have led them to see Trump as a kindred spirit.

"The rebels are Republicans now. You want to be a rebel, you want to be punk rock, you want to like buck the system, you're a conservative now," Rogan said during the interview, which has nearly 50 million views on YouTube.

Simons says Rogan and his acolytes, consciously or not, have shifted what's acceptable in comedy rightward.

"The relationship that people have with these roast comics, these comics who tell racist jokes or sexist jokes, is that they don't mean what they say, it's just funny," Simons said.

Marc Maron, whose podcast "WTF" helped birth the genre, called out his fellow comics in a blog post after the Rogan interview.

"The anti-woke flank of the new fascism is being driven almost exclusively by comics, my peers," Maron wrote. "When comedians with podcasts have shameless, self-proclaimed white supremacists and fascists on their show to joke around like they are just entertainers or even just politicians, all it does is humanize and normalize fascism."

A fractured media landscape

It wasn't always like this.

Johnny Carson, the king of late night for three decades until his 1992 retirement, steered clear of political controversies to cultivate a mass audience. This was also when most Americans got their news from the "Big Three" television networks.

Fast forward to today: Left-leaning hosts of comedy shows across many channels deliver nightly polemics interspersed with news clips. To their critics, comedians like Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and John Oliver are indistinguishable from MSNBC commentators.

Comedian Wayne Federman, the author of a history of stand-up, says these hosts can only draw a fraction of Carson's viewers, removing the economic incentive to appeal widely.

"As most late-night hosts seemed openly aligned with (the Democratic National Committee), a market niche opened in the podcast space. Enter Joe Rogan," he said.

Rogan's show, for which he landed an estimated \$250 million deal with Spotify, has become a springboard for up-and-coming comics.

"For a lot of comedians right now, following in Joe Rogan's footsteps and trying to be in his world and emulate him is a smart career move," Simons said. "I think that's partly why there are so many Andrew

Schulzes and Theo Vons.”

Presidential candidate or insult comic?

Beyond his podcast appearances, Trump may have benefited more subtly from stand-up’s proliferation. Much was made of Trump’s extemporaneous speaking style — what he referred to as “the weave” — in which his hourlong speeches meandered through stories, digressions, movie references and obscenities.

As political speech, it was unconventional, but it bore many of stand-up’s hallmarks: deliberate provocations, trademark punchlines and callbacks eventually wrapping it all together.

“Because some of the things he says seem like they’re so off-center, people take it as a joke,” said Shilpa Davé, a University of Virginia professor of media studies. “The kind of comedy that he’s doing doesn’t come off as threatening, it comes off as acceptable.”

It also posed problems for journalists covering his speeches: When he said he would be a dictator for a day, or inveighed against “enemies from within,” or promised to round up and deport millions of immigrants in the U.S. without authorization, was he laying out policies or joking around?

“You can first denounce what journalists do by having called everything they say ‘fake news,’ and then you can denounce what they expose by saying they just don’t get it — the stand-up comedy defense,” said Robert Thompson, a professor of television and popular culture at Syracuse University.

There were times when the jokes didn’t land — but they weren’t his. Trump faced outrage after Tony Hinchcliffe, another comedian with a roast-style podcast, referred to Puerto Rico as a “floating island of garbage” and made other racist jokes at a rally. The campaign distanced itself from Hinchcliffe as Puerto Rican celebrities backed Harris and commentators wondered if it would turn off Latino voters.

“Imagine bombing so hard you save america from fascism,” comedian Zack Bornstein posted on X.

But barely a week later, it was Trump who brought the house down.

## **Trump’s incoming chief of staff is a former lobbyist. She’ll face a raft of special interests**

By BRIAN SLODYSKO, JOSHUA GOODMAN and ALAN SUDERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As incoming White House chief of staff, one of Susie Wiles’ vexing challenges will be policing the buffet line of powerful interests who want something from Donald Trump.

It’s a world she knows well. During Trump’s first presidency, she lobbied for many of them.

Trump was first elected on a pledge to “drain the swamp” in Washington. But his transactional approach to the presidency instead ushered in a lobbying boom that showered allies, including Wiles, with lucrative contracts, empowered wealthy business associates and stymied his agenda after his administration was ensnared in a series of influence-peddling scandals.

Now, as Trump prepares to return to power, his victory is likely to embolden those who think they can get his ear, raising the prospect that his second administration could face many of the same perils as his first. That will test the ability of Wiles to manage a growing number of high-powered figures — including Trump’s children, his son-in-law Jared Kushner and billionaires like Elon Musk — who will not be dependent on her for access to him.

The appointment of a former lobbyist to such an important job “bodes very poorly for what we are about to see from the next Trump administration,” said Craig Holman, himself a registered lobbyist for the government watchdog group Public Citizen. “This time around, Trump didn’t even mention ‘draining the swamp.’ ... He’s not even pretending.”

In a statement, Brian Hughes, a spokesman from the Trump transition effort, rejected any suggestion that Wiles’ past as a lobbyist would make her susceptible to pressure.

“Susie Wiles has an undeniable reputation of the highest integrity and steadfast commitment to service both inside and outside government,” Hughes said. “She will bring this same integrity and commitment as she serves President Trump in the White House, and that is exactly why she was selected.”

Wiles’ job won’t be easy

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Wiles' selection as chief of staff was Trump's first announced hire after his win. Wiles co-led the former president's campaign and was widely credited with having run an operation that was far more disciplined than his two previous efforts. Even so, she will have her work cut out for her. Though the job has traditionally entailed policing who has access to the president, Trump chafed at such efforts during his first presidency as he churned through four chiefs of staff.

During his recent victory speech, Trump called Wiles an "Ice Maiden" while praising her as a consummate behind-the-scenes player. She will be the first woman to hold the position.

What is also clear is that Wiles, 67, has successfully managed headstrong men across a lengthy career in politics, government and lobbying. The daughter of NFL player and sportscaster Pat Summerall, Wiles worked for U.S. Rep. Jack Kemp, a conservative icon, in the 1970s, followed by stints on Ronald Reagan's campaign and as a scheduler in his White House.

She later headed to Florida, where she advised two Jacksonville mayors and is credited with helping businessman Rick Scott, now a U.S. senator, win the governor's office. After briefly managing Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman's 2012 presidential campaign, she oversaw Trump's 2016 campaign in Florida, when his win in the state helped him clinch the White House.

Wiles represented a Venezuelan TV network

Wiles was a partner at Ballard Partners, a regional firm that lobbied for Trump's companies in Florida. Shortly after Trump's election, Ballard set up shop in Washington and quickly became a dominant player, pulling in more than \$70 million in lobbying fees during Trump's presidency, representing a who's who of corporate America, lobbying disclosures show.

Many of Wiles' clients were plain vanilla entities with obvious aims — General Motors, a trade group for children's hospitals, homebuilders, and the City of Jacksonville.

One in particular stood out that speaks to the ways, subtle or otherwise, that foreign interests seek to influence U.S. policy. In 2017, Wiles registered as a lobbyist for Globovisión, a Venezuelan TV network owned by Raúl Gorrín, a businessman charged in Miami with money laundering.

Gorrín bought the broadcast company in 2013 and immediately softened its anti-government coverage. He hired Ballard to advise on "general government policies and regulations," lobbying disclosures show. But rather than working with the agencies that oversee telecommunications, Ballard's lobbying was trained on the White House, which would have little say in regulating a foreign broadcaster in the U.S. Globovisión paid Ballard \$800,000 for a year of work.

Gorrín worked to help Venezuelan leaders

Brian Ballard, president of the firm, said that it's clear to him that Gorrín's aims weren't limited to the media business. Gorrín, who owns several luxury properties in Miami, had long positioned himself as a bridge between Venezuela's socialist government and U.S. officials.

By the time Wiles and a team of Ballard lobbyists represented Globovisión, Gorrín was leading a quiet charm offensive for Nicolás Maduro's government that sought closer ties with Trump at a time when the country was facing food shortages, violent crime and hyperinflation. It started before Trump took office when Citgo, a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-owned oil company, kicked in a \$500,000 donation for Trump's inauguration.

"He was a fraud and as soon as we learned he was a fraud, we fired him," said Ballard. "He would ask us to set up a lot of things, in LA and D.C., and then nothing would happen. It was all a fantasy. He just wanted to use our firm."

A few days after Ballard dropped Gorrín in 2018, federal prosecutors unsealed charges against the businessman for allegedly using the U.S. finance system to supply Venezuelan officials with private jets, a yacht and champion show-jumping horses as part of a fake loan scheme perpetrated by insiders to pilfer the state's coffers. Last month, he was charged a second time, also out of Miami, in another scheme to siphon \$1 billion from the state oil company, PDVSA.

Wiles is described as a 'straight shooter'

Ballard said Wiles had almost no role in managing the relationship with Gorrín or several other clients



for which she is listed as a lobbyist. But he praised her as someone who is a highly organized "straight shooter" and "tough as nails" despite her soft demeanor.

"She's the type of person who you want in a foxhole," he said. "She will serve the president well."

During Trump's first term, Maduro engaged in a peacemaking offensive that included attempts to hire at least two other lobbyists. It fizzled out, however. In 2019, the White House slapped crushing oil sanctions on the OPEC nation, closed the U.S. Embassy in Caracas and recognized the head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly as the country's legitimate ruler. Maduro was then indicted in 2020 by the U.S. Justice Department on federal drug trafficking charges out of New York.

Gorrín has long denied any wrongdoing and remains a fugitive. In a brief interview with The Associated Press, he called Wiles a "lady" and said she always acted professionally and humanely.

Ballard called the firm's work for Gorrín a "big mistake." Going forward, Ballard expects access to the White House to be more tightly controlled just as his firm, after a steep learning curve during the first Trump administration, will do a better job vetting potential clients to make sure their interests align with the president's agenda.

"We learned a lot," he says, "and so did the president."

Foreign clients

Globovisión wasn't Wiles' only client with foreign ties.

In early 2019, she registered with the Justice Department as a foreign agent working for one of Nigeria's main political parties for two months. Another client was an auto dealership owned by Shafik Gabr, a wealthy businessman who was in a financial dispute related to selling cars in Egypt with a subsidiary of the German automaker Volkswagen.

Wiles was also a registered lobbyist for the subsidiaries of a multinational gaming company and a Canadian company looking to build a massive copper and gold mine near Alaska's salmon-rich Bristol Bay.

Wiles was hardly an outlier in Trump's Washington, where his eponymously named hotel served as a hub for lobbyists, business leaders and foreign governments looking to rub shoulders with Trump World figures as they sought the president's favor.

Though much of it was part of the normal course of business in Washington, a number of Trump allies and advisers were investigated and charged with crimes linked to their work on behalf of foreign countries and entities.

After becoming Trump's de facto campaign manager in 2022, Wiles kept on lobbying, this time for Mercury, a multinational public affairs and lobbying firm. Most recently she was representing the maker of Swisher Sweets cigars.

## **Pope warns the Vatican pension fund needs urgent reform as employees demand transparency**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis, who has imposed a series of cost-cutting measures across the cash-strapped Vatican, warned Thursday that the city state's troubled pension fund needs urgent reform to guarantee future obligations.

Vatican employees responded by expressing concern that their compensation might be targeted in any further cost-cutting to shore up the pension system, and asked for the fund's finances to be made public.

In a letter to Vatican department heads and cardinals, Francis said he had named a top economic adviser Cardinal Kevin Farrell as a special administrator for the fund, suggesting that decisive, immediate action was necessary.

The letter was the latest evidence of the Vatican's precarious financial situation, after years of mismanagement, financial scandals and budget deficits -- all worsened by COVID-19 and the months-long closures of a key source of revenue, the Vatican Museums.

Already, Francis has cut the salaries of cardinals by 10%, suspended some seniority bonuses, trimmed special stipends for Rome-based cardinals and begun charging some market-rate rents for their apartments.

The pension fund has long been the source of particular concern, and in the new letter Francis acknowledged that the current analysis "indicates a serious prospective imbalance in the fund, the size of which tends to expand over time in the absence of intervention."

"In concrete terms, this means that the current system is unable to guarantee in the medium term the fulfillment of the pension obligation for future generations," he wrote.

The Association of Lay Vatican Employees, the closest thing the Vatican has to a labor union, voiced alarm at Francis' warning about their pensions, insisting that lay employees had already sacrificed enough in his cost-cutting initiatives and that the Vatican leadership should listen to workers' concerns.

"Salaries have not been indexed to the cost of living, while rent increases for Vatican properties have been related to inflation," the group said in a statement that also called for the Vatican to make public the pension fund's balance sheet.

Noting that Francis frequently preaches about the need to give workers dignified wages and pay special attention to the needs of families, the union said employees were "exhausted by cuts and especially by the lack of responses to their legitimate request to be heard."

The Vatican has some 4,500 employees, around 3,100 of whom work for the Holy See bureaucracy and the rest for the Vatican city state itself, in the museums and other offices that run the territory. The union counts some 700 lay employees.

While Vatican salaries are typically low, the benefits can be attractive to Italian laypeople, including tax-free income and access to a private health system, below-market rents and a tax-free supermarket, gas station, pharmacy and department store.

Lay employees, however, have increasingly been raising their voices about cost cuts and overwork. Earlier this year 49 museum employees filed a class-action lawsuit in the Vatican tribunal about labor woes.

The Holy See ended 2023 with a profit of 45.9 million euros, according to the latest financial statement.

As recently as 2015, the pension fund had insisted it was in sound financial health, and that it was expected to top 500 million euros by the end of 2015 after having started out with the equivalent of 5 million euros in 1993.

Farrell, an Irish-born American who heads the Vatican's laity and family office, has increasingly been entrusted with the Vatican's most sensitive financial and administrative issues under Francis. He is the camerlengo, who runs the Holy See after the death of a pope, and heads the investment committee, the commission that deals with the most sensitive "reserved" matters facing the church and is the president of the Vatican city state's supreme court.

## **US regulators seek to break up Google, forcing Chrome sale as part of monopoly punishment**

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

U.S. regulators want a federal judge to break up Google to prevent the company from continuing to squash competition through its dominant search engine after a court found it had maintained an abusive monopoly over the past decade.

The proposed breakup floated in a 23-page document filed late Wednesday by the U.S. Department of Justice calls for sweeping punishments that would include a sale of Google's industry-leading Chrome web browser and impose restrictions to prevent Android from favoring its own search engine.

A sale of Chrome "will permanently stop Google's control of this critical search access point and allow rival search engines the ability to access the browser that for many users is a gateway to the internet," Justice Department lawyers argued in their filing.

Although regulators stopped short of demanding Google sell Android too, they asserted the judge should make it clear the company could still be required to divest its smartphone operating system if its oversight committee continues to see evidence of misconduct.

The broad scope of the recommended penalties underscores how severely regulators operating under President Joe Biden's administration believe Google should be punished following an August ruling by U.S.

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District Judge Amit Mehta that branded the company as a monopolist.

The Justice Department decision-makers who will inherit the case after President-elect Donald Trump takes office next year might not be as strident. The Washington, D.C. court hearings on Google's punishment are scheduled to begin in April and Mehta is aiming to issue his final decision before Labor Day.

If Mehta embraces the government's recommendations, Google would be forced to sell its 16-year-old Chrome browser within six months of the final ruling. But the company certainly would appeal any punishment, potentially prolonging a legal tussle that has dragged on for more than four years.

Besides seeking a Chrome spinoff and a corralling of the Android software, the Justice Department wants the judge to ban Google from forging multibillion-dollar deals to lock in its dominant search engine as the default option on Apple's iPhone and other devices. It would also ban Google from favoring its own services, such as YouTube or its recently-launched artificial intelligence platform, Gemini.

Regulators also want Google to license the search index data it collects from people's queries to its rivals, giving them a better chance at competing with the tech giant. On the commercial side of its search engine, Google would be required to provide more transparency into how it sets the prices that advertisers pay to be listed near the top of some targeted search results.

Kent Walker, Google's chief legal officer, lashed out at the Justice Department for pursuing "a radical interventionist agenda that would harm Americans and America's global technology." In a blog post, Walker warned the "overly broad proposal" would threaten personal privacy while undermining Google's early leadership in artificial intelligence, "perhaps the most important innovation of our time."

Wary of Google's increasing use of artificial intelligence in its search results, regulators also advised Mehta to ensure websites will be able to shield their content from Google's AI training techniques.

The measures, if they are ordered, threaten to upend a business expected to generate more than \$300 billion in revenue this year.

"The playing field is not level because of Google's conduct, and Google's quality reflects the ill-gotten gains of an advantage illegally acquired," the Justice Department asserted in its recommendations. "The remedy must close this gap and deprive Google of these advantages."

It's still possible that the Justice Department could ease off attempts to break up Google, especially if Trump takes the widely expected step of replacing Assistant Attorney General Jonathan Kanter, who was appointed by Biden to oversee the agency's antitrust division.

Although the case targeting Google was originally filed during the final months of Trump's first term in office, Kanter oversaw the high-profile trial that culminated in Mehta's ruling against Google. Working in tandem with Federal Trade Commission Chair Lina Khan, Kanter took a get-tough stance against Big Tech that triggered other attempted crackdowns on industry powerhouses such as Apple and discouraged many business deals from getting done during the past four years.

Trump recently expressed concerns that a breakup might destroy Google but didn't elaborate on alternative penalties he might have in mind. "What you can do without breaking it up is make sure it's more fair," Trump said last month. Matt Gaetz, the former Republican congressman that Trump nominated to be the next U.S. Attorney General, has previously called for the breakup of Big Tech companies.

Gaetz faces a tough confirmation hearing.

This latest filing gave Kanter and his team a final chance to spell out measures that they believe are needed to restore competition in search. It comes six weeks after Justice first floated the idea of a breakup in a preliminary outline of potential penalties.

But Kanter's proposal is already raising questions about whether regulators seek to impose controls that extend beyond the issues covered in last year's trial, and — by extension — Mehta's ruling.

Banning the default search deals that Google now pays more than \$26 billion annually to maintain was one of the main practices that troubled Mehta in his ruling.

It's less clear whether the judge will embrace the Justice Department's contention that Chrome needs to be spun out of Google, and the recommendation that Android should be completely walled off from the company's own search engine.

"It is probably going a little beyond," Syracuse University law professor Shubha Ghosh said of the Chrome breakup. "The remedies should match the harm, it should match the transgression. This does seem a little beyond that pale."

Google rival DuckDuckGo, whose executives testified during last year's trial, asserted the Justice Department is simply doing what needs to be done to rein in a brazen monopolist.

"Undoing Google's overlapping and widespread illegal conduct over more than a decade requires more than contract restrictions: it requires a range of remedies to create enduring competition," Kamyil Bazbaz, DuckDuckGo's senior vice president of public affairs, said in a statement.

Trying to break up Google harks back to a similar punishment initially imposed on Microsoft a quarter century ago following another major antitrust trial that culminated in a federal judge deciding the software maker had illegally used his Windows operating system for PCs to stifle competition.

However, an appeals court overturned an order that would have broken up Microsoft, a precedent many experts believe will make Mehta reluctant to go down a similar road with the Google case.

## Federal Reserve's likely slowdown in rate cuts could disappoint borrowers

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just a few weeks ago, the path ahead for the Federal Reserve looked straightforward: With inflation cooling and the job market slowing, the Fed appeared on track to steadily cut interest rates.

In September, its officials predicted that they would reduce their benchmark rate four times next year, on top of three rate cuts this year.

Yet that outlook has swiftly changed. Several surprisingly strong economic reports, combined with President-elect Donald Trump's policy proposals, have led to a decidedly more cautious tone from the Fed that could mean fewer cuts and higher interest rates than had been expected.

Fewer rate cuts would likely mean continued high mortgage rates and other borrowing costs for consumers and businesses. Auto loans would remain expensive. Small businesses would still face high loan rates.

In a speech last week in Dallas, Chair Jerome Powell made clear that the Fed isn't necessarily inclined to cut rates each time it meets every six weeks.

"The economy is not sending any signals that we need to be in a hurry to lower rates," Powell said. "The strength we are currently seeing in the economy gives us the ability to approach our decisions carefully."

His comments were widely seen as signaling potentially fewer rate cuts in 2025, a view that sent stock prices falling after they had surged with Trump's election.

Trump has proposed higher tariffs on all imports as well as mass deportations of undocumented immigrants — steps that economists say would worsen inflation. The president-elect has also proposed a menu of tax cuts and deregulation, which might help spur economic growth but would also fan inflation if businesses couldn't find enough workers to meet increased consumer demand.

And recent economic data suggests that inflation pressures could prove more persistent and economic growth more resilient than was thought just a few months ago. At his most recent news conference, Powell suggested that the economy could even accelerate in 2025.

Wall Street traders and some economists now envision just two, rather than four, rate cuts next year. And while the Fed will likely cut its key rate when it meets in mid-December, traders foresee a nearly even likelihood that the central bank could leave the rate unchanged.

"I absolutely would anticipate that they'll ease up on the pace of cuts," said Jim Baird, chief investment officer at Plante Moran Financial Advisors. "The potential for growth to remain strong — that has to call into question whether they will feel either the need or ability to cut rates at the pace they had previously forecast."

Economists at Bank of America expect annual inflation to remain "stuck" above 2.5%, higher than the



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Fed's 2% target level, in part given the likelihood that Trump's economic proposals, if carried out, would fuel price pressures. The economists now foresee just three rate reductions in the coming months, in December, March and June. And they expect the Fed to stop easing credit once its benchmark rate, now at 4.6%, reaches 3.9%.

Krishna Guha, an analyst at investment bank Evercore ISI, wrote last week that, "We think the looming Trump presidency is helping to drive a change in tone from the Fed — including Powell — towards a warier and more hedged posture on the pace and extent of further cuts."

Trump has vowed to impose a 60% tariff on all Chinese goods and a "universal" tariff of 10% or 20% on everything else that enters the United States. On Wednesday, a top executive at Walmart, the world's largest retailer, warned that Trump's tariff proposals could force the company to raise prices on imported goods.

"Tariffs will be inflationary for customers," John David Rainey, Walmart's chief financial officer, told The Associated Press. Other consumer goods and retail companies, including Lowe's, Stanley Black & Decker, and Columbia Sportswear, have issued similar warnings.

In trying to gauge the right level for interest rates, the Fed's policymakers face a significant obstacle: They don't know how much further they can reduce rates before reaching a level that neither stimulates nor restrains the economy — what's called the "neutral rate." The officials don't want to cut rates so low as overheat the economy and reignite inflation. Nor do they want to keep rates so high as to damage the job market and the economy and risk a recession.

An unusually wide divergence has developed among the 19 officials on the Fed's rate-setting committee as to where the neutral rate is. In September, the officials collectively projected that the neutral rate lies between 2.4% and 3.8%. Lorie Logan, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, has noted that that range is twice as large as it was two years ago.

In a recent speech, Logan suggested that the Fed's benchmark rate might be only slightly above the neutral level now. If so, that would mean few additional rate cuts are needed.

Other officials disagree. In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Austan Goolsbee, president of the Fed's Chicago branch, said he thought the neutral rate is much lower than the Fed's current rate. If so, many more rate cuts would likely be appropriate.

"I still think we're far from what anybody thinks is neutral," Goolsbee said. "We still got a ways to come down."

Perhaps the biggest unknown is how Trump's proposals on tariffs, deportations and tax cuts will shape the Fed's rate decisions. Powell has stressed that the Fed won't change its policymaking until it's clear what changes the new administration will actually implement.

As is customary for the Fed, though, Powell avoided commenting directly on presidential policies. But he did acknowledge that the Fed's economists are assessing the potential effects of a Trump presidency.

"We don't actually really know what policies will be put in place," Powell said. "We don't know over what timeframe."

Another factor is that the economy is much different now than when Trump first took office in January 2017. With unemployment lower than it was then, economists say, additional stimulus through tax cuts might create more demand than the economy can handle, possibly fueling inflation.

Tax cuts, "starting from an economy close to full employment, will lead to inflation and, by implication, higher Fed policy rates and a stronger dollar," Olivier Blanchard, a former top economist at the International Monetary Fund and senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, wrote in a recent commentary.

In 2018, when Trump imposed a slew of tariffs on imports from China, as well as on steel, aluminum and washing machines, Fed economists produced an analysis of how they should respond.

Their conclusion? As long as the tariffs were one-time increases and the public didn't expect inflation to rise, the Fed wouldn't have to respond by raising its key rate.

Yet last week, Powell acknowledged that the economy was different now, with inflation a bigger threat.

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"Six years ago," he said, "inflation was really low and inflation expectations were low. And now, we've come way back down, but we're not back where we were. It's a different situation."

## Today in History: November 22 John F. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Nov. 22, the 327th day of 2024. There are 39 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Nov. 22, 1963, John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was shot to death during a motorcade in Dallas; Texas Gov. John B. Connally, riding in the same car as Kennedy, was seriously wounded. Suspected gunman Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as president.

Also on this date:

In 1718, English pirate Edward Teach — better known as "Blackbeard" — was killed during a battle off what is now North Carolina.

In 1935, a flying boat, the China Clipper, took off from Alameda, California, carrying more than 100,000 pieces of mail on the first trans-Pacific airmail flight.

In 1986, 20-year-old Mike Tyson became the youngest heavyweight boxing champion in history, stopping WBC titleholder Trevor Berbick in the second round of their championship bout in Las Vegas.

In 1990, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, having failed to win reelection to the Conservative Party leadership on the first ballot, announced she would resign.

In 2005, Angela Merkel (AHN'-geh-lah MEHR'-kuhl) took office as Germany's first female chancellor.

In 2010, a panicked crush at a festival in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh left some 350 dead and hundreds injured in what the prime minister called the country's biggest tragedy since the 1970s reign of terror by the Khmer Rouge.

In 2017, Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian Serb general whose forces carried out the worst massacre in Europe since World War II, was convicted of genocide and other crimes by the United Nations' Yugoslav war crimes tribunal and sentenced to life behind bars.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-filmmaker Terry Gilliam is 84. Hockey Hall of Famer Jacques Laperrière is 83. Astronaut Guion (GEYE'-uhn) Bluford is 82. Tennis Hall of Famer Billie Jean King is 81. Rock musician-actor Steven Van Zandt is 74. Rock musician Tina Weymouth (Talking Heads) is 74. Actor Richard Kind is 68. Actor Jamie Lee Curtis is 66. Actor Mads Mikkelsen is 59. Actor Mark Ruffalo is 57. Tennis Hall of Famer Boris Becker is 57. Actor Scarlett Johansson is 40. Actor Alden Ehrenreich is 35. Actor Dacre Montgomery is 30. Actor Auli'i Cravalho is 24.