

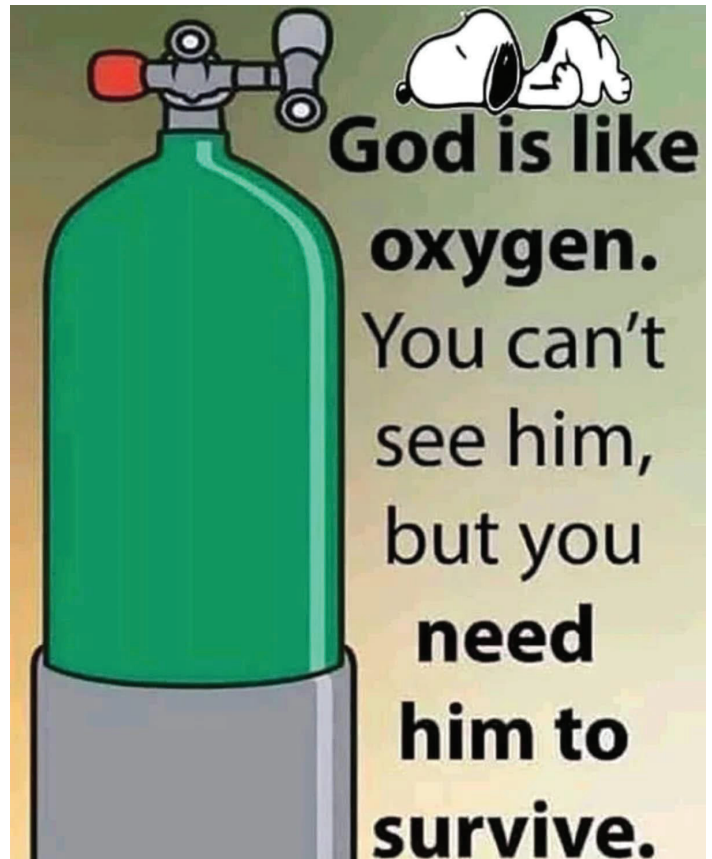
Groton Daily Independent

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Tuesday, Dec. 10

Senior Menu: Baked fish, au gratin, winter blend, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Lunch: Waffles.
School Breakfast: Chicken strips, waffle fries.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Church Council, 6 p.m.
JH Boys Wrestling at Pierre, 4 p.m.
Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.
Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center
Groton United Methodist: Bible Study with Pastor Rob, 10 a.m.



Wednesday, Dec. 11

Senior Menu: Ham and raisin sauce, baked sweet potato, cheesy green beans, Jell-O cake, dinner roll.
School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch: Cheese quesadilla, refried beans.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; DFC Youth supper, 6 p.m.; Advent Service, 7 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Caroling, 6 p.m.
Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Thursday, Dec. 12

Senior Menu: Pork cutlet, creamy noodles, California blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Breakfast Pizza.
School Lunch: Chicken alfredo, cooked broccoli.
Groton Lions Club meeting, 6 p.m., 104 N Main

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

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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.

CEO Shooting Suspect Seized

Police have arrested a suspect in connection to the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, who was shot outside of a Manhattan hotel last week. The suspect has been charged with five crimes in Pennsylvania, where he was found, including carrying a firearm without a license, forgery, and tampering with records. He has also been charged with murder in Manhattan.

Twenty-six-year-old Luigi Mangione was identified at a McDonald's yesterday in Altoona, western Pennsylvania—roughly 280 miles from New York City, where the fatal shooting took place. Police say he was found carrying a so-called "ghost gun," a firearm made using parts printed or purchased online that may be more difficult to trace or tie to past crimes. The silencer and other features were consistent with the murder weapon, according to authorities.

The suspect was also carrying multiple fake IDs and a handwritten, three-page manifesto allegedly criticizing the healthcare industry for prioritizing profit over patient care.

Advertising Behemoth

Omnicom Group is acquiring Interpublic Group in a roughly \$13B deal that would create the world's largest advertising agency valued at more than \$30B. The companies are behind iconic marketing campaigns like "Got Milk" for the California Milk Processor Board, "Because I'm Worth It" for L'Oreal, and "Think Different" for Apple.

Under the terms of the stock-for-stock transaction, Omnicom shareholders will own 60.6% of the combined company, while Interpublic shareholders will own 39.4%. The combined entity will operate under the Omnicom name and trade under the OMC ticker symbol on the New York Stock Exchange. The deal is expected to have an annual cost savings of \$750M and is set to close in the second half of 2025.

Omnicom is the third-largest advertising holding company globally by revenue, generating roughly \$15B in 2023, while Interpublic follows with roughly \$11B. Combined, the two agencies will surpass current industry leaders: UK-based WPP, which reported approximately \$18B in revenue in 2023, and Paris-based Publicis Groupe, which reported nearly \$16B in revenue.

Quantum Breakthrough

Researchers at Google reached a major milestone in the race to build practical quantum computers, revealing a device with an error rate that gets lower as the number of qubits increases. The company says the breakthrough could allow it to build a commercially viable quantum computer by the end of the decade.

Quantum computers rely on individual qubits, which harness the power of quantum mechanics but are highly susceptible to things like temperature fluctuations, potentially introducing errors. Google's Willow chip effectively spreads the quantum information across more than 100 qubits—making one, single "logical" qubit.

To demonstrate, researchers performed a benchmark calculation using Willow in about five minutes. In contrast, a supercomputer would take 714 trillion times longer than the age of the universe, which is about 14 billion years old, to perform the same computation. Researchers will now work to scale up multiple logical qubits connected together.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

New York Mets sign former New York Yankees superstar Juan Soto to 15-year, \$765M contract, the most lucrative deal in sports history.

Dave Parker and Dick Allen elected to Baseball Hall of Fame via Classic Baseball Era Committee.

President-elect Donald Trump, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Elon Musk among shortlist of candidates for Time magazine's 2024 Person of the Year.

"Emilia Pérez" leads all films with 10 nominations for the 2025 Golden Globe Awards; "The Bear" tops on the TV side with five nods.

US Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson to perform in Broadway musical "& Juliet" this Saturday.

Science & Technology

Nature Magazine releases its annual list of the top 10 people shaping science and technology in 2024; efforts range from AI weather prediction to the detection of fraud in academic papers.

Social forum platform Reddit to test a conversational AI feature, allowing US users to ask questions and curate responses; model trained on years of user-generated content.

Physicists make first-ever observation of the antimatter partner of hyperhelium, using Europe's Large Hadron Collider; study provides insight into first fractions of a second following the Big Bang.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.6%, Dow -0.5%, Nasdaq -0.6%); investors await tomorrow's release of key inflation data—the consumer price index report.

Nvidia faces probe in China over possible antitrust violations related to the chipmaker's 2020 acquisition of Israeli tech company Mellanox.

Hershey shares close up nearly 11% on reports of Cadbury-owner Mondelez exploring acquisition; Hershey previously rejected Mondelez's \$23B takeover bid in 2016.

Rupert Murdoch loses court bid to change his family's trust to consolidate his eldest son Lachlan's control of News Corp. and Fox Corp; the trust currently ensures all four of Murdoch's children have equal say in governing his media empire.

Politics & World Affairs

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to take the witness stand for first time in ongoing corruption trial on accusations of fraud, breach of trust, and accepting bribes in three separate instances.

Former Marine Daniel Penny acquitted of criminally negligent homicide in the May 2023 New York City subway death of Jordan Neely; jury's decision came three days after a more serious charge of manslaughter was dismissed.

Haitian gang kills over 180 people, mostly elderly, in the capital of Port-au-Prince; gang leader reportedly targeted the group after consulting a voodoo priest who blamed them for giving the leader's son a severe illness through witchcraft.



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**\$25 per
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**Some games may not
have commentary but
will have the score**

**Text Paul at
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X SERIES | *Cub Cadet*

PUT WINTER IN ITS PLACE.



2X TWO-STAGE POWER
INTELLIPOWER **TRAC** **MAX** **EFI**

When the winters get tough, the Cub Cadet® 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™ trim package to help tackle the deep stuff. Featuring trigger-controlled power steering, push-button electric start, dual LED headlights, 16-inch X-Trac™ tires and a 3-year limited warranty.**

ENGINEERED FOR		
SNOWFALL	DRIVEWAY	SURFACES
Up to 18-23" (18"-23" for EFI and MAX™ units)	Up to 8-15+ cars	Smooth & gravel



2X 24" WITH INTELLIPOWER®

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

- IntelliPOWER® engine technology delivers consistent power in heavy and wet snow conditions
- Trigger-control power steering
- Single-hand remote chute and pitch control
- 3-year limited residential / 1-year commercial limited warranty**

\$1,199* Additional models available with 26", 28" clearing width



2X 26" TRAC WITH INTELLIPOWER®

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

- 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®

Take on winter with the 357cc Cub Cadet® engine with IntelliPOWER®.

- 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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† 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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You have to start some time! Why not **now!**

5 months to get your through the winter!

Student: \$175.75, Single: \$202.40, Couple: \$298.90,
Family: \$362.15

This will get you into the gym through the end of May!



Gift
Certificates
Available!

Daily Pass Available for \$5

Age 65 or older
Physical Therapy
\$20 per month

Annual Memberships:

Student: \$255.60

Single: \$319.50

Couple: \$575.10

Family: \$702.26



15 N Main St. - Ste. 101
Downtown Groton

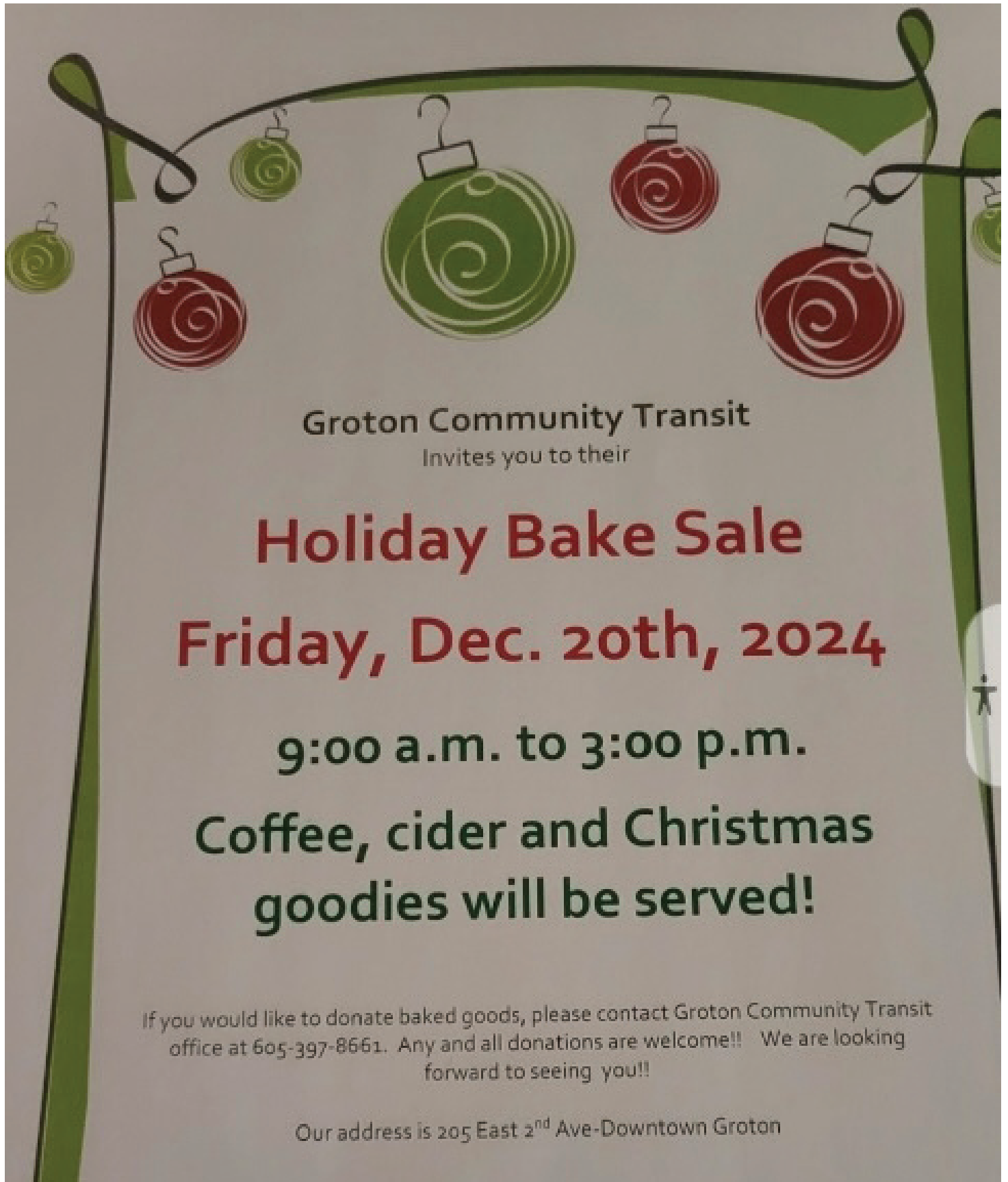
Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460

Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



Living Heart Fitness Center

Open 24/7



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 2nd 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 20th 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



**Groton Christian & Missionary
Alliance Church**

Presents "God's Gift of Love"

December 15th at 5pm

706 N Main

**A ham and turkey dinner with all the
trimmings will be served as a gift to
the community! The public is invited!**





DACOTAH BANK

HOLIDAY
OPEN HOUSE

Cookies & Calendars

DECEMBER 10 -13

9:00 - 4:00 PM

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

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MEMBER FDIC

The Life of Carol Osterman

Services for Carol Osterman, 79, of Groton will be 2 p.m., Friday, Dec. 13, 2024 at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. The Rev. Mike Jacobson will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery, Groton under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Thursday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7 p.m.

Carol passed away December 6, 2024 at Avera St. Lukes Hospital, Aberdeen.

Carol Jean was born on May 31, 1945 in Aberdeen to Robert Albert and Inez Jane (Dunker) Knickrehm. She was baptized and confirmed at the Presbyterian Church in Groton. Carol attended her early school years at Garden Prairie Country School, later transferring to Groton. She graduated from Groton High School in 1963. On August 31, 1963 she was united in marriage to Gerald "Mick" Osterman and together they were blessed with two sons. Carol was active as a full-time farmwife and mother. Over the years she raised chickens, ran the pig farrowing operation, along with growing a large garden. Together, she and Mick enjoyed traveling with his show tractors to many shows in different states.

Outside of farm life, Carol was active within her church. She was a member of WELCA, taught Sunday School, sang in the choir, and was a Bible Study and Circle member. Carol was also involved with a Woman's Card Club, Extension Club, Jaycettes, DAR and numerous other boards. She was active in Eastern Star Diana Chapter 83 where she held many offices, both at the local and state level. She served as Worthy Matron and was known by many for selling their evergreen Christmas wreaths. Carol knitted Christmas stockings for family and friends along with making quilts for treasured keepsakes.

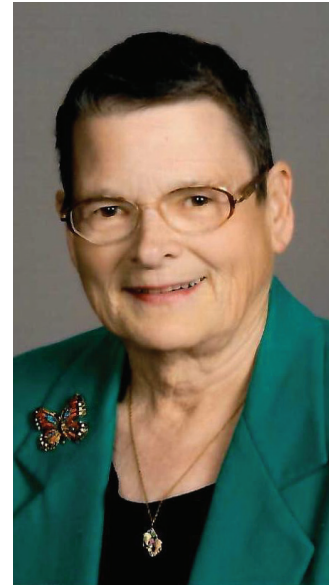
Celebrating her life are her two sons, Todd Osterman of Conde, Robert (Angela) Osterman of Andover, 7 grandchildren: Katherine Osterman, Michelle (Lee) Wasland, Loren Osterman, Jessica Osterman, Lexie Osterman, Jason (Bridget) Osterman and Nicole (Chris) Freeman. Carol is also survived by two sisters, Ann & Robert Winegar of Minneapolis and Roberta Olson of Brookings, and 13 great-grandchildren.

Preceding her in death were her parents, her husband, Mick in 2017, grandson, Jeffrey, and brother-in-law, David Olson. Carol is also preceded by her in-laws, Oliver, Mary & Florence Belden and uncle, Albert Belden.

Honorary Casketbearers will be members of the Monday Morning Coffee Group.

Casketbearers will be Jason Osterman, Loren Osterman, Lee Wasland, Chris Freeman, Lexie Osterman and Jessica Osterman.

www.paetznick-garness.com



Reaching Out: Supporting Veterans and Those in Need During the Holiday Season

As the holiday season approaches, it's easy to get caught up in the rush of festive preparations—shopping, cooking, and planning gatherings. However, this time of year can be particularly challenging for many people, especially veterans and those facing financial difficulties. The holidays can remind them of the struggles they encounter in daily life, from loneliness to financial instability. This is a moment for us to extend our hands and hearts to those who need help the most.

Our veterans—those who have served our country with honor—often face challenges long after their military service ends. Unfortunately, not all veterans are aware of the resources available to assist them, and others may find themselves isolated or lacking sufficient support during the holiday season.

This is why it is crucial for veterans to contact local county and tribal veterans service officers (VSOs). These officers are committed to helping veterans navigate the available support systems. They can assist with benefits claims, housing, healthcare, and mental health services, ensuring veterans receive the help they deserve. Contacting your VSO is a proactive step to guarantee that you, the veterans, and those in your community are not overlooked this season.

211 is a critical resource for individuals experiencing financial hardship, food insecurity, or emotional distress. It serves as a helpline and online tool that connects people to essential services and community programs. Whether it's accessing food pantries, mental health support, financial aid, or housing assistance, 211 can help direct individuals to the appropriate resources in their vicinity. This service is free, confidential, and available 24/7, making it an invaluable asset for those who feel overwhelmed and uncertain about where to seek help.

Another great resource for veterans is the 988-crisis line. By pressing 1 after dialing 988, veterans are connected to trained responders who comprehend the unique challenges that service members and veterans face. If you are fortunate enough to be able to help others this holiday season, consider these practical ways to make a difference:

1. **Donate to veterans' charities:** Numerous organizations are dedicated to improving veterans' lives. Whether contributing to food drives, toy collections for children of veterans, or funding mental health services for those who served, your contribution can make a real difference.

2. **Volunteer:** Many organizations that support veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and those in need rely on volunteers to assist with meal distributions, gift wrapping, and general community outreach. If you have the time, consider donating your energy to a local cause.

3. **Spread the word:** Sometimes, people don't know what help is available. Use your voice to encourage others to contact 211 or 988, county or tribal veterans service officers, local veterans service organizations, or other community services.

4. **Offer a listening ear:** Sometimes, the greatest gift you can give someone is your time and attention. For many veterans, the holidays can be lonely. A simple phone call, letter, or invitation to a holiday meal can provide meaningful support.

Remember that we are all part of a larger community this holiday season, and every effort to help someone in need makes a difference. By reaching out to local resources such as 211 or 988, engaging with county and tribal veterans service officers or veterans service organizations, and offering support to those struggling around us, we can ensure that the holidays are a time of warmth, compassion, and connection for everyone—especially for those who have given so much for our country.



Greg Whitlock,
Secretary
South Dakota
Department of
Veterans Affairs

Groton school board discusses facility projects, reviews preliminary 2025-2026 calendar

by Elizabeth Varin

The Groton Area School District board reviewed potential priorities for upcoming facility projects during its latest meeting, following a Buildings, Grounds, and Transportation Committee discussion.

The committee, made up of district staff and board members Tigh Fliehs and TJ Harder, met November 20 to discuss district building priorities. It came after community member and Groton football advocate Tom Woods asked the board whether they wanted to move forward with finding grant funding and matching community money for improvements to the school's football field.

Superintendent Joe Schwan told the board he has requested quotes for some of the possible field projects, including irrigation, grading, seeding or sodding, rebuilding the crows nest, replacing the sound equipment and more. However, those quotes haven't been returned yet.

"If we know what we're doing, is it the best way of spending money," he said. "I don't think we've really answered that yet."

Board member Nick Strom asked why the district couldn't play soccer at the football field, to which Schwan replied that the ground would get torn up quickly. Keeping the field in good, playable condition would be difficult.

The committee also discussed future plans for the school, including overarching goals for the future, said board President Grant Rix.

2025-2026 preliminary budget discussed

The preliminary calendar has the first day of school scheduled for August 20, 2025. The last day of school would be May 13, 2026.

However, dates are subject to change, including the winter break period.

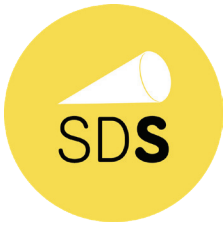
The preliminary calendar includes a half-day on December 23, 2025, with classes resuming January 6, 2026.

Staff aren't excited about having school on December 23, said Superintendent Joe Schwan. If there is no school on Tuesday, December 23, there will likely be attendance issues on Monday, December 22.

If the holiday break begins December 19, a day could be added to the beginning of the school year and one to the end of the school year, Schwan said.

Schwan added he can bring the calendar back to the board in January if they would like to review it then.

- The board approved hiring Teresa Davies as a food service team member.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Native kids remain overrepresented in foster system; SD plans to invest in prevention, kinship care

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 9, 2024 1:59 PM

Native American children remain overrepresented in the South Dakota foster care system, accounting for 72.5% of the foster care population at the end of fiscal year 2024, according to new data.

That's down slightly from 74% at the end of the 2023 fiscal year. The state's fiscal years run from July to June.

The percentage is still about seven times greater than Indigenous children's representation in the state's general population.

The state Department of Social Services recently released its annual Child Protection Services report, detailing the number of children in foster care, how they're cared for and where they're discharged.

Of the state's 1,710 foster care children at the end of fiscal year 2024, 1,239 were Native American, the report says.

Nearly 30% of children, regardless of their race, were placed in kinship care with relatives or close family friends, while 85% were placed in a "family setting" with a foster family.

The department added the "kinship care placement" detail in the latest report as it works to increase the number of family members or relatives caring for a child instead of placing a child in a foster home. Of the state's 824 foster homes, 89 — or 11% — are Native American.

The department plans to start a Kinship Licensing Program next year to increase kinship caregiver numbers. Currently, kinship caregivers don't receive the same amount of resources and financial support as foster parents, unless they become licensed foster parents themselves. That training is intensive, time consuming and potentially unrelated to the kin's situation since they're already familiar with the child.

When children have to be removed from their homes, prioritizing kinship care can improve academic, behavioral and mental health outcomes, and allow the child to stay within their culture and community, according to Child Trends, a research organization focused on child welfare.

The next step in creating the Kinship Licensing Program is to get approval from the Legislative Rules Review Committee.

According to the 2024 fiscal year report, Child Protection Services worked with over 700 children without removing them from their home. That can be through a "safety plan," which is a strategy created by a social worker to address safety concerns of at-risk families while a case is being investigated.

"What we know is when parents and children can be together and both go through those changes and processes and see that behavior change at the same time, we tend to see better outcomes," said Pamela Bennett, the division director of South Dakota Child Protection Services, during an Indian Child Welfare Advisory Council meeting earlier this year.

South Dakota is developing its federally mandated, three-year Family First Prevention Plan, which would use federal funds to pay for prevention services without removing children from at-risk homes. South Dakota is one of the last four states in the nation to create its plan.

Of the 1,006 children who left the child welfare system during the 2024 fiscal year, 493 were reunited with their families, 233 were adopted (58% by a foster parent and 37% by a relative), 63 children were transferred to a tribal program, 65 children aged out of the system, 88 were placed into a formal guardianship agreement, 50 were placed with a relative without guardianship, four were transferred to the

Department of Corrections, and six were transferred to another agency.

Two children ran away and two children died in state care. The report did not include further information about the deaths or runaways. A request for more information from South Dakota Searchlight is pending with the Department of Social Services.

The department also reported the placement of 241 children in adoptive homes.

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

States go after 'claim sharks' that charge vets for help with disability claims

The practice is illegal under federal law, but there is no penalty for flouting it

BY: ANNA CLAIRE VOLLERS, STATELINE - DECEMBER 9, 2024 10:13 AM

For-profit consultants across the country make millions each year by charging military veterans for help in filing their disability claims with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The practice exists in a legal loophole: It's illegal under federal law for companies that aren't accredited by the VA to charge veterans fees for helping file their disability claims, but there's no criminal penalty for breaking the law. Recent attempts to regulate this for-profit shadow industry have stalled in Congress.

While some state lawmakers are trying to close the loophole by filing bills to restrict the practice, they're up against their legislative peers and a cadre of industry leaders with a stable of lobbyists who want the loophole sealed into place at the state level.

Three states — Maine, New Jersey and New York — passed laws in the past year cracking down on for-profit consultants. Similar bills were introduced in 17 other states, including South Dakota, where lawmakers last winter decided to table the bill and continue monitoring the outcome of pending federal legislation on the issue and other developments.

Meanwhile, Louisiana enacted a law hailed by the for-profit industry as a win; it allows companies to charge up to \$12,500 in fees for a task that veterans service organizations such as The American Legion will do for free.

The issue is pitting veterans against one another.

"When we have organizations and companies out there like these claim sharks that are preying on our veterans and taking away their hard-earned benefits and making a profit off them, there's something empirically wrong with that," said Missouri Republican state Rep. Dave Griffith, a former Green Beret in the U.S. Army 8th Special Forces Group.

Griffith introduced a bill earlier this year that would impose criminal penalties on those receiving compensation for helping a veteran apply for benefits. The bill died in committee, but Griffith has refiled it for the upcoming legislative session.

"What's even more disturbing to me," said Griffith, who served in Vietnam, "is that many of these organizations are run by veterans."

The for-profit consulting industry argues that veterans should have the freedom to hire whomever they want to help them navigate the VA's plodding, glitchy application process. Disability claims currently take four or five months on average to resolve, according to VA data, though some languish for a year or more.

Some veterans have reported that the expense is worth it — and have chided the government for not doing a better job marketing directly to vets about how to get their benefits.

The companies charging exorbitant fees, industry representatives say, are just a few bad apples.

"The key for us is having transparent disclosures, processes and statements of fees so veterans can make informed decisions," said Peter O'Rourke, president of the National Association for Veteran Rights,

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a newly formed trade association for the claims consulting industry. O'Rourke, a U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force veteran, was formerly acting secretary of Veterans Affairs during the Trump administration before he was forced out in 2018.

O'Rourke estimated he and his team have been to 38 states to testify at committee hearings and speak with legislators.

"There's a better way of doing business, and we need to have more of that discussion, versus going back in time and criminalizing what the market has been able to provide veterans," he said.

Promises and profits

The urgency from all sides of the issue follows Congress' passage two years ago of the PACT Act, the largest expansion of veterans' benefits in generations. It offers disability-related benefits for veterans suffering from the effects of Agent Orange, toxic burn pits in recent wars and other toxic exposures over the past several decades. Under the act, millions more veterans could qualify for aid.

That increased funding represents a potential bonanza for private consultants who promise to help military veterans access it — for a price.

Veterans with a service-related disability, from cancer to asthma to depression, can apply to receive a monthly cash benefit from the government. Their checks could range from \$500 to more than \$4,000 per month, depending on the severity of the disability and other factors, such as their number of dependents.

But getting approved takes months. The claims process — sluggish and riddled with glitches, according to veterans and the VA's own data — requires a lengthy application and detailed medical documentation.

Enter the private claims consultant. For a fee or a cut of a veteran's future disability benefits — often five times what the veteran stands to receive from the VA, amounting to thousands of dollars — the consulting company promises to help smooth the process and maximize the veteran's disability check.

"Veterans are often facing delays with the VA, and I can see why there's a desire to get results. But these companies sometimes use exploitative practices and seize a big chunk of your benefits," said Florida Democratic state Rep. Anna V. Eskamani. She partnered with Republican state Rep. Michelle Salzman, an Army veteran, to introduce a claim shark bill in the most recent legislative session. The bill died in committee, but Eskamani said they plan to continue talking with veterans and introduce a similar bill next session.

Since January, Republican and Democratic lawmakers in at least 17 states — from Rhode Island to Mississippi to California — have introduced bills to ban or restrict private claim consultants from profiting off veterans.

Most are based on the federal GUARD Act, currently stalled in Congress, which would impose penalties on unaccredited consultants who charge veterans for claims filing assistance. Organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and The American Legion have been outspoken supporters of the GUARD Act and similar state efforts to rein in for-profit consultants.

Last year, New Jersey became the first state to make it illegal for anyone lacking VA accreditation to charge a veteran for assistance filing a disability claim. Maine and New York soon followed.

The VA grants accreditation to attorneys, veterans service organizations and other claims agents that meet certain requirements, such as a background check and a written exam. Organizations such as the VFW and The American Legion provide their services for free, though attorneys and agents are allowed to charge fees to assist with some claims, including appeals.

Griffith, the Missouri legislator, modeled his bill after the New Jersey law. When he first began researching the issue, he said, he didn't like what he saw. Often, he said, companies will charge a fee for their services equal to five times the increase of the veteran's monthly benefit.

For example: A new veteran approved for 100% disability receives about \$3,800 per month from the VA. For help filing that claim, a consulting company might charge a one-time fee of about \$19,000.

In some cases, Griffith said, consultants can pocket as much as \$30,000 through tactics such as holding onto a claim for months before filing so that they can take their cut from the substantial backpay that the VA eventually awards the veteran.

Criticism and pushback

O'Rourke said his group is in favor of some legal guardrails at the federal or state level to protect veterans from exploitation, such as setting certain limits around fees or requiring transparency in contract agreements. But, he said, private consulting should be freely available because the VA and its current accreditation process haven't kept up with the needs of veterans.

"We're looking at, after 20 years of war, a strain on our social infrastructure when it comes to how we take care of veterans," he said, noting that the VA's claims and appeals process is decades old, complex and cumbersome to navigate, even with accredited groups offering help. "Asking veterans to go into a system that uses a lot of their time and causes frustration ... veterans are going to try to find workarounds for that."

Groups including the VFW have been vocal opponents of for-profit consulting companies, urging lawmakers to take action and waging public relations battles against the industry. For-profit companies have been investigated by media and officials in states including Texas and Louisiana for potentially illegal practices.

Last year, the VA issued a fraud alert, warning veterans to avoid consultants who aren't accredited.

But the industry is pushing back. One of the largest for-profit consulting companies spent more than \$800,000 last year and \$780,000 this year in federal lobbying efforts, according to data compiled by the nonprofit OpenSecrets. That included pushing for a bill that would make the legal loophole permanent. At the state level, representatives from some of the industry's largest players are showing up in statehouses across the country to speak against bills.

"I got very close to getting my bill passed last year," said Griffith. But claims consulting companies hired a lobbyist in Missouri, he said. "They lobbied the [House] speaker's office and he delayed the bill."

During a committee hearing, Missouri legislators heard opposition to the bill from O'Rourke, who also testified against Eskamani and Salzman's bill in Florida.

"I was surprised at the amount of money they're willing to spend to try to keep things the way they are," said Eskamani, who said she didn't expect to see such a concerted effort to stop a bill in its first committee meeting.

In June, Louisiana quietly enacted a law that will allow unregulated companies to profit from assisting veterans with their disability claims, though it caps consulting fees at \$12,500. Republican Gov. Jeff Landry allowed the bill to become law without his signature. It marked an about-face for Landry: When he was the state attorney general, he worked to shut down the types of consulting businesses the law now explicitly allows.

Similar bills were introduced this year in Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii and Kentucky, but did not pass.

Last month in Alabama, members of the legislative committee for the state veterans affairs department voted to work with state lawmakers on a bill to prohibit claims consultants from profiting off veterans. The issue is likely to show up again next year in state legislative sessions around the country.

Anna Claire Vollers covers health care for Stateline. She is based in Huntsville, Alabama.

Biden designates Native American boarding school national monument

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - DECEMBER 9, 2024 5:12 PM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden created the Carlisle Federal Indian Boarding School National Monument in Pennsylvania on Monday to underscore the oppression Indigenous people faced there and across the broader Native American boarding school system, as well as the lasting impacts of the abuse that occurred at these schools.

The proclamation came as Biden — who hosted his fourth and final White House Tribal Nations Summit on Monday — announced several efforts his administration is taking to support tribal communities.

The administration continues to acknowledge and apologize for the federal government's role in the Na-

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tive American boarding school system, which had devastating repercussions for Indigenous communities across the United States. Children at these institutions were subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse throughout the 19th and mid-20th centuries.

At least 973 Native children died while attending the boarding schools, according to an investigative report from the Department of the Interior.

"Making the Carlisle Indian School a national monument, we make clear what great nations do: We don't erase history — we acknowledge it, we learn from it and we remember so we never repeat it again," Biden said at the summit at the Department of the Interior. "We remember so we can heal. That's the purpose of memory."

Carlisle was the first off-reservation federal boarding school for Native children, and took in thousands of children from more than 140 tribes who were stolen from their families.

Carlisle school officials "forced children to cut their hair, prohibited them from speaking their Native languages, and subjected them to harsh labor," per a White House fact sheet.

Native communities, businesses, hospitals

Vice President Kamala Harris, who spoke at the summit earlier in the day, said "for far too long, the federal government has underinvested in Native communities, underinvested in Native entrepreneurs and small businesses, and underinvested in Native hospitals, schools and infrastructure."

Harris said that because of these underinvestments, the administration has "made it a central priority — and it will remain a central priority — to address these historic inequities and to create opportunity in every Native community."

She pointed to the administration's efforts in helping Native entrepreneurs gain access to capital and investing over \$1 billion in Native community banks.

"We know that one of the biggest hurdles to Native entrepreneurs is having access to capital — it's one of the biggest challenges," she said, adding that "it's not for lack of a good idea, for serious work ethic, for a plan that actually would benefit the community and meet a demand, but it's access to capital."

Loss of Native languages

Meanwhile, the administration announced a host of additional actions Monday to support tribal communities, such as debuting a decade-long revitalization plan to address the government's role in the loss of Native languages throughout the country.

"It's a vision that works with tribes to support teachers, schools, communities, organizations, in order to save Native language from disappearing," Biden said.

"This matters. It's part of our heritage. It's part of who we are as a nation. It's how we got to be who we are."

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.

Altoona, Pa., police arrest suspect in killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson

NYPD identified the 26-year-old man as Luigi Mangione

BY: PETER HALL - DECEMBER 9, 2024 2:36 PM

Police in Altoona, Pennsylvania, arrested a suspect Monday in the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson last week in New York, authorities announced.

New York Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch identified the man arrested as Luigi Mangione, 26, whose last known address was in Honolulu, Hawaii. Mangione was in possession of what New York police described as a "ghost gun" made with a 3D printer and a "handwritten document that speaks to his motivation and

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mindset," Tisch said.

Mangione was arrested at a McDonalds where he was recognized by an employee. The New York Police Department has published images from surveillance cameras showing the suspect's face.

NYPD Chief of Detectives Joe Kenny said Mangione had no prior criminal record and that police believe he attended college in Pennsylvania. Social media accounts in Mangione's name say that he attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science.

Mangione was being held on Pennsylvania weapons charges and NYPD detectives were en route to Altoona, nearly 300 miles from New York, to interview him, Kenny said.

Thompson, 50, was shot several times by a person who authorities believe was lying in wait early Wednesday morning outside the Manhattan hotel where UnitedHealthcare was holding an investors meeting.

A spokesperson for the Blair County District Attorney's Office said it would release a statement later Monday.

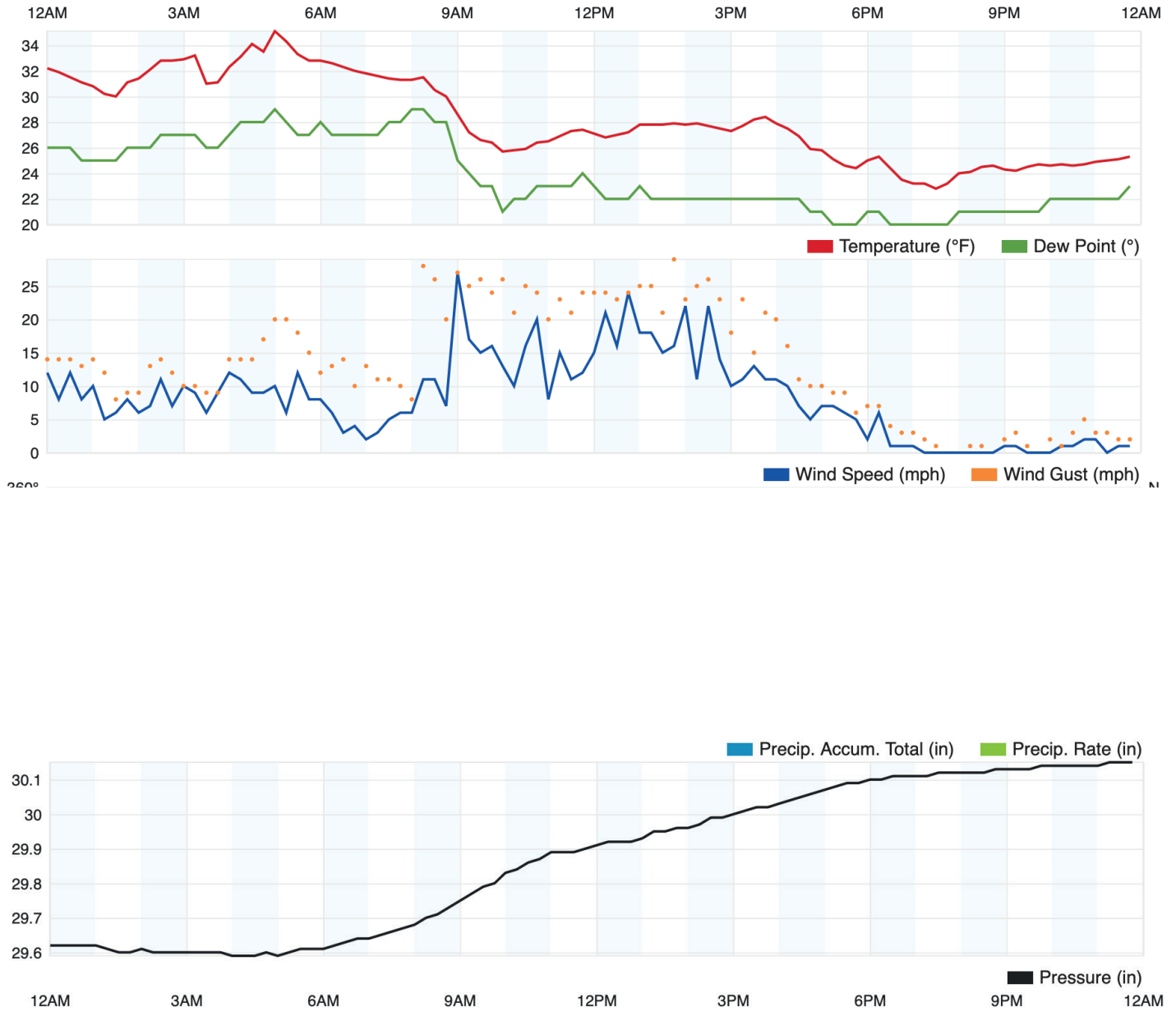
Thompson had been CEO of UnitedHealthcare, one of the nation's largest for-profit health insurance providers, for nearly three years. His killing has prompted an outpouring of criticism of the company and the United States' health care system generally for denying or unnecessarily complicating medical treatment.

Peter Hall, of the Pennsylvania Capital-Star, has been a journalist in Pennsylvania and New Jersey for more than 20 years, most recently covering criminal justice and legal affairs for The Morning Call in Allentown. His career at local newspapers and legal business publications has taken him from school board meetings to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and many points of interest between. He earned a degree in journalism from Susquehanna University.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Tuesday

Tuesday Night

Wednesday

**Wednesday
Night**

Thursday



High: 27 °F

Chance Snow



Low: -1 °F

Blustery.
Chance Snow
then Chance
Flurries



High: 7 °F

Cold



Low: -7 °F

Mostly Clear



High: 10 °F

Cold

Wind Chill Temperatures

Tuesday Afternoon, Dec 10 - Friday Morning, Dec 13



	Tue 12/10		Wed 12/11				Thu 12/12				Fri 12/13	
	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am
Aberdeen	18	10	-5	-14	-12	-11	-11	-11	-7	-3	-4	-4
Miller	19	15	-5	-13	-9	-4	-7	-11	-4	-1	-3	-2
Mobridge	20	7	-6	-11	-7	-4	-7	-8	-2	-2	-2	-1
Murdo	19	16	-2	-8	-2	5	-3	-7	2	5	1	1
Ortonville	14	16	0	-11	-15	-13	-12	-2	-7	-5	-4	-4
Pierre	22	15	-2	-8	-3	2	-3	-9	0	2	-1	0
Sisseton	14	11	-3	-14	-18	-18	-17	-14	-9	-9	-8	-6
Watertown	12	12	-3	-16	-17	-16	-14	-11	-9	-6	-5	-6

Apparent Temperature (°F)

Additional Details



How cold will it get?

- A blast of cold air will impact South Dakota and western MN Wednesday into early Friday.
- Overnight lows may be as low as -10 degrees.
- 10 mph winds will be enough to push wind chills down to around -20 degrees.



Potential Impacts

- Extended time outside may be dangerous and lead to hypothermia.
- Frostbite could set in within 30 minutes of being outside.

Valid: Tue 12 pm CST - Fri 06 am CST

Issued: Mon, Dec 9, 2024, 1 pm CST



A blast of cold air will impact South Dakota and western Minnesota Wednesday into early Friday. Wind chills may reach -20 degrees or lower should winds pick up. Be sure to bundle up and limit outdoor activity while temperatures are at their coldest.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 35 °F at 4:56 AM

Low Temp: 23 °F at 7:24 PM

Wind: 29 mph at 9:23 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 50 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1979

Record Low: -29 in 1972

Average High: 31

Average Low: 10

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.20

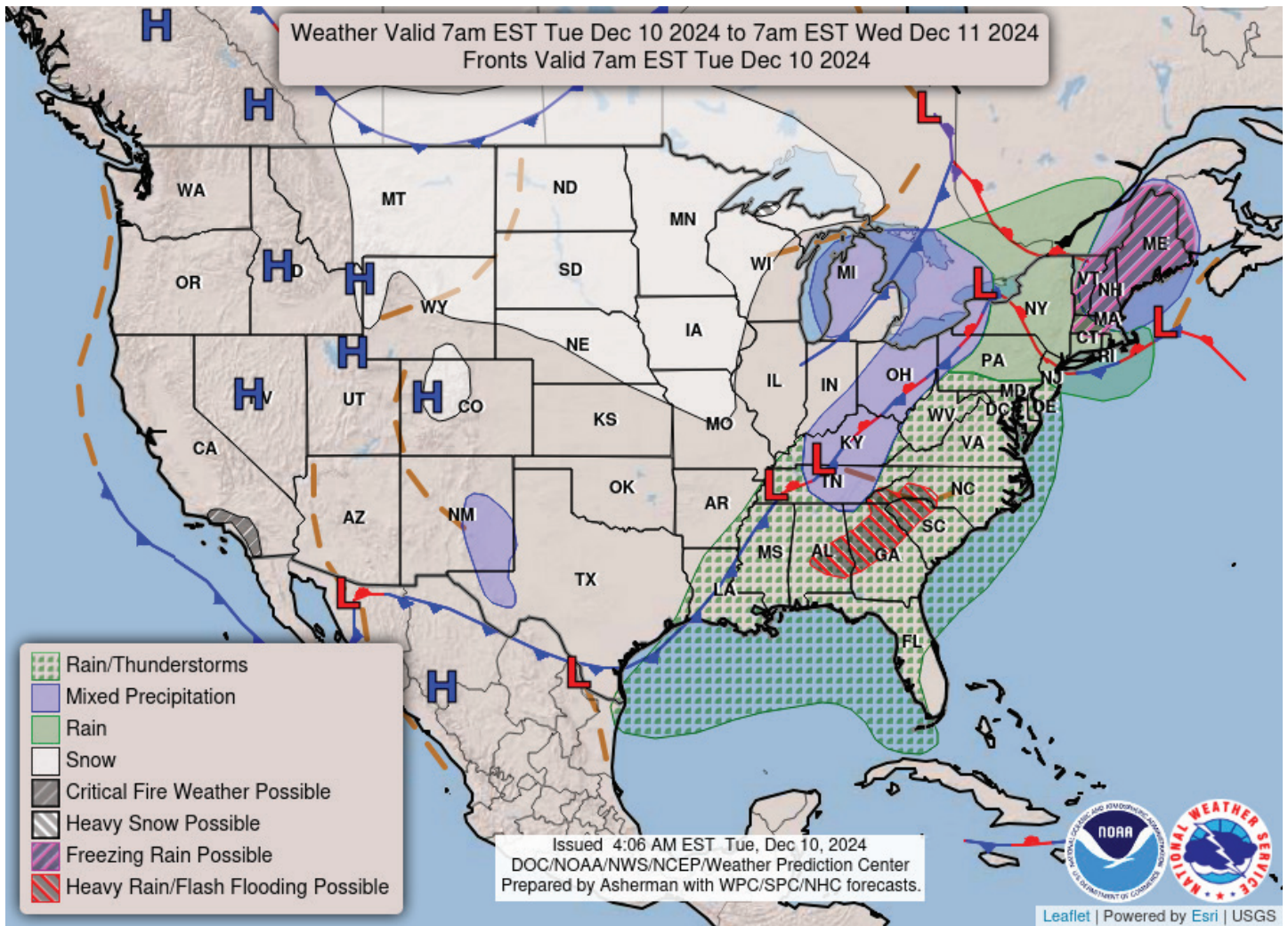
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.41

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:50:53 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:01:01 am



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Today in Weather History

December 10, 2000: Heavy snow of 6 to 8 inches fell across parts of Lyman and Jones Counties on the 10th and 11th. Some amounts included 6 inches at Kennebec and Okaton and 8 inches at Murdo.

December 10, 1699: A severe ice storm hit Boston, Massachusetts causing much damage to orchards.

1946 - The temperature at New York City soared to 70 degrees. (David Ludlum)

1949 - The barometric pressure at Las Vegas, NV, reached a record low reading of 29.17 inches (987.8 millibars). (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A cold front brought high winds to the eastern slopes of the Northern and Central Rockies. Winds gusted to 97 mph at Mines Peak CO. In Wyoming, up to a foot of snow blanketed the Teton Village Ski Resort, northwest of Jackson. Strong chinook winds in the Central High Plains Region, gusting to 61 mph at Scottsbluff NE, warmed temperatures to near 70 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Squalls produced heavy snow in the Lower Great Lakes Region. Totals in northeastern Ohio ranged up to 14 inches at Harpersfield, and totals in western New York State ranged up to 14 inches at Sodus. In the snowbelt of Upper Michigan, the Ontonogon area reported two feet of snow in two days. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Heavy snow fell across the northern and central mountains of Colorado, with 24 inches reported at Steamboat Springs. Six to twelve inches of snow fell in the Denver and Boulder area delaying plane flights and snarling traffic. Heavy snow also spread across the Central Plains into the Mississippi Valley. Winner SD received 11 inches of snow, and more than ten inches of snow was reported north of Sioux City IA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1992 - A slow-moving Nor'easter storm batters the northeast U.S. coast killing 19 people.

December 10, 2002: A shower of tiny fish rained down on Korona, a village in the mountains of northern Greece. A Greek television reported a waterspout caused the incident on Lake Doirani.



The Promise Of Peace

A professor stood before his class and boasted, "The Bible is false. It cannot be believed. It says, 'Peace and goodwill toward men.' History cannot account for a time when there were no wars!"

Disturbed, Arthur went to his pastor and related the incident. Calmly, his pastor said, "Art, that's not what the angels said. They said, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth among men with whom He is pleased.'"

Politicians speak of peace through treaties and boundaries, threats and sanctions, wars and rumors of wars. But that is not the peace that God speaks of in His Word. His Word speaks of a peace that comes through salvation and surrender to the Prince of Peace. It is a peace that comes from the new heart that He implants within us. It is a peace that Christians enjoy when we open the door to our hearts and allow Him to come in and rule our lives.

The peace that Scripture speaks of will never come from a non-peaceful source. It is a peace that comes through the risen Christ and has its source in God Himself.

We cannot find peace in a turbulent, war-torn world until we make peace with God through Jesus Christ. Only when we go to Him in humility and with faith, trust, and surrender, repent and ask for His forgiveness will He grant us His peace.

Prayer: We pray, Father for Your peace – a peace that comes from the God of all comfort Who gives us His peace that assures us of His presence in our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:13-14 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

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 17 Hrs 18 Mins
DRAW: 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.09.24

15 24 29 38 51 3

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$16,520,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 33
DRAW: Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.09.24

1 13 19 22 28 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 48 Mins
DRAW: 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.07.24

7 10 20 26 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$143,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 48
DRAW: Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.09.24

7 17 28 44 54 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 17
DRAW: Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.09.24

35 37 40 45 51 24

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$30,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 17
DRAW: Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

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

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Chester 58, Freeman Academy-Marion 23

Hill City 55, Hot Springs 13

Rapid City Stevens 60, Douglas 28

Tea 62, Sioux City, North, Iowa 23

Vermillion 61, Canton 57

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

Middle East latest: Netanyahu testifies in his corruption trial as warplanes hit sites in Syria

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli warplanes pounded military sites in Syria after Israeli troops seized a border buffer zone following the collapse of President Bashar Assad's rule. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meanwhile testified in his long-running corruption trial.

Israel denied its forces were advancing toward Damascus. Israeli troops on Sunday entered the buffer zone that had been established after the 1973 Mideast war and the military said it would deploy in "several other places necessary for (Israel's) defense."

Netanyahu told the court in Tel Aviv that the charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust against him are "an ocean of absurd" and promised his version would cut through the prosecution's case.

Critics have accused him of dragging out the war in Gaza and putting off a ceasefire deal that could release some 100 remaining hostages after 14 months of war triggered by the Hamas' attack on Oct. 7, 2023.

Israel's offensive has killed over 44,500 Palestinians in the Gaza since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, according to local health authorities. They say most of the dead are women and children but do not distinguish between fighters and civilians. The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250, including older adults and children.

Here's the Latest:

Netanyahu testifies he works 17-18 hours daily engulfed in meetings

TEL AVIV, Israel — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he works 17 to 18 hours a day and that he is engulfed in meetings, especially during the past year that Israel has been fighting wars.

Netanyahu was testifying in his long-running corruption trial. He has denied charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate cases.

"If only I could steal away five minutes to enjoy some time with my wife," he told the court Tuesday.

Israeli military official says troops plan to seize a buffer zone inside Syria

TEL AVIV, Israel — An Israeli military official says troops plan to seize a buffer zone inside Syria as well as "a few more points that have strategic meaning."

The official spoke Tuesday on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. The official dismissed reports of a larger Israeli invasion as "rumors."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday that Israeli forces were moving to control a roughly 400-square-kilometer (155-square-mile) demilitarized buffer zone in Syrian territory. The buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights was created by the U.N. after the 1973 Mideast war.

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Following the overthrow of President Bashar Assad, Israel sent troops into the buffer zone. It said the move was temporary and was aimed at preventing attacks. It said the 1974 agreement establishing the zone had collapsed and that Syrian troops had withdrawn from their positions.

Israel has also carried out airstrikes across Syria in recent days targeting what it says are suspected chemical weapons and long-range rockets.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have condemned Israel's incursion, accusing it of exploiting the disarray in Syria and violating international law.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it in a move not recognized by the international community, except for the United States. The rest of the world views the strategic plateau as occupied Syrian territory.

— By Joseph Krauss

Israeli air force has launched hundreds of airstrikes in Syria, war monitor says

DAMASCUS, Syria — Israel's air force has carried out hundreds of airstrikes in different parts of Syria as its ground forces move north of the Golan Heights along the border with Lebanon, according to an opposition war monitor.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Tuesday that since the fall of President Bashar Assad's government, Israel's air force has carried out more than 300 airstrikes against research centers, arms depots and military infrastructure across Syria, as well as a naval base along the Mediterranean coast.

Associated Press journalists in Damascus witnessed intense airstrikes on the city and its suburbs overnight into Tuesday morning.

Photographs posted online by activists showed destroyed missile launchers, helicopters and warplanes.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops marched along the border with Lebanon and now control a long stretch on the Syrian side facing Lebanon's Rashaya region, according to the war monitor's head, Rami Abdurrahman, and the Beirut-based Al-Mayadeen TV, which has reporters in Syria.

Israeli troops are now about 25 kilometers (15 miles) southwest of Damascus, according to the monitor.

Saudi Arabia condemns Israeli incursion into a buffer zone in Syria

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia has condemned Israel's incursion into a buffer zone in Syria and a wave of Israeli airstrikes launched after the overthrow of President Bashar Assad.

The Saudi Foreign Ministry said in a statement Tuesday that "the assaults carried out by the Israeli occupation government, including the seizure of the buffer zone in the Golan Heights, and the targeting of Syrian territory confirm Israel's continued violation of the principles of international law and its determination to sabotage Syria's chances of restoring its security, stability and territorial integrity."

Israel sent troops into a buffer zone inside Syria that had been established after the 1973 Mideast war. It said the move was temporary and was taken to prevent any cross-border attacks after Syrian troops withdrew.

Israel has also carried out heavy airstrikes that it says are aimed at preventing suspected chemical weapons and long-range rockets from falling into the hands of extremists.

Saudi Arabia has been in talks with the United States in recent years over normalizing relations with Israel in exchange for a U.S. defense pact, American assistance in establishing a civilian nuclear program and a pathway to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

But the kingdom has also repeatedly condemned Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip, where it is at war with the Hamas militant group.

Last month, Saudi Arabia's crown prince and day-to-day ruler Mohammed bin Salman accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza, allegations Israel adamantly rejects.

Suspect in UnitedHealthcare CEO killing charged with murder in New York, court records show

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

ALTOONA, Pa. (AP) — After UnitedHealthcare's CEO was gunned down on a New York sidewalk, police searched for the masked gunman with dogs, drones and scuba divers. Officers used the city's muscular surveillance system. Investigators analyzed DNA samples, fingerprints and internet addresses. Police went door-to-door looking for witnesses.

When an arrest came five days later, those sprawling investigative efforts shared credit with an alert civilian's instincts. A Pennsylvania McDonald's customer noticed another patron who resembled the man in the oblique security-camera photos that New York police had publicized.

Luigi Nicholas Mangione, a 26-year-old Ivy League graduate from a prominent Maryland real estate family, was arrested Monday in the killing of Brian Thompson, who headed one of the United States' largest medical insurance companies.

He remained jailed in Pennsylvania, where he was initially charged with possession of an unlicensed firearm, forgery and providing false identification to police. By late evening, prosecutors in Manhattan had added a charge of murder, according to an online court docket. He's expected to be extradited to New York eventually.

It's unclear whether Mangione has an attorney who can comment on the allegations. Asked at Monday's arraignment whether he needed a public defender, Mangione asked whether he could "answer that at a future date."

Mangione was arrested in Altoona, Pennsylvania, after the McDonald's customer recognized him and notified an employee, authorities said. Police in Altoona, about 233 miles (375 kilometers) west of New York City, were soon summoned.

They arrived to find Mangione sitting at a table in the back of the restaurant, wearing a blue medical mask and looking at a laptop, according to a Pennsylvania police criminal complaint.

He initially gave them a fake ID, but when an officer asked Mangione whether he'd been to New York recently, he "became quiet and started to shake," the complaint says.

When he pulled his mask down at officers' request, "we knew that was our guy," rookie Officer Tyler Frye said at a news conference in Hollidaysburg.

New York Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch said at a Manhattan news conference that Mangione was carrying a gun like the one used to kill Thompson and the same fake ID the shooter had used to check into a New York hostel, along with a passport and other fraudulent IDs.

NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said Mangione also had a three-page, handwritten document that shows "some ill will toward corporate America."

A law enforcement official who wasn't authorized to discuss the investigation publicly and spoke with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity said the document included a line in which Mangione claimed to have acted alone.

"To the Feds, I'll keep this short, because I do respect what you do for our country. To save you a lengthy investigation, I state plainly that I wasn't working with anyone," the document said, according to the official.

It also had a line that said, "I do apologize for any strife or traumas but it had to be done. Frankly, these parasites simply had it coming."

Pennsylvania prosecutor Peter Weeks said in court that Mangione was found with a passport and \$10,000 in cash — \$2,000 of it in foreign currency. Mangione disputed the amount.

Thompson, 50, was killed last Wednesday as he walked alone to a midtown Manhattan hotel for an investor conference. Police quickly came to see the shooting as a targeted attack by a gunman who appeared to wait for Thompson, came up behind him and fired a 9 mm pistol.

Investigators have said "delay," "deny" and "depose" were written on ammunition found near Thompson's body. The words mimic a phrase used to criticize the insurance industry.

From surveillance video, New York investigators gathered that the shooter fled by bike into Central Park,

emerged, then took a taxi to a northern Manhattan bus terminal.

Once in Pennsylvania, he went from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, "trying to stay low-profile" by avoiding cameras, Pennsylvania State Police Lt. Col. George Bivens said.

A grandson of a wealthy, self-made real estate developer and philanthropist, Mangione is a cousin of a current Maryland state legislator. Mangione was valedictorian at his elite Baltimore prep school, where his 2016 graduation speech lauded his classmates' "incredible courage to explore the unknown and try new things."

He went on to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science in 2020 from the University of Pennsylvania, a spokesperson said.

"Our family is shocked and devastated by Luigi's arrest," Mangione's family said in a statement posted on social media late Monday by his cousin, Maryland lawmaker Nino Mangione. "We offer our prayers to the family of Brian Thompson and we ask people to pray for all involved."

Luigi Nicholas Mangione worked for a time for the car-buying website TrueCar and left in 2023, CEO Jantoon Reigersman said by email.

From January to June 2022, Mangione lived at Surfbreak, a "co-living" space at the edge of Honolulu tourist mecca Waikiki.

Like other residents of the shared penthouse catering to remote workers, Mangione underwent a background check, said Josiah Ryan, a spokesperson for owner and founder R.J. Martin.

"Luigi was just widely considered to be a great guy. There were no complaints," Ryan said. "There was no sign that might point to these alleged crimes they're saying he committed."

At Surfbreak, Martin learned Mangione had severe back pain from childhood that interfered with many aspects of his life, from surfing to romance, Ryan said.

"He went surfing with R.J. once but it didn't work out because of his back," Ryan said, but noted that Mangione and Martin often went together to a rock-climbing gym.

Mangione left Surfbreak to get surgery on the mainland, Ryan said, then later returned to Honolulu and rented an apartment.

Martin stopped hearing from Mangione six months to a year ago.

Although the gunman obscured his face during the shooting, he left a trail of evidence in New York, including a backpack he ditched in Central Park, a cellphone found in a pedestrian plaza, a water bottle and a protein bar wrapper.

In the days after the shooting, the NYPD collected hundreds of hours of surveillance video and released multiple clips and still images in hopes of enlisting the public's eyes to help find a suspect.

"This combination of old-school detective work and new-age technology is what led to this result today," Tisch said at the New York news conference.

New York prosecutors charge suspect in UnitedHealthcare CEO killing with murder, court records show

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, MARK SCOLFORO and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

ALTOONA, Pa. (AP) — A man suspected in the brazen Manhattan killing of UnitedHealthcare's CEO was arrested and charged with murder Monday after a quick-thinking McDonald's customer in Pennsylvania recognized him from a surveillance photo and police officers found a gun, mask and writings linking him to the ambush.

The chance sighting at the restaurant in Altoona led to a dramatic break in a challenging but fast-moving investigation that captivated the public in the five days since the shooting that shook the business world.

Luigi Nicholas Mangione, a 26-year-old Ivy League graduate from a prominent Maryland real estate family, had a gun believed to be the one used in last Wednesday's shooting of Brian Thompson, as well as writings suggesting anger with corporate America, police said.

Late Monday, Manhattan prosecutors filed murder and other charges against Mangione, according to an online court docket. He remained jailed in Pennsylvania, where he was charged with possession of an

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unlicensed firearm, forgery and providing false identification to police.

Mangione was sitting in the rear of the McDonald's wearing a blue medical mask and looking at a laptop computer, court documents said. A customer saw him and an employee called 911, said Kaz Daughtry, an NYPD deputy commissioner.

Altoona Police Officer Tyler Frye said he and his partner recognized the suspect immediately when he pulled down his mask. "We just didn't think twice about it. We knew that was our guy," he said.

When one of the officers asked if he'd been to New York recently, he "became quiet and started to shake," according to a criminal complaint based on their accounts of the arrest.

In his backpack, police found a black, 3D-printed pistol and a 3D-printed black silencer, the complaint said. Such ghost guns can be assembled at home from parts without a serial number, making them difficult to trace. The pistol had a metal slide and plastic handle with a metal threaded barrel.

He was taken into custody at about 9:15 a.m., police said.

Mangione had clothing and a mask similar to those worn by the shooter and a fraudulent New Jersey ID matching one the suspect used to check into a New York City hostel before the shooting, NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch said.

NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said Mangione was born and raised in Maryland, has ties to San Francisco and a last known address in Honolulu.

"Our family is shocked and devastated by Luigi's arrest," Mangione's family said in a statement posted on social media late Monday by his cousin, Maryland lawmaker Nino Mangione. "We offer our prayers to the family of Brian Thompson and we ask people to pray for all involved."

Mangione was arraigned and ordered held without bail during a brief court hearing. Asked if he needed a public defender, he asked if he could "answer that at a future date." He eventually will be extradited to New York to face charges in connection with Thompson's death, Kenny said.

Police found a three-page document with writings suggesting that Mangione had "ill will toward corporate America," Kenny said.

The handwritten document "speaks to both his motivation and mindset," Tisch said.

A law enforcement official who wasn't authorized to discuss the investigation publicly and spoke with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity said the document included a line in which Mangione claimed to have acted alone.

"To the Feds, I'll keep this short, because I do respect what you do for our country. To save you a lengthy investigation, I state plainly that I wasn't working with anyone," the document said, according to the official.

It also had a line that said, "I do apologize for any strife or traumas but it had to be done. Frankly, these parasites simply had it coming."

Mangione also had a passport and \$10,000 in cash — \$2,000 of it in foreign currency, authorities said. Mangione, who said Hawaii was his most recent address, disputed the amount.

Thompson, 50, was killed last Wednesday as he walked alone to a hotel, where UnitedHealthcare's parent company, UnitedHealth Group, was holding its annual investor conference, police said.

UnitedHealth Group thanked law enforcement in a statement. "Our hope is that today's apprehension brings some relief to Brian's family, friends, colleagues and the many others affected by this unspeakable tragedy," a company spokesperson said.

The shooting shook U.S. businesses and the health insurance industry in particular, causing companies to rethink security plans and delete photos of executives from their websites.

Mangione attended an elite Baltimore prep school, graduating as valedictorian in 2016, according to the school's website. He went on to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science in 2020 from the University of Pennsylvania, a school spokesperson said.

One of his cousins is a Maryland state legislator and his family bought a country club north of Baltimore in the 1980s. On Monday, police blocked off an entrance to the property, which public records link to the suspect's parents. A swarm of reporters and photographers gathered outside.

Mangione went from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh after the shooting, and likely "was in a variety of locations

across the state," said Lt. Col. George Bivens of the Pennsylvania State Police said.

"Based on everything we have seen, he was very careful with trying to stay low profile, avoid cameras — not all that successfully in some cases, but that was certainly the effort he was making," Bivens said.

In the days since the shooting, police turned to the public for help by releasing a collection of nine photos and video — including footage of the attack, as well as images of the suspect at a Starbucks beforehand.

Photos taken in the lobby of a hostel on Manhattan's Upper West Side showed the suspect grinning after removing his mask, police said.

On Monday, police credited news outlets for disseminating the images and the tipster for recognizing the suspect and calling authorities.

Investigators earlier suggested the gunman may have been a disgruntled employee or client of the insurer. Ammunition found near Thompson's body bore the words "delay," "deny" and "depose," mimicking a phrase used by insurance industry critics.

The gunman concealed his identity with a mask during the shooting yet left a trail of evidence, including a backpack he ditched in Central Park, a cellphone found in a pedestrian plaza and a water bottle and protein bar wrapper that police say he bought at Starbucks minutes before the attack.

On Friday, police said the killer had left the city soon after the shooting. Retracing the gunman's steps using surveillance video, investigators say the shooter rode into Central Park on a bicycle and emerged from the park without his backpack. He made his way to a bus station that offers commuter service to New Jersey and routes to the East Coast, police said.

Biden is rushing aid to Ukraine. Both sides are digging in. And everyone is bracing for Trump

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, ILLIA NOVIKOV and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The grinding war between Ukraine and its Russian invaders has escalated ahead of Donald Trump's inauguration, with President Joe Biden rushing out billions of dollars more in military aid before U.S. support for Kyiv's defenses is thrown into question under the new administration.

Russia, Ukraine and their global allies are scrambling to put their side in the best possible position for any changes that Trump may bring to American policy in the nearly 3-year-old war. The president-elect insisted in recent days that Russia and Ukraine immediately reach a ceasefire and said Ukraine should likely prepare to receive less U.S. military aid.

On the war's front lines, Ukraine's forces are mindful of Trump's fast-approaching presidency and the risk of losing their biggest backer.

If that happens, "those people who are with me, my unit, we are not going to retreat," a Ukrainian strike-drone company commander, fighting in Russia's Kursk region with the 47th Brigade, told The Associated Press by phone.

"As long as we have ammunition, as long as we have weapons, as long as we have some means to defeat the enemy, we will fight," said the commander, who goes by his military call sign, Hummer. He spoke on condition he not be identified by name, citing Ukrainian military rules and security concerns.

"But, when all means run out, you must understand, we will be destroyed very quickly," he said.

The Biden administration is pushing every available dollar out the door to shore up Ukraine's defenses before leaving office in six weeks, announcing more than \$2 billion in additional support since Trump won the presidential election last month.

The U.S. has sent a total of \$62 billion in military aid since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. And more help is on the way.

The administration is on track to disperse the U.S. portion of a \$50 billion loan to Ukraine, backed by frozen Russian assets, before Biden leaves the White House, U.S. officials said. They said the U.S. and Ukraine are in "advanced stages" of discussing terms of the loan and close to executing the \$20 billion of the larger loan that the U.S. is backing.

Biden also has eased limits on Ukraine using American longer-range missiles against military targets

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deeper inside Russia, following months of refusing those appeals over fears of provoking Russia into nuclear war or attacks on the West. He's also newly allowed Ukraine to employ antipersonnel mines, which are banned by many countries.

Biden and his senior advisers, however, are skeptical that allowing freer use of the longer-range missiles will change the broader trajectory of the war, according to two senior administration officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

But the administration has at least a measure of confidence that its scramble, combined with continued strong European support, means it will leave office having given Ukraine the tools it needs to sustain its fight against Russia for some time, the officials said.

Enough to hold on, but not enough to defeat Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces, according to Ukraine and some of its allies.

Even now, "the Biden administration has been very careful not to run up against the possibility of a defeated Putin or a defeated Russia" for fear of the tumult that could bring, said retired Gen. Philip Breedlove, a former supreme allied commander of NATO. He is critical of Biden's cautious pace of military support for Ukraine.

Events far from the front lines this past weekend demonstrated the war's impact on Russia's military.

In Syria, rebels seized the country's capital and toppled Russia-allied President Bashar Assad. Russian forces in Syria had propped up Assad for years, but they moved out of the way of the rebels' assault, unwilling to take losses to defend their ally.

Biden said it was further evidence that U.S. support for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was wearing down Russia's military.

Trump, who has long spoken favorably of Putin and described Zelenskyy as a "showman" wheedling money from the U.S., used that moment to call for an immediate ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia.

And asked in a TV interview — taped before he met with Zelenskyy over the weekend in Paris — if Ukraine should prepare for the possibility of reduced aid, Trump said, "Yeah. Probably. Sure."

Trump's supporters call that pre-negotiation maneuvering by an avowed deal-maker. His critics say they fear it shows he is in Putin's sway.

Zelenskyy said Monday that Russian forces' retrenchment from outposts worldwide demonstrates that "the entire army of this great pseudo-empire is fighting against the Ukrainian people today."

"Forcing Putin to end the war requires Ukraine to be strong on the battlefield before it can be strong diplomatically," Zelenskyy wrote on social media, repeating near-daily appeals for more longer-range missiles from the U.S. and Europe.

In Kursk, Hummer, the Ukrainian commander, said he notices Russian artillery strikes and shelling easing up since the U.S. and its European allies loosened limits on use of longer-range missiles.

But Moscow has been escalating its offensives in other ways in the past six months, burning through men and materiel in infantry assaults and other attacks far faster than it can replace them, according to the Institute for the Study of War.

In Kursk, that includes Russia sending waves of soldiers on motorcycles and golf carts to storm Ukrainian positions, Hummer said. The Ukrainian drone commander and his comrades defend the ground they have seized from Russia with firearms, tanks and armored vehicles provided by the U.S. and other allies.

Ukraine's supporters fear that the kind of immediate ceasefire Trump is urging would be mostly on Putin's terms and allow the Russian leader to resume the war when his military has recovered.

"Putin is sacrificing his own soldiers at a grotesque rate to take whatever territory he can on the assumption that the U.S. will tell Ukraine that U.S. aid is over unless Russia gets to keep what it has taken," Phillips O'Brien, a professor of strategic studies at Scotland's University of St. Andrews, wrote on his Substack channel.

Putin's need for troops led him to bring in North Korean forces. Biden's decision to allow Ukraine to use longer-range missiles more broadly in Russia was partly in response, intended to discourage North Korea from deeper involvement in the war, one of the senior administration officials said.

Since 2022, Russia already had been pulling forces and other military assets from Syria, Central Asia and elsewhere to throw into the Ukraine fight, said George Burros, an expert on the Russia-Ukraine conflict at the Institute for the Study of War.

Any combat power that Russia has left in Syria that it could deploy to Ukraine is unlikely to change battlefield momentum, Burros said.

"The Kremlin has prioritized Ukraine as much as it can," he said.

Here's how the US is countering the Islamic State group during Syria's upheaval

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Massive U.S. airstrikes on Islamic State militants in Syria were meant in part as a message to the group and a move to ensure that it doesn't try to take advantage of the chaos following the overthrow of President Bashar Assad's government.

The U.S. and its partners want to make sure the Islamic State group, which still has a presence in Syria, can't step into the leadership void and once again exert control over wide swaths of the country, Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh said Monday. The U.S. on Sunday struck about 75 IS targets in the Syrian desert.

The U.S. has had troops in Syria for the last decade to battle IS. The tumult following a rebel offensive that toppled Assad has raised fears of an Islamic State resurgence.

"ISIS will try to use this period to reestablish its capabilities, to create safe havens," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday, using another acronym for the group. "As our precision strikes over the weekend demonstrate, we are determined not to let that happen."

So far, U.S. officials are saying that they do not plan an increase in American forces in Syria but are focused on making sure those already there are safe.

Here's a look at the U.S. fight against the Islamic State group:

What's the U.S. military presence in Syria?

The U.S. has about 900 troops and an undisclosed number of contractors in Syria, largely at small bases in the north and east, with a small number farther south at the al-Tanf garrison closer to the Iraq and Jordan borders.

U.S. special operations forces also routinely move in and out of the country but are usually in small teams and are not included in the official count.

Islamic State militants seized large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, declaring a caliphate. The U.S. gathered a coalition of allies and was able to defeat IS in Iraq in 2017. The U.S. partnered with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, and after fierce fighting, ultimately declared an end to the caliphate in Syria in 2019.

Remnants of the militant group remain, including as many as 10,000 fighters held in SDF-run detention facilities in Syria and tens of thousands of their family members living in refugee camps.

And IS fighters have been more active over the past year or so, including in attacks against U.S. and Kurdish forces in Syria.

The country has been wracked by violence and competing interests. Russia has a naval port in the north, and while there have been fewer Russian forces in the area since the onset of the war in Ukraine, the U.S. maintains a deconfliction phoneline with Moscow to avoid any troop miscalculations on the ground or in the air.

Iran also has had a significant presence, often using Syria as a transit route to move weapons into Lebanon for use by Hezbollah militants against Israel.

The al-Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria is located on a vital road that can link Iranian-backed forces from Tehran all the way to southern Lebanon and Israel's doorstep. So troops at the U.S. garrison can try and disrupt those shipments.

Why is the U.S. striking Islamic State targets?

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The U.S. has, over the past decade, routinely targeted IS leaders, camps and weapons in Syria to keep the group at bay and prevent it from coalescing.

In the past year, as Israel's war with Hamas widened into a broader conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon, attacks by Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria as well as by the Islamic State group have escalated.

As a result, the U.S. has kept up a steady drumbeat of counterattacks against all the groups, including against IS camps in the desert, where fighters found safe haven.

Officials say that while the group is vastly weaker than in 2014, it still maintains thousands of militants in Syria.

On Sunday, the U.S. launched one of its larger, more expansive assaults against IS camps and operatives in the desert, taking advantage of the Assad government's downfall. The U.S. bombed at least 75 targets in about five locations using B-52 bombers, A-10 attack aircraft and F-15 fighter jets.

"Does it send a message? I mean, I think it absolutely sends a message that we use B-52s, A-10s and F-15s," Singh told reporters. She had no other details on the result of the strikes.

What's next for the U.S. in Syria?

The Biden administration insists the U.S. will not get involved in Syria's war or the overthrow of the Assad government. But the U.S. and its allies have deep interests in Syria, including the efforts to defeat IS, disrupt Iran-backed groups and contain the remnants of al-Qaida and other terror groups that have found sanctuary.

"I think it is a harbinger of more instability and the potential for more political violence," Chris Costa, former senior director for counterterrorism in the first Trump administration, said last week before the fall of Damascus. Costa spent decades in the U.S. Army and ran special operations in combat zones. "I think there's the potential for ISIS again to make trouble not just for the Iraqis but also be emboldened in the region."

Alex Younger, who led Britain's foreign intelligence agency, MI6, between 2014 and 2020, said a big concern is the "very large number of ISIS detainees left over from the destruction of the caliphate."

Younger told the BBC that IS remnants are "currently contained by the Kurdish groups in the east, but if they go off the job, you can expect a serious spike in the threat posed to Europe by ISIS."

Who will rule Syria?

Another problem is figuring out who's in charge.

The opposition forces that stormed into Damascus and sent Assad fleeing to Russia are led by a group called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, that originally was part of al-Qaida, but split a number of years ago. HTS is considered a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. and the United Nations.

Its leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has sought to reassure Syrians that the group is more moderate. U.S. officials say that while he may be saying some of the right things, they are adopting a wait-and-see attitude for now.

White House national security spokesman, John Kirby, told CNN News Central on Monday that while HTS "was the vanguard" they aren't the only opposition group involved.

"We're going to be working through all the processes we can, including at the U.N., to make sure that there is adequate communication with these opposition groups and that we are all working together," he said.

Singh said she is not aware of any formal U.S. channel of communications with the group. But, she said, "We have other ways of getting messages through, you know, groups and other allies in the region."

Elon Musk warns Republicans against standing in Trump's way — or his

By THOMAS BEAUMONT, JULIET LINDERMAN and MARTHA MENDOZA Associated Press
DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A week after President-elect Donald Trump's victory, Elon Musk said his political action committee would "play a significant role in primaries."

The following week, the billionaire responded to a report that he might fund challengers to GOP House members who don't support Trump's nominees. "How else? There is no other way," Musk wrote on X, which he rebranded after purchasing Twitter and moving to boost conservative voices, including his own.

And during his recent visit to Capitol Hill, Musk and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy delivered a warning to Republicans who don't go along with their plans to slash spending as part of Trump's proposed Department of Government Efficiency.

"Elon and Vivek talked about having a naughty list and a nice list for members of Congress and senators and how we vote and how we're spending the American people's money," said Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga.

Trump's second term comes with the specter of the world's richest man serving as his political enforcer. Within Trump's team, there is a feeling that Musk not only supports Trump's agenda and Cabinet appointments, but is intent on seeing them through to the point of pressuring Republicans who may be less devout.

One Trump adviser, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal political dynamics, noted Musk had come to enjoy his role on the campaign and that he clearly had the resources to stay involved.

The adviser and others noted that Musk's role is still taking shape. And Musk, once a supporter of President Barack Obama before moving to the right in recent years, is famously mercurial.

"I think he was really important for this election. Purchasing Twitter, truly making it a free speech platform, I think, was integral to this election, to the win that Donald Trump had," said departing Republican National Committee co-chair Lara Trump, the president-elect's daughter-in-law. "But I don't know that ultimately he wants to be in politics. I think he considers himself to be someone on the outside."

During the presidential campaign, Musk contributed roughly \$200 million to America PAC, a super PAC aimed at reaching Trump voters online and in person in the seven most competitive states, which Trump swept. He also invested \$20 million in a group called RBG PAC, which ran ads arguing Trump would not sign a national abortion ban even as the former president nominated three of the justices who overturned a federally guaranteed right to the procedure.

Musk's donation to RBG PAC — a name that invokes the initials of former Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a champion of abortion rights — wasn't revealed until post-election campaign filings were made public Thursday.

Musk has said he hopes to keep America PAC funded and operating. Beyond that, he has used his X megaphone to suggest he is at least open to challenging less exuberant Trump supporters in Congress.

Another key Trump campaign ally has been more aggressive online. Conservative activist Charlie Kirk, whose group Turning Point Action also worked to turn out voters for Trump, named Republican senators he wants to target.

"This is not a joke, everybody. The funding is already being put together. Donors are calling like crazy. Primaries are going to be launched," Kirk said on his podcast, singling out Sens. Joni Ernst of Iowa, Jim Risch of Idaho, Mike Rounds of South Dakota and Thom Tillis of North Carolina as potential targets. All four Republican senators' seats are up in 2026.

For now, Musk has been enjoying the glow of his latest conquest, joining Trump for high-level meetings and galas at the soon-to-be president's Mar-a-Lago resort home in Palm Beach, Florida. The incoming administration is seeded with Musk allies, including venture capitalist and former PayPal executive David Sacks serving as the "White House A.I. & Crypto Czar" and Jared Isaacman, a tech billionaire who bought a series of spaceflights from Musk's SpaceX, named to lead NASA.

Musk could help reinforce Trump's agenda immediately, some GOP strategists said, by using America PAC to pressure key Republicans. Likewise, Musk could begin targeting moderate Democrats in pivotal

states and districts this spring, urging them to break with their party on key issues, Republican strategist Chris Pack said.

"Instead of using his influence to twist GOP arms when you have majorities in both houses, he could start going after Democrats who vote against Trump's agenda in states where the election was a referendum for Trump," said Pack, former communications director for the National Republican Senatorial Committee. "Otherwise, if you pressure Republicans with a primary, you can end up with a Republican who can't win, and then a Democrat in that seat."

Thousands scour Syria's most horrific prison but find no sign of their loved ones

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — They came from all over Syria, tens of thousands. The first place they rushed to after the fall of their longtime tormentor, former President Bashar Assad, was here: Saydnaya Prison, a place so notorious for its horrors it was long known as "the slaughterhouse."

For the past two days, all have been looking for signs of loved ones who disappeared years or even decades ago into the secretive, sprawling prison just outside Damascus.

But hope gave way to despair Monday. People opened the heavy iron doors lining the hallways to find cells inside empty. With sledgehammers, shovels and drills, men pounded holes in floors and walls, looking for what they believed were secret dungeons, or chasing sounds they thought they heard from underground. They found nothing.

Insurgents freed dozens of people from the Saydnaya military prison on Sunday when Damascus fell. Since then, almost no one has been found.

"Where is everyone? Where are everyone's children? Where are they?" said Ghada Assad, breaking down in tears.

She had rushed from her Damascus home to the prison on the capital's outskirts, hoping to find her brother. He was detained in 2011, the year that protests first erupted against the former president's rule — before they turned into a long, grueling civil war. She didn't know why he was arrested.

"My heart has been burned over my brother. For 13 years, I kept looking for him," she said. When insurgents last week seized Aleppo — her original hometown — at the start of their swiftly victorious offensive, "I prayed that they would reach Damascus just so they can open up this prison," she said.

Civil defense officials helping in the search were as confused as the families over why no further inmates were being found. It appeared fewer were held here in recent weeks, they said.

But few were giving up, a sign of how powerfully Saydnaya looms in the minds of Syrians as the heart of Assad's brutal police state. The sense of loss over the missing — and the sudden hope they might be found -- brought a kind of dark unity among Syrians from across the country.

During Assad's rule and particularly after the 2011 protests began, any hint of dissent could land someone in Saydnaya. Few ever emerged.

In 2017, Amnesty International estimated that 10,000-20,000 people were being held there at the time "from every sector of society." It said they were effectively slated for "extermination."

Thousands were killed in frequent mass executions, Amnesty reported, citing testimony from freed prisoners and prison officials. Prisoners were subjected to constant torture, intense beatings and rape. Almost daily, guards did rounds of the cells to collect bodies of inmates who had died overnight from injuries, disease or starvation. Some inmates fell into psychosis and starved themselves, the human rights group said.

"There is not a home, there is not a woman in Syria who didn't lose a brother, a child or a husband," said Khairiya Ismail, 54. Two of her sons were detained in the early days of the protests against Assad — one of them when he came to visit her after she herself had been detained.

Ismail, accused of helping her son evade military service, spent eight months in Adra prison, northeast of Damascus. "They detained everyone."

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An estimated 150,000 people were detained or went missing in Syria since 2011 — and tens of thousands of them are believed to have gone through Saydnaya.

"People expected many more to be here ... They are clinging to the slightest sliver of hope," said Ghayath Abu al-Dahab, a spokesman for the White Helmets, the search and rescue group that operated in rebel-held areas throughout the war.

Five White Helmet teams, with two canine teams, came to Saydnaya to help the search. They even brought in the prison electrician, who had the floor plan, and went through every shaft, vent and sewage opening. So far, there were no answers, Abu al-Dahab said.

He said the civil defense had documents showing more than 3,500 people were in Saydnaya until three months before the fall of Damascus. But the number may have been less by the time the prison was stormed, he said.

"There are other prisons," he said. "The regime had turned all of Syria into a big prison." Detainees were held in security agencies, military facilities, government offices and even universities, he added.

Around the Y-shaped main building of the prison, everyone kept trying, convinced they could find some hidden chamber with detainees, dead or alive.

Dozens of men tried to force a metal gate open until they realized it led only to more cells upstairs. Others asked the insurgents guarding the prison to use their rifle to lever open a closed door.

A handful of men were gathered, excavating what looked like a sewage opening in a basement. Others dug up electrical wiring, thinking it might lead to hidden underground chambers.

In a scene throughout the day, hundreds cheered as men with sledgehammers and shovels battered a huge column in the building's atrium, thinking they had found a secret cell. Hundreds ran to see. But there was nothing, and tears and loud sighs replaced the celebrations.

In the wards, lines of cells were empty. Some had blankets, a few plastic pots or a few names scribbled on walls. Documents, some with names of prisoners, were left strewn in the yard, the kitchen and elsewhere. Families scoured them for their loved ones' names.

A brief protest broke out in the prison yard, when a group of men began chanting: "Bring us the prison warden." Calls on social media urged anyone with information of the secret cells of the prison to come forth and help.

Firas al-Halabi, one of the prisoners freed when insurgents first broke into Saydnaya, was back on Monday visiting. Those searching flocked around him, whispering names of relatives to see if he met them.

Al-Halabi, who had been an army conscript when he was arrested, said he spent four years in a cell with 20 others.

His only food was a quarter loaf of bread and some burghul. He suffered from tuberculosis because of the cell conditions. He was tortured by electrocution, he said, and the beatings were constant.

"During our time in the yard, there was beating. When going to the bathroom, there was beating. If we sat on the floor, we got beaten. If you look at the light, you are beaten," he said. He was once thrown into solitary for simply praying in his cell.

"Everything is considered a violation," he said. "Your life is one big violation to them."

He said that in his first year in the prison guards would call out hundreds of names over the course of days. One officer told him it was for executions.

When he was freed Sunday, he thought he was dreaming. "We never thought we would see this moment. We thought we would be executed, one by one."

Noha Qweidar and her cousin sat in the yard on Monday, taking a rest from searching. Their husbands were detained in 2013 and 2015. Qweidar said she had received word from other inmates that her husband was killed in a summary execution in prison.

But she couldn't know for sure. Prisoners reported dead in the past have turned up alive.

"I heard that (he was executed) but I still have hope he is alive."

Just before sundown on Monday, rescue teams brought in an excavator to dig deeper.

But late at night, the White Helmets announced the end of their search, saying in a statement they had found no hidden areas in the facility.

"We share the profound disappointment of the families of the thousands who remain missing and whose fates are unknown."

Rupert Murdoch's attempt to change his family's trust over Fox News media empire control rejected

RENO, Nev. (AP) — A probate commissioner has ruled against Rupert Murdoch's effort to change his family's trust to give one of his sons control of his media empire and ensure Fox News maintains its conservative editorial slant, according to a sealed document obtained by The New York Times.

In a decision filed on Saturday, a probate commissioner in Nevada concluded that Murdoch, 93, and his son, Lachlan Murdoch, had acted in "bad faith" in their endeavor to amend the irrevocable trust, The New York Times reported on Monday.

The trust divides control of the company equally among four of Rupert Murdoch's children — Prudence, Elisabeth, Lachlan and James — after he dies. Lachlan Murdoch has been the head of Fox News and News Corp since late last year, when his father stepped down.

The elder Murdoch has argued that to preserve his businesses' commercial value for all his heirs, the trust must be changed to allow Lachlan Murdoch to maintain Fox News' conservative bent. James and Elisabeth Murdoch are both known to have less-conservative political views than their father or brother, potentially complicating efforts to ensure that Fox News remains conservative.

In his 96-page opinion, Nevada Probate Commissioner Edmund J. Gorman Jr. of the Second Judicial District Court characterized the plan to change the trust as a "carefully crafted charade" to "permanently cement Lachlan Murdoch's executive roles" inside the empire "regardless of the impacts such control would have over the companies or the beneficiaries" of the family trust.

Adam Streisand, a lawyer for Rupert Murdoch, told the newspaper that his client and his client's son were disappointed with the ruling and intended to appeal.

A spokesperson for Prudence, Elisabeth and James Murdoch said in an emailed statement to The Associated Press that they welcome the ruling and hope that their family can "move beyond this litigation to focus on strengthening and rebuilding relationships among all family members."

Gorman in his conclusion said: "The effort was an attempt to stack the deck in Lachlan Murdoch's favor after Rupert Murdoch's passing so that his succession would be immutable. The play might have worked; but an evidentiary hearing, like a showdown in a game of poker, is where gamesmanship collides with the facts and at its conclusion, all the bluffs are called and the cards lie face up."

He added: "The court, after considering the facts of this case in the light of the law, sees the cards for what they are and concludes this raw deal will not, over the signature of this probate commissioner, prevail."

As Israel advances on a Syrian buffer zone, it sees peril and opportunity

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The dramatic downfall of Syrian President Bashar Assad presents possible danger, and an opening, for neighboring Israel.

After fighting wars on multiple fronts for months, Israel is now concerned that unrest in Syria could spill over into its territory. Israel also views the end of the Assad regime as a chance to disrupt Iran's ability to smuggle weapons through Syria to the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

The Israeli military over the weekend began seizing control of a demilitarized buffer zone in Syria created as part of a 1974 ceasefire between the countries. It said the move was temporary and meant to secure its border.

But the incursion sparked condemnation, with critics accusing Israel of violating the ceasefire and possibly exploiting the chaos in Syria for a land grab. Israel still controls the Golan Heights that it captured from Syria during the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed — a move not recognized by most of the in-

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ternational community.

Here's a look at recent developments along the Syrian frontier.

Where are the Israeli troops?

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday that Israeli forces were moving to control a roughly 400-square-kilometer (155-square-mile) demilitarized buffer zone in Syrian territory. The buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights was created by the U.N. after the 1973 Mideast war. A U.N. force of about 1,100 troops has patrolled the area since then.

On a visit Sunday to a Golan Heights hilltop overlooking Syria, Netanyahu said that because Syrian troops had abandoned their positions, Israel's move into the buffer zone was necessary as a "temporary defensive position."

"The peacekeepers at (the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, or UNDOF) informed the Israeli counterparts that these actions would constitute a violation of the 1974 disengagement agreement, that there should be no military forces or activities in the area of separation," said U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric. He added that the buffer zone was calm and UNDOF peacekeepers remained in their position. The Security Council is scheduled to meet for special consultations called by Russia to discuss the buffer zone issue.

The rebels who ousted Assad and now control much of Syria are led by a former senior al-Qaida militant, although he severed ties with the extremist group years ago and has promised representative government and religious tolerance.

On Monday evening, Netanyahu said Assad's fall is the "direct result of the heavy blows we landed on Hamas, on Hezbollah and on Iran." He added that Israel would occupy the summit of Mount Hermon, which is within the buffer zone on the Syria-Lebanon border, and at 2,814 meters (9,232 feet) is the highest peak in the eastern Mediterranean coast.

Israel has sent troops into the buffer zone, including on the Syrian side of snow-dusted Mount Hermon, which is divided between the Golan Heights, Lebanon, and Syria. Only the United States recognizes Israel's control of the Golan Heights.

How long will Israeli troops be in the buffer zone?

Israeli troops began moving into the buffer zone Saturday. Also on Saturday, armed men attacked U.N. forces near the border with Israel, according to Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar.

"(The Israeli military) took targeted and temporary control of certain areas near the border to prevent an Oct. 7 scenario from Syria," Saar said, referring to Hamas' surprise 2023 attack into Israel from the Gaza Strip.

Dujarric also acknowledged Saturday's attack.

"Armed individuals climbed the wall of a U.N. position near Hadar," he said. "Following an exchange of fire with U.N. peacekeepers who were protecting the position, the base was partially looted. There were no casualties."

UNDOF forces later recovered some of the looted items, "including a number of the weapons and ammunition that had been taken," he added.

Many in the region condemned the move. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry accused Israel of "exploiting the power vacuum ... to occupy more Syrian territories and create a fait accompli in violation of international law."

Saudi Arabia separately criticized Israel for what it called its "determination to undermine opportunities for Syria to restore its security, stability and territorial integrity."

This isn't the first time Israel has entered the buffer zone this year.

An Associated Press report last month examining satellite imagery found that Israel had been working on a construction project, possibly a new road, along the border with Syria from as early as July, and had in some cases entered the buffer zone during construction. Following the AP report, U.N. forces warned that the Israeli military has committed "severe violations" of its ceasefire deal with Syria.

Is Israel invading Syria?

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Israeli political and military leaders have stressed that the seizure of the buffer zone is temporary and not a prelude to entering other parts of Syrian territory.

"The plan at the moment is that this is a temporary step to make sure stability is kept in the border, making sure the buffer zone is kept, and the U.N. forces can stay," said a military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with military guidelines.

The official noted that in 2014, U.N. peacekeepers fled the buffer zone after al-Qaida-linked Syrian rebels attacked their encampments. After armed men attacked U.N. forces over the weekend, Israel wanted to ensure the situation did not repeat itself, the official said.

Israel isn't currently trying to change the border or prepare for an invasion into Syria, said Carmit Valensi, a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, a Tel Aviv think-tank.

"Right now, it's a tactical operation, not a long-term strategy, in response to the dynamic situation in Syria," she said. With the collapse of the Syrian army, Israel wants to protect its borders until the situation stabilizes, she said.

What are Israel's interests?

Israel says its immediate goal is to prevent the instability in Syria from spreading into the border region.

Defense Minister Israel Katz on Monday laid out Israel's plans for the border area. He said that after completing the takeover of the buffer zone, Israel would create a "security zone" beyond it by destroying heavy artillery across Syria and preventing Iran from smuggling weapons through Syria into Lebanon.

Foreign Minister Saar said Monday that Israel has struck multiple sites holding chemical weapons and long-range missiles to prevent them from falling into the hands of hostile actors. Saar did not say when the strikes occurred. Analysts said Israel is likely to continue carrying out strikes against targets across Syria.

Israel is planning outreach to Syria's Druze population, a close-knit religious minority that also lives in Israel, Jordan and Lebanon and has maintained some ties across borders.

Israel is also trying to open lines of communication with Syrian rebel groups, to help ensure Iranian-backed factions don't reclaim any territory, according to Valensi.

For many years, Israel quietly provided food, medicine, clothing and other assistance to war-ravaged southern Syria through "Operation Good Neighbor," which ended in 2018. More than 4,000 wounded and sick Syrians received medical treatment in Israel or in Israeli field hospitals, and those non-diplomatic connections could now prove crucial.

Oregon's Gabriel, Colorado's Hunter, Boise State's Jeanty, Miami's Ward are named Heisman finalists

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Oregon's Dillon Gabriel, Colorado's Travis Hunter, Boise State's Ashton Jeanty and Miami's Cam Ward were announced as the Heisman Trophy finalists on Monday night.

The Heisman has been given to the nation's most outstanding college football player since 1935. This year's winner will be announced Saturday in New York. The top four vote-getters determined by more than 900 voters are selected as finalists. The voting panel includes members of the media and former Heisman winners.

A look, in alphabetical order, at each of the finalist's road to Manhattan.

Gabriel

Gabriel, who transferred from Oklahoma in the offseason, led unbeaten and top-ranked Oregon to the Big Ten championship in its first year in the league and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff.

Gabriel averages 274 yards passing per game and has thrown for 28 touchdowns with six interceptions. His 73.2% completion rate is second in the nation. His 35 total touchdowns are tied for seventh nationally, and his career total of 187 is the highest in NCAA history.

He set the all-time Football Bowl Subdivision record for career quarterback starts with his 62nd in the Big Ten title game.

Hunter

Hunter, will go down as one of the great two-way players in history. His accomplishments harken those of Charles Woodson, the Michigan cornerback who in 1997 became the first Heisman winner who primarily played defense.

Woodson also spent time at receiver, but Hunter's offensive production dwarfs his. Hunter was named All-Big 12 first-team receiver and earned honorable mention for offensive player of the year. He leads the Big 12 with 92 receptions and 14 receiving touchdowns and is second with 1,152 yards. His 21 receiving plays of 20-plus yards lead the nation.

He also is Big 12 defensive player of the year and a unanimous first-team defensive back after recording 31 tackles, tying for the Big 12 lead with 11 pass breakups and tying for second with four interceptions.

Jeanty

The junior running back has had one of the most productive seasons in college football history. His 2,497 yards rushing are the fourth-highest single-season total in the FBS, and his 192.1 yards per game lead the nation and are 58 more than the next highest average. Jeanty has rushed for at least 125 yards in 13 straight games.

Jeanty has gone over 200 yards in his last two games and a total of six times this season. He averages 7.26 yards per carry, and his 344 attempts are the most in the FBS in two seasons. He and Army's Bryson Daily share the national lead with 29 rushing touchdowns.

Ward

The Miami quarterback was named Associated Press offensive player of the year and newcomer of the year in the Atlantic Coast Conference on Monday. He leads the nation with a school-record 36 passing touchdowns and his 4,123 passing yards, 4,319 total yards, 343.6 passing yards per game and 41 total touchdowns rank second.

Ward leads the nation's highest-scoring offense (44.2 ypg). He became the first Miami quarterback to post seven straight 300-yard games, and he has 10 games with 300-plus yards and three or more TD passes.

Takeaways from AP's report on Chinese gold mining threatening endangered protected site in Congo

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

OKAPI WILDLIFE RESERVE, Congo (AP) — For eight years, a Chinese mining company has been vastly expanding inside an endangered World Heritage Site, accused by locals and conservationists of decimating the environment.

The Okapi Wildlife Reserve became a protected site in 1996, due to its unique biodiversity and large number of threatened species, including its namesake, the okapi, a forest giraffe, of which it holds some 15% of the world's remaining 30,000. It's part of the Congo Basin rainforest — the world's second-biggest — and a vital carbon sink that helps mitigate climate change. It also has vast mineral wealth such as gold and diamonds.

The original boundaries of the reserve were established three decades ago, by Congo's government and encompassed the area where the Chinese company now mines. But over the years under opaque circumstances, the boundaries shrunk, allowing the company to operate inside the lush forest.

Mining is prohibited in protected areas, which includes the reserve, according to Congo's mining code.

Issa Aboubacar, a spokesperson for the Chinese company, Kimia Mining Investment, said the group is operating legally. It recently renewed its permits until 2048, according to government records.

Congo's mining registry said the map they're using came from files from the ICCN, the body responsible for managing Congo's protected areas, and it's currently working with the ICCN on updating the boundaries and protecting the park.

The ICCN told The Associated Press that in meetings this year with the mining registry the misunderstandings around the boundaries were clarified and the original ones should be used. An internal government memo from August, seen by AP, said all companies in the Reserve will be closed down, including Kimia Mining. However, it was unclear when that would happen or how.

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The document has not previously been reported and is the first acknowledging that the current boundaries are wrong, according to environmentalists working in Congo.

Rights groups in Congo have long called on the government to revoke the Chinese permits, saying the mining ministry illegally awarded them based on inaccurate maps.

Here are some takeaways from AP's report on the issue:

Contested boundaries

The Muchacha mine — the biggest in the reserve and one of the largest small and medium scale gold mines in the country — spans approximately 12 miles (19 kilometers) along the Ituri River and consists of several semi-industrial sites. Satellite images analyzed by AP show consistent development along the southwestern section of the Reserve, since it began operating in 2016, with a boom in recent years.

Joel Masselink, a geographer specializing in satellite imagery, who previously worked on conservation projects in the forest, said the mining cadastral — the agency responsible for allocating mineral licenses — is using a version of the reserve's maps in which the area's been shrunk by nearly a third. This has allowed it to award and renew exploration and extraction concessions, he said.

Changing World Heritage Site boundaries needs to be approved by UNESCO experts and the World Heritage Committee, which analyze the impact of the modification, a spokesperson for the World Heritage Center told AP. The Center said no request to modify the Reserve's boundaries had been made and that cases of boundary modifications to facilitate development were rare.

Civil society groups in Congo accuse some government officials of intentionally moving the boundaries for personal gain.

The U.N. report said mines are controlled by the military, and some members are under the protection of powerful business and political interests, with soldiers at times denying local officials access to the sites.

Environment and communities impacted

Nearly two dozen residents, as well as former and current Kimia Mining employees from villages in and around the Reserve, told AP the mining was decimating the forests and the wildlife and contaminating the water and land.

Five people who had worked inside Kimia's mines, none of whom wanted to be named for fear of reprisal, said when the Chinese finished in one area, they leave exposed, toxic water sources. Sometimes people would fall into uncovered pits and when it rains, water seeps into the soil.

Employees and mining experts say the Chinese companies use mercury in their operations, used to separate gold from ore. Mercury is considered one of the top ten chemicals of major public health concern by the U.N. and can have toxic effects on the nervous and immune systems.

Assana, a fisher who worked in the mines and only wanted to use his first name, said it now takes four days to catch the same amount of fish he used to get in a day. While doing odd jobs for the company last year, the 38-year-old saw the Chinese repeatedly chop swaths of forest, making the heat unbearable, he said.

Between last January and May, the reserve lost more than 480 hectares (1,186 acres) of forest cover — the size of nearly 900 American football fields — according to a joint statement from the Wildlife Conservation Society and government agencies, which said it was concerned at the findings.

Double standards

Residents, who once mined in the reserve, are infuriated by the double standard.

Despite being a protected forest, people still mined there until authorities cracked down, largely after the Chinese arrived. Kimia Mining grants limited access to locals to mine areas for leftovers, but for a fee that many can't afford, say locals.

Muvunga Kakule used to do artisanal mining in the reserve while also selling food from his farm to other miners. The 44-year-old said he's now unable to mine or sell produce as the Chinese don't buy locally. He's lost 95% of his earnings and can no longer send his children to private school.

Some residents told The AP there are no other options for work and have been forced to mine secretly and risk being jailed.

Resolution efforts

Conservation groups are trying to protect the reserve, but say it's hard to enforce when there's ambiguity on the legalities.

"On the one hand, Congo's law clearly states that mining is illegal in protected areas. On the other hand, if a mine is operating with an official permit, then that creates confusion, and that becomes hard to enforce on the ground," said Emma Stokes, Vice President of field conservation for The Wildlife Conservation Society.

The internal memo, seen by the AP, outlines discussions by a joint task force between the ICCN — the body responsible for managing protected areas — and Congo's mining registry, which was created to try and resolve the boundary issue.

The document said it will trigger the process of stopping all mining within the Reserve and integrate the agreed upon map from the joint commission into the mining registry's system.

UNESCO's requested a report from Congo by February, to provide clarity on what will be done to resolve the problem.

Chinese gold mining threatens a protected UN heritage site in Congo

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

OKAPI WILDLIFE RESERVE, Congo (AP) — Scattered along the banks of the Ituri River, buildings cram together, cranes transport dirt and debris scatters the soil. The patches of trees are a scant reminder that a forest once grew there.

Nestled in eastern Congo's Ituri province, the Chinese-run gold mine is rapidly encroaching on an area that many say it shouldn't be operating in at all - the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, an endangered World Heritage site.

The original boundaries of the reserve were established three decades ago, by Congo's government and encompassed the area where the Chinese company now mines. But over the years under opaque circumstances, the boundaries shrunk, allowing the company to operate inside the lush forest.

The reserve was already on the endangered list, amid threats of conflict and wildlife trafficking. Now the rapid expansion of the Chinese mines threatens to further degrade the forest and the communities living within. Residents and wildlife experts say the mining's polluting the rivers and soil, decimating trees and swelling the population, increasing poaching, with little accountability.

"It is alarming that a semi-industrial mining operation is being given free rein in what's supposed to be a protected World Heritage Site, that was already on the danger list," said Joe Eisen, executive director, of Rainforest Foundation UK.

Spanning more than 13,000 square kilometers (5,000 square miles), the reserve became a protected site in 1996, due to its unique biodiversity and large number of threatened species, including its namesake, the okapi, a forest giraffe, of which it holds some 15% of the world's remaining 30,000. It's part of the the Congo Basin rainforest — the world's second-biggest — and a vital carbon sink that helps mitigate climate change. It also has vast mineral wealth such as gold and diamonds.

Mining is prohibited in protected areas, which includes the reserve, according to Congo's mining code.

Issa Aboubacar, a spokesperson for the Chinese company, Kimia Mining Investment, said the group is operating legally. It recently renewed its permits until 2048, according to government records.

Congo's mining registry said the map they're using came from files from the ICCN, the body responsible for managing Congo's protected areas, and it's currently working with the ICCN on updating the boundaries and protecting the park.

The ICCN told The Associated Press that in meetings this year with the mining registry the misunderstandings around the boundaries were clarified and the original ones should be used.

An internal government memo from August, seen by AP, said all companies in the Reserve will be closed down, including Kimia Mining. However, it was unclear when that would happen or how.

The document has not previously been reported and is the first acknowledging that the current boundaries are wrong, according to environmentalists working in Congo.

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Rights groups in Congo have long said the permits were illegally awarded by the mining ministry based on inaccurate maps.

Shifting boundaries and rules

Eastern Congo's been beset by violence for decades and the Okapi Reserve's endured years of unrest by local militia.

In 2012, in Epulu town, a local rebel group slaughtered several residents including two rangers, as well as 14 okapis, the latter were part of a captive breeding program.

The reserve's also been threatened by artisanal — small scale — mining, by thousands of Indigenous peoples who live in and around the forest.

The Muchacha mine — the biggest in the reserve and one of the largest small and medium scale gold mines in the country — spans approximately 12 miles (19 kilometers) along the Ituri River and consists of several semi-industrial sites. Satellite images analyzed by AP show consistent development along the southwestern section of the Reserve, since it began operating in 2016, with a boom in recent years.

Joel Masselink, a geographer specializing in satellite imagery, who previously worked on conservation projects in the forest, said the mining cadastral — the agency responsible for allocating mineral licenses — is using a version of the reserve's maps in which the area's been shrunk by nearly a third. This has allowed it to award and renew exploration and extraction concessions, he said.

The mining cadastral told the U.N. that the boundaries were changed due to a letter from the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature, the body in charge of protected areas in Congo, but didn't provide a copy, said a report from U.N. experts. The ICCN told the AP it's never seen the letter and the boundaries used should be the original ones.

Changing World Heritage Site boundaries needs to be approved by UNESCO experts and the World Heritage Committee, which analyze the impact of the modification, a spokesperson for the World Heritage Center told AP. The Center said no request to modify the Reserve's boundaries had been made and that cases of boundary modifications to facilitate development were rare.

Civil society groups in Congo accuse some government officials of intentionally moving the boundaries for personal gain. "We all knew that Muchacha was within the reserve," said Alexis Muhima, executive director of the Congolese Civil Society Observatory for Peace Minerals. He said the discrepancy over the park's boundaries started when they realized the mine was producing large quantities of gold.

The U.N. report said mines are controlled by the military, and some members are under the protection of powerful business and political interests, with soldiers at times denying local officials access to the sites.

Residents, who once mined in the reserve, are infuriated by the double standard. "The community is worried, because the Chinese are mining in a protected area when it's forbidden for the community," said Jean Kamana, the chief of Epulu, a village inside the Reserve.

Despite being a protected forest, people still mined there until authorities cracked down, largely after the Chinese arrived. Kimia Mining grants limited access to locals to mine areas for leftovers, but for a fee that many can't afford, say locals.

Muvunga Kakule used to do artisanal mining in the reserve while also selling food from his farm to other miners. The 44-year-old said he's now unable to mine or sell produce as the Chinese don't buy locally. He's lost 95% of his earnings and can no longer send his children to private school.

Some residents told The AP there are no other options for work and have been forced to mine secretly and risk being jailed.

Losing land, animals and income

During a trip to the reserve earlier this year, Kimia Mining wouldn't let AP enter the site and the government wouldn't grant access to patrol the forest with its rangers.

But nearly two dozen residents, as well as former and current Kimia Mining employees from villages in and around the Reserve, told The AP the mining was decimating the forests and the wildlife and contaminating the water and land.

Five people who had worked inside Kimia's mines, none of whom wanted to be named for fear of reprisal, said when the Chinese finished in one area, they leave exposed, toxic water sources. Sometimes people

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would fall into uncovered pits and when it rains, water seeps into the soil.

Employees and mining experts say the Chinese use mercury in its operations, used to separate gold from ore. Mercury is considered one of the top ten chemicals of major public health concern by the U.N. and can have toxic effects on the nervous and immune systems.

One 27-year-old woman who worked as a cook for Kimia for six months and lives in Badengaido town, close to the mine, said the soil has become infertile. "(It's) poisoned by chemicals used by the Chinese," she said.

The AP could not independently verify her claim. However, a report from the University of Antwerp that researched the impact of conflict and mining on the Reserve said chemicals used to purify gold, such as mercury or cyanide, can enter the ecosystems and pollute the soil.

In the past, 15 kilograms (33 pounds) of peanut seeds would yield approximately 30 bags, but now it's hard to get three, she said. The loss of income has made it challenging to afford school and medical care for her siblings.

Assana, a fisher who also worked in the mines and only wanted to use his first name, said it now takes four days to catch the same amount of fish he used to get in a day. While doing odd jobs for the company last year, the 38-year-old saw the Chinese repeatedly chop swaths of forest, making the heat unbearable, he said.

Between last January and May, the reserve lost more than 480 hectares (1,186 acres) of forest cover — the size of nearly 900 American football fields — according to a joint statement from the Wildlife Conservation Society and government agencies, which said it was concerned at the findings.

Aboubacar, Kimia's spokesperson in Congo, said the company respects environmental standards and pays tax to the government for reforestation. Mining is a crucial revenue stream for Congo and it "can't place a higher value on the environment than on mining," he said.

Kimia is supporting the population and has employed more than 2,000 people, said Aboubacar.

Conservation is an uphill battle

Conservation groups are trying to protect the reserve, but say it's hard to enforce when there's ambiguity on the legalities.

"On the one hand, Congo's law clearly states that mining is illegal in protected areas. On the other hand, if a mine is operating with an official permit, then that creates confusion, and that becomes hard to enforce on the ground," said Emma Stokes, Vice President of field conservation for The Wildlife Conservation Society.

The internal memo, seen by AP, outlines discussions by a joint task force between the ICCN and Congo's mining registry, which was created to try and resolve the boundary issue. The document said it will trigger the process of stopping all mining within the Reserve and integrate the agreed upon map from the joint commission into the mining registry's system.

UNESCO's requested a report from Congo by February, to provide clarity on what will be done to resolve the problem.

But this comes as little comfort to communities in the reserve.

Wendo Olengama, a Pygmy chief, said the influx of thousands of people into the Chinese-run mines has increased poaching, making it hard to earn money.

During the authorized hunting season, he could capture up to seven animals a day, eating some and selling others. Now it's hard to get two, he said.

Sitting in a small hut beside his wife, as she bounces their 3-year-old granddaughter on her lap, the couple says they want the Chinese company to provide business opportunities, such as cattle raising and teach people responsible hunting.

"If the situation persists, we'll live in misery," said his wife, Dura Anyainde. "We won't have food to eat."

Tulsi Gabbard, Trump's pick for intel chief, faces questions on Capitol Hill amid Syria fallout

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump's pick for intelligence chief, Tulsi Gabbard, faced fresh scrutiny Monday on Capitol Hill about her proximity to Russian-ally Syria amid the sudden collapse of that country's hardline Assad rule.

Gabbard ignored shouted questions about her 2017 visit to war-torn Syria as she ducked into one of several private meetings with senators who are being asked to confirm Trump's unusual nominees.

But the Democrat-turned-Republican Army National Reserve lieutenant colonel delivered a statement in which she reiterated her support for Trump's America First approach to national security and a more limited U.S. military footprint overseas.

"I want to address the issue that's in the headlines right now: I stand in full support and wholeheartedly agree with the statements that President Trump has made over these last few days with regards to the developments in Syria," Gabbard said exiting a Senate meeting.

The incoming president's Cabinet and top administrative choices are dividing his Republican allies and drawing concern, if not full opposition, from Democrats and others. Not just Gabbard, but other Trump nominees including Pentagon pick Pete Hegseth, were back at the Capitol ahead of what is expected to be volatile confirmation hearings next year.

The incoming president is working to put his team in place for an ambitious agenda of mass immigrant deportations, firing federal workers and rollbacks of U.S. support for Ukraine and NATO allies.

"We're going to sit down and visit, that's what this is all about," said Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., as he welcomed Gabbard into his office.

The president-elect announced other appointments Monday, including his lawyer Harmeet Dhillon for assistant attorney general for civil rights at the Justice Department and Mark Paoletta as the returning general counsel of the Office of Management and Budget.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary pick Hegseth appeared to be picking up support from once-skeptical senators, the former Army National Guard major denying sexual misconduct allegations and pledging not to drink alcohol if he is confirmed.

The president-elect's choice to lead the FBI, Kash Patel, who has written extensively about locking up Trump's foes and proposed dismantling the Federal Bureau of Investigation, launched his first visits with senators Monday.

"I expect our Republican Senate is going to confirm all of President Trump's nominees," said Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., on social media.

Despite widespread concern about the nominees' qualifications and demeanors for the jobs that are among the highest positions in the U.S. government, Trump's team is portraying the criticism against them as nothing more than political smears and innuendo.

Showing that concern, nearly 100 former senior U.S. diplomats and intelligence and national security officials have urged Senate leaders to schedule closed-door hearings to allow for a full review of the government's files on Gabbard.

Trump's allies have described the criticisms of Hegseth in particular as similar to those lodged against Brett Kavanaugh, the former president's Supreme Court nominee who denied a sexual assault allegation and went on to be confirmed during Trump's first term in office.

Said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., about Hegseth: "Anonymous accusations are trying to destroy reputations again. We saw this with Kavanaugh. I won't stand for it."

One widely watched Republican, Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa, herself a former Army National Guard lieutenant colonel and sexual assault survivor who had been criticized by Trump allies for her cool reception to Hegseth, appeared more open to him after their follow-up meeting Monday.

"I appreciate Pete Hegseth's responsiveness and respect for the process," Ernst said in a statement.

Ernst said that following "encouraging conversations," he had committed to selecting a senior official

who will "prioritize and strengthen my work to prevent sexual assault within the ranks. As I support Pete through this process, I look forward to a fair hearing based on truth, not anonymous sources."

Hegseth, in an interview late Monday with Sean Hannity of Fox News, said he had a "great meeting" with Ernst and "the fact that she's willing to support me through this process means a lot."

Hegseth said he had meetings scheduled this week with two other female Republican senators — Lisa Murkowski of Alaska on Tuesday and Susan Collins of Maine on Wednesday.

Ernst, meanwhile, also had praise for Patel — "He shares my passion for shaking up federal agencies" — and for Gabbard.

Once a rising Democratic star, Gabbard, who represented Hawaii in Congress, arrived a decade ago in Washington, her surfboard in tow, a new generation of potential leaders. She ran unsuccessfully for president in 2020.

But Gabbard abruptly left the party and briefly became an independent before joining with Trump's 2024 campaign as one of his enthusiasts, in large part over his disdain for U.S. involvement overseas and opposition to helping Ukraine battle Russia.

Her visit to Syria to meet with then-President Bashar Assad around the time of Trump's first inauguration during the country's bloody civil war stunned her former colleagues and the Washington national security establishment. The U.S. had severed diplomatic relations with Syria. Her visit was seen by some as legitimizing a brutal leader who was accused of war crimes.

Gabbard has defended the trip, saying it's important to open dialogue, but critics hear in her commentary echoes of Russia-fueled talking points. Assad fled to Moscow over the weekend after Islamist rebels overtook Syria in a surprise attack, ending his family's five decades of rule.

She said her own views have been shaped by "my multiple deployments and seeing firsthand the cost of war and the threat of Islamist terrorism."

Gabbard said, "It's one of the many reasons why I appreciate President Trump's leadership and his election, where he is fully committed, as he has said over and over, to bring about an end to wars."

Last week, the nearly 100 former officials, who served in both Democratic and Republican administrations, said in the letter to Senate leaders they were "alarmed" by the choice of Gabbard to oversee all 18 U.S. intelligence agencies.

They said her past actions "call into question her ability to deliver unbiased intelligence briefings to the President, Congress, and to the entire national security apparatus."

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence was created after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to coordinate the nation's intelligence agencies and act as the president's main intelligence adviser.

6 Guatemalans arrested and charged with human smuggling in deadly 2021 Mexico truck crash

By JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Six Guatemalans were arrested in Guatemala and in Texas Monday on human smuggling charges linked to a 2021 semitrailer truck crash in Mexico that killed more than 50 migrants, authorities said.

The truck had been packed with at least 160 migrants, many of them Guatemalans, when it crashed into a support for a pedestrian bridge in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of the southern state of Chiapas. The arrests were announced on the three-year anniversary of the accident.

According to an indictment unsealed Monday in Laredo, Texas, Guatemalan authorities arrested Tomas Quino Canil, 36; Alberto Marcario Chitic, 31; Oswaldo Manuel Zavala Quino, 24; and Josefa Quino Canil de Zavala, 42.

Another man, Jorge Agapito Ventura, was arrested at his home in Cleveland, Texas, U.S. authorities said. Guatemalan officials noted a sixth arrest. A sixth name listed on the U.S. federal indictment was blacked out.

The accused were charged with conspiracy, placing life in jeopardy, causing serious bodily injury, and resulting in death.

It was unclear late Monday if those arrested had attorneys in the United States who could comment on their behalf. Justice Department officials did not immediately respond to an email Monday night.

The indictment charges them with conspiring to smuggle migrants from Guatemala through Mexico to the U.S. for payment. In some cases that involved smuggling unaccompanied children, the defendants would provide scripts of what to say if apprehended, the indictment said.

The smugglers would move migrants on foot, inside minibuses, cattle trucks and tractor trailers, the indictment said. It said the smugglers would use Facebook Messenger to request and deliver identification documents to the migrants to get them into the U.S.

"The tragedy that occurred three years ago today in Chiapas is further proof that human smugglers are ruthless, callous and dangerous, intending migrants should not believe their lives," said U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas.

Guatemalan Interior Minister Francisco Jiménez said the defendants were part of a criminal structure called Los Quino, and that U.S. officials had requested extradition of the four arrested in Guatemala.

Authorities executed 15 search warrants across Guatemala on Monday, Jiménez said. He said they had the support of the U.S. and Mexican governments.

Polygamous sect leader gets 50 years in prison in scheme to orchestrate sex involving children

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — A polygamist religious leader who claimed more than 20 spiritual "wives" including 10 underage girls was sentenced to 50 years in prison on Monday for coercing girls as young as 9 years old to submit to criminal sex acts with him and other adults, and for scheming to kidnap them from protective custody.

Samuel Bateman, whose small group was an offshoot of the sect once led by Warren Jeffs, had pleaded guilty to a yearslong scheme to transport girls across state lines for his sex crimes, and later to kidnap some of them from protective custody.

Under the agreement, Bateman pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit transportation of a minor for sexual activity, which carries a sentence of 10 years to life imprisonment, and one count of conspiracy to commit kidnapping, which is punishable by up to life imprisonment. He was sentenced to 50 years on each count, to be served concurrently.

The rest of the charges were dismissed as part of the agreement.

Authorities say that Bateman, 48, tried to start an offshoot of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints based in the neighboring communities of Colorado City, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah. The fundamentalist group, also known as FLDS, split from the mainstream Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after Mormons officially abandoned polygamy in 1890.

U.S. District Court Judge Susan Brnovich sentenced Bateman after hearing statements in court by three teenage girls about the trauma they still struggle to overcome. Although they gave their names in court, The Associated Press does not name victims of sexual crime, and some appeared to still be minors.

"You should not have the opportunity to be free and never have the opportunity to be around young women," Brnovich told Bateman, noting that for a man of his age the 50-year sentence was effectively a life sentence.

"You took them from their homes, from their families and made them into sex slaves," the judge said. "You stripped them of their innocence and childhood."

A short competency hearing that was closed to the public was held just before sentencing to discuss a doctor's assessment of Bateman's mental health. The defense had argued that Bateman could have benefited from a maximum of 20 years of psychiatric treatment behind bars before being released.

The girls told the court, sometimes addressing Bateman himself, how they grappled to develop relationships in high school, among other struggles. Now living with foster families, they said they had received much support from trusted adults outside their community.

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After the sentencing, the teens hugged and wept quietly. They were escorted out of court by a half dozen men and women in jackets with the slogan "Bikers Against Child Abuse," a group dedicated to protecting children from what it calls dangerous people and situations. A woman who sat with the teens said no one in the group would have a comment.

There was no one in the courtroom who appeared to be a supporter of Bateman.

The alleged practice of sect members sexually abusing girls whom they claim as spiritual "wives" has long plagued the FLDS. Jeffs was convicted of state charges in Texas in 2011 involving sexual assaults of his underage followers. Bateman was one of Jeffs' trusted followers and declared himself, like Jeffs, to be a "prophet" of the FLDS. Jeffs denounced Bateman in a written "revelation" sent to his followers from prison, and then tried to start his own group.

In 2019 and 2020, insisting that polygamy brings exaltation in heaven and that he was acting on orders from the "Heavenly Father," Bateman began taking female adults and children from his male followers and proclaiming them to be his "wives," the plea agreement said. While none of these "marriages" were legally or ceremonially recognized, Bateman acknowledged that each time he claimed another "wife," it marked the beginning of his illicit sexual contact with the woman or girl.

Federal agents said Bateman demanded that his followers confess publicly for any indiscretions and he imposed punishments that ranged from public shaming to sexual activity, including requiring that some male followers atone for their "sins" by surrendering their own wives and daughters to him.

Bateman traveled extensively between Arizona, Utah, Colorado and Nebraska and regularly coerced underage girls into his criminal sexual activity, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Arizona said. Recordings of some of his sex crimes were transmitted across state lines via electronic devices.

Bateman was arrested in August 2022 by state police as he drove through Flagstaff, Arizona, pulling a trailer. Someone had alerted authorities after spotting small fingers reaching through the slats of the door. Inside the trailer, which had no ventilation, they found a makeshift toilet, a sofa, camping chairs and three girls, 11 to 14 years old.

Bateman posted bond but was soon arrested again, accused of obstructing justice in a federal investigation into whether children were being transported across state lines for his sex crimes. Authorities also took nine children from Bateman's home in Colorado City into protective custody.

Eight of the children later escaped from foster care in Arizona, and were found hundreds of miles away in Washington state, in a vehicle driven by one of the adult "wives." Bateman also admitted his involvement in the kidnapping plot.

Federal prosecutors noted that Bateman's plea agreement was contingent on all of his co-defendants also pleading guilty. It also called for restitution of as much as \$1 million per victim, and for all assets to be immediately forfeited.

Seven of Bateman's adult "wives" have been convicted of crimes related to coercing children into sexual activity or impeding the investigation into Bateman. Some acknowledged they also coerced girls to become Bateman's spiritual "wives," witnessed Bateman having criminal sexual activity with girls, participated in illicit group sex involving children, or joined in kidnapping them from foster care. Another woman is scheduled to be tried Jan. 14 on charges related to the kidnappings.

Two Colorado City brothers also face 10 years to life at their sentencings, on Dec. 16 and Dec. 20, after being convicted in October of charges including interstate travel to persuade or coerce a child to engage in sexual activity. Authorities say one bought Bateman two Bentley automobiles, while the other bought him a Range Rover.

In court records, lawyers for some of Bateman's "wives" painted a bleak picture of their clients' religious upbringings.

One said his client was raised in a religious cult that taught sexual activity with children was acceptable and that she was duped into "marrying" Bateman. Another said her client was given to Bateman by another man as if she were a piece of property, feeling she had no choice.

A gang leader in Haiti is accused of massacring older people to avenge his son's death

By EVENS SANON and DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — A gang leader who controls a key port in Haiti's capital is accused of massacring older people and Vodou religious leaders in his community to avenge his son's death, according to the government and human rights organizations that estimate more than 100 were killed.

Reports on the number of dead in Port-au-Prince can vary wildly in a country where such killings often occur in gang-controlled, largely inaccessible areas.

Haiti's government in a statement Monday acknowledged the massacre, saying over 100 were killed in the Cité Soleil neighborhood, and promised to bring to justice those responsible for "this unspeakable carnage."

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres condemned the ongoing violence, which saw the killing of "at least 184 people, including 127 elderly men and women, between December 6-8 in the Wharf Jérémie neighborhood of Cite Soleil," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. The U.N. did not respond to queries on how it obtained those figures.

Guterres called on Haitian authorities to conduct a thorough investigation and ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice for this killing and all other human rights abuses and violations, Dujarric said.

Volker Türk, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, told journalists earlier Monday that at least 184 people were killed by a powerful gang leader.

Haitian watchdogs also estimated more than 100 were killed, at times citing community residents.

The Cooperative for Peace and Development, a local rights group, said in a statement Sunday its monitoring unit found that around 20 older people were killed. But it noted that unidentified residents in the community controlled by gang leader Micanor Altès, also known as Monel Felix and Wa Mikanò, claimed there were more than 100 victims.

The National Human Rights Defense Network, another local rights group, said at least 110 people were killed between Friday and Saturday. The group and its executive director, Pierre Espérance, did not say where it obtained that information, and Espérance did not return requests for comment.

The murky information was a worrying sign in a country in the grip of widespread gang violence.

"The fact that we have so many doubts about what happened days after the massacre is a signal that clearly indicates the level of control (gangs) have on the population," said Diego Da Rin, an analyst with the International Crisis Group.

The accused gang leader controls the coastal communities of Wharf Jérémie, La Saline and Fort Dimanche and was known for robbery, extortion and hijacking of goods and trucks, according to a U.N. report earlier this year.

"Micanor was not known for being as brutal as other gang leaders," Da Rin said. "Not until now."

The gang leader could not be reached for comment and has not posted on social media. A spokesman for Haiti's National Police did not return a message for comment.

The National Human Rights Defense Network said the massacre occurred because the gang leader's child was severely ill, prompting him to seek advice from a Vodou priest. After his son died, he accused older people in the community "of practicing witchcraft and harming the child."

The Cooperative for Peace and Development said that according to information circulating in the community, Micanor accused people in the neighborhood for causing his son's illness.

"He decided to cruelly punish all elderly people and (Vodou) practitioners who, in his imagination, would be capable of casting a bad spell on his son," the group said.

It said gunmen rounded up well-known community leaders and took them to the gang leader's stronghold, where they were executed. Also killed were motorcycle drivers who tried to save some victims.

The group also noted that there's a ban on people leaving the community "in order to continue to identify (Vodou) practitioners and the elderly with the aim of carrying out the silent killing."

Da Rin noted that usually killings in Haiti are documented and posted on social media, though they can

be difficult to verify. "In this case, there was not even a message on WhatsApp or a video on TikTok, which is very unusual," he said.

The Cooperative for Peace and Development said Micanor has previously targeted Vodou practitioners, killing a dozen older women and Vodou leaders "wrongly accused of witchcraft" in recent years.

It's not unusual for Haitians to seek medical and other advice from Vodou priests known as "oungans." The religion that mixes Catholicism with animist beliefs was at the root of the revolution that led Haiti to become the world's first free Black republic in 1804.

The massacre in Port-au-Prince comes two months after over 70 people were killed in the central town of Pont-Sondé, where gangs are vying to control more territory.

Such killings have overwhelmed Haiti's National Police and a U.N.-backed mission led by Kenyan police that lacks funds and personnel, with the U.S. and other countries pushing for a U.N. peacekeeping mission.

"The crisis in Haiti has reached catastrophic levels with allied criminal groups intensifying large-scale, coordinated attacks on the population and key state infrastructure," Human Rights Watch said Monday as it called for a U.N. mission.

It noted that "many Haitians live with the constant fear of being killed, raped, kidnapped, or forcibly recruited even as they struggle every day to find adequate food, water, and health care to survive."

More than 4,500 people have been reported killed in Haiti this year, according to the U.N.

Middle East latest: Israeli strikes hit Gaza and also target suspected weapons sites in Syria

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli strikes killed at least six people in the central Gaza Strip, Palestinian medical officials said Monday, while also hitting suspected chemical and long-range weapons sites in Syria to keep them from rebels who seized Damascus.

The U.N. Security Council on Monday held emergency closed consultations on Syria at the request of Russia, which said it granted asylum to its longtime ally Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

Russian President Vladimir Putin personally made the decision to offer asylum to Assad, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. Peskov wouldn't comment on Assad's specific whereabouts and said that Putin wasn't planning to meet with him.

Israel's offensive has killed over 44,500 Palestinians in the Gaza since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, according to local health authorities. They say most of the dead are women and children but do not distinguish between fighters and civilians.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250, including older adults and children. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Here's the Latest:

UN Security Council appears united on the need to preserve Syria's sovereignty

UNITED NATIONS – The U.N. Security Council appears united on the need to preserve Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity and provide humanitarian assistance to millions in need following the surprise rebel offensive that overthrew President Bashar Assad, the United States and Russia said after a closed U.N. Security Council emergency meeting.

Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia, who called for Monday's meeting, told reporters that the lightning takeover of Syria took everyone by surprise and the council has to watch and evaluate the fluid situation.

"The council, I think, was more or less united on the need to preserve the territorial integrity and unity of Syria, to ensure the protection of civilians, to ensure that humanitarian aid is coming to the needed population," he said.

Nebenzia said council members discussed issuing a united statement on Syria at the closed meeting,

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hopefully "in the coming days."

U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood said the U.S. is working to get agreement on a statement "over the next day or so."

"The intention is for the council to speak with one voice on the situation in Syria," he said.

During the closed consultations, Wood said, the 15 council members showed "a great respect and great understanding of what's going on on the ground right now."

"No one expected the Syrian forces to fall like a house of cards, and it took a lot of people by surprise," he said. "It's very fluid situation, but just about everyone spoke about the need for Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence to be respected, concern about the humanitarian situation."

Wood said there's a lot of uncertainty about the future, but Assad's ouster is a new opportunity for a democratic Syria that respects the human rights and dignity of the Syrian people. At the same time, there are great risks, he said, and "we want to try to take advantage of the opportunities before other nefarious actors, try to take advantage of it for not so good purposes."

Syria's UN ambassador says the country's diplomats have received instructions to continue with their jobs
UNITED NATIONS – Syria's U.N. ambassador says the country's embassies and missions have received instructions to continue doing their job during the current transitional period.

"We are with the Syrian people," Koussay Aldahhak told a group of journalists including The Associated Press on Monday outside the U.N. Security Council where members were holding emergency closed consultations on the rebel overthrow of President Bashar Assad.

"Syria now is witnessing a new era of change, a new historical phase of its history and Syrians are looking forward for establishing a state of freedom, equality, rule of law, democracy," the Syrian envoy said. "We will join efforts to rebuild our country, to rebuild what was destroyed, and to rebuild the future, a better future of Syria for all Syrians,"

Syria's U.N. mission follows instructions from the leaders who draw up the country's foreign policy, he said, adding that while they await a new government "we are continuing with the current one and the leadership."

On instructions from the current leaders, Aldahhak said he sent letters to the Security Council and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Monday condemning and demanding an end to Israeli attacks on Syria on Sunday and Monday, and demanding "to not allow Israel to benefit from the transition that the Syrians are doing now."

Aldahhak said like everyone he was surprised at the sudden transformation in the country.

Asked whether he was happy about it, he said that even though the U.N. mission is thousands of miles from Syria, "When Syrians are happy, we are happy. When Syrians are suffering, we are suffering."

"We want to live in stability and security. Syrians suffered for a long time," he said.

State Department says it is not actively reviewing HTS 'foreign terrorist organization' designation
WASHINGTON — The State Department says it is not actively reviewing the "foreign terrorist organization" designation of the main Syrian rebel group that overthrew of President Bashar Assad's government this weekend. But, it says such designations are constantly under review and that even while it is in place, the designation does not bar U.S. officials speaking with members or leaders of the group.

"There is no specific review related to what happened" over the weekend, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters on Monday. "That said, we are always reviewing. Based on their actions there could be a change in our sanctions posture, but we have nothing today."

He said a review could be initiated if HTS takes steps to reverse the reasons for its designation. That would be based entirely on their actions, he said.

The so-called FTO designation imposes numerous sanctions against those targeted, including a ban on the provision of "material support" to such groups, although Miller said that would not necessarily prevent discussions between its members and U.S. officials.

He cited the case of the Trump administration negotiating with the Taliban over the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan but later conceded that the Taliban has never been designated an FTO. Instead, the Taliban

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was listed as a "specially designated terrorist organization" a label that comes with less stringent sanctions.

Nevertheless, Miller said that U.S. officials "do have the ability, when it is in our interest legally to communicate with a designated terrorist organization."

In an unrelated move, Miller said the U.S. had arranged with local groups to secure the shuttered U.S. embassy compound in Damascus, which suspended operations in 2012 and had been until recently under the protection of the Czech embassy. The Czechs, however, closed their own embassy in Damascus as the situation in the capital grew more uncertain. Miller would not say with what groups the U.S. made the arrangements with.

U.S. President Joe Biden speaks to Jordan's King Abdullah II about Syria

President Joe Biden and Jordan's King Abdullah II spoke by phone on Monday about the rapidly evolving situation in Syria and joint efforts to keep the terror group ISIS from exploiting the situation, according to the White House.

The leaders also discussed the dozens of U.S. airstrikes conducted on Sunday targeting IS leaders and fighters in the Syrian desert as well as ongoing efforts to reach a ceasefire and hostage deal in Gaza.

The call between the leaders comes with Undersecretary of state for Political Affairs John Bass and Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf in the region now holding consultations with key partners. They are in Amman, Jordan, on Monday and were in Doha, Qatar, over the weekend.

More than a million Syrian refugees have flooded into neighboring Jordan since the civil war ignited in 2011, and officials in Amman are hoping to avoid another refugee crisis following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

"The President emphasized the support of the United States for the stability of Jordan and Jordan's central role in maintaining stability and de-escalating tensions throughout the Middle East region," the White House said in a statement.

Syrian rights organization says Israeli air forces launched more than 100 airstrikes in Syria.

DAMASCUS—The Israeli air force launched more than 100 airstrikes targeting military sites in four Syrian cities, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Associated Press reporters. The strikes killed two people and caused extensive damage to key military facilities.

The targeted military sites included research centers, weapons warehouses, airports and aircraft squadrons, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The attacks also disabled air defense systems and rendered multiple sites inoperable.

Among the targets were research centers in Hama and Damascus, including the Barzeh Scientific Research Center. The facility has previously been targeted, most notably during a 2018 U.S.-led coalition strike in response to Syria's alleged chemical weapons program.

In Damascus, an Associated Press reporter described plumes of smoke rising from the Barzeh research facility as weapon warehouses were also struck. Heavy explosions were heard across the capital.

In the port city of Latakia, airstrikes hit an air defense facility near the coastal port, damaging Syrian naval ships and warehouses previously controlled by the former Syrian regime, the Syrian Observatory said.

In Daraa, a city in southwestern Syria, strikes targeted military positions and warehouses in the western countryside and northern areas, killing two people, the observatory said.

The Israeli military declined to comment on the strikes in Syria.

Earlier on Monday, Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said it had struck suspected chemical weapons sites and long-range rockets in Syria to prevent them from falling into the hands of hostile actors.

U.S. sends special envoy for hostage affairs to Beirut

The U.S. has sent its special envoy for hostage affairs to Beirut to seek information about the whereabouts of Austin Tice, a journalist who vanished in Syria 12 years ago, following the overthrow of Bashar Assad's government.

Roger Carstens is talking to officials in the region to find out where Tice is and "get him home as soon as possible," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters Monday.

President Joe Biden said Sunday that his administration believed Tice was alive and was committed to bringing him home. Tice, who has had his work published by The Washington Post, McClatchy newspapers

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and other outlets, disappeared in August 2012 at a checkpoint in a contested area west of Damascus.

A video released weeks after Tice went missing showed him blindfolded and held by armed men and saying, "Oh, Jesus." He has not been heard from since. Syria has publicly denied that it was holding him.

Israel's UN ambassador sends an urgent letter to UN Security Council calling Syria's developments 'a security threat'

Israel's U.N. Ambassador Danny Danon sent an urgent letter to the U.N. Security Council Monday calling the recent developments in Syria "a security threat" and saying it has taken "limited and temporary measures to counter any further threat to its citizens." He said Israel is committed to the framework of the 1974 disengagement agreement and "does not intervene in the ongoing conflict between Syrian armed groups."

The Security Council is scheduled to meet shortly for closed consultations called by Russia which said it wanted the buffer zone issue discussed.

UN says Israeli forces are occupying a demilitarized buffer zone in violation of a ceasefire agreement

UNITED NATIONS – The United Nations says Israeli forces are occupying a demilitarized buffer zone between Israel and Syria in violation of a 1974 ceasefire agreement following the 1973 Mideast war.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Monday U.N. peacekeepers confirmed that "Israeli Defense Forces have entered the area of separation and have been moving within that area where they remain in at least three locations."

The Israeli military informed the peacekeeping force, known as UNDOF, that it would enter the area as "a temporary defensive measure" to prevent it from being occupied "by non-state armed groups" and reserved the right to take action against any threat against Israel, Dujarric said.

"For our part, the peacekeepers at UNDOF informed the Israeli counterparts that these actions would constitute a violation of the 1974 disengagement agreement, that there should be no military forces or activities in the area of separation, and Israel and Syria must continue to uphold the terms of that 1974 agreement," the U.N. spokesman said.

Dujarric underscored that following the rebel overthrow of president Bashar Assad "the U.N. remains committed to helping Syrians build a country where reconciliation, where justice, and where freedom and prosperity are shared realities for all."

UN secretary-general speaks to Turkey and Qatar leaders about rebuilding Syria's institutions

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke to Turkey's foreign minister and Qatar's prime minister Monday morning about rebuilding Syria's institutions so that they are inclusive, protect minority rights, and restore Syria's territorial integrity, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Guterres and his senior advisors, including U.N. special envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen, will continue to press this issue with other key leaders and parties, he said.

On the humanitarian front, Dujarric said more than 16 million Syrians need assistance and there is an urgent need for more shelter materials, food and sanitation facilities.

According to the U.N.'s partners, he said, some one million people, mostly women and children, were displaced between Nov. 28 and Sunday, particularly from Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Idlib governorates.

Hundreds of Syrian refugees gather at border crossings in southern Turkey, eager to return to Syria

Hundreds of Syrian refugees gathered at two border crossings in southern Turkey on Monday, eagerly anticipating their return home following the fall of President Bashar Assad's government.

Many arrived at the Cilvegozu and Oncupinar border gates at daybreak, draped in blankets and coats. Some camped by the barriers of the border crossing, warming themselves with makeshift fires or resting on the cold ground. The crossings correspond to the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salameh gates on the Syrian side of the border.

Hundreds of displaced Syrians are also returning from Lebanon, with dozens of cars lining up to enter. Turkish officials have not said how many Syrians have returned since Assad's downfall. The country hosts 3 million refugees.

Turkey's president welcomes capture of two Kurdish-held cities in northern Syria

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ANKARA, Turkey - Turkey's president on Monday welcomed the capture of two Kurdish-held cities in northern Syria by a Turkey-backed opposition force and said Turkey would not allow militant groups to threaten its security from across its borders.

The Turkish proxy force, known as the Syrian National Army, took control of the city of Manbij on Monday days after it also took over the city of Tal Rifaat, expelling Syrian Kurdish militias.

In a televised address, Recep Tayyip Erdogan maintained that Kurdish groups in Syria were attempting to "turn the chaos into an opportunity."

"We will not tolerate the emergence of new terrorist outbreaks beyond our borders," Erdogan said.

The Turkish leader again hailed the fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad and vowed to stand by the Syrian people.

"As of yesterday, dark era has ended in Syria, bright days have begun," Erdogan said. "While Aleppo, Hama, Homs and finally Damascus passed under the control of (Syria's) real owners, the Baath dictatorship which had survived through blood, cruelty, oppression and tyranny for 61 years, has completely collapsed."

Erdogan added that Turkey wanted all of Syria's ethnic and religious groups to live in peace.

As hundreds of refugees began to return to Syria, Erdogan announced plans to reopen a third border crossing to prevent "congestions and ease the (refugee) flows."

Syria's opposition meets for the first time with the prime minister

BEIRUT — The leader of Syria's opposition met for the first time with the country's prime minister to discuss Syria's political transition following the fall of the Syrian regime. He emphasized that the new leadership cannot entirely abandon the practices of the previous government.

In a video of the meeting shared on the rebels' "Military Operations" Telegram channel, opposition leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, widely known as Abu Mohammad al-Golani, told Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi Jalali, "The men have a high level of experience," referring to the rebels.

"They started the work from nothing. Idlib is small and has few resources, but thank God, we were able to achieve something big through it," he added. "You will see there are skills, and despite this, we cannot dispense of the old practices."

Earlier today, Jalali said most cabinet members who are in Damascus are performing their duties from their offices to guarantee security in the country.

Britain suspends decisions on accepting Syrian refugees

LONDON — Britain has followed Germany and several other European countries by suspending decisions about whether to accept Syrian refugees in the wake of the Assad government's fall.

The Home Office said in a statement on Monday that it "has paused decisions on Syrian asylum claims whilst we assess the current situation."

British prime minister says the UK will not soon remove Syrian militant group HTS from its list of terror groups

LONDON — British Prime Minister Keir Starmer says the U.K. will not soon remove Syrian militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham from its list of terror groups, after one of his Cabinet ministers said it would be considered "quite quickly."

Speaking on a visit to Saudi Arabia, Starmer said "no decision is pending at all on this."

Starmer said "it is far too early" to make that decision, and "at the moment the focus has to be on talking to our allies, making sure that this is an opportunity for Syria and therefore we have to work to make sure that this is a peaceful opportunity."

Foreign Secretary David Lammy said HTS' past links with al-Qaida "should rightly make us cautious" and "we will judge HTS by their actions."

Cabinet Minister Pat McFadden said earlier that the group's removal from the terrorist list "will have to be considered quite quickly."

U.S. deputy ambassador to the UN outlines its priorities ahead of emergency Security Council meeting

UNITED NATIONS — The United States has three primary interests in Syria: protecting U.S. soldiers and personnel, ensuring U.S. allies are safe, and preventing a humanitarian catastrophe, the U.S. deputy ambassador said ahead of an emergency U.N. Security Council meeting on the fast-evolving events in the

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country.

The United States will work to try and ensure that “all of those things happen,” Robert Wood told reporters ahead of Monday afternoon’s closed council meeting called by Russia.

He said another “high, high priority” for the U.S. is to locate and free missing American journalist Austin Tice, who disappeared 12 years ago near the Syrian capital. “We have reasons to believe that he still is (alive), but we have to see,” he said.

Wood called the situation in Syria “dynamic” following the rebel overthrow of President Bashar Assad. The U.S. will judge the insurgent force now in control of Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS on “what actions they take.” HTS is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, which impacts U.S. efforts to communicate directly with the rebels. But he said there are various channels to talk to different factions “and we’re going to do that in order to try to best protect our interests in Syria right now.”

As for Iran’s so-called Axis of Resistance, Wood said Tehran and its allies Hezbollah and Hamas are clearly weakened while Israel has been strengthened.

“We just want to make sure that nefarious players are not going to be able to take advantage of the situation in Syria right now, because everything is fragile and fast-moving,” Wood said.

Rebel forces in Syria announce a general amnesty for all conscripted soldiers

BEIRUT— Rebel forces in Syria announced Monday a general amnesty for all conscripted soldiers serving under mandatory service in the now-ousted Syrian regime.

“The Military Operations Directorate announces a general amnesty for all conscripted soldiers serving under mandatory service. Their safety is guaranteed, and any harm or assault against them is strictly prohibited,” the opposition said in a message on their Telegram channel.

The announcement followed the ousting of Bashar Assad and the fall of his regime, which had ruled Syria for over 50 years. The opposition faced little resistance from the Syrian army as it moved south, swiftly capturing one city after another.

Global chemical arms watchdog warns Syria about unaccounted weapons

THE HAGUE — The global chemical weapons watchdog on Monday reminded Syria of its obligations to comply with rules to safeguard certain toxic chemicals, after rebels entered the capital Damascus over the weekend and overthrew President Bashar Assad.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said in a statement it has been “monitoring closely the recent developments in Syria, with special attention to the status of its chemical weapons related sites and other locations of interest.”

Syria’s Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said Monday that most cabinet ministers are still working from offices in Damascus but the status of a stockpile of chemical weapons that Assad has been accused of using against civilians is unclear.

Assad’s government has denied using chemical weapons but the OPCW has found evidence indicating their repeated use by Syria in the country’s grinding civil war.

Ceasefire implementation committee holds its first meeting in Lebanon

BEIRUT — Representatives from a five-member committee tasked with enforcing a ceasefire that stopped the war between Hezbollah and Israel on Monday held their first meeting in Naqoura, southern Lebanon.

The group, comprising the United States, France, the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Lebanon known as UNIFIL, the Lebanese army and the Israeli army met to coordinate efforts supporting the Nov. 27 ceasefire, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut said.

Hosted by UNIFIL and chaired by the U.S. with France assisting, the meeting focused on advancing the implementation of the U.S.-brokered ceasefire and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which aims to maintain stability along the Lebanon-Israel border, the embassy said.

“This mechanism will meet regularly and coordinate closely to advance implementation of the ceasefire agreement and UNSCR 1701,” the U.S. Embassy said.

The U.S. military announced in late November that Maj. Gen. Jasper Jeffers and envoy Amos Hochstein would co-chair the committee temporarily, with Hochstein serving until a permanent civilian co-chair is appointed.

Syrian government services come to a 'complete halt' as state workers stay home after rebel takeover

By SARAH EL DEEB, BASSEM MROUE and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Syria's prime minister said Monday that most cabinet ministers were back at work after rebels overthrew President Bashar Assad, but some state workers failed to return to their jobs, and a United Nations official said the country's public sector had come "to a complete and abrupt halt."

Meanwhile, streams of refugees crossed back into Syria from neighboring countries, hoping for a more peaceful future and looking for relatives who disappeared during Assad's brutal rule.

There were already signs of the difficulties ahead for the rebel alliance now in control of much of the country. The alliance is led by a former senior al-Qaida militant who severed ties with the extremist group years ago and has promised representative government and religious tolerance.

The rebel command said Monday they would not tell women how to dress.

"It is strictly forbidden to interfere with women's dress or impose any request related to their clothing or appearance, including requests for modesty," the command said in a statement on social media.

Nearly two days after rebels entered the capital, some key government services had shut down after state workers ignored calls to go back to their jobs, the U.N. official said, causing issues at airports and borders and slowing the flow of humanitarian aid.

Rebel leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, who was long known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, also met for the first time with Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi Jalali, who stayed in Syria when Assad fled.

"You will see there are skills" among the rebels, al-Sharaa said in a video shared on a rebel messaging channel.

Israel said it carried out airstrikes on suspected chemical weapons sites and long-range rockets to keep them from falling into the hands of extremists. Israel also seized a buffer zone inside Syria after Syrian troops withdrew.

In northern Syria, Turkey said allied opposition forces seized the town of Manbij from Kurdish-led forces backed by the United States, a reminder that even after Assad's departure, the country remains split among armed groups that have fought in the past.

The Kremlin said Russia has granted political asylum to Assad, a decision made by President Vladimir Putin. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on Assad's specific whereabouts and said Putin did not plan to meet with him.

Damascus was quiet Monday, with life slowly returning to normal, though most shops and public institutions were closed. In public squares, some people were still celebrating. Civilian traffic resumed, but there was no public transport. Long lines formed in front of bakeries and other food stores.

There was little sign of any security presence though in some areas, small groups of armed men were stationed in the streets.

Across swathes of Syria, families are now waiting outside prisons, security offices and courts, hoping for news of loved ones who were imprisoned or who disappeared.

Just north of Damascus in the feared Saydnaya military prison, women detainees, some with their children, screamed as rebels broke locks off their cell doors. Amnesty International and other groups say dozens of people were secretly executed every week in Saydnaya, and they estimate that up to 13,000 Syrians were killed between 2011 and 2016.

"Don't be afraid," one rebel said as he ushered women from packed cells. "Bashar Assad has fallen!"

In southern Turkey, Mustafa Sultan was among hundreds of Syrian refugees waiting at border crossings to head home. He was searching for his older brother, who was imprisoned under Assad.

"I haven't seen him for 13 years," he said. "I am going to go see whether he's alive."

Prime minister says government is operational, but UN official says it's paralyzed

Jalali, the prime minister, has sought to project normalcy since Assad fled.

"We are working so that the transitional period is quick and smooth," he told Sky News Arabia TV on

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Monday, saying the security situation had already improved from the day before.

At the court of Justice in Damascus, which was stormed by the rebels to free detainees, Judge Khitam Haddad, an aide to the justice minister in the outgoing government, said Sunday that judges were ready to resume work quickly.

"We want to give everyone their rights," Haddad said outside the courthouse. "We want to build a new Syria and to keep the work, but with new methods."

But a U.N. official said some government services had been paralyzed as worried state employees stayed home.

The public sector "has just come to a complete and abrupt halt," said U.N. Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria Adam Abdelmoula, noting, for example, that an aid flight carrying urgently needed medical supplies had been put on hold after aviation employees abandoned their jobs.

"This is a country that has had one government for 53 years and then suddenly all of those who have been demonized by the public media are now in charge in the nation's capital," Abdelmoula told The Associated Press. "I think it will take a couple of days and a lot of assurance on the part of the armed groups for these people to return to work again."

Britain, U.S. considering removing insurgent group from terror list

Britain and the U.S. are both considering whether to remove the main anti-Assad rebel group from their lists of designated terrorist organizations.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham began as an offshoot of al-Qaida but cut ties with the group years ago and has worked to present a more moderate image.

The group's leader, al-Sharaa, "is saying some of the right things about the protection of minorities, about respecting people's rights," British Cabinet minister Pat McFadden said, adding that a change would be considered "quite quickly."

But British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, speaking later during a visit to Saudi Arabia, said it was "far too early" to make that decision.

In Washington, a Biden administration official noted that HTS will be an "important component" in Syria's future and that the U.S. needs to "engage with them appropriately."

Another administration official said the U.S. remains in a "wait and see" mode on whether to remove the designation.

Both officials requested anonymity to discuss the ongoing internal deliberations.

State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters that such designations are constantly under review. Even while it is in place, the designation does not bar U.S. officials from speaking with members or leaders of the group, he said.

The U.S. also announced it was sending its special envoy for hostage affairs to Beirut to seek information about the whereabouts of Austin Tice, a journalist who vanished in Syria 12 years ago and who President Joe Biden has said is believed to be alive.

Israel confirms it struck suspected chemical weapons and rockets

Israelis welcomed the fall of Assad, who was a key ally of Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, while expressing concern over what comes next. Israel says its forces temporarily seized a buffer zone inside Syria dating back to a 1974 agreement after Syrian troops withdrew in the chaos.

"The only interest we have is the security of Israel and its citizens," Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar told reporters Monday. Saar did not provide details about the targets, but the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said they included weapons warehouses, research centers, air defense systems and aircraft squadrons.

Israel has carried out hundreds of airstrikes in Syria in recent years, targeting what it says are military sites related to Iran and Hezbollah. Israeli officials rarely comment on individual strikes.

Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons stockpile in 2013, after the government was accused of launching an attack near Damascus that killed hundreds of people. But it is widely believed to have kept some of the weapons and was accused of using them again in subsequent years.

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Turkey says its allies have taken northern town

Officials in Turkey, which is the main supporter of the Syrian opposition to Assad, say its allies have taken full control of the northern Syrian city of Manbij from a U.S.-supported and Kurdish-led force known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF.

The SDF said a Turkish drone struck in the village of al-Mistriha in eastern Syria, killing 12 civilians, including six children.

Turkey views the SDF, which is primarily composed of a Syrian Kurdish militia, as an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey. The SDF has also been a key ally of the United States in the war against the Islamic State group.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan on Monday warned against allowing Islamic State or Kurdish fighters to take advantage of the situation, saying Turkey will prevent Syria from turning into a "haven for terrorism."

Trump promises to end birthright citizenship: What is it and could he do it?

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump has promised to end birthright citizenship as soon as he gets into office to make good on campaign promises aiming to restrict immigration and redefining what it means to be American.

But any efforts to halt the policy would face steep legal hurdles.

Birthright citizenship means anyone born in the United States automatically becomes an American citizen. It's been in place for decades and applies to children born to someone in the country illegally or in the U.S. on a tourist or student visa who plans to return to their home country.

It's not the practice of every country, and Trump and his supporters have argued that the system is being abused and that there should be tougher standards for becoming an American citizen.

But others say this is a right enshrined in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, it would be extremely difficult to overturn and even if it's possible, it's a bad idea.

Here's a look at birthright citizenship, what Trump has said about it and the prospects for ending it:

What Trump has said about birthright citizenship

During an interview Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" Trump said he "absolutely" planned to halt birthright citizenship once in office.

"We're going to end that because it's ridiculous," he said.

Trump and other opponents of birthright citizenship have argued that it creates an incentive for people to come to the U.S. illegally or take part in "birth tourism," in which pregnant women enter the U.S. specifically to give birth so their children can have citizenship before returning to their home countries.

"Simply crossing the border and having a child should not entitle anyone to citizenship," said Eric Ruark, director of research for NumbersUSA, which argues for reducing immigration. The organization supports changes that would require at least one parent to be a permanent legal resident or a U.S. citizen for their children to automatically get citizenship.

Others have argued that ending birthright citizenship would profoundly damage the country.

"One of our big benefits is that people born here are citizens, are not an illegal underclass. There's better assimilation and integration of immigrants and their children because of birthright citizenship," said Alex Nowrasteh, vice president for economic and social policy studies at the pro-immigration Cato Institute.

In 2019, the Migration Policy Institute estimated that 5.5 million children under age 18 lived with at least one parent in the country illegally in 2019, representing 7% of the U.S. child population. The vast majority of those children were U.S. citizens.

The nonpartisan think tank said during Trump's campaign for president in 2015 that the number of people in the country illegally would "balloon" if birthright citizenship were repealed, creating "a self-perpetuating class that would be excluded from social membership for generations."

What does the law say?

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In the aftermath of the Civil War, Congress ratified the 14th Amendment in July 1868. That amendment assured citizenship for all, including Black people.

"All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside," the 14th Amendment says. "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States."

But the 14th Amendment didn't always translate to everyone being afforded birthright citizenship. For example, it wasn't until 1924 that Congress finally granted citizenship to all Native Americans born in the U.S.

A key case in the history of birthright citizenship came in 1898, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Wong Kim Ark, born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrants, was a U.S. citizen because he was born in the states. The federal government had tried to deny him reentry into the country after a trip abroad on grounds he wasn't a citizen under the Chinese Exclusion Act.

But some have argued that the 1898 case clearly applied to children born of parents who are both legal immigrants to America but that it's less clear whether it applies to children born to parents without legal status or, for example, who come for a short-term like a tourist visa.

"That is the leading case on this. In fact, it's the only case on this," said Andrew Arthur, a fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports immigration restrictions. "It's a lot more of an open legal question than most people think."

Some proponents of immigration restrictions have argued the words "subject to the jurisdiction thereof" in the 14th Amendment allows the U.S. to deny citizenship to babies born to those in the country illegally. Trump himself used that language in his 2023 announcement that he would aim to end birthright citizenship if reelected.

So what could Trump do and would it be successful?

Trump wasn't clear in his Sunday interview how he aims to end birthright citizenship.

Asked how he could get around the 14th Amendment with an executive action, Trump said: "Well, we're going to have to get it changed. We'll maybe have to go back to the people. But we have to end it." Pressed further on whether he'd use an executive order, Trump said "if we can, through executive action."

He gave a lot more details in a 2023 post on his campaign website. In it, he said he would issue an executive order the first day of his presidency, making it clear that federal agencies "require that at least one parent be a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident for their future children to become automatic U.S. citizens."

Trump wrote that the executive order would make clear that children of people in the U.S. illegally "should not be issued passports, Social Security numbers, or be eligible for certain taxpayer funded welfare benefits."

This would almost certainly end up in litigation.

Nowrasteh from the Cato Institute said the law is clear that birthright citizenship can't be ended by executive order but that Trump may be inclined to take a shot anyway through the courts.

"I don't take his statements very seriously. He has been saying things like this for almost a decade," Nowrasteh said. "He didn't do anything to further this agenda when he was president before. The law and judges are near uniformly opposed to his legal theory that the children of illegal immigrants born in the United States are not citizens."

Trump could steer Congress to pass a law to end birthright citizenship but would still face a legal challenge that it violates the Constitution.

In promising to shake up Washington, Trump is in a class of his own

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the history of American politics, there's no shortage of presidents who promised to shake up Washington once they got to the White House. But Donald Trump may prove to be in a class of his own, and he appears more interested in beating the federal government into submission than

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recalibrating it.

In staffing his administration, Trump has shown an inclination to select people who distrust or even disdain the agencies that they've been chosen to lead, setting up a potential war of attrition between the incoming Republican president and American institutions.

"There's been nothing like what Trump is suggesting to do," said Doug Brinkley, a presidential historian. "We're talking about dismantling the federal government."

Trump's approach will become even clearer this week as Kash Patel, his choice for FBI director, heads to Capitol Hill for an initial round of meetings with senators who will decide whether to confirm him to the post. A former national security official who has branded himself as an eager acolyte of Trump, Patel has talked about shutting down the agency's headquarters, splitting up its responsibilities and targeting Trump's perceived enemies.

Greg Brower, a former U.S. attorney who served as the FBI's top congressional affairs official, said Trump seems to want to make the nation's law enforcement institutions "part of his political operation run out of the White House."

"That's a major course change that I'm just not sure a majority of senators are willing to endorse," Brower said.

Republican senators are already considering whether to support Pete Hegseth, whom Trump wants to lead the Pentagon, despite allegations of sexual misconduct, excessive drinking and financial mismanagement. Hegseth is an Army veteran and former Fox News commentator who has described the military as flooded with "woke" liberal ideology. He also wants to remove women from combat roles.

Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for Trump's transition team and the incoming White House press secretary, said the next administration wants to "shatter the Deep State," a term for entrenched civil servants who have frustrated Trump and his allies.

"President Trump was re-elected by a resounding mandate from the American people to change the status quo in Washington," she said in a statement. "That's why he has chosen brilliant and highly-respected outsiders to serve in his Administration, and he will continue to stand behind them as they fight against all those who seek to derail the MAGA Agenda."

Margaret Spelling, who served as education secretary under President George W. Bush, said it is "probably not a good management style" to treat government employees as adversaries.

"If you're going to turn the tide or redirect the ship of state, you've got to have help doing it," she said. "And that's people who work there already."

Spelling's former department could be outright eliminated if Trump has his way. His choice of education secretary, Linda McMahon, has never worked in the field. She served for one year on the Connecticut Board of Education and is a member of the board of trustees at a private university. McMahon led the Small Business Administration during Trump's first term, and she made a name for herself by running World Wrestling Entertainment, a cultural juggernaut that features musclebound men beating each other up in elaborately scripted fights.

Trump's plans for the federal government blend conservative ideology, which has long viewed Washington as too intrusive in Americans' daily lives, with his personal vendettas. After being plagued by investigations and contradicted by career officials during his first term, the returning president has no interest in a replay and he's more skeptical of insider views that clash with his own instincts.

Some of his personnel choices have alarmed political opponents, but Trump's approach could prove appealing to voters whose faith in government has sunk to record lows in recent years. Only about 2 in 10 Americans trust the government to do the right thing always or most of the time, according to the Pew Research Center, down from around 4 in 10 who said this in 2000 — before the upheaval of a global financial crisis, an inconclusive war on terrorism and a worldwide pandemic.

Kay Schlozman, a Boston College political science professor, said Trump's nominees could be viewed as "an extension of his capacity to question the received wisdom and question the supposed elites who always run everything."

Some of the largest gaps between expertise and personnel have been evident in public health. Trump

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chose Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services despite his reputation as one of the most prolific spreaders of unfounded theories about the supposed danger of vaccines.

Trump also picked Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, a critic of public health measures like lockdowns and vaccine mandates that were used during the coronavirus outbreak, to run the National Institutes of Health, the country's top medical research agency.

In other areas of government, loyalty has often been prized over expertise. Lee Zeldin, a former New York congressman, never served on any committees dealing with the environment during nearly a decade on Capitol Hill. Now he's on deck to lead the Environmental Protection Agency.

Brinkley said it's not uncommon to have presidents attempt to change how Washington works. Richard Nixon tried to circumvent government agencies by centralizing decision-making in the White House, and Warren Harding stocked his Cabinet with business leaders.

But Brinkley said Trump's approach is more venomous, and he seems to be setting up his staff to compete to be the most zealous.

"It's got a gladiator feel," he said. "They each want to show that they've got a scalp to punish the so-called deep state, the legacy media or the Democratic Party."

Another way that Trump is taking on Washington is the Department of Government Efficiency, an independent advisory organization that will be run by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy.

Musk, the world's richest man, and Ramaswamy, an entrepreneur, plan to provide ideas on dramatically reducing federal spending and cutting the government workforce. They also said Trump should sidestep Congress whenever possible, setting up a potential constitutional clash.

Theda Skocpol, a Harvard University professor of government and sociology, agreed that Americans are often doubtful about Washington's effectiveness.

"But it doesn't mean there's going to be an easy path to eliminating entire departments or functions of government because people will realize they have the stakes in those things," she said.

However, Skocpol said, chaos might be the actual goal.

"Parts of American conservatism have been trying to make government a mess when they control it, and then use it as an argument for less government," she said.

'Emilia Pérez' leads Golden Globe nominations with 10, followed by 'The Brutalist' and 'Conclave'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

Jacques Audiard's audacious musical "Emilia Pérez," about a Mexican drug lord who undergoes gender affirming surgery, led nominations to the 82nd Golden Globes on Monday, scoring 10 nods to lead it over other contenders like the musical smash "Wicked," the papal thriller "Conclave" and the postwar epic "The Brutalist."

The nominations for the Globes, which will be televised by CBS and streamed on Paramount+ on Jan. 5, were announced on Monday morning by Mindy Kaling and Morris Chestnut.

The embattled Globes, which are no longer presented by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, are still in comeback mode after years of scandal and organizational upheaval. Working in the Globes favor this year: a especially starry field of nominees. Zendaya, Timothée Chalamet, Angelina Jolie, Daniel Craig, Denzel Washington, Ariana Grande, Cynthia Erivo, Glen Powell and Selena Gomez all scored nominations.

The young Donald Trump drama "The Apprentice" also landed nominations for its two central performances, by Sebastian Stan as Trump and Jeremy Strong as Roy Cohn. The president elect has called "The Apprentice" a "politically disgusting hatchet job" made by "human scum."

How much the recent president election will figure into Hollywood's awards season remains to be seen. In the season's first awards ceremony, the Gotham Awards, Trump went unmentioned but sometimes alluded to. Stan also received a nomination Monday for the dark comedy "A Different Man."

While "Oppenheimer" and, to a lesser degree, "Barbie," sailed into the Globes nominations as the clear heavyweights of awards season, no such frontrunner has emerged this year — and, with the exception

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of "Wicked," most of the contenders are far lighter on box office. The Globes don't often align with the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, a much larger group that far more closely reflects the film industry. But they can give movies a major boost, and ripe fodder for their awards marketing.

Netflix dominates

Netflix, which acquired "Emilia Pérez" after its Cannes Film Festival debut, dominated the nominations, leading all studios in both film nods (13) and in the TV categories (23).

"Emilia Pérez," an operatic genre-skipping movie that combines elements of a narco thriller, a Broadway musical and a trans drama, scored nominations for its three stars: Karla Sofía Gascón, Zoe Saldaña and Gomez. No comedy or musical has ever received more Globe nominations.

Brady Corbet's "The Brutalist" landed seven nominations, including best picture, drama, and acting nods for Adrien Brody and Guy Pearce. The soon-to-be-released film, from A24, is uncommonly ambitious, with a runtime of three-and-a-half hours, including an intermission.

A24 narrowly trailed Netflix in the film categories, scoring 12 nominations overall, including best actor, drama, for Hugh Grant's darkest turn yet in the horror film "Heretic." Grant, in a statement, thanked the directors, Scott Beck and Bryan Woods "for spotting my need to kill."

Close behind it was Edward Berger's "Conclave," starring Ralph Fiennes as a cardinal tasked with leading the conclave to elect a new pope. It landed six nominations, including best picture, drama, and acting nods for Fiennes and Isabella Rossellini.

Sean Baker's Palme d'Or-winning "Anora," starring Mikey Madison as a Brooklyn sex worker who marries the son of a Russian oligarch, was nominated for five awards, including best picture, comedy or musical, and best female actor for Madison and best supporting actor for Yura Borisov.

The Globes will be hosted by comedian Nikki Glaser, who scored her own nomination for best stand-up special. CBS, which began airing the Globes last year on a new deal, will hope Glaser manages to do better than last year's emcee, Jo Koy, whose stint was widely panned.

Who are this year's top Globes nominees?

The nominees for best motion picture drama are: "The Brutalist"; "A Complete Unknown"; "Conclave"; "Dune: Part Two"; "Nickel Boys"; "September 5."

The nominees for best film musical or comedy are: "Wicked"; "Anora"; "Emilia Pérez"; "Challengers"; "A Real Pain"; "The Substance."

What stood out?

Coralie Fargeat's gory body horror satire "The Substance," starring Demi Moore as an actress who resorts to extremes to stay young in a Hollywood obsessed with young beauty, landed five nominations overall, including nods for both Moore and her younger doppelganger, Margaret Qualley.

Among animated movies, DreamWorks' "The Wild Robot" also had an especially good day. The tale of the shipwrecked robot came away with four nominations, including one for cinematic and box office achievement, a relatively new category populated by big ticket-sellers like "Deadpool & Wolverine" and "Inside Out 2." The strong showing suggests the other animated nominees — "Flow," "Inside Out 2," "Memento of a Snail," "Moana 2," "Wallace and Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl" — may have a hard time besting "The Wild Robot."

The Bob Dylan film "A Complete Unknown," starring Chalamet, also had a lot to celebrate. Coming off an endorsement from Dylan, himself, the film landed nominations for Chalamet, Edward Norton (who plays Woody Guthrie) and best picture, drama.

Pamela Anderson also landed her first Golden Globe nomination. In "The Last Showgirl," Anderson plays an aging Las Vegas showgirl, a performance that's led to the best reviews of Anderson's career. She was nominated for best female actor, drama, alongside Jolie ("Maria"), Nicole Kidman ("Babygirl"), Tilda Swinton ("The Room Next Door"), Fernanda Torres ("I'm Still Here") and — in a surprise — Kate Winslet ("Lee").

Anderson, reached by video conference Monday, said she put her whole life into the film.

"I was making pickles and jam. I didn't think I'd be doing any more in this industry," said Anderson. "I was a little disappointed in myself and was kind of reassessing some of my life choices. But then this came up."

How about the TV categories?

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"The Bear," which dominated the 2024 Globes, led all series with five nominations for its third season. That included nods for Jeremy Allen White, Ayo Edebiri, Liza Colón-Zayas and Ebon Moss-Bachrach. Its stiffest competition this year might come in the FX series "Shogun" (four nominations, including acting nods for Anna Sawai and Hiroyuki Sanada) or Apple TV's "Slow Horses" (nods for Gary Oldman and Jack Lowden).

"Only Murders in the Building" again led the comedy or musical category, with nominations for its stars Steve Martin, Martin Short and Gomez, her second nomination to go with hers for "Emilia Pérez."

What's the deal with the Golden Globes, anyway?

The Globes aren't ever quite drama-free, but things have settled down for the embattled awards body. After The Los Angeles Times reported that the HFPA voters included no Black members, among other issues, most of Hollywood boycotted the show and the 2022 ceremony was scrapped.

Last January's Globes were the first after the disbanding of the HFPA and their acquisition by Dick Clark Productions and billionaire Todd Boehly's private equity firm Eldridge Industries. However, earlier this fall, the Ankler reported that former members of the HFPA filed a letter with the California attorney general's office questioning "the validity of the purchase."

Though the 2024 Globes were mostly panned, ratings improved. According to Nielsen, some 9.5 million watched, leading CBS to give the show a five-year deal.

What's new this year?

Last year, the Globes introduced two new categories that remain this time around: the cinematic and box office achievement award and the best performance in stand-up comedy on television. One tweak this time comes in the lifetime achievement awards. This year, those are going to Ted Danson (for the Carol Burnett Award) and Viola Davis (for the Cecil B. DeMille Award). Those will be handed out in a gala dinner on Friday, Jan. 3, two days before the Globes.

A long road ahead to decide Syria's future after rapid end to Assad's rule

By LEE KEATH and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — For the first time in 50 years, the question of how Syria will be governed is wide open. The end of the Assad family's rule is for many Syrians a moment of mixed joy and fear, of the total unknown.

The insurgency that swept President Bashar Assad out of power is rooted in Islamist jihadi fighters. Its leader says he has renounced past ties to al-Qaida, and he has gone out of his way to assert a vision of creating a pluralistic Syria governed by civil institutions — not dictators and not ideology.

But even if he is sincere, he is not the only player. The insurgency is made up of multiple factions, and the country is riven among armed groups, including U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters controlling the east. Remnants of the old regime's military — and its feared security and intelligence services — could coalesce once again.

Foreign powers with their own interests have their hands deep in the country, and any of them — Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States and Israel — could act as spoilers.

Syria's multifaith and multiethnic population sees itself poised on a moment that could tip either into chaos or cohesion. The country's Sunni Muslims, Shiite Alawites, Christians and ethnic Kurds have often been pitted against each, whether by Assad's rule or a 14-year civil war.

Divisions from the conflict run deep, and many worry about revenge killings, whether against former figures of Assad's state or — more frightening — whole communities seen as backing the old system.

The civil war displaced half of Syria's prewar population of 23 million. Many who fled are watching developments closely to determine whether the time has come to return.

Right now there are only questions.

How will Syria be governed?

In the short period following Assad's abrupt fall, rebel leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has sought to reassure Syrians that the group he leads — Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS — does not seek to dominate the country and will continue government services. He has spoken of

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setting up a decentralized governance system.

Government officials who remained in Damascus as Assad fled — including Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali — have met with the rebels to discuss the transfer of power.

The Al Jazeera television network reported Monday that HTS had decided to appoint the head of the “salvation government” running its stronghold in northwest Syria, Mohammed Al-Bashir, to form a transitional government. There was no official confirmation.

Details on what form the government will take have been scarce.

The rebels likely did not expect to be saddled with running an entire country when they launched their offensive against Aleppo less than two weeks ago, said Qutaiba Idlbi, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East Programs. The rapid fall of Damascus and the melting away of police and military, left security challenges, he said.

The only existing framework for a transition is no longer relevant. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 had called for a political process involving both Assad’s government and opposition groups.

“Everyone’s saying, especially rebels on the ground, ‘That framework is no longer applicable, because there is no longer a regime. We’re not going to give the regime in politics what they lost through military means,’” Idlbi said.

So far, public sector workers have not heeded calls from the caretaker prime minister to go back to their jobs -- causing troubles in places like airports, borders and at the Foreign Ministry, said Adam Abdelmoula, the U.N.’s humanitarian coordinator for Syria.

“I think it will take a couple of days — and a lot of assurance on the part of the armed groups — for these people to return to work again,” he said. In the current chaos, U.N. workers have had difficulty accessing the country, and that has hampered distribution of humanitarian aid, he said.

How inclusive will the insurgents be?

The insurgents have sought to reassure Syria’s religious minorities that they will not be targeted, despite HTS’ fundamentalist Sunni Muslim origins.

So far the civil peace seems to be holding. The insurgents have appeared disciplined, working to keep order, with no sign of reprisals. Experts say only time will tell what post-Assad Syria will look like.

“Everyone’s still willing to really engage, really work with others,” said Haid Haid, a consulting fellow at the Middle East and North Africa program of Chatham House. “That sort of positive atmosphere is crucial, but it might not last long.”

Splits could open as decisions are made.

It can’t be guaranteed all the fighters within the HTS will back al-Sharaa’s talk of a pluralist system. Outside Damascus’ historic Hamadiyeh market on Sunday, around a dozen fighters chanted, “Down, down with a secular state” — a sign that at least some among the insurgents may seek a harder Islamist line.

“The opposition is not a homogenous movement,” said Burcu Ozcelik, a senior research fellow for Middle East Security at the Royal United Services Institute think tank in London.

There are multiple armed opposition groups, including forces in the south who are distinct from HTS and the Turkish-backed groups in the north. Internal fractures within the HTS-led movement, “which may become more salient in the weeks and months to come, may lead to discord and threaten Syrian stability,” Ozcelik said.

There may be pressure to purge former members of Assad’s large state bureaucracy, especially those employed as part of a vast security state that included informers and officers widely hated for torture, abuses and corruption.

Insurgents and many in the public don’t want them to return. But a purge can spark a destabilizing backlash — as when U.S. administrators disbanded Iraq’s army after Saddam Hussein’s fall in 2003, fueling a Sunni insurgency.

Syria’s Alawite population is feeling particularly vulnerable. Assad and his family were Alawites — a branch of Shia Islam — and many among the Sunni insurgents see the community as his loyalists.

The question of the Kurds looms large

Kurdish-led forces allied with the United States have run a semi-autonomous zone in Syria’s northeast

for years, where they have been a key player in the fight against the Islamic State militant group. While both were opponents of the government during the civil war, the relationship between the Kurds and the Arab opposition groups is tense.

HTS has been extending an olive branch to the Kurds. Reintegrating the east would likely mean some form of concession to Kurdish autonomy.

But that risks angering neighboring Turkey, which vehemently opposes the Kurdish factions that run Syria's east. Already, Turkish-backed insurgents allied with HTS have taken the opportunity to push the Kurds out of some pockets of territory, seizing the northern town of Manbij, and clashes have broken out in other areas.

While the insurgents' largely benign approach to minorities so far has allayed many international worries, Abdelmoula said, "those pockets of fighting are very significant because the fighting is mostly along ethnic lines. And that's dangerous."

Veteran Daniel Penny is acquitted in NYC subway chokehold case over Jordan Neely's death

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A Marine veteran who used a chokehold on an agitated subway rider was acquitted on Monday in a death that became a prism for differing views about public safety, valor and vigilantism.

A Manhattan jury cleared Daniel Penny of criminally negligent homicide in Jordan Neely's 2023 death. A more serious manslaughter charge was dismissed last week because the jury deadlocked on that count.

Penny, who had shown little expression during the trial, briefly smiled as the verdict was read. While celebrating later with his attorneys, he said he felt "great."

Both applause and anger erupted in the courtroom, and Neely's father and two supporters were ushered out after audibly reacting. Another person also left, wailing with tears.

"It really, really hurts," Neely's father, Andre Zachery, said outside the courthouse. "I had enough of this. The system is rigged."

The case amplified many American fault lines, among them race, politics, crime, urban life, mental illness and homelessness. Neely was Black. Penny is white.

There were sometimes dueling demonstrations outside the courthouse, including on Monday. High-profile Republican politicians portrayed Penny as a hero while prominent Democrats attended Neely's funeral.

Penny's attorneys argued he was protecting himself and other subway passengers from a volatile, mentally ill man who was making alarming remarks and gestures.

Penny "finally got the justice he deserved," one of his lawyers, Thomas Kenniff, said while celebrating the outcome with him at a downtown Manhattan pub.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, a Democrat whose office brought the case, said prosecutors "followed the facts and the evidence from beginning to end" and respect the verdict.

The anonymous jury, which had started deliberating Tuesday, was escorted out of court to a van.

Penny, 26, served four years in the Marines and went on to study architecture.

Neely, 30, was a sometime subway performer with a tragic life story: His mother was killed and stuffed in a suitcase when he was a teenager.

As a younger man, Neely did Michael Jackson tributes — complete with moonwalks — on the city's streets and subways. But Neely also struggled with mental illness after losing his mother, whose boyfriend was convicted of murdering her.

He subsequently was diagnosed with depression and schizophrenia, was repeatedly hospitalized, and used the synthetic cannabinoid K2 and realized it negatively affected his thinking and behavior, according to medical records seen at the trial. The drug was in his system when he died.

Neely told a doctor in 2017 that being homeless, living in poverty and having to "dig through the garbage" for food made him feel so hopeless that he sometimes thought of killing himself, hospital records show.

About six years later, he boarded a subway under Manhattan on May 1, 2023, hurled his jacket onto

the floor, and declared that he was hungry and thirsty and didn't care if he died or went to jail, witnesses said. Some told 911 operators that he tried to attack people or indicated he'd harm riders, and several testified that they were afraid.

Neely was unarmed, with nothing but a muffin in his pocket, and didn't touch any passengers. One said he made lunging movements that alarmed her enough that she shielded her 5-year-old from him.

Penny came up behind Neely, grabbed his neck, took him to the floor and "put him out," as the veteran told police at the scene.

Passengers' video showed that at one point during the roughly six-minute hold, Neely tapped an on-looker's leg and gestured to him. Later, he briefly got an arm free. But he went still nearly a minute before Penny released him.

"He's dying," an unseen bystander said in one video. "Let him go!"

A witness who stepped in to hold down Neely's arms testified that he told Penny to free the man, though Penny's lawyers noted the witness' story changed significantly over time.

Penny told detectives shortly after the encounter that Neely threatened to kill people and the chokehold was an attempt to "de-escalate" the situation until police could arrive. The veteran said he held on so long because Neely periodically tried to break loose.

"I wasn't trying to injure him. I'm just trying to keep him from hurting anyone else. He's threatening people. That's what we learn in the Marine Corps," Penny told the detectives.

However, one of Penny's Marine Corps instructors testified that the veteran misused a chokehold technique he'd been taught.

Prosecutors said Penny reacted far too forcefully to someone he perceived as a peril, not a person. Prosecutors also argued that any need to protect passengers quickly ebbed when the train doors opened at the next station, seconds after Penny took action.

Although Penny told police he'd used "a choke" or "a chokehold," one of his lawyers, Steven Raiser, cast it as a Marine-taught chokehold "modified as a simple civilian restraint." The defense lawyers contended Penny didn't consistently apply enough pressure to kill Neely.

Contradicting a city medical examiner's finding, a pathologist hired by the defense said Neely died not from the chokehold but from the combined effects of K2, schizophrenia, his struggle and restraint, and a blood condition that can lead to fatal complications during exertion.

Penny did not testify, but relatives, friends and fellow Marines did — describing him as an upstanding, patriotic and empathetic man.

The manslaughter charge would have required proving that Penny recklessly caused Neely's death. Criminally negligent homicide involves engaging in serious "blameworthy conduct" while not perceiving such a risk. Both charges were felonies punishable by prison time.

During the criminal trial, Neely's father filed a wrongful death suit against Penny.

Netanyahu is set to take the witness stand for the first time in his corruption trial in Israel

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is set to take to the witness stand Tuesday for the first time in his trial on corruption allegations, a pivotal point in the drawn-out proceedings that comes as he wages war in Gaza and faces an international arrest warrant for war crimes charges.

Netanyahu is on trial at home on accusations of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate matters. Netanyahu denies wrongdoing, but his appearance on the witness stand will be a low point in his decades-long political career, standing in contrast to the image of a sophisticated, respected leader he has tried to cultivate.

The trial will take up a chunk of Netanyahu's time at a crucial point for Israel. While he makes his case for weeks from the stand, he will still be tasked with managing the war in Gaza, maintaining a fragile ceasefire with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and keeping tabs on threats from the wider Middle

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East, including Iran.

It will be the first time an Israeli prime minister has taken the stand as a criminal defendant. Netanyahu has repeatedly sought to delay the proceedings, citing the war in Gaza and security concerns. The judges ordered the trial to resume Tuesday, moving the proceedings to an underground chamber in a Tel Aviv court as a security precaution.

Netanyahu's appearance in the courtroom will also draw attention to other legal issues in the Israeli leader's orbit. Close advisers in his office are embroiled in a separate series of scandals surrounding leaked classified information and doctored documents. While Netanyahu is not suspected of direct involvement in those, they could weaken his public image.

On Monday evening, Netanyahu called a press conference, his first in three months, where he gave a glowing overview of Israel's achievements in 14 months of war and said the fighting with Hamas and Hezbollah were directly responsible for the fall of Bashar Assad's government in Syria.

When questioned about the next day's testimony, Netanyahu became visibly angry. "I have been waiting eight years for this day, to present the truth," he said, railing against the "political hunt" that he asserted had "ruined the lives of dozens of people" caught up in the trial. He accused the media of pursuing fake news against him and reporting lies.

Here is a look at the trial.

Where does Netanyahu's trial stand?

The trial, which began in 2020, involves three separate cases in which prosecutors say Netanyahu exchanged regulatory favors with media titans for favorable press coverage and advanced the personal interests of a billionaire Hollywood producer in exchange for lavish gifts.

Prosecutors have called roughly 140 witnesses to the stand — fewer than the 300 initially expected to testify.

Those witnesses have included some of Netanyahu's closest former confidants who turned against him, as well as former prime minister Yair Lapid, former security chiefs and media personalities. Lawyers have submitted thousands of items of evidence including recordings, police documents and text messages.

A new documentary, "The Bibi Files," has shined new light on the cases by obtaining footage of Netanyahu being questioned by police, as well as interrogations of his wife and some key witnesses. In a glimpse of what can be expected in the courtroom, Netanyahu appears combative and anxious at times, accusing police of unfairly picking on him and denigrating other witnesses as liars.

The prosecution called to the stand its final witness over the summer, bringing to an end three years of testimony and setting the stage for the defense to lay out its case, with Netanyahu its first witness. Netanyahu's appearance will give Israelis a chance to see the long-serving Israeli leader answer to the charges before the three-judge panel.

What are some notable moments from Netanyahu's trial?

The prosecution has sought to portray Netanyahu as media-obsessed, to push its narrative that he would break the law for favorable coverage.

Witness accounts have shed light not only on the three cases but also on details about Netanyahu's character and his family's reputation for living lavishly on the backs of taxpayers and wealthy supporters.

One former aide and a key prosecution witness called him a "control freak" over his image. Another witness described expensive gifts for Netanyahu and his wife.

Arnon Milchan, an Israeli producer of Hollywood blockbuster films such as "Pretty Woman," took the stand last year by videoconference, describing how he routinely delivered tens of thousands of dollars of champagne, cigars and other gifts requested by the Israeli leader.

One key witness, a former top aide to Netanyahu, stunned prosecutors by backtracking from his earlier claims against the prime minister, opening the door for the defense to erode his credibility as a witness. The trial was jolted by Israeli media reports that police used sophisticated phone-hacking software to spy on this witness.

What happens next in Netanyahu's trial?

Like other witnesses, Netanyahu will testify three days a week, for hours at a time. The defense will

seek to depict him as a law-abiding leader who was a victim of careless and biased police investigations.

Netanyahu's critics have sought to draw a clear line between the cases and the war in Gaza. They say the allegations led Netanyahu to promote a contentious judicial overhaul plan last year that bitterly divided the country and created an image of weakness that encouraged the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that triggered the war.

Netanyahu's critics, including families of hostages held by Hamas, now accuse him of dragging out the conflict — and risking the lives of their loved ones — to avoid an embarrassing investigation and new elections that could force him from power.

If he is eventually voted out of power, being away from the prime minister's seat would make it harder for Netanyahu to rail against the justice system and delegitimize the verdict in the eyes of the public.

A verdict isn't expected until 2026 at least, and then Netanyahu can choose to appeal to the Supreme Court. Israel's courts are notoriously sluggish, and the case was further delayed last year when courts went on hiatus for two months after war broke out following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack.

Once the defense rests, each side will summarize their cases before judges convene to deliberate over Netanyahu's fate.

Assad's downfall is a humbling blow to Russia. How will it affect Putin's prestige?

By The Associated Press undefined

Almost exactly seven years ago, President Vladimir Putin stood with Russian troops at their air base in Syria and proudly declared victory over "terrorists" in that country as part of the Kremlin's military intervention to prop up the government of Bashar Assad amid a civil war.

This weekend, those hard-won gains seemed a distant memory. Assad hastily fled to Moscow as his power crumbled during a lightning offensive by rebels that his main international allies, Russia and Iran, were unable to stem.

The Kremlin's failure to prevent Assad's swift downfall has exposed limits of Russia's power and dented its international clout at a pivotal stage of its war in Ukraine.

A look at Russia's involvement in Syria and the possible consequences of Assad's demise for Moscow:

What was Russia's role in Syria and its civil war?

The Soviet Union was a longtime ally of Assad's father, Hafez Assad, who ruled the country for nearly 30 years, and provided military advisers and aid.

After an 2011 uprising against Bashar Assad's rule morphed into a civil war, Russia continued to be a key backer of Damascus, offering political support at the United Nations. When Assad's rule neared collapse after a series of battlefield defeats in 2015, Russia joined Iran to intervene militarily.

Russia deployed warplanes to the Hemeimeem air base in Syria's coastal province of Latakia, delivering thousands of tons of military equipment and supplies in an operation dubbed the "Syrian Express." On Sept. 30, 2015, Moscow launched its air campaign.

Russia kept only about 50 warplanes at Hemeimeem, but they operated at a frenetic pace, each flying several sorties a day. Most of the Russian air force personnel were rotated through the base, giving them combat experience.

At the same time, Moscow expanded and upgraded its naval base in Tartus, the only such outpost outside the former USSR. It deployed special operations forces for critical ground missions and sent hundreds of military advisers to train Syrian troops and direct their operations. Mercenaries from Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group military contractor also joined the battle.

The military intervention allowed Assad to reclaim control of most of Syria, making the Kremlin a key power broker in the Middle East and boosting Russia's prestige. Putin's triumphal visit to Hemeimeem on Dec. 11, 2017, came a week after Russia declared victory over the Islamic State group in Syria and shortly after he announced a reelection bid for 2018.

It was Russia's first military operation outside the former Soviet Union since the USSR's collapse in 1991

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and gave Moscow a chance to test its latest weapons in combat. That military success emboldened Putin and was a key factor that contributed to his decision to invade Ukraine in 2022.

Why did Russia fail to keep Assad in power?

After helping Assad regain control over most Syria, Russia urged him to engage in talks with moderate opposition groups. Buoyed by opposition defeats, however, Assad staunchly resisted any initiatives aimed at national reconciliation.

"Trying to minimize its costs in Syria, Russia has increasingly focused on maintaining the shaky and inefficient status quo, preserving the crumbling and delegitimized Assad regime without any perspectives," said Ruslan Pukhov, a Moscow-based military expert, in an analysis.

During recent contacts between Syrian and Turkish officials that Moscow helped broker this year, Assad's government showed little interest in compromise — a recalcitrance that paved the way for the offensive by Turkey-backed opposition groups that ousted Assad.

Syria's economic woes, exacerbated by isolating international sanctions, weakened the country and its military. The demoralized Syrian army quickly crumbled under the brunt of the opposition offensive, a rapid meltdown that Tehran and Moscow couldn't avert with the small contingents they had in Syria.

Russia dedicated the bulk of its assets to the war in Ukraine, while Iran, weakened by international sanctions and locked in a tense standoff with Israel, similarly lacked resources to help Assad.

Alexander Dugin, an ideologue linked to some hawkish Kremlin circles, called Assad's demise as a painful blow to Russia.

"The Assad regime that we supported through enormous efforts collapsed in just a few days. It's very sad," Dugin said.

What happens to Russian assets in Syria?

With Assad's demise, the future of Russia bases in Syria — its only military foothold outside the former Soviet Union — is in question.

The number of Russian warplanes at Hemeimeem air base has shrunk from several dozen to just a few, although it continues to be a key logistics point. Russian military cargo planes ferrying private contractors and supplies to Africa used it for refueling, and its loss would pose logistical problems for operations there.

"The importance of Syria for Russia's operations in Africa has been invaluable," Moscow-based Middle East expert Nikolai Sukhov said in televised comments.

The Tartus naval base is used by Russian warships for maintenance, refueling and replenishing supplies on visits to the Mediterranean. While opposition forces that eventually ousted Assad swept across Syria in late November, the Russian navy and air force held drills in the eastern Mediterranean, with Tartus as its operational center.

Even as Putin granted Assad and his family an asylum in Russia, Moscow reached out to the new Syrian authorities to try to ensure the security of its bases and to extend their stay. An opposition flag quickly was hoisted at the Syrian Embassy in Moscow.

Asked about the bases, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said it would be a topic for future discussions with the new authorities.

"For now, we are witnessing a period of transformation and extreme instability, so it will obviously take time and require a serious conversation with those who will have power," he said.

Syria's new leaders reportedly promised not to attack Russian military facilities.

Bronwen Maddox, director and chief executive at Chatham House, noted in a commentary that "whatever government emerges in Damascus is expected — for the moment — to respect the deal that Assad struck granting Russia use of a military base on the Syrian coast."

But she added that this "important asset is vulnerable," and that risks Russia's regional influence.

What does Assad's demise mean for Russia?

Assad's rapid downfall dealt a heavy blow to Putin at a time when he is preparing for a new U.S. administration and what that means for the war in Ukraine. President-elect Donald Trump has pledged to negotiate an end to the conflict.

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Many observers note that the humiliating loss of Russia's only ally in the Middle East has dented Kremlin prestige on the global stage and could weaken Putin's hand in any negotiations on Ukraine.

"The key issue is how Moscow will now try to adapt to the new realities and whether it will have enough flexibility to deal with the new masters of Syria, who seem to be interested in avoiding conflict with Moscow for now," Tatiana Stanovaya of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center wrote in a commentary.

There is also the possibility that Putin could take an even more uncompromising stance in negotiations to avoid looking weak.

"Assad's collapse has also shaken Putin, making him less inclined to demonstrate flexibility with Ukraine," Stanovaya added. "The war in Ukraine has, to some extent, cost him Syria, which reinforces his unwillingness to compromise."

'Polarization' is Merriam-Webster's 2024 word of the year

By ANNA FURMAN Associated Press

The results of the 2024 U.S. presidential election rattled the country and sent shockwaves across the world — or were cause for celebration, depending on who you ask. Is it any surprise then that the Merriam-Webster word of the year is "polarization"?

"Polarization means division, but it's a very specific kind of division," said Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster's editor at large, in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press ahead of Monday's announcement. "Polarization means that we are tending toward the extremes rather than toward the center."

The election was so divisive, many American voters went to the polls with a feeling that the opposing candidate was an existential threat to the nation. According to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters, about 8 in 10 Kamala Harris voters were very or somewhat concerned that Donald Trump's views — but not Harris' — were too extreme, while about 7 in 10 Trump voters felt the same way about Harris — but not Trump.

The Merriam-Webster entry for "polarization" reflects scientific and metaphorical definitions. It's most commonly used to mean "causing strong disagreement between opposing factions or groupings." Merriam-Webster, which logs 100 million pageviews a month on its site, chooses its word of the year based on data, tracking a rise in search and usage.

Last year's pick was "authentic." This year's comes as large swaths of the U.S. struggle to reach consensus on what is real.

"It's always been important to me that the dictionary serve as a kind of neutral and objective arbiter of meaning for everybody," Sokolowski said. "It's a kind of backstop for meaning in an era of fake news, alternative facts, whatever you want to say about the value of a word's meaning in the culture."

It's notable that "polarization" originated in the early 1800s — and not during the Renaissance, as did most words with Latin roots about science, Sokolowski said. He called it a "pretty young word," in the scheme of the English language. "Polarized is a term that brings intensity to another word," he continued, most frequently used in the U.S. to describe race relations, politics and ideology.

"The basic job of the dictionary is to tell the truth about words," the Merriam-Webster editor continued. "We've had dictionaries of English for 420 years and it's only been in the last 20 years or so that we've actually known which words people look up."

"Polarization" extends beyond political connotations. It's used to highlight fresh cracks and deep rifts alike in pop culture, tech trends and other industries.

All the scrutiny over Taylor Swift's private jet usage? Polarizing. Beef between rappers Kendrick Lamar and Drake? Polarizing. The International Olympic Committee's decision to strip American gymnast Jordan Chiles of her bronze medal after the Paris Games? You guessed it: polarizing.

Even lighthearted memes — like those making fun of Australian breakdancer Rachael "Raygun" Gunn's performance — or the proliferation of look-alike contests, or who counts as a nepo baby proved polarizing.

Paradoxically though, people tend to see eye to eye on the word itself. Sokolowski cited its frequent use among people across the political spectrum, including commentators on Fox News, MSNBC and CNN.

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"It's used by both sides," he said, "and in a little bit ironic twist to the word, it's something that actually everyone agrees on."

Rounding out Merriam-Webster's top 10 words of 2024:

Demure

TikToker Jools Lebron's 38-second video describing her workday makeup routine as "very demure, very mindful" lit up the summer with memes. The video has been viewed more than 50 million times, yielding "huge spikes" in lookups, Sokolowski said, and prompting many to learn it means reserved or modest.

Fortnight

Taylor Swift's song "Fortnight," featuring rapper Post Malone, undoubtedly spurred many searches for this word, which means two weeks. "Music can still send people to the dictionary," Sokolowski said.

Totality

The solar eclipse in April inspired awe and much travel. There are tens of millions of people who live along a narrow stretch from Mexico's Pacific coast to eastern Canada, otherwise known as the path of totality, where locals and travelers gazed skyward to see the moon fully blot out the sun. Generally, the word refers to a sum or aggregate amount — or wholeness.

Resonate

"Texts developed by AI have a disproportionate percentage of use of the word 'resonate,'" Sokolowski said. This may be because the word, which means to affect or appeal to someone in a personal or emotional way, can add gravitas to writing. But, paradoxically, artificial intelligence "also betrays itself to be a robot because it's using that word too much."

Allision

The word was looked up 60 times more often than usual when, in March, a ship crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore. "When you have one moving object into a fixed object, that's an allision, not a collision. You're showing that one of the two objects struck was not, in fact, in motion," Sokolowski said.

Weird

This summer on the TV news show "Morning Joe," Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz called Republican leaders "weird." It may have been what launched his national career, landing him as the Democratic vice presidential nominee. Though it's a word that people typically misspell — is it "ei" or "ie"? — and search for that reason, its rise in use was notable, Sokolowski said.

Cognitive

Whether the word was used to raise questions about President Joe Biden's debate performance or Trump's own age, it cropped up often. It refers to conscious intellectual activity — such as thinking, reasoning, or remembering.

Pander

Pander was used widely in political commentary, Sokolowski said. "Conservative news outlets accused Kamala Harris of pandering to different groups, especially young voters, Black voters, gun rights supporters." Whereas Walz said Trump's visit to a McDonald's kitchen pandered to hourly wage workers. It means to say, do, or provide what someone — such as an audience — wants or demands even though it is not "good, proper, reasonable, etc."

Democracy

In 2003, Merriam-Webster decided to make "democracy" its first word of the year. Since then, the word — which, of course, means a form of government in which the people elect representatives to make decisions, policies and laws — is consistently one of the dictionary's most looked up. "There's a poignancy to that, that people are checking up on it," Sokolowski said. "Maybe the most hopeful thing that the curiosity of the public shows, is that they're paying attention."

Associated Press polling editor Amelia Thomson-Deveaux contributed reporting.

Which words defined the last 10 years, according to Merriam-Webster?

1. 2023: authentic
2. 2022: gaslighting
3. 2021: vaccine
4. 2020: pandemic
5. 2019: they
6. 2018: justice
7. 2017: feminism
8. 2016: surreal
9. 2015: ism
10. 2014: culture

Zelenskyy open to Western troops providing security for end to war in Ukraine

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Monday that he's open to the potential deployment of Western troops in Ukraine to guarantee the country's security as part of a broad effort to end the almost three-year war with Russia.

The deployment would be a step toward Ukraine joining NATO, Zelenskyy said in a post on his Telegram channel.

"But before that, we must have a clear understanding of when Ukraine will be in the European Union and when Ukraine will be in NATO," Zelenskyy said.

His proposals tread a delicate diplomatic path amid international efforts to find a way of ending Europe's biggest conflict since World War II at a time when Russia has gained an upper hand in the fighting.

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump is seeking to bring about a ceasefire and met with Zelenskyy in Paris on Saturday. But Zelenskyy said Monday that he would approach outgoing U.S. President Joe Biden about Ukraine's possible NATO membership because he's still in office, while Trump doesn't yet have "legal rights" to decide on the matter.

"He wants to have a cease-fire," Trump said of Zelenskyy in comments to the New York Post published Sunday. "He wants to make peace. We didn't talk about the details."

Putin's forces are taking heavy losses in Ukraine, Trump noted.

"I'm formulating a concept of how to end that ridiculous war," he said.

The possibilities of Ukraine joining the 32-nation NATO military alliance and of Western troops being stationed on its soil have been deeply divisive and contentious issues since Russia's full-scale invasion began on Feb. 24, 2022.

At their summit in Washington in July, NATO declared Ukraine on an "irreversible" path to membership, but stopped short of inviting the country in. The United States and Germany have balked at Ukraine joining NATO while at war with Russia.

One obstacle has been the view that Ukraine's borders would need to be clearly demarcated before it could join so that there can be no mistaking where the alliance's pact of mutual defense would come into effect. Russia's invading army occupies about one-fifth of Ukraine.

French President Emmanuel Macron floated the idea of Western troops on the ground in Ukraine last February. But it raised the same fears of escalation that have led Western leaders to place limits on weapons supplies and permissions for their use.

European military heavyweights Germany and Poland immediately said they wouldn't send troops to Ukraine. Macron declined to provide details about which nations were considering sending troops, saying he preferred to maintain some "strategic ambiguity."

Ukraine's forces are weathering a monthslong onslaught by Russia centered on the eastern Donetsk region, where Kyiv's defenses are creaking.

Zelenskyy said on X that over the past week alone, Russia launched nearly 500 powerful guided bombs,

more than 400 attack drones and almost 20 missiles of various types against Ukraine.

"Ukraine wants this war to end more than anyone else. No doubt, a diplomatic resolution would save lives. We do seek it," he said.

Zelenskyy thanked Biden for the latest U.S. military aid of nearly \$1 billion. With doubts about whether Trump will keep up U.S. military support, the Biden administration has been trying to spend every dollar remaining from a massive foreign aid bill passed earlier this year to put Ukraine in the strongest position possible.

Meanwhile, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's challenger in the upcoming German election, Friedrich Merz, said that there's a "basic consensus" in Germany on continuing to provide military aid to Ukraine.

But during a visit to Kyiv, he also highlighted differences with Scholz, who has refused to send Taurus long-range cruise missiles to Ukraine as he insists that everything must be done to prevent a wider war between the West and Russia. Merz has been open to providing them and allowing Ukraine to hit military targets inside Russia.

As he met Zelenskyy, Merz noted that France, the U.K. and the U.S. have a different position from the current German government.

"Our position is clear, as is that of my parliamentary group: we want to put your army in a position to reach military bases in Russia – not the civilian population, not the infrastructure, but the military targets from which your country is being fought," he said.

"With this range restriction, we are forcing your country to fight with one hand behind its back, and that is not our position," he added.

Merz's center-right Union bloc leads German opinion polls. The election is expected on Feb. 23.

Russia has used its hypersonic Oreshnik missile for the first time. What are its capabilities?

By The Associated Press undefined

The silent black-and-white surveillance camera video of the Russian missile attack in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro was brief but chilling: Six huge fireballs pierced the darkness and slammed into the ground at astonishing speed.

Within hours of the Nov. 21 attack on the military facility, Russian President Vladimir Putin took the rare step of speaking on national TV to boast about the new, hypersonic missile. He warned the West that its next use could be against Ukraine's NATO allies who allowed Kyiv to use their longer-range missiles to strike inside Russia.

Putin said the missile was called the "Oreshnik" — Russian for "hazelnut tree."

A look at the weapon, how it fits into Moscow's battle plan and what political message Russia wants to send by using it:

What's known about the Oreshnik?

A satisfied smile played across Putin's face as he described how the Oreshnik streaks to its target at 10 times the speed of sound, or Mach 10, "like a meteorite," and claimed it was immune to any missile defense system. Ukrainian military officials said it reached Mach 11.

Gen. Sergei Karakayev, head of Russia's Strategic Missile Forces, said the Oreshnik could carry nuclear or conventional warheads and has a range to reach any European target.

The Pentagon said the Oreshnik was an experimental type of intermediate-range ballistic missile, or IRBM, based on Russia's RS-26 Rubezh intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM. The attack marked the first time such a weapon was used in a war.

Intermediate-range missiles can fly between 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,400 miles). Such weapons were banned under a Soviet-era treaty that Washington and Moscow abandoned in 2019.

Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate said the missile had six warheads, each carrying six submunitions. Its payload of independently targetable warheads, like a cluster of hazelnuts growing on a tree, could be

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the inspiration for the missile's name.

Video of the attack appeared to show six warheads surrounded by clouds of plasma raining down in a fiery descent. The six submunitions released by each warhead apparently were unarmed but had high kinetic energy estimated to deliver a destructive force equivalent to tons of explosives.

Putin claimed the weapon is so powerful that using several such missiles — even fitted with conventional warheads — could be as devastating as a nuclear strike. It's capable of destroying underground bunkers "three, four or more floors down," he boasted, threatening to use it against the government district in Kyiv.

Ukraine's Security Service showed The Associated Press wreckage of the missile -- charred, mangled wires and an ashen airframe — at Dnipro's Pivdenmash plant that built missiles when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. There were no fatalities in the attack, and authorities haven't described the damage to the plant. They said the missile was fired from the 4th Missile Test Range of Kapustin Yar in Russia's Astrakhan region on the Caspian Sea.

What other missiles has Russia used?

Russia has used an assortment of missiles to pummel Ukraine since the start of its invasion in February 2022, but none had the range and power of Oreshnik.

They included subsonic long-range cruise missiles that carry about 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds) of explosives, enough to inflict a significant damage to Ukrainian power plants and other key infrastructure. The winged, jet-propelled cruise missiles have a range of up to 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles), able to reach all of Ukraine.

Russia also used swarms of inexpensive, Iranian-designed drones that carry only about 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of explosives. The slow-flying drones are relatively easy to intercept, but Russia used dozens of them at a time to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses and divert attention from simultaneously launched cruise missiles.

For some priority targets, Russia has used faster and harder-hitting missiles, including the ground-launched Iskander short-range ballistic missile with a range of 500 kilometers (310 miles).

For particularly important targets, Moscow has used the hypersonic Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missile. Its high speed — able to briefly reach Mach 10 — and ability to maneuver in flight helps it evade air defenses, although Ukraine claims to have shot down a few of them.

Oreshnik is even more difficult to intercept than Kinzhal. It can inflict significantly heavier damage because of its multiple high-energy warheads.

What message is Putin sending with the Oreshnik?

Putin described the Oreshnik as a response to the U.S. and U.K. allowing Ukraine to use their longer-range weapons to strike Russian territory, a move he said gave "elements of a global character" to the conflict.

"We believe that we have the right to use our weapons against military facilities of the countries that allow to use their weapons against our facilities," he said.

Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of Putin's Security Council, said Oreshnik could reach targets in Europe within minutes, inflicting "catastrophic" damage. "Bomb shelters will not save you," he posted on his messaging app channel.

Russian state media extolled the Oreshnik, claiming it will take just 11 minutes to reach an air base in Poland and 17 minutes to reach NATO's headquarters in Brussels. T-shirts have appeared with images of Putin and the Oreshnik, and he was told at a briefing that a couple planned to name their daughter after the missile.

Military expert Mathieu Boulègue of Chatham House in Britain said that while the Oreshnik isn't a game-changer on the battlefield, "in terms of psychological warfare, it works great" in serving the Kremlin's goal to scare a Western audience.

The Nov. 21 attack came two days after Putin signed a revised version of Russia's nuclear doctrine, which lowered the threshold for using nuclear weapons. The doctrine allows for a potential nuclear response by Moscow even to a conventional attack on Russia by any nation that is supported by a nuclear power.

The use of the Oreshnik was an expression of Moscow's anger at the use of longer-range Western mis-

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siles and a signal to Ukraine and President-elect Donald Trump that Russia was going to pursue its goals, regardless of the support for Kyiv, said James J. Townsend, senior fellow at the Center for New American Security.

"This is a very powerful message being sent," Townsend said. "It's showing Trump how serious Russia looks on what the Biden administration has been doing and how seriously they look on and how angry they are about this type of assistance."

Putin's warning about potential strikes on NATO assets follows calls by Russian hawks for such attacks to force Ukraine's allies to back down.

Unlike other Russian conventional weapons with a shorter range, Oreshnik offers the capability to launch a powerful, conventional strike anywhere in Europe, giving the Kremlin a new instrument of escalation without tapping its nuclear arsenal. There will be no way to know whether Oreshnik carries a nuclear or a conventional warhead before it hits the target.

"The enemy must understand that we are ready to take the most resolute steps and strike the territory of NATO members with conventional weapons first," said Sergei Karaganov, a political expert who advises the Kremlin. "At the same time, we will warn them that if they respond to that attack in an escalatory way, a nuclear strike would come second, and a third wave will target American bases."

Today in History: December 10

Teddy Roosevelt first American to win Nobel Prize

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 10, the 345th day of 2024. There are 21 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 10, 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt became the first American to win a Nobel Prize, winning the Nobel Peace Prize for helping to negotiate peace in the Russo-Japanese War.

Also on this date:

In 1861, the Confederacy admitted Kentucky as it recognized a pro-Southern shadow state government that was acting without the authority of the pro-Union government in Frankfort.

In 1898, a treaty was signed in Paris officially ending the Spanish-American War.

In 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. received his Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, saying he accepted it "with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind."

In 1967, singer Otis Redding, 26, and six others were killed when their plane crashed into Wisconsin's Lake Monona; trumpeter Ben Cauley, a member of the group the Bar-Kays, was the only survivor.

In 1994, Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin received the Nobel Peace Prize, pledging to pursue their mission of healing the anguished Middle East.

In 2007, former Vice President Al Gore accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with a call for humanity to rise up against a looming climate crisis and stop waging war on the environment.

In 2022, Morocco became the first African country to reach the World Cup semifinals by beating Portugal 1-0.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Fionnula Flanagan is 83. Actor-singer Gloria Loring is 78. Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark., is 74. Actor Susan Dey is 72. Jazz musician Diane Schuur is 71. Actor-director Kenneth Branagh (BRAH'-nah) is 64. Actor Nia Peeples is 63. TV chef Bobby Flay is 60. Rock musician Meg White (The White Stripes) is 50. Actor Emmanuelle Chriqui is 49. Actor Raven-Symone is 39. Actor/singer Teyana Taylor is 34. Actor Kiki Layne is 33. NFL quarterback Joe Burrow is 28. Cyclist Jonas Vingegaard is 28.