

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Saturday, Dec. 7

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Season Parents Day Out, 1-5 p.m.  
Girls Varsity Wrestling at Dell Rapids, 9 a.m.  
Boys Varsity Wrestling at Clark Tournay, 9:30 a.m.  
JH GBB Jamboree at Groton Area, 10 a.m.  
Olive Grove Holiday Party, 6 p.m. to midnight.  
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main



Groton Robotics is in Mitchell.

## Sunday, Dec. 8

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.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.  
Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS), 3:16 p.m., GHS Conference Room  
United Methodist: Conde worship at 8:30 a.m.; Groton worship at 10:30 a.m.; Sunday School Christmas Practice with snack, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

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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.**

## **USDA Targets Bird Flu in Milk**

The US Department of Agriculture yesterday ordered new testing of the country's milk supply for bird flu, beginning Dec. 16.

Bird flu was first reported in cows in March and has spread to at least 720 herds in 15 states. Nearly 60 people, mostly farmers, have been infected through contact. The initiative aims to better track and control the spread of avian influenza in dairy cattle by requiring nationwide dairy farms, bulk milk transporters, and processing facilities to share raw, unpasteurized milk samples upon request.

Classified as H5N1, the virus is a variant of influenza A—the family that includes strains responsible for the seasonal and epidemic flu in humans. The proteins on the H5N1 surface correspond to receptors found in many bird species. Infection in humans (whose receptors are less accessible than birds') is rare and typically results in mild symptoms and low transmission rates. However, a study this week found a single mutation in the virus may enable human-to-human transmission.

Globally, fewer than 500 human deaths have been linked to H5N1 since 2003.

## **South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol faces impeachment vote.**

The National Assembly is poised to vote Saturday evening local time on whether to impeach Yoon after the conservative president temporarily declared martial law earlier in the week. Yoon's decision was based on the alleged presence of antistate, pro-North Korean influences within the country. Members of Yoon's party and the opposition liberal coalition have pushed for impeachment.

## **Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral reopens this weekend after 2019 fire.**

A reopening service will be held tonight for over 1,500 invite-only guests, followed by an inaugural Mass tomorrow. Over 50 heads of state and government are expected to attend. The reopening comes more than five years after a fire in 2019 caused the now-861-year-old landmark's roof to collapse. Public viewing areas for 40,000 spectators will be set up along the southern bank of the Seine.

## **Appeals court upholds law requiring sale or ban of TikTok in US.**

A federal appeals court upheld a US law requiring TikTok's Chinese parent company, ByteDance, to either sell the app or face a ban in the US by mid-January. The ruling dismissed TikTok's claim that the law infringes on First Amendment rights, emphasizing the US government's actions aim to protect its citizens from potential foreign adversarial threats. TikTok said it will take its case to the Supreme Court.

## **Manslaughter charge against former marine Daniel Penny dismissed.**

The jury in the trial of Penny had reported Friday they were deadlocked and unable to reach a unanimous decision on whether he was guilty of manslaughter in the May 2023 death of Jordan Neely on a New York City subway. The judge dismissed the manslaughter charge after a request from prosecutors and instructed the jury to consider a lesser count of criminally negligent homicide.

## **US economy adds 227,000 jobs in November, more than expected.**

The nonfarm payroll growth is up from a revised growth of 36,000 in October and beats economist estimates of 214,000 jobs. The unemployment rate edged higher to 4.2% from 4.1%, as expected. Average hourly earnings rose 0.4% month-over-month and 4% year-over-year—both 0.1 percentage point higher than expected.

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## **Romanian top court annuls presidential election result over interference.**

Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the presidential election after intelligence services warned about a Russian influence campaign supporting conservative populist candidate Calin Georgescu. The decision means the entire first round of voting will be redone, with a new date to be set, following concerns about foreign interference and the integrity of the electoral process.

## **Humankind(ness)**

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Nora K. in Chicago, Illinois.

"My son, Patrick, recently moved to Charlotte and was spending Thanksgiving alone. I wanted to find someone to locate a restaurant that was open, pick up a holiday meal, and deliver it to him. I posted my request in a note to Task Rabbit. (Somehow it went to 'Emergency Home Repair Needed'??) It was a long shot. The nicest young man responded. All the restaurants in the area were closed, but by 7:00 pm he interrupted his own Thanksgiving dinner at his mom's and delivered a homemade feast! Turkey, ham, and all the fixings, even including a generous slice of pumpkin pie! When I count all the things I'm grateful for this season, Kareem tops my list. He made a miracle happen!"

## **8th Annual Holiday Party**

### **Live & Silent Auctions**

**Olive Grove Golf**

**Clubhouse**

**Groton, SD**

**Saturday, Dec. 7, 2024**

**Holiday Party - 6 p.m. to close**

**A variety of snacks served.**

**Silent Auction Basket Items**

**Bidding closes at 8:30 p.m.**

**Live Auctions begin at 8:30 p.m.**

**Proceeds  
raised to  
replace  
cooler in  
clubhouse!**

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**X SERIES** | *Cub Cadet*

## PUT WINTER IN ITS PLACE.






**2X** TWO-STAGE POWER

INTELLIPOWER<sup>®</sup> TRAC MAX EFI

When the winters get tough, the Cub Cadet<sup>®</sup> 2X gets tougher. This two-stage snow blower is engineered for clearing between 12-18 inches of powder and slush. If you measure snow in feet instead of inches, step up to the commercial-grade 2X MAX<sup>™</sup> trim package to help tackle the deep stuff. Featuring trigger-controlled power steering, push-button electric start, dual LED headlights, 16-inch X-Trac<sup>™</sup> tires and a 3-year limited warranty.\*\*

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Up to 18"-23" (18"-23" for EFI and MAX <sup>™</sup> units)	Up to 8-15+ cars	Smooth & gravel



### 2X 24" WITH INTELLIPOWER<sup>®</sup>

Clear paths with the 2X 24" snow blower featuring a 243cc Cub Cadet<sup>®</sup> engine with IntelliPOWER<sup>®</sup>.

- ▶ IntelliPOWER<sup>®</sup> engine technology delivers consistent power in heavy and wet snow conditions
- ▶ Trigger-control power steering
- ▶ Single-hand remote chute and pitch control
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**\$1,199\***

Additional models available with 26", 28" clearing width



### 2X 26" TRAC WITH INTELLIPOWER<sup>®</sup>

Designed to provide steady traction in extreme weather conditions—try the 2X 26" TRAC with IntelliPOWER<sup>®</sup>.

- ✦ TRAC drive designed for traction on slopes, inclines and gravel
- ✦ Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- ✦ 23" intake height
- ✦ Heated hand grips
- ✦ High-arc steel chute
- ✦ Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty\*\*

**\$1,999\***



### 2X 30" MAX INTELLIPOWER<sup>®</sup>

Take on winter with the 357cc Cub Cadet<sup>®</sup> engine with IntelliPOWER<sup>®</sup>.

- ✦ 14" augers and impeller
- ✦ Sealed ball bearings on auger and wheel shafts
- ✦ LED light bar on auger housing
- ▶ Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- ▶ 23" intake height
- ▶ Heated hand grips
- ▶ High-arc steel chute
- ▶ Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty\*\*

**\$2,399\***

✦ Indicates step-up feature

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*Cub Cadet*

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<sup>1</sup> Restrictions apply. See dealer or cubcadet.com/en\_US/financing for details.

\* Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes are additional and vary by location. Freight and PDI charges may be additional and vary by dealer. Models subject to limited availability. Images may not reflect dealer inventory and/or unit specifications.

\*\* See owner's manual for warranty details and information.

Certain restrictions apply.

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EXCEPTIONAL FINANCING  
OFFERS AVAILABLE!



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## **GHS Girls Basketball**

### **Varsity Game: Groton Area 39, Timber Lake 11**

Rylee Dunker 7 points, 5 rebounds, 2 steals, 3 fouls

Faith Traphagen 6 points, 4 rebounds, 2 fouls

Jaedyn Penning 6 points, 9 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal, 1 foul

Kennedy Hansen 6 points, 4 rebounds, 3 steals, 2 fouls

Taryn Traphagen 5 points, 4 rebounds, 1 steal, 2 fouls

Brooklyn Hansen 3 points, 6 rebounds, 1 assist

Talli Wright 3 points 2 rebounds

Laila Roberts 2 points, 2 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal, 3 fouls

Jerica Locke 1 point, 6 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 steals, 3 fouls

Mia Crank 2 fouls

McKenna Tietz 1 steal.

3-Pointers: Kennedy Hanson 2, Brooklyn Hansen 1, Faith Traphagen 1.

Groton Area made 9 of 33 field goals for 27 percent, 4 of 13 three-pointers for 31 percent, 9 of 15 free throws for 60 percent, had 42 rebounds, 17 turnovers, 10 assists, 11 steals and 18 fouls.

Timber Lake was 6 of 20 from the free throw line for 30 percent, made its first field goal of the game with 4:45 left in the game. Natalie Lawrence - 3 points (1 3 pointer), Jasmine Nash 3, Ruby Maher 3, Sara Keller 1, Kessa Bigger 1.

### **JV Game: Groton Area 33, Timber Lake 15**

Chesney Weber 11, Taryn Traphagen 7, McKenna Tietz 6, Talli Wright 2, Kella Tracy 2, Ashlynn Warrington 2, Makenna Krause 1.

### **C Game: Groton Area 44, Timber Lake 7**

Kella Tracy 16, Chesney Weber 10, Makenna Krause 8, Ashlynn Warrington 6, Emerlee Jones 2, Kinsley Rowen 1, Avery Crank 1.

The junior varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Adam and Nicole Wright.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meathouse in Andover.

Shane Clark provided the play-by-play with Jeslyn Kosel running the camera and Paul Kosel doing technology.

**FOR RENT!**

**1, 2, AND 3 BEDROOM  
UNITS AVAILABLE IN  
GROTON & WEBSTER!**

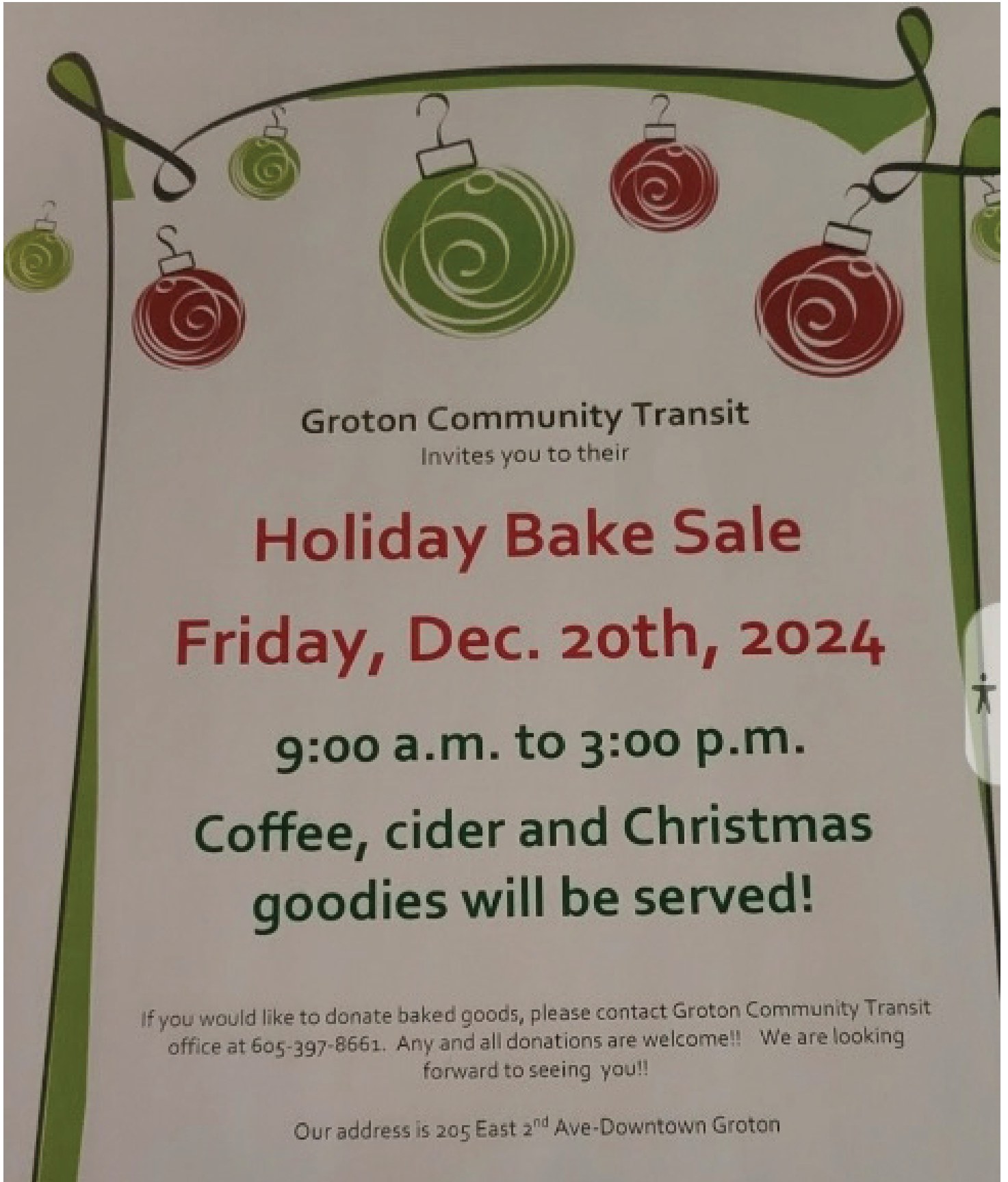
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Groton Community Transit  
Invites you to their

## Holiday Bake Sale

### Friday, Dec. 20th, 2024

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Coffee, cider and Christmas  
goodies will be served!

If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact Groton Community Transit  
office at 605-397-8661. Any and all donations are welcome!! We are looking  
forward to seeing you!!

Our address is 205 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave-Downtown Groton

## HOLIDAY BAKE SALE

12/20/2024-Friday

Happy Holidays! We hope this finds all of you staying well and healthy! Hoping you can enjoy what this wonderful season brings!

We are looking for donations of baked goods for our upcoming bake sale on Friday, December 20<sup>th</sup> 2024. If you would like to donate items please contact the dispatch office at 605-397-8661. Baked goods need to be delivered to the transit by 8:00 am the morning of the bake sale. Please feel free to package your items to your liking. We will price items as they are brought in. As always, we would like to thank you for supporting the GCT!! We look forward to hearing from you!

Please don't hesitate to call to arrange pickup of your donation...We would be happy to come and grab from you!!

Sincerely & Thank you Again!!

Groton Community Transit





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## Groton Chamber of Commerce

December 4, 2024

6pm The Jungle

• Prior to the meeting, a welcome was held with Tim and Donna Janusz and Jillian Schaunaman, new owners of The Jungle.

• Members present: Hannah Hochstetler, Ashley Bentz, Katelyn Nehlich, Bruce Babcock, April Abeln and Douglas Heinrich

• Minutes from the previous meeting were approved by Heinrich and seconded by Nehlich. All members present voted aye.

• Treasurer's report was given. Dacotah Bank checking account balance is \$11,827.93 in addition to the \$10,000

CD. The bucks account balance is about \$2,699.80. No checks are outstanding. The report was approved by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich. All members present voted aye.

• An email from Midco was shared as well as a card from Front Porch 605.

• Chamber dues have been paid by 49 businesses so far and several first timers have paid. A Facebook post and story will be posted Mid-January to encourage others to pay by the February 1st deadline.

• A total shirt fundraiser amount is not yet known.

• Dakota Broadcasting is going to test the radio ad deal with the Aberdeen Chamber before they offer it to Groton.

• Election of officers will be held next meeting.

• Abeln will highlight 2025 Chamber members on Facebook weekly starting in January and will add the post to our story as well. Other members will be encouraged to share the duty.

• Motion by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich to donate \$150 to Dakota Broadcasting for their Shop with a Cop event. All members present voted aye.

• The Chamber's 2025 city budget request was approved. A review will be held in March at a City Council meeting with tumblers gifted to members.

• January's meeting will be held January 8th at 12pm instead of New Year's Day. It was suggested that meeting email reminders be sent.

• Motion by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich to donate a tumbler and \$25 Chamber Bucks to Fruit Fusion for their Christmas giveaway. All members present voted aye.

• Motion by Abeln and seconded by Babcock to pay for a yearly subscription to the Groton Independent for Rosewood Court for Christmas. All members present voted aye. Abeln will ask for an invoice and pay online.

Angel Tree shopping may be a possibility next year as well.

• The new owners of Train Fitness were welcomed this week. Five Star Marine Werx declined a welcome visit since their business is in Aberdeen. Kate's Confections, Maria's Smokey Hot Honey, and Farmer's Union Insurance have been contacted about welcomes.

• Meeting attendance and incentives were discussed.

• Motion by Abeln and seconded by Babcock to continue radio ads with Dakota Broadcasting for 2025. All members present voted aye. Business shoutouts may be done instead of event advertising. Ads are played 7 times per week Tuesday through Thursday between 6am-7pm.

• Next Meeting: January 8th, 12pm at City Hall

Upcoming events

12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close

12/10-13/2024 Dacotah Bank Cookies & Calendars 9am-4pm

12/14/2024 Santa Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

12/15/2024 Christian & Missionary Alliance Christmas Pageant 5pm

12/19/2024 Holiday Lighting Contest 7pm

12/20/2024 Groton Community Transit Holiday Bake Sale 9am-3pm



The children were able to decorate their own cookies at the Tour of Trees held Friday at the Wage Memorial Library. (Courtesy Photo Kellie Locke)

## Half-Staff Flag Notification

**Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day - December 7th, 2024**

December 7th, 2024 is National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day. All Americans are encouraged to observe this solemn day of remembrance and to honor our military, past and present, with appropriate ceremonies and activities. To honor of those American patriots who died as a result of their service at Pearl Harbor, the flag of the United States, and subordinate flags are to be lowered to half-staff on December 7th from sunrise to sunset.



## Medora Christmas Show "A Magical Christmas"

December 8, 2024 - 3:00 pm

Aberdeen Civic Theater  
225 2nd Ave, SE

General Admission Tickets:  
\$35/Adult, \$25 Child

Available

Interior Design Concepts  
21 N Main Street, Aberdeen, SD or  
[www.aberdeencommunityconcerts.org](http://www.aberdeencommunityconcerts.org)

Call 605-228-0946 or 216-2822

Presented by  
Aberdeen Community Concert Association

## South Dakota Department of Health Reports First Flu Death of the 2024-2025 Flu Season

PIERRE, SD – The Department of Health is reporting the first influenza death of the 2024-2025 season, a Corson County resident in the over 65 years age group.

"Influenza can be a very serious illness," said Dr. Joshua Clayton, State Epidemiologist for the Department of Health. "Taking preventative measures like regularly washing hands, covering your cough, and getting vaccinated if you choose against the flu will protect you and your family."

Clayton noted it is still early in the flu season with only 215 lab-confirmed flu cases and 15 hospitalizations reported; however, an average of 33 South Dakotan deaths are reported each year.

During the flu season, we encourage all South Dakotans to take the following preventative actions to help slow the spread of the flu:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick;
- Wash your hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand gel;
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth;
- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze; and
- Stay home if you are sick.

In addition to preventative actions, yearly flu vaccinations are recommended for everyone age six months and older. Groups like pregnant women, children younger than five years, people over 65 years, and people with chronic medical conditions are at higher risk for flu-related complications. Healthcare workers and household contacts of high-risk populations, such as those with young infants, should also be vaccinated.

A list of participating locations offering flu vaccines in your community can be found online. For more information and the latest resources visit the DOH website.

Influenza is a virus spread by respiratory droplets when an infected person talks, coughs, or sneezes. Common signs and symptoms of the flu include fever, cough, sore throat, headache, fatigue, body or muscle aches, and runny or stuffy nose.

At the heart of the Department of Health's mission is a simple yet profound goal: to protect and improve the health of all South Dakotans. The department is entrusted with the vital task of promoting wellness, preventing disease, and ensuring access to quality healthcare for all South Dakotans across our great state.

### **\*\*LAND AUCTION\*\***

Up for auction is 66+/- acres land. 22.91 acres of tillable, 24.10 acres of CRP/CREP, 19.12+/- acres of hunting in Groton, SD on US Hwy 12. No easements on any of the acres. Unlimited possibilities ranging from recreational property of development property. You can bid online at HIBid.com up until we start the live auction Dec. 7th at 1 p.m. From there we will be taking live bids and internet bids. Auction will be held at the American Legion in Groton at 1 p.m.

Terms of the auction, 10% down on sale day (non-refundable). Closing within 20 days of auction at Kolker Law Office in Groton SD.

SAM HANSON, EXIT REALTY CONNECTION  
1001 9th Ave SE., Watertown, SD 57201, 605-520-6349  
shauctioneer@hotmail.com

# Broton Daily Independent

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**BROWN COUNTY  
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA  
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY**

**December 10, 2024 8:45 A.M.**

**COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD**

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity of Public Comment
4. Michael Lacopetti, Project Developer with Invenergy LLC
5. Patricia Kendall, Dacotah Prairie Museum Director
  - a. Discuss Future Expansion of Museum
6. Discuss Court Appointed Attorney Contract
7. Jon Lemke, Chief Deputy Sheriff and Josh Lee, Deputy Sheriff/K9 Handler
  - a. Discuss the use of Opioid Funds
8. Consent Calendar
  - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of December 3, 2024
  - b. Claims
  - c. HR Report
  - d. Travel Requests
  - e. Approve & Authorize Chairman to Sign Fair Contracts – Confidential until released
  - f. Authorize Advertising for Budget Supplement Hearing
  - g. Landfill Tonnage Report
  - h. Set Date & Authorize Advertising for Special Event Temporary License – Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce
9. Other Business
10. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
11. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

**Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.**

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

**You can also dial in using your phone.** United States: +1 (872) 240-3311

**Access Code:** 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

**Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at**

<https://www.brown.sd.us/departments/commission>



DACOTAH BANK

HOLIDAY  
OPEN HOUSE

Cookies & Calendars

DECEMBER 10 -13

9:00 - 4:00 PM

*Stop in for cookies,  
coffee and a calendar!*

7 E. US Hwy 12 | Groton

MEMBER FDIC

## GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

### School Board Meeting

December 9, 2024 – 7:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

#### AGENDA:

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

#### POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

#### CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of November 12, 2024 school board meetings as drafted.
2. Approval of November 2024 District bills for payment.
3. Approval of November 2024 Financial Report, Agency Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approval of November 2024 School Transportation Report.
5. Approval of November 2024 School Lunch Report.
6. Approval of surplus property list; items of no value for disposal.

#### OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Second reading and adoption of recommended policy changes BB School Board Legal Status (Amendment), BBB School Board Elections (Amendment), GCDB/GDDB Background Checks (Amendment), GCDB-E(2) Privacy Act Statement (Amendment), AFF Complaint Policy for Federal Programs (Delete), AC Nondiscrimination in Federal Programs (Amendment), GBEC Use of Alcohol, Drugs, and Controlled Substances, IGCD Advanced Placement and Dual Credit Courses, DK Payment Procedures, DN School Properties Disposal Procedure, IIA Instructional Material
3. Second Reading and adoption of recommended Job Descriptions: Elementary Principal, Food Service Director, Transportation Director
4. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

#### NEW BUSINESS:

1. Review preliminary 2025-2026 School Calendar.
2. Adopt Supplemental Budget #FY25-3.
3. Approve establishment of custodial accounts: Wellness/Power Lifting and MS/HS Social Committee.
4. Approve hiring Teresa Davies, Food Service Team Member.

#### ADJOURN



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Proposed funding cut could sink network in as little as two years, SDPB director says

Public broadcasting leader predicts layoffs, complete loss of local programming could snowball into loss of donor support

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 6, 2024 6:00 PM



A sign in the window identifies South Dakota Public Broadcasting's Rapid City studio on Dec. 6, 2024. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

South Dakota Public Broadcasting could cease to exist in as little as two years if lawmakers adopt Gov. Kristi Noem's \$3.6 million budget cut, the network's executive director said Friday.

Julie Overgaard sounded that alarm during a meeting of the Educational Telecommunications Board, which acts as an advisory council for SDPB.

Noem proposed the funding cut, which amounts to about 65% of SDPB's state funding, during her annual budget address on Tuesday. The governor has proposed \$82.7 million in cuts across state government in response to lower state revenue compared to the past

few years.

Noem also proposed \$10.7 million in new spending, \$4 million of which would go toward \$3,000 education savings accounts that lower-income families could use to pay for private school tuition, homeschooling and other forms of nontraditional schooling.

SDPB and its associated nonprofit fundraising organization, Friends of SDPB, have sent emails to supporters and offered statements to the media outlining the immediate impact of a 65% budget cut. In the near-term, it could mean a loss of all original state and local programming, including high school activi-



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ties broadcasts, the radio show "In the Moment" and television programs like "Dakota Life" and "South Dakota Focus."

Overgaard's message to the telecommunications board on Friday was more stark. She called Noem's budget "devastating news."

Donors send their money to Friends of SDPB in large part to support local programming. Without local programming, Overgaard said, that support would dry up.

"At best, we have about a 24 to 36 month lifeline," Overgaard said. "I don't think there is much point in pretending this is not as serious as it is."

Kay Jorgensen, who chairs the telecom board, said the budget proposal is worthy of a more serious look than the group had time for on Friday. The board had a full agenda, one set up before Noem's budget speech.

Members heard about SDPB's financial health from its accountant, about the popularity of its high school football coverage this fall from its content director, and about an audit performed by Eide Bailly.

The audit found no financial disparities, ethical concerns or areas where SDPB strayed from best practices, one of its authors told the board. The draft audit document notes that SDPB serves 90% of the state's geography and around 382,000 households.

"I don't think there's an organization in the country that can defend and be proud of its broadcast work more than the team at South Dakota Public Broadcasting," Jorgensen said after hearing from Overgaard.

## **Layoffs, lost programming, potential insolvency**

In a follow-up interview with South Dakota Searchlight, Overgaard said the \$3.6 million cut would trigger a 50% reduction in support from the federal Corporation for Public Broadcasting, from \$2 million annually to \$1 million. The formula for grants from the corporation factors in state or local matching dollars.

SDPB currently has 64 full-time employees, not counting employees of Friends of SDPB. Most of the SDPB employees would lose their jobs if the cut goes through, Overgaard told Searchlight.

The shallow funding pool left after the cut wouldn't be enough to pay for much more than engineering and network maintenance, she said.

It would likely be possible for SDPB to continue recording and streaming legislative committee hearings, floor debates and meetings of the state's various oversight boards and commissions, but there would be no news coverage.

The money could also maintain the infrastructure needed for Amber Alert and emergency alert messages, which originate with law enforcement and are distributed by SDPB's network to the state's commercial broadcast systems.

Beyond that and national programming – all of which is funded through donations from listeners and viewers, Overgaard said, not through tax dollars – there would be little left of the SDPB that exists today.

If SDPB cannot remain financially solvent, she said, the state would need to find another way to get emergency alerts to its citizens.

## **Per capita spending comparison inaccurate, broadcaster says**

In 2006, lawmakers passed a \$500,000 cut to SDPB in the waning days of the legislative session. Lawmakers found themselves inundated with comments from constituents and restored the funding.

Ryan Howlett, CEO of Friends of SDPB, told the board Friday that the group saw a major fundraising spike immediately following Noem's budget address.

"We've been really buoyed by people, by their support with not only their dollars, but their willingness to contact their legislators in their district and the administration of the state of South Dakota on our behalf," Howlett said.

Howlett told Searchlight, however, that a short-term fundraising bump does nothing to solve the larger problems that would follow a state funding cut.

Larry Rohrer, a South Dakota Hall of Fame member known as the voice of SDPB, hopes listeners and

viewers continue to rally behind the network.

Rohrer, who's now retired, helped lead the network into the internet age, setting up the communications network that has streamed legislative debates since 2000. A little more than a decade later, Rohrer helped shepherd through the operational framework for SD.net, which streams and archives not only legislative coverage, but meetings from boards and commissions or agencies like the Public Utilities Commission.

Some lawmakers were skeptical of streaming legislative debates, Rohrer said, but the skepticism dissipated quickly.

"What eventually happened was that the legislators heard from their constituents that they liked this," Rohrer said.

Broadcasting high school activities has also buoyed SDPB's reputation, he said. That's at least in part because the network broadcasts not just popular sports like football, but a wide range of sports and arts activities that might have a smaller but dedicated following.

"This is the question that we asked internally: I want you to tell me which of those 35 high school championships don't deserve to be on TV," Rohrer said. "I dare you to answer that question, because the truth is they all do."

In her budget speech, Noem told lawmakers that SDPB's state funding is among the highest in the nation per capita.

Noem's office did not offer a response to Overgaard's comments on SDPB's solvency, nor did the Bureau of Finance and Management.

Rohrer said he doesn't know where that per capita figure came from, but said it's not an apples-to-apples comparison. Few states have radio and television under one roof through a state-held broadcast license as SDPB does, as opposed to separate radio and television networks, one or more of them licensed through a university or independent nonprofit. Even fewer offer services that range from emergency alerts and year-round government meeting livestreams to live coverage of events like the annual Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup.

The trouble with using a per capita figure, Rohrer said, is that it leaves out the nuance.

"You can say that in 10 seconds," Rohrer said. "For me to explain the different flavors of public stations and the variety of services takes five minutes. Some people don't have time for that. My hope is that people would take the time to look deeper and understand that this is not a 10-second narrative."

*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.*

## 'Wild places are worth fighting for': Concern grows for receding South Dakota wetlands

**US Supreme Court decision adds urgency to already worsening situation, advocates say**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FRIDAY DECEMBER 6, 2024 11:10 AM**

EUREKA — John Cooper, 80 years old and with a new set of knees, still rises before the sun, dons waders, sets up decoys and tries to call in ducks.

"I love waterfowl hunting," he whispered, nestled into the cattails along the edge of a pond this fall. "The immersive experience of the hunt, learning about these ecosystems, being involved in waterfowl conservation — I love everything about it."

"And it's good eating if you cook it right," he added.

For Cooper, a former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service law enforcement officer and former head of the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, duck hunting is more than a pastime. It's a passion tied to the wildlife and land he's spent over 50 years trying to conserve.

These days, he worries about disappearing wetlands and hopes the next generation will stop the losses.

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Activists across the nation share his concern. The Union of Concerned Scientists, based in Massachusetts, released a report Wednesday saying that a U.S. Supreme Court decision, Sackett v. EPA, has stripped federal protections from 30 million acres of wetlands in the Upper Midwest.

The ruling redefined federal wetlands protections, leaving those without direct surface connections to larger water bodies unregulated. The researchers said the decision will accelerate wetland losses. According to estimates by the U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the more than 300,000



**Ducks fly off of a northern South Dakota wetland on September 27, 2024.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

square miles of wetlands that existed on the U.S. mainland several hundred years ago had already been reduced to almost half that amount by 2019.

The report says the next federal farm bill, likely to be considered by the new Congress next year, presents an opportunity to strengthen wetland protections by increasing funding for conservation programs that pay farmers to conserve and restore wetlands on their land.

Stacy Woods, a research director with the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the threat to wetlands is particularly severe in South Dakota, where agriculture occupies more than 85% of the land and the state has no wetlands protections beyond enforcing federal laws.

The report says South Dakota is home to about 1.9 million acres of wetlands, which is about a 30% decline from the 2.7 million acres estimated to have existed two centuries ago.

Cooper said he sees evidence of those losses every time he goes hunting.

## Conservationist to the core

Born and raised on an orange and avocado farm in rural California, Cooper earned a criminology degree from the University of California, joined the Navy and served two tours in the Vietnam War.

He joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Law Enforcement Division, where he oversaw habitat and wildlife protection across the Dakotas and Nebraska for 22 years.

"There was just an unbelievable amount of habitat when I first moved here," he said.

In 1995, then-Gov. Bill Janklow appointed Cooper as secretary of South Dakota's Department of Game, Fish and Parks, a role Cooper held until 2007. Cooper also served as Gov. Mike Rounds' senior policy adviser on Missouri River issues and as a senior policy adviser to the Bipartisan Policy Center on climate change and wildlife management. From 2013 to 2016, he chaired the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission.

All the while, Cooper said, wetlands were vanishing.

"The days of when I first moved here are gone," he said. "Those live in the heads of old guys like me now."

## The influence of farm policy

The 1980s farm crisis was a key turning point for wetlands and wildlife habitat, Cooper said. Federal policies in the 1970s had encouraged farmers to plant more crops, especially corn, to meet booming global demand. Many farmers borrowed heavily to buy land, equipment and supplies to expand production.

The surge in planting caused over-production, driving crop prices down. When interest rates on loans soared in the 1980s, many farmers were deep in debt, unable to repay their loans. Bankruptcies spread across rural America, forcing many farm families off the land.

In response, the federal government introduced policies to help struggling farmers. They included subsidies, programs to buy surplus crops, 10-year

contracts paying landowners to leave marginal land as grass, and requirements for ethanol to be mixed into gasoline. The goal was to stabilize farm incomes and protect family farms, Cooper said.

"But did it stop the corporate consolidation trend?" Cooper asked.

The evidence says no. Subsidies based on production rewarded larger farms, encouraging growth and out-competing smaller operations. Increasingly expensive farm equipment, seeds and technology favored big operations with better access to credit. And rising land values made expansion easier for large farms while pricing out smaller ones.

Large-scale farms operating on 2,000 acres or more now control over two-thirds of the cropland in South Dakota, according to the 2022 U.S. Census of Agriculture. Thirty years ago, large farms controlled less than half of the state's cropland, according to a report from South Dakota State University Extension.

The report says the number of farming operations in the state dropped nearly 30% from 26,808 in 1997 to 19,302 in 2022. The sharpest declines have occurred among medium-sized farms.

"You used to only have these small, diversified family farms – a couple of families to a section – where having good habitat was just part of it," Cooper recalls. "Now, what you see is an industrialized ocean of corn and soybeans."

Cooper said federally subsidized crop programs have encouraged the draining of wetlands and the tilling of grasslands, incentivizing producers to cultivate more acres.

"To be clear, I have nothing against the actual farmers," Cooper said. "They're responding to a system the international seed and chemical companies, biofuels, tractor companies, and other fat cats have cooked up, where production is king, and conservation doesn't put food on a farmer's table."



**John Cooper carries decoys to his vehicle after a day of duck hunting near Eureka on Sept. 28, 2024.** (Joshua Haiar/

South Dakota Searchlight)

## Impacts from drain tile

Some farmers drain wetlands using underground perforated pipes, called drain tile, which lower the water table and make land suitable for farming.

"And that water goes somewhere," Cooper said.

Instead of being retained in a wetland, excess water from drain-tiled fields flows into ditches, creeks

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**A dog retrieves a duck on a wetland near Eureka on Sept. 27, 2024.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

and rivers. The amount of water flowing down the James River in eastern South Dakota has risen 300% since the late 1990s, according to a report by the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The report primarily blames increased precipitation.

But the report also says that "only a handful of counties in eastern South Dakota have a drain tile permit program, meaning there is not a temporal or spatial record of tile drainage in the state and thus difficult to determine the extent to which tiling may have increased flow."

Cooper is skeptical that increased rainfall is the lone culprit.

"Nothing on the land occurs in isolation," Cooper said. "And things start to accumulate."

Other researchers have attributed widespread higher streamflows not only to higher precipitation, but also urban development that sends rainfall running across concrete and asphalt into streams, expanded tile drainage systems under farmland, and the conversion of grassland to cropland, which causes higher runoff.

"Taxpayers are subsidizing rich operations to drain wetlands and plant another acre of corn," Cooper said. "There has got to be a better way to pay these landowners for the ecological benefits their land provides."

The Union of Concerned Scientists not only supports increased funding for conservation programs to protect wetlands, but also tying crop insurance subsidies to environmentally friendly farming practices. By adopting methods such as cover cropping and reduced tillage, farmers can minimize harmful runoff while maintaining productive operations, the union's report says.

## Farm Bureau perspective

South Dakota Farm Bureau President Scott VanderWal is a contrary voice, arguing that subsidies aren't driving increased corn production. He supported the Sackett v. EPA decision.

He attributes increased production to advances in genetics, equipment and the changing climate, all of which have allowed farmers to grow corn and other crops in places that previously weren't considered good areas for those crops. He also said that farmers don't drain "true wetlands" as defined by federal regulations, since doing so would forfeit federal subsidies.

Cooper uses the broader scientific definition of wetlands, which includes ecosystems where water saturates the soil seasonally, supporting aquatic plants and wildlife.

"We've never agreed with John on that," VanderWal said.

VanderWal is also skeptical that draining wetlands worsens flooding, suggesting drained land can absorb water and saying there are ways to control the outflow.

Cooper counters that downstream flooding impacts communities more than farmland — which is insured by federally subsidized programs. There have been signs of worsening floods in South Dakota, including in June when a record crest on the Big Sioux River overwhelmed flood-control measures and devastated the community of McCook Lake.

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"We need to let these watersheds serve their purpose, as they have for thousands of years," Cooper said. "When someone thinks their 'private property rights' trump Mother Nature, it sets us all up for trouble. Mother Nature always bats last."

VanderWal said modern agriculture prioritizes conservation more than ever, with farmers adopting practices like reduced tillage or no-till and leaving crop residues on the land to protect the soil.

"This is becoming more important all the time," VanderWal said. "People are learning."

## Why wetlands matter

Wetlands absorb and store excess water during heavy rains and snowmelt. That slows water flow into rivers, reducing the risk of downstream flooding, explained Stacy Woods, of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Another way wetlands help mitigate flooding is by slowing climate change, which has already brought more extreme weather to South Dakota.

South Dakota has seen two billion-dollar floods in the last two decades. Just this year, the June storms that brought flooding to McCook Lake dumped 10 to 20 inches of rain on some southeast South Dakota communities. During those storms, Mitchell and Sioux Falls recorded their wettest two-day periods since the National Weather Service began record-keeping.

"Healthy wetlands can capture and store carbon, keeping it out of the atmosphere where it would otherwise trap heat and contribute to a warming planet," Woods said. "But when wetlands are damaged or destroyed, they can release this stored carbon as methane, carbon dioxide, or other heat-trapping gasses that accelerate climate change."

Saturated wetland soils slow plant decomposition, and the dense plant material becomes carbon-rich peat. Wetlands cover about 3% of the planet's land yet store approximately 30% of all land-based carbon. That's according to documentation from the 50th anniversary of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, an international treaty the U.S. joined in 1986 focused on the conservation of wetlands worldwide.

The loss of wetlands is particularly concerning for waterfowl populations, especially in the Prairie Pothole Region, often referred to as North America's "duck factory." This region, which spans much of northeastern South Dakota, is one of the most important breeding grounds for ducks. The small, shallow, seasonal wetlands are critical nesting habitats teeming with the bugs ducklings consume. Yet, these same wetlands are among the most vulnerable to drainage for agricultural purposes. And pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers can kill wetland bugs.

That's why hunters including Cooper are concerned about wetlands, but he wants to spread the concern wider.

"You don't have to be a duck hunter to care about this," Cooper said. "When we lose these places, we



**John Cooper moves his duck boat out of the reeds along a northern South Dakota wetland on Sept. 27, 2024.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

lose a lot more than hunting opportunities, no doubt about it.”

### Cooper's message

Cooper is not optimistic about wetland conservation, citing the dominance of production agriculture and the imbalance between federal programs incentivizing production over conservation.

“Until the feds make conservation as competitive as production, I don't see it changing,” Cooper said. “We need incentives that reward preserving wetlands and grasslands or enforce their protection.”

He urges policymakers to recognize wetlands and grasslands as vital climate solutions. He advocates more federal support to encourage less tilling of the soil, more cover crops left on farmland year-round, and incentivizing wetland preservation over the conversion of wet areas to cropland.

Cooper and his wife, Vera, are committed conservationists, supporting groups including Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever, which work to conserve wildlife habitats. For him, hunting ties directly to conservation, providing state funding for habitat conservation and improvement through license fees and taxes.

“Hunting isn't just about pursuing wild game. It's about protecting the ecosystems that sustain them,” Cooper said.

At 80, Cooper acknowledges the toll of his efforts but remains steadfast.

“Vera says it's time to kick my feet up, but she knows I can't,” he said. “Because the wild places are worth fighting for.”

*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.*

## COMMENTARY

# An exciting turning point for the defense of people who can't afford lawyers

**Momentum builds with new commission, first statewide public defender and comprehensive study**

by Neil Fulton

An effective and efficient system of indigent defense is important for all South Dakotans. South Dakota has devoted a couple years of study, discussion and legislative action to the issue. Judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys, county commissioners, legislators and others have all worked together in this effort. This broad cooperation reflects the importance of the issue and provides a foundation to successfully tackle it.

Last year, the Legislature created and funded the Commission on Indigent Legal Services and a statewide public defender office. They are tasked with developing standards for assigning cases, providing training to private lawyers who take appointments, and handling appeals in criminal cases across South Dakota.

Chris Miles, an excellent and experienced criminal defense lawyer, has been hired as the first statewide defender. Chris is working to hire additional lawyers and develop systems to handle appeals effectively and efficiently. The commission is beginning to set priorities for appointing and training lawyers.



(Getty Images)

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Additionally, a comprehensive study of the current system in South Dakota was completed over the last year, providing a roadmap for improvements.

This building momentum is important. It is equally important to step back and consider why an effective and efficient system of indigent defense is important for all South Dakotans.

First, the Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees all citizens counsel when charged with a criminal offense. This guarantee is met at public expense for individuals who cannot afford lawyers. This is a foundational commitment to justice. Before the force of the government can be brought to bear against any citizen, they can have a legal expert interpret the applicable law, explain their options, and advocate freely and forcefully on their behalf in court.

These guarantees make the United States different from other countries. The law applies evenly to all citizens, not selectively based on our station or connections. Indigent defense is good for all South Dakotans because it promotes justice for all.

Second, a well-structured and well-funded indigent defense system makes our criminal justice system more efficient. When there is real expertise working on any legal matter, the big issues get identified and addressed correctly and quickly. This keeps resources focused on the most significant cases and avoids the cost of appeals and postconviction proceedings when mistakes are made.

Additionally, when offices work together regularly, even as adversaries, they develop professional relationships that place the long-term health of the system above advantage in the moment. This is particularly true in South Dakota, where we are fortunate to have a bar with a strong tradition of collegiality. No system is perfect, but having excellent lawyers for both prosecution and defense makes our system function significantly better.

Third, South Dakota currently shifts the obligation to provide indigent defense from the state, which is where the Constitution imposes it, to counties. County governments have a limited revenue base that is under increasing pressure for infrastructure and other expenses. When indigent defense costs jump due to a few large cases (one murder trial can overextend a small county) or increased case volume, counties struggle to sustain the burden.

Involving the state in funding the costs of indigent defense through handling appeals and major cases, coordinating training and support with local lawyers, and developing statewide protocols can help counties with these costs. Just this year the Commission of Indigent Legal Services distributed to counties \$3 million that the Legislature appropriated to ease that burden. It is projected that the statewide indigent defense office will alleviate more than \$1 million in appeal costs from counties when it is fully functional. Increasing efficiency and providing state support will be a win for all taxpayers and county governments who can re-prioritize those dollars.

The history of robust indigent defense is strong in South Dakota. We provided those services even before statehood was realized, well ahead of many other states. There are significant challenges facing the system now. But South Dakota is at an exciting turning point in the history of indigent defense. Legislators, judges, county officials, prosecutors and defense attorneys, and all interested in the criminal justice system are united in the growing effort to build on the strength of our indigent defense system in creative ways in years to come.

This is the kind of effort South Dakota leaders put into the most critical issues. It reflects the shared recognition that an effective and efficient criminal justice system, and the indigent defense services that make that system run, is good for all South Dakotans.

*Neil Fulton is the chair of the South Dakota Commission on Indigent Legal Services, dean of the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law, and former federal public defender for South Dakota and North Dakota. The views expressed are his and not those of USD or the South Dakota Board of Regents.*



## US adds 227,000 jobs in what analysts say is a healthy economy

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - DECEMBER 6, 2024 4:34 PM

The economy added 227,000 jobs in November, making for a strong jobs report despite a slight increase in the unemployment rate. Although the labor market has cooled this year, the Trump administration stands to inherit a fairly healthy labor market, with decent job growth across many sectors.

The number of jobs was bolstered by the return of striking workers, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report. Employment in transportation equipment manufacturing rose by 32,000 jobs. Boeing machinists who went on strike in September seeking higher pay and better retirement benefits reached a deal in November.

The agency also revised up the number of jobs added in the October and September reports by 56,000 jobs combined.

Although the unemployment rate ticked up from 4.1% to 4.2%, the economy is looking strong, particularly when you look at gross domestic product, said Louise Sheiner, with the nonpartisan Brookings Institution.

"It's been remarkably strong. If you look at what the Congressional Budget Office projected the level of real GDP before the pandemic, it's higher now. We've just had a really strong economy," said Sheiner, who focuses on fiscal policy.

Although she said the labor market has been slowing a little, it's still healthy.

Elise Gould, senior economist at the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute, said the three-month average of job growth at 173,000 jobs shows a fairly strong labor market.

Employment in healthcare and government, including state government employment, continued to add jobs. Leisure and hospitality added 53,000 jobs and food services and drinking places added 29,000 jobs.

Gould said she is keeping an eye on the employment-to-population ratio, a measure of workers employed versus the working-age population. The measure is down 0.6 percentage point over the year.

"Let's pay attention to that and see where that goes," she said. "We were at a pretty nice high this summer that has come down a bit."

Economists will also keep an eye on demographic data changes in the next jobs report. The unemployment rate for Black men jumped from 5.7% to 6% and the unemployment rate for Black women increased from 4.9% to 6%. Economists and policy experts said that although they will be watching these numbers, they don't think the higher unemployment rate for Black people will necessarily continue. The month-to-month data can be volatile and may not point to a broader trend, they said.

"The Black unemployment rate jumped to 6.4% which is the highest since March and then looking at Black women, we saw their unemployment rate jumped to 6% which is the highest that we've seen in 2.5



**Boeing workers gather on a picket line near the entrance to a Boeing facility on Oct. 24, 2024, in Seattle. The strike ended with a deal in November. Those workers returning to the job factored into growth reported in the latest labor report.** (David Ryder/Getty Images)

years," said Clara Wilson, senior policy analyst at the Groundwork Collaborative, a left-of-center economic think tank. "However, the spike in Black unemployment is something to always keep a track of because if we continue to see a rise in Black unemployment that typically is a warning signal canary in the coal mine that there could be further weakening in the labor market down the line."

Retail jobs fell by 28,000, with a loss of 15,000 in general merchandise and 4,000 in electronics and appliance retailers.

"I'm not particularly concerned about it because it can be due to the fact that it was just a late Thanksgiving this year, so that holiday hiring may not have happened during the reference period in the same way," Gould said.

Average hourly earnings rose 0.4%, the same as October, and 4% over the past year. Although some economists say the Federal Reserve would like to see wages come down to help it meet its 2% target for inflation, Wilson said higher wages are an indication that workers are benefiting from the current economy. She said she's worried that the Trump administration will undo some of the economic progress she said has been made from the Biden administration's major legislation.

"It's really important to remember that real people are behind the data and the strong labor market propels more opportunities for workers and ensures families have higher wages and that leads to a stronger economy. Policymakers should take those lessons that we've learned from those strong public investments and sustain that progress," Wilson said.

*Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.*

## USDA launches national testing of milk from dairy farms to track bird flu outbreak

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 6, 2024 3:35 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced Friday it will require dairy farms to share samples of unpasteurized milk when requested, in an effort to gather more information about the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza.

Public health officials have tracked the spread of bird flu or H5N1 in domestic poultry flocks for years before the virus began showing up in the country's dairy herds this March, raising concerns.

While the risk to the general public remains low and there is no evidence to suggest bird flu can spread from person to person, nearly 60 people, mostly farmworkers, have



**Holstein milking cows at an Idaho dairy on July 20, 2012.** (Photo by Kirsten Strough/USDA)

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contracted the virus this year.

The new milk testing requirements from USDA will apply nationally but will begin first in California, Colorado, Michigan, Mississippi, Oregon and Pennsylvania, the week of Dec. 16.

"Among many outcomes, this will give farmers and farmworkers better confidence in the safety of their animals and ability to protect themselves, and it will put us on a path to quickly controlling and stopping the virus' spread nationwide," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a written statement.

## Unpasteurized milk

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has repeatedly tested pasteurized milk on store shelves throughout the country to reaffirm it's safe to drink. Other dairy products, like cheese and ice cream, have also been found safe.

But the FDA continues to urge people against consuming unpasteurized milk, since it doesn't go through the heating process that kills off viruses and bacteria.

Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a written statement the new milk "testing strategy is a critical part of our ongoing efforts to protect the health and safety of individuals and communities nationwide."

"Our primary responsibility at HHS is to protect public health and the safety of the food supply, and we continue to work closely with USDA and all stakeholders on continued testing for H5N1 in retail milk and dairy samples from across the country to ensure the safety of the commercial pasteurized milk supply," Becerra said. "We will continue this work with USDA for as long and as far as necessary."

The USDA began a voluntary bulk tank testing program for milk this summer in an attempt to make it easier for farmers to move their cattle across state lines without having to test each cow. The department also began a year-long study in August to test for bird flu in dairy cattle moved into meat production, seeking to confirm prior studies that found it safe to eat.

The bird flu outbreak has affected 720 dairy herds throughout 15 states so far this year, though California became the epicenter during the last month, according to data from the USDA.

The Golden State holds nearly all of the 273 herds diagnosed, with just four found in Utah during the last 30 days.

California also holds the bulk of bird flu infections in people, with 32 of the 58 diagnosed cases this year, according to information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Colorado accounts for another 10 human cases and Washington state confirmed 11 people infected with H5N1. Michigan has had two cases this year, while Missouri, Oregon and Texas have each had one positive human case.

## USDA order

The USDA federal order announced Friday will require anyone responsible for a dairy farm — such as a bulk milk transporter, bulk milk transfer station, or dairy processing facility — to share unpasteurized or raw milk samples when requested.

Any farm owners whose dairy herds test positive for H5N1 will be required to share epidemiological information that would allow public health officials to perform contact tracing and other types of disease surveillance.

Additionally, private laboratories and state veterinarians must alert USDA to positive samples that were collected as part of this National Milk Testing Strategy.

*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.*

## Federal appeals court upholds rapidly approaching TikTok ban

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - DECEMBER 6, 2024 1:56 PM

The law Congress passed this year to force the Chinese parent company of social media giant TikTok to either sell the service or face a U.S. ban is constitutional, a panel of federal appeals judges ruled Friday.

The order from a three-judge panel of the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals preserves the bipartisan law President Joe Biden signed in April forcing ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, to cease operations in the United States over concerns the platform's data gathering could be obtained and used by the Chinese Communist Party.

TikTok, ByteDance and a handful of users sued the administration to block enforcement of the law, saying it violated the First Amendment right to free speech and other rights.

The panel on Friday rejected that argument, saying that although the short-form videos produced on the service constitute speech and the shuttering of U.S. operations would limit that speech, that was the result of the Chinese government's "hybrid commercial threat to U.S. national security," not the U.S. government's actions.

"The First Amendment exists to protect free speech in the United States," Senior Judge Douglas H. Ginsburg wrote for the panel. "Here the Government acted solely to protect that freedom from a foreign adversary nation and to limit that adversary's ability to gather data on people in the United States."

Ginsburg, who was appointed to the court by Republican President Ronald Reagan, and Neomi Rao, a Donald Trump appointee, formed the court's main opinion. Chief Judge Sri Srinivasan, whom Democrat Barack Obama appointed, wrote a concurring opinion.

TikTok has the option to appeal Friday's ruling to the full D.C. Circuit or the U.S. Supreme Court. The law is set to go into effect Jan. 19, the day before Trump — who has said he opposes the law even after trying his own TikTok ban during his first presidency — retakes office.

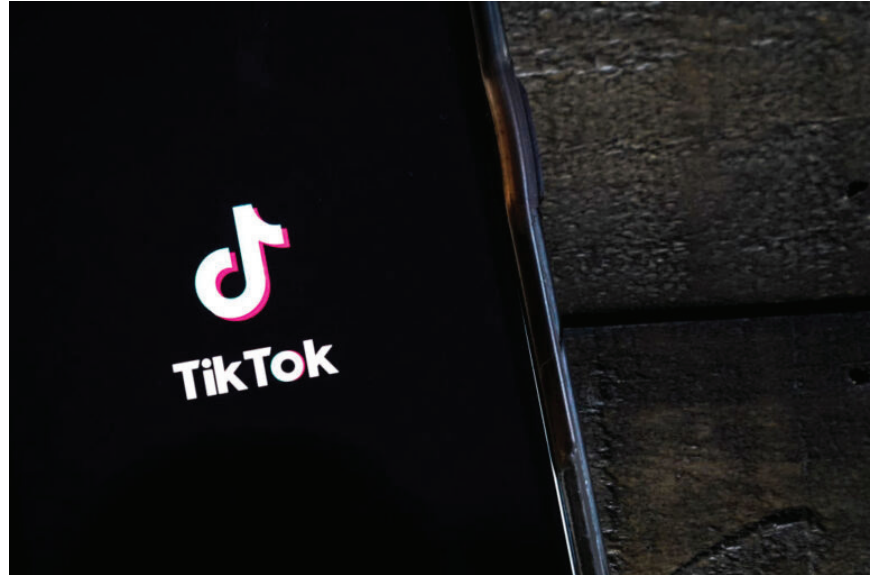
### Free speech concerns

Those challenging the law are likely to appeal directly to the Supreme Court and to seek an emergency temporary stay, "given the urgency of the situation," Jacob Huebert, who represents a plaintiff in the case, said in a Friday interview.

Huebert is the president of Liberty Justice Center, a nonprofit that has litigated high-profile free-speech cases and is representing the libertarian news and commentary channel BASEDPolitics in the TikTok case, arguing that the law unconstitutionally restricts the channel's reach to its intended audience of Gen Z users.

The government's national security argument should not have overridden the First Amendment concerns, Huebert said.

"This national security justification that the court relied so heavily on isn't enough," he said.



**A U.S. law that would force the Chinese parent company of social media giant TikTok to either sell the service or face a U.S. ban is constitutional, a panel of federal appeals judges ruled Friday. In this 2020 photo illustration, the TikTok app is displayed on an Apple iPhone.** (Photo Illustration by Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

The law would set a dangerous precedent that could be applied in the future to other social media, he added.

"It should trouble you regardless of what you think about TikTok or China in particular because it's really a threat to Americans' free speech rights online, across the board," Huebert said.

### **Bill sponsors from both parties praise ruling**

The bipartisan leaders of the U.S. House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, where the bill was introduced, cheered the decision Friday in a joint statement.

"Today's ruling is a victory for the American people and TikTok users, and a loss for the Chinese Communist Party, which will no longer be able to exploit ByteDance's control over TikTok to undermine our sovereignty, surveil our citizens, and threaten our national security," Chairman John Moolenaar, a Michigan Republican, wrote. "I am optimistic that President Trump will facilitate an American takeover of TikTok to allow its continued use in the United States and I look forward to welcoming the app in America under new ownership."

Ranking Democrat Raja Krishnamoorthi of Illinois said there is no solution other than a sale of TikTok.

"With today's opinion, all three branches of government have reached the same conclusion: ByteDance is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, and TikTok's ownership by ByteDance is a national security threat that cannot be mitigated through any other means than divestiture," he said. "Every day that TikTok remains under the Chinese Communist Party's control is a day that our security is at risk."

The bill was introduced in March by then-Chair Mike Gallagher, a Wisconsin Republican who has since left Congress, and Krishnamoorthi.

It has dozens of co-sponsors from each party and passed the House 352-65. The Senate cleared the bill in April as part of a larger funding package.

*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.*

## **Panel on Trump assassination attempts wraps up with Secret Service pledge of improvements**

**BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - DECEMBER 6, 2024 1:41 PM**

WASHINGTON — Acting Secret Service Director Ronald Rowe Jr. touted multiple changes and improvements on Thursday to his agency in the wake of two assassination attempts against Donald Trump earlier this year.

Rowe testified before the bipartisan congressional task force investigating the two separate attempts on the now president-elect's life. The hearing wrapped up the task force's months-long probe, and members voted unanimously to release the panel's final report — although a screaming match that erupted between Rowe and a Texas congressman also showed some underlying tensions.

The Secret Service, which is housed within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, has been under intense scrutiny after a gunman opened fire at a July rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, striking Trump's ear, killing one person and wounding two others. The gunman was killed at the scene.

Authorities then investigated a second apparent assassination attempt against Trump just two months later near Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Florida. The suspect has pleaded not guilty to the charges against him.

The July shooting prompted a slew of federal investigations and the creation of the task force, which expanded its focus following the Florida incident.

Rowe — who quickly stepped into the temporary post in July after Kimberly Cheatle resigned as director — again acknowledged the agency's "failure" to "adequately secure the Butler Farm Show site and protect President-elect Trump."

"That abject failure underscored critical gaps in Secret Service operations, and I recognize that we did

not meet the expectations of the American public, Congress and our protectees, and they rightly have that idea based on how we performed," he said.

### Agency improvements

Rowe detailed several actions the agency is taking, such as expanding the use of "unmanned aerial systems for aerial observation at venues" and "counter-unmanned aerial systems technologies."

He also said applications to the agency are up and they have "really turned the tide" on their hiring.

In his written testimony, Rowe said they recently onboarded a "chief wellness officer" as part of efforts to prioritize mental health and wellness programs at the agency.

He noted a need for a "paradigm shift" that centers on "elevating protection, prioritizing training, strengthening our workforce and increasing accountability."

He also wants to "reconstitute" the agency's culture so that "training is routine and expected."

### Hearing grows tense

At one point, the hearing escalated into a screaming match between Rowe and Texas GOP Rep. Pat Fallon. The congressman brought in a large image of Rowe standing behind President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, Trump, Ohio GOP Sen. J.D. Vance and other leaders during a 9/11 memorial ceremony in New York City.

Fallon questioned why Rowe stood there when the person standing closest to the president is usually the special agent in charge, or SAC, of the detail.

"Actually, congressman, what you're not seeing is the SAC of the detail out of the picture's view, and that is the day where we remember the more than 3,000 people that have died on 9/11," Rowe said. "I actually responded to Ground Zero. I was there going through the ashes of the World Trade Center. I was there at Fresh Kills."

"I'm not asking you that," Fallon shouted at Rowe, proceeding to press him again on whether Rowe was the special agent in charge.

"Do not invoke 9/11 for political purposes!" Rowe yelled back, later adding that he was representing the Secret Service and his presence "did not affect protective operations."

Fallon accused Rowe of being at the event because he's "auditioning for this job" that he's "not gonna get." Trump has yet to disclose whom he wants to run the agency. The director of the Secret Service is not subject to confirmation by the Senate, although some members of Congress want to change that.

*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.*

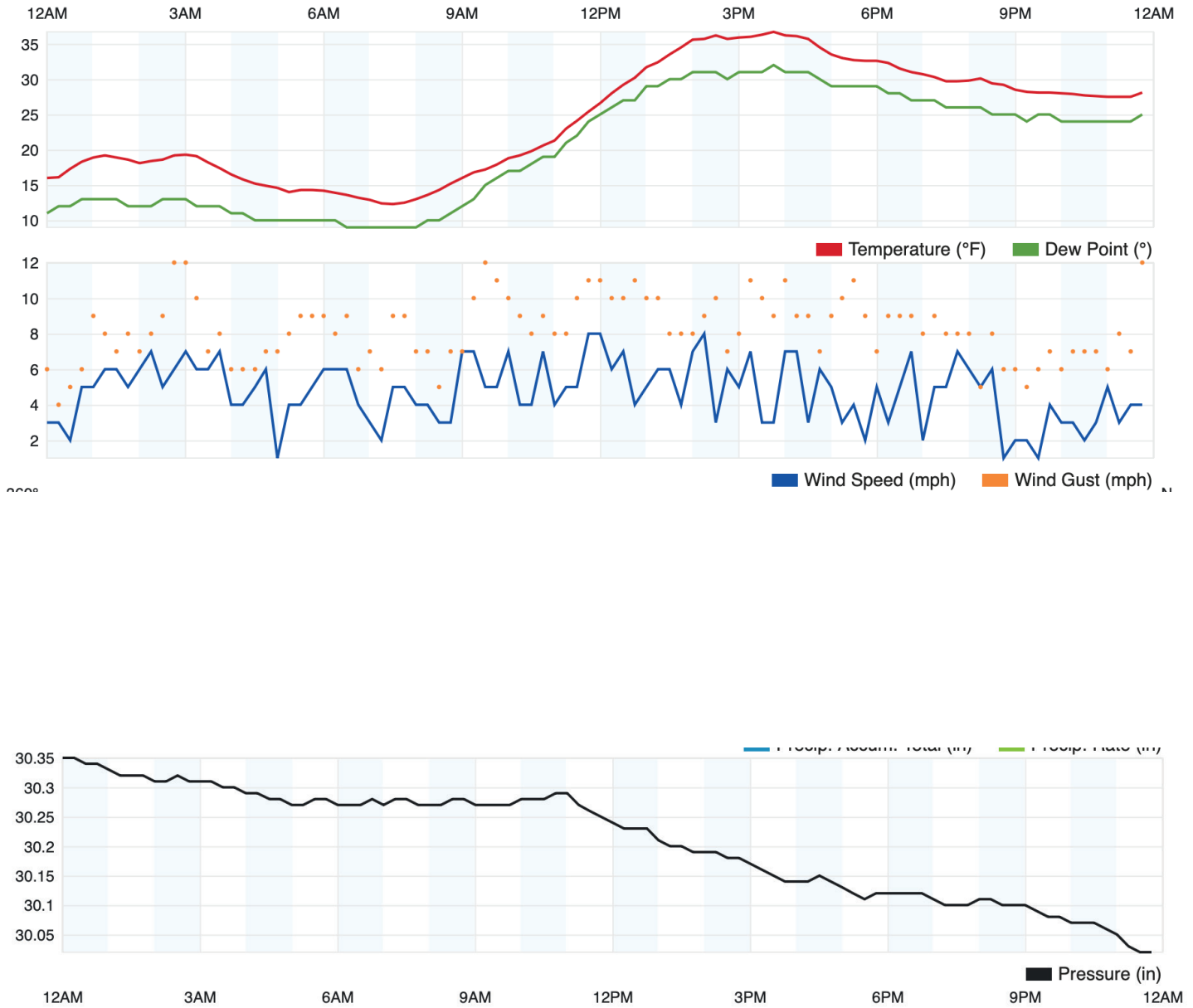


**Acting U.S. Secret Service Director Ronald Rowe Jr. testifies before a joint hearing of the Senate Judiciary and Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committees in the Dirksen Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill on July 30, 2024 in Washington, D.C.** (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Groton Daily Independent

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Today



High: 47 °F

Mostly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 26 °F

Increasing  
Clouds

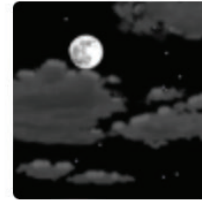
Sunday



High: 42 °F

Slight Chance  
Rain/Freezing  
Rain then  
Chance Rain

Sunday Night



Low: 24 °F

Partly Cloudy

Monday



High: 32 °F

Chance Snow  
and Breezy

## Saturday



Highs: 41-60°F

Mostly Sunny Skies

## Looking Ahead

### Sunday



Highs: 39-52°F  
Lows: 27-36°F

20-40% chance for  
rain through the  
afternoon over  
northern SD

### Monday



Highs: 29-36°F  
Lows: 22-28°F

20-40% chance for  
snow over northern  
SD through the  
afternoon

Saturday will be mostly sunny with warmer temperatures through the day. Those temperatures will start to cool slightly Sunday with a 20-40% chance for rain over northern SD Sunday morning into the afternoon. Temperatures continue to cool Monday with a 20-40% chance for snow to fall mainly over northern SD, though snowfall accumulations will stay low.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 37 °F at 3:48 PM

Low Temp: 12 °F at 7:22 AM

Wind: 13 mph at 11:47 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 53 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1918

Record Low: -27 in 2013

Average High: 32

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.14

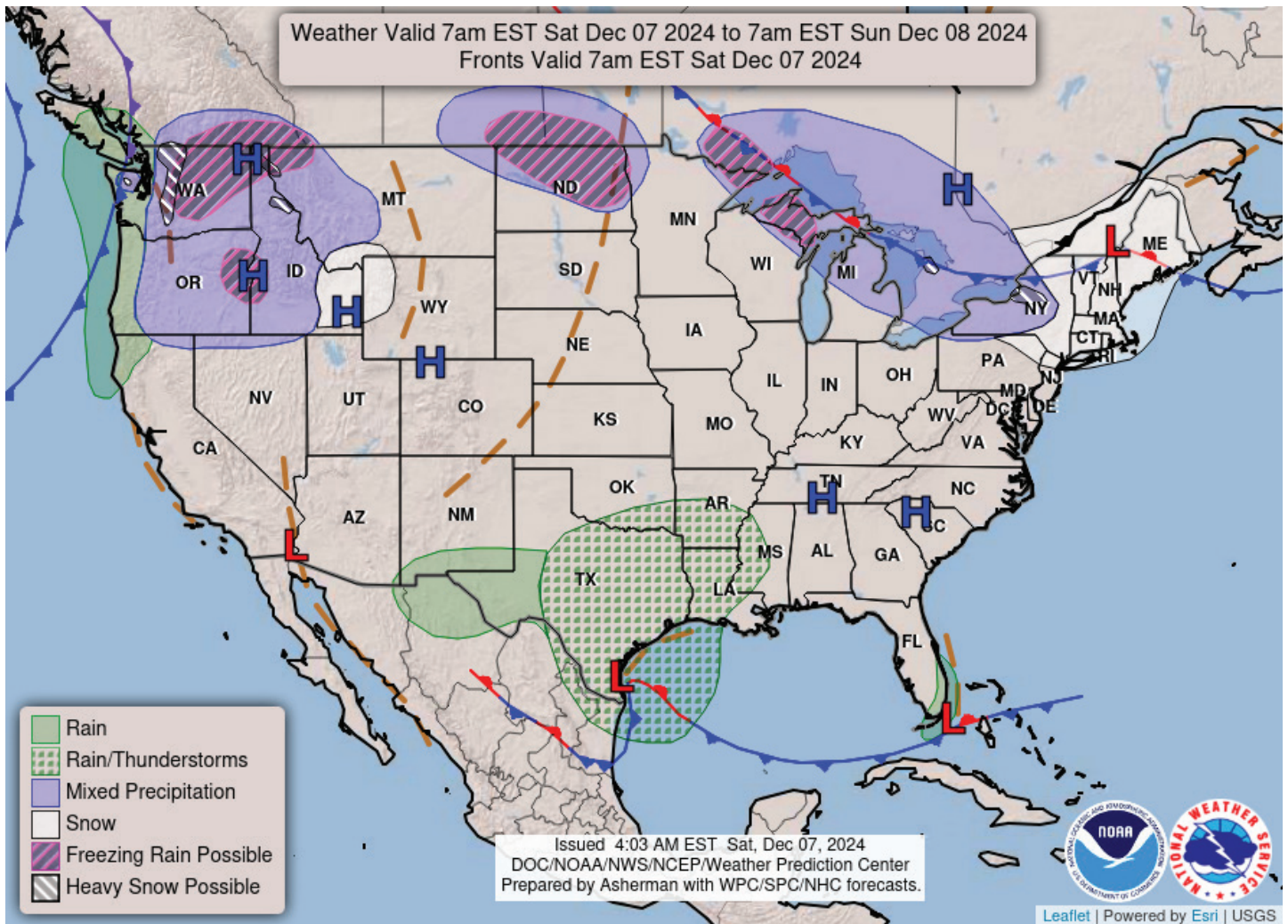
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.35

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:50:59 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:58:19 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 7, 1963: Winds of 50 to 60 mph resulted in blowing snow all day on the 7th, which reduced visibilities to near zero and produced snow drifts several feet deep in many areas. Snowfall in eastern South Dakota was generally from 3 to 7 inches with 1 to 2 inches in the western part of the state. Storm total snowfall included 8 inches at Sisseton, 5 inches at Watertown and Wheaton, 4 inches at Aberdeen, and 2 inches at Mobridge.

December 7, 1971: Heavy snow of 7 to 12 inches fell in north-central South Dakota on the 7th. Timber Lake and Eagle Butte each reported 12 inches of snow. Strong winds accompanied the snow and caused extensive drifting. Drifts up to 15 feet were reported in sheltered areas near Lemmon. Seven inches fell at Mobridge, and 11 inches fell at Selby. McIntosh received 4 inches.

1740 - In early December two weeks of mild and rainy weather culminated in the worst flood in fifty years in the Lower Connecticut River Valley. The Merrimack River swelled to its highest level, and in Maine the raging waters swept away mills, carried off bridges, and ruined highways. (David Ludlum)

1935 - Severe flooding hit parts of the Houston, TX, area. Eight persons were killed as one hundred city blocks were inundated. Satsuma reported 16.49 inches of rain. The Buffalo and White Oak Bayous crested on the 9th. (6th-8th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Heavy rain fell across eastern Puerto Rico, with 19.41 inches reported at Las Piedras. Flooding caused five million dollars damage. Another in a series of storms hit the northwestern U.S., with wind gusts above 100 mph reported at Cape Blanco OR. While snow and gusty winds accompanied a cold front crossing the Rockies, strong westerly winds, gusting to 93 mph at Boulder CO, helped temperatures in western Kansas reach the 60s for the sixth day in a row. Freezing drizzle in northeastern slowed traffic to 5 mph on some roads in Morrow County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - An outbreak of cold arctic air brought up to 18 inches of snow to the Colorado Rockies, with 14 inches at Boulder CO, and seven inches at Denver. Heavy snow blanketed New Mexico the following day, with 15 inches reported near Ruidoso. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A storm moving out of the Central Rocky Mountain Region spread snow across Kansas and Oklahoma into Arkansas and Tennessee. Snowfall totals ranged up to 7.5 inches at Winfield KS. Freezing rain on trees and power lines cut off electricity to 24,000 homes in northeastern Arkansas, and 40,000 homes in the Nashville TN area were without electricity for several hours. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2006: A rare tornado tore through Kensal Rise in London. This T4 on the TORRO scale, equivalent to an F2 on the Fujita scale, injured six people and damaged 150 homes. According to the BBC, the last tornado which caused significant damage in London was in December 1954, in West London.



## Never Mind, Santa...

Chris was sitting in Santa's lap and going over a long list of presents that he wanted for Christmas. "I want a bicycle," he said, "and I also want a wagon, a chemistry set, a telescope, an electric train, a football, a Kindle FIRE, and a pair of rollerblades."

"That's a long list," said Santa. "I'll have to check carefully to see if you were a good boy."

After thinking for a moment Chris said, "Don't bother, Santa, I'll just settle for the rollerblades." Not many of us would be able to "pass" a really thorough investigation to discover if we were worthy of receiving a long list of gifts. We'd probably be like Chris and settle very quickly for very little. Nor would many of us want to have someone investigate our lives and then decide if we deserved a gift or not. We would be quite anxious – if not completely frightened.

But God is so very different. He knows everything there is to know about us and still offers us the most precious gift He has: His Son.

"Now, no one is likely to die for a good person," said Paul, "though someone might be willing to die for someone who is especially good. But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." Christ: the source of eternal life.

There you have it. It is not about whether or not we are good or deserving of eternal life through Him. It is because of God's great love that we can have the gift of eternal life!

Prayer: May we realize during this season, our Father, the great Gift we have because of Your love. May Your Son be our main interest and attraction this year. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Romans 5:5-11 Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

*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:  
12.06.24

16 21 33 39 45 24

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$619,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.04.24

10 13 32 42 44 9

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$16,420,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 45 Mins  
29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.06.24

1 3 33 36 39 1

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 28  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.04.24

4 7 9 11 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$136,000**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 28  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.04.24

14 35 43 48 54 1

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

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 29 Mins  
29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.04.24

1 23 25 28 61 13

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$260,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 29 Mins  
29 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  
04/05/2025 Dueling Duo at the Legion (Baseball/softball foundation fundraiser)  
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  
06/07/2025 Second Annual Day of Play at Groton Baseball Complex  
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

### Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Groton 39, Timber Lake 11

Kimball-White Lake 50, Hanson 34

Lemmon High School 70, Bison 19

North Central 41, Strasburg, N.D. 14

Sioux Falls Lincoln 50, Yankton 43

Watertown 39, Great Plains Lutheran 34

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

### Prospects for President Yoon's impeachment are dim with ruling party boycotting vote

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Most ruling party lawmakers were boycotting a parliamentary vote Saturday to deny a two-thirds majority sought by the opposition to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol over his short-lived imposition of martial law, as protests grew nationwide calling for his removal.

The likely defeat of the motion is expected to intensify public protests calling for Yoon's ouster and deepen political chaos in South Korea, with a survey suggesting a majority of South Koreans support the president's impeachment. Yoon's martial law declaration drew criticism from his own ruling conservative party, but it is also determined to oppose Yoon's impeachment apparently because it fears losing presidency to liberals.

Impeaching Yoon would require support from two-thirds of the National Assembly, or 200 of its 300 members. The opposition parties who brought the impeachment motion have 192 seats, meaning they need at least eight additional votes from Yoon's People Power Party.

The opposition-controlled parliament began a vote earlier Saturday, but only three lawmakers from PPP took part with opposition members. If the number of lawmakers who cast ballots doesn't reach 200, the motion will be scrapped at midnight without the ballot counting, according to the National Assembly. Opposition parties could submit a new impeachment motion after a new parliamentary session opens next Wednesday.

There are worries that Yoon won't be able to serve out his remaining 2 ½ years in office because his leadership took a huge hit. Many experts say some ruling party lawmakers could eventually join opposition parties' efforts to impeach Yoon if public demands for it grow further.

If Yoon is impeached, his powers will be suspended until the Constitutional Court decides whether to remove him from office. If he is removed, an election to replace him must take place within 60 days.

National Assembly Speaker Woo Won Shik urged ruling party members to return to the chamber to participate in the vote, stressing that it was closely watched by the nation and also the world.

"Don't make a shameful judgment and please vote based on your convictions," Woo said.

Democratic Party leaders visited a hall on the floor below the main chamber where PPP lawmakers were gathered, attempting to persuade them to vote. After being blocked from entering, they angrily accused the conservatives' leadership of preventing its lawmakers from voting freely.

Earlier Saturday, Yoon issued a public apology over the martial law decree, saying he won't shirk legal or political responsibility for the declaration and promising not to make another attempt to impose martial law. He said would leave it to his party to chart a course through the country's political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office."

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"The declaration of this martial law was made out of my desperation. But in the course of its implementation, it caused anxiety and inconveniences to the public. I feel very sorry over that and truly apologize to the people who must have been shocked a lot," Yoon said.

Since taking office in 2022, Yoon has struggled to push his agenda through an opposition-controlled parliament and grappled with low approval ratings amid scandals involving himself and his wife. In his martial law announcement on Tuesday night, Yoon called parliament a "den of criminals" bogging down state affairs and vowed to eliminate "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces."

The turmoil resulting from Yoon's bizarre and poorly-thought-out stunt has paralyzed South Korean politics and sparked alarm among key diplomatic partners like the U.S. and Japan.

Tuesday night saw special forces troops encircling the parliament building and army helicopters hovering over it, but the military withdrew after the National Assembly unanimously voted to overturn the decree, forcing Yoon to lift it before daybreak Wednesday. The declaration of martial law was the first of its kind in more than 40 years in South Korea. Eighteen lawmakers from the ruling party voted to reject Yoon's martial law decree along with opposition lawmakers.

Yoon's speech fueled speculation that he and his party may push for a constitutional amendment to shorten his term, instead of accepting impeachment, as a way to ease public anger over the marital law and facilitate Yoon's early exit from office.

Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the main liberal opposition Democratic Party, told reporters that Yoon's speech was "greatly disappointing" and that the only way forward is his immediate resignation or impeachment. His party called Yoon's martial law "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or coup."

The passage of Yoon's impeachment motion appeared more likely Friday when the chair of Yoon's party called for his removal on Friday, but the party remained formally opposed to impeachment.

On Saturday, tens of thousands of people densely packed several blocks of roads leading up to the National Assembly, waving banners, shouting slogans and dancing and singing along to K-pop songs with lyrics changed to call for Yoon's ouster. Protesters also gathered in front of PPP's headquarters near the Assembly, angrily shouting for its lawmakers to vote to impeach Yoon.

A smaller crowd of Yoon's supporters, which still seemed to be in the thousands, rallied in separate streets in Seoul, decrying the impeachment attempt they saw as unconstitutional.

Lawmakers on Saturday first voted on a bill appointing a special prosecutor to investigate stock price manipulation allegations surrounding Yoon's wife. Some lawmakers from Yoon's party were seen leaving the hall after that vote, triggering angry shouts from opposition lawmakers.

On Friday, PPP chair Han Dong-hun, who criticized Yoon's martial law declaration, said he had received intelligence that during the brief period of martial law Yoon ordered the country's defense counterintelligence commander to arrest and detain unspecified key politicians based on accusations of "anti-state activities."

Hong Jang-won, first deputy director of South Korea's National Intelligence Service, told lawmakers in a closed-door briefing Friday that Yoon had ordered him to help the defense counterintelligence unit to detain key politicians. The targeted politicians included Han, Lee and Woo, according to Kim Byung-kee, one of the lawmakers who attended the meeting.

The Defense Ministry said Friday it suspended three military commanders including the head of the defense counterintelligence unit over their involvement in enforcing martial law.

Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho has told parliament that Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun ordered the deployment of troops to the National Assembly after Yoon imposed martial law. Opposition parties accused Kim of recommending to Yoon to enforce martial law.

Kim resigned Thursday, and prosecutors imposed an overseas travel ban on him.



## Trump in Paris for Notre Dame Cathedral's reopening and to meet with Macron

By SYLVIE CORBET and ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Donald Trump is off on his first international trip as president-elect, ready to join world leaders and dignitaries in Paris for a Saturday celebration of the renovation of Notre Dame Cathedral after a devastating fire in 2019.

Trump wrote when he accepted the invitation earlier this week that French President Emmanuel Macron had done "a wonderful job ensuring that Notre Dame has been restored to its full level of glory, and even more so. It will be a very special day for all!"

Since Trump touched down at Paris' Orly Airport on Saturday morning, more than 20 French government security agents have been helping ensure his safety alongside the Secret Service, according to French national police. A special French police van has also provided anti-drone protection for Trump's convoy.

Security is tighter than usual outside the U.S. Embassy and other sites around Paris for the grandiose Notre Dame reopening, where dozens of international VIPs are expected.

Macron, who has had an up-and-down relationship with Trump, has made a point of cultivating a relationship with the president-elect since he defeated Vice President Kamala Harris last month. But his office nonetheless played down the significance of the invitation, saying that other politicians who do not currently hold office had been invited as well.

Trump was invited as president-elect of a "friendly nation," Macron's office said, adding, "This is in no way exceptional, we've done it before."

President Joe Biden was invited as well but will not attend. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre cited a scheduling conflict and said that the first lady, Jill Biden, will instead represent the U.S.

Trump and the U.S. first lady last encountered one another shortly after the election, when he visited the White House for the traditional meeting between outgoing and incoming presidents.

Trump's visit to France comes as Macron and other European leaders are trying to cultivate the president-elect's favor and persuade him to maintain support for Ukraine in its defense against Russia's three-year invasion.

Ahead of the Notre Dame event, Trump will meet with Macron and Britain's Prince William — who's also meeting with Jill Biden, according to the British royal palace.

Macron will convene separately Saturday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. It's not clear whether Trump will meet Zelenskyy, too. Trump has vowed to end the war in Ukraine swiftly but has not specified how, raising concerns in Kyiv about what terms may be laid out for any future negotiations.

In an effort to build trust with the incoming U.S. administration, Zelenskyy's top aide Andriy Yermak met key members of Trump's team on a two-day trip earlier this week. A senior Ukrainian official, who spoke on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to speak publicly, described the meetings as productive, but declined to disclose details.

Relations between France and the U.S. during Trump's first term began warmly enough but grew increasingly strained over time.

Macron was the guest of honor at Trump's first state dinner, and Trump traveled to France several times. But the relationship suffered after Macron criticized Trump for questioning the need for NATO and raising doubts about America's commitment to the mutual defense pact.

On the campaign trail this year, Trump often mocked Macron, imitating his accent and threatening to impose steep tariffs on wine and champagne bottles shipped to the U.S. if France tried to tax American companies.

But Macron was one of the first global leaders to congratulate Trump last month after the election.

Trump was president in 2019 when a massive fire engulfed Notre Dame, collapsing its spire and threatening to destroy one of the world's greatest architectural treasures, known for its mesmerizing stained glass.

"So horrible to watch the massive fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris," he wrote on what was then Twitter, offering his advice to the city.

"Perhaps flying water tankers could be used to put it out. Must act quickly!" he wrote.

French officials appeared to respond shortly after, noting that "All means" were being used to extinguish the flames, "except for water-bombing aircrafts which, if used, could lead to the collapse of the entire structure of the cathedral."

Last weekend, Trump announced that he intends to nominate real estate developer Charles Kushner, the father of his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to serve as ambassador to France. Predecessors in that prestigious role include Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

## **Syrian troops withdraw from the south of the country as they rush to defend Homs**

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The Syrian army withdrew from much of southern Syria on Saturday, leaving more areas of the country, including two provincial capitals, under the control of opposition fighters, the military and an opposition war monitor said.

The redeployment away from the provinces of Daraa and Sweida came as Syria's military sent large numbers of reinforcements to defend the key central city of Homs, Syria's third largest, as insurgents approached its outskirts.

The rapid advances by insurgents is a stunning reversal of fortunes for Syria's President Bashar Assad, who appears to be largely on his own, with erstwhile allies preoccupied with other conflicts.

His chief international backer, Russia, is busy with its war in Ukraine, and Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah, which at one point sent thousands of fighters to shore up his forces, has been weakened by a yearlong conflict with Israel. Iran, meanwhile, has seen its proxies across the region degraded by Israeli regular airstrikes.

Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Syria war monitor, reported Saturday that Iran's military advisers have started leaving Syria. He added that Iran-backed fighters in eastern Syria, mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan, have withdrawn into central Syria.

The shock offensive began Nov. 27 led by the jihadi Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, during which gunmen captured the northern city of Aleppo, Syria's largest, and the central city of Hama, the country's fourth largest city. The group has its origins in al-Qaida and is considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the United Nations.

HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani told CNN in an exclusive interview Thursday from Syria that the aim of the offensive is to overthrow Assad's government.

The Britain-based Observatory said Syrian troops have withdrawn from much of the two southern provinces and are sending reinforcements to Homs, where a battle is looming. If the insurgents capture Homs, they would cut the link between Damascus, Assad's seat of power, and the coastal region where the president enjoys wide support.

The Syrian army said in a statement Saturday that it has carried out redeployment and repositioning in Sweida and Daraa after its checkpoints came under attack by "terrorists." The army said it is setting up a "strong and coherent defensive and security belt in the area," apparently to defend Damascus from the south.

Since Syria's conflict broke out in March 2011, the Syrian government has been referring to opposition gunmen as terrorists.

In the gas-rich nation of Qatar, the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey were scheduled to meet to discuss the situation in Syria. Turkey is a main backer of the rebels seeking to overthrow Assad.

Qatar's top diplomat, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, criticized Assad for failing to take advantage of the lull in fighting in recent years to address the country's underlying problems. "Assad didn't seize this opportunity to start engaging and restoring his relationship with his people," he said.

Sheikh Mohammed said he was surprised by how quickly the rebels have advanced and said there is a real threat to Syria's "territorial integrity." He said the war could "damage and destroy what is left if there

is no sense of urgency" to start a political process.

After the fall of the cities of Daraa and Sweida early Saturday, Syrian government forces remain in control of five provincial capitals — Damascus, Homs and Quneitra, as well as Latakia and Tartus on the Mediterranean coast.

Tartus is home to the only Russian naval base outside the former Soviet Union while Latakia is home to a major Russian air base.

On Friday, U.S.-backed fighters of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces captured wide parts of the eastern province of Deir el-Zour that borders Iraq as well as the provincial capital that carries the same name. The capture of areas in Deir el-Zour is a blow to Iran's influence in the region as the area is the gateway to the corridor linking the Mediterranean to Iran, a supply line for Iran-backed fighters, including Lebanon's Hezbollah.

With the capture of a main border crossing with Iraq by the SDF and after opposition fighters took control of the Naseeb border crossing to Jordan in southern Syria, the Syrian government's only gateway to the outside world is the Masnaa border crossing with Lebanon.

## **Alone and broke against a renewed insurgency, is Assad's rule at risk of collapse?**

By ZEINA KARAM and SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The last time Syrian President Bashar Assad was in serious trouble was 10 years ago, at the height of the country's civil war, when his forces lost control over parts of the largest city, Aleppo, and his opponents were closing in on the capital, Damascus.

Back then, he was rescued by his chief international backer, Russia, and longtime regional ally Iran, which along with Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia helped Assad's forces retake Aleppo, tipping the war firmly in his favor.

Now, as insurgents pursue a shock offensive that quickly captured not just Aleppo, but the key city of Hama and a string of other towns across the country's northwest, the Syrian leader appears to be largely on his own.

Russia is preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, and Hezbollah, which at one point sent thousands of its fighters to shore up Assad's forces, has been weakened by a yearlong conflict with Israel. Iran, meanwhile, has seen its proxies across the region degraded by Israeli airstrikes.

Moreover, Syrian troops are exhausted and hollowed out by 13 years of war and economic crises, with little will left to fight.

So will Assad's rule collapse in the near future?

"The coming days and weeks will be critical in determining whether the rebel offensive poses an existential threat to the Assad regime or whether the regime manages to regain its footing and push back on recent rebel gains," said Mona Yacoubian, an analyst with the United States Institute for Peace.

"While weakened and distracted, Assad's allies are unlikely to simply cave to the rebels' offensive," she wrote in an analysis.

Not out of the woods

Until recently, it seemed that Syria's president was almost out of the woods. He never really won the long-running civil war, and large parts of the country were still outside his control.

But after 13 years of conflict, it appeared that the worst was over and that the world was ready to forget. Once viewed as a regional pariah, Assad saw Arab countries warming up to him again, renewing ties and reinstating Syria's membership in the Arab League. Earlier this year, Italy also decided to reopen its embassy in Damascus after a decade of strained relations.

In the aftermath of one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, aid groups and international donors in Syria began pivoting toward spending more on the country's recovery than on emergency assistance, providing a lifeline for Syrians and restoring basic services.

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But then the sudden offensive launched by insurgents on Nov. 27 reignited the war and caught everyone off guard with its scope and speed.

It also left Syria's neighbors anxious, wary that violence and refugees could spill across borders and worried about the growing influence of Islamist groups, a major concern for most of Syria's Arab neighbors.

Geopolitical shifts

Analysts say a confluence of geopolitical developments beginning with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, followed by the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza that started on Oct. 7, 2023, helped create the opportunity for Assad's opponents to pounce.

As the rebels advanced this past week, Syrian forces appeared to melt away, putting up no resistance, with several reports of defection. Russian forces carried out occasional airstrikes. Hezbollah's leader in Lebanon said the group will continue to support Syria, but made no mention of sending fighters again.

"The rebel assault underscores the precarious nature of regime control in Syria," Yacoubian wrote.

"Its sudden eruption and the speed with which rebel groups managed to overtake Aleppo ... expose the complex dynamics that reside just below the surface in Syria and can transform superficial calm into major conflict."

Aron Lund, a Syria expert with Century International, a New York-based think tank and a researcher with the Swedish Defense Research Agency, said the developments in Syria are a geopolitical disaster for Russia and Iran.

"They too were surely surprised by what happened, and they have all sorts of resource constraints," including Russia's war in Ukraine and Hezbollah's losses in Lebanon and Syria.

Exhausted and broken

While the country's conflict lines have been largely stalemated since 2020, Syria's economic woes have only multiplied in the past few years.

The imposition of U.S. sanctions, a banking crisis in neighboring Lebanon and an earthquake last year contributed to the fact that almost all Syrians face extreme financial hardship.

That has caused state institutions and salaries to wither.

"If you can't pay your soldiers a living wage, then maybe you can't expect them to stay and fight when thousands of Islamists storm" their cities, Lund said. "It is just an exhausted, broken and dysfunctional regime" to start with.

Part of the insurgents' attempt to reassert their grip on Aleppo, the city where they were ousted in 2016 after a grueling military campaign, was to issue a call to government soldiers and security agencies to defect, granting them what they called "protection cards," which offer some sort of amnesty and assurances that they won't be hunted down.

The spokesman for the insurgents, Hassan Abdul-Ghani, said more than 1,600 soldiers have applied for the cards over two days in Aleppo city.

Hundreds of defectors lined up outside city police stations Thursday to register their details with the insurgents.

Hossam al-Bakr, 33, originally from Hama who served in Damascus and defected four years earlier to Aleppo, said he came to "settle his position" and get a new ID.

The laminated card handed out to each defector was titled the "defection card." It showed the name, ID number and place of service of each defector. It is issued by "The General Command: Military Operations Room."

On Thursday, Maj. Mohamed Ghoneim, who was in charge of registering the defectors, said more than 1,000 soldiers or police officers came to register. Some who were in possession of their official guns handed them over, he added.

"There are thousands who want to apply," he said.

Charles Lister, a longtime Syria expert, said while most of the international community has written off the conflict as either frozen or finished, the armed opposition has never given up and has been training for such a scenario for years.

A ragtag group of militias, plagued by infighting and rivalry, spent years preparing and organizing, pro-

pelled by a dream to regain control of territory from Assad.

"The regime has been more vulnerable over the last year or two than it has perhaps been throughout the entirety of the conflict," Lister said. "And it has gotten used to the idea that if it can wait things out, it will ultimately prove to be the victor."

## **Notre Dame reopens its doors to Macron and other world leaders in a rare symbol of unity**

By THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France's iconic Notre Dame Cathedral is formally reopening its doors on Saturday for the first time since a devastating fire nearly destroyed the 861-year-old landmark in 2019.

The restoration, a spectacular achievement in just five years for a structure that took nearly two centuries to build, is seen as a moment of triumph for French President Emmanuel Macron, who championed the ambitious timeline — and a welcome respite from his domestic political woes.

Under the luminous stained glass, many world leaders, dignitaries, and worshippers will gather in the evening to mark the occasion — a rare moment of unity against the backdrop of global divisions and conflicts.

President-elect Donald Trump, America's first lady Jill Biden and Britain's Prince William, along with dozens of state and government and personalities — 1,500 guests in all — will attend the reopening celebration under Notre Dame's soaring Gothic arches, led by Archbishop Laurent Ulrich.

Instead of starting from the cathedral's forecourt as initially planned and because of strong winds forecast for Saturday evening in Paris, the French presidential palace and the Paris diocese said Friday the entire opening ceremony will be held inside Notre Dame.

A sign of hope

Notre Dame's rector, Rev. Olivier Ribadeau Dumas, says the cathedral is "more than just a French monument" and a beloved treasure of world's cultural heritage.

"The cathedral is a magnificent symbol of unity," the rector said. "A sign of hope, because what seemed impossible has become possible."

Saturday's events will blend solemn religious tradition with cultural grandeur, starting with Ulrich symbolically reopening Notre Dame's grand wooden doors.

Tapping them three times with a staff crafted from charred wood salvaged from the cathedral's fire-ravaged roof, he will declare the cathedral open for worship once more.

Solemn rituals

Psalms, prayers, and hymns will fill the cavernous space as the cathedral's thunderous organ, silenced since the fire, is reawakened. The 8,000-pipe instrument, painstakingly restored and cleaned of toxic lead dust, will respond to the archbishop's invocation, with four organists performing an improvised interplay of melodies.

Later in the evening, a star-studded concert will take center stage inside the cathedral and pay tribute to its resurrection and to those who labored to restore it, offering a universal message of harmony. Pianist Lang Lang, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and soprano Pretty Yende are among the world-famous artists slated to perform.

On Sunday, Ulrich will lead the inaugural Mass and consecrate the cathedral's new altar, designed by contemporary artist Guillaume Bardet to replace the one crushed beneath the flaming spire in the blaze.

Nearly 170 bishops from France and abroad will attend, alongside priests from all 113 parishes of the Paris diocese.

Unity in times of global challenges

The reopening of Notre Dame comes at a time of profound global unrest, with wars raging in Ukraine and the Middle East.

For Catholics, Notre Dame's rector said the cathedral "carries the enveloping presence of the Virgin Mary, a maternal and embracing presence."

"It is a magnificent symbol of unity, a sign of hope," Dumas said.

The range of dignitaries coming to Paris from Africa to the Mideast and the U.S. underline the cathedral's

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significance as a symbol of shared heritage and peace.

Macron's political woes

The celebration is expected to give a much-needed boost to embattled Macron, whose prime minister resigned this week, plunging the nation's political scene into more turmoil.

The French president, who has called Notre Dame's reopening "a jolt of hope," will address the gathering. He had hoped the occasion would briefly silence his critics and showcase France's unity and resilience under his leadership.

The ambitious five-year restoration timeline, announced just a day after the 2019 fire, had seemed improbable to many.

Macron's presidency faces its gravest crisis after the government's collapse this week in a historic no-confidence vote that toppled Prime Minister Michel Barnier.

The vote followed months of political gridlock after snap elections. Calls are now growing louder from opposition forces for Macron to resign. But he vowed in an address to the nation on Thursday to remain in office until the end of his term in 2027, and said he'll name a new prime minister within days.

As France struggles with economic woes and mounting social unrest, Notre Dame's rebirth celebrations form a stark contrast to the crisis.

Tight security

Security will be tight all through the weekend, echoing measures taken during the Paris Olympics earlier this year.

The Île de la Cité — the small island in the River Seine that is home to Notre Dame — will be closed to tourists and non-residents, with access restricted to invitees and those who live on the island.

Public viewing areas along the Seine's southern bank will accommodate 40,000 spectators, who can follow the celebrations on large screens.

The archbishop's reopening of the cathedral doors will be followed by a liturgical service and the re-awakening of the grand organ, ending with the celebratory concert that will honor Notre Dame's cultural and spiritual significance.

For many, Notre Dame's rebirth is not just a French achievement but a global one — after the reopening, the cathedral is set to welcome 15 million visitors annually, up from 12 million before the fire.

Following the 2019 fire, nearly \$1 billion in donations quickly poured in from around the world, testifying to Notre Dame's universal appeal.

## **Pope creates 21 cardinals, many of them reformers in their own right, to carry out his reform plans**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis is installing 21 new cardinals, many of whom are key figures in his reform agenda: A Dominican preacher who acted as the spiritual father for Francis' recent gathering of bishops, a Neapolitan "street priest" like himself, and a Peruvian bishop who has strongly backed his crackdown on abuse.

Francis' 10th consistory to create new princes of the church is also the biggest infusion of voting-age cardinals in his 11-year pontificate, further cementing his imprint on the group of men who will one day elect his successor. With Saturday's additions, Francis will have created 110 of the 140 cardinals under 80, thus eligible to vote in a conclave.

This consistory also brings the number of voting-age cardinals well over the 120-man limit set by St. John Paul II. But 13 existing cardinals will turn 80 next year, bringing the numbers back down.

This consistory is notable too because the 21 men being elevated aren't the same ones Francis named Oct. 6 when he announced an unusual December consistory.

One of Francis' original picks, Indonesian Bishop Paskalis Bruno Syukur, the bishop of Bogor, asked not to be made a cardinal "because of his desire to grow more in his life as a priest," the Vatican said. Francis quickly substituted him with the Naples archbishop, Domenico Battaglia, known for his pastoral work in

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the slums and rough parts of Naples.

Which country gets the most new cardinals?

Battaglia is one of five Italians getting the red hat, keeping the once-dominant Italian presence in the College of Cardinals strong. Turin is getting a cardinal in its archbishop, Roberto Repole, as is Rome: Baldassare Reina, who on the same day Francis announced he was becoming a cardinal also learned that Francis had promoted him to be his top administrator for the diocese of Rome.

Francis, who is technically bishop of Rome, has been conducting a years-long reorganization of the Rome diocese and its pontifical universities. Reina – who is also grand chancellor of the pre-eminent Pontifical Lateran University – will be expected to execute the reform.

Another Italian is the oldest cardinal: Angelo Acerbi, a 99-year-old retired Vatican diplomat. He is the only one among the 21 new cardinals to be older than 80 and thus ineligible to vote in a conclave. Francis' picks on Saturday also include the youngest cardinal: the 44-year-old head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Melbourne, Australia, Mykola Bychok.

Yet another Italian is one of two Vatican priests who do jobs in the Holy See that don't usually carry the red hat: Fabio Baggio is undersecretary in the Vatican development office. Francis also decided to make a cardinal out of George Jacob Koovakad, the priest who organizes the pope's foreign travels.

Other picks have high-profile roles in Francis' reforms.

The archbishop of Lima, Peru, Carlos Gustavo Castillo Mattasoglio, made headlines recently because of an extraordinary essay he penned for El Pais newspaper in which he called for the suppression of an influential Peruvian Catholic movement, the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, which also has a presence in the U.S.

Castillo called the group a "failed experiment" of the church in Latin America, one of several conservative, right-wing movements that cropped up in the 1970s and 1980s as a counterweight to the more left-leaning liberation theology.

"My hypothesis is that the Sodalitium obeys a political project," Castillo wrote. "It is the resurrection of fascism in Latin America, artfully using the church by means of sectarian methods."

Francis has recently expelled the Sodalitium's founder and several top members following a Vatican investigation.

What are the geographic breakdowns?

Castillo is one of five new Latin American cardinals named by history's first Latin American pope. They include the archbishop of Santiago del Estero, Argentina, Vicente Bokalic Iglic; the archbishop of Porto Alegre, Brazil, Jaime Spengler; the archbishop of Santiago, Chile, Fernando Natalio Chomali Garib and the archbishop of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Luis Gerardo Cabrera Herrera.

Francis has long sought to broaden the geographic diversity of the College of Cardinals to show the universality of the church, particularly where it is growing. Asia got two new cardinals: Tarcisio Isao Kikuchi, the archbishop of Tokyo; and Pablo Virgilio Sinogco David, the bishop of Kalookan, Philippines. Africa also got two new cardinals: the archbishop of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Ignace Bessi Dogbo, and the bishop of Algiers, Algeria, Jean-Paul Vesco.

"There hasn't been an African pope, but it's a possibility in the church," Dogbo said in an interview on the eve of his installation. "And I think that this eventuality — which is not necessarily a demand — if this eventuality were to arise, the universal church would have to be ready to take it on."

Francis also tapped the archbishop of Tehran, Iran, Dominique Joseph Mathieu, the bishop of Belgrade, Serbia, Ladislav Nemet, while the lone North American cardinal named is the archbishop of Toronto, Frank Leo.

The Lithuanian-born cardinal-elect, Rolandas Makrickas, has a special job in this pontificate: As the archpriest of the St. Mary Major basilica, he hosts Francis every time the pope returns from a foreign trip, since the pope likes to pray before an icon of the Madonna in the church. Additionally, Makrickas oversaw a recent financial reform of the basilica and would have been involved in identifying the future final resting place for Francis, since the Argentine pope has said he will be buried there.

The pope's preacher

Perhaps the most familiar new cardinal to anyone who has been following Francis' reform agenda is the Dominican Timothy Radcliff, the spiritual father of the just-concluded synod, or gathering of bishops. The years-long process aimed to make the church more inclusive and responsive to the needs of rank-and-file Catholics, especially women.

A British theologian, the white-robed Radcliffe often provided clarifying, if not humorous interventions during the weeks-long debate and retreats. At one point he set off a mini-firestorm by suggesting that external financial pressures influenced African bishops to reject Francis' permission to allow blessings for gay couples. He later said he just meant that the African Catholic Church is under pressure from other well-financed faiths.

As the synod was winding down, he offered some valuable perspective.

"Often we can have no idea as to how God's providence is at work in our lives. We do what we believe to be right and the rest is in the hands of the Lord," he told the gathering. "This is just one synod. There will be others. We do not have to do everything, just try to take the next step."

## **Days after gunman killed UnitedHealthcare's CEO, police push to ID him and FBI offers reward**

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The gunman who killed the CEO of the largest U.S. health insurer likely left New York City on a bus soon after the brazen ambush that has shaken corporate America, police officials said. But he left something behind: a backpack that was discovered in Central Park.

Nearly four days after the shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, police still did not know the gunman's name or whereabouts or have a motive for the killing. Investigators were looking at whether the shooter may have been a disgruntled employee or client of the insurer, Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny told reporters.

The FBI announced Friday night it was offering a \$50,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction.

Video of the gunman fleeing Wednesday's shooting showed him riding a bicycle into Central Park and later taking a taxi to a bus terminal that offers commuter service to New Jersey and Greyhound routes to Philadelphia, Boston and Washington, D.C, according to Kenny.

Police have video of the man entering the bus station but no video of him exiting, leading them to believe he left the city, Kenny said.

Investigators on Friday found a backpack in the park that had been worn by the gunman during the shooting, police said, following a massive sweep to find it in a vast area with lakes and ponds, meadows, playgrounds and woods.

Police didn't immediately reveal what, if anything, it contained but said it would be analyzed for clues.

The gunman made sure to conceal his identity with a mask during almost all of his time in the city, including during the attack and while he ate, yet left a trail of evidence in view of the nation's biggest city and its network of security cameras.

The gunman arrived in New York City on Nov. 24 and shot Thompson 10 days later outside his company's annual investor conference at a hotel just blocks from Radio City Music Hall and Rockefeller Center.

The gunman got off a bus that originated in Atlanta and made several stops along the way, Kenny said. Police have not determined where he got on the bus. Investigators have a list of passengers, but none of them would have had to provide an ID when they climbed aboard, Kenny said.

Investigators believe the suspect used a fake identification card and paid cash, Kenny said, when he checked in at the hostel, which has a café along with shared and private rooms and is blocks from Columbia University.

Investigators have tested a discarded water bottle and protein bar wrapper in a hunt for his DNA. They also were trying to obtain additional information from a cellphone found along the gunman's escape route.

Photos of the suspected shooter that were taken in the lobby of a hostel on Manhattan's Upper West



Sides appear to be from the only time he removed his mask, Kenny said. The images, showing a man smiling in the lobby of the HI New York City hostel. They are among a collection of photos and video circulated since the shooting — including footage of the attack, as well as images of the suspected gunman at a Starbucks beforehand.

“From every indication we have from witnesses, from the Starbucks, from the hostel, he kept his mask on at all times except for the one instance where we have him photographed with the mask off,” Kenny said.

His roommates at the hostel also said he didn’t speak to them. Nothing of investigative value was found in a search of the suspected shooter’s hotel room.

Asked how close he felt police were to making an arrest, Kenny said, “This isn’t ‘Blue Bloods.’ We’re not going to solve this in 60 minutes. We’re painstakingly going through every bit of evidence that we can come across. Eventually, when an apprehension is made, we will have to present all of these facts to a judge and jury, so we’re taking our time, doing it right and making sure we’re going to get justice for this victim and closure for his family.”

Security video of the shooting shows the killer approaching Thompson from behind, firing several shots with a gun equipped with a silencer, barely pausing to clear a jam while the executive fell to the sidewalk.

Police were looking into the possibility that the weapon was a veterinary pistol, which is a weapon commonly used on farms and ranches if an animal has to be euthanized quietly, Kenny said — though he stressed that hadn’t been confirmed.

The words “delay,” “deny” and “depose” were scrawled on the ammunition, one word on each of three bullets, Kenny said. A law enforcement official previously told The Associated Press the words were “deny,” “defend” and “depose.” The messages mirror the phrase “delay, deny, defend,” which is commonly used by lawyers and critics about insurers that delay payments, deny claims and defend their actions.

Thompson, a father of two sons who lived in a Minneapolis suburb, had been with Minnesota-based UnitedHealthcare since 2004 and served as CEO for more than three years.

The insurer’s parent company, UnitedHealth Group Inc., was holding its annual meeting in New York for investors. The company abruptly ended the conference after Thompson’s death.

UnitedHealth Group said it was focused on supporting Thompson’s family, ensuring the safety of employees and assisting investigators. “While our hearts are broken, we have been touched by the huge outpouring,” the company said.

UnitedHealthcare provides coverage for more than 49 million Americans. It manages health insurance coverage for employers and state and federally funded Medicaid programs.

In October, UnitedHealthcare was named along with Humana and CVS in a Senate report detailing how its denial rate for prior authorizations for some Medicare Advantage patients has surged in recent years.

The shooting has rocked the health insurance industry in particular, causing companies to reevaluate security plans and delete photos of executives from their websites. A different Minnesota-based health care company said Friday it was temporarily closing its offices out of an abundance of caution, telling employees to work from home.

## **UnitedHealthcare CEO’s shooting opens a door for many to vent frustrations over insurance**

By TOM MURPHY and DEVI SHASTRI AP Health Writers

For years, patients in the U.S. health care system have grown frustrated with a bureaucracy they don’t understand.

Doctors are included in an insurer’s network one year but not the next. Getting someone on the phone to help can be next to impossible. Coverage of care and prescriptions is often unceremoniously denied.

This week’s fatal shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson has unleashed a wave of public feeling — exasperation, anger, resentment, helplessness — from Americans sharing personal stories of interactions with insurance companies, often seen as faceless corporate giants.

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In particular, the words written on ammunition found at the shooting scene — “delay,” “deny” and “depose,” echoing a phrase used to describe how insurers dodge claim payouts — amplified voices that have long been critical of the industry.

“All of a sudden, I am fired up again,” said Tim Anderson, describing how his wife, Mary, had to deal with UnitedHealthcare coverage denials before she died from Lou Gehrig’s disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, in 2022.

Anderson said they couldn’t get coverage for machines to help his wife breathe or talk — toward the end, she communicated by blinking when he showed her pictures. The family had to rely on donations from a local ALS group, he said.

“The business model for insurance is don’t pay,” said Anderson, 67, of Centerville, Ohio.

“When Mary could still talk, she said to me to keep fighting this,” he added. “It needs to be exposed.”

For Anderson and others, Thompson’s death and the message left at the scene have created an opportunity to vent their frustrations. Conversations at dinner tables, office water coolers, social gatherings and on social media have pivoted to the topic, as police efforts to find the gunman keep the case in the news.

Hans Maristela said he understands why the chatter is bubbling up. The 54-year-old caregiver in California was moved to comment on Facebook about UnitedHealthcare’s reputation of denying coverage. As a Catholic, he said, he grieves Thompson’s death and feels for his family, especially with the holidays around the corner.

But he sees frustration with insurers even among his clients, most of them wealthy older people who’ve not been shielded from high out-of-pocket costs.

“And then you know the CEO of this company you pay a lot of money to gets \$10 million dollars a year, you won’t have a lot of sympathy for the guy,” Maristela said, citing Thompson’s compensation package that included base pay and stock options. “Health care is a business, I understand, but the obsession with share price, with profit, has to be reevaluated.”

University of Pennsylvania researcher Michael Anne Kyle said she’s not surprised by the growth of conversation around insurers.

“People are often struggling with this by themselves, and when you see someone else talk about it, that may prompt you to join the conversation,” she said.

Kyle studies how patients access care and said she’s seen frustration with the system build for years. Costs are rising, and insurers are using more controls such as prior authorizations and doctor networks to manage them. Patients are often stuck in the middle of disputes between doctors and insurers.

“Patients are already spending a lot of money on health care, and then they’re still facing problems with the service,” she said.

Insurers often note that most of the money they bring in goes back out the door to pay claims, and that they try to corral soaring costs and the overuse of some care.

In Ohio, Anderson said his initial reaction to the CEO shooting was to question whether it was connected to a coverage denial, like the ones he’d experienced with his wife.

“I definitely do not condone killing people,” he said. “But I read it and said, ‘I wonder if somebody had a spouse whose coverage was denied.’”

It’s something Will Flanary, a Portland-based ophthalmologist and comedian with a large social media following, saw online a lot in the shooting’s immediate aftermath and found very telling.

“It’s zero sympathy,” he said. “And the lesson to take away from that is not, ‘Let’s shame people for celebrating a murder.’ No, it’s: ‘Look at the amount of anger that people have toward this system that’s taken advantage of people and do something to try to fix that.’”

Flanary’s content, published under the name Dr. Glaucomflecken, started out as niche eye doctor jokes and a way to cope with his own experiences with two cancer diagnoses and a sudden cardiac arrest. But it has evolved, featuring character skits that call attention to and satirize the decisions of large health insurers, including UnitedHealthcare.

He said he’s never seen conversations around health insurance policy take off the way they did this week — and he hopes these new voices can help bring about change.

"I'm always talking about how powerful social media can be with advocacy," he said, "because it really is the only way to put a significant amount of pressure on these corporations who are doing bad things for patients."

## **Election Day has long passed. In some states, legislatures are working to undermine the results**

By GARY FIELDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — While the election was over a month ago, voters in some parts of the country are discovering that having their say at the ballot box is not necessarily the final word.

Lawmakers in several states have already initiated or indicated plans to alter or nullify certain results. Republican lawmakers in North Carolina are moving to undercut the authority of the incoming Democratic governor, Republicans in Missouri are taking initial steps to reverse voter-approved abortion protections, and Democrats in Massachusetts are watering down an attempt by voters to hold the Legislature more accountable.

The actions following the Nov. 5 election continue a pattern that has accelerated in recent years and has been characterized by critics as undemocratic.

"I think certainly when you're a voter and you're voting on the issue, you're not thinking about whether someone's then going to overturn or just ignore the things that you voted on," said Anne Whitesell, an assistant professor of political science at Miami University in Ohio.

The strategies range from outright reversals to "slow walking" the implementation of voter-approved ballot initiatives, such as lawmakers refusing to provide funding. Whitesell said that was a prevalent strategy for some Republican governors and lawmakers after voters in their states approved expanding Medicaid coverage following the passage of the Affordable Care Act. The matter ultimately had to be settled in the courts, extending the lag time between vote and implementation.

"When you're a voter, that's not what you're thinking is going to happen," Whitesell said.

North Carolina provides one of the most egregious examples of a legislature moving to counter the will of the voters.

Voters there ended the Republican supermajority for the upcoming session and elected Democrats to nearly all statewide offices, including governor and attorney general. Despite that, Republican lawmakers called a lame-duck session to push through a series of wide-ranging changes before they lose their veto-proof majority next year.

Those include taking powers from several of the Democrats elected to statewide office. Under the abrupt changes, the new governor would lose the authority to appoint members to the state elections board. Current Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, vetoed the bill, but that action was overridden by the Republicans in the state Senate. The House vote is expected next week.

The Republican change would put control of the state election board in the hands of the state auditor, the only statewide office to be won by a Republican last month. The legislation also weakens the authority of the governor to fill vacancies on the state court of appeals and the state supreme court, while prohibiting the attorney general from taking legal positions contrary to the legislature's.

The Rev. Rob Stephens, an organizer with Repairers of the Breach and the Poor People's Campaign, was among those who protested the moves at the state Capitol. He said North Carolinians had "voted to end single party rule" and select the state officials to lead the incoming government, only to have that threatened by Republican lawmakers in a process he called "a betrayal of democracy."

Patrick Williamson, general counsel with the Fair Elections Center, an election reform group based in Washington, D.C., said more than 5.7 million North Carolina voters elected whom they wanted and did so with the understanding of what authorities those officials would have.

"This runs entirely contrary to what voters expected when they were casting their ballots in November," he said.

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He also said the actions run counter to voters' actions in 2018, when they rejected a proposed constitutional amendment that sought to strip part of Cooper's authorities surrounding the elections board.

In Missouri, voters approved a constitutional amendment last month enshrining abortion rights into the state constitution. Shortly after, a Republican state senator introduced a new attempt at a constitutional amendment that "prohibits the performance or inducement of an abortion upon a woman, except in cases of medical emergency."

Massachusetts voters overwhelmingly approved giving the state auditor the authority to audit the Legislature. But Democrats, who control both chambers, have said the vote violates the separation of powers.

After the election, lawmakers in the House approved a change to the process by which they would seek an independent financial audit of their practices. State Auditor Diana DiZoglio, a Democrat who championed the ballot question, said lawmakers are trying to take the teeth out of the measure and give themselves the ability to control the scope of any review.

The actions taken by some legislatures after the November election continue a recent pattern.

In Ohio, legislation is pending in the Republican-controlled Legislature that could significantly alter an initiative voters approved last year legalizing recreational marijuana use. Key changes include doubling the approved tax rate on adult-use cannabis and cutting in half the number of plants per household that Ohioans agreed could be grown at home.

Voters in several Texas cities in recent years — including Dallas last month — also have passed measures that decriminalize small amounts of marijuana. But the state's Republican attorney general has taken them to court, arguing that cities can't override Texas' strict laws banning marijuana.

In Tennessee, the Republican-led Legislature has tussled for years with left-leaning Memphis and Nashville to override some of their local policies. Memphis voters in 2008 approved ranked-choice voting and rejected an attempt to repeal it a decade later. But in 2022, lawmakers banned ranked-choice voting statewide.

After Nashville voters approved a community oversight board for the city's police force, the Republican-controlled Legislature passed a law in 2023 that gutted such bodies.

Earlier this year, the Utah Supreme Court ruled that lawmakers had infringed on the constitutional rights of voters after they established a citizen-led redistricting commission to draw new congressional maps. Voters passed the initiative in 2018, but the GOP-controlled Legislature reduced the commission's authority two years later and drew its own gerrymandered maps, touching off the legal fight.

In 2018, Democrats who control the District of Columbia council voted to repeal a voter-approved measure that would have raised the minimum wage for servers and other tipped workers.

Nowhere has legislative pushback garnered as much outside attention this year as in North Carolina, where some critics characterize the moves by Republican lawmakers as an audacious power grab.

John Fortier, senior fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said he does not know the specifics of the lame duck session in North Carolina, but said the GOP legislation sounds like part of a long-standing battle between the parties over who should wield certain powers.

"I agree, this does not always look pretty," he said. "You think there's some norms you should want to settle on, but I do think there's been a shifting set of norms there."

Christina Melody Fields Figueredo, executive director of the left-leaning Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, said what is happening in North Carolina is why the center emphasizes that Election Day is not the end of the work.

Activists have to let voters know that attempts to ignore or overrule their actions at the ballot box are direct assaults on representative government, she said, yet many of these attempts often go unnoticed by voters.

To people who are struggling to pay for food or housing, "the concept of democracy feels very vague," she said.

## 100-year-old Pearl Harbor survivor recalls confusion and chaos during Japanese bombing 83 years ago

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii (AP) — Bob Fernandez thought he'd go dancing and see the world when he joined the U.S. Navy as a 17-year-old high school student in August 1941.

Four months later he found himself shaking from explosions and passing ammunition to artillery crews so his ship's guns could return fire on Japanese planes bombing Pearl Harbor, a Navy base in Hawaii.

"When those things go off like that, we didn't know what's what," said Fernandez, who is now 100. "We didn't even know we were in a war."

Two survivors of the bombing — each 100 or older — are planning to return to Pearl Harbor on Saturday to observe the 83rd anniversary of the attack that thrust the U.S. into World War II. They will join active-duty troops, veterans and members of the public for a remembrance ceremony hosted by the Navy and the National Park Service.

Fernandez was initially planning to join them but had to cancel because of health issues.

The bombing killed more than 2,300 U.S. servicemen. Nearly half, or 1,177, were sailors and Marines on board the USS Arizona, which sank during the battle. The remains of more than 900 Arizona crew members are still entombed on the submerged vessel.

A moment of silence will be held at 7:54 a.m., the same time the attack began eight decades ago. Aircraft in missing man formation are due to fly overhead to break the silence.

Dozens of survivors once joined the annual remembrance but attendance has declined as survivors have aged. Today there are only 16 still living, according to a list maintained by Kathleen Farley, the California state chair of the Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors. Military historian J. Michael Wenger has estimated there were some 87,000 military personnel on Oahu on the day of the attack.

Many laud Pearl Harbor survivors as heroes, but Fernandez doesn't view himself that way.

"I'm not a hero. I'm just nothing but an ammunition passer," he told The Associated Press in a phone interview from California, where he now lives with his nephew in Lodi.

Fernandez was working as a mess cook on his ship, the USS Curtiss, the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, and planned to go dancing that night at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Waikiki.

He brought sailors coffee and food as he waited tables during breakfast. Then they heard an alarm sound. Through a porthole, Fernandez saw a plane with the red ball insignia painted on Japanese aircraft fly by.

Fernandez rushed down three decks to a magazine room where he and other sailors waited for someone to unlock a door storing 5-inch (12.7-centimeter), 38-caliber shells so they could begin passing them to the ship's guns.

He has told interviewers over the years that some of his fellow sailors were praying and crying as they heard gunfire up above.

"I felt kind of scared because I didn't know what the hell was going on," Fernandez said.

The ship's guns hit a Japanese plane that crashed into one of its cranes. Shortly after, its guns hit a dive bomber which then slammed into the ship and exploded below deck, setting the hangar and main decks on fire, according to the Navy History and Heritage Command.

Fernandez's ship, the Curtiss, lost 21 men and nearly 60 of its sailors were injured.

"We lost a lot of good people, you know. They didn't do nothing," Fernandez said. "But we never know what's going to happen in a war."

After the attack, Fernandez had to sweep up debris. That night, he stood guard with a rifle to make sure no one tried to come aboard. When it came time to rest, he fell asleep next to where the ship's dead were lying. He only realized that when a fellow sailor woke him up and told him.

After the war, Fernandez worked as a forklift driver at a cannery in San Leandro, California. His wife of 65 years, Mary Fernandez, died in 2014. His oldest son is now 82 and lives in Arizona. Two other sons and a stepdaughter have died.

He has traveled to Hawaii three times to participate in the Pearl Harbor remembrance. This year would

have been his fourth trip.

Fernandez still enjoys music and goes dancing at a nearby restaurant once a week if he can. His favorite tune is Frank Sinatra's rendition of "All of Me," a song his nephew Joe Guthrie said he still knows by heart.

"The ladies flock to him like moths to a flame," Guthrie said.

## **IAEA chief: Iran is poised to 'quite dramatically' increase stockpile of near weapons-grade uranium**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

MANAMA, Bahrain (AP) — Iran is poised to "quite dramatically" increase its stockpile of near weapons-grade uranium as it has started cascades of advanced centrifuges, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency warned Friday.

The comments from Rafael Mariano Grossi came just hours after Iran said it conducted a successful space launch with its heaviest payload ever, the latest for its program that the West alleges improves Tehran's ballistic missile program.

The launch of the Simorgh rocket comes as Iran's nuclear program now enriches uranium at 60%, a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. While Iran maintains its program is peaceful, officials in the Islamic Republic increasingly threaten to potentially seek the bomb and an intercontinental ballistic missile that would allow Tehran to use the weapon against distant foes like the United States.

The moves are likely to further raise tensions gripping the wider Middle East over Israel's continued war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip and as an uneasy ceasefire holds in Lebanon. However, Iran may as well be preparing the ground for possible talks with the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump, who in his first term unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

The U.S. intelligence community in a report released Thursday said that while "Iran is not building a nuclear weapon" it has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce one, if it so chooses."

The Iranian debate over seeking the bomb "risks emboldening nuclear weapons advocates within Iran's decision-making apparatus and shifting the thinking of current and future Iranian elites about the utility of nuclear weapons," the report added.

Grossi, speaking to journalists in Bahrain, on the sidelines of the International Institute of Strategic Studies' Manama Dialogue, said his inspectors planned to see just how many centrifuges Iran would be spinning after Tehran informed his agency of its plans.

"I think it is very concerning," Grossi said. "They were preparing and they have all of these facilities sort of in abeyance and now they are activating that. So we are going to see."

He added: "If they really make them turn — all of them — it's going to be a huge jump."

An IAEA statement issued shortly after Grossi's remarks said Iran had begun feeding two cascades of advanced IR-6 centrifuges with uranium previously enriched up to 20% at its underground Fordo facility. That site is located under a mountain, protecting it from airstrikes.

Cascades are a group of centrifuges that spin uranium gas together to more quickly enrich the uranium. The IR-6 centrifuges enrich uranium faster than Iran's baseline IR-1 centrifuges, which have been the workhorse of the country's atomic program. Adding 20% uranium, as opposed to 5% uranium previously planned, further speeds up that process.

"The facility's updated design information showed that the effect of this change would be to significantly increase the rate of production," the IAEA statement said. Iran separately will start feeding natural uranium into eight other IR-6 cascades at Fordo as well to produce 5%-enriched uranium, it added.

The IAEA warned in late November that Iran was preparing to begin enriching uranium with thousands of advanced centrifuges. That came as a response to the Board of Governors at the IAEA condemning Iran for failing to cooperate fully with the agency.

Iran did not acknowledge the preparations. The Iranian mission to the United Nations did not respond to a request for comment.

Meanwhile, the launch Friday took place at Iran's Imam Khomeini Spaceport in rural Semnan province,

some 220 kilometers (135 miles) east of Tehran. That's the site of Iran's civilian space program, which has suffered a series of failed Simorgh launches in the past.

The Simorgh carried what Iran described as an "orbital propulsion system," as well as two research systems to a 400-kilometer (250-mile) orbit above the Earth. A system that could change the orbit of a spacecraft would allow Iran to geo-synchronize the orbits of its satellites, a capability Tehran has long sought.

It also carried the Fakhr-1 satellite for Iran's military, the first time Iran's civilian program is known to have carried a military payload.

Iran also put the payload of the Simorgh at 300 kilograms (660 pounds), heavier than all its previous successful launches within the country. State television carried footage of a correspondent discussing the payload just as the Simorgh lifted off into the sky, as people called out: "God is the greatest!"

The U.S. military referred questions about the launch to the country's Space Command, which did not respond. Space experts said tracking data appeared to show the launch successfully put objects in orbit.

The United States has previously said Iran's satellite launches defy a U.N. Security Council resolution and called on Tehran to undertake no activity involving ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons. U.N. sanctions related to Iran's ballistic missile program expired in October 2023.

"Iran's work on space-launch vehicles — including its Simorgh — probably would shorten the timeline to produce an intercontinental ballistic missile, if it decided to develop one, because the systems use similar technologies," a U.S. intelligence community report released in July said.

Iran has always denied seeking nuclear weapons and says its space program, like its nuclear activities, is for purely civilian purposes. However, U.S. intelligence agencies and the IAEA say Iran had an organized military nuclear program up until 2003.

Under Iran's relatively moderate former President Hassan Rouhani, the Islamic Republic slowed its space program for fear of raising tensions with the West. The late hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, a protégé of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who came to power in 2021, pushed the program forward. Raisi died in a helicopter crash in May.

Iran's reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, who has been signaling he wants to negotiate with the West over sanctions, has yet to offer a strategy when it comes to Iran's ambitions in space. The Simorgh launch represented the first for his administration from the country's civil space program. Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard conducted a successful launch of its parallel program in September.

## **Police find bag carried by gunman who killed UnitedHealthcare's CEO, say he likely fled NYC on bus**

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The gunman who killed the CEO of the largest U.S. health insurer likely left New York City on a bus soon after the brazen ambush that has shaken corporate America, police officials said Friday. But he left something behind: a backpack that was discovered in Central Park.

Three days after the shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, police still did not know the gunman's name or whereabouts or have a motive for the killing, Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny told reporters. Investigators were looking at whether the shooter may have been a disgruntled employee or client of the insurer, he said.

The FBI announced Friday night it was offering a \$50,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction.

Video of the gunman fleeing Wednesday's shooting showed him riding a bicycle into Central Park and later taking a taxi to a bus terminal that offers commuter service to New Jersey and Greyhound routes to Philadelphia, Boston and Washington, D.C, according to Kenny.

Police have video of the man entering the bus station but no video of him exiting, leading them to believe he left the city, Kenny said.

Investigators on Friday found a backpack in the park that had been worn by the gunman during the

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shooting, police said, following a massive sweep to find it in a vast area with lakes and ponds, meadows, playgrounds and woods.

Police didn't immediately reveal what, if anything, it contained but said it would be analyzed for clues.

The gunman made sure to conceal his identity with a mask during almost all of his time in the city, including during the attack and while he ate, yet left a trail of evidence in view of the nation's biggest city and its network of security cameras.

The gunman arrived in New York City on Nov. 24 and shot Thompson 10 days later outside his company's annual investor conference at a hotel just blocks from Radio City Music Hall and Rockefeller Center.

The gunman got off a bus that originated in Atlanta and made several stops along the way, Kenny said. Police have not determined where he got on the bus. Investigators have a list of passengers, but none of them would have had to provide an ID when they climbed aboard, Kenny said.

Investigators believe the suspect used a fake identification card and paid cash, Kenny said, when he checked in at the hostel, which has a café along with shared and private rooms and is blocks from Columbia University.

Investigators have tested a discarded water bottle and protein bar wrapper in a hunt for his DNA. They also were trying to obtain additional information from a cellphone found along the gunman's escape route.

Photos of the suspected shooter that were taken in the lobby of a hostel on Manhattan's Upper West Side appear to from the only time he removed his mask, Kenny said. The images, showing a man smiling in the lobby of the HI New York City hostel. They are among a collection of photos and video circulated since the shooting — including footage of the attack, as well as images of the suspected gunman at a Starbucks beforehand.

"From every indication we have from witnesses, from the Starbucks, from the hostel, he kept his mask on at all times except for the one instance where we have him photographed with the mask off," Kenny said.

His roommates at the hostel also said he didn't speak to them. Nothing of investigative value was found in a search of the suspected shooter's hotel room.

Asked how close he felt police were to making an arrest, Kenny said, "This isn't 'Blue Bloods.' We're not going to solve this in 60 minutes. We're painstakingly going through every bit of evidence that we can come across. Eventually, when an apprehension is made, we will have to present all of these facts to a judge and jury, so we're taking our time, doing it right and making sure we're going to get justice for this victim and closure for his family."

Security video of the shooting shows the killer approaching Thompson from behind, firing several shots with a gun equipped with a silencer, barely pausing to clear a jam while the executive fell to the sidewalk.

Police were looking into the possibility that the weapon was a veterinary pistol, which is a weapon commonly used on farms and ranches if an animal has to be euthanized quietly, Kenny said — though he stressed that hadn't been confirmed.

The words "delay," "deny" and "depose" were scrawled on the ammunition, one word on each of three bullets, Kenny said. A law enforcement official previously told The Associated Press the words were "deny," "defend" and "depose." The messages mirror the phrase "delay, deny, defend," which is commonly used by lawyers and critics about insurers that delay payments, deny claims and defend their actions.

Thompson, a father of two sons who lived in a Minneapolis suburb, had been with Minnesota-based UnitedHealthcare since 2004 and served as CEO for more than three years.

The insurer's parent company, UnitedHealth Group Inc., was holding its annual meeting in New York for investors. The company abruptly ended the conference after Thompson's death.

UnitedHealth Group said it was focused on supporting Thompson's family, ensuring the safety of employees and assisting investigators. "While our hearts are broken, we have been touched by the huge outpouring," the company said.

UnitedHealthcare provides coverage for more than 49 million Americans. It manages health insurance coverage for employers and state and federally funded Medicaid programs.

In October, UnitedHealthcare was named along with Humana and CVS in a Senate report detailing how its denial rate for prior authorizations for some Medicare Advantage patients has surged in recent years.



The shooting has rocked the health insurance industry in particular, causing companies to reevaluate security plans and delete photos of executives from their websites. A different Minnesota-based health care company said Friday it was temporarily closing its offices out of an abundance of caution, telling employees to work from home.

## Federal appeals court upholds law requiring sale or ban of TikTok in the US

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

A federal appeals court panel on Friday unanimously upheld a law that could lead to a ban on TikTok as soon as next month, handing a resounding defeat to the popular social media platform as it fights for its survival in the U.S.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit denied TikTok's petition to overturn the law — which requires TikTok to break ties with its China-based parent company ByteDance or be banned by mid-January — and rebuffed the company's challenge of the statute, which it argued had ran afoul of the First Amendment.

"The First Amendment exists to protect free speech in the United States," said the court's opinion, which was written by Judge Douglas Ginsburg. "Here the Government acted solely to protect that freedom from a foreign adversary nation and to limit that adversary's ability to gather data on people in the United States."

TikTok and ByteDance — another plaintiff in the lawsuit — are expected to appeal to the Supreme Court, though its unclear whether the court will take up the case.

"The Supreme Court has an established historical record of protecting Americans' right to free speech, and we expect they will do just that on this important constitutional issue," TikTok spokesperson Michael Hughes said in a statement.

"Unfortunately, the TikTok ban was conceived and pushed through based upon inaccurate, flawed and hypothetical information, resulting in outright censorship of the American people," Hughes said. Unless stopped, he argued the statute "will silence the voices of over 170 million Americans here in the US and around the world on January 19th, 2025."

Though the case is squarely in the court system, it's also possible the two companies might be thrown some sort of a lifeline by President-elect Donald Trump, who tried to ban TikTok during his first term but said during the presidential campaign that he is now against such action.

"He wants to save TikTok," Rep. Michael Waltz, Trump's pick for national security adviser, said Friday during an interview on Fox Business.

The law, signed by President Joe Biden in April, was the culmination of a yearslong saga in Washington over the short-form video-sharing app, which the government sees as a national security threat due to its connections to China.

The U.S. has said it's concerned about TikTok collecting vast swaths of user data, including sensitive information on viewing habits, that could fall into the hands of the Chinese government through coercion. Officials have also warned the proprietary algorithm that fuels what users see on the app is vulnerable to manipulation by Chinese authorities, who can use it to shape content on the platform in a way that's difficult to detect. The European Union on Friday expressed similar concerns as it investigates intelligence that suggests Russia possibly abused the platform to influence the elections in Romania.

"Today's decision is an important step in blocking the Chinese government from weaponizing TikTok," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement Friday.

TikTok, which sued the government over the law in May, has long denied it could be used by Beijing to spy on or manipulate Americans. Its attorneys have accurately pointed out that the U.S. hasn't provided evidence to show that the company handed over user data to the Chinese government, or manipulated content for Beijing's benefit in the U.S. They have also argued the law is predicated on future risks, which the Department of Justice has emphasized pointing in part to unspecified action it claims the two companies have taken in the past due to demands from the Chinese government.

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Friday's ruling came after the appeals court panel, composed of two Republicans and one Democrat appointed judges, heard oral arguments in September.

In the hearing, which lasted more than two hours, the panel appeared to grapple with how TikTok's foreign ownership affects its rights under the Constitution and how far the government could go to curtail potential influence from abroad on a foreign-owned platform. On Friday, all three denied TikTok's petition.

In the court's ruling, Ginsburg, a Republican appointee, rejected TikTok's main legal arguments against the law, including that the statute was an unlawful bill of attainder, or a taking of property in violation of the Fifth Amendment. He also said the law did not violate the First Amendment because the government is not looking to "suppress content or require a certain mix of content" on TikTok.

"Content on the platform could in principle remain unchanged after divestiture, and people in the United States would remain free to read and share as much PRC propaganda (or any other content) as they desire on TikTok or any other platform of their choosing," Ginsburg wrote, using the abbreviation for the People's Republic of China.

Judge Sri Srinivasan, the chief judge on the court, issued a concurring opinion.

TikTok's lawsuit was consolidated with a second legal challenge brought by several content creators — for which the company is covering legal costs — as well as a third one filed on behalf of conservative creators who work with a nonprofit called BASED Politics Inc. Other organizations, including the Knight First Amendment Institute, had also filed amicus briefs supporting TikTok.

"This is a deeply misguided ruling that reads important First Amendment precedents too narrowly and gives the government sweeping power to restrict Americans' access to information, ideas, and media from abroad," said Jameel Jaffer, the executive director of the organization. "We hope that the appeals court's ruling won't be the last word."

Meanwhile, on Capitol Hill, lawmakers who had pushed for the legislation celebrated the court's ruling.

"I am optimistic that President Trump will facilitate an American takeover of TikTok to allow its continued use in the United States and I look forward to welcoming the app in America under new ownership," said Republican Rep. John Moolenaar of Michigan, chairman of the House Select Committee on China.

Democratic Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, who co-authored the law, said "it's time for ByteDance to accept" the law.

To assuage concerns about the company's owners, TikTok says it has invested more than \$2 billion to bolster protections around U.S. user data.

The company has also argued the government's broader concerns could have been resolved in a draft agreement it provided the Biden administration more than two years ago during talks between the two sides. It has blamed the government for walking away from further negotiations on the agreement, which the Justice Department argues is insufficient.

Attorneys for the two companies have claimed it's impossible to divest the platform commercially and technologically. They also say any sale of TikTok without the coveted algorithm — the platform's secret sauce that Chinese authorities would likely block under any divestiture plan — would turn the U.S. version of TikTok into an island disconnected from other global content.

Still, some investors, including Trump's former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and billionaire Frank McCourt, have expressed interest in purchasing the platform. Both men said earlier this year that they were launching a consortium to purchase TikTok's U.S. business.

This week, a spokesperson for McCourt's Project Liberty initiative, which aims to protect online privacy, said unnamed participants in their bid have made informal commitments of more than \$20 billion in capital.

## **Trump offers a public show of support for Hegseth and says he believes he can be confirmed**

By COLLEEN LONG and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump on Friday offered a public show of support for

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Pete Hegseth, his embattled choice to lead the Defense Department, whose confirmation by the Senate is in doubt as he faces questions over allegations of excessive drinking, sexual assault and his views on women in combat.

Hegseth, a former Fox News Host, Army National Guard major and combat veteran, spent much of the week on Capitol Hill trying to salvage his Cabinet nomination and privately reassure Republican senators that he is fit to lead Trump's Pentagon.

"Pete Hegseth is doing very well," Trump posted on his social media site. "He will be a fantastic, high energy, Secretary of Defense." The president added, "Pete is a WINNER, and there is nothing that can be done to change that!!!"

Trump told NBC's "Meet the Press" in an interview recorded Friday that he believes Hegseth will be confirmed and that he still has confidence in him.

"Pete is doing well now," the president-elect said in an excerpt of the interview set to air Sunday. "I mean, people were a little bit concerned. He's a young guy with a tremendous track record."

He said senators have called him to tell him that Hegseth is fantastic. Trump also cast doubt on reports of alcohol misuse by Hegseth, saying he has spoken to people who know him well and has been assured Hegseth doesn't have a drinking problem.

The pitched nomination battle over Hegseth is emerging not only as a debate about the best person to lead the Pentagon, but also at a key moment for a "Make America Great Again" movement that appears to be relishing a public fight over its hard-line push for a more masculine military and an end to the "woke-ism" of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

Trump's allies are forcefully rallying around the embattled Hegseth — the Heritage Foundation's political arm is promising to spend \$1 million to shore up his nomination — as he vows to stay in the fight, as long as the president-elect wants him to.

"We're not abandoning this nomination," Vice-President-elect JD Vance said as he toured post-hurricane North Carolina.

"Pete Hegseth is going to get his hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, not a sham hearing before the American media," Vance said. He said he had spoken with GOP senators and he believes Hegseth will be confirmed. "We are completely behind him."

The effort has become a test of Trump's clout and of how far loyalty for the president-elect goes with Republican senators who have concerns about his nominees. Two of Trump's other choices have stepped aside as they faced intense scrutiny: former congressman Matt Gaetz, his first choice for attorney general, and Chad Chronister, a Florida sheriff who was Trump's first choice to lead the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The president's son Donald Trump Jr. also made a show of support for Hegseth on Friday, part of a full-court MAGA press.

"If you're a GOP Senator who voted for Lloyd Austin, but criticize @PeteHegseth, then maybe you're in the wrong political party!" he wrote on X, referring to President Joe Biden's defense secretary.

Thanking the president-elect for the support, Hegseth posted on social media, "Like you, we will never back down."

Hegseth has promised not to drink on the job and told lawmakers he never engaged in sexual misconduct, even as his professional views on female troops have also come under intensifying scrutiny. He said as recently as last month that women "straight up" should not serve in combat.

He picked up one important endorsement from Republican Sen. Katie Britt of Alabama, whose support was seen as a potentially powerful counterweight to the cooler reception Hegseth had received from Sen. Joni Ernst, herself a former Army National Guard lieutenant colonel.

"Huge. Thanks to Katie for her leadership," Vance posted on social media.

Ernst, who is also a sexual assault survivor, stopped short of an endorsement after her meeting with Hegseth this week. On Friday, Ernst posted on X that she and Hegseth would continue having "constructive conversations" as the process moves forward. She said she would meet with him again next week.

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"At a minimum, we agree that he deserves the opportunity to lay out his vision for our warfighters at a fair hearing," she wrote.

Trump put out the statement Friday in response to coverage saying he had lost faith in Hegseth, according to a person familiar with his thinking who was not authorized to discuss it publicly.

The president-elect and his team have been pleased to see Hegseth putting up a fight and his performance this week reiterates why he was chosen, the person said. They believe he can still be confirmed.

If Hegseth goes down, Trump's team believes the defeat would empower others to spread what they cast as "vicious lies" against every candidate Trump chooses.

Still, Trump's transition team has been looking at potential replacements if Hegseth's nomination cannot move forward, including former presidential rival Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

DeSantis plans to attend the Army-Navy football game with Trump on Dec. 14, according to a person familiar with the Florida governor's plans who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity to discuss them before a public announcement.

And DeSantis and Trump had spoken about the defense secretary post when they saw each other Tuesday at a memorial service for sheriff deputies in West Palm Beach, Florida, according to people familiar with the matter who said Trump was interested in DeSantis for the post, and the governor was receptive.

At the same time, DeSantis also is poised to select a replacement for the expected Senate vacancy to be created by Marco Rubio becoming secretary of state, and Trump's daughter-in-law Lara Trump is seen as the preferred choice by those in Trump's orbit.

Despite a weeklong push of private Capitol Hill meetings, Hegseth is facing resistance from senators as reports have emerged about his past, including the revelation that he made a settlement payment after being accused of a sexual assault that he denies.

The New Yorker cited what it described as a whistleblower report and other documents about his time leading a veterans advocacy group, Concerned Veterans for America, that alleged multiple incidents of alcohol intoxication at work events, inappropriate behavior around female staffers and financial mismanagement.

The New York Times obtained an email from his mother Penelope from 2018, in which she confronted him about mistreating women after he impregnated his current wife while he was married to his second wife. She went on "Fox & Friends" this week to defend her son.

Trump ally Sen. Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla., said senators are judging "Pete for who he is today."

In many ways the increasingly pitched battle resembles the political and culture wars that exploded over Trump's pick of Brett Kavanaugh for the Supreme Court during his first term at the White House.

Kavanaugh had also faced allegations of sexual assault that he strenuously denied, but Republicans rallied to his side and turned a tide of opposition into a more sympathetic view of the Supreme Court nominee as the victim of a liberal-led smear campaign. He eventually won confirmation.

While Hegseth was still fighting for votes in the Senate, he did appear to make incremental progress with some Republicans who had expressed concerns about the reports of his drinking, in particular.

"I'm not going to make any decision regarding Pete Hegseth's nomination based on anonymous sources," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

North Dakota Sen. Kevin Cramer said of the allegations against Hegseth, "I have no reason to doubt him any more than believe somebody else."

Still, Cramer indicated he could still change his mind. A background check "will be informative."

Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., said after meeting with Hegseth that he wanted to see how he does in a hearing but "he went a long way" toward getting his support.

## Trump taps forceful ally of hard-line immigration policies to head Customs and Border Protection

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The picture of who will be in charge of executing President-elect Donald Trump's

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hard-line immigration and border policies has come into sharper focus after he announced his picks to head Customs and Border Protection and also the agency tasked with deporting immigrants in the country illegally.

Trump said late Thursday he was tapping Rodney Scott, a former Border Patrol chief who's been a vocal supporter of tougher enforcement measures, for CBP commissioner.

As acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Trump said he had chosen Caleb Vitello, a career ICE official with more than 23 years in the agency.

They will work with an immigration leadership team that includes South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem as head of the Department of Homeland Security; former acting Immigration and Customs Enforcement head Tom Homan as border czar; and immigration hard-liner Stephen Miller as deputy chief of staff.

Here's a closer look at the picks:

Rodney Scott

Customs and Border Protection, with its roughly 60,000 employees, falls under the Department of Homeland Security. It includes the Border Patrol, which Scott led during Trump's first term, and is essentially responsible for protecting the country's borders while facilitating trade and travel.

Scott comes to the job firmly from the Border Patrol side of the house. He became an agent in 1992 and spent much of his career in San Diego. When he joined the agency, San Diego was by far the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. Traffic plummeted after the government dramatically increased enforcement there, but critics note the effort pushed people to remote parts of California and Arizona.

San Diego was also where wall construction began in the 1990s, which shaped Scott's belief that barriers work. He was named San Diego sector chief in 2017.

When he was appointed head of the border agency in January 2020, he enthusiastically embraced Trump's policies.

"He's well known. He does know these issues and obviously is trusted by the administration," said Gil Kerlikowske, the CBP commissioner under the Obama administration.

Kerlikowske took issue with some of Scott's past actions, including his refusal to fall in line with a Biden administration directive to stop using terms like "illegal alien" in favor of descriptions like "migrant," and his decision as San Diego sector chief to fire tear gas into Mexico to disperse protesters.

"You don't launch projectiles into a foreign country," Kerlikowske said.

At the time Scott defended the agents' decisions, saying they were being assaulted by "a hail of rocks."

While Trump's focus may be on illegal immigration and security along the U.S.-Mexico border, Kerlikowske also stressed the other parts of CBP's mission.

The agency is responsible for securing trade and international travel at airports, ports and land crossings around the country. Whoever runs the agency has to make sure that billions of dollars worth of trade and millions of passengers move swiftly and safely into and out of the country.

And if Trump makes good on promises to ratchet up tariffs on Mexico, China and Canada, CBP will play an integral role in enforcing them.

"There's a huge amount of other responsibility on trade, on tourism, on cyber that take a significant amount of time and have a huge impact on the economy if it's not done right," Kerlikowske said.

After being forced out under the Biden administration, Scott has been a vocal supporter of Trump's hard-line immigration agenda. He has appeared frequently on Fox News and testified in Congress. He's also a senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

In a 2023 interview with The Associated Press, he advocated for a return to Trump-era immigration policies and more pressure on Mexico to enforce immigration on its side of the border.

Caleb Vitello

Vitello will take over as acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency responsible for arresting and deporting migrants in the U.S. illegally. A career ICE official, he most recently was the assistant director for firearms and tactical programs.

He's also served on the National Security Council and held positions at ICE directly related to the agency's enforcement operations. That will be key as the agency attempts to ramp up efforts to find and remove

people in the country illegally.

ICE has not had a Senate-confirmed leader in years.

"I know Caleb Vitello very well. He's a consummate professional, cares about the mission," said Jason Houser, a former chief of staff at ICE under the Biden administration. "He's probably one of the smartest guys" on enforcement and removal operations, Houser said.

Houser also noted the challenges that come with the job.

There are a limited number of enforcement and removal officers — the people who actually track down migrants and remove them from the country. And there's more than a million people with final orders of removal, meaning they've gone through the immigration process and been found to have no right to stay in America. But the problem is that many of them come from countries to which it's very difficult to deport people, such as Venezuela or Cuba, Houser said.

Houser said he anticipates that another arm of ICE, called Homeland Security Investigations, will be pulled in more to help with efforts to remove migrants through things like worksite enforcement. Currently HSI investigates anything with a connection to the border, which can mean human trafficking and human smuggling, counterterrorism or cybercrime, he said.

Others

Trump announced Anthony W. Salisbury as the deputy homeland security adviser. Salisbury is currently the special agent in charge of the HSI office in Miami. He has held key positions in Mexico City and overseeing money-laundering investigations.

Separately, Trump announced he was sending the former head of the National Border Patrol Council, Brandon Judd, to Chile as ambassador. The council represents Border Patrol agents.

## Romania's top court annuls first round of presidential vote won by far-right candidate

By STEPHEN McGRATH Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania (AP) — A top Romanian court on Friday annulled the first round of the country's presidential election, days after allegations emerged that Russia ran a coordinated online campaign to promote the far-right outsider who won the first round.

The Constitutional Court's unprecedented decision — which is final — came after President Klaus Iohannis declassified intelligence on Wednesday that alleged Russia organized thousands of social media accounts to promote Calin Georgescu across platforms such as TikTok and Telegram.

The court, without naming Georgescu, said that one of the 13 candidates in the Nov. 24 first round had improperly received "preferential treatment" on social media, distorting the outcome of the vote.

Georgescu denounced the verdict as an "officialized coup" and an attack on democracy, as did the second-place finisher, reformist Elena Lasconi of the center-right Save Romania Union party.

Despite being an outsider who declared zero campaign spending, Georgescu emerged as the frontrunner who was to face Lasconi in a runoff on Sunday. Some 951 voting stations had already opened abroad on Friday for the runoff for Romania's large diaspora, but had to be halted.

Iohannis said he would remain in office until a new presidential election could be rerun from scratch. On Dec. 1, one week after the first round of the presidential race, Romania also held a parliamentary election, which saw pro-Western parties win the most votes but also gains for far-right nationalists. Iohannis said that once the new government is formed, the date of the new presidential vote would be set.

On Wednesday the president had released intelligence files from the Romanian Intelligence Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Special Telecommunication Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

In a televised statement Friday, Iohannis said he was "deeply concerned" by the contents of the intelligence reports. "Intelligence reports revealed that this candidate's campaign was supported by a foreign state with interests contrary to Romania's. These are serious issues," he said.

The Constitutional Court in its published decision cited the illegal use of digital technologies including artificial intelligence, as well as the use of "undeclared sources of funding." It said one candidate received

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"preferential treatment on social media platforms, which resulted in the distortion of voters' expressed will."

Georgescu slammed the verdict as putting "democracy is under attack."

"I have only one pact ... with the Romanian people and God," he said in a video statement. "We are no longer talking about fairness but rather about a mockery that betrays the principles of democracy ... It is time to show that we are a courageous people who know that the destiny and rights of the Romanian nation are in our hands."

Lasconi also strongly condemned the court's decision, saying it was "illegal, immoral, and crushes the very essence of democracy" and that the second round should have gone forward.

"Whether we like it or not, from a legal and legitimate standpoint, 9 million Romanian citizens, both in the country and the diaspora, expressed their preference for a particular candidate through their votes," she said.

"I know I would have won. And I will win because the Romanian people know I will fight for them, that I will unite them for a better Romania," she added.

Some 9.4 million people — about 52.5% of eligible voters — had cast ballots in the first round in this European Union and NATO member country. The president serves a five-year term and has significant decision-making powers in national security, foreign policy and judicial appointments.

Most surveys had predicted the top candidate would be Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu of the ruling center-left Social Democrats. They indicated that second place would be claimed by either Lasconi or the leader of the far-right Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, George Simion.

As the surprising results came in with Georgescu on top, and Lasconi narrowly beating Ciolacu, it plunged the political establishment into turmoil.

The same court last week ordered a recount of the first-round votes, which added to the myriad controversies that have engulfed a chaotic election cycle. Following a recount, the court then validated the first-round results on Monday.

Many observers have expressed concerns that annulling the vote could trigger civil unrest. The court said Friday that its decision was meant "to restore citizens' trust in the democratic legitimacy of public authorities, in the legality and fairness of elections."

Simion, of the far-right party, said the development was a "coup d'état in full swing" but urged people not to take to the streets. "We don't let ourselves be provoked, this system has to fall democratically," he said.

Cristian Andrei, a political consultant based in Bucharest, said the court's decision amounts to a "crisis mode situation for Romanian democracy."

"In light of the information about the external interference, the massive interference in elections, I think this was not normal but predictable, because it's not normal times at all, Romania is an uncharted territory," he told The Associated Press. "The problem is here, do we have the institutions to manage such an interference in the future?"

Georgescu's surprising success left many political observers wondering how most local surveys were so far off, putting him behind at least five other candidates before the vote.

Many observers attributed his success to his TikTok account, which now has 6 million likes and 541,000 followers. But some experts suspected Georgescu's online following was artificially inflated while Romania's top security body alleged he was given preferential treatment by TikTok over other candidates.

In the intelligence release, the secret services alleged that one TikTok user paid more \$381,000 (361,000 euros) to other users to promote Georgescu content. Intelligence authorities said information they obtained "revealed an aggressive promotion campaign" to increase and accelerate his popularity.

Georgescu, when asked by the AP in an interview Wednesday whether he believes the Chinese-owned TikTok poses a threat to democracy, defended social media platforms.

"The most important existing function for promoting free speech and freedom of expression is social media," he said.

## In California's 'earthquake country,' a 7.0 temblor prompts confusion and a tsunami warning

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Valerie Starkey was driving through Northern California to visit relatives when she suddenly felt shaking and feared her car had broken down, only to realize later that it was an earthquake so powerful that it triggered a tsunami warning for hundreds of miles of the U.S. West Coast.

The epicenter of Thursday's 7.0 magnitude shaker occurred in what's known as California's "earthquake country" because it's where three tectonic plates meet. The temblor was the most powerful to rattle the state since a 7.1-magnitude quake hit Ridgecrest in 2019.

Its intensity shocked Starkey and many of the 5.3 million other people along nearly 500 miles (805 kilometers) of the California and Oregon coasts who were under the tsunami warning for about an hour. It was lifted after no major waves arrived.

"I thought my axles had fallen apart," said Starkey, a Del Norte County supervisor representing Crescent City, a town of fewer than 6,000 near the Oregon border. "That's what I was feeling ... 'My axles are broken now.' I did not realize it was an earthquake."

The quake struck at 10:44 a.m. west of Ferndale, a small city in coastal Humboldt County, about 130 miles (209 kilometers) from the Oregon border, the U.S. Geological Survey said. The shaking knocked items off grocery store shelves and sent children scrambling under desks at schools.

It was felt as far south as San Francisco, some 270 miles (435 kilometers) away, where residents described a rolling motion for several seconds. It was followed by multiple smaller aftershocks. There were no immediate reports of major damage or injuries from the quake.

The tsunami warning issued shortly after the quake struck spanned from the edge of California's Monterey Bay north into Oregon.

"It was a strong quake. Our building shook. We're fine, but I have a mess to clean up right now," said Julie Kreitzer, owner of Golden Gait Mercantile, a store packed with food, wares and souvenirs that is a main attraction in Ferndale.

"I have to go. I have to try and salvage something for the holidays because it's going to be a tough year," Kreitzer said before hanging up.

The region — known for its redwood forests, scenic mountains and the three-county Emerald Triangle's legendary marijuana crop — was struck by a magnitude 6.4 quake in 2022 that left thousands of people without power and water. The northwest corner of California is the most seismically active part of the state because it's where three tectonic plates meet, seismologist Lucy Jones said on the social media platform BlueSky.

Shortly after the quake, phones in Northern California buzzed with the tsunami warning from the National Weather Service that said: "A series of powerful waves and strong currents may impact coasts near you. You are in danger. Get away from coastal waters. Move to high ground or inland now. Keep away from the coast until local officials say it is safe to return."

Numerous cities urged people to evacuate to higher ground as a precaution.

In Santa Cruz, authorities cleared the main beach, taping off entrances with police tape. Aerial footage showed cars bumper-to-bumper heading to higher ground on California highways 1 and 92 in the Half Moon Bay area south of San Francisco.

Cindy Vosburg, the executive director for the Crescent City-Del Norte County Chamber of Commerce, said she heard alarms sound just before shaking began, and the city's cultural center downtown started to creak.

"Just as it would start to subside, the building would roll again," Vosburg said.

White House spokesperson Jeremy Edwards said President Joe Biden was briefed on the earthquake and that FEMA officials are in touch with their state and local counterparts in California and Oregon.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed off on a state of emergency declaration to quickly move state resources to impacted areas along the coast. State officials were concerned about damage in the northern part of the



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state, Newsom said.

Crews in Eureka, the biggest city in the region, were assessing if there was any damage. Eureka Mayor Kim Bergel, who works at a middle school, said lights were swaying and everyone got under desks.

"The kids were so great and terrified. It seemed to go back and forth for quite a long time," she said. Some children asked, "Can I call my mom?"

The students were later sent home.

Humboldt County Sheriff William Honsal said residents experienced cracks in their homes' foundations, as well as broken glass and windows, but nothing severe.

Honsal said he was in his office in the 75-year-old courthouse in downtown Eureka when he felt the quake.

"We're used to it. It is known as 'earthquake country' up here," he said. "It wasn't a sharp jolt. It was a slow roller, but significant."

The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District, known as BART, stopped traffic in all directions through the underwater tunnel between San Francisco and Oakland, and the San Francisco Zoo's visitors were evacuated.

This quake was a strike-slip type of temblor that shifts more horizontally and is less prone to cause tsunamis, unlike the more vertical types, said National Weather Service tsunami program manager Corina Allen in Washington state.

## South Korea's governing party head supports suspending Yoon's powers, making impeachment more likely

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's governing party chief expressed support Friday for suspending the constitutional powers of President Yoon Suk Yeol for imposing martial law this week, in a bombshell reversal that makes Yoon's impeachment more likely.

Opposition parties are pushing for a parliamentary vote on Yoon's impeachment on Saturday, calling his short-lived martial law declaration an "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or coup." But they need support from some members of the president's People Power Party to get the two-thirds majority required to pass the impeachment motion.

The turmoil resulting from Yoon's nighttime martial law decree has frozen South Korean politics and caused worry among neighbors, including fellow democracy Japan, and Seoul's top ally, the United States, as one of the strongest democracies in Asia faces a political crisis that could unseat its leader.

During a party meeting, PPP leader Han Dong-hun stressed the need to suspend Yoon's presidential duties and power swiftly, saying he poses a "significant risk of extreme actions, like reattempting to impose martial law, which could potentially put the Republic of Korea and its citizens in great danger."

Han said he had received intelligence that Yoon had ordered the country's defense counterintelligence commander to arrest and detain unspecified key politicians based on accusations of "anti-state activities" when martial law was in force.

"It's my judgment that an immediate suspension of President Yoon Suk Yeol's official duties is necessary to protect the Republic of Korea and its people," Han said.

Impeaching Yoon would require support from 200 of the National Assembly's 300 members. The opposition parties that jointly brought the impeachment motion have 192 seats combined. PPP has 108 lawmakers.

If Yoon is impeached, he would be suspended until the Constitutional Court rules on whether to remove him from office or restore his presidential power. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, the country's No. 2 official, would take over presidential responsibilities.

The Defense Ministry said it suspended the defense counterintelligence commander, Yeo In-hyung, who Han alleged had received orders from Yoon to detain the politicians. The ministry also suspended Lee Jin-woo, commander of the capital defense command, and Kwak Jong-geun, commander of the special warfare command, over their involvement in enforcing martial law.

In a closed-door briefing to lawmakers, Hong Jang-won, first deputy director of South Korea's National

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Intelligence Service, said Yoon called after imposing martial law and ordered him to help the defense counterintelligence unit to detain key politicians. The targeted politicians included Han, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung and National Assembly speaker Woo Won Shik, said Kim Byung-kee, one of the lawmakers who attended the meeting. Kim said Hong told lawmakers he ignored Yoon's orders.

The spy agency's director, Cho Taeyong, questioned Hong's account. Cho told reporters that such an order would have come to him, rather than Hong, and that he never received any orders from Yoon to detain politicians.

Han earlier said he would work to defeat the impeachment motion even though he criticized Yoon's martial law declaration as "unconstitutional." Han said there was a need to "prevent damage to citizens and supporters caused by unprepared chaos."

Thousands of protesters have marched in the streets of Seoul since Wednesday, calling for Yoon to resign and be investigated. Thousands of autoworkers and other members of the Korean Metal Workers' Union, one of the country's biggest umbrella labor groups, have started hourly strikes since Thursday to protest Yoon. The union said its members will start on indefinite strikes beginning on Dec. 11 if Yoon was still in office then.

Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho promised the ministry's "active cooperation" with an investigation by prosecutors into the military's role in Yoon's martial law enforcement. He said military prosecutors will also be involved in the investigation. He denied media speculation that Yoon and his military confidantes might consider imposing martial law a second time.

"Even if there's a demand to enforce martial law, the Defense Ministry and the Joint Chiefs of Staff will absolutely not accept it," Kim said.

Kim became the acting defense minister after Yoon's office on Thursday accepted the resignation of Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun, who has also been banned from traveling while he is investigated over the imposition of martial law.

Opposition parties and Han allege that it was Kim Yong Hyun who recommended that Yoon declare martial law. During a parliamentary hearing on Thursday, Kim Seon Ho said Kim Yong Hyun also ordered troops to be deployed to the National Assembly after Yoon imposed martial law.

Han leads a minority faction within the ruling party, and 18 lawmakers in his faction voted with opposition lawmakers to overturn Yoon's martial law decree. Martial law ultimately lasted about six hours, after its quick overrule by the National Assembly forced Yoon's Cabinet to lift it before daybreak Wednesday.

The main liberal opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung said in a televised speech Friday that it was crucial to suspend Yoon as "quickly as possible."

Lee said Yoon's martial law enforcement amounted to "rebellion and also a self-coup." He said Yoon's move caused serious damage to the country's image and paralyzed foreign policy, pointing to criticism from the Biden administration and foreign leaders canceling their visits to South Korea.

Yoon has made no immediate response to Han's comments. He hasn't made public appearances since he made a televised announcement that his martial law decree was lifted.

Prosecutor General Shim Woo Jung told reporters the prosecution plans to investigate rebellion charges against Yoon following complaints filed by the opposition. While the president mostly has immunity from prosecution while in office, the protection does not extend to allegations of rebellion or treason. It wasn't immediately clear how the prosecution plans to proceed with an investigation on Yoon.

The Democratic Party is also considering filing a complaint against PPP floor leader Choo Kyung-ho, whom the opposition party accuse of attempting to facilitate Yoon's martial law enforcement.

Choo, a Yoon loyalist, had asked party lawmakers to convene at the party's headquarters rather than the National Assembly after martial law began. That meant fewer lawmakers were present for parliament's vote on lifting martial law.

## Crews recover the body of a woman from a Pennsylvania sinkhole after a 4-day search

By MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

The remains of a woman who fell into a sinkhole were recovered Friday, four days after she went missing while searching for her cat, a state police spokesperson said.

Trooper Steve Limani said the body of 64-year-old Elizabeth Pollard was sent to the Westmoreland County Coroner's Office for an autopsy after rescuers used machinery to bring her to the surface.

Limani told reporters Pollard was found at about 11 a.m. approximately 30 feet (9 meters) underground, some 12 feet (4 meters) from the opening of the sinkhole. Limani said Pollard apparently fell onto a cone-shaped pile of debris created by the crumbling mine, then rolled or otherwise moved toward the southwest to where her body was recovered.

The autopsy may help determine whether Pollard was killed by the fall, Limani said.

The announcement came in the fourth day of the search for Pollard, who had last been seen Monday evening, looking for the cat near a restaurant half a mile (0.8 kilometers) from her home in the village of Marguerite.

Axel Hayes, Pollard's son, said a state trooper told him and other family members that her body had been found.

"I was hoping for the best, I really was," Hayes said in a phone interview. "I was hoping she was still alive, maybe in a coma or something. I wasn't expecting all of this."

Mike O'Barto, who chairs the Unity Township Board of Supervisors, said the tragedy was deeply felt among his friends and neighbors.

"Unity Township is a tight-knit community. We are made of several coal mining towns. And of course, Marguerite's one of them," O'Barto said. "And when people suffer, we all suffer. The people of Unity Township are sad today."

Pollard's family reported her missing around 1 a.m. Tuesday as the temperature in the area dropped below freezing.

The search focused on a sinkhole that began as a manhole-sized gap and may have only recently opened above where coal was mined until about 70 years ago. Hunters and restaurant workers who were in the area in the hours before Pollard's disappearance told police they hadn't noticed the sinkhole.

Police said they found Pollard's car parked about 20 feet (6 meters) from the sinkhole with her 5-year-old granddaughter inside. The cat, Pepper, has not reappeared, Hayes said.

The effort to find Pollard — which a fire official said lasted about 80 hours — included lowering a pole camera with a sensitive listening device into the hole, although it detected nothing. Crews removed a massive amount of soil and rock to try to reach the area where they believed she fell into the chasm about 30 feet (9 meters) deep.

Pollard grew up in Jeanette, about 12 miles (19 kilometers) from Unity Township, where she lived for much of her adult life. She previously worked at Walmart and was married for more than 40 years.

## Thousands flee as Syrian insurgents advance to the doorstep of the country's third-largest city

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Thousands of people fled the central Syrian city of Homs, the country's third largest, as insurgents seized two towns on the outskirts Friday, positioning themselves for an assault on a potentially major prize in their march against President Bashar Assad.

The move, reported by pro-government media and an opposition war monitor, was the latest in the stunning advances by opposition fighters over the past week that have so far met little resistance from Assad's forces. A day earlier, fighters captured the central city of Hama, Syria's fourth largest, after the army said it withdrew to avoid fighting inside the city and spare the lives of civilians.

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The insurgents, led by the jihadi Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, have vowed to march to Homs and the capital, Damascus, Assad's seat of power. Videos circulating online showed a highway jammed with cars full of people fleeing Homs, a city with a large population belonging to Assad's Alawite sect, seen as his core supporters.

If Assad's military loses Homs, it could be a crippling blow. The city, parts of which were controlled by insurgents until 2014, stands at an important intersection between Damascus and Syria's coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus, where Assad enjoys wide support. Homs province is Syria's largest in size and borders Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. The city is also home to one of Syria's two state-run oil refineries.

Pressure on the government intensified from multiple directions.

Opposition protesters stormed security posts and army positions in the southern province of Sweida, opposition activists said. U.S.-backed Kurdish forces who control eastern and northeastern Syria began to encroach on government-held territory.

Offensive leaves Assad reliant on Russia

After years of largely being bottled up in a northwest corner of the country, the insurgents burst out a week ago, captured the northern city of Aleppo, Syria's largest, and have kept advancing since. Government troops have repeatedly fallen back.

The sudden offensive has flipped the tables on a long-entrenched stalemate in Syria's nearly 14-year-old civil war. Along with HTS, the fighters include forces of an umbrella group of Turkish-backed Syrian militias called the Syrian National Army. Turkey has denied backing the offensive, though experts say insurgents would not have launched it without the country's consent.

HTS's leader, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, told CNN in an exclusive interview Thursday from Syria that Assad's government was on the path to falling, propped up only by Russia and Iran.

"The seeds of the regime's defeat have always been within it," he said. "But the truth remains, this regime is dead."

A key question about Assad's ability to fight back is how much top ally Russia — whose troops back Assad's forces — will throw support his way at a time when it is tied up in the war in Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he planned to discuss the developments in Syria with his Turkish and Iranian counterparts at a meeting Friday in the Qatari capital, Doha.

In an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, he said international actors were backing the insurgents' advances and that he would discuss "the way to cut the channels of financing and arming them."

Meanwhile, Russia's embassy in Syria issued a notice reminding Russian citizens that they may use commercial flights to leave the country "in view of the difficult military-political situation."

The foreign ministers of Iran, Iraq and Syria — three close allies — gathered Friday in Baghdad to consult on the rapidly changing war. Syrian Foreign Minister Bassam Sabbagh said the current developments may pose "a serious threat to the security of the region as a whole."

Assad opponents move in center, south and east

The insurgent fighters on Friday took over the central towns of Rastan and Talbiseh, putting them 5 kilometers (3 miles) from Homs, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor.

"The battle of Homs is the mother of all battles and will decide who will rule Syria," said Rami Abdurrahman, the Observatory's chief.

Pro-government Sham FM said the insurgents entered Rastan and Talbiseh without facing any resistance. There was no immediate comment from the Syrian military.

The Observatory said Syrian troops had left Homs. But the military denied that in comments reported by the state news agency SANA, saying troops were reinforcing their positions in the city and were "ready to repel" any assault.

In eastern Syria, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces coalition said it had moved into the government-held half of the city of Deir el-Zour, apparently without resistance. One of the main cities in the east, Deir el-Zour had long been split between the government on the western side of the Euphrates River and the SDF on the eastern side.

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The SDF also said it took control of further parts of the border with Iraq. That appeared to bring it closer to the government-held Boukamal border crossing. The crossing is a vital for the government because it is the gateway to the corridor to Iran, a supply line for Iran-backed fighters, including Lebanon's Hezbollah.

At the same time, insurgents seized Syria's sole crossing to Jordan, according to opposition activists. Jordan announced it was closing its side of the crossing. Lebanon also closed all but one of its border crossings with Syria.

Worsening economy could hurt Assad's war effort

The opposition assault has struck a blow to Syria's already decrepit economy. On Friday, the U.S. dollar was selling on Syria's parallel market for about 18,000 pounds, a 25% drop from a week ago. When Syria's conflict erupted in March 2011, a dollar was valued at 47 pounds.

The drop further undermines the purchasing power of Syrians at a time when the U.N. has warned that 90% of the population is below the poverty line.

Syria's economy has been hammered for years by the war, Western sanctions, corruption and an economic meltdown in neighboring Lebanon, Syria's main gate to the outside world.

Damascus residents told The Associated Press that people are rushing to markets to buy food, fearing further escalation.

The worsening economy could be undermining the ability of Syria's military to fight, as the value of soldiers' salaries melts away while the insurgents are flush with cash.

Syria's military has not appeared to put up a cohesive counteroffensive against the opposition advances. SANA on Friday quoted an unnamed military official as saying the Syrian and Russian air forces were striking insurgents in Hama province, killing dozens of fighters.

Syria's defense minister said in a televised statement late Thursday that government forces withdrew from Hama as "a temporary tactical measure" and vowed to gain back lost areas.

"We are in a good position on the ground," Gen. Ali Mahmoud Abbas said, saying troops remained "at the gates of Hama." He spoke before the opposition advanced further south toward Homs.

He said the insurgents, whom he described as "takfiri" or Muslim extremists, are backed by foreign countries. He did not name the countries but appeared to be referring to Turkey and the United States.

## Vance tells residents in hurricane-stricken North Carolina that they haven't been forgotten

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and GARY ROBERTSON Associated Press

FAIRVIEW, N.C. (AP) — Vice President-elect JD Vance on Friday assured residents of western North Carolina still cleaning up from Hurricane Helene that they haven't been forgotten as he surveyed storm wreckage and talked to first responders in one of his first public appearances since the election.

Vance said he was visiting because the holidays are approaching and he wants to provide some comfort to those affected by the hurricane as they go about trying to rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

"My simple message to the people of Appalachia is that we haven't forgotten you — we love you," said Vance, who made a name for himself writing about the region in his memoir "Hillbilly Elegy."

He added, "Certainly when this administration changes hands in the next 45 days, we're going to do everything that we can to help people rebuild, to get them back on their feet, to bring some commerce back to this area, but, most importantly, to allow people to live in their homes."

The hurricane struck in late September. In North Carolina, the state government estimates that the storm caused a combined \$53 billion in damages and needed upgrades to protect against future natural disasters. More than 100 North Carolina residents died from the storm, which the state estimates damaged over 120,000 homes, at least 6,000 miles (9,700 kilometers) of roads and over 160 sewer and water systems.

The incoming vice president and his wife, Usha, visited the Fairview Volunteer Fire Department, where they heard that the building flooded with 4 to 6 inches of water and that roughly a dozen people contracted walking pneumonia as they responded to the hurricane's destruction. Power outages meant that some first responders and their families could not check in on each other for several days. At least one

firefighter lost his life while trying to save lives in the storm.

Vance also toured a house that is being rebuilt after the storm. The construction is being undertaken by Samaritan's Purse, an evangelical Christian charity led by Franklin Graham, son of the late pastor Billy Graham, who was known for his close relationships with U.S. presidents.

"We want you to have the best Christmas as you possibly can have, despite the circumstances," Vance said in a message to residents while speaking to reporters afterward.

More than 60% of voters in Buncombe County, where Vance visited Friday, backed Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, in November's presidential election. Liberal-leaning Asheville is known for its vibrant arts scene and the Biltmore Estate tourist attraction. The city's arts district faced substantial damage from Helene.

But the majority of North Carolina voters supported President-elect Donald Trump, and he generally fared better among voters hurt by Hurricane Helene. The Republican gave a blistering critique of the Biden administration's relief efforts, which President Joe Biden characterized as "un-American" misinformation.

AP VoteCast, an extensive survey of the electorate, found that 26% of North Carolina voters said the hurricane affected their lives by damaging their homes, causing extended power outages or interfering with their ability to cast a ballot. Trump won 53% of those voters.

Vance has largely stayed out of the public eye since the Nov. 5 election aside from shepherding Trump's Cabinet nominees around Capitol Hill.

Vance defended Pete Hegseth after his tour of the region, saying that Trump's defense secretary nominee deserved a Senate confirmation hearing rather than a "sham hearing before the American media" over allegations of sexual assault and excessive drinking of alcohol.

The incoming vice president also said he did not know whether he would be escorting Kash Patel, Trump's pick for FBI director, around the Senate next week.

In North Carolina, state lawmakers have already allocated more than \$900 million in disaster relief, but Gov. Roy Cooper has sought at least \$3.9 billion. The Democratic governor and other state leaders have asked the federal government for \$25 billion in aid.

Hundreds of miles of roads have been reopened and water systems are back online, but the work has been slow-going. More than 100,000 western North Carolina residents were told just two weeks ago that they could once again use water coming out of Asheville's water system to bathe and to drink from the faucet. A destroyed water system in at least one isolated county could take years to rebuild.

Many Republicans and residents were critical of the initial recovery operations by the federal government and Cooper's administration. Housing for displaced residents for the winter has become a concern, and some allies of Cooper have blamed GOP lawmakers for failing to provide grants to small businesses at risk of failing and housing renters faced with eviction.

## **Biden is considering preemptive pardons for officials and allies before Trump takes office**

By ZEKE MILLER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is weighing whether to issue sweeping pardons for officials and allies who the White House fears could be unjustly targeted by President-elect Donald Trump's administration, a preemptive move that would be a novel and risky use of the president's extraordinary constitutional power.

The deliberations so far are largely at the level of White House lawyers. But Biden himself has discussed the topic with some senior aides, according to two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity Thursday to discuss the sensitive subject. No decisions have been made, the people said, and it is possible Biden opts to do nothing at all.

Pardons are historically afforded to those accused of specific crimes — and usually those who have already been convicted of an offense — but Biden's team is considering issuing them for those who have

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not even been investigated, let alone charged. They fear that Trump and his allies, who have boasted of enemies lists and exacting "retribution," could launch investigations that would be reputationally and financially costly for their targets even if they don't result in prosecutions.

While the president's pardon power is absolute, Biden's use in this fashion would mark a significant expansion of how they are deployed, and some Biden aides fear it could lay the groundwork for an even more drastic usage by Trump. They also worry that issuing pardons would feed into claims by Trump and his allies that the individuals committed acts that necessitated immunity.

Recipients could include infectious-disease specialist Dr. Anthony Fauci, who was instrumental in combating the coronavirus pandemic and who has become a pariah to conservatives angry about mask mandates and vaccines. Others include witnesses in Trump's criminal or civil trials and Biden administration officials who have drawn the ire of the incoming president and his allies.

Some fearful former officials have reached out to the Biden White House preemptively seeking some sort of protection from the future Trump administration, one of the people said.

It follows Biden's decision to pardon his son Hunter — not just for his convictions on federal gun and tax violations, but for any potential federal offense committed over an 11-year period, as the president feared that Trump allies would seek to prosecute his son for other offenses. That could serve as a model for other pardons Biden might issue to those who could find themselves in legal jeopardy under Trump.

Biden is not the first to consider such pardons — Trump aides considered them for him and his supporters involved in his failed efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election that culminated in a violent riot at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. But he could be the first to issue them since Trump's pardons never materialized before he left office nearly four years ago.

Gerald Ford granted a "full, free, and absolute pardon" in 1974 to his predecessor, Richard Nixon, over the Watergate scandal. He believed a potential trial would "cause prolonged and divisive debate over the propriety of exposing to further punishment and degradation a man who has already paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing the highest elective office of the United States," as written in the pardon proclamation.

Politico was first to report that Biden was studying the use of preemptive pardons.

On the campaign trail, Trump made no secret of his desire to seek revenge on those who prosecuted him or crossed him.

Trump has talked about "enemies from within" and circulated social media posts that call for the jailing of Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, former Vice President Mike Pence and Sens. Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer. He also zeroed in on former Rep. Liz Cheney, a conservative Republican who campaigned for Harris and helped investigate Jan. 6, and he promoted a social media post that suggested he wanted military tribunals for supposed treason.

Kash Patel, whom Trump has announced as his nominee to be director of the FBI, has listed dozens of former government officials he wanted to "come after."

Richard Painter, a Trump critic who served as the top White House ethics lawyer under President George W. Bush, said he was reluctantly in support of having Biden issue sweeping pardons to people who could be targeted by Trump's administration. He said he hoped that would "clean the slate" for the incoming president and encourage him to focus on governing, not on punishing his political allies.

"It's not an ideal situation at all," Painter said. "We have a whole lot of bad options confronting us at this point."

While the Supreme Court this year ruled that the president enjoys broad immunity from prosecution for what could be considered official acts, his aides and allies enjoy no such shield. Some fear that Trump could use the promise of a blanket pardon to encourage his allies to take actions they might otherwise resist for fear of running afoul of the law.

"There could be blatant illegal conduct over the next four years, and he can go out and pardon his people before he leaves office," Painter said. "But if he's going to do that, he's going to do that anyway regardless of what Biden does."

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More conventional pardons from Biden, such as those for sentencing disparities for people convicted of federal crimes, are expected before the end of the year, the White House said.

## Trump talks up his transition and election victory as he receives Fox Nation award

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

GREENVALE, N.Y. (AP) — Not yet even in office, Donald Trump said Thursday he's already accomplished more than President Joe Biden did in his entire term, an outsized claim by the president-elect just a month out from the election.

Trump, who has been largely ensconced at his Mar-a-Lago club in recent weeks as he's worked to staff his new administration, made the comment as he ventured to New York's Long Island to be honored as part of Fox Nation's annual Patriot Awards on Fox's streaming platform.

"I think you have seen more happen in the last two weeks than you have in the last four years," Trump told the crowd at the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts.

"It was a tremendous day, a tremendous night," he said, recalling his election victory in a 10-minute acceptance speech that sounded like a highlight reel of his campaign rally speeches. It came complete with a live performance of "God Bless the USA" by the singer Lee Greenwood, calls to "get the criminals out of our country" and an embrace of all-paper election ballots and mandatory voter ID.

Trump also pointed to the conversations he's had with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum since he threatened two of the country's top trading partners with a 25% tariff on all imported goods unless they do more to tackle illegal border crossings and drug flows.

"Justin came flying right in," Trump said in reference to Trudeau's trip to Mar-a-Lago. That prompted some in the audience to chant "51!" — a nod to Trump apparently joking at his dinner with Trudeau that Canada could become the 51st U.S. state.

The annual awards "honor and recognize America's finest patriots, including military veterans, first responders and other inspirational everyday heroes," according to Fox. The event was hosted by Fox host Sean Hannity, a longtime Trump friend who stepped in after the president-elect nominated Pete Hegseth, the original host, as defense secretary.

Among those recognized Thursday night were conservative actor and evangelist Kirk Cameron; Gen. Dick Cody, who used his own helicopter to deliver supplies to people after Hurricane Helene; and Jonathan Diller, the New York Police Department officer who was killed during a traffic stop in Queens. His widow, Stephanie, received a standing ovation and thanked Trump for his support. Others invoked Trump as well.

The ceremony also honored Paws of War, an organization that provides service dogs to veterans and helps those serving overseas bring animals they meet in war zones to the U.S. One such reunion played out on stage.

The heartfelt moments were juxtaposed against the kind of boisterous red meat politics that loyal watchers of Fox hosts like Hannity expect.

The anchor used his introduction to take an election victory lap, boasting that Democrats "got their ass kicked." He played "YMCA" — the song Trump has long used to close out his rallies — and invited audience members to dance like the president-elect. And he offered a series of impressions, mimicking former vice presidential candidate Tim Walz's enthusiasm and Biden appearing lost, complete with a backdrop of the rainforest where he spoke during a recent trip to the Amazon.

Later, he donned an orange safety vest — a nod to the one Trump wore when he delivered a press conference from a garbage truck during the campaign after Biden suggested Trump's supporters were garbage.

Trump's award marks the culmination of Fox's reembrace of the president-elect, who has had an up-and-down relationship with the network in recent years.

Fox paid \$787 million in 2023 to settle a defamation lawsuit by Dominion Voting Systems over false claims by Fox personalities who echoed Trump's lies that the 2020 election was stolen from him through mass



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voter fraud. For more than six months ending in spring 2023, Fox had what many considered a “soft ban” on Trump appearances, with its leaders looking to move on. But when it became clear that voters did not want to, Fox and its personalities were quick to embrace Trump again.

Individual personalities have undergone their own journeys: Former Fox host Megyn Kelly drew Trump’s ire in a 2015 debate for her sharp question about his treatment of women; now she’s a popular podcast host and Trump supporter. The Dominion lawsuit uncovered emails in which former Fox host Tucker Carlson spoke disparagingly of Trump, including saying he “truly can’t wait” for Trump to become an ex-president. They’ve since made amends.

Through it all, Trump has been quick to take to social media to criticize Fox for content he deems insufficiently loyal.

On Thursday, he was more magnanimous.

“You have incredible people at Fox,” he said before quipping, “A couple I don’t like.”

Trump has begun to emerge more in public since spending most of his transition so far behind closed doors at his club in Palm Beach, Florida. This week, he made an unannounced appearance at a memorial service for three Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office deputies who were killed in a car crash last month.

This weekend, he will travel to Paris to join other world leaders and dignitaries for a ceremony to celebrate the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral, which was devastated by a fire five years ago.

## US added a strong 227,000 jobs in November in bounce-back from October slowdown

By PAUL WISEMAN and ANNE D’INNOCENZIO AP Business Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — America’s job market rebounded in November, adding 227,000 workers in a solid recovery from the previous month, when the effects of strikes and hurricanes had sharply diminished employers’ payrolls.

Last month’s hiring growth was up considerably from a meager gain of 36,000 jobs in October. The government also revised up its estimate of job growth in September and October by a combined 56,000.

Friday’s report from the Labor Department report showed that the unemployment rate ticked up from 4.1% in October to a still-low 4.2%. Hourly wages rose 0.4% from October to November and 4% from a year earlier — both solid figures and slightly higher than forecasters had expected.

The November employment report provided the latest evidence that the U.S. job market remains durable even though it has lost significant momentum from the 2021-2023 hiring boom, when the economy was rebounding from the pandemic recession. The job market’s gradual slowdown is, in part, a result of the high interest rates the Federal Reserve engineered in its drive to tame inflation.

The Fed jacked up interest rates 11 times in 2022 and 2023. Defying predictions, the economy kept growing despite much higher borrowing rates for consumers and businesses. But since early this year, the job market has been slowing.

Thomas Simons, U.S. economist at Jefferies, wrote in a commentary that the recovery from October’s strikes and hurricanes likely boosted last month’s payrolls by 60,000, suggesting that the job market is strong enough to absorb most jobseekers but not enough to raise worries about inflation.

The healthy gain of 227,000 payroll jobs in November was derived from from a Labor Department survey of employers. A separate survey of households, which determines the unemployment rate, looked weaker: The ranks of the unemployed rose by 161,000. And the number of Americans who said they either had a job or were looking for one fell for a second straight month.

Economists also noted that the November job gains were narrow: Just three categories of employers — healthcare and social assistance; leisure and hospitality; and government — accounted for 70% of the added jobs. And the 22,000 jobs that factories gained in November were boosted by the end of strikes at Boeing and elsewhere that restored many workers to their employers’ payrolls. Retailers, by contrast, shed 28,000 jobs.

"I don't think we should be misled by the solid number of 227,000," said Julia Pollak, chief economist at the employment firm ZipRecruiter.

Pollak noted that averaging the October and November job gains amounts to a modest 132,000 per month.

"This report offers very little evidence of a labor market rebound," she said.

Still, Americans as a whole have been enjoying unusual job security. This week, the government reported that layoffs fell to just 1.6 million in October, below the lowest levels in the two decades that preceded the pandemic. At the same time, the number of job openings rebounded from a 3 1/2 year low, a sign that businesses are still seeking workers even though hiring has cooled.

The overall economy has remained resilient. The much higher borrowing costs for consumers and businesses that resulted from the Fed's rate hikes had been expected to tip the economy into a recession. Instead, the economy kept growing as households continued to spend and employers continued to hire.

The economy grew at a 2.8% annual pace from July through September on healthy spending by consumers. Annual economic growth has topped a decent 2% in eight of the past nine quarters. And inflation has dropped from a 9.1% peak in June 2022 to 2.6% last month. Even so, Americans were deeply frustrated by still-high prices under the Biden-Harris administration, and partly for that reason chose last month to return Donald Trump to the White House.

While comparatively few Americans are losing jobs, those who do are finding it harder to land a new one: The average unemployed American last month had been out of work for 23.7 weeks, the longest such stretch in 2 1/2 years.

The progress against inflation and the slowdown in hiring, which eases pressure on companies to raise wages and prices, led the Fed to cut its key rate in September and again last month. Another rate cut is expected to be announced when the Fed meets Dec. 17-18.

Pollak of ZipRecruiter said she sees some reason for optimism about the job market. Wage gains have been exceeding inflation for two years, for example, thereby strengthening Americans' buying power. And lower borrowing rates are likely to encourage spending and hiring in the future.

"There are all kinds of mounting tailwinds that should propel this labor market forward," she said.

For now, though, some businesses are cautious. Chris Butler, CEO of the National Tree Company, which makes artificial holiday trees, wreaths and garlands, said he's taking a watchful approach to hiring. The company is grappling with subdued spending, and, like its competitors, National Tree has discounted heavily as many shoppers have pulled back on discretionary purchases. Butler is also monitoring the prospect of heavy new tariffs that President-elect Donald Trump has said he will impose on imports from China and other countries.

Although National Tree Company sources a significant chunk of its business from China, it has been moving more production to Vietnam and Cambodia. It plans to be fully out of China in 2026 as it braces for Trump to take office.

For 2025, Butler said, "we'll probably add a few roles. But it's certainly not going to be a hiring bonanza."

## Will Juan Soto top Shohei Ohtani's deal? In the era of deferred money, it might depend on the math

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Deciding whether Juan Soto tops Shohei Ohtani for baseball's largest contract could be in the eye of the beholder because of all the deferred money in Ohtani's deal.

Ohtani agreed last December to a \$700 million, 10-year deal with the Los Angeles Dodgers, easily exceeding the previous high set when Mike Trout and the Los Angeles Angels struck a \$426.5 million, 12-year agreement through 2030.

Ohtani's deal includes \$680 million in deferred money payable from 2034-43. There are several interpretations for how to value that deal in current dollars:

1. For baseball's luxury tax, the average annual value is pegged at \$46.08 million using a 4.33% discount rate.

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2. The players' association uses a 5% rate, which puts the value at \$43.75 million per season.

3. For MLB's regular payroll, a 10% rate results in a \$28.21 million per year rate.

Soto could get a contract of 10-to-15 years for \$600 million or more.

His agent, Scott Boras, is not a big fan of deferred money and thinks teams might not insist on delaying the cash.

"I think it's much less of an issue than it was before," Boras said. "Deferral as a mechanism for me, is it: Will it impede my ability to get the greatest asset I can acquire? And the answer to that is I don't think they're going to want to do anything that impedes their primary pursuit and goal."

The interest figure used for discounting to determine luxury tax value is set in the collective bargaining agreement as the federal mid-term rate defined in section 1274(d) of the Internal Revenue Code for the October preceding the initial contract year.

That rate dropped to 3.7% this offseason, which meant if Ohtani's deal had been agreed to this month, its annual luxury tax value would have been about \$49.3 million. That would have resulted in an additional \$3.5 million annual tax bill for the Dodgers, who will exceed the top threshold and would pay additional tax at a 110% rate on each dollar.

MLB's regular payrolls, which use the same rate as the one for calculating the qualifying offer price based on the 125 largest contracts, use the prime rate set by J.P. Morgan Chase on the preceding Nov. 1 plus 1%, rounded to the nearest full percentage point. That figure dropped to 9% for this offseason.

Deferred compensation must be funded by the second July 1 after the season in which it was earned, discounted to a present-day value at a 5% rate.

Los Angeles owes deferred payments just over \$1 billion due from 2028-46 to Ohtani, Mookie Betts, Freddie Freeman, Will Smith, Teoscar Hernández, Blake Snell and Tommy Edman.

"It's just trying to kick dollars down the road," St. Louis Cardinals president of baseball operations John Mozeliak said at the general managers meetings last month.

Ohtani's payments are two-thirds of the total owed.

"It was a unique situation for where a club was, a unique situation for a player who has very significant earning potential outside of strictly his compensation from a club," New York Mets president of baseball operations David Stearns said. "Those other ones are much more representative of what you see in sort of standard contracts around the industry. Each organization, each ownership group is going to have a slightly different perspective on this, on how they're calculating the returns off of that deferred compensation."

Dodgers president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman said his team's leadership from Guggenheim Baseball Management has the expertise to fund deferred compensation wisely.

"A lot of our ownership group are from financial background and can have that money going to work right now," he said.

MLB proposed during collective bargaining on June 21, 2021, to put an end to the practice.

"For contracts entered into after the effective date of the Basic Agreement, deferred compensation of any kind will not be permitted," the proposal read, according to a copy obtained by The Associated Press.

That idea was rejected by the union and not included in the five-year agreement that expires in December 2026.

New York Yankees general manager Brian Cashman thinks his team's large resources encourage players to seek their money as soon as possible.

"We're open to deferrals," he said. "A lot of times players are less open to doing deferrals for us than they are for maybe other markets, but if we can do stuff that benefits us, of course we will."

## **Ailing kids wait months for Israeli permission to leave Gaza for treatment. Some die in the meantime**

WAFSA SHURFAFA and FATMA KHALED Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The 12-year-old Palestinian boy was lying in a hospital bed in central Gaza, wracked with leukemia, malnourished and whimpering in pain despite the morphine doctors were

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giving him, when Rosalia Bollen, a UNICEF official, said she saw him in late October.

Islam al-Rayahen's family had asked Israeli authorities six times over the past months for permission to evacuate him from Gaza for a desperately needed stem cell transplant, Bollen said. Six times, the request was refused for unexplained security reasons, she said.

Islam died three days after she saw him, Bollen said.

Thousands of patients in Gaza are waiting for Israeli permission for urgently needed medical evacuation from Gaza for treatment of war wounds or chronic diseases they can't get after the destruction of much of the territory's health care system by Israel's 15-month military campaign.

Among them are at least 2,500 children who UNICEF says must be transported immediately.

"They cannot afford to wait. These children will die. They're dying in waiting and I find it striking that the world is letting that happen," Bollen said.

The Israeli military often takes months to respond to medical evacuation requests, and the number of evacuations has plunged in recent months. In some cases, the military rejects either the patient or, in the case of children, the caregivers accompanying them on vague security grounds or with no explanation.

The Israeli decisions appear to be "arbitrary and are not made on a criteria nor logic," said Moeen Mahmood, the Jordan country director for Doctors Without Borders.

COGAT, the Israeli military agency in charge of humanitarian affairs for Palestinians, said in a statement to The Associated Press that it "makes every effort to approve the departure of children and their families for medical treatments, subject to a security check." It did not respond when asked for details about Islam's case.

A military official said Israel's internal intelligence service reviews whether the patient or their escort have what he called "a connection to terrorism," and if one is found they are refused. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss confidential procedures.

Osaid Shaheen, who is nearly 2, now faces having his eyes removed after Israel rejected his evacuation for treatment of cancer in his retinas.

The toddler was diagnosed with the cancer in April, after his mother, Sondos Abu Libda, noticed his left eyelid was droopy. The World Health Organization requested his evacuation through the Rafah border crossing in southern Gaza, but the crossing was shut down in May when Israeli troops took it over in an offensive, Abu Libda said.

WHO applied again, this time for Osaid to leave through the Kerem Shalom crossing into Israel, now the only route for evacuees to travel. During the long wait, the cancer spread to the child's other eye and reached stage 4.

In November, Abu Libda was told Osaid was rejected on security grounds with no further explanation.

She was stunned, she said. "I didn't expect that a child could get a security rejection."

Doctors have given the boy three doses of chemotherapy. But with supplies short in Gaza, they're struggling to get more. If they can't, they will have to remove Osaid's eyes or the cancer will spread to other parts of his body, Abu Libda said.

"He's just a child. How will he live his life without seeing? How will he play? How will he see his future and how will his life turn out?" Abu Libda asked, standing outside the house where her family is sheltering in the Beni Suheil district of southern Gaza.

Nearby, little Osaid — who so far still has his sight — toddled around in the rubble of a building destroyed by Israeli forces, smiling as he played with chunks of rubble. When asked about his case, COGAT did not reply.

WHO says 14,000 patients of all ages need medical evacuation from Gaza. The territory's Health Ministry puts the number higher, at 22,000, including 7,000 patients in extreme need who could die soon without treatment, according to Mohamed Abu Salmeya, a ministry official in charge of evacuation referrals.

Since the war began on Oct. 7, 2023, 5,230 patients have been evacuated, said Margaret Harris, a WHO spokesperson.

Since May, when the Rafah crossing shut down, the rate has slowed down, with only 342 patients evacuated, she said, an average of less than two a day. Before the war, when Israeli permission was also

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necessary, around 100 patients a day were transferred out of Gaza, according to WHO.

More than 44,500 Palestinians have been killed and more than 105,000 wounded by Israel's bombardment and ground offensives, launched in retaliation for Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel. The casualty toll, by Gaza's Health Ministry, does not distinguish combatants from civilians — but more than half are women and children.

Gaza's health system has been decimated, with only 17 of the territory's original 36 hospitals functioning — and those only partially. They struggle with the waves of war wounded on top of patients with other conditions.

Carrying out specialized surgeries or treatments in Gaza is difficult or impossible, with equipment destroyed, some specialist doctors killed or arrested and medical supplies limited. Gaza's only dedicated cancer hospital was seized by Israeli troops early in the war, heavily damaged and has been shut down.

Doctors without Borders said in August, it sought to evacuate 32 children along with their caregivers, but only six were allowed to leave. In November, it applied for eight others, including a 2-year-old with leg amputations, but Israeli authorities blocked evacuation, it said

The military official said five of the eight requests in November were approved but the caregivers trying to travel with the children were rejected on security grounds. The official said Doctors Without Borders would have to resubmit the requests with alternate escorts. The official didn't say why the other three children weren't approved.

The rejected caregivers were the children's mothers and grandmothers, said Mahmood, the Doctor's Without Borders official, who said no explanation was given for the security concern.

Children long waiting for permission face dire consequences if they don't get treatment.

Nima al-Askari said doctors told her that 4-year-old Qusay could become paralyzed if her son doesn't get surgery in the next two or three months for a heart defect that constricts his aorta.

"Should I wait until my son becomes paralyzed?" al-Askari said. "Everyone is telling me to wait until he gets evacuated. ... This is my only son. I can't see him in a wheelchair."

Asma Saed said she has been waiting for three months to hear whether her 2-year-old son, Al-Hassan, can travel for treatment for kidney failure. In the meantime, they are living in a squalid tent camp in Khan Younis, with little clean water or food.

She said her son doesn't sleep, screaming all night.

"I wish I could see him like any child in the world who can move, walk, and play," she said. "He's a child, he can't express his pain."

## Trump names former Sen. David Perdue of Georgia to be ambassador to China

By COLLEEN LONG and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump has selected former Sen. David Perdue of Georgia to be the U.S. ambassador to China, leaning on a former business executive turned politician to serve as the administration's envoy to America's most potent economic and military adversary.

Trump said in a social media post Thursday that Perdue "brings valuable expertise to help build our relationship with China."

Perdue lost his Senate seat to Democrat Jon Ossoff four years ago and ran unsuccessfully in a 2022 primary against Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp. Perdue pushed Trump's debunked lies about electoral fraud during his failed bid for Georgia governor.

During his time in the Senate, Perdue was labeled as "anti-China" in a 2019 Chinese think tank report. The former Georgia lawmaker advocated for a more robust naval force to cope with threats, including from China.

Before launching his political career, Perdue held a string of top executive positions, including at Sara Lee, Reebok and Dollar General.

Economic tensions will be a big part of the U.S.-China picture for the new administration.

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Trump has threatened to impose sweeping new tariffs on Mexico, Canada and China as soon as he takes office as part of his effort to crack down on illegal immigration and drugs. He said he would impose a 25% tax on all products entering the country from Canada and Mexico, and an additional 10% tariff on goods from China, as one of his first executive orders.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington cautioned earlier this week that there will be losers on all sides if there is a trade war.

"China-US economic and trade cooperation is mutually beneficial in nature," embassy spokesman Liu Pengyu posted on X. "No one will win a trade war or a #tariff war." He added that China had taken steps in the last year to help stem drug trafficking.

In response to Perdue's nomination, Liu on Thursday night said in a statement that China "is ready to engage in dialogue, expand cooperation, and manage differences with the incoming US government so as to maintain stability in China-US relations to the benefits of the two countries and the world at large."

It is unclear whether Trump will actually go through with the threats or if he is using them as a negotiating tactic.

The tariffs, if implemented, could dramatically raise prices for American consumers on everything from gas to automobiles to agricultural products. The U.S. is the largest importer of goods in the world, with Mexico, China and Canada its top three suppliers, according to the most recent U.S. Census data.

Perdue, if confirmed, will have to negotiate a difficult set of issues that goes beyond trade.

Washington and Beijing have long had deep differences on the support China has given to Russia during its war in Ukraine, human rights issues, technology and Taiwan, the self-ruled democracy that Beijing claims as its own.

Chinese President Xi Jinping said in a meeting with outgoing President Joe Biden last month that Beijing stood "ready to work with a new U.S. administration." But Xi also warned that a stable China-U.S. relationship was critical not only to the two nations but to the "future and destiny of humanity."

"Make the wise choice," Xi cautioned during his November meeting with Biden on the sidelines of an international summit in Peru. "Keep exploring the right way for two major countries to get along well with each other."

Trump's relationship with Xi started out well during his first term before becoming strained over disputes about trade and the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trump seems particularly focused on using tariffs as a pressure point on Xi, even threatening he would use tariffs as a cudgel to pressure Beijing to crack down on the production of materials used in making fentanyl in Mexico that is illegally sold in the United States.

A second Trump administration is expected to test U.S.-China relations even more than the Republican's first term, when the U.S. imposed tariffs on more than \$360 billion in Chinese products.

That brought Beijing to the negotiating table, and in 2020, the two sides signed a trade deal in which China committed to improve intellectual property rights and buy an extra \$200 billion of American goods. A couple years later, a research group showed that China had bought essentially none of the goods it had promised.

Before Trump's return to power, many American companies, including Nike and eyewear retailer Warby Parker, had been diversifying their sourcing away from China. Shoe brand Steve Madden says it plans to cut imports from China by as much as 45% next year.

Trump also filled out more of his immigration team Thursday, as he promises mass deportations and border crackdowns.

He said he's nominating former Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott to head Customs and Border Protection. Scott, a career official, was appointed head of the border agency in January 2020 and enthusiastically embraced then-President Trump's policies, particularly on building a U.S.-Mexico border wall. He was forced out by the Biden administration.

Trump also said he'd nominate Caleb Vitello as acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency that, among other things, arrests migrants in the U.S. illegally. Vitello is a career ICE official with more than 23 years in the agency and most recently has been the assistant director for firearms and

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tactical programs.

The president-elect named the head of the Border Patrol Union, Brandon Judd, as ambassador to Chile. Judd has been a longtime supporter of Trump's, appearing with him during his visits to the U.S.-Mexico border, though he notably supported a Senate immigration bill championed by Biden that Trump sank in part because he didn't want to give Democrats an election-year win on the issue.

## Today in History: December 7, Japan attacks Pearl Harbor

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Dec. 7, the 342nd day of 2024. There are 24 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 7, 1941, the Empire of Japan launched an air raid on the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, killing more than 2,300 Americans. The United States declared war against Japan the following day.

Also on this date:

In 1787, Delaware became the first state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

In 1972, America's last crewed moon mission to date was launched as Apollo 17 blasted off from Cape Canaveral.

In 1982, convicted murderer Charlie Brooks Jr. became the first U.S. prisoner to be executed by lethal injection, at a prison in Huntsville, Texas.

In 1988, a major earthquake in the Soviet Union devastated northern Armenia, killing at least 25,000 people.

In 1993, six people were killed and 19 wounded in a mass shooting aboard a Long Island Rail Road train in New York.

In 2004, Hamid Karzai (HAH'-mihd KAHR'-zeyeh) was sworn in as Afghanistan's first popularly elected president.

In 2018, James Alex Fields Jr., who drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters at a 2017 white nationalist rally in Virginia, was convicted of first-degree murder.

Today's Birthdays: Linguist and political philosopher Noam Chomsky is 96. Actor Ellen Burstyn is 92. Baseball Hall of Famer Johnny Bench is 77. Singer-songwriter Tom Waits is 75. Sen. Susan M. Collins, R-Maine, is 72. Basketball Hall of Famer Larry Bird is 68. Actor Jeffrey Wright is 59. Actor C. Thomas Howell is 58. Football Hall of Famer Terrell Owens is 51. Football Hall of Famer Alan Faneca is 48. Actor Shiri Appleby is 46. Singer-songwriter Sara Bareilles (bah-REHL'-es) is 45. Actor Nicholas Hoult is 35. MLB All-Star Pete Alonso is 30. Olympic swimming gold medalist Torri Huske is 22.