

Groton Daily Independent

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

Good Morning It's Thankful Thursday

May the Lord continue to bless and keep you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.



Have a wonderful day in the Lord!

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

Friday, Dec. 13

Senior Menu: Potato soup, ham salad croissant, Monterey blend, fruit.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Rapid City

Basketball Double Header at Hamlin (Boys C at 4 p.m., Girls JV at 4 p.m.; Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

Saturday, Dec. 14

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Rapid City

Santa Day at Professional Management Services, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

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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.

Albertsons Sues Kroger

Grocery chain Albertsons has abandoned a proposed \$25B merger with Kroger and is now suing its rival for alleged breach of contract. The termination ends a two-year effort to combine the competitors into the largest supermarket in US history, which would have controlled roughly 13% of the grocery market.

Albertsons seeks a \$600M termination fee and additional damages for legal expenses as well as lost shareholder value. Albertsons alleges Kroger failed to make sufficient efforts to secure regulatory approval for the merger, including refusing to divest enough assets and ignoring regulators' feedback. Kroger denied the claims, contending Albertsons isn't entitled to the termination fee because Kroger fulfilled its end of the agreement.

The move comes a day after federal and state courts halted the deal, citing concerns about reduced competition and higher consumer prices. A third judgment is pending in Colorado. The merger had faced opposition from nine state attorneys general and the Federal Trade Commission.

Franklin Fire Burns Malibu

The Franklin Fire in Malibu, California, has burned roughly 4,000 acres of land and is 7% contained as of this writing. It has destroyed and damaged over 15 structures and placed roughly 20,000 people under evacuation orders—including celebrities Cher and Dick Van Dyke. Nearly 60,000 people have lost electricity.

The fire erupted late Monday evening as a brush fire north of Pepperdine University. The cause is still under investigation. Unusually dry mountains and grass have fueled recent wildfires in Southern California. The Franklin Fire has been further fueled by strong winds and low levels of humidity, creating "Red Flag" conditions and propelling the fire toward Malibu and the Pacific Ocean.

The Red Flag conditions lessened yesterday, with some shelter-in-place orders lifted; at its height, the Franklin Fire was spreading the equivalent of five football fields every minute, growing 39% over 12 hours.

FIFA World Cup Locations

Six countries across three continents will host the 2030 FIFA men's World Cup, while Saudi Arabia is set to be the tournament's lone host in 2034. A majority of 200 regional soccer federations approved the unopposed bids at yesterday's Congress, though FIFA has faced criticism for an allegedly obscure bidding process.

Three opening matches in 2030—the centenary of the event—will be played in Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay (the site of the first World Cup), before moving play to Spain, Portugal, and Morocco. It marks the first time a North African country will host a World Cup match and will be the first such event to take place on more than one continent.

The 2034 World Cup adds to Saudi Arabia's expansion into sports, as its sovereign wealth fund has invested in golf, wrestling, motorsports, and more. Analysts say host countries see an uptick in tourism and short-term economic activity but note the long-term benefits of high-value, low-use stadium infrastructure are limited.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

2025's Academy Awards ceremony will be livestreamed on Hulu alongside ABC broadcast.
Sundance Film Festival (Jan. 23 to Feb. 2) announces its lineup of 87 feature films.
Michael Cole, actor known for starring role in "The Mod Squad," dies at 84.
Berlin tapped to host its first regular season NFL game in 2025.
NCAA looking to expand March Madness tournaments to 72 or 76 teams in near future.
Rocky Colavito, nine-time MLB All-Star, dies at 91.
Six-time Super Bowl champion coach Bill Belichick, who stepped down as coach of the New England Patriots in 2023 after 24 seasons, hired as next head coach at the University of North Carolina.

Science & Technology

James Webb Space Telescope detects and estimates the mass of a galaxy that existed just 600 million years after the Big Bang; "Firefly Sparkle" expected to shed light on how the Milky Way developed.
Researchers discover a new type of magnetism; altermagnetism phenomenon may lead to faster and more efficient digital memory devices.
Engineers develop microscopic robots for delivering drugs to specific locations inside the body; demonstration project successfully treated bladder tumors in mice.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.8%, Dow -0.2%, Nasdaq +1.8%); Nasdaq tops 20,000 for first time, lifted by Alphabet, Tesla, Amazon, and Meta, which all closed at record highs.
Consumer price index rose 2.7% year-over-year in November and 0.3% month-over-month; both figures are in line with expectations but higher than the 2.6% and 0.2% growth rates in October.
SpaceX valuation rises to \$350B as the company and its investors agree to buy back stock from insiders.
Macy's misses analyst estimates, cuts earnings outlook after concluding investigation into employee who hid \$151M accounting error.

Politics & World Affairs

FBI Director Christopher Wray to resign before President-elect Donald Trump takes office next month; the announcement by Wray, who Trump appointed in 2017, comes after Trump named Kash Patel as his intended FBI director.
House of Representatives pass \$895B defense bill for 2025 fiscal year, a 1% increase from 2024; the bill, which the Senate is expected to approve next week, would give 14.5% raise to junior enlisted service members.
Federal judge rejects satirical site The Onion's \$1.8M bid to purchase Alex Jones' Infowars site as part of bankruptcy auction proceedings, citing problems with the auction process; sale now turns to trustee to manage.

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Holiday OPEN HOUSE

Sat. Dec 14th
11am to 3pm



Free Event & Family Fun!

21 S. MAIN ST., ABERDEEN, SD 605 626-7117
DACOTAHPRAIRIEMUSEUM.COM

SD511 Update

South Dakota travelers rely on SD511 for real-time travel information, including road conditions, closures, construction, incidents, weather forecasts, and roadway camera images, especially during winter. This year, the South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) has partnered with numerous counties and tribes across the state allowing them to directly update road conditions on the statewide SD511 system.

SDDOT provides a 511 website at <https://sd511.org>, mobile apps for both iOS and Android devices, and the legacy 511 phone number that can be dialed toll-free anywhere in South Dakota. Callers outside South Dakota can dial 800-MYSD511 (800-697-3511). People can also subscribe to receive text messages and/or email notifications for road closure updates and travel advisories along routes of their choice.

Craig Smith, SDDOT Director of Operations, noted, "Local officials will now be able to designate their counties and tribal areas as "no travel advised" or "roads closed" during severe storms. The local restrictions will be displayed on SD511's maps and road condition reports and transmitted to navigation app providers, enabling travelers to plan and complete their travel more safely."

To date, sixty of the state's sixty-six counties and eight of nine tribes are registered to participate this winter.

Brown County is one of the counties that has partnered with SD DOT to help provide, up to date travel and road information.

Brown County takes this very seriously as we know this affects the people of our county, businesses, and people traveling thru. Safety of the travelers and our responders is foremost in the decision-making process.

Having 511 on a local level is an outstanding tool in helping keep travelers in our county safe during inclement winter weather.

For more information or questions please call the Brown County Emergency Management office at 605-626-7122.

Rounds Introduces Legislation to Create Formal Mediation Process for U.S. Forest Service Boundary Disputes

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) today introduced the Fence Line Fairness Act, legislation that would create a formal mediation process for land boundary disputes between landowners and the United States Forest Service (USFS).

About 2.6 million acres in South Dakota are federally owned, 76 percent of which are managed by USFS. Congress has authorized land agencies to offer leases to local producers to use the land in a way that supports economic activity while also preserving natural resources, such as grazing or mining. Many producers who obtain these leases also have private land that borders USFS land, which is typically where boundary disputes arise.

The Fence Line Fairness Act would create a committee made up of appointed producers, tasked with mediating disputes and providing recommendations to both the agency and involved producers. The committee would be made up of producers from the state, two of which are appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and three of which are appointed by the state's Department of Agriculture or Natural Resources.

"Landowners deserve a proper notice and review process involving land disputes with the federal government," said Rounds. "My legislation would create a committee made up of local farmers and ranchers appointed by both the federal and state Departments of Agriculture. This gives local landowners a fighting chance at settling a dispute before it escalates."

This legislation is supported by South Dakota Cattlemen's Association, South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, R-CALF USA, Public Lands Council and United States Cattlemen's Association.

"Introducing mediation that includes local producers and entities who know the land and know the parties and their operation will resolve issues that come forward regarding minor fence line disputes with the U.S. Forest Service," said Carl Sanders, South Dakota Cattlemen's Association's Federal Lands Policy Committee Chair. "As a producer who works closely with the Forest Service through grazing on a Grasslands Forest Service Permit, I believe that through the necessary steps, conflict can be resolved and a compromise will be made."

"We're already experiencing situations where uncertainty over boundary lines with the federal government is disrupting the lives and livelihoods of ranchers and potentially threatening their ability to continue ranching," said Bill Bullard, CEO of R-CALF. "Senator Rounds' bill is a common-sense intervention that holds the promise of alleviating such drastic and costly outcomes."

"The U.S. Cattlemen's Association commends the work of Senator Rounds for working to protect ranchers from the lengthy timelines that come with mediation of federal disputes," said Justin Tupper, President of the U.S. Cattlemen's Association. "The Fence Line Fairness Act would help producers resolve disputes in a more fair, timely, and local manner. This is the beginning of a larger conversation about the rights of landowners on or adjacent to public lands. We support this bill and hope for its inclusion in the next Farm Bill."

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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

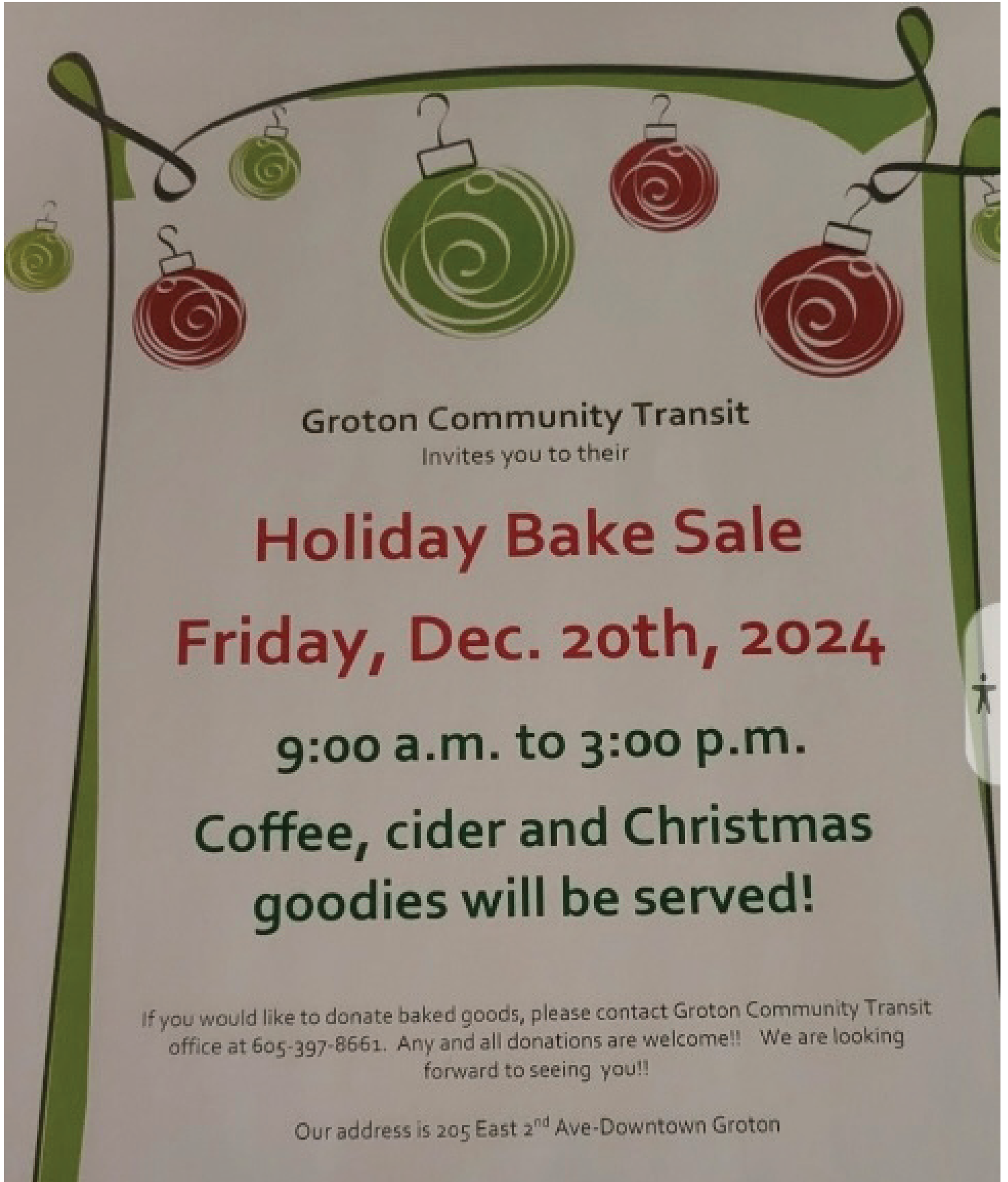
Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460

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!*

7 E. US Hwy 12 | Groton

MEMBER FDIC

Card Shower
Merry Jo Ball will be celebrating her
on December 24, 2024.

90th
BIRTHDAY

Greetings may be sent to
915 Arbor Lane Apt 37
Aberdeen SD 57401

Two loans approved at GOED monthly meeting

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Governor’s Office of Economic Development (GOED) Board of Economic Development approved projects totaling more than \$12 million in capital investment at its monthly meeting. The actions are expected to create approximately 48 full-time jobs.

“Investing in our local businesses is crucial for building a strong economy,” said GOED Commissioner Joe Fiala. “These investments will empower businesses to thrive and provide valuable employment opportunities for local residents.”

Harris Machine Company was approved for a \$1,326,749 SD Works Loan. The loan will fund the purchase, installation, and support of new equipment at their Aberdeen location. This loan complements a previously approved SD Works project that facilitated the company's expansion into Aberdeen and supported earlier equipment purchases.

Huhu, LLC, a construction company based in Aberdeen, was approved for a \$760,000 SD Works Loan. This funding will be used to expand its corporate headquarters due to space constraints at its current facility.

Grant County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: 149th Street and 481st Avenue, two and a half miles east of Milbank, SD
When: 2:38 p.m., Tuesday, December 10, 2024

Driver 1: 81-year-old male from Milbank, SD, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2000 Ford F250
Seat belt Used: No

Grant County, S.D.- A Milbank, SD man received fatal injuries in a single vehicle crash Tuesday afternoon, two and a half miles east of Milbank, SD.

The name of the person involved has not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2000 Ford F250 was traveling east on 149th Street near 481st Avenue when the vehicle slid across the slick roadway and into the north ditch and rolled into a field. The driver was ejected and received fatal injuries in the crash.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

Name Released in Roberts County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: Interstate 29, mile marker 233, one mile north of Sisseton, SD
When: 3:26 p.m., December 7, 2024

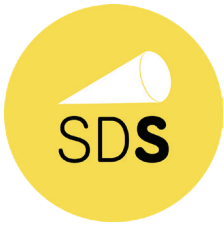
Driver 1: Robert Daniel Ash, 41-year-old male from Bristol, SD, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2017 Ford F250 Super Duty
Seat belt Used: No

Roberts County, S.D.- A Bristol, SD man received fatal injuries in a single vehicle crash Saturday afternoon near Sisseton, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates Robert Daniel Ash, the driver of a 2017 Ford F250 pickup, was traveling southbound on Interstate 29 near mile marker 233 when his vehicle entered the west ditch, struck a fence and billboard post and rolled. Ash sustained fatal injuries from the crash.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

It's a done doula: South Dakota Medicaid to cover childbirth support starting in 2025

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 11, 2024 3:27 PM

South Dakota Medicaid will start covering doula birth and postpartum services in 2025.

Medicaid is a joint federal-state health insurance program for low-income and disabled people. Doulas are trained, non-medical professionals who provide physical, emotional and educational support to pregnant clients.

Under the new plan, Medicaid recipients will be eligible for up to \$1,800 in doula services within 18 months of delivery, according to a news release from the South Dakota Doulas advocacy organization.

"This historic decision marks a major milestone in the state's commitment to improving maternal health and expanding access to essential support for families by establishing doulas as Medicaid health care providers," said board president Kelsie Thomas, who is also co-owner of Transitions: Doula and Life Services.

Services will require a referral from a physician or other licensed practitioner, according to the Department of Social Services. Medicaid covered about one-quarter of all births in South Dakota in 2023, according to March of Dimes, a health care advocacy organization.

A 2013 study reported that pregnant patients using doulas were two times less likely to experience birth complications. A 2016 study found that doula services can be cost-effective for state Medicaid programs, with patients experiencing lower rates of preterm and C-section births.

The expansion comes in part due to efforts from Rep. Mellissa Heermann, R-Brookings, last legislative session. Heermann introduced a bill to cover a portion of doula services under Medicaid. She tabled the bill after DSS Secretary Matt Althoff told lawmakers his department planned to expand coverage.

Brookings Health System announced on Wednesday it'll hold a doula and childbirth support workshop in January and February, which the state approved as certification to become a doula provider.

Board awards \$10.5 million in federal, \$760,000 in state funds to affordable housing projects

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 11, 2024 2:56 PM

A state board awarded over \$10.5 million in federal funding at its Tuesday meeting to help rehabilitate or construct affordable housing in South Dakota.

The developments received \$3.33 million in Housing Tax Credits, \$4.27 million in HOME Investment Partnership Program funds and \$2.93 million in Housing Trust Funds.

Housing is considered affordable in South Dakota when residents have to pay no more than 30% of income for costs such as rent or mortgage and utilities, according to state law. The projects awarded incentivize expansion of affordable housing for low-income South Dakotans.

There were more applications than available money. Fifteen applicants requested over \$10 million for the tax credit program, \$13.7 million for the HOME program and \$8.7 million in trust funds, staff said during the meeting.

Projects that applied but weren't awarded funding by the South Dakota Housing Development Authority

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Board are located in Rapid City, Frederick, Aberdeen, Vermillion, Spearfish and Sioux Falls.

Six projects received \$761,500 in state funding through the Housing Opportunity Fund, which is an affordable housing program for South Dakota residents.

The awarded housing developments include:

Ashbrook Trail Apartments is a new construction apartment building for seniors in Mitchell. The development includes 41 units for low-income residents while five will be market rate. The board approved the project for \$1 million in a HOME loan, \$600,000 in a Housing Trust Fund loan and \$727,594 in Housing Tax Credits.

Denver Terrace Apartments is a rehabilitation project of a 34-unit 1972 apartment building in north Rapid City. The board approved the project for \$725,000 in a HOME loan, \$584,000 in a Housing Trust Fund loan and \$733,000 in Housing Tax Credits.

Foss Flats Senior Apartments is a 44-unit new construction project to house seniors in Sioux Falls. The board approved the project for \$1 million in a HOME loan, \$600,000 in a Housing Trust Fund loan and \$740,000 in Housing Tax Credits.

Homes Are Possible, Inc. will construct 11 single family homes in Aberdeen. Funds will be used as homebuyer assistance for applicants. The board approved \$220,000 in a Housing Opportunity Fund loan.

Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity received approval for \$96,525 in a Housing Opportunity Fund loan to construct a single family home in Rapid City.

LifeScape Carter Home is a duplex to house eight individuals with special needs in Sioux Falls. The board approved the project for \$544,664 in a HOME loan and \$544,664 in a Housing Trust Fund loan.

LifeScape Churchill Home is the construction of a 12-bedroom group home for special needs housing in Sioux Falls. The board awarded \$73,500 in a Housing Opportunity Fund loan to the project.

Presentation Heights is a rehabilitation project turning a former college dorm built in 2013 into 45 housing units. The project received approval for \$1 million in a HOME loan, \$600,000 in a Housing Trust Fund loan and \$384,527 in Housing Tax Credits. Five units will be market rate.

Rosholt Governor House builds a single family home in Rosholt. The board approved the project for \$120,000 in a Housing Opportunity Fund loan.

South Eastern Development Foundation Workforce Housing Program is a new construction project of 10 single family homes in Sioux Falls. Funds received will be used as homebuyer assistance to reduce the cost burden to the homebuyers. The board approved the project for \$114,000 in a Housing Opportunity Fund loan.

Southeastern Behavioral Apartments is a mixed-use development in central-Sioux Falls with 55 housing units and offices for mental health services on the ground level. The board approved funding for \$740,000 in Housing Tax Credits.

Habitat for Humanity of Greater Sioux Falls received approval for \$114,000 in a Housing Opportunity Fund loan to construct a twin home, serving two families.

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.

Last of state's housing infrastructure grant money awarded to Rapid City project

Program still has millions in loan funds available

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 11, 2024 2:00 PM

A state board awarded the remainder of grant funding Tuesday from the Housing Infrastructure Financing Program, while much of the program's loan money remains available.

The program uses a mix of state and federal money to ease the burden of high inflation for homebuilders and address a need for workforce housing. Lawmakers created the program in 2023, after legal wrangling held up the funds the previous year. It covers up to one-third of the cost of a development's roads, sewer lines, street lights and other costs associated with building new neighborhoods.

The funding pool included \$50 million in federal COVID relief funding for grants, \$50 million in state funding for grants, \$100 million in state funding for loans, plus interest income earned by the funds.

The South Dakota Housing Authority Board awarded \$1,077,604 — the remainder of interest-derived grant funds — to a water booster pump station project meant to increase water capacity to the Shepherd Hills development near Menards in eastern Rapid City. The total project costs \$5.8 million and will provide water capacity to 78 single family lots and hundreds of multifamily lots within the undeveloped area, said Housing Development Authority Executive Director Chas Olson.

The board also approved a loan Tuesday of \$625,000 to another Rapid City project. Stoney Creek Reserve plans to develop 25 single family home lots on the southwest edge of the city. The total project cost is \$2.1 million.

The authority has awarded money to 74 projects from the fund so far. The funds will help create 7,043 new single family home lots and 5,127 new multifamily units.

The board has awarded \$120.5 million after the December meeting and has about \$86.3 million in loan funds available. About \$2 million is reserved for an administrative fee for South Dakota Housing to run the program. The funds have garnered an extra \$9 million due to interest.

Olson told South Dakota Searchlight earlier this year that demand for loans was lower as long as grants were available, and many of the grant-funded projects are now underway.

"As a result, contractors are occupied, and developers without ongoing projects might be waiting to see how quickly these new units are absorbed," Olson said.

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.

Red Trail Energy shareholders approve sale to sustainable aviation fuel company

BY: JEFF BEACH - DECEMBER 11, 2024 5:22 PM

Shareholders of North Dakota's Red Trail Energy have approved the sale of its ethanol plant and carbon capture and storage to Colorado-based Gevo, which has plans to make sustainable aviation fuel at the site and another location in South Dakota.

Gevo announced in September that it had a deal to buy Red Trail Energy at Richardton in southwest North Dakota for \$210 million.

The deal is expected to close by the first quarter of 2025, Gevo said Wednesday in a news release announcing the decision. Gevo said there was "overwhelming approval" by Red Trail shareholders.

Gevo is developing a sustainable aviation fuel plant at Lake Preston, South Dakota. Gevo is hoping to use the Summit Carbon Solutions pipeline for carbon capture and storage but Summit has yet to obtain

a permit for its pipeline in South Dakota.

Gevo CEO Patrick Gruber said in a news release that the Red Trail purchase "mitigates risk around carbon sequestration for our Net-Zero 1 plant site in South Dakota."

The Red Trail site guarantees that Gevo will have a plant with carbon capture and storage if that is not an option in South Dakota.

Red Trail was the first ethanol plant in the country to capture carbon from the fermentation process as it turns corn into ethanol. The captured carbon is permanently stored underground near the plant, taking advantage of the geology in western North Dakota that is suitable for carbon sequestration.

"The infrastructure and resources that we will have acquired in North Dakota offer tremendous flexibility," Gruber said.

Low-carbon ethanol is the basis for sustainable aviation fuel. The ethanol industry is hopeful that low-carbon liquid biofuels will demand a premium price that will eventually benefit corn growers, too.

Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions has obtained pipeline permits in Iowa and North Dakota and approval of a short segment of its Minnesota route could come Thursday. Summit's route also includes Nebraska, which has no state agency that issues carbon pipeline permits.

North Dakota's Industrial Commission is considering Summit's CO2 storage site plan Thursday.

North Dakota Monitor Deputy Editor Jeff Beach is based in the Fargo area. His interests include agriculture, renewable energy and rural issues.

U.S. House passes defense bill barring trans medical coverage for service members' kids

SD Rep. Dusty Johnson votes yes as legislation receives bipartisan support

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - DECEMBER 11, 2024 4:56 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House handily approved the annual defense policy bill Wednesday, despite late opposition from Democrats over a provision that bans military health insurance coverage for service members' children seeking transgender care.

Lawmakers passed the historically bipartisan package 241-180. In the end, 81 Democrats supported the bill, and 16 Republicans voted against it. The measure now heads to the Senate.

Congress has approved the must-pass legislation for 63 years straight. President Joe Biden has not issued a statement yet on whether he will sign it into law.

The \$884.9 billion bill includes a 4.5% pay increase for all troops, and an additional 10% bump for the military's most junior enlisted ranks, from private to corporal. The bill also outlines improvements in military housing and child care.

The massive package is a policy bill, meaning it does not provide the Pentagon with funding but rather enshrines the Defense Department's goals for the upcoming fiscal year. Congressional appropriators still need to approve any actual spending.

'Lives of thousands of children at risk'

Among the Democrats who opposed the final legislation was the House Armed Services Committee's top Democrat, Rep. Adam Smith. In a statement after the vote, Smith said he couldn't vote yes, though there was "much to celebrate" in the text.

"However, the corrosive effect of Speaker Johnson's insistence on including a harmful provision puts the lives of thousands of children at risk by denying them health care and may force thousands of service members to choose between continuing their military service or leaving to ensure their child can get the health care they need. This will be felt for generations to come," Smith, of Washington state, said.

All Democrats present for a procedural step to advance the bill Tuesday voted against the defense package.

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A four-line provision into the 1,800-page bill bans military TRICARE health insurance coverage for service members' children who seek "medical interventions for the treatment of gender dysphoria that could result in sterilization."

Treatment for gender dysphoria — an incongruence between a person's sex assigned at birth and current gender expression — includes mental health measures, hormone therapy and surgery. The bill does not define which treatments are banned.

Smith, on the floor ahead of the vote, said the measure was included for "ignorant, bigoted reasons against the trans community," and that it "taints an otherwise excellent piece of legislation."

House speaker touts ban

Alabama's Rep. Mike Rogers, chair of the House Armed Services Committee, told reporters on Capitol Hill Tuesday that House Speaker Mike Johnson "didn't talk to me about it" before including the provision in the final text.

Johnson, of Louisiana, touted the measure Tuesday, as well as other provisions that freeze hiring of diversity, equity and inclusion positions, and prohibit federal funds for certain race relations education in Defense Department institutions.

Human Rights Campaign President Kelley Robinson criticized the House's approval of the measure in the final bill, saying military members were used as "bargaining chips" for the issue.

"Military servicemembers and their families wake up every day and sacrifice more than most of us will ever understand. Those families protect our right to live freely and with dignity — they deserve that same right, and the freedom to access the care their children need," Robinson said.

"Today, politicians in the House betrayed our nation's promise to those who serve. Not since the 'Defense of Marriage Act' passed almost 30 years ago has an anti-LGBTQ+ policy been enshrined into federal law. For the thousands of families impacted, this isn't about politics. It's about young people who deserve our support," the campaign's president continued.

Space Force controversy

Another provision in the bill will transfer certain Air National Guard functions and personnel to Space Force without permission from state governors — a measure that stirred opposition.

Roughly 1,000 Air National Guard space professionals serve in 14 units across seven states, according to the National Guard Association of the United States, which panned the measure.

The move could affect up to 33 personnel in Alaska, 126 in California, 119 in Colorado, 75 in Florida, 130 in Hawaii and 69 in Ohio.

Retired Maj. Gen. Francis M. McGinn, president of the National Guard Association, said in a statement Monday that the provision is an "existential threat to state authority over the National Guard."

An amendment to strike the provision offered by Democratic Rep. Joe Neguse of Colorado failed in the House Rules Committee on Monday.

New requirements for blast exposure

The final bill also included a measure to prevent, assess and treat conditions, including traumatic brain injuries, suffered by service members repeatedly exposed to explosion pressure waves.

The legislation requires the Defense Department to establish the Defense Intrepid Network for Traumatic Brain Injury and Brain Health no later than Jan. 1, 2026. Other mandates include creating safety thresholds for blast exposure by early 2027, and establishing policies to encourage service members to seek treatment, without fear of retaliation, for brain trauma.

The department will also be required to report back to Congress on the safety initiatives and numbers of service members who seek treatment, among other data.

The safety provisions were championed this year by Sens. Joni Ernst, an Iowa Republican, and Elizabeth Warren, a Massachusetts Democrat, as well as House Democrat Ro Khanna of California.

States Newsroom interviewed a Washington state Purple Heart recipient in May who was among more than 100 troops who suffered traumatic brain injuries following an Iranian air strike on the U.S. Al Asad Airbase in Iraq in January 2020.

On the campaign trail in October, President-elect Donald Trump downplayed those troops' injuries as "headaches." That was not the first time Trump had disparaged the troops' injuries stemming from the 2020 attack.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

State schedules public input meetings on Summit carbon pipeline application

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - DECEMBER 11, 2024 11:44 AM

The South Dakota Public Utilities Commission has scheduled a series of six public input meetings in January about a company's permit application to construct a carbon dioxide pipeline.

The meetings are scheduled for Jan. 15-17 at various locations in eastern South Dakota near the proposed pipeline route.

Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions plans a 2,500-mile, \$9 billion pipeline to capture carbon dioxide from 57 ethanol plants across five states, including eastern South Dakota, and transport it to North Dakota for underground storage. The project would capitalize on federal tax credits incentivizing the prevention of heat-trapping carbon emissions.

"The purpose of the public input meetings will be to hear public comments regarding the Application and the Project," the commission said in a written order. "At the meetings, Summit will present a brief description of the Project, after which interested persons may appear and present their views, comments, and questions regarding the Application."

Summit recently reapplied for a South Dakota permit after being rejected last year. The project has route permits in North Dakota and Iowa, while Minnesota is considering a permit and Nebraska has no state permitting process for carbon pipelines. North Dakota is also considering the proposed underground storage site.

The South Dakota public meeting schedule is:

Wednesday, Jan. 15, at 10 a.m. CST at the Mitchell High School Performing Arts Center, 821 N. Capital St., Mitchell.

Wednesday, Jan. 15, at 5 p.m. CST at the HUB Auditorium, Southeast Technical College, 2001 N. Career Ave., Sioux Falls.

Thursday, Jan. 16, at 11:30 a.m. CST at De Smet Event Center Theater, 705 Wilder Lane, De Smet.

Thursday, Jan. 16, at 6 p.m. CST at the Kampeska Hall, Ramkota Hotel & Watertown Event Center, 1901 Ninth Ave. SW, Watertown.

Friday, Jan. 17, at 10:30 a.m. CST at the Dakota Room, The Dakota Event Center, 720 Lamont St., Aberdeen.

Friday, Jan. 17, at 6 p.m. CST at Redfield School Auditorium, 111 E. Sixth Ave., Redfield.

Wildland firefighter pay raises could vanish without action by Congress within days

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - DECEMBER 11, 2024 10:44 AM

The \$20,000 salary increase for wildland firefighters in the 2021 infrastructure law could be coming to an end next week if Congress doesn't act.

The infrastructure law included \$600 million to boost salaries for the nearly 11,200 wildland firefighters for two years, giving the Interior Department or Forest Service employees a raise of either \$20,000 each or 50% of their base salary.

Federal wildland firefighters earn as little as \$15 per hour, with entry level positions earning just less than \$27,000 per year, according to Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, an advocacy group. Those rates are well below those of some state employees in similar roles.

The problem is Congress provided the higher pay rate would expire with the rest of government spending, which is set for Dec. 20.

Lawmakers are likely to once again pass a continuing resolution prior to that deadline to keep the government open at current spending levels into the new year.

But because the firefighter pay boost was part of the infrastructure law instead of a yearly spending bill, it would require additional legislation to keep being paid out beyond Dec. 20.

Firefighters, their advocates and some members of Congress are now pushing to have the pay raise made permanent, as lawmakers enter the final days of this session of Congress.

Disaster bill

President Joe Biden asked for a disaster relief spending bill after hurricanes Helene and Milton to include \$24 billion for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Biden called for the bill — which is expected to be attached to the continuing resolution — to include “statutory language to support permanent, comprehensive pay reform for Federal wildland firefighters.”

The disaster aid bill appears the best chance of addressing the issue this year.

And appropriators are looking at fixing the issue in their annual funding bills, even as work on those bills is likely to be paused as Congress instead looks to pass a stopgap measure past Dec. 20 to keep the government funded for the next few months.

A House proposal included in Republicans' spending bill covering the Interior Department, the Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies would direct \$330 million for a pay increase to replace the expiring infrastructure law salary increase. It would be a permanent pay fix.

Setting a baseline in an annual spending bill would help keep the salaries consistent and avoid the uncertainty that comes with the expiration of the one-time infrastructure law funding, supporters say.

“Rather than continuing temporary and uncertain Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) supplemental payments, the funding in this bill will permanently address Federal wildland firefighter pay and capacity,” the funding bill's chief sponsor, Idaho Republican Mike Simpson, and Oregon Republican Lori Chavez-DeRemer wrote in an August op-ed in the Idaho Statesman.

Simpson is the chair of the subcommittee responsible for writing the bill. Chavez-DeRemer, who represents a purple district in Central Oregon, lost her reelection bid this fall but won a nomination to join President-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet as secretary of Labor.

The Musk-Ramaswamy cost-cutting drive

The effort comes amid an atmosphere favorable to funding cuts in Washington. Republicans, who will soon have unified control of Washington as Trump returns to the Oval Office, have blamed the inflation of the past four years on high government spending.

Trump has tasked entrepreneurs Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy with looking at ways to reduce federal spending. The pair of wealthy Trump backers has estimated \$2 trillion could be trimmed from the \$6.75

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trillion annual budget, though they have been vague about what exactly would be chopped.

The Musk-Ramaswamy organization, which has not been formally created but is dubbed the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, is not expected to be an official government entity. A Trump spokeswoman did not return a message seeking comment about whether wildland firefighter pay would be a target for funding cuts.

Finding the political will to increase spending for any purpose in such an environment could be challenging, though increasing the pay of wildland firefighters — who work to manage the increasingly severe and costly fires that particularly ravage the rural areas known as the wildland-urban interface — has support from across the political spectrum in Congress, including leading GOP members.

The House funding bill authored by Simpson that included the pay raise passed the House nearly along party lines.

In a video message to constituents this month, Simpson sounded broadly supportive of Musk and Ramaswamy's mission, but indicated there were areas he would fight to avoid cuts. He did not explicitly mention firefighter pay.

"It will be an interesting debate," Simpson said of the effort to identify funding cuts. "I don't mind having outside eyes look at how Congress does their job and how the money is spent. It could be spent more efficiently and more effectively, thus saving the taxpayer money."

He added he was "excited" to see recommendations from the pair.

"There will be some I suspect I disagree with and a lot of them I probably agree with," he said. "So that will be a debate for Congress."

Senate bill

The Senate, which generally requires a much more bipartisan approach than the House, has not passed the Simpson-authored bill that Democrats opposed because of its drastic cuts to the Interior Department and EPA.

But the Senate companion spending bill, sponsored by Oregon Democrat Jeff Merkley, who chairs the corresponding spending panel in the Senate, also includes a permanent raise for wildland firefighters, as well as funding for a firefighter health and wellness program and a fund for housing.

"This bill honors the courageous work our federal wildland firefighters do by establishing a permanent fix to prevent a devastating pay cut," Senate Appropriations Chair Patty Murray, a Washington Democrat, said in a statement after the committee passed the bill 28-1 in July.

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

Trump immigration overhaul could threaten states' agricultural economies

Roughly 40% of farmworkers are not legally authorized to work in the United States

BY: NADA HASSANEIN, STATELINE - DECEMBER 11, 2024 6:00 AM

If President-elect Donald Trump follows through on his pledge to deport millions of immigrants, it could upend the economies of states where farming and other food-related industries are crucial — and where labor shortages abound.

Immigrants make up about two-thirds of the nation's crop farmworkers, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, and roughly 2 in 5 of them are not legally authorized to work in the United States.

Agricultural industries such as meatpacking, dairy farms and poultry and livestock farms also rely heavily on immigrants.

"We have five to six employees that do the work that nobody else will do. We wouldn't survive without them," said Bruce Lampman, who owns Lampman Dairy Farm, in Bruneau, Idaho. His farm, which has been in the family three decades, has 350 cows producing some 26,000 pounds of milk a day.

"My business and every agriculture business in the U.S. will be crippled if they want to get rid of everybody who does the work," said Lampman, adding that his workers are worried about what's to come.

Anita Alves Pena, a Colorado State University professor of economics who studies immigration, noted that many agricultural employers already can't find enough laborers. Without farm subsidies or other protections to make up for the loss of immigrant workers, she said, the harm to state economies could be significant.

"Farmers across the country, producers in a lot of different parts, are often talking about labor shortages — and that's even with the current status quo of having a fairly high percentage of unauthorized individuals in the workforce," Pena said. "A policy like this, if it was not coupled with something else, would exacerbate that."

Employers have a hard time hiring enough farm laborers because such workers generally are paid low wages for arduous work.

In addition to hiring immigrant laborers who are in the country illegally, agricultural employers rely on the federal H-2A visa program. H-2A visas usually are for seasonal work, often for about six to 10 months. However, they can be extended for up to three years before a worker must return to their home country.

Employers must pay H-2A workers a state-specific minimum wage and provide no-cost transportation and housing. Still, employers' applications for H-2A visas have soared in the past 18 years, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a trend reflecting the shortage of U.S.-born laborers willing to do the work. The number of H-2A positions has surged from just over 48,000 in 2005 to more than 378,000 in 2023.

But agricultural employers that operate year-round, such as poultry, dairy and livestock producers, can't use the seasonal visa to fill gaps, according to the USDA.

Farmers also employ foreign nationals who have "temporary protected status" under a 1990 law that allows immigrants to remain if the U.S. has determined their home countries are unsafe because of violence or other reasons. There are about 1.2 million people in the U.S. under the program or eligible for it, from countries including El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Lebanon and Ukraine. Many have been here for decades, and Trump has threatened to end the program.

Support for the program

Immigration advocates want a pathway for H-2A workers to gain permanent legal status, and agricultural trade organizations are pushing for an expansion of the H-2A program to include year-round operations.

The National Milk Producers Federation says it's too early to say how it would cope with mass deportations under the Trump administration. But the group states it "strongly supports efforts to pass agriculture labor reform that provides permanent legal status to current workers and their families and gives dairy farmers access to a workable guestworker program."

Immigrants make up 51% of labor at dairy farms across states, and farms that employ immigrants pro-

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duce nearly 80% of the nation's milk supply, according to the organization.

"Foreign workers are important to the success of U.S. dairy, and we will work closely with members of Congress and federal officials to show the importance of foreign workers to the dairy industry and farm communities," Jaime Castaneda wrote, the group's executive vice president for policy development and strategy, wrote in an email.

Adam Croissant, the former vice president of research and development at yogurt company Chobani, which has manufacturing plants in Idaho and New York, said he's seen a lot of misinformation around immigrants' workforce contributions.

"The dairy industry as a whole understands that without immigrant labor, the dairy industry doesn't exist. It's as simple as that," said Croissant.

Tom Super, a spokesperson for the National Chicken Council, lambasted U.S. immigration policy and said the poultry industry "wants a stable, legal, and permanent workforce."

"The chicken industry is heavily affected by our nation's immigration policy or, more pointedly, lack thereof. ... The system is broken, and Washington has done nothing to fix it," Super wrote in an email.

Changes ahead?

But major changes to the H-2A visa program are unlikely to happen before deportations begin. In an interview with NBC News' "Meet the Press" over the weekend, Trump repeated his promise to start deporting some immigrants almost immediately.

He said he plans to begin with convicted criminals, but would then move to other immigrants. "We're starting with the criminals, and we've got to do it. And then we're starting with the others, and we're going to see how it goes."

Some farmers still hope that Trump's actions won't match his rhetoric. But "hoping isn't a great business plan," said Rick Naerebout, CEO of the Idaho Dairyman's Association. "Our ability to feed ourselves as a country is completely jeopardized if you do see the mass deportations."

If the deportations do happen, agricultural workers will disappear faster than they can be replaced, experts say.

"The H-2A program will not expand instantly to fill the gap. So, that's going to be a problem," said Jeffrey Dorfman, a professor of agricultural economics at North Carolina State University who was Georgia's state economist from 2019 to 2023.

In Georgia, agriculture is an \$83.6 billion industry that supports more than 323,000 jobs. It is one of the five states most reliant on the federal H-2A visa program, depending on those workers to fill about 60% of agricultural jobs.

Dorfman argued that even the fear of deportation will have an impact on the workforce.

"When farmworkers hear about ICE [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement] raids on a nearby farm, lots of them disappear. Even the legal ones often disappear for a few days. So, if everybody just gets scared and self-deports, just goes back home, I think that would be the worst disruption," said Dorfman, adding that even more jobs would need to be filled if the administration revokes temporary protected status.

Antonio De Loera-Brust, communications director for the farmworker labor union United Farm Workers, said the nation's focus should be on protecting workers, no matter their legal status.

"They deserve a lot better than just not getting deported," he said. "They deserve better wages, they deserve labor rights, they deserve citizenship."

And though economists and the agriculture industry have said that mass deportations could raise grocery store prices, De Loera-Brust called that particular argument a sign of "moral weakness."

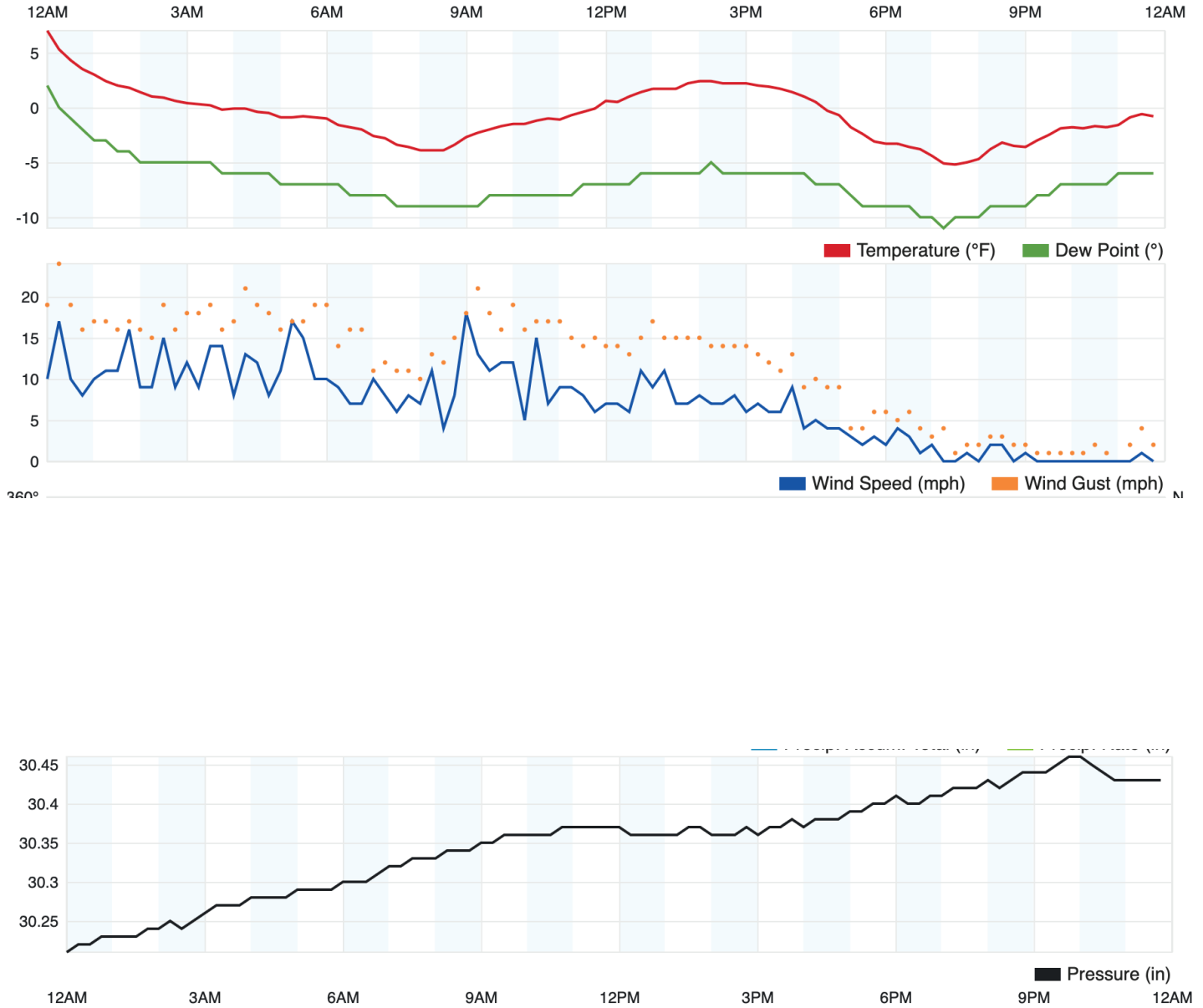
"As if the worst thing about hundreds of thousands of people getting separated from their families was going to be that consumers would have to pay more for a bag of strawberries or a bag of baby carrots," De Loera-Brust said. "There's a moral gap there."

Nada Hassanein is a health care reporter for Stateline with a focus on inequities.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thursday



High: 9 °F

Chance
Flurries

Thursday
Night



Low: 1 °F

Partly Cloudy

Friday



High: 23 °F

Partly Sunny

Friday Night



Low: 15 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Saturday



High: 30 °F

Partly Sunny



Cold Continues

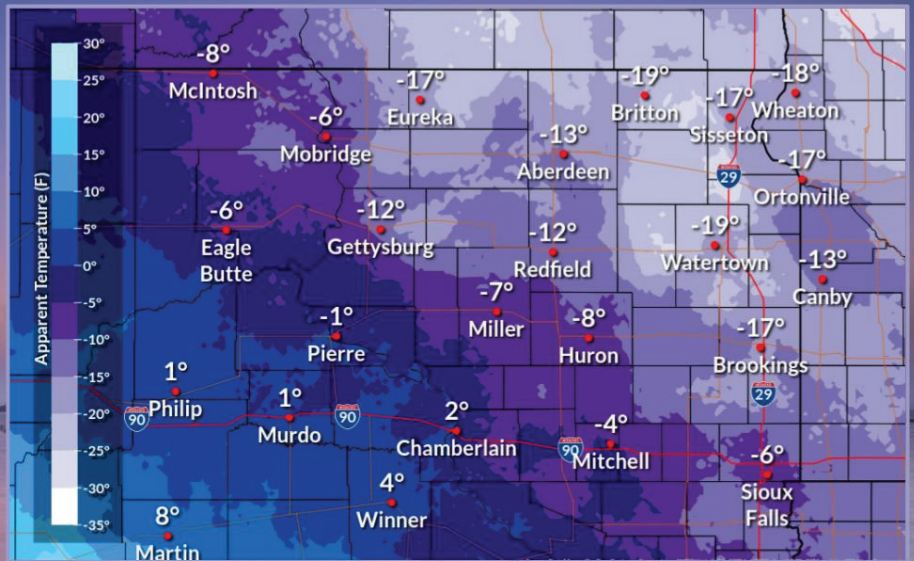
December 11, 2024
1:38 PM

Wind chills as low as -20 degrees will be possible through Thursday morning.

Key Messages

- Arctic air continues to impact northeast and central South Dakota & western Minnesota through Thursday morning.
- Winds remain gentle, but even gusts to 10 mph are enough to make the wind chill feel 10 to 15 degrees colder.
- Hypothermia can be a hazard of prolonged outdoor exposure in these temperatures. 30 minutes or more of exposure can lead to frostbite. **Limit outdoor activity when possible, and bundle up if you do have to go outside.**

Minimum Wind Chill Through 8 AM Thursday Morning



NOAA National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Wind chills as low as -20 degrees will be possible through Thursday morning. Even though winds will remain gentle, but it doesn't take much wind to drastically drop the wind chill by 10-15 degrees. Limit outdoor exposure when possible, and bundle up if you do have to go outside.

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The Science of Wind Chill

NO WIND

98.6°F
Average temperature of the human body

Under calm conditions, the body radiates heat, creating a layer of warmth between our skin and the cold surroundings.

WINDY

95°F
Hypothermia begins when our body temperature drops two to four degrees

But when it's windy, the moving air breaks up this insulating layer. It speeds up heat loss by whisking away the warmth from our skin.

Heat is moved away from our bodies.

weather.gov/winter

<p><u>Thursday</u></p> <p>H highs: 3 to 20°F Occasional flurries to light snow showers this morning over central SD</p>		
<p><u>Thursday evening</u></p> <p>Lows: -4 to 11°F Partly cloudy</p>	<p><u>Friday</u></p> <p>H highs: 16 to 28°F Mostly Cloudy</p>	

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 7 °F at 12:00 AM

Low Temp: -5 °F at 7:35 PM

Wind: 25 mph at 12:07 AM Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 49 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 54 in 1924

Record Low: -28 in 1893

Average High: 30

Average Low: 9

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.23

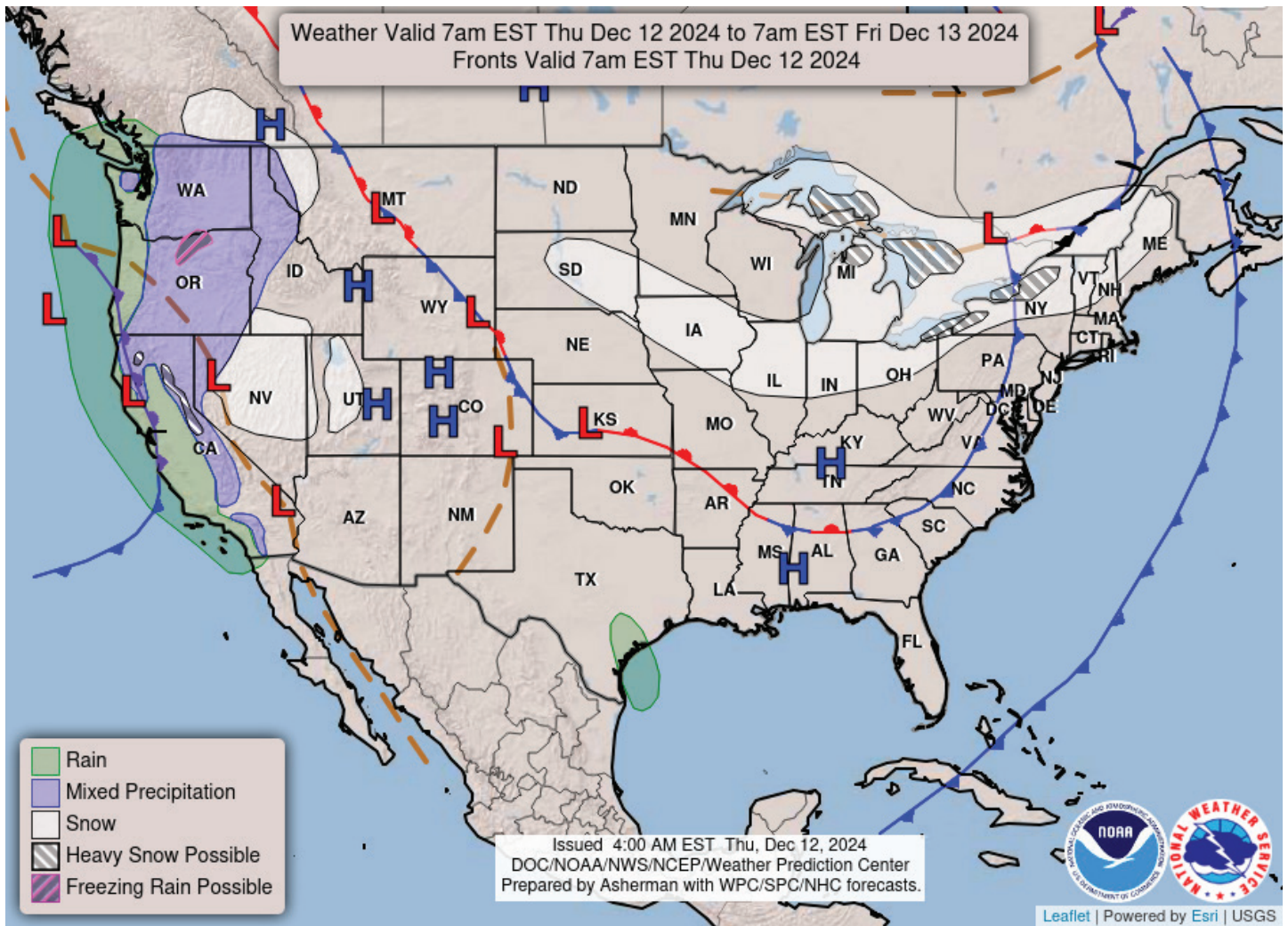
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.44

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:51:02 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:02:39 am



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Today in Weather History

1882 - Portland, OR, was drenched with 7.66 inches of rain, a record 24 hour total for that location. (12th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1960 - The first of three Middle Atlantic snowstorms produced a foot of snow at Baltimore MD. A pre-winter blizzard struck the northeastern U.S. producing wind gusts as high as 51 mph, along with 16 inches of snow at Nantucket MA, and 20 inches at Newark NJ. (David Ludlum)

1969 - The worst tornado of record for western Washington State tracked south of Seattle, traveling five miles, from Des Moines to Kent. The tornado, 50 to 200 yards in width, began as a waterspout over Puget Sound. One person was injured and the tornado caused half a million dollars damage. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - While a developing winter storm began to spread snow across New Mexico into Colorado, high winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern states. Winds in California gusted to 60 mph in the Sacramento River Delta, and in the San Bernardino Valley. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Cold arctic air spread from the Great Lakes Region to the Appalachian Region. Twenty-five cities, mostly in the northeastern U.S., reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 12 degrees below zero at Albany NY was their coldest reading of record for so early in the season. Saranac Lake NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 28 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A winter storm produced snow from northern Mississippi to the Middle Atlantic Coast, with 10.5 inches reported at Powhatan VA. Heavy snow whitened the Black Hills of South Dakota, with 36 inches reported at Deer Mountain. Thirteen cities in the north central U.S., from Minnesota to Texas, reported record low temperatures for the date, including Duluth MN and Yankton SD with morning lows of 22 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995 - A severe coastal storm is blamed for five deaths and loss of power to over one million people in Oregon and Washington. Winds at Sea Lion Caves near Florence topped out at 119 mph before problems developed with the anemometer. In Newport, a gust of 107 mph occurred downtown, while Astoria and Cape Blanco also had gusts of over 100 mph. Astoria's air pressure dropped as low as 28.53 inches, an all-time record (and comparable to the central pressure of a Category 2 hurricane!). Gusts in the Willamette Valley exceeded 60 mph.

2008 - A significant ice storm wreaked havoc across New York and New England on December 12, disrupting electricity and leaving over 1 million homes and businesses without power. New Hampshire alone had as many as 320,000 residents without power, which according to reports it was described as the worst outages in 30 years (Reuters). Four fatalities were reported and parts of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Maine declared a state of emergency (BBC News).



Where's Jesus' Present?

It was Christmas Eve. The tree was brightly decorated, the presents were wrapped with beautiful paper and colorful bows, the meal was over, and the family gathered together to read the Story of the Birth of Jesus, followed by a time of prayer. It was a family tradition.

"Now," said Dad, "let each one of us say a prayer and I will end our prayer-time before we go to bed."

After praying, Susie went to the tree and began to look at each present. She looked at the name on each of them very carefully. The family was curious but quiet.

Finally, Susie, looked at each member of the family and asked, "Where's the present for Jesus? What are we giving Him this year?"

Stunned, the family sat in silence. No one had thought about a gift for Jesus.

Paul has a suggestion for the best gift we could give Christ this Christmas. Writing to the Romans he said, "And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies – your entire self – to God... be a living and holy sacrifice to Him – the kind He will accept."

When we think of giving gifts this Christmas each of us would do well to think first of the gift God wants from us. We need to take Paul's words seriously, and give the most valuable gift – the gift of ourselves – to God!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, trouble our hearts with the words of Paul this season, and carefully and prayerfully consider the gift You want most – surrendered lives! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

Tags: ChristmasRomans 12:1

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:
12.10.24

12 14 26 48 52 21

MegaPlier: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$670,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 8
DRAW: Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.11.24

4 14 30 45 50 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$16,700,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 23
DRAW: Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.11.24

10 19 32 44 46 1

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 38 Mins
DRAW: 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.11.24

19 22 27 28 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$149,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 38
DRAW: Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.11.24

18 23 34 60 62 19

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 7
DRAW: Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.11.24

13 44 50 52 54 20

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$45,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 7
DRAW: Mins 45 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

Nevada wins 77-63 against South Dakota State

By The Associated Press undefined

RENO, Nev. (AP) — Nick Davidson's 16 points helped Nevada defeat South Dakota State 77-63 on Wednesday.

Davidson added six rebounds and six assists for the Wolf Pack (7-3). Tyler Rolison scored 14 points while shooting 6 for 9, including 2 for 5 from beyond the arc. Tre Coleman shot 5 for 10, including 3 for 8 from beyond the arc to finish with 13 points, while adding six assists.

Joe Saylor led the Jackrabbits (8-4) in scoring, finishing with 15 points. Owen Larson added 11 points and eight rebounds for South Dakota State. Matthew Mors also had nine points.

North Dakota regulators consider underground carbon dioxide storage permits for Midwest pipeline

By JACK DURA and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A North Dakota panel will consider Thursday whether to approve permits for underground storage of hundreds of millions of metric tons of carbon dioxide that a proposed pipeline would carry from ethanol plants throughout the Midwest.

Approval from the governor-led, three-member Industrial Commission would be another victory for Summit Carbon Solutions' controversial project, though further court challenges are likely. Last month, the company gained approval for its North Dakota route, and Iowa regulators also have given conditional approval.

Also on Thursday, Minnesota utility regulators were scheduled to consider approval for a 28-mile leg of the project of the project.

Summit's 2,500-mile, \$8 billion pipeline would transport planet-warming CO2 emissions from 57 ethanol plants in North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska for underground storage in central North Dakota.

North Dakota Republican Gov. Doug Burgum chairs the Industrial Commission, which includes the state attorney general and agriculture commissioner and oversees a variety of energy topics and state-owned enterprises.

Burgum is President-elect Donald Trump's choice for Interior Secretary and to lead a new National Energy Council. Burgum supports Summit's project and has frequently touted North Dakota's underground carbon dioxide storage as a "geologic jackpot." In 2021, he set a goal for the No. 3 oil-producing state to be carbon-neutral by 2030. His term ends Saturday.

Summit applied for permits for three storage facilities, which would hold a combined, estimated maximum of 352 million metric tons of CO2 over 20 years. The pipeline would carry up to 18 million metric tons of CO2 per year to be injected about 1 mile (1.6 kilometers) underground, according to an application fact sheet.

Summit's documents detail a well site layout encompassing a pump/meter building, gas detection stations, inlet valves and emergency shutoff valve.

Carbon dioxide would move through the pipeline in a pressurized form to be injected deep underground into a rock formation.

Jessie Stolark, who leads a group that includes Summit and supports the project, said the oil industry has long used similar technology.

"We know that this can be done safely in a manner that is protective of human health and underground sources of drinking water," said Stolark, executive director of the Carbon Capture Coalition.

Summit's project has drawn the ire of landowners around the region. They oppose the potential taking of their property for the pipeline and fear a pipe rupture releasing a cloud of heavy, hazardous gas over

the land.

A North Dakota landowners group is challenging a property rights law related to the underground storage, and attorney Derrick Braaten said they likely would challenge the granting of permits for the storage plans.

"The landowners that I'm working with aren't necessarily opposed to carbon sequestration itself," Braaten said. "They're opposed to the idea that a private company can come in and use their property without having to negotiate with them or pay them just compensation for taking their private property and using it."

Carbon capture projects such as Summit's are eligible for lucrative federal tax credits intended to encourage cleaner-burning ethanol and potentially result in corn-based ethanol being refined into jet fuel.

Some opponents argue the amount of greenhouse gases sequestered through the process would make little difference and could lead farmers to grow more corn despite environmental concerns about the crop.

In Minnesota, utility regulators were expected to decide Thursday whether to grant a route permit for a small part of the overall project, a 28-mile (45-kilometer) segment that would connect an ethanol plant in Fergus Falls to Summit's broader network.

An administrative law judge who conducted hearings recommended in November that the Public Utilities Commission grant the permit, saying the panel lacks the legal authority to reject it. The judge concluded that the environmental impacts from the Minnesota segment would be minimal, that the environmental review met the legal requirements, and noted that Summit has secured agreements from landowners along most of the recommended route. Commission staff, the state Department of Commerce and Summit largely concurred with those findings.

Environmental groups that oppose the project dispute the judge's finding that the project would have a net benefit for the environment.

In addition to North Dakota, Summit has a permit from Iowa for its route, but regulators for that state required the company to obtain approvals for routes in the Dakotas and underground storage in North Dakota before it can begin construction. The Iowa Utilities Commission's approval sparked lawsuits related to the project.

Last year, South Dakota regulators rejected Summit's application. The company submitted another permit application last month.

In Nebraska, where there is no state regulatory process for CO2 pipelines, Summit is working with individual counties to advance its project. At least one county has denied a permit.

Middle East latest: Israeli airstrikes kill 28 in Gaza, including 7 children, health officials say

By The Associated Press undefined

Palestinian medical officials say Israeli airstrikes have killed at least 28 people in the Gaza Strip, including seven children and a woman, hours after the U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

One of the strikes overnight and into Thursday flattened a house in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp, according to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the nearby city of Deir al-Balah, where the casualties were taken.

Two other strikes killed 15 men who were part of local committees established to secure aid convoys. The committees were set up by displaced Palestinians in coordination with the Hamas-run Interior Ministry.

On Wednesday, the U.N. General Assembly approved resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and expressing support for the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees that Israel has moved to ban. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, although they reflect world opinion.

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

Israel's offensive has killed over 44,800 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not say how many were combatants. The Israeli

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military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Here's the latest:

US Secretary of State Blinken visits Mideast after Assad's ouster in Syria

AQABA, Jordan — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has arrived in Jordan on his 12th visit to the Mideast since the Israel-Hamas war erupted last year and his first since the weekend ouster of Syrian President Bashar Assad that has sparked new fears of instability in a region wracked by three conflicts despite a ceasefire agreement in Lebanon.

Blinken was meeting in Aqaba with Jordan's King Abdullah II and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi on Thursday before traveling to Turkey for talks with Turkish officials on Friday. The meetings will focus largely on Syria but also touch on long-elusive hopes for a deal to end the fighting in Gaza that has devastated the Palestinian territory since October 2023.

Blinken is the latest senior U.S. official to visit the Middle East in the five days since Assad was deposed as the Biden administration navigates more volatility in the region in its last few weeks in office and as President-elect Donald Trump has said the U.S. should stay out of the Syrian conflict.

Other include national security adviser Jake Sullivan and a top military commander who traveled there as the U.S. and Israel have launched airstrikes to prevent the Islamic State militant group from reconstituting and prevent materiel and suspected chemical weapons stocks from falling into militant hands.

Blinken "will discuss the need for the transition process and new government in Syria to respect the rights of minorities, facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance, prevent Syria from being used as a base of terrorism or posing a threat to its neighbors, and ensure that chemical weapons stockpiles are secured and safely destroyed," the State Department said.

The U.S. would be willing to recognize and fully support a new Syrian government that met those criteria.

U.S. officials say they are not actively reviewing the foreign terrorist organization designation of the main Syrian rebel group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, known as HTS, which was once an al-Qaida affiliate, but stressed they are not barred from speaking to its members.

Netanyahu says Israeli forces will remain in Syrian buffer zone until border security is guaranteed

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israeli forces will remain in a Syrian buffer zone until a new force on the other side of the border can guarantee security.

After the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar Assad, Israeli forces pushed into a buffer zone that had been established after the 1973 Mideast war. The military says it has seized additional strategic points nearby.

Netanyahu's office said in a statement Thursday that Assad's overthrow by jihadi rebels created a vacuum on the border.

"Israel will not permit jihadi groups to fill that vacuum and threaten Israeli communities on the Golan Heights with October 7th style attacks," it said, referring to Hamas' 2023 attack out of Gaza, which ignited the war there.

"That is why Israeli forces entered the buffer zone and took control of strategic sites near Israel's border."

The statement added that "this deployment is temporary until a force that is committed to the 1974 agreement can be established and security on our border can be guaranteed."

The buffer zone is adjacent to the Golan Heights, which Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed. The international community, except for the United States, views the Golan as occupied Syrian territory.

Attacker who fatally shot boy on a bus in the West Bank turns himself in, military says

JERUSALEM — Israel's military said Thursday that the attacker who fatally shot a 12-year-old Israeli boy in the occupied West Bank overnight turned himself in to authorities.

The attacker opened fire on a bus near the Israeli settlement of Beitar Illit, critically wounding the boy, who hospital authorities pronounced dead in the early morning. Three others were wounded in the attack, paramedics said.

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The shooting took place just outside Jerusalem in an area near major Israeli settlements.

Indonesia evacuates 37 citizens from Syria

JAKARTA, Indonesia — The Indonesian government has evacuated 37 citizens from Syria following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad government, officials said Thursday.

The evacuees were taken by land from Damascus to Beirut, where they boarded three commercial flights to Jakarta, said Judha Nugraha, director of citizen protection at the Foreign Affairs Ministry.

The Indonesian Embassy in Damascus said all 1,162 Indonesian citizens in Syria were safe.

Indonesian Ambassador to Syria Wajid Fauzi said the situation in Syria has gradually returned to normal.

"I can say that 98% of people's lives are back to normal, shops are open, public transportation has started running," Fauzi said, adding that most Indonesian nationals living in Syria had chosen to stay.

Israeli airstrikes kill at least 28 people, including 7 children, Palestinian medical officials say

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Palestinian medical officials say Israeli airstrikes have killed at least 28 people in the Gaza Strip, including seven children and a woman.

One of the strikes overnight and into Thursday flattened a house in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp, according to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the nearby city of Deir al-Balah, where the casualties were taken.

An Associated Press reporter saw the bodies at the hospital's morgue.

Two other strikes killed 15 men who were part of local committees established to secure aid convoys. The committees were set up by displaced Palestinians in coordination with the Hamas-run Interior Ministry.

The Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis received the bodies and an Associated Press reporter counted them. The hospital said eight were killed in a strike near the southern border town of Rafah and seven others in a strike 30 minutes later near Khan Younis.

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

Israel's offensive has killed over 44,800 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not say how many were combatants. The Israeli military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The fighting has plunged Gaza into a severe humanitarian crisis, with experts warning of famine.

Israel says it allows enough aid to enter and blames U.N. agencies for not distributing it. The U.N. says Israeli restrictions, and the breakdown of law and order after Israel repeatedly targeted the Hamas-run police force, make it extremely difficult to operate in the territory.

UN General Assembly demands ceasefire in Gaza and backs UN agency helping Palestinian refugees

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly approved resolutions Wednesday demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and backing the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees that Israel has moved to ban.

The votes in the 193-nation world body were 158-9 with 13 abstentions to demand a ceasefire now and 159-9 with 11 abstentions to support the agency known as UNRWA.

The votes culminated two days of speeches overwhelmingly calling for an end to the 14-month war between Israel and the militant Hamas group.

General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they reflect world opinion. There are no vetoes in the assembly.

Israel and its close ally, the United States, were in a tiny minority speaking and voting against the resolutions.

Biden commutes roughly 1,500 sentences and pardons 39 people in biggest single-day act of clemency

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is commuting the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic and is pardoning 39 Americans convicted of nonviolent crimes. It's the largest single-day act of clemency in modern history.

The commutations announced Thursday are for people who have served out home confinement sentences for at least one year after they were released. Prisons were uniquely bad for spreading the virus and some inmates were released in part to stop the spread. At one point, 1 in 5 prisoners had COVID-19, according to a tally kept by The Associated Press.

Biden said he would be taking more steps in the weeks ahead and would continue to review clemency petitions. The second largest single-day act of clemency was by Barack Obama, with 330, shortly before leaving office in 2017.

"America was built on the promise of possibility and second chances," Biden said in a statement. "As president, I have the great privilege of extending mercy to people who have demonstrated remorse and rehabilitation, restoring opportunity for Americans to participate in daily life and contribute to their communities, and taking steps to remove sentencing disparities for non-violent offenders, especially those convicted of drug offenses."

The clemency follows a broad pardon for his son Hunter, who was prosecuted for gun and tax crimes. Biden is under pressure from advocacy groups to pardon broad swaths of people, including those on federal death row, before the Trump administration takes over in January. He's also weighing whether to issue preemptive pardons to those who investigated Trump's effort to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and are facing possible retribution when he takes office.

Those pardoned Thursday had been convicted of nonviolent crimes such as drug offenses and turned their lives around, White House lawyers said. They include a woman who led emergency response teams during natural disasters; a church deacon who has worked as an addiction counselor and youth counselor; a doctoral student in molecular biosciences; and a decorated military veteran.

The president had previously issued 122 commutations and 21 other pardons. He's also broadly pardoned those convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, and pardoned former U.S. service members convicted of violating a now-repealed military ban on consensual gay sex.

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., and 34 other lawmakers are urging the president to pardon environmental and human rights lawyer Steven Donziger, who was imprisoned or under house arrest for three years because of a contempt of court charge related to his work representing Indigenous farmers in a lawsuit against Chevron.

Others are advocating for Biden to commute the sentences of federal death row prisoners. His attorney general, Merrick Garland, paused federal executions. Biden had said on the campaign trail in 2020 that he wanted to end the death penalty but he never did, and now, with Trump coming back into office, it's likely executions will resume. During his first term, Trump presided over an unprecedented number of federal executions, carried out during the height of the pandemic.

More pardons are coming before Biden leaves office on Jan. 20, but it's not clear whether he'll take action to guard against possible prosecution by Trump, an untested use of the power. The president has been taking the idea seriously and has been thinking about it for as much as six months — before the presidential election — but has been concerned about the precedent it would set, according to people familiar with the matter who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss internal discussions.

But those who received the pardons would have to accept them. New California Sen. Adam Schiff, who was the chairman of the congressional committee that investigated the violent Jan. 6 insurrection, said such a pardon from Biden would be "unnecessary," and that the president shouldn't be spending his waning days in office worrying about this.

A president has the power to both pardon, in which a person is relieved of guilt and punishment, or commute a sentence, which reduces or eliminates the punishment but doesn't exonerate the wrongdoing. It's customary for a president to grant mercy at the end of his term, using the power of the office to wipe away records or end prison terms.

Before pardoning his son, Biden had repeatedly pledged not to do so. He said in a statement explaining his reversal that the prosecution had been poisoned by politics. The decision prompted criminal justice advocates and lawmakers to put additional public pressure on the administration to use that same power for everyday Americans. It wasn't a very popular move; only about 2 in 10 Americans approved of his decision, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

South Korea's Yoon defends martial law as an act of governance and vows to 'fight to the end'

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol defended his martial law decree as an act of governance and denied rebellion charges, vowing Thursday to "fight to the end" in response to attempts to impeach him and intensifying investigations into last week's dramatic move.

The main opposition Democratic Party quickly slammed Yoon's speech as "an expression of extreme delusion" and "false propaganda." Later Thursday, it and other opposition parties submitted a new impeachment motion against Yoon for a floor vote this weekend.

The opposition-controlled parliament also passed motions Thursday to impeach and suspend Yoon's police chief and justice minister over the imposition of martial law, escalating the pressure on Yoon's embattled government.

Yoon's short-lived Dec. 3 martial law declaration has generated political chaos and large protests calling for his ouster. The decree brought hundreds of armed troops who attempted to encircle parliament and raid the election commission, though no major violence or injuries occurred. Martial law lasted only six hours as Yoon was forced to lift it after the National Assembly unanimously voted it down.

In a televised speech Thursday, Yoon, a conservative, said he enacted martial law as a warning to the liberal Democratic Party. He called the party "a monster" and "anti-state forces" that he said tried to use its legislative muscle to impeach top officials, undermined the government's budget bill for next year and sympathized with North Korea.

"I will fight to the end to prevent the forces and criminal groups that have been responsible for paralyzing the country's government and disrupting the nation's constitutional order from threatening the future of the Republic of Korea," Yoon said. "The opposition is now doing a sword dance of chaos, claiming that the declaration of martial law constitutes to an act of rebellion. But was it really?"

Yoon said martial law was an act of governance that cannot be the subject of investigations and doesn't amount to rebellion. He said the deployment of nearly 300 soldiers to the National Assembly was designed to maintain order, not dissolve or paralyze it.

Kim Min-seok, head of a Democratic Party task force, dismissed Yoon's statement as "an expression of extreme delusion" and "a declaration of war against the people." Kim accused the president of attempting to incite pro-Yoon riots by far-right forces. He said the Democratic Party will focus on getting the motion impeaching Yoon passed on Saturday.

It's unclear how Yoon's comments will affect his fate. Opposition parties hold 192 seats combined, eight votes short of a two-thirds majority of the 300 members of the National Assembly. The earlier attempt to impeach Yoon failed with most lawmakers from Yoon's governing People Power Party boycotting the vote.

Yoon's speech was expected to deepen a divide inside the PPP. When party chair Han Dong-hun, a critic of Yoon, called Yoon's statement "a confession of rebellion" during a party meeting, Yoon loyalists angrily jeered and called on Han to stop speaking. Han has urged party members to vote in favor of Yoon's impeachment.

Opposition parties and even some PPP members say the martial law decree was unconstitutional. South

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Korean law allows the president to declare martial law during wartime or similar emergencies, and they said such a situation did not exist. They argue that deploying troops to seal the National Assembly to suspend its political activities amounted to rebellion because the constitution doesn't give a president such rights in any situation.

The country's law enforcement authorities are investigating whether Yoon and others involved in imposing martial law committed rebellion, abuse of power and other crimes. A conviction for rebellion carries a maximum penalty of death.

The National Assembly on Thursday passed a bill that could introduce an independent counsel to investigate Yoon on rebellion charges without his approval. A bill it endorsed earlier this week on appointing an independent counsel requires Yoon's approval. The Justice Ministry on Monday placed an overseas travel ban on Yoon.

South Korean law gives a president immunity from prosecution while in office, except for allegations of rebellion or treason. This means that Yoon can be questioned and detained by investigative agencies over his martial law decree, but many observers doubt that authorities will forcefully detain him because of the potential for clashes with his presidential security service.

On Wednesday, Yoon's presidential security service didn't allow police to search the presidential office.

Yoon's statement was seen as an about-face. Last Saturday, he apologized over declaring martial law and said he wouldn't avoid responsibility for it. He said he would leave it to his party to chart a course through the political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office."

On Wednesday, Yoon's former defense minister, Kim Yong Hyun, was arrested on allegations of playing a key role in a rebellion and committing abuse of power. The national police chief, Cho Ji Ho, and the head of Seoul's metropolitan police have been detained while their actions of sending police forces to the National Assembly are investigated as a criminal matter.

The impeachment motion against Cho accuses him of committing rebellion and violating other laws by deploying police forces to the parliament after martial law was announced. The separate motion for Justice Minister Park Sung Jae accuses him of rebellion because he didn't question the constitutionality of Yoon's martial law decree and didn't actively stop its enforcement.

Kim, who resigned after martial law was lifted, is one of Yoon's close associates. He has been accused of recommending martial law to Yoon and sending troops to the National Assembly to block lawmakers from voting on it. He tried to kill himself in detention, but correctional officers stopped him and he was in stable condition, according to the Justice Ministry.

In his speech Thursday, Yoon said he had discussed imposing martial law only with Kim before he informed other top officials about it at a Cabinet meeting just before its declaration.

On the night of Dec. 3, besides the National Assembly, Yoon and Kim sent troops to the National Election Commission. That raised speculation that he might have tried to seize computer servers at the commission as he believed unfounded rumors that the results of April's parliamentary elections, in which his party suffered steep losses, were rigged.

Yoon said he asked Kim to examine the supposed vulnerabilities of the commission's computer systems, which Yoon said was hampering the credibility of election results. He accused the commission of resisting a thorough inspection by Seoul's spy agency following a cyberattack attributed to North Korea-backed hackers last year.

If Yoon is impeached, his presidential powers would be suspended until the Constitutional Court decides whether to remove him from office or restore his powers. If he is dismissed, a new presidential election would be required within 60 days.

Migrant workers in Lebanon are trying to return home after alleged abuses and then war

By SALLY ABOU ALJOUND and LUJAIN JO Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Isatta Bah wakes up from a nap in a crowded shelter on the outskirts of Beirut, clutching her baby, Blessing.

The 24-year-old from Sierra Leone spends her days waiting for an exit visa that could put her and her 1-year-old on a plane back to the West African nation. She wants to reunite with her family after what she called exploitative work conditions and sexual violence, along with the recent horrors of war in Lebanon.

"My experience in Lebanon is not good for me. I am really tired," Bah said. "I want to go home."

Hundreds of migrant workers in Lebanon are waiting to be repatriated after the ceasefire ending the 14-month war between the Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Israel went into effect last month.

Lebanon has long drawn migrant workers dreaming of building better lives for their families. Enticed by promises of stable jobs and decent pay, they enter Lebanon via recruitment agencies under a sponsorship-based labor system known as Kafala — only to find themselves often trapped with confiscated passports, long hours, withheld wages and, for many, abuse.

The Kafala system has long been criticized by human rights groups, but the government rarely if ever addresses the criticism. But Bah knew little of that when she came to Lebanon in 2022. She was promised a job at a supermarket with a \$200 monthly salary, she said. Instead, she was sent to care for an older woman once she arrived.

Within a month of her arrival, her 3-year-old son back home fell ill and died. She said she was not given the time to grieve and fled her employer's house. Since her employer held her passport and other documents, Bah said she had to leave them behind.

Her experience in Lebanon then took a darker turn. One day she and five housemates were picked up by a taxi driver who said he would take them home. Instead, she said, the driver dropped them at the wrong spot. As they tried and failed to find another cab, a group of men chased them and raped them.

"Men were coming and they were cheering for us," said Bah, who gave her consent to be named. "They beat us and they had sex with us." She said it took her about two weeks to recover and resume work at two hotels. Without documents, migrants can hesitate to go to police.

Two months later, she and another friend found out they were pregnant.

Bah recounted the experience as she watched her baby's wobbly footsteps.

With war, their lives became more precarious. When Israel intensified its bombardment of Beirut's southern suburbs in September, Bah fled the area with her baby and friends on foot.

Not every migrant worker escaped the attacks. An estimated 37 have been killed and 150 wounded since October 2023, said Joelle Mhanna with the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration.

There were few places to turn. Most government-run shelters refused to take in displaced people who were not Lebanese, said activist Dea Hajj Shaheen. After supporting migrant women during previous crises in Lebanon, she stepped in again along with other volunteers.

To house over 200 women from Sierra Leone including Bah, they repurposed an abandoned space owned by her family — a former car dealership that was later a venue for pop-up events and named The Shelter.

The kitchen was alive with activity as women cooked, some dancing to Nigerian music. In another area, rows of thin mattresses lay in the dim light from broken windows. Despite the modest conditions, the women set up a Christmas tree crafted from sticks.

While some migrants have been accepted at government-run shelters, there were regular reports of others being evicted or denied access, the IOM said.

Some migrants hesitate to approach the government shelters for fear of detention or deportation, Mhanna said. "As a result, most are being hosted by embassies, NGOs and community-based organizations including churches, monasteries and other religious groups."

The Lebanese government has not directly addressed the issue of migrant workers being rejected from government-run shelters, despite repeated calls for action from rights organizations and the United Nations.

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Moving on from the shelters they found posed another challenge for migrants like Bah, as many had passports and other documents confiscated by former employers.

"We had to secure exit permits, immigration clearances and even child travel documents for the five children in this group," said Shaheen, who coordinated the repatriation last month of 120 women and their children with the support of IOM, who chartered the flight.

IOM said it has received requests from around 10,000 migrants seeking to be repatriated, a small fraction of the over 175,000 in Lebanon.

As of Nov. 26, the IOM had supported over 400 migrants to return home. That included two charter flights for people from Bangladesh and Sierra Leone. It wasn't clear how many more flights are planned, or to where.

Laughter and cheer filled Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport on Nov. 19. The women from Sierra Leone arrived in groups, dragging suitcases and sharing hugs. Some danced in celebration for their long-awaited flight.

"It wasn't easy in Lebanon," said Amanata Thullah after four years. "I am happy to be going back to my country."

Mariam Sesay, who described herself as the head of Sierra Leone's community in Lebanon, said there had been "a lot of distress and trauma" in recent months.

Bah was not among those leaving, but she said she and others at the shelter were happy to see friends return home.

She now awaits her turn, along with over 50 others.

At first she was told she needed official documents for her baby and the father's consent to travel. But a lawyer waived the requirement due to her circumstances, Shaheen said.

"I wish to go back home to continue my education," Bah said. "Since I was little, I always wanted to be a computer science student, because I'm good at that."

She looked down at Blessing. "Now I have something to take care of," she said. "When I watch her walk or laugh, that gives me joy."

Middle East latest: UN General Assembly demands a ceasefire in Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

The U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly approved resolutions Wednesday demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and expressing support for the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees that Israel has moved to ban. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, although they reflect world opinion.

Israel has faced growing international criticism over its conduct in Gaza as it fights Hamas militants, especially when it comes to humanitarian aid for desperate people in the besieged and heavily destroyed territory.

Israeli airstrikes in northern and central Gaza killed at least 33 people overnight and into Wednesday, Palestinian medical officials said. Hospital records show one Israeli strike in northern Gaza killed 19 people in a home, including a family of eight — four children, their parents and two grandparents.

The Israeli military said it targeted a Hamas militant in the vicinity of the hospital, part of a blistering offensive in Gaza's isolated and heavily destroyed north.

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

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed more than 44,800 Palestinians in Gaza, according to local health officials. They say women and children make up more than half the dead but do not distinguish between fighters and civilians in their count. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

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Here's the latest:

Israeli airstrike kills at least 13 people, including 7 children, Palestinian medical officials say
DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Palestinian medical officials say an Israeli airstrike early Thursday killed at least 13 people, including seven children and a woman, in central Gaza.

The strike flattened a house in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp, according to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the nearby city of Deir al-Balah, where the casualties were taken.

An Associated Press reporter saw the bodies at the hospital's morgue.

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

Israel's offensive has killed over 44,800 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not say how many were combatants. The Israeli military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Shooting attack on Israeli bus kills child, wounds 2 people

JERUSALEM — Israeli hospital officials say a young boy died after being wounded in a shooting attack in the occupied West Bank that also wounded two adults.

An Israeli bus came under fire from a suspected Palestinian attacker late Wednesday, the military said, and Israeli forces are searching for the shooter.

The shooting took place just outside Jerusalem in an area near major Israeli settlements.

Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem said the boy was 12 years old, after initial reports said he was 10. A spokesperson for the hospital did not immediately respond to a request for clarification. The hospital said two other people, ages 24 and 55, were also wounded.

UN General Assembly demands ceasefire in Gaza and backs UN agency helping Palestinian refugees

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly approved resolutions Wednesday demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and backing the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees that Israel has moved to ban.

The votes in the 193-nation world body were 158-9 with 13 abstentions to demand a ceasefire now and 159-9 with 11 abstentions to support the agency known as UNRWA.

The votes culminated two days of speeches overwhelmingly calling for an end to the 14-month war between Israel and the militant Hamas group.

General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they reflect world opinion. There are no vetoes in the assembly.

Israel and its close ally, the United States, were in a tiny minority speaking and voting against the resolutions.

Israeli forces pull out of first Lebanese border town as part of ceasefire

BEIRUT — Israeli forces withdrew from a strategic town in southern Lebanon and handed it back to the Lebanese army in coordination with U.N. peacekeepers, the two militaries said Wednesday, marking an important test of the recent ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah militants.

It appeared to be Israel's first pullout from a Lebanese border town captured during this fall's ground invasion, and comes as part of the initial phase of the ceasefire.

The Lebanese army said Wednesday it has deployed units to five positions around the town of Kham coinciding with the Israeli army's withdrawal.

Israel's military confirmed this was the first town it has turned over to the Lebanese army under the truce, which — if it endures — would end nearly 14 months of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah.

Israel has said the truce deal gives it the right to use military force against perceived ceasefire violations. Israel has launched near-daily strikes, mostly in southern Lebanon, that have killed at least 28 people and wounded 25 others since the ceasefire took effect on Nov. 27. Still, the shaky truce appears to be holding.

Five people were killed Wednesday by at least three Israeli strikes in different towns in the southern municipality of Bint Jbeil, Lebanon's Health Ministry and state news agency said.

The Lebanese army warned civilians to stay out of Kham until it can clear the area of any unexploded

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munitions. The strategic hilltop town, located less than 3 miles (5 kilometers) from the border with Israel, saw some of the most intense fighting during the war.

Thousands of Lebanese displaced by the war returned home two weeks ago after a ceasefire took hold, driving cars stacked with personal belongings and defying warnings from Lebanese and Israeli troops to avoid some areas.

Russia has pulled its naval forces out of Syria, US official says

WASHINGTON — All Russian naval ships that were docked at the Syrian port of Tartus have left and it appears Moscow is now looking for a new base along the coast now that its key ally, Bashar Assad, has been ousted a ruler of Syria, a U.S. official said.

It's not clear where the ships will go, but Russia may seek a new port on the Mediterranean Sea along the African shoreline, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. assessments.

The official did not say how many vessels Russia had in Syria at the time Assad was overthrown. Moscow has dedicated the bulk of its military assets to the war in Ukraine.

Asked about Tartus on Wednesday, Sabrina Singh, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said that the U.S. is seeing some Russian forces and naval vessels leaving Syria.

"They just had one of their key political allies, ousted," said Singh. "We're seeing Russia consolidate assets."

— By Lolita C. Baldor

Palestinians urge UN General Assembly to vote for an immediate Gaza ceasefire

UNITED NATIONS — The Palestinians are urging United Nations member countries to vote in favor of resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and supporting the U.N. agency helping Palestinian refugees, which Israel has moved to ban in Palestinian territories.

The Palestinian mission to the United Nations issued the urgent appeal to the 193 U.N. member nations ahead of Wednesday afternoon's votes on the resolutions in the General Assembly, whose members have has been listening to two days of speeches overwhelmingly supporting the measures.

Israel and close ally the United States have spoken against the resolutions.

The Palestinians and their supporters went to the General Assembly after the U.S. vetoed a Security Council resolution last month demanding an immediate ceasefire in the war in Gaza. It was supported by the 14 other Security Councilmember nations, but the U.S. objected because the resolution did not include a link to an immediate release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

The General Assembly resolution being voted on Wednesday mirrors the Security Council language: It "demands an immediate, unconditional and permanent cease-fire to be respected by all parties, and further reiterates its demand for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages."

Unlike the Security Council, there are no vetoes in the General Assembly. But while council resolutions are legally binding, assembly resolutions are not, though they do reflect world opinion.

The second resolution being voted on supports the mandate of the U.N. agency caring for Palestinian refugees known as UNRWA which was established by the General Assembly in 1949.

It "deplores" legislation adopted by Israel's parliament, the Knesset, on Oct. 28 banning UNRWA's activities in the Palestinian territories, which takes effect in 90 days.

It calls on the Israeli government "to abide by its international obligations, respect the privileges and immunities of UNRWA and uphold its responsibility to allow and facilitate full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian assistance in all its forms into and throughout the entire Gaza Strip."

Israel lifts restrictions on outdoor activities in the northern Golan Heights

JERUSALEM — Israel has lifted restrictions on public gatherings and outdoor activities in areas near the Lebanese border in the northern Golan Heights, two weeks after a ceasefire with Hezbollah.

The army's Home Front Command said it was changing its public safety guidelines to "full activity" from "partial activity."

Israel had tightened restrictions on Nov. 25, reflecting concerns that fighting could intensify ahead of any possible cease-fire between Israel and Lebanese militants. The truce went into effect on Nov. 27.

In recent days, Israeli tanks and troops have advanced out of Israeli-held territory in the Golan Heights

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and pushed into a buffer zone inside Syria — a move Israel said it took to prevent attacks on its citizens. Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it in a move not recognized internationally, except by the United States.

Palestinian factions in Syria form a united delegation to meet with country's new rebel rulers
BEIRUT - Syria-based Palestinian factions have formed a unified delegation to meet with the country's new rebel-led authorities.

The factions said in a statement after their meeting Wednesday at the Palestinian Embassy that they stand by the side of the Syrian people.

The factions condemned Israel's airstrikes on Syria over the past few days that have destroyed much of the assets of the Syrian army.

The factions decided to form a joint committee to run the affairs of Palestinians in Syria as well as to be in contact with the new insurgent-led transitional government, following the ouster of President Bashar Assad.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live in Syria, many of them refugees, and the factions that have been based in Damascus were close to Assad's government. Hamas was based in Syria until it left in 2012 a year after the county's civil war began.

UN chief pledges support for Syria's transition, says Assad's fall brings hope to Mideast
PRETORIA, South Africa — The United Nations chief says the fall of Syria's authoritarian government has brought hope to the troubled Middle East, and pledged the global body's support to the country's new leaders to ensure a smooth transition.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Wednesday that the U.N. wants to see "an inclusive political process in which the rights of all minorities will be fully respected, and paving the way towards a united sovereign Syria, with its territorial integrity fully re-established."

The jihadi-led Syrian rebels took control of the capital Damascus after the Syrian army withdrew from much of southern part of the country, leaving many areas, including several provincial capitals, under the control of opposition fighters. A Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed force also controls large parts of northeastern Syria.

Guterres said he fully trusts the people of Syria to be able "to choose their own destiny".
"I think it is our duty to do everything to support the different Syrian leaders in order to make sure that they come together and are able to guarantee a smooth transition, an inclusive transition in which all Syrians can feel that they belong," Guterres said. "The alternative does not make any sense."

Guterres is in South Africa to discuss the country's role as it takes over the G20 presidency, among other issues.

Israeli airstrike kills four people in central Gaza
DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — An Israeli strike in central Gaza Strip killed four people and injured 16 others Wednesday, health officials said.

Those killed and injured were taken to Awda Hospital after the strike hit a house in the urban Nuseirat refugee camp, according to the press center at the hospital.

Since Israel's war in Gaza began in October last year, at least 44,805 people have been killed and 106,257 others have been injured, according to the latest update by the Gaza Health ministry.

Top US military commander in the Mideast visits Lebanon for talks with army chief
BEIRUT — The top U.S. military commander for the Middle East was in Lebanon on Wednesday meeting with the head of the Lebanese army.

In the wake of shocking overthrow of the government in neighboring Syria, the two military leaders discussed the security situation in Lebanon, a statement from the country's army said.

U.S. Army Gen. Erik Kurilla, who leads U.S. Central Command, met with the head of the Lebanese army Gen. Joseph Aoun to discuss ongoing American support for the implementation of the U.S.-and French-brokered ceasefire agreement, which ended more than a year of war between Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

Israel has said the truce deal gives it the right to use military force against perceived ceasefire violations. Israel has launched near-daily strikes, mostly in southern Lebanon, that have killed at least 28 people and

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wounded 25 others since the ceasefire took effect on Nov. 27. Still, the shaky truce appears to be holding.

Five people were killed Wednesday by at least three Israeli strikes in different towns in the southern municipality of Bint Jbeil, Lebanon's Health Ministry and state news agency said.

On Tuesday, Kurilla was in eastern Syria visiting U.S. military bases and meeting with members of a Kurdish-led Syrian force that is backed by the U.S. He was assessing what CENTCOM described as efforts to counter a resurgence of the Islamic State group. He also visited Baghdad for talks with Iraqi officials on regional security and counter-IS operations.

Syrian rebels work to get the capital's airport up and running again

DAMASCUS — With the fall of Damascus, security forces of the deposed Bashar Assad government and staff withdrew from the Damascus International airport, grounding flights and stranding passengers. The airport has not been functional since.

Now, security members of the rebel alliance in control of Syria have taken control of the airport, hoping to restore security, a sense of confidence, and the legitimacy needed to restart flights out of the capital, and from one of the country's three international airports.

"Damascus international airport is the heart of the city because it is the gateway for international delegations and missions," Omar al-Shami, a security official with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the faction that led the shock offensive that led to the fall of Assad, told The Associated Press, calling it "the passage for Syria to breathe."

Al-Shami said security was restored at the international airport nearly 12 hours after the fall of Damascus. The factions entered the capital before dawn, and security members of the rebel alliance took charge before sunset on Sunday. He said he hoped the airport would be operational in less than a week.

On Wednesday, a handful of engineers were inspecting four planes that were on the tarmac. Cleaning staff were removing broken furniture, glass windows, and trash from ransacking by looters following the fall of Damascus. The attack, reportedly by mobs and looters from the neighboring areas, left parts of the airport halls destroyed, with smashed furniture and merchandise.

"There was a lot damage in the airport's equipment and facilities in 90% of the sections," Anis Fallouh, the head of the airport, told the AP.

Fallouh said the operations to clean up the airport aim to convince international airlines to resume their flights to Damascus. "Soon in the coming days, flights will resume when we reopen air traffic to Syria and inform countries that Damascus airport is operational. We may start with domestic or test flights to ensure that everything in the airport is operational and avoid any mistakes. Then we can resume international flights."

Engineers were inspecting the four planes on the tarmac, from two Syrian airlines. Some administrative staff were visiting the airport as the new administrators of Damascus work to convince state officials to return to their posts.

"We are on the Airbus 320, the technical team. Because of the security vacuum that happened on Sunday, some ill-intentioned people tried to cause damage but thank God the plane is fine — the body, the engines and its systems. Some things are missing and we are trying to fix that," said Bassam Radi, the engineer in charge of maintenance, said.

Germany says it's looking for ways to work with Syria's new rulers

BERLIN — German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on Wednesday addressed Berlin's reservations but also willingness to work the Syrian militant group in control of Damascus, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS.

"Nobody overlooks the origins of HTS in the al-Qaeda ideology. It is therefore clear that we will measure HTS by its actions," Baerbock told reporters in Berlin. "Any cooperation presupposes that ethnic and religious minorities are protected, women's rights are respected and acts of revenge are prevented."

She said that "whether we like it or not, the HTS militia ... is one of the decisive actors for the future of Syria."

"Together with our partners, we are therefore looking for an adequate way of dealing with HTS, with whom many have had no direct contact for good reasons," she added.

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Ahmad al-Sharaa, the insurgent leader also known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has renounced longtime ties to al-Qaida and depicted himself as a champion of pluralism and tolerance.

Israeli airstrike in southern Lebanon kills 1, state news agency says

BEIRUT — An Israeli airstrike near the southern Lebanese town of Bin Jbeil killed one person and wounded another, the state news agency reported.

National News Agency said Wednesday's airstrike hit a home. It gave no further details and there was no immediate comment from Israeli military.

More than a dozen people have been killed in Israeli airstrikes since a ceasefire went into effect on Nov. 27, ending the 14-month Israel-Hezbollah war.

Blinken is returning to the Middle East

WASHINGTON — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is returning to the Middle East this week on his 12th visit since the Israel-Hamas war erupted last year but his first since the ouster of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Assad's departure has sparked new fears of instability in the region now wracked by three conflicts despite a ceasefire agreement in Lebanon.

Blinken will travel to Jordan and Turkey on Thursday and Friday for talks expected to focus largely on Syria but also touch on long-elusive hopes for a deal to end the fighting in Gaza that has devastated the territory since October 2023.

The State Department said Blinken would meet Jordanian officials, including King Abdullah II, in the port of Aqaba on Thursday before flying to Ankara for meetings with Turkish officials Friday.

Other stops in the region are also possible, officials said.

Blinken "will reiterate the United States' support for an inclusive, Syrian-led transition to an accountable and representative government," department spokesman Matthew Miller said in a statement.

Insurgents set fire to Hafez Assad's tomb, a war monitor says

BEIRUT — Insurgents have set on fire the tomb of Syria's former President Hafez Assad in his hometown in the northwest, a war monitor and a local journalist said Wednesday.

Hafez Assad had ruled Syria for 30 years until his death in 2000, when his son, Bashar, succeeded him. Both ruled Syria with an iron fist and were blamed for crackdowns that left tens of thousands dead, mainly in the central city of Hama in 1982, and in much of the country since the civil war in 2011.

Bashar Assad was ousted over the weekend and fled to Russia where he was given political asylum.

Rami Abdurrahman of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Syrian journalist Qusay Noor told The Associated Press that the tomb was set on fire Wednesday in the town of Qardaha in Latakia province.

UN appeals for \$4 billion for humanitarian operations in Palestinian territories

JERUSALEM — The United Nations is asking donors for over \$4 billion to fund humanitarian operations in the Palestinian territories, most of it earmarked for war-ravaged Gaza.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also called for the "lifting all impediments to the entry of aid" in its appeal issued Wednesday.

U.N. agencies say aid operations in Gaza are hindered by Israeli restrictions and the breakdown of law and order. Israel says it allows enough aid to enter and blames the U.N. for not distributing it within the territory.

The appeal for 2025 includes \$3.6 billion for Gaza and about \$450 million for Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Israel's offensive, launched after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack, has destroyed vast areas of the besieged territory and displaced around 90% of its population of 2.3 million. Many have been displaced multiple times and are now crammed into squalid tent camps with little in the way of food or other essentials. Most of the population relies on international aid.

Paraguay's president addresses the Knesset ahead of embassy reopening in Jerusalem

JERUSALEM — The president of Paraguay addressed the Israeli parliament Wednesday ahead of the

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reopening of the country's embassy in Jerusalem.

The decision to reopen the embassy in Jerusalem and recognize the city as the capital of Israel is a diplomatic win for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and puts Paraguay in a small group of countries that have taken the move.

Israel annexed east Jerusalem in 1967 but it wasn't recognized by the international community, and most countries run their embassies out of Tel Aviv.

"Without Jerusalem, the land of Israel is a body without a soul," President Santiago Peña said in a speech to the Knesset. "So I say here today that without an embassy in Jerusalem, diplomatic relations with Israel do not have a real heart." He said he hoped the move would inspire other countries to do the same.

The embassy is set to open Thursday.

Peña's move was welcomed by Netanyahu, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, along with other Israeli leaders.

"Tomorrow we will inaugurate together the embassy of Paraguay in our eternal capital, and that will happen not for the first time, but for the second time," Netanyahu said.

Paraguay had an embassy in Jerusalem in 2018, under Former President Horacio Cartes. That embassy was moved back to Tel Aviv by Cartes' successor, Mario Abdo Benitez, prompting Israel to close its embassy in Asuncion.

Israel reopened its embassy in September.

Russia says it's in touch with new authorities in Syria

MOSCOW — Russia said Wednesday it has maintained contacts with the new authorities in Syria.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that "we are monitoring most closely what is happening in Syria."

"We, of course, maintain contacts with those who are currently controlling the situation in Syria," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.

"This is necessary because our bases are located there, our diplomatic mission is located there and, of course, the issue related to ensuring the security of these facilities is extremely important and of primary significance."

Peskov wouldn't give details of those contacts, saying only that Russia has contacted "those who are controlling the situation on the ground."

He wouldn't give the number of Russian troops in Syria.

Asked to comment about Israel's seizure of a buffer zone on the border with Syria, Peskov called them destabilizing.

"The strikes and actions in the Golan Heights area, in the buffer zone area, are unlikely to help stabilize the situation in an already destabilized Syria," he said.

Russia has granted political asylum to ousted Syrian President Bashar Assad and his family after they fled rebels who seized Damascus over the weekend.

Iran's supreme leader says fall of Syrian government was part of joint plan by US and Israel

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei says the recent events in Syria, including the fall of its government, were part of a joint plan by the United States and Israel.

"There should be no doubt that what has happened in Syria is the result of a joint American and Zionist plan," Khamenei said in a speech in Tehran on Wednesday that was broadcast on state TV. "We have evidence, and this evidence leaves no room for doubt."

The Supreme leader added: "A neighboring state of Syria has played a clear role in this matter, and it continues to do so. Everyone can see this."

Khamenei also rejected speculation by analysts who have said that Iran will be weakened by the fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad's government.

"Those ignorant analysts are unaware of the meaning of resistance. They think that if resistance weakens, Islamic Iran will also weaken. But I say, with the help and power of God — by the will of Almighty Allah — Iran is powerful and it will become even more powerful," he said.

Southern California forecast of cool temps, calm winds to help firefighters battle Malibu blaze

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER, JAE C. HONG and GABRIELA AOUN ANGUIERA Associated Press
MALIBU, Calif. (AP) — Cooler temperatures, calmer winds and a chance of rainfall in Southern California this week are forecast to help firefighters as they battle a wind-driven blaze in steep, rugged terrain that's driven thousands, including celebrities, from their homes in Malibu.

The weather improved so much Wednesday that meteorologists said all red flag warnings, which indicate conditions for high fire danger and the notorious Santa Ana winds, were discontinued. The conditions allowed firefighters to have "a lot of success" despite the nearly inaccessible terrain, CalFire Assistant Chief Dusty Martin said.

Still, some 20,000 residents remained under evacuation orders and warnings Wednesday evening from the blaze, dubbed the Franklin Fire, which was only 7% contained over 6 square miles (16 square kilometers).

It's unclear how the blaze started. Officials said nine structures had been destroyed and at least six others had been damaged, though crews had only surveyed about 25% of the affected area, said Deputy Chief Albert Yanagisawa of the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Much of the devastation occurred in Malibu, a community of about 10,000 people on the western edge of Los Angeles known for its stunning bluffs and Zuma Beach, which features in many Hollywood films.

Flames burned near horse farms, celebrities' seaside mansions, and Pepperdine University, where students were forced to shelter in place on campus for a second night Tuesday.

Faculty members are determining how best to complete the semester, which ends at Pepperdine this week. Final exams were postponed or canceled, depending on the class, university spokesperson Michael Friel said. An early analysis showed little to no damage to structures on campus, the university said.

Lonnie Vidaurri's four-bedroom home in the Malibu Knolls neighborhood is one of those destroyed. After evacuating to a hotel in Santa Monica with his wife and two young daughters, a neighbor called to tell Vidaurri that firefighters would need to break into his house.

"It's pretty torched all around," Vidaurri said. He expects that the family's pet bunnies did not survive the fire, and that they lost most of their things. "My girls cried, obviously, but it could have been worse."

Mimi Teller, a Red Cross spokesperson who worked in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood, said many people arrived in their pajamas and were "definitely in shock."

"Nobody even had a backpack, it was, 'Get out now,'" Teller said. "One lady didn't even have a leash for her dog, she just scooped them up."

Shawn Smith said he was asleep early Tuesday when someone knocked on his RV at 3 a.m. to wake him up to evacuate the Malibu RV Park.

"You could see the fires rolling in, in over the canyon," he said. "It was like 'Holy crap, this is real.'"

He returned Wednesday to find that the RV park had been saved — firefighters stopped the flames just before they entered the area.

"We got lucky," he said.

Dick Van Dyke, one of many celebrities with homes in Malibu, said in a Facebook post that he and his wife, Arlene Silver, evacuated as the fire swept in. And Cher evacuated from her Malibu home when ordered and is staying at a hotel, her publicist, Liz Rosenberg, said Tuesday.

The fire erupted shortly before 11 p.m. Monday and swiftly moved south, jumping over the famous Pacific Coast Highway and extending all the way to the ocean. It was propelled by Santa Ana winds, with gusts that reached 40 mph (64 kph). Santa Anas are notorious seasonal winds that blow dry air from the interior toward the coast, pushing back moist ocean breezes.

Alec Gellis stayed behind Monday night to save his home in Malibu's Serra Retreat neighborhood from the flames. He used pumps in the home's swimming pool to help spray water over the house and surrounding vegetation, turning the lush area "into a rainforest."

Gellis said there were flames within 5 feet (1.5 meters) of the home on all sides. "The whole canyon was completely lit up."

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Utilities preemptively shut off power to tens of thousands of homes and businesses, starting Monday night, to mitigate the impacts of the Santa Ana winds, whose strong gusts can damage electrical equipment and spark wildfires.

As of Wednesday afternoon, electricity was still out for roughly 600 Southern California Edison customers, and the majority of those were in Los Angeles County, said utility spokesperson Gabriela Ornelas.

"We have been making significant progress," she said.

Outages in Malibu were not included in that figure, Ornelas said. Some 3,300 customers in the Malibu area remained without power, due to safety shutoffs and for firefighter safety. Power was first shut off to most customers in Malibu on Monday evening.

The Woolsey Fire that roared through the area in 2018, killing three people and destroying 1,600 homes, was sparked by Edison equipment. Asked Wednesday if Edison equipment was involved in the Franklin Fire, Ornelas referred all questions regarding the cause to fire officials.

Homeland Security shares new details of mysterious drone flights over New Jersey

By BRUCE SHIPKOWSKI Associated Press

The large mysterious drones reported flying over parts of New Jersey in recent weeks appear to avoid detection by traditional methods such as helicopter and radio, according to a state lawmaker briefed Wednesday by the Department of Homeland Security.

In a post on the social media platform X, Assemblywoman Dawn Fantasia described the drones as up to 6 feet in diameter and sometimes traveling with their lights switched off. The Morris County Republican was among several state and local lawmakers who met with state police and Homeland Security officials to discuss the spate of sightings that range from the New York City area through New Jersey and westward into parts of Pennsylvania, including over Philadelphia.

The devices do not appear to be being flown by hobbyists, Fantasia wrote.

Dozens of mysterious nighttime flights started last month and have raised growing concern among residents and officials. Part of the worry stems from the flying objects initially being spotted near the Picatinny Arsenal, a U.S. military research and manufacturing facility; and over President-elect Donald Trump's golf course in Bedminster. Drones are legal in New Jersey for recreational and commercial use, but they are subject to local and Federal Aviation Administration regulations and flight restrictions. Operators must be FAA certified.

Most, but not all, of the drones spotted in New Jersey were larger than those typically used by hobbyists.

The number of sightings has increased in recent days, though officials say many of the objects seen may have been planes rather than drones. It's also possible that a single drone has been reported more than once.

Gov. Phil Murphy and law enforcement officials have stressed that the drones don't appear to threaten public safety. The FBI has been investigating and has asked residents to share any videos, photos or other information they may have.

Two Republican Jersey Shore-area congressmen, U.S. Reps. Chris Smith and Jeff Van Drew, have called on the military to shoot down the drones.

Smith said a Coast Guard commanding officer briefed him on an incident over the weekend in which a dozen drones followed a motorized Coast Guard lifeboat "in close pursuit" near Barnegat Light and Island Beach State Park in Ocean County.

Coast Guard Lt. Luke Pinneo told The Associated Press Wednesday "that multiple low-altitude aircraft were observed in vicinity of one of our vessels near Island Beach State Park."

The aircraft weren't perceived as an immediate threat and didn't disrupt operations, Pinneo said. The Coast Guard is assisting the FBI and state agencies in investigating.

In a letter to U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Smith called for military help dealing with the drones, noting that Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst has the capability "to identify and take down unauthorized

unmanned aerial systems.”

However, Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh told reporters Wednesday that “our initial assessment here is that these are not drones or activities coming from a foreign entity or adversary.”

Many municipal lawmakers have called for more restrictions on who is entitled to fly the unmanned devices. At least one state lawmaker proposed a temporary ban on drone flights in the state.

“This is something we’re taking deadly seriously. I don’t blame people for being frustrated,” Murphy said earlier this week. A spokesman for the Democratic governor said he did not attend Wednesday’s meeting.

Republican Assemblyman Erik Peterson, whose district includes parts of the state where the drones have been reported, said he also attended Wednesday’s meeting at a state police facility in West Trenton. The session lasted for about 90 minutes.

Peterson said DHS officials were generous with their time, but appeared dismissive of some concerns, saying not all the sightings reported have been confirmed to involve drones.

So who or what is behind the flying objects? Where are they coming from? What are they doing? “My understanding is they have no clue,” Peterson said.

A message seeking comment was left with the Department of Homeland Security.

Most of the drones have been spotted along coastal areas and some were recently reported flying over a large reservoir in Clinton. Sightings also have been reported in neighboring states.

James Edwards, of Succasunna, New Jersey, said he has seen a few drones flying over his neighborhood since last month.

“It raises concern mainly because there’s so much that’s unknown,” Edwards said Wednesday. “There are lots of people spouting off about various conspiracies that they believe are in play here, but that only adds fuel to the fire unnecessarily. We need to wait and see what is really happening here, not let fear of the unknown overtake us.”

North Carolina announces 5-year deal with Bill Belichick to take over as coach of the Tar Heels

By ROB MAADDI and AARON BEARD AP Sports Writers

Bill Belichick had seemingly been waiting for the right opportunity to return to an NFL sideline. Instead, the six-time Super Bowl-winning head coach is headed to the college ranks to take over at North Carolina.

The school announced it had reached a five-year deal with Belichick on Wednesday night, roughly a week after Belichick’s name surfaced as an unlikely candidate to replace the program’s winningest coach in Mack Brown. The deal requires approval by UNC trustees as well as the UNC public system’s governors; an introductory news conference has yet to be scheduled.

Moving on from the 73-year-old Brown to hire the 72-year-old Belichick means UNC is turning to a coach who has never worked at the college level, yet had incredible success in the NFL alongside quarterback Tom Brady throughout most of his 24-year tenure with the Patriots, which ended last season.

There’s also at least a small family tie to the UNC program for Belichick; his late father, Steve, was an assistant coach for the Tar Heels from 1953-55.

“I am excited for the opportunity at UNC-Chapel Hill,” Belichick said in a statement. “I grew up around college football with my dad and treasured those times. I have always wanted to coach in college and now I look forward to building the football program in Chapel Hill.

He’s arriving on campus at a time of rapid changes in college athletics, from free player movement through the transfer portal and athletes’ ability to cash in on endorsements to the looming arrival of revenue sharing. Consider the Belichick hiring a novel approach by the school to rethinking how it will approach those challenges, led by someone known for success at the highest level of the sport.

“We know that college athletics is changing, and those changes require new and innovative thinking,” UNC athletics director Bubba Cunningham said in a statement. “Bill Belichick is a football legend, and hiring him to lead our program represents a new approach that will ensure Carolina football can evolve, compete and win — today and in the future.”

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Belichick holds 333 career regular-season and postseason wins in the NFL, trailing only Don Shula's 347 for the NFL record, while his 31 playoff wins are the most in league history.

He's the second coach to win a Super Bowl and then later become a college head coach; Bill Walsh won three Super Bowls with the San Francisco 49ers and later went 17-17-1 at Stanford from 1992-94.

He had been linked to NFL jobs in the time since his departure from the Patriots, notably the Atlanta Falcons in January. That's why word of Belichick's conversations with UNC — first reported by Inside Carolina and confirmed by the AP last week — stirred such surprise as an unexpected and unconventional candidate.

But the two sides had been in discussions for several days working on terms before finally reaching an agreement to cap what once seemed an improbable outcome.

Belichick said Monday on ESPN's "The Pat McAfee Show" that he'd had "a couple of good conversations" with UNC chancellor Lee Roberts and that he'd spent much of the past year taking a "longer look" at college football.

"If I was in a college program, the college program would be a pipeline to the NFL for the players that had the ability to play in the NFL," Belichick said Monday. "It would be a professional program: training, nutrition, scheme, coaching, techniques that would transfer to the NFL.

"It would be an NFL program at a college level. And an education that would get the players ready for their career after football, whether that was the end of their college career or at the end of their pro career."

Belichick began his NFL coaching career as an assistant with the Baltimore Colts in 1975 and later worked as defensive coordinator under Bill Parcells with the New York Giants, winning two Super Bowls during that stint. He also spent five seasons as head coach of the Cleveland Browns in the first half of the 1990s.

He got his second shot as a head coach in 2000 with the Patriots. And in his second year, as Brady rose to stardom, Belichick won his first Super Bowl title as a head coach.

The Belichick-Brady duo went on to win the Super Bowl for the 2003, 2004, 2014, 2016 and 2018 seasons, and Belichick was The Associated Press NFL coach of the year three times.

Now he takes over a UNC program that is facing a familiar challenge of how to build a sustained winner. The program had reached elite levels in moments rather than eras, notably with Brown building UNC into top-10 national stats (1996, 1997) to end his first tenure in Chapel Hill before taking over at Texas or the Tar Heels cracking the top 10 of the AP Top 25 poll briefly in 2015 and 2020.

The peak of Brown's second tenure came with a nine-win season and trip to the Atlantic Coast Conference championship game in 2022 behind eventual No. 3 overall NFL draft pick Drake Maye, who was coincidentally drafted by the Patriots for their first post-Belichick year.

The school announced Nov. 26 that Brown wouldn't return for a seventh season in his second stint in Chapel Hill, a firing that became effective after the program's all-time wins leader coached his finale in the Nov. 30 loss to rival N.C. State.

Freddie Kitchens, himself a former Browns head coach, has been working as the interim coach as the Tar Heels prepare to face UConn in the Fenway Bowl on Dec. 28.

Rights group accuses Russian mercenaries of abuses against civilians in Mali

By MARK BANCHEREAU Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — Mali's armed forces, supported by Russian mercenaries, committed abuses against civilians since the withdrawal of a U.N. peacekeeping mission late last year, Human Rights Watch said in a report released Thursday.

Malian armed forces and the Russia-backed Wagner Group deliberately killed at least 32 civilians, including seven in a drone strike, kidnapped four others, and burned at least 100 homes in towns and villages in central and northern Mali since May, the rights group said.

Human Rights Watch also accused jihadi groups in the region of having summarily executed at least 47 civilians and displaced thousands of people since June. It said the groups burned thousands of houses and looted livestock, which is vital to the survival of the nomadic communities in the region.

"The Malian army with the Wagner Group and Islamist armed groups have been targeting civilians and their property in violation of the laws of war," Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior Sahel researcher at Human Rights Watch, said in the report.

Mali, along with its neighbors Burkina Faso and Niger, has for over a decade battled an insurgency fought by jihadi groups, including some allied with al-Qaida and the Islamic State group. Following military coups in all three nations in recent years, the ruling juntas have expelled French forces and turned to Russia's mercenary units for security assistance.

Wagner has been present in Mali since late 2021 following a military coup, replacing French troops and international peacekeepers to help fight the militants. At the same time, the mercenary group has been accused of helping to carry out raids and drone strikes that have killed civilians.

In December last year, the United Nations ended its decade long peacekeeping mission in Mali, known as MINUSMA following the government's request that alleged the force was inadequate to respond to the insurgency.

"Since MINUSMA left Mali a year ago, it has been extremely difficult to get comprehensive information on abuses, and we are deeply concerned that the situation is even worse than reported," Allegrozzi said.

Atmospheric river brings weather whiplash to East Coast as bomb cyclone develops

By PATRICK WHITTLE and DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The U.S. East Coast began a whiplash-inducing stretch of weather Wednesday with a deluge of rain, rapid snowmelt and powerful gusts, creating dangerous conditions, due in part to an atmospheric river and developing bomb cyclone.

Ski resort operators in the Northeast watched their snow turn to mush with a deluge of rain and unseasonably high temperatures — followed by damaging winds — all in the same day, part of a powerful storm system that stretched from Florida to Maine.

Utilities braced for widespread power outages with winds projected to exceed 60 mph (97 kph) through late Wednesday. Isolated severe thunderstorms were possible southward into portions of Florida. Elsewhere, heavy lake effect snow was expected through Thursday in parts of Michigan, along the Lake Michigan shoreline, and dangerous cold enveloped parts of the Upper Midwest.

A key driver in the weather was an atmospheric river, which is a long band of water vapor that can transport moisture from the tropics to more northern areas, said Derek Schroeter, a forecaster with the National Weather Service. New England was bearing the brunt as the storm tapped moisture from the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of the U.S. Southeast, and transported it to places like Maine, he said.

Forecasters also said the storm had the potential to include a process that meteorologists call bombogenesis, or a "bomb cyclone." That's a rapid intensification of a cyclone in a short period of time, and it has the ability to bring severe rainfall.

"Is that what they're calling it?" said Jen Roberts, co-owner of Onion River Outdoors sporting goods store in Montpelier, Vermont. She lamented that a five-day stretch of snowfall that lured ski customers into the store was being washed away, underscoring the region's fickle weather. "But you know, this is New England. We know this is what happens."

Alex Hobbs, a Boston college student, hopes that the weather won't interfere with her plans to return home to San Francisco soon.

"I'm a little worried about getting delays with heavy wind and rain, possibly snow," she said Wednesday.

In New England, the storm began with combination of fog and freezing rain Tuesday night into early Wednesday, making travel treacherous. A tractor-trailer carrying a load of oranges went off the Maine Turnpike in New Gloucester; the road was so treacherous that the oranges couldn't be removed until a day later.

In New Hampshire, the Mount Washington Avalanche Center issued a special bulletin Wednesday for

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the Presidential Range of mountains, which received significant snowfall over the last two weeks. "Heavy rainfall could create dangerous and unpredictable avalanche conditions on steep snow-covered slopes," the avalanche center warned.

Atop Mount Washington, wind gusts hit 89 mph (143 kph). The location is one of the planet's windiest spots. Its highest gust recorded for 2023 was 132 mph (212 kph). From January to December of that year, it saw 145 days with gusts of 73 mph (117 kph) or higher.

The rain should help ease drought conditions in the region. As recently as last week, state environmental officials in Massachusetts raised drought concerns on Cape Cod, while a more critical drought declaration remained in effect in other parts of the state.

Flood watches were in effect in Vermont, where the capital city of Montpelier, hard hit in past floods, advised residents to elevate items in basements and low areas that are prone to flooding. And in Rhode Island, heavy surf and flooding closed several roads in Newport.

There were power outages scattered across the region. In Rhode Island more than 6,000 were without power at about 6 p.m., compared to 4,900 in Massachusetts and 4,300 in Maine.

In Higganum, Connecticut, 13 students and a bus driver had to wait inside their bus as utility crews and firefighters removed downed electrical wires that fell onto the bus. Once the area was deemed safe, students evacuated the bus and boarded another that took them to their parents, said Olivia Drake, public information officer for the Haddam Volunteer Fire Company.

It was the fire department's third incident involving power lines on Wednesday. Earlier in the day, firefighters responded to a pole fire and a tree that was leaning on power lines and was smoldering.

Ski resorts around the Northeast were preparing visitors for a potentially messy day on Wednesday. "We don't say the 'r-word' around here. It's a forbidden word," said Jamie Cobbett, marketing director at Waterville Valley Resort in New Hampshire. "We're getting some moist wet weather today. We'll put the mountain back together tonight, and hopefully we'll be back skiing tomorrow with no problems.

At Vermont's Sugarbush resort, skier Marcus Caston was waterlogged but shrugged it off. "The conditions are actually pretty good. The rain is making the snow nice and soft. It's super fun," he said. "We're having fun out here."

Trump taps immigration hard-liner Kari Lake as head of Voice of America

By WILL WEISSERT and JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump said Wednesday that he's picking Kari Lake as director of Voice of America, installing a staunch loyalist who ran unsuccessfully for Arizona governor and a Senate seat to head the congressionally funded broadcaster that provides independent news reporting around the world.

Lake, an immigration hard-liner, was a television news anchor in Phoenix for nearly three decades until she left in 2021 after making a series of controversial statements on social media, including sharing COVID-19 misinformation during the pandemic.

Telegenic, engaging and adept at communicating, Lake launched her political career a short time later, quickly building a loyal following and national profile as she sparred with journalists and echoed Trump in her sharp criticism of what she called the "fake news."

In a statement, Trump said Lake would be ultimately be appointed by and work closely with the head of the U.S. Agency for Global Media for his incoming administration, "who I will announce soon."

He said Lake will "ensure that the American values of Freedom and Liberty are broadcast around the World FAIRLY and ACCURATELY, unlike the lies spread by the Fake News Media."

The president-elect has in the past been a fierce critic of Voice of America, including saying in 2020 that "things they say are disgusting toward our country."

The broadcaster drew additional criticism during Trump's first term for its coverage of the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, with a White House publication, the "1600 Daily" email summary of news and

events, accusing it of using taxpayer money “to speak for authoritarian regimes.” That was after VOA covered the lifting of lockdowns in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the virus first emerged.

VOA was founded during World War II, and its congressional charter requires it to present independent news and information to international audiences. It responded to Trump’s criticism by defending its coverage.

Upon taking office in January 2021, President Joe Biden’s administration swiftly removed a number of senior officials aligned with Trump from VOA and positions affiliated with it.

Lake endeared herself to Trump through her dogmatic commitment to the falsehood that both she and Trump were the victims of election fraud. She has never acknowledged losing the gubernatorial race and called herself the “lawful governor” in her 2023 book, “Unafraid: Just Getting Started.”

Lake continued her unsuccessful fight in court to overturn it even after beginning her run for Senate — which she lost by an even higher margin last month, after trying to moderate her tone during her tone but struggling to keep a consistent message on thorny topics, including election fraud and abortion.

Trump nonetheless considered her for his vice presidential running mate before deciding on JD Vance.

Also Wednesday, Trump announced Leandro Rizzuto as his choice to be the U.S. ambassador to the Washington-based Organization of American States, and said he wanted Florida personal injury attorney Dan Newlin to be his administration’s ambassador to Colombia.

He also picked Peter Lamelas, a physician and the founder of one of Florida’s largest urgent care companies, to be the U.S. ambassador to Argentina. Lamelas is also a large donor to the past campaigns of Trump and other top Republicans.

Judge declares mistrial after jury deadlocks over killing of gay University of Mississippi student

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

A judge declared a mistrial Wednesday in the case of Sheldon “Timothy” Herrington Jr. in the 2022 killing of Jimmy “Jay” Lee, a gay man who was prominent in the LGBTQ+ community at the University of Mississippi.

Jurors said they were unable to reach a verdict after over nine and a half hours of deliberation.

Lee’s body has never been found, but a judge declared him dead.

Herrington, 24, showed little emotion as he left the courtroom with his attorneys and several relatives. He remains free on bond and is still charged with capital murder, which Mississippi law defines as a killing committed along with another felony — in this case, kidnapping. Prosecutors had said they would not seek the death penalty. He faces life in prison if he is tried again and convicted.

Jurors on Wednesday were told they could also consider lesser charges of first-degree murder, punishable by life in prison; second-degree murder, 20 years to life; or manslaughter, up to 20 years.

Circuit Judge Kelly Luther said he will consult with prosecutors and defense attorneys about setting another trial.

Both Herrington and Lee had graduated from the University of Mississippi. Lee, 20, was pursuing a master’s degree. He was known for his creative expression through fashion and makeup and often performed in drag shows in Oxford, according to a support group called Justice for Jay Lee.

Lee disappeared July 8, 2022, in Oxford, where the university is located and the trial was held.

Police arrested Herrington two weeks after Lee vanished. Investigators testified that they used warrants to obtain electronic records including explicit messages between social media accounts belonging to the two men and online searches conducted by Herrington, including one inquiring how long it takes to strangle someone.

Prosecutors said during closing arguments Wednesday that Herrington and Lee had a sexual encounter that ended badly and Lee left Herrington’s apartment. They said text messages showed that Herrington, who was not openly gay, persuaded Lee to return with the promise of more sex. Prosecutors said Lee was killed after going back.

“Tim Herrington lived a lie — lived a lie to his family,” District Attorney Ben Creekmore said. “He lied to

Jay Lee to coax him over there, promising to do something with him.”

Herrington’s attorney, Kevin Horan, has said prosecutors cannot prove Lee is dead without having a body. He told jurors Wednesday that text messages showed Herrington did not lure Lee to his apartment.

“He’s the one that’s being dominant anchoring this particular conversation,” Horan said of Lee.

Lee, 20, has not contacted friends or family, and his financial transactions and once-prolific social media posts have stopped since the day he disappeared, investigators testified.

Police arrested Herrington two weeks after Lee went missing. Authorities interviewed Herrington twice that day, and he gave conflicting information about the hours before Lee vanished, Oxford Police Chief Jeff McCutchen testified Tuesday.

Before officers interviewed Herrington, they had already obtained explicit messages exchanged between social media accounts belonging to Herrington and Lee during the final hours Lee was known to be alive, McCutchen said.

Google records obtained through a warrant showed that Herrington searched “how long does it take to strangle someone” at 5:56 a.m., University Police Department Sgt. Benjamin Douglas testified last week.

The final text message from Lee’s phone was sent to a social media account belonging to Herrington at 6:03 a.m. from a spot near Herrington’s apartment, McCutchen said Tuesday. A cellphone tower in another part of Oxford last located any signal from Lee’s phone shortly before 7:30 a.m., the police chief said. A security camera showed Herrington moments later jogging out of a parking lot where Lee’s car was abandoned, investigators testified earlier.

On the day Lee vanished, Herrington was also seen on security cameras buying duct tape in Oxford and driving to his own hometown of Grenada about an hour south of Oxford, police have testified.

Herrington’s relatives sat behind him in the courtroom, and Lee’s sat behind prosecutors. When Luther dismissed court after the mistrial, he instructed the two groups to leave separately.

Jurors were chosen from another county about 250 miles (402 kilometers) to the south. They heard eight days of arguments and testimony.

The judge twice urged jurors to continue deliberating when they said they were deadlocked. After the third such message, Luther declared the mistrial and thanked them for serving, adding: “I’ve asked a lot of you.”

Hannah Kobayashi, missing Hawaii woman whose disappearance prompted a massive search, is found safe

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Hannah Kobayashi, the missing Hawaii woman whose disappearance prompted a massive search and a missing persons investigation in Los Angeles, has been found safe, police said Wednesday.

Kobayashi vanished last month in Los Angeles. She missed her connecting flight and planned to explore the city the next day, but subsequent text messages to her family — and an inability to then reach her — alarmed them so much that they later reported her missing.

Other details about her disappearance, as well as where and how she was found, were not immediately available Wednesday, but police previously said she was “voluntarily missing” and had gone on her own will across the border into Mexico.

“We are happy to learn that Hannah has been found safe,” the Los Angeles Police Department said in a statement. “Now that we have this new information, this has become a private matter and we will wrap up our investigation.”

Kobayashi’s mother and sister, in a statement through their lawyer, were the first to announce Wednesday that she had been found safe.

“We are incredibly relieved and grateful that Hannah has been found safe,” Brandi Yee and Sydni Kobayashi wrote. “This past month has been an unimaginable ordeal for our family, and we kindly ask for privacy as we take the time to heal and process everything we have been through. We want to express

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our heartfelt thanks to everyone who supported us during this difficult time. Your kindness and concern have meant the world to us.”

Kobayashi, a budding photographer from Maui, was heading to New York City on Nov. 8 for a new job and to visit relatives when she missed a connecting flight during a stop at Los Angeles International Airport. She told her family she was sleeping at the airport that night and texted them the next day to say she was sightseeing in Los Angeles.

Her family reported her missing to law enforcement on Nov. 11 after relatives received “strange and cryptic, just alarming” text messages, according to her aunt Larie Pidgeon.

“Once the family started pressing, she went dark,” Pidgeon told The Associated Press late last month. After the texts on Nov. 11, her phone “just went dead,” Pidgeon said.

Family members, friends and local volunteers searched for Hannah in Los Angeles. Hannah’s father, Ryan Kobayashi, was among those who flew in from Hawaii to help in the search. He was found dead Nov. 24 in a parking lot near LA International Airport, according to the county medical examiner. Kobayashi’s family confirmed Ryan Kobayashi’s death in a statement the same day, saying they “endured a devastating tragedy” and that he died by suicide.

Police said Hannah Kobayashi walked into Mexico at the San Ysidro border crossing about 125 miles (201 kilometers) southeast of Los Angeles on Nov. 12, the day after her family reported her missing. Authorities made the announcement after reviewing security video from U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Kobayashi disappeared voluntarily as she sought to “step away from modern connectivity,” Jim McDonnell, the LA police chief, previously said.

Saudi Arabia will host the 2034 World Cup. But when exactly?

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

ZURICH (AP) — Saudi Arabia scored a major win in its campaign to attract major sports events to the kingdom when it was formally appointed as the 2034 World Cup host on Wednesday.

Still, many questions remain about the tournament as well as the 2030 World Cup, which will be co-hosted by Spain, Portugal and Morocco, with three games in South America.

Here are some of the key issues that need to be answered over the next decade:

Where will games be played?

Saudi Arabia proposes 15 stadiums — eight still on paper — in five cities: Eight in the capital Riyadh, four in the Red Sea port city Jeddah, and one each in Abha, Al Khobar and Neom, the planned futuristic mega-project. Each would have at least 40,000 seats for World Cup games.

The opening game and final are set for a 92,000-seat venue planned in Riyadh. Some designs are vivid. In Neom, the stadium is planned 350 meters (yards) above street level and one near Riyadh is designed to be atop a 200-meter cliff with a retractable wall of LED screens.

Saudi Arabia aims to host all 104 games, though there has been speculation that some games could be played in neighboring or nearby countries.

When will the World Cup be played?

Surely not in the traditional World Cup period of June-July, when temperatures in Saudi Arabia routinely exceed 40 Celsius (104 degrees).

FIFA moved the Qatar-hosted World Cup to November-December 2022, though those dates were not loved by most European clubs and leagues whose seasons were interrupted. Also, that slot is complicated in 2034 by the holy month of Ramadan through mid-December and Riyadh hosting the multi-sport Asian Games.

January 2034 could be a possibility even though that would be just before the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. The International Olympic Committee has signaled it won’t be opposed to back-to-back major events.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday, Saudi World Cup bid official Hammad Albalawi said the precise dates of the tournament are up to the world soccer body.

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"That's a decision by FIFA. We stand ready to be part of this conversation. But ultimately it's a FIFA decision together with the confederations," Albalawi said.

Will stadiums be segregated for men and women?

Giving more rights and freedoms to women in a traditionally conservative society is fundamental to Saudi messaging around the modernization program known as Vision 2030.

The kingdom decided in 2017 to let women attend sports events, initially in major cities and in family zones separate from men-only sections.

By 2034, at the promised pace of social reforms, female fans should not be restricted.

Saudi Arabia launched a women's professional soccer league in 2022 with players joining from clubs in Europe. They face no restrictions playing in shorts and with hair uncovered.

Will alcohol be allowed at the venues or hotels?

The Saudi prohibition of alcohol is clear and understood before FIFA signs any sponsor deals for 2034. But will there be any exceptions?

The alcohol issue was problematic for the World Cup in Qatar because the expectation was created that beer sales would be allowed at stadiums even before Qatar won its bid in 2010. One year later, FIFA extended a long-time deal to have Budweiser as the official World Cup beer through 2022.

Qatar then backtracked on that promise three days before the first game, causing confusion and the sense of a promise broken.

In Qatar, alcohol was served only at luxury suites at the stadiums. Visitors could also have a drink in some hotel bars.

But Saudi Arabia has even stricter rules on alcohol — and there is no indication that will change.

Albalawi noted that Saudi Arabia has successfully hosted dozens of sports events where alcohol wasn't served.

"We're creating a safe and secure family environment for fans to bring their families into our stadiums," he said.

How will workers rights be protected?

Saudi promises to reform and enforce labor laws, and fully respect migrant workers, have been accepted by FIFA but face broad skepticism from rights groups and trade unions. A formal complaint is being investigated by the U.N.-backed International Labor Organization.

Protecting the migrant workers needed to build stadiums and other tournament projects — a decade after it was a defining issue for Qatar — looms as a signature challenge for Saudi Arabia.

Would Israel be allowed to play if it qualified for the 2034 World Cup?

Saudi-Israeli relations had been improving when FIFA all but gave the 2034 World Cup to the kingdom on Oct. 4 last year. Three days later Hamas attacked Israel and diplomacy got more complicated.

Any soccer federation bidding to host a FIFA tournament accepts a basic principle that whichever team qualifies is welcome.

That did not stop Indonesia putting up barriers last year to Israel coming for the men's Under-20 World Cup. Indonesia does not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel which had qualified through a European tournament nine months before the issue flared.

FIFA moved the entire tournament to Argentina and the Israeli team reached the semifinals.

Israel played at the 1970 World Cup but has never advanced through qualifying in Europe, where it has been a member of UEFA for 30 years. Europe should have 16 places in the 48-team World Cup in Saudi Arabia.

Where will the final of the 2030 World Cup be played?

Most of the attention at the FIFA Congress on Wednesday was on the Saudi decision, but the soccer body and its members also formally approved the hosts of the 2030 World Cup — the most spread out and longest ever.

One game each in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, the original host in 1930, will be played from June 8-9. The tournament resumes four days later for the other 101 games shared between Spain, Portugal

and Morocco.

Six countries, three continents, multiple languages and currencies. Fans traveling on planes, trains, automobiles and boats across about 14 kilometers (10 miles) of water between Spain and Morocco.

The final is due on July 21, 2030 and a decision on where it will be played could cause some tension between the host countries.

Morocco wants it in the world's biggest soccer venue — the planned 115,000-seat King Hassan II Stadium in Casablanca. Spain, meanwhile, has proposed to host the final in either of the remodeled home stadiums of club giants Real Madrid or Barcelona.

FBI Director Wray says he intends to resign before Trump takes office in January

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — FBI Director Christopher Wray told bureau workers Wednesday that he plans to resign at the end of President Joe Biden's term in January, an announcement that came a week and a half after President-elect Donald Trump said he would nominate loyalist Kash Patel for the job.

Wray said at a town hall meeting that he would be stepping down "after weeks of careful thought," roughly three years short of the completion of a 10-year term during which he tried to keep the FBI out of politics even as the bureau found itself entangled in a string of explosive investigations, including two that led to separate indictments of Trump last year as well as inquiries into Biden and his son.

"My goal is to keep the focus on our mission — the indispensable work you're doing on behalf of the American people every day," Wray told agency employees. "In my view, this is the best way to avoid dragging the bureau deeper into the fray, while reinforcing the values and principles that are so important to how we do our work."

The intended resignation was not unexpected considering that Trump had settled on Patel to be director and had repeatedly aired his ire at Wray, whom he appointed during his first term. But his departure is nonetheless a reflection of how Trump's norm-breaking style has reshaped Washington, with the president-elect yet again flouting tradition by moving to replace an FBI director well before his term was up and Wray resigning to avert a collision with the incoming administration.

"It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway — this is not easy for me," Wray said. "I love this place, I love our mission, and I love our people — but my focus is, and always has been, on us and doing what's right for the FBI."

Wray received a standing ovation following his remarks before a standing-room-only crowd at FBI headquarters and some in the audience cried, according to an FBI official who was not authorized to discuss the private gathering by name and spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press.

Trump applauded the news on social media, calling it "a great day for America as it will end the Weaponization of what has become known as the United States Department of Injustice" and saying that Patel's confirmation will begin "the process of Making the FBI Great Again."

If confirmed by the Senate, Patel would herald a radical leadership transformation at the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency. He has advocated shutting down the FBI's Washington headquarters and called for ridding the federal government of "conspirators," raising alarms that he might seek to wield the FBI's significant investigative powers as an instrument of retribution against Trump's perceived enemies.

Patel said Wednesday that he was looking forward to "a smooth transition. I will be ready to serve the American people on day one."

It's extremely rare for FBI directors to be ousted from their jobs before the completion of their 10-year terms, a length meant to insulate the agency from the political influence of changing administrations. But Trump has done it twice, placing Wray in the job in 2017 after firing Director James Comey amid an investigation into ties between Russia and the Republican president's campaign.

Despite having appointed Wray, Trump had telegraphed his anger with the FBI director on multiple occasions throughout the years, including as recently as the past week.

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In an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" that aired Sunday, Trump said, "I can't say I'm thrilled with him. He invaded my home," a reference to the FBI's 2002 search of Trump's Florida property, Mar-a-Lago, for classified documents from Trump's first term as president.

That search, and the recovery of boxes of sensitive government records, paved the way for one of two federal indictments against Trump. The case, and another one charging him with plotting to overturn the 2020 election, have both been dismissed by the Justice Department special counsel that brought them in light of Trump's November victory.

Attorney General Merrick Garland praised Wray for having "served our country honorably and with integrity for decades." He said: "Under Director Wray's principled leadership, the FBI has worked to fulfill the Justice Department's mission to keep our country safe, protect civil rights, and uphold the rule of law."

Natalie Bara, the president of the FBI Agents Association, said in a statement that Wray had led the FBI "through challenging times with a steady focus on doing the work that keeps our country safe."

Throughout his seven years on the job, the self-professed "low-key, understated" Wray brought a workmanlike approach to the job, repeatedly preaching a "keep calm and tackle hard" mantra despite a steady drumbeat of attacks from Trump and his supporters.

He also sought to avoid public conflict when possible with the Trump White House, distancing himself and his leadership team from the FBI's Russia investigation over errors that took place before he took office and announcing dozens of corrective actions meant to prevent the recurrence of the surveillance abuses that plagued the inquiry.

But there were other instances when he memorably broke from Trump — he did not agree, for instance, with Trump's characterization of the Russia investigation as a "witch hunt." He made known his displeasure when the White House blessed the declassification of materials related to the surveillance of a former Trump campaign aide and contradicted a Trump talking point by stating that Ukraine had not interfered in the 2016 election.

He repeatedly sought to keep the focus on the FBI's day-to-day work, using the bulk of his resignation announcement to praise the bureau's efforts in countering everything from violent crime and cyberattacks to Chinese espionage and terrorism.

"The most sacred responsibility of government is — and will remain — protecting its citizens," Wray said. "You all are on the front lines of that effort every day, and I know you will continue to adapt and evolve and innovate to stay ahead."

Yet even as he leaves office at a time of heightened threats, much of the public focus has been on the politically sensitive investigations of his tenure.

Besides the inquiries into Trump, the FBI in recent years also investigated Biden's handling of classified information as well as Biden's son Hunter for tax and gun violations. Hunter Biden was pardoned by his father last week.

A particular flashpoint came in August 2022, when FBI agents searched Mar-a-Lago — an action officials defended as necessary given the boxes of documents that were being concealed at the Palm Beach property and the evidence of obstruction that the Justice Department said had been gathered.

Trump railed against the FBI over that search and has kept up his criticism ever since. The president-elect, for instance, was angered by Wray's comment at a congressional hearing that there was "some question about whether or not it's a bullet or shrapnel" that struck Trump's ear during an assassination attempt in Pennsylvania in July. The FBI later stated unequivocally that it was indeed a bullet.

Before being named FBI director, Wray worked at a prestigious law firm, King & Spalding, where he represented former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie during the "Bridgewater" scandal. He also led the Justice Department's criminal division for a period during President George W. Bush's administration.

Wisconsin kayaker who faked his death and fled the country is charged after returning to US

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

GREEN LAKE, Wis. (AP) — A Wisconsin man who faked his own drowning and left his wife and three children for Eastern Europe willingly returned to the U.S. after four months and was charged Wednesday with obstructing an intense lake search for his body.

The criminal complaint charging Ryan Borgwardt with misdemeanor obstruction offers a detailed account of how the 45-year-old pulled off his disappearance, including how he struggled to emerge from the water, almost didn't make it through customs on his way overseas and was living in the country of Georgia when he realized he had left too many clues behind.

Police said Borgwardt turned himself in to authorities at the Green Lake County sheriff's office in Wisconsin on Tuesday. A judge entered a not-guilty plea on his behalf during a brief court hearing on Wednesday afternoon. He was released on \$500 bail, although he would only have to pay that amount if he misses a future court date.

Borgwardt told Judge Mark Slate that he would represent himself going forward since he has only \$20 in his wallet. The judge advised he could get a court-appointed lawyer but didn't name one for him.

It's unclear what Borgwardt plans to do now. His parents were in court, but he was led out by bailiffs after the proceeding ended without speaking to them. Bailiffs escorted the couple out through a rear door to avoid waiting reporters.

Borgwardt was reported missing on Aug. 12. According to a criminal complaint, Borgwardt told investigators that he had been researching how to disappear, studying lake deaths and how deep a body has to sink so it won't resurface.

He attended church with his family on the morning of Aug. 11 and then put his plan into motion that night, driving 50 miles (80 kilometers) from his home in Watertown to Green Lake. Sheriff Mark Podoll said Borgwardt told investigators he picked Green Lake because it's the deepest lake in Wisconsin.

He paddled his kayak to the middle of the lake, inflated a raft he brought with him, overturned the kayak and paddled back to shore in the raft, dumping his cell phone and a tackle box with other identification in the lake on the way, according to the complaint.

Borgwardt said "he had to make this believable so that everyone, including law enforcement, would think he drowned in the lake," the complaint said.

He told investigators he struggled to get out of the lake, sinking into waist-deep muck. Worried that police would find his muddy footprints, he tried to wash them off the road before retrieving an electric bike he had stashed nearby. He traveled 70 miles (112 kilometers) through the night to Madison, where he caught a bus to the Toronto airport.

He said he barely got through Canadian customs because he didn't have his driver's license, which he had thrown in the lake. He eventually boarded a flight to Paris and then to an unspecified country in Asia.

After landing in that country, a woman picked him up. They spent a couple days in a hotel, and he later took up residency in the country of Georgia, according to the complaint and a probable cause statement.

Investigators contacted Borgwardt through information they found on a laptop he left behind, including a photo of the woman he traveled to meet. He told investigators he had to leave the laptop behind to make his death believable but left too much information on it, according to the complaint.

Podoll said in November that investigators found passport photos, inquiries about moving funds to foreign banks and communication with a woman from Uzbekistan. They also discovered that Borgwardt took out a \$375,000 life insurance policy in January. Podoll has said the policy was for his family.

The sheriff's office has said the search for Borgwardt's body lasted more than a month and cost at least \$35,000. Borgwardt told investigators he often checked the news for updates on his disappearance and thought the search would last only a few weeks, according to the complaint.

Borgwardt told investigators that he knew police would find him but he wanted to delay their efforts for as long as he could, according to the complaint.

Podoll announced in November that investigators had made contact with Borgwardt and were “pulling at his heartstrings” to come home.

The sheriff told reporters during a news conference Wednesday morning that Borgwardt returned to the U.S. willingly and turned himself at the sheriff’s office in the Green Lake County Government Center on Tuesday afternoon. He declined to detail Borgwardt’s return trip, saying only that “he got on an airplane.” He also declined to elaborate on what drove Borgwardt to return.

“That’s going to be up to him someday,” the sheriff said. “We’re not going to release that. ... We brought a dad back on his own.”

The Trump and Biden teams insist they’re working hand in glove on foreign crises

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump doesn’t think much of Joe Biden’s foreign policy record. The Republican president-elect frequently casts the outgoing Democratic president as a feckless leader who shredded American credibility around the world during his four-year term.

But a funny thing happened on Trump’s way back to the White House: The Biden and Trump national security teams have come to an understanding that they have no choice but to work together as conflicts in Gaza, Syria and Ukraine have left a significant swath of the world on a knife’s edge.

It’s not clear how much common ground those teams have found as they navigate crises that threaten to cause more global upheaval as Trump prepares to settle back into the White House on Jan. 20, 2025.

“There is a deep conviction on the part of the incoming national security team that we are dealing with ... and on our part, directed from President Biden, that it is our job, on behalf of the American people, to make sure this is a smooth transition,” Biden’s national security adviser Jake Sullivan said during a weekend appearance at a forum in California. “And we are committed to discharging that duty as relentlessly and faithfully as we possibly can.”

To be certain, Trump and his allies haven’t let up on their criticism of Biden, putting the blame squarely on the shoulders of Biden and Democrats for the series of crises around the globe.

The president-elect says Biden is responsible for the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, arguing that policies under his watch led to Hamas and Russia becoming emboldened. And shortly before Syria’s Bashar al-Assad’s government collapsed last week, Trump blamed Biden’s old boss, former President Barack Obama, for failing to enforce his own “red line” in 2013 after Assad deployed chemical weapons that killed hundreds of civilians, and laying the groundwork for Islamic militants to establish a beachhead in the country.

But amid the hectoring of Biden, Trump team officials acknowledge that the Biden White House has worked diligently to keep Trump’s circle apprised and help ensure there is a smooth handoff on national security matters.

“For our adversaries out there that think this is a time of opportunity that they can play one administration off the other, they’re wrong, and we are — we are hand in glove,” Mike Waltz, Trump’s pick for national security adviser, said in a Fox News interview last month. “We are one team with the United States in this transition.”

While Trump rarely has a good word for the Democratic administration, there’s an appreciation in Trump world of how the Biden White House has gone about sharing critical national security information, according to a Trump transition official who was not authorized to comment publicly.

The coordination is precisely how lawmakers intended for incoming and outgoing administrations to conduct themselves during a handover when they bolstered federal support for transitions. It’s already the most substantive handoff process since 2009, aides to Biden and Trump acknowledged, surpassing Trump’s chaotic first takeover in 2017 and his wide refusal to cooperate with the incoming Biden team in 2021.

Trump’s pick to serve as special envoy to the Middle East, Florida real estate developer Steve Witkoff, consulted with Biden administration officials as he recently traveled to Mideast to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Qatar’s Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani,

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according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly about the sensitive talks and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Sullivan, who was to travel to Israel on Wednesday for talks with Netanyahu, has in turn kept Waltz in the loop about the Biden administration's efforts at getting a ceasefire and hostage deal in Gaza before Trump's inauguration.

Biden administration officials say that the two national security teams have also closely coordinated on Ukraine and Syria, though they have provided scant detail on what that coordination has looked like.

"Let me put it this way: Nothing that we're doing and nothing that we're saying are coming as a surprise to the incoming team," White House national security spokesman John Kirby said. "They will decide for themselves what policies they might want to keep in place, what approaches they might want to continue and which ones they won't."

Trump made clear during his campaign that he would move to end the war in Ukraine quickly once he came to office. He called on Russian leader Vladimir Putin earlier this week to act to reach an immediate ceasefire with Ukraine.

But the Biden White House has begun gently — and publicly — making the case for how continued support for Ukraine lines up with Trump's priorities.

On Saturday, Sullivan pointed to comments made by Trump on social media to buttress the case that Biden's push for continued support of Ukraine falls in line with the incoming president's thinking.

Trump earlier that day had noted that Assad's rule was collapsing because Russia "lost all interest in Syria because of Ukraine, where close to 600,000 Russian soldiers lay wounded or dead, in a war that should never have started, and could go on forever."

"Russia and Iran are in a weakened state right now, one because of Ukraine and a bad economy, the other because of Israel and its fighting success," Trump said in the posting on Truth Social.

Sullivan underscored that Biden and Trump are in agreement that there should be no American boots on the ground in Syria and that the war in Ukraine was a major factor in Assad's fall.

"I was a little bit struck by it — earlier in the post, he said part of the reason this is happening is because of Russia's war against Ukraine," Sullivan said of Trump. "And I think he even referenced the sheer scale of the casualties that Russia has suffered in Ukraine, and for that reason, they're not in a position to defend their client, Assad. And on that point, we're in vigorous agreement."

Two days later in Washington, Sullivan made the case that Trump should bolster the little-known U.S. International Development Finance Corporation that was created during the Republican's first term.

The push for reauthorizing the foreign aid agency comes as Trump has promised to make massive cuts to the federal bureaucracy.

Trump signed into law the agency's authority -- tucked into a five-year reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration — to provide \$60 billion in loans, loan guarantees and insurance to companies in developing nations.

Sullivan called the agency an effective tool for private-public partnerships, before allowing that "maybe I shouldn't be the one" making the case "since I'm leaving, but I will give my advice anyway."

"It was created as we've all noted, under the Trump administration," Sullivan said in remarks at the agency's annual conference. "It has been strengthened under the Biden administration. And as we look to DFC reauthorization next year, it has to remain a bipartisan priority."

After Assad's government fell, the Biden administration issued a warning to Iran not to speed up its nuclear program after one of its closest allies was toppled, declaring "that'll never happen on our watch." The U.S. official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic, hinted at coordination on the matter with the Trump team.

The official said there had been "good discussions" with the incoming administration on the matter and there was an expectation the same policy would carry over.

Biden has also approved a new national security memorandum that is meant to serve as a road map for the incoming Trump administration as it looks to counter growing cooperation between China, Iran, North Korea and Russia, the White House announced Wednesday.

Biden administration officials began developing the guidance this summer. It was shaped to be a document that could help the next administration build its approach from Day 1 on how it will go about dealing with the tightening relationships between the United States' most prominent adversaries and competitors, according to two other senior administration officials.

One of those officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, sought to assure the incoming Trump team that the Biden White House effort "isn't trying to box them in or tilt them toward one policy option or another."

Instead, the official said, it's about helping the next administration build "capacity" as it shapes its policies on some of the most difficult foreign policies it will face.

Israeli strikes on Gaza kill at least 33 including children, Palestinian medics say

By SAMY MAGDY and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli strikes pounded the Gaza Strip overnight and into Wednesday, with one attack ripping through a home where displaced people were sheltering in the isolated north. The strikes killed at least 33 people including children, Palestinian health officials said.

Violence also flared in outside Jerusalem, where an Israeli bus came under fire from a suspected Palestinian attacker late Wednesday, wounding three people including a 10-year-old boy, according to the military and hospital officials. The attack took place on a highway near major Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, and the army was looking for the shooter in the area around Bethlehem.

The Israel-Hamas war in Gaza shows no end in sight, even after Israel reached a ceasefire with Lebanon's Hezbollah militants and attention shifted to the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar Assad by insurgents. Both the current and incoming U.S. administrations have said they hope to end the war in Gaza before the inauguration in January, but ceasefire talks have repeatedly stalled.

The U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly approved resolutions Wednesday demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and backing the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees that Israel has moved to ban.

General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, although they do reflect world opinion. The votes in the 193-nation assembly were 158-9 with 13 abstentions to demand a ceasefire. Israel and its close ally the United States were in the tiny minority voting against.

Israeli strike in north Gaza wipes out 3 generations

The strike on the home killed 19 people in the northern town of Beit Lahiya near the border with Israel, according to nearby Kamal Adwan Hospital, which received the bodies. Hospital records show that a family of eight was among those killed: four children, their parents and two grandparents.

The Israeli military said it targeted a Hamas militant in the vicinity of the hospital. It said reports about the number of casualties in the strike were inaccurate, without elaborating. The military says it tries to avoid harming civilians and accuses militants of hiding among them, putting their lives in danger.

The hospital said another strike near its entrance on Wednesday killed a woman and her two children.

The hospital director, Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, said Israeli drones struck nearby residential blocks overnight, causing explosions that sparked panic among the facility's more than 120 sick and wounded patients.

"We have received distress calls from neighbors and trapped people, but we're not able to leave the hospital because of the continued risk," he said. "We are witnessing a massive loss of life, with many martyrs in the targeted areas."

Another strike in the decades-old Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza killed at least seven people, according to the Awda Hospital. The dead included two children, their parents and three other relatives, it said. Later, the hospital said another attack hit the same camp, killing four people and injuring 16 more.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military on the other strikes.

In Lebanon, where near-daily Israeli attacks have continued despite the ceasefire, at least five people died Wednesday in Israeli strikes in the south, according to Lebanon's Health Ministry and state news agency.

Elsewhere in southern Lebanon, Israeli forces withdrew from a strategic town and handed it back to the

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Lebanese army in coordination with U.N. peacekeepers, the two militaries said. It appeared to be the first Israeli pullout from a Lebanese border town captured during the ground invasion.

In Syria, the Israeli military estimates it has destroyed 70% to 80% of Syrian military assets in recent days, according to an official speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss an intelligence assessment. The military has said it has carried out hundreds of airstrikes.

Evacuation orders in camp after rocket fire

Militants in central Gaza fired four projectiles into Israel on Wednesday, two of which were intercepted, the military said. The other two fell in open areas, and there were no reports of casualties.

The military ordered the evacuation of a five-block area of the built-up Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza, saying the rockets had been fired from there. The orders indicated that Israel would soon carry out strikes in the area.

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

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 44,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to local health officials. They say women and children make up more than half the dead but do not distinguish between fighters and civilians in their count. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Thousands more Palestinians have gone missing during the war, some after encounters with Israeli troops.

UN says Gaza civilians face 'utterly devastating situation'

Israel has been waging a renewed offensive against Hamas militants in Gaza's heavily destroyed north since early October. Troops have surrounded Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and the urban Jabaliya refugee camp, allowing in almost no humanitarian aid and ordering tens of thousands to flee to nearby Gaza City.

Israeli officials have said the three communities are mostly deserted, but the United Nations humanitarian office said Tuesday it believes around 65,000 to 75,000 people are still there, with little access to food, water, electricity or health care. Experts have warned that the north may be experiencing famine.

Sigrid Kaag, the senior U.N. humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, told reporters on Tuesday that civilians trying to survive all across Gaza face an "utterly devastating situation."

She pointed to the breakdown in law and order and looting that has left the U.N. and many aid organizations unable to deliver food and other humanitarian essentials to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in need.

Kaag said she and other U.N. officials repeatedly ask Israel for access for convoys to northern Gaza and elsewhere, to allow in commercial goods, to reopen the Rafah crossing from Egypt in the south and to approve dual-use items.

The Israeli military says it allows in enough humanitarian aid and blames U.N. agencies for not distributing it, saying large amounts of aid have accumulated just inside Gaza's borders. U.N. officials say Israeli restrictions, the breakdown of law and order and ongoing fighting make it difficult to access the aid and distribute it, and have repeatedly called for a ceasefire.

The United States, Egypt and Qatar have mediated talks between Israel and Hamas for nearly a year, and diplomats say those efforts have recently gained momentum.

But Hamas has said it will not release the remaining hostages without an end to the war and a full withdrawal of Israeli troops. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to continue the war until Hamas is destroyed and all the hostages are returned and has said Israel will maintain a lasting military presence in some areas.

Gun found on suspect in killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO matches shell casings at scene, police say

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

ALTOONA, Pa. (AP) — The gun found on the man charged with killing United Healthcare's CEO matched shell casings found at the site of the shooting, New York City's police commissioner said Wednesday as authorities scrutinized evidence and the suspect's experiences with the victim's industry.

Luigi Mangione's fingerprints also matched a water bottle and a snack bar wrapper that police found near the scene in midtown Manhattan, Commissioner Jessica Tisch said at an unrelated news conference. Police had said earlier that they believed the gunman bought the items at a nearby coffee shop while awaiting his target.

Mangione, 26, remained jailed without bail Wednesday in Pennsylvania, where he was arrested and initially charged with gun and forgery offenses. Manhattan prosecutors were working to bring him to New York to face a murder charge in the death of Brian Thompson, the leader of the United States' biggest health insurer.

Mangione's lawyer has cautioned the public against prejudging the case.

While the case is in early stages, police believe the suspect may have been motivated by animus toward the health care industry.

Investigators are looking into an accident that injured Mangione's back and sent him to an emergency room on July 4, 2023, police said Wednesday. They're scrutinizing his Facebook page, where he posted X-rays of numerous screws that were inserted into his spine. And police are studying his writings about the injury and his disdain for corporate America and the U.S. health care system.

Authorities recovered a spiral notebook that Mangione kept, along with a three-page, handwritten letter found when he was arrested Monday in Pennsylvania, a law enforcement official said Wednesday. Police have not disclosed what was in the notebook.

The letter teased the possibility that clues to the attack — "some straggling notes and To Do lists that illuminate the gist of it" — could be found in the notebook, the law enforcement official said. The official wasn't authorized to disclose information about the investigation and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

A law enforcement bulletin obtained by the AP earlier this week said the letter disdained corporate greed and what Mangione called "parasitic" health insurance companies. The prep school and Ivy League graduate wrote that the U.S. has the most expensive health care system in the world and that major corporations' profits continue to rise while life expectancy doesn't, according to the bulletin.

In his first public words since his arrest, Mangione shouted about an "insult to the intelligence of the American people" on his way into court Tuesday.

At a brief hearing, defense lawyer Thomas Dickey said that he didn't believe there was evidence to support a forgery charge and questioned whether the gun allegation amounts to a crime. Dickey also said Mangione would contest his extradition to New York and wanted a hearing on the issue.

"You can't rush to judgment in this case or any case," Dickey said afterward. "He's presumed innocent. Let's not forget that."

Mangione was arrested in Altoona, about 230 miles (about 370 kilometers) west of New York City, after a McDonald's customer recognized him and notified an employee, authorities said.

New York police officials have said Mangione was carrying the gun and the same fake ID the suspected shooter had used to check into a New York hostel, along with a passport and other fraudulent IDs.

Thompson, 50, was killed Dec. 4 as he walked alone to a Manhattan hotel for an investor conference.

There were no fingerprints on the ammunition found at the shooting scene, but work is ongoing to analyze a print on cellphone left nearby, police said Wednesday.

Police are continuing to search for more surveillance video showing Mangione's movements in New York between Nov. 24, when they say he arrived in the city, and the shooting. From video collected already, investigators determined the suspect quickly fled the city, likely by bus, after the killing.

His movements afterward are unclear, but authorities believe he took steps to stay off the radar. Prosecutors said at Mangione's Pennsylvania hearing this week that when arrested, he had what are known as Faraday bags for his cellphone and laptop to block signals authorities can use to track electronic devices.

Mangione, a grandson of a well-known Maryland real estate developer and philanthropist, had a graduate degree in computer science and worked for a time at a car-buying website. During the first half of 2022, he bunked at a co-living space in Hawaii, where those who knew him said he suffered from severe and sometimes debilitating back pain.

His relatives have said in a statement that they are "shocked and devastated" at his arrest.

Montana Supreme Court upholds lower court ruling that allows gender-affirming care for minors

By AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — A Montana law banning gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors will remain temporarily blocked, the state Supreme Court ruled Wednesday, after justices unanimously agreed with a lower court judge who found the law likely violates the state's constitutional right to privacy.

The case against the Montana law now goes to trial before District Court Judge Jason Marks in Missoula. "I will never understand why my representatives are working to strip me of my rights and the rights of other transgender kids," Phoebe Cross, a 17-year-old transgender boy and lead plaintiff, said in a statement. "Just living as a trans teenager is difficult enough, the last thing me and my peers need is to have our rights taken away."

The attorney general's office said it looks forward to defending the law, with a spokesperson noting there are recent scientific and legal developments that fall in the state's favor. This comes as the British government on Wednesday indefinitely banned puberty blockers for children with gender dysphoria, citing an unacceptable safety risk.

"In upholding the district court's flawed decision to temporarily block a duly enacted law, the Supreme Court put the wellbeing of children -- who have yet to reach puberty -- at risk by allowing experimental treatments that could leave them to deal with serious and irreversible consequences for the rest of their lives to continue," spokesperson Chase Scheuer said.

The U.S. Supreme Court earlier this month heard arguments over Tennessee's ban on puberty blockers, hormones or surgery for transgender minors, with observers saying it appeared the justices were likely to uphold the ban. The Biden administration had sought to block similar bans that exist in more than half the states.

"Because Montana's constitutional protections are even stronger than their federal counterparts, transgender youth in Montana can sleep easier tonight knowing that they can continue to thrive for now, without this looming threat hanging over their heads," said Kell Olsen, an attorney for Lambda Legal.

Republican Sen. John Fuller, who sponsored the bill, said Wednesday's decision "is an egregious example of the hyperpartisanship of the Montana Supreme Court." He criticized the courts for upholding the "ability to sterilize and mutilate children" and denying protection to children "from unscientific and experimental drugs and operations that have grown increasingly evident as a danger to children."

Fuller hasn't decided if he will bring a similar bill in the 2025 Legislature.

Legislative debate over Montana's bill drew national attention in the spring of 2023 after Republicans punished Democratic Rep. Zoey Zephyr — the first transgender woman elected to the state's Legislature — for admonishing lawmakers who supported the bill.

The Montana Supreme Court "has reaffirmed what we have known all along — gender-affirming care saves lives, and like all health care decisions, it should be left between doctors and patients," Zephyr said Wednesday.

Marks blocked the law in late September 2023, just days before it was to take effect. He agreed with transgender youth, their families and health care providers that the law is likely unconstitutional and would harm the mental and physical health of minors with gender dysphoria, rather than protect them from

experimental treatments, as supporters said it would.

Marks said he could only conclude the Legislature's stated intent in passing the law was "disingenuous" and it seemed more likely its purpose is to "ban an outcome deemed undesirable by the Montana Legislature, veiled as protection for minors."

The law sought to prohibit the use of puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones and surgical treatments for gender dysphoria. However, cisgender minors would still be able to receive puberty blockers to treat early puberty or surgical procedures to treat intersex conditions, the plaintiffs argued.

Montana is one of at least 26 states that have passed bans on gender-affirming medical care for minors and most face lawsuits. Some bans have been temporarily blocked by courts, while others have been allowed to take effect. Fifteen states have enacted protections for gender-affirming medical care for minors.

In Montana's case, transgender youth argued the law would ban them from continuing to receive gender-affirming medical care, violating their constitutional rights to equal protection, the right to seek health care and the right to dignity. The state Supreme Court upheld the injunction based on the right to privacy, which court rulings have said includes the right to make personal medical decisions free from government interference.

Two justices argued the court should have also clarified that discrimination on the basis of gender identity is a form of sex discrimination that is prohibited by the equal protection clause of the state constitution.

The parents of the plaintiffs argued the law would violate their constitutional right to make medical decisions for their children and two medical providers said it would prevent them from providing effective and necessary care to their patients.

Treatments for gender dysphoria meet standards of care approved by major medical organizations including the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, the ACLU argued in its complaint.

One of the young plaintiffs was dismissed from the lawsuit in September 2024 after turning 18.

Donald Trump will ring the New York Stock Exchange bell as he's named Time's Person of the Year

By MICHELLE L. PRICE, COLLEEN LONG and DAVID BAUDER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump used his image as a successful New York businessman to become a celebrity, a reality television star and eventually the president. Now he will get to revel in one of the most visible symbols of success in the city when he rings the opening bell of the New York Stock Exchange on Thursday as he's also named Time Magazine's Person of the Year.

Trump is expected to be on Wall Street to mark the ceremonial start of the day's trading, according to four people with knowledge of his plans. He will also be announced Thursday as Time's 2024 Person of the Year, according to a person familiar with the selection. The people who confirmed the stock exchange appearance and Time award were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

It will be a notable moment of twin recognitions for Trump, a born-and-bred New Yorker who at times has treated the stock market as a measure of public approval and has long-prized signifiers of his success in New York's business world and his appearances on the covers of magazines — especially Time.

Trump was named the magazine's Person of the Year in 2016, when he was first elected to the White House. He had already been listed as a finalist for this year's award alongside Vice President Kamala Harris, X owner Elon Musk, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Kate, the Princess of Wales.

Time declined to confirm the selection ahead of Thursday morning's announcement.

"Time does not comment on its annual choice for Person of the Year prior to publication," a spokesperson for the magazine said Wednesday.

The ringing of the bell is a powerful symbol of U.S. capitalism — and a good New York photo opportunity at that. Despite his decades as a New York businessman, Trump has never done it before.

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It was unclear whether Trump, a Republican, would meet with New York's embattled mayor, Democrat Eric Adams, who has warmed to Trump and has not ruled out changing his political party. Adams has been charged with federal corruption crimes and accused of selling influence to foreign nationals; he has denied wrongdoing.

Trump himself was once a symbol of New York, but he gave up living full-time in his namesake Trump Tower in Manhattan and moved to Florida after leaving the White House.

CNN first reported Wednesday Trump's visit to the stock exchange and Politico reported that Trump was expected to be unveiled as Time's Person of the Year.

The stock exchange regularly invites celebrities and business leaders to participate in the ceremonial opening and closing of trading. During Trump's first term, his wife, Melania Trump, rang the bell to promote her "Be Best" initiative on children's well-being.

Last year, Time CEO Jessica Sibley rang the opening bell to unveil the magazine's 2023 Person of the Year: Taylor Swift.

After the Nov. 5 election, the S&P 500 rallied 2.5% for its best day in nearly two years. The Dow Jones Industrial Average surged 1,508 points, or 3.6%, while the Nasdaq composite jumped 3%. All three indexes topped records they had set in recent weeks.

The U.S. stock market has historically tended to rise regardless of which party wins the White House, with Democrats scoring bigger average gains since 1945. But Republican control could mean big shifts in the winning and losing industries underneath the surface, and investors are adding to bets built earlier on what the higher tariffs, lower tax rates and lighter regulation that Trump favors will mean.

Trump has long courted the business community based on his own status as a wealthy real estate developer who gained additional fame as the star of the TV show "The Apprentice" in which competitors tried to impress him with their business skills. He won the election in part by tapping into Americans' deep anxieties about an economy that seemed unable to meet the needs of the middle class.

The larger business community has applauded his promises to reduce corporate taxes and cut regulations. But there are also concerns about his stated plans to impose broad tariffs and possibly target companies that he sees as not aligning with his own political interests.

Trump spends the bulk of his time at his Florida home but was in New York for weeks this spring during his hush money trial there. He was convicted, but his lawyers are pushing for the case to be thrown out in light of his election.

While he spent hours in a Manhattan courthouse every day during his criminal trial, Trump took his presidential campaign to the streets of the heavily Democratic city, holding a rally in the Bronx and popping up at settings for working-class New Yorkers: a bodega, a construction site and a firehouse.

Trump returned to the city in September to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at his Manhattan tower and again in the final stretch of the presidential campaign when he held a rally at Madison Square Garden that drew immediate blowback as speakers made rude and racist insults and incendiary remarks.

At the stock exchange, the ringing of the bell has been a tradition since the 1800s. The first guest to do it was a 10-year-old boy named Leonard Ross, in 1956, who won a quiz show answering questions about the stock market.

Many times, companies listing on the exchange would ring the bell at 9:30 a.m. to commemorate their initial offerings as trading began. But the appearances have become an important marker of culture and politics -- something that Trump hopes to seize as he's promised historic levels of economic growth.

The anti-apartheid advocate and South African President Nelson Mandela rang the bell, as has Hollywood star Sylvester Stallone with his castmates from the film "The Expendables." So, too, have the actors Robert Downey Jr. and Jeremy Renner for an "Avengers" movie and the Olympians Michael Phelps and Natalie Coughlin.

In 1985, Ronald Reagan became the first sitting U.S. president to ring the bell.

"With tax reform and budget control, our economy will be free to expand to its full potential, driving the bears back into permanent hibernation," Reagan said at the time. "We're going to turn the bull loose."

The crowd of traders on the floor chanted, "Ronnie! Ronnie! Ronnie!"
The Dow Jones Industrial Average climbed in 1985 and 1986, but it suffered a decline in October 1987 in an event known as "Black Monday."

Google forges ahead with its next generation of AI technology while fending off a breakup threat

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Google on Wednesday unleashed another wave of artificial intelligence designed to tackle more of the work and thinking done by humans as it tries to stay on the technology's cutting edge while also trying to fend off regulatory threats to its empire.

The next generation of Google's AI is being packaged under the Gemini umbrella, which was unveiled a year ago. Google is framing its release of Gemini 2.0 as a springboard for AI agents built to interpret images shown through a smartphone, perform a variety of tedious chores, remember the conversations consumers have with people, help video game players plot strategy and even tackle the task of doing online searches.

In a blog post, Google CEO Sundar Pichai predicted the technology contained in Gemini 2.0 will "understand more about the world around you, think multiple steps ahead and take action on your behalf, with your supervision." It's a similar goal being pursued by hard-charging rivals such as OpenAI, with its chatGPT technology, and industry powerhouse such as Microsoft with a variety of similar tools on its Windows software.

A lot of Google's latest AI technology will initially be confined to test groups and subscribers who pay \$20 per month for Gemini Advanced, but some features will be made available through its search engine and mobile apps. Google is planning wider releases next year that will include the technology popping up in its smorgasbord of free products, including its Chrome browser, digital maps and YouTube.

Besides trying to outshine OpenAI and other ambitious startups, Google is also trying to stay a step ahead of Apple as that trendsetting company begins to blend AI into its latest iPhones and other devices. After releasing a software update enabling the first bundle of the iPhone's "Apple Intelligence" features that spruced up the device's Siri assistant, another batch of the AI technology came out with a free software update that was also released Wednesday.

Google is pushing forward with its latest AI advances even as the U.S. Justice Department is trying to break up the Mountain View, California, company to prevent further abusive practices by its dominant search engine, which was declared an illegal monopoly by a federal judge earlier this year as part of a landmark antitrust case.

Among other things, Gemini 2.0 is supposed to improve the AI overviews that Google began highlighting in its search results over its traditional listing of the most pertinent links to websites earlier this year in response to AI-powered "answer engines" such as Perplexity.

After the AI overviews initially produced some goofy suggestions, including putting glue on pizza, Google refined the technology to minimize such missteps. Now, company executives are promising things are going to get even better with Gemini 2.0, which Pichai said will be able to engage in more human-like reasoning while solving more advanced math problems and even churn out some computer code. The improvements to AI Overviews will initially only appear to a test audience before a wider release next year.

The technological upgrade is also supposed to infuse a still-experimental universal AI agent dubbed "Project Astra," with even more smarts and versatility, enabling people to have more meaningful and helpful conversations with the technology. In a show of confidence, Google said it will expand the number of people testing Project Astra without providing any specifics of the group's size.

As part of Gemini 2.0, Google is also going to begin testing an extension to Chrome called "Project Mariner," which can be turned on to do online searches and sift through the results so people don't have to bother.

If the U.S. Department of Justice gets its way, Google will be forced to sell or spin off Chrome as part

of its punishment for deploying its search engine in ways that stifled competition and potential innovation. Google has ridiculed the Justice Department's proposal as "overly broad" and vowed to resist any attempt to break up the company during federal court hearings scheduled to begin in Washington D.C. next spring.

Even if those proceedings culminate in a court order mandating a breakup, Google could still appeal in a process that could take years to resolve while it continues its AI expansion.

"I can't wait to see what this next era brings," Pichai wrote in his blog post, signaling the company doesn't believe it will be deterred by regulators.

US warns Russia may be ready to use new lethal missile against Ukraine again in 'coming days'

By AAMER MADHANI and LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russia could launch its lethal new intermediate-range ballistic missile against Ukraine again soon, the Pentagon said Wednesday, as both sides wrestle for a battlefield advantage that will give them leverage in any negotiations to end the nearly 3-year war.

Sabrina Singh, Pentagon spokeswoman, told reporters in a briefing that an attack could be carried out "in the coming days." She added that the U.S. does not consider this missile — called the Oreshnik — a game changer on the battlefield, but that the Russians are "trying to use every weapon that they have in their arsenal to intimidate Ukraine."

She said the U.S. is basing its warning on a new intelligence assessment, but she couldn't provide any other details, including where Russia may strike.

U.S. officials said earlier Wednesday that the U.S. was seeing the Russians make preparations for another launch of the missile, which was used for the first time last month. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive information.

The threat comes as President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to end the war and Western allies suggest that negotiations to do so could begin this winter.

Singh said the U.S. will continue to support Ukraine, including with additional air defense systems designed to protect the country against air assaults. Just days ago, the U.S. promised close to \$1 billion in new security aid to Ukraine, including munitions for air defense.

The Russian Defense Ministry also suggested that Moscow is prepared to retaliate because Ukraine used six U.S.-made ATACMS missiles to strike a military air base in Taganrog in the southern Rostov region on Wednesday, injuring soldiers. It said two of the missiles were shot down by an air defense system and four others deflected by electronic warfare assets.

"This attack with Western long-range weapons will not be left unanswered and relevant measures will be taken," the ministry said in a statement.

This isn't the first time that U.S. officials have warned of potential Russian action or strategic moves, in part as a diplomatic effort to message Moscow and possibly sway decisions.

In the run-up to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. openly discussed intelligence that Russia was readying troops to move on Kyiv. And later publicly said Moscow was positioning operatives in eastern Ukraine to conduct a "false-flag operation" that would create a pretext for its troops to invade.

According to the U.S. officials, Russia has only a handful of the Oreshnik missiles and they carry a smaller warhead than other missiles that Russia has regularly launched at Ukraine.

Russia first fired the missile in a Nov. 21 attack against the Ukrainian city of Dnipro. Surveillance camera video of the strike showed huge fireballs piercing the darkness and slamming into the ground at astonishing speed. It was the first time the weapon was used in combat.

Within hours of the 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.

The attack came two days after Putin signed a revised version of Russia's nuclear doctrine that lowered

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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.

That strike also came soon after President Joe Biden agreed to loosen restrictions on Ukraine's use of American-made longer-range weapons to strike deeper into Russian territory, and just one day after the U.S. said it was giving Ukraine antipersonnel mines to help it slow Russia's battlefield advances.

"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," Putin said at the time.

He also warned that the new missile could be used against other Ukrainian sites, including the government district in Kyiv, and last month said the General Staff of the Russian military was selecting possible future targets, such as military facilities, defense plants or decision-making centers in Kyiv.

The Russian president declared that, "while selecting targets for strikes with such systems as Oreshnik on the territory of Ukraine, we will ask civilians and nationals of friendly countries there to leave dangerous zones in advance."

Putin has hailed Oreshnik's capability, saying its multiple warheads that plunge to a target at Mach 10 are immune from interception and are so powerful that the use of several of them in one conventional strike could be as devastating as a nuclear attack.

Speaking Tuesday, Putin charged that "a sufficient number of these advanced weapon systems simply makes the use of nuclear weapons almost unnecessary."

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. They have said it is not technically a hypersonic missile as it does not have a hypersonic glide vehicle that propels the missile for most of the launch and re-entry.

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.

Fighting has escalated in the grinding war as both Russia and Ukraine scramble to get an upper hand in any coming negotiations. Trump's inauguration next month has also raised questions about how much support the U.S. will continue to provide to Kyiv.

Trump has 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. Writing on social media last weekend, Trump said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "would like to make a deal and stop the madness."

The Biden administration, meanwhile, announced a \$988 million long-term aid package last weekend. That funding is on top of an additional \$725 million in U.S. military assistance, including counter-drone systems and HIMARS munitions, announced early last week that would be drawn from the Pentagon's stockpiles to get them to the front lines more quickly. The U.S. has provided Ukraine with more than \$62 billion in military aid since Russia's invasion in February 2022.

Arguments over whether Luigi Mangione is a 'hero' offer a glimpse into an unusual American moment

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

Is he a hero? A killer? Both?

About the same time the #FreeLuigi memes featuring the mustachioed plumber from "Super Mario Brothers" mushroomed online this week, commenters shared memes showing Tony Soprano pronouncing Luigi Mangione, the man charged with murdering the UnitedHealthcare CEO in Manhattan, a hero. There were the posts lionizing Mangione's physique and appearance, the ones speculating about who could play him on "Saturday Night Live," and the ones denouncing and even threatening people at a Pennsylvania McDonald's for spotting him and calling police.

It was all too much for Pennsylvania's governor, a rising Democrat who was nearly the vice presidential nominee this year. Josh Shapiro — who was dealing with a case somewhere else that happened to land in his lap — decried what he saw as growing support for "vigilante justice."

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As with so many American events at this moment in the 21st century, the curious case of Brian Thompson and Luigi Mangione has both captivated and polarized a media-saturated nation.

The saga offers a glimpse into how, in a connected world, so many different aspects of modern American life can be surreally linked — from public violence to politics, from health care to humor (or attempts at it).

And it summons a question, too: How can so many people consider someone a hero when the rules that govern American society — the law — are treating him as the complete opposite?

He's being cast as a romantic figure

Mangione is in a Pennsylvania jail cell as he awaits extradition to New York on murder charges. Little new information is available about a possible motive, though writings found in Mangione's possession hinted at a vague hatred of corporate greed and an expression of anger toward "parasitic" health insurance companies.

That detail came after earlier clues showed some bullets recovered from the scene had the words "deny," "defend" and "depose," reflecting words used by insurance industry critics. A number of the posts combine an apparent disdain for health insurers — with no mention of the loss of life — with a vague attempt at what some called humor.

"He took action against private health insurance corporations is what he did. he was a brave italian martyr. in this house, luigi mangione is a hero, end of story!" one anonymous person said in a post on X that has nearly 2 million views.

On Monday, Shapiro took issue with comments like those. It was an extraordinary moment that he tumbled into simply because Mangione was apprehended in Pennsylvania. Shapiro's comments — pointed, impassioned and, inevitably, political — yanked the conversation unfolding on so many people's phone screens into real life.

"We do not kill people in cold blood to resolve policy differences or express a viewpoint," the governor said. "In a civil society, we are all less safe when ideologues engage in vigilante justice."

But to hear some of his fellow citizens tell it, that's not the case at all. Like Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger, D.B. Cooper and other notorious names from the American past, Mangione is being cast as someone to admire.

More like domestic terrorism than vigilantism?

Regina Bateson, an assistant political science professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, has studied vigilantism, the term to which Shapiro alluded. She doesn't see this case as a good fit for the word, she says, because the victim wasn't linked to any specific crime or offense. As she sees it, it's more akin to domestic terrorism.

But Bateson views the threats against election workers, prosecutors and judges ticking up — plus the assassination attempts against President-elect Donald Trump this past summer — as possible signs that personal grievances or political agendas could erupt. "Americans are voicing more support for — or at least understanding of — political violence," she said.

Shapiro, apparently fed up with the embrace of the killing, praised the police and the people of Blair County, who abided by a 9/11-era dictum of seeing something and saying something. The commenters have Mangione wrong, the governor said: "Hear me on this: He is no hero. The real hero in this story is the person who called 911 at McDonald's this morning."

Even shy of supporting violence, there are many instances of people who vent over how health insurers deny claims. Consider Tim Anderson, whose wife, Mary, dealt with UnitedHealthcare coverage denials before she died from Lou Gehrig's disease in 2022. "The business model for insurance is don't pay," Anderson, 67, of Centerville, Ohio, told The Associated Press.

The discourse around the killing and Mangione is more than just memes. Conversations about the interconnectedness of various parts of American life are unfolding online as well, propelled by the saga. One Reddit user said he was banned for three days for supporting Kyle Rittenhouse, who was acquitted after testifying he acted in self-defense when he fatally shot two people in 2020 during protests. "Do you think people are getting banned for supporting Luigi?" the poster wondered.

The comments cover a lot of ground. They include people saying the UnitedHealthcare slaying isn't a

"right or left issue" and wondering what it would take to get knocked off the platform.

"You probably just have to cross the line over into promoting violence," one commenter wrote. "Not just laughing about how you don't care about this guy."

Taken together, the comments make one thing clear: The case — and now Mangione himself — have captured the American imagination, at least for the moment. And when that happens in a nation of phones and memes, a lot of people are going to have opinions — from anonymous commenters on Reddit to the governor of Pennsylvania himself.

US inflation ticked up last month as some price pressures remain persistent

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fueled by pricier used cars, hotel rooms and groceries, inflation in the United States moved slightly higher last month in the latest sign that some price pressures remain elevated.

Consumer prices rose 2.7% in November from a year earlier, up from a yearly figure of 2.6% in October. Excluding volatile food and energy costs, so-called core prices increased 3.3%, the same as in the previous month. Measured month to month, prices climbed 0.3% from October to November, the biggest such increase since April. Core prices also rose 0.3% for a fourth straight month.

Wednesday's inflation figures from the Labor Department are the final major piece of data that Federal Reserve officials will consider before they meet next week to decide on interest rates. The relatively mild November increase won't likely be enough to discourage the officials from cutting their key rate by a quarter-point. The probability of a rate cut next week, as envisioned by Wall Street traders, rose to 98% after Wednesday's inflation report was released, according to futures pricing tracked by CME FedWatch.

"It's generally in the ballpark of what the Fed would like to see," said Jason Pride, chief investment strategist at Glenmede, a wealth management firm.

Though sharp increases for such items as groceries and hotel rooms increased overall inflation last month, those categories are often volatile. Pride noted that the cost of services, such as rents, car insurance, and airline fares, cooled in November.

Last week, Fed Chair Jerome Powell suggested that with the economy generally healthy, the Fed could reduce its key rate slowly.

"We're not quite there on inflation, but we're making progress," Powell said. "We can afford to be a little more cautious."

With the job market cooling, growth in Americans' paychecks has slowed from a nearly 6% annual pace in 2022 to about 4% now, a rate nearly consistent with inflation at the Fed's 2% target. Powell has said he doesn't think the current job market is a driver of higher prices.

Randy Carr, CEO of World Emblem, a maker of patches, labels and badges for companies, universities and law enforcement agencies, said he is providing smaller wage increases, in the 3% to 5% range, than his company did during the height of inflation.

"Things have kind of leveled off," he said.

Carr's customers, which include the company that makes UPS uniforms, generally won't accept price hikes much more than 2% a year. So World Emblem aims to offset the cost of its higher wages through greater efficiencies in manufacturing.

In September, the Fed slashed its benchmark rate, which affects many consumer and business loans, by a sizable half-point. It followed that move with a quarter-point rate cut in November. Those cuts lowered the central bank's key rate to 4.6%, down from a four-decade high of 5.3%.

Though inflation is now way below its peak of 9.1% in June 2022, average prices are still about 20% higher than they were three years ago — a major source of public discontent that helped drive President-elect Donald Trump's victory over Vice President Kamala Harris in November.

Grocery prices jumped last month, an uncomfortable reminder for consumers that food prices remain a big drag on households' budgets. Beef prices leapt 3.1% just from October to November and are up 5%

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from a year earlier.

Egg prices, which have been volatile for more than two years, in part because of outbreaks of bird flu, soared 8.2% just last month. They are nearly 38% higher than a year ago.

Gas prices ticked up 0.6% from October to November, ending a string of declines. Still, gas is down more than 8% from a year earlier. Hotel prices leapt 3.2% from October to November and are 3.7% higher than a year ago.

Used-car prices jumped 2% from October to November; new cars rose 0.6%. Those increases might have been fueled by a surge in demand after Hurricane Helene's destruction of existing cars in places like North Carolina.

But one key category that has been pushing prices up showed welcome signs of cooling in November: Rental prices ticked up just 0.2%, the smallest increase since July 2021. A measure of housing costs also rose by just 0.2%, the mildest rise since April 2021.

Fed officials have made clear that they expect inflation to fluctuate along a bumpy path even as it gradually cools toward their target level. In speeches last week, several of the central bank's policymakers stressed their belief that with inflation having already fallen so far, it was no longer necessary to keep their benchmark rate quite as high.

Typically, the Fed cuts rates to try to stimulate the economy enough to maximize employment yet not so much as to drive inflation high. But the U.S. economy appears to be in solid shape. It grew at a brisk 2.8% annual pace in the July-September quarter, bolstered by healthy consumer spending. That has led some Wall Street analysts to suggest that the Fed doesn't actually need to cut its key rate further.

But Powell has said that the central bank is seeking to "recalibrate" its rate to a lower setting, one more in line with tamer inflation.

One possible problem to the Fed's efforts to keep inflation down is Trump's threat to impose widespread tariffs on U.S. imports — a move that economists say would likely send inflation higher. Trump has said he could impose tariffs of 10% on all imports and 60% on goods from China. As a consequence, economists at Goldman Sachs have forecast that core inflation would amount to 2.7% by the end of 2025. Without tariffs, they estimate it would drop to 2.4%.

World Emblem, based in Hollywood, Florida, has plants in Georgia and California but makes about 60% of its products in Mexico. President-elect Donald Trump has threatened to impose steep tariffs on imports from Mexico. Carr, the company's CEO, said he would try to offset the impact of tariffs through a mix of price increases and reductions in research and development.

"I wish we didn't have to deal with it, but if we have to, we're putting plans together," he said.

Syrians flock to morgues looking for loved ones who perished in Assad's prisons

By HUSSEIN MALLA and OMAR ALBAM Associated Press

DAMASCUS (AP) — Mohammad Chaeab spoke softly into his phone, telling a relative the grim news: He found his brother at the morgue.

"I saw him and said my goodbyes," he said. His gaze lingered on the blackened body of Sami Chaeab, whose teeth were bared and whose eye sockets were empty. It looked as if he had died screaming. "He doesn't look normal. He doesn't even have eyes."

The dead man was jailed five months ago, disappearing into a dark prison system under the rule of President Bashar al-Assad. His body is just one of many found in Syrian detention centers and prisons since Assad's government fell last weekend.

Some of the prisoners died just weeks ago. Others perished months earlier. Syrians across the world are now circulating images of the bodies in hope of seeing slain loved ones whose fate had been a mystery.

At the morgue visited by The Associated Press on Wednesday in Damascus, families flocked to a wall where some of the pictures were pinned in a haunting gallery of the dead. Relatives desperately scanned the images for a recognizable face.

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Mohammad Chaeab never knew why his brother had been imprisoned. "We heard stories — cannabis, organ trafficking, drugs, weapon trading. But he had nothing to do with any of that," he said.

He rushed to the morgue after another brother living in Turkey sent him a photo of a body that looked familiar. He was able to identify his brother by a mole under his ear and a half-amputated finger, an injury from when he was 12.

Standing over the body, he lifted the drape and gently pulled out his brother's left hand, examining it closely. "Here," he said, pointing to the stump.

Nearby, forensic workers worked rapidly to identify the bodies and hand them over to relatives.

Yasser Qasser, a forensic assistant at the morgue, said they received 40 bodies that morning from the hospital that were being fingerprinted and having DNA samples taken. The staff had already identified about eight, he said. "But dozens of families are arriving, and the numbers don't match."

Some bodies came from the notorious Saydnaya Prison, still dressed in prisoner uniforms, Qasser said.

His colleague, Dr. Abdallah Youssef, said identifying all of them would take time.

"We understand the suffering of the families, but we are working under immense pressure. The bodies were found in salt rooms, exposed to extreme cold," he said.

Morgue officials who examined the corpses have seen bullet wounds and marks that appeared to be the result of torture, he added.

An estimated 150,000 people have been detained or reported missing in Syria since 2011. Under Assad's rule, any whiff of dissent could send someone to prison immediately. For years, it was a sentence akin to death, as few ever emerged from the system.

Citing testimony from freed prisoners and prison officials, Amnesty International has reported that thousands of Syrians were killed in frequent mass executions. Prisoners were subjected to constant torture, intense beatings and rape. Inmates frequently died from injuries, disease or starvation. Some fell into psychosis and starved themselves, the human rights group said.

Among the bodies at the morgue Wednesday was Mazen al-Hamada, a Syrian activist who fled to Europe but returned to Syria in 2020 and was imprisoned upon arrival. His mangled corpse was found wrapped in a bloody sheet in Saydnaya.

As they searched the morgue, some families moved among the bodies, weeping quietly and pausing to look for familiar features. The bodies lay covered in white shrouds, each marked with a number and some bearing the label "unknown."

Hilala Meryeh, a 64-year-old Palestinian mother of four, stood in the dingy identification room, bags of bodies all around her. She had just found one of her sons.

She paused, screwed her eyes closed and turned her face toward the ceiling, murmuring a prayer. Her four boys were arrested by the former Syrian regime in 2013 during a crackdown on the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk. She still needed to find three.

"I don't know where they are," she said. "Give me my children, search for my children!"

"Why did he do this to his people?" Meryeh cried out. "Imprison them, we wouldn't have objected. Try them, but to slaughter them?"

Other Syrians, like Imad Habbal, stood motionless in the morgue, coming to grips with the reality and injustice of their loss.

Habbal gazed at the body of his brother, Diaa Habbal.

"We came yesterday, and we found him dead," he said. "They killed him. Why? What was his crime? What did he ever do to them? Just because he came back to his country?"

Diaa Habbal, a Syrian who had been living in Saudi Arabia since 2003, returned to Damascus in mid-2024 to visit his family, his brother said. He was arrested by the Syrian military police six months ago on charges of evading military service.

With trembling hands, Imad Habbal lifted the covering, his voice breaking as he wept and spoke to his brother.

"I told you not to come," he said. "I wish you didn't come."

The Trump and Biden teams insist they're working hand in glove on foreign crises

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump doesn't think much of Joe Biden's foreign policy record. The Republican president-elect frequently casts the outgoing Democratic president as a feckless leader who shredded American credibility around the world during his four-year term.

But a funny thing happened on Trump's way back to the White House: The Biden and Trump national security teams have come to an understanding that they have no choice but to work together as conflicts in Gaza, Syria and Ukraine have left a significant swath of the world on a knife's edge.

It's not clear how much common ground those teams have found as they navigate crises that threaten to cause more global upheaval as Trump prepares to settle back into the White House on Jan. 20, 2025.

"There is a deep conviction on the part of the incoming national security team that we are dealing with ... and on our part, directed from President Biden, that it is our job, on behalf of the American people, to make sure this is a smooth transition," Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan said during a weekend appearance at a forum in California. "And we are committed to discharging that duty as relentlessly and faithfully as we possibly can."

To be certain, Trump and his allies haven't let up on their criticism of Biden, putting the blame squarely on the shoulders of Biden and Democrats for the series of crises around the globe.

The president-elect says Biden is responsible for the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, arguing that policies under his watch led to Hamas and Russia becoming emboldened. And shortly before Syria's Bashar al-Assad's government collapsed last week, Trump blamed Biden's old boss, former President Barack Obama, for failing to enforce his own "red line" in 2013 after Assad deployed chemical weapons that killed hundreds of civilians, and laying the groundwork for Islamic militants to establish a beachhead in the country.

But amid the hectoring of Biden, Trump team officials acknowledge that the Biden White House has worked diligently to keep Trump's circle apprised and help ensure there is a smooth handoff on national security matters.

"For our adversaries out there that think this is a time of opportunity that they can play one administration off the other, they're wrong, and we are — we are hand in glove," Mike Waltz, Trump's pick for national security adviser, said in a Fox News interview last month. "We are one team with the United States in this transition."

While Trump rarely has a good word for the Democratic administration, there's an appreciation in Trump world of how the Biden White House has gone about sharing critical national security information, according to a Trump transition official who was not authorized to comment publicly.

The coordination is precisely how lawmakers intended for incoming and outgoing administrations to conduct themselves during a handover when they bolstered federal support for transitions. It's already the most substantive handoff process since 2009, aides to Biden and Trump acknowledged, surpassing Trump's chaotic first takeover in 2017 and his wide refusal to cooperate with the incoming Biden team in 2021.

Trump's pick to serve as special envoy to the Middle East, Florida real estate developer Steve Witkoff, consulted with Biden administration officials as he recently traveled to Mideast to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly about the sensitive talks and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Sullivan, who was to travel to Israel on Wednesday for talks with Netanyahu, has in turn kept Waltz in the loop about the Biden administration's efforts at getting a ceasefire and hostage deal in Gaza before Trump's inauguration.

Biden administration officials say that the two national security teams have also closely coordinated on Ukraine and Syria, though they have provided scant detail on what that coordination has looked like.

"Let me put it this way: Nothing that we're doing and nothing that we're saying are coming as a surprise to the incoming team," White House national security spokesman John Kirby said. "They will decide for

themselves what policies they might want to keep in place, what approaches they might want to continue and which ones they won't."

Trump made clear during his campaign that he would move to end the war in Ukraine quickly once he came to office. He called on Russian leader Vladimir Putin earlier this week to act to reach an immediate ceasefire with Ukraine.

But the Biden White House has begun gently — and publicly — making the case for how continued support for Ukraine lines up with Trump's priorities.

On Saturday, Sullivan pointed to comments made by Trump on social media to buttress the case that Biden's push for continued support of Ukraine falls in line with the incoming president's thinking.

Trump earlier that day had noted that Assad's rule was collapsing because Russia "lost all interest in Syria because of Ukraine, where close to 600,000 Russian soldiers lay wounded or dead, in a war that should never have started, and could go on forever."

"Russia and Iran are in a weakened state right now, one because of Ukraine and a bad economy, the other because of Israel and its fighting success," Trump said in the posting on Truth Social.

Sullivan underscored that Biden and Trump are in agreement that there should be no American boots on the ground in Syria and that the war in Ukraine was a major factor in Assad's fall.

"I was a little bit struck by it — earlier in the post, he said part of the reason this is happening is because of Russia's war against Ukraine," Sullivan said of Trump. "And I think he even referenced the sheer scale of the casualties that Russia has suffered in Ukraine, and for that reason, they're not in a position to defend their client, Assad. And on that point, we're in vigorous agreement."

Ex-defense chief in South Korea tried to kill himself after being arrested over martial law

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's previous defense minister was stopped from attempting suicide while in detention over last week's martial law declaration, officials said Wednesday, as President Yoon Suk Yeol's office resisted a police attempt to search the compound.

The main liberal opposition Democratic Party is pushing for a new motion to impeach Yoon for his Dec. 3 decree that imposed martial law in South Korea for the first time in more than four decades. Its first impeachment attempt against Yoon last Saturday failed after ruling party lawmakers boycotted the vote. The party said it plans to submit the new motion on Thursday to set up a vote on Saturday.

Yoon's ill-conceived power grab has paralyzed South Korean politics, frozen its foreign policy and rattled financial markets. On Wednesday, rival North Korea's state media for the first time reported about the turmoil across the border, but the country hasn't shown any suspicious activities.

Shin Yong Hae, commissioner general of the Korea Correctional Service, told lawmakers that former Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun tried to kill himself the previous night at a detention center in Seoul. He said correctional officers stopped him and that he was in stable condition.

Kim was arrested by prosecutors early Wednesday on allegations of playing a key role in a rebellion and committing abuse of power. He became the first person formally arrested over the martial law decree.

Kim, one of Yoon's close associates, has been accused of recommending martial law to Yoon and sending troops to the National Assembly to block lawmakers from voting on it. Enough lawmakers eventually managed to enter a parliament chamber and they unanimously rejected Yoon's decree, forcing the Cabinet to lift it before daybreak on Dec. 4.

Kim said in a statement on Tuesday that he "deeply apologizes for causing significant anxiety" to the public. He said all responsibility for the martial law imposition rests with him and pleaded for leniency for soldiers deployed to enforce it.

Prosecutors have up to 20 days to determine whether to indict Kim.

Yoon's office blocks search of presidential compound

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Later Wednesday, police detained National Police Agency Commissioner General Cho Ji Ho and Kim Bong-sik, head of Seoul's metropolitan police. They were accused of deploying police forces to parliament to block lawmakers from voting.

The main focus of the investigation is finding whether Yoon, Kim and others involved in imposing martial law committed rebellion. A conviction for rebellion carries a maximum penalty of death.

South Korean police said they sent officers to search Yoon's office on Wednesday to look for any evidence related to the martial law introduction. But investigators failed to enter the office as of Wednesday evening, about six hours after their arrival, senior police officer Lee Ho-young told the parliament.

Some observers earlier said that the presidential security service won't likely permit searches of Yoon's office, citing a law that prohibits searches of sites with state secrets without approval from those in charge of those areas.

Yoon on Saturday apologized over the martial law decree, saying that he won't avoid legal or political responsibility for it. He said he would leave it to his party to chart a course through the country's political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office."

The leader of Yoon's ruling party later vowed to arrange the president's stable exit from office, saying the party will coordinate with Cabinet members over state affairs and that Yoon will be sidelined from duties.

The comments were criticized as unrealistic and unconstitutional, and caused widespread questions about who is in charge of South Korea and its military at a time of heightened tensions with North Korea. The Justice Ministry on Tuesday banned Yoon from leaving the country as he faces investigations.

Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho reiterated Wednesday that Yoon remains in charge of the military. But Yoon hasn't been involved in any major official activities since lifting martial law, except for accepting resignation offers by officials involved in the martial law case and appointing the head for the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A view from North Korea

A Wednesday article from the North's state news agency reported about the South Korean political chaos and protests triggered by Yoon's martial law decree. The report mostly attempted to explain the South Korean events, though it called Yoon "a traitor" and his military "gangsters."

Many experts say North Korea is sensitive to the domestic spread of news on major anti-government protests in foreign countries, because its own people have no official access to international news and could be affected by such events. The U.S. State Department said Monday that the U.S.-South Korean alliance remains "iron-clad" and that Washington is committed to the peace and security of the Korean Peninsula.

In his martial law announcement, the conservative Yoon stressed a need to rebuild the country by eliminating "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces," a reference to his liberal rivals who control parliament. Since taking office in 2022, Yoon has had near-constant friction with the Democratic Party, which introduced motions to impeach some of his top officials and launched a political offensive over scandals involving Yoon and his wife.

Opposition parties and many experts say the martial law decree was unconstitutional. They say a president is by law allowed to declare martial law only during wartime or similar emergency situations, but South Korea wasn't in such a predicament. They argue that deploying troops to seal the National Assembly to suspend its political activities amounted to rebellion because the constitution doesn't allow a president to use the military to suspend parliament in any situation.

If Yoon is impeached, his presidential powers would be suspended until the Constitutional Court decides whether to restore his powers or remove him from office. If he is dismissed from office, a new presidential election would be required.

These Palestinians disappeared after encounters with Israeli troops in Gaza

By WAFAA SHURAF, SARAH EL DEEB and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Reem Ajour says she last saw her husband and then 4-year-old daughter in March, when Israeli soldiers raided a family home in northern Gaza. She is haunted by those chaotic last moments, when the soldiers ordered her to go — to leave behind Talal and Masaa, both wounded.

Eight months later, the 23-year-old mother still has no answers about their fate. The military says it does not have them. Troops leveled the house where they were staying soon after the raid.

"I am living and dead at the same time," she said, breaking down in sobs.

Ajour is one of dozens of Palestinians that an Israeli legal group, Hamoked, is helping in their search for family members who went missing after being separated by Israeli soldiers during raids and arrests in the Gaza Strip.

Their cases — a fraction of the estimated thousands who have gone missing during the 14-month-long war — highlight a lack of accountability in how the Israeli military deals with Palestinians during ground operations in Gaza, Hamoked says.

Throughout the war, the military has conducted what amounts to a mass sifting of the Palestinian population as it raids homes and shelters and sends people through checkpoints. Troops round up and detain men, from dozens to several hundreds at a time, searching for any they suspect of Hamas ties, while forcing their families away, toward other parts of Gaza. The result is families split apart, often amid the chaos of fighting.

But the military has not made clear how it keeps track of everyone it separates, arrests or detains. Even if troops transfer Palestinians to military detention inside Israel, they can hold them incommunicado for more than two months — their whereabouts unknown to families or lawyers, according to rights groups.

When people vanish, it's nearly impossible to know what happened, Hamoked says.

"We've never had a situation of mass forced disappearance from Gaza, with no information provided for weeks and weeks to families," said Jessica Montell, the director of Hamoked. Israel's High Court of Justice has refused to intervene to get answers, despite Hamoked's petitions, she said.

Asked by The Associated Press about the cases of Ajour and two other families it interviewed, the Israeli military declined comment.

4-year-old Masaa Ajour was shot, then separated from her mother

The Ajours were sheltering at a home in Gaza City that belonged to Talal's family after being displaced from their own house earlier in the war. Israeli troops raided the home on March 24, opening fire as they burst in, Ajour said.

Ajour, who was three months pregnant, was shot in the stomach. Talal was wounded in his leg, bleeding heavily. Masaa lay passed out, shot in the shoulder — though Ajour said she saw her still breathing.

As one soldier bandaged the little girl's wound, another pointed his gun in Ajour's face and told her to head out of Gaza City.

She said she pleaded that she couldn't leave Masaa and Talal, but the soldier screamed: "Go south!"

With no choice, Ajour collected her younger son and went down to the street. "It was all in a blink of an eye. It was all so fast," she said. Still bleeding, she walked for two and a half hours, clutching her son.

When they reached a hospital in central Gaza, doctors treated her stomach wound and found her fetus' pulse. Weeks later, doctors found the pulse had gone. She miscarried.

Ajour said that several weeks later, a Palestinian released from a prison in southern Israel told her family he had heard her husband's name called out over a loudspeaker among a list of detainees.

The rumor has kept her hope alive, but the military told Hamoked it had no record of Masaa or Talal being detained.

Another possibility is that they died on the scene, but no one has been able to search the rubble of the family's building to determine if any bodies are there.

The storming of their building came as Israeli forces were battling Hamas fighters in surrounding streets

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while raiding nearby Shifa Hospital, where it claimed the militants were based. Troops cleared families out of nearby homes and often then destroyed or set the buildings ablaze, according to witnesses at the time.

The military itself may not know what happened to Ajour's husband and daughter, said Montell of Hamoked.

"That illustrates a broader problem," she said.

Ajour and her son now shelter in a tent camp outside the central Gaza town of Zuweida.

Masaa, she said, "was my first joy" — with blond hair and olive-colored eyes, a face "white like the moon."

Masaa's fifth birthday was in July, Ajour said, sobbing. "She turned five while she is not with me."

Does the military document what troops do in Gaza?

Under a wartime revision to Israeli law, Palestinians from Gaza taken to military detention in Israel can be held for over two months without access to the outside world.

Israel says the law is necessary to handle the unprecedented number of detainees as it seeks to destroy Hamas following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel that killed 1,200 and took around 250 people hostage inside Gaza. The military has transferred some 1,770 of its Gaza detainees to civilian prisons, according to rights groups, but it has not revealed the number still in its detention.

Milena Ansari, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, said Israel is obligated under international law to document what happens during every home raid and detention. But the military is not transparent about the information it collects on detainees or on how many it is holding, she said.

Hamoked has asked the military for the whereabouts of 900 missing Palestinians. The military confirmed around 500 of them were detained in Israel. It said it had no record of detaining the other 400.

The group petitioned Israel's High Court of Justice seeking answers in 52 cases, including that of Masaa and two other children, where witnesses testified that the missing were handled by troops before their disappearances.

"The judges just dismiss the cases, without even inquiring what measures might be necessary to prevent such cases in the future," said Montell.

A court spokesperson said it often asks the military to provide additional information but isn't authorized to investigate if the military says it is not detaining them.

In the cases of three missing adult Palestinians presented by Hamoked, the military first claimed it was not holding them, then found records of them being detained after being pressed by Hamoked to double-check.

In another case, military police discovered that two Palestinians they had initially denied holding -- a father and his adult son -- had died in Israeli custody. The U.N. Human Rights Office says at least 53 Palestinians are known to have died in Israeli detention during the war.

Ailing with cancer, Mahmoud Alghrabli disappeared after raid

The last time the Alghrabli family saw their 76-year-old patriarch, Mahmoud Alghrabli, was when Israeli troops stormed their district in Khan Younis on Feb. 4. The soldiers ordered residents out of the area. The Alghrablis had to carry Mahmoud, suffering from cancer, out of their building on a chair, his son Ahmed Alghrabli told the AP.

After detaining some men, the soldiers ordered the rest to leave. Mahmoud Alghrabli made it to a sand mound near the house. Ahmed Alghrabli said his brother went to help the father, but soldiers shouted at him to leave.

"He left our father by force, or he would have been shot," he said.

The family returned a month later. There was no trace of Mahmoud. Ahmed Alghrabli said he "walked meter by meter" searching for traces, finding bones but not knowing whose they were. He keeps them wrapped in a piece of cloth at home.

Hamoked was told by the military there was no indication of him in Israeli detention.

"By God, I don't sleep at night," said Mahmoud's wife, Sabah Abdul-Salam. Whether he was arrested or killed, she said, "let us know, we will rest."

Mahmoud Almoqayed vanished while searching for his family

The only traces left of another missing man, 77-year-old Mahmoud Almoqayed, are his torn shirt and pants with his ID in the pocket. They were found in the dirt near the school where he and his family were sheltering when it was raided by Israeli troops on May 23 in the northern town of Beit Lahiya.

The soldiers released Almoqayed and sent him and other men to another shelter, said his son, Rani Almoqayed, a doctor working in Saudi Arabia who pieced together the account from witnesses and family members.

Once at the second shelter, the elderly Almoqayed immediately turned back, determined to find his wife and grandchildren left behind at the school, witnesses told his son. It was dark, well after 1 a.m., and troops were all around the area. Almoqayed was never seen by his family again.

Weeks later, his family found his abandoned clothes. They also found skulls and body parts nearby, Rani Almoqayed said.

The military police told Hamoked it had no indication Almoqayed was detained.

Rani Almoqayed believes it's possible his father was killed and Israeli troops took the body. Since December 2023, the military has returned at least 318 bodies and a sack of body parts to Gaza after seizing them to search for hostages, a senior U.N. official in Gaza told the AP, speaking anonymously to discuss confidential matters.

The bodies, with no identification and often decomposed, are buried in anonymous mass graves.

The family had Mahmoud Almoqayed declared officially dead, his son said.

"But the doubt will not stop and one's heart won't ease unless they see the body."

US Biathlon officials ignored sexual harassment and abuse of female racers for decades, athletes say

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

Sexual abuse and harassment by coaches and others in positions of power over women on the U.S. Biathlon team have been dismissed, ignored or excused over decades by officials more concerned with winning medals than holding offenders accountable, according to a half-dozen former Olympians and other biathletes.

While the men involved climbed the sport's ranks, these women told The Associated Press they were forced to end racing careers early.

"My safety on the team was clearly secondary," said two-time Olympian Joan Wilder, 58, who said her coach got away with trying to sexually assault her in 1990 despite her complaints to then-U.S. Biathlon official Max Cobb.

Cobb, who the women say was informed but failed to address several claims, went from U.S. domestic team manager to U.S. Biathlon Association CEO and is now secretary general of the International Biathlon Union, the worldwide governing body of the sport, which combines cross-country skiing with target shooting.

The women came forward after AP reported that Olympian Joanne Reid was sexually abused and harassed for years, according to findings by the U.S. Center for SafeSport, created to investigate sex-abuse allegations in Olympic sports in the Larry Nassar gymnastics scandal's aftermath.

The AP generally does not identify victims of sexual abuse except in cases where they publicly identify themselves or share their stories openly, as these women have.

Cobb denied allegations of failing to act. "During my 33 years at U.S. Biathlon, athlete safety was always fundamental to me and I can't recall ever hearing from athletes or others that my efforts in this regard were not appropriate," he said via email to AP.

Cobb declined to be interviewed by AP, saying it would violate SafeSport's code.

However, an investigation ordered by U.S. Biathlon into team culture and safety following AP's report found biathletes faced "misogynistic" behavior while racing and feared retaliation over coming forward.

In response, biathlon officials said they were adopting an "action plan." _____

Biathlon is the only winter sport with no U.S. Olympic medals. Desperate to excel, U.S. officials hired European coaches and staff, and turned a blind eye when women raised their claims, those interviewed said.

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In 1990, to prepare for the first-ever women's Olympic biathlon race, U.S. officials hired German biathlete Walter Pichler to coach.

During training camp that year, the team went out one night. Then 20-year-old Wilder said she went to bed early and woke to someone on her back — Pichler trying to force her to have sex, she said in a complaint to SafeSport.

Pichler denied trying to sexually assault Wilder. "This is unbelievable," he told AP. "I always had a super relationship with Joanie, or with all the athletes, all the female, the men athletes."

Wilder said she reported it to then-team manager Cobb. He "didn't consider it discipline-worthy," she said.

Wilder said in her SafeSport complaint that she faced retaliation for pressing the issue of firing Pichler.

She was temporarily bumped from the 1994 Olympic team, then dropped from the national team before the 1998 Olympics without being told — putting her health insurance at risk.

She called Cobb.

"Max ended the conversation with, 'Well, if you write a letter to the U.S. Olympic Committee and say that you're resigning from biathlon, I'll extend your medical insurance,'" she told AP.

She decided she didn't have any fight left, and left the sport.

Grace Boutot grew up near the Maine Winter Sports Center's Nordic ski facility, used by U.S. Biathlon.

In 2003, Boutot, then 12, was recruited into the program. She started racing in 2004 and, at 15, began training with new coach Gary Colliander.

Colliander gave her much coaching attention and hugs, she said. His attention increased over time, she said, with him inviting her to his home, massaging her legs, and rubbing her back and buttocks.

It escalated after she turned 18 to "kissing, sexual fondling and oral sex," according to a treatment summary by therapist Jacqueline Pauli-Ritz, shared with AP.

Boutot said she begged him to stop but Colliander ignored her.

She became severely depressed and started cutting herself, according to Pauli-Ritz's notes. In September 2010, Pauli-Ritz contacted Colliander and told him he should stop coaching Boutot, the treatment summary said.

"He did not do this until after the suicide attempt," Pauli-Ritz wrote, referring to Boutot's 2010 overdose on antidepressants at training camp.

The next day, Colliander resigned. He took a coaching job in Colorado and was hired in December 2016 by the U.S. Paralympic team.

Colliander didn't respond to phone messages and emails seeking comment.

In October 2010, Boutot informed the Maine Winter Sports Center about Colliander's abuse, according to a letter she sent the center's board. But, she said, there was no investigation.

Boutot said she also faced abuse by then-U.S. Biathlon junior team coach Vladimir Cervenka of the Czech Republic, starting in 2007.

When she won a silver medal at the 2009 Youth World Championships, Cervenka grabbed her, she said.

"He forcibly kissed me and groped my entire body, smothering me and crushing me until he was pulled off of me by our team masseuse," she said of Cervenka, who was 26 years older.

Cervenka denied Boutot's claims.

"I absolutely did not kiss her or grope her body," he told AP via email.

Boutot reported Cervenka's alleged abuse twice to U.S. Biathlon officials, including in a January 2011 email to Cobb and a U.S. Biathlon board member in which she also expressed concern about Cervenka's inappropriate contact with other young teammates and her worries about retaliation. In the email exchange, she was told the issues were serious, but she had to make her complaint public so Cervenka could defend himself.

Boutot said she expected them to investigate: "I told them of the abuse, and they never took me seriously."

Boutot faced retaliation by the Maine Winter Sports Center, she said in a 2011 complaint to the Maine Human Rights Commission.

The center settled for \$75,000. Boutot quit racing.

SafeSport has ordered a new investigation into whether Reid was retaliated against for exposing the abuse she endured to the watchdog group. SafeSport spokeswoman Hilary Nemchik said she couldn't comment on the ongoing case.

SafeSport investigates claims even when the legal statute of limitations has expired.

Wilder said she didn't know she had that option and has now filed a complaint, naming Cobb and Pichler. "I sincerely hope that my shared story with other women biathletes results in this being bookends to a darker period," Wilder said.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Martha Bellisle is an amateur biathlete who has won several U.S. national and world championship gold medals in the master's division for competitors 60 and older. She has competed at local races across the country sanctioned by the U.S. Biathlon Association.

Biden approves national security memo on China, Iran, North Korea and Russia ahead of Trump's return

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has approved a new national security memorandum ahead of Donald Trump's return to the White House that could serve as a road map for the incoming administration as it looks to counter growing cooperation among China, Iran, North Korea and Russia, the White House said Wednesday.

Biden administration officials began developing the guidance this summer. It was shaped to be a document that could help the next administration build its approach from Day 1 on how it deals with the tightening relationships involving America's most prominent adversaries and competitors, according to two senior administration officials.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, said the classified memorandum would not be made public because of the sensitivity of some of its findings.

The document includes four broad recommendations: improving U.S. government interagency cooperation, speeding up the sharing of information with allies about the four adversaries, calibrating the U.S. government's use of sanctions and other economic tools for maximum effectiveness, and bolstering preparation to manage simultaneous crises involving the adversaries.

The U.S. for many years has been concerned about cooperation among the four countries. Coordination has accelerated between the countries in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The officials noted that as Russia has become more isolated by much of the world, Moscow has turned to Iran for drones and missiles. From North Korea, the Russians have received artillery, missiles and even thousands of troops that have traveled to help the Russians try to repel Ukrainian forces from the Kursk region. China, meanwhile, has supported Russia with dual use components that help keep its military industrial base afloat.

In return, Russia has sent fighter jets to Iran and assisted Tehran as it looks to bolster its missile defense and space technology.

North Korea has received from Russia much-needed fuel and funding to help build out its manufacturing and military capabilities. The officials added that Russia has "de facto accepted North Korea as a nuclear weapon state."

China, meanwhile, is benefiting from Russian know-how, with the two countries working together to deepen their military technical cooperation. The two nations are also conducting joint patrols in the Arctic region.

Biden and Trump have sharply different worldviews, but officials in both the incoming and outgoing administrations said they have sought to coordinate on national security issues during the transition.

One of the officials said that the Biden White House memo "isn't trying to box (the Trump administration) in or tilt them toward one policy option or another."

The official said the document is intended to help the next administration build "capacity" as it shapes its policies on some of the most difficult foreign policies it will face.

Only about 2 in 10 Americans approve of Biden's pardon of his son Hunter, an AP-NORC poll finds

By WILL WEISSERT and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Only about 2 in 10 Americans approve of President Joe Biden's decision to pardon his son Hunter after earlier promising he would do no such thing, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

That displeasure tracks with the bipartisan uproar in Washington that ignited over the president's about-face. The survey found that a relatively small share of Americans "strongly" or "somewhat" approve of the pardon, which came after the younger Biden was convicted on gun and tax charges. About half said they "strongly" or "somewhat" disapprove, and about 2 in 10 neither approve nor disapprove.

The Democratic president had said repeatedly that he would not use his pardon power for the benefit of his family, and the White House continued to insist, even after Republican Donald Trump's election win in November, that Biden's position had not changed — until it suddenly did.

"I know it's not right to believe politicians as far as what they say compared to what they do, but he did explicitly say, 'I will not pardon my son,'" said Peter Prestia, a 59-year-old Republican from Woodland Park, New Jersey, just west of New York City, who said he strongly disagreed with the move. "So, it's just the fact that he went back on his word."

In issuing a pardon Dec. 1, Biden argued that the Justice Department had presided over a "miscarriage of justice" in prosecuting his son. The president used some of the same kind of language that Trump does to describe the criminal cases against him and his other legal predicaments.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said it was a decision that Biden struggled with but came to shortly before he made the announcement, "because of how politically infected these cases were" as well as "what his political opponents were trying to do."

The poll found that about 4 in 10 Democrats approve of the pardon, while about 3 in 10 disapprove and about one-quarter did not have an opinion or did not know enough to say. The vast majority of Republicans and about half of independents had a negative opinion.

For some, it was easy to see family taking priority over politics.

"Do you have kids?" asked Robert Jenkins, a 63-year-old Democrat who runs a lumber yard and gas station in Gallipolis, Ohio. "You're gonna leave office and not pardon your kid? I mean, it's a no-brainer to me."

But Prestia, who is semiretired from working for a digital marketing conglomerate, said Biden would have been better off not making promises.

"He does have that right to pardon anybody he wants. But he just should have kept his mouth shut, and he did it because it was before the election, so it's just a bold-faced lie," Prestia said.

Despite the unpopularity of his decision, the president's approval rating has not shifted meaningfully since before his party lost the White House to Trump. About 4 in 10 Americans "somewhat" or "strongly" approve of the way Biden is handling his job as president, which is roughly where his approval rating has stood in AP-NORC polls since January 2022.

Still, the pardon keeps creating political shock waves, with Republicans, and even some top Democrats, decrying it.

Older adults are more likely than younger ones to approve of Biden's pardoning his son, according to the poll, although their support is not especially strong. About one-third of those ages 60 and older approve, compared with about 2 in 10 adults under 60.

The age divide is driven partially by the fact that younger adults are more likely than older ones to say they neither approve nor disapprove of the pardon or that they do not know enough to say.

About 6 in 10 white adults disapprove of the pardon, compared with slightly less than half of Hispanic adults and about 3 in 10 Black adults. Relatively large shares of Black and Hispanic Americans — about 3 in 10 — were neutral, the poll found.

"Don't say you're gonna do something and then fall back," said Trinell Champ, 43, a Democrat from Nederland, Texas, who works in the home health industry and said she disapproved of the pardon. "At the

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end of the day, all you have is your word.”

Champ, who is Black, voted for Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris over Trump. “I just had my hopes up for her, but I wasn’t 100% positive,” she said.

Champ also said she does not approve of Biden’s handling of the presidency and thinks the country is on the wrong track. “While he was in office, I felt like I really didn’t see a lot of changes,” she said.

“I just felt like everything just kind of stayed the same,” Champ said.

Overall, though, the pardon did not appear to be a driving factor in many Americans’ assessment of Biden’s job performance. The share of Black Americans who approve of the way he is handling his job as president did fall slightly since October, but it is hard to assess what role the pardon may have played.

Jenkins is also chair of the Democratic Party in Gallia County, a strongly Republican area in southeast Ohio. He said things have not been going well for his businesses and, though he approved of Biden’s handling of the presidency, he believes the country is now on the wrong track.

He said that is partly because of Trump’s win in the presidential race, but it is also because Biden made his decision to leave the race in July and endorse Harris when there was not enough time for a more open primary process that might have led to a stronger Democratic nominee.

“I know he’s in a spot there, but jeez-o-Pete, he got down the wrong end,” Jenkins said of Biden. He said if Biden had stepped aside earlier and a nominee emerged from 15 or 20 candidates, “I think we would have won on that. Who knows?”

Prestia said he does not approve of Biden’s handling of the presidency but sees the country now on the right track because Trump is returning to the White House.

“Compared to Biden, he means what he says,” Prestia said.

Today in History: December 12 Supreme Court issues Bush v. Gore decision

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Dec. 12, the 347th day of 2024. There are 19 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 12, 2000, George W. Bush became president-elect as a divided U.S. Supreme Court reversed a state court recount decision in Florida’s tightly contested presidential election.

Also on this date:

In 1870, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina became the first Black lawmaker sworn into the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 1985, 248 American soldiers and eight crew members were killed when an Arrow Air charter crashed after takeoff from Gander, Newfoundland.

In 2010, the inflatable roof of the Minneapolis Metrodome collapsed following a snowstorm that had dumped 17 inches (43 centimeters) on the city. (The NFL was forced to shift an already rescheduled game between the Minnesota Vikings and New York Giants to Detroit’s Ford Field.)

In 2015, nearly 200 nations meeting in Paris adopted the first global pact to fight climate change, calling on the world to collectively cut greenhouse gas emissions but imposing no sanctions on countries that didn’t do so.

In 2018, Michael Cohen, President Donald Trump’s one-time fixer, was sentenced to three years in prison for crimes that included arranging the payment of hush money to conceal Trump’s alleged sexual affairs.

In 2020, thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington for rallies to back his efforts to subvert the election he lost to Joe Biden.

Today’s Birthdays: Basketball Hall of Famer Bob Pettit is 92. Singer Connie Francis is 87. Singer Dionne Warwick is 84. Hall of Fame race car driver Emerson Fittipaldi is 78. Actor Bill Nighy is 75. Gymnast-actor Cathy Rigby is 72. Singer-musician Sheila E. is 67. Actor Sheree J. Wilson is 66. Tennis Hall of Famer Tracy Austin is 62. Football Hall of Famer John Randle is 57. Author Sophie Kinsella is 55. Actor Jennifer Connelly is 54. Actor Regina Hall is 54. Actor Mayim Bialik is 49. Actor Lucas Hedges is 28.