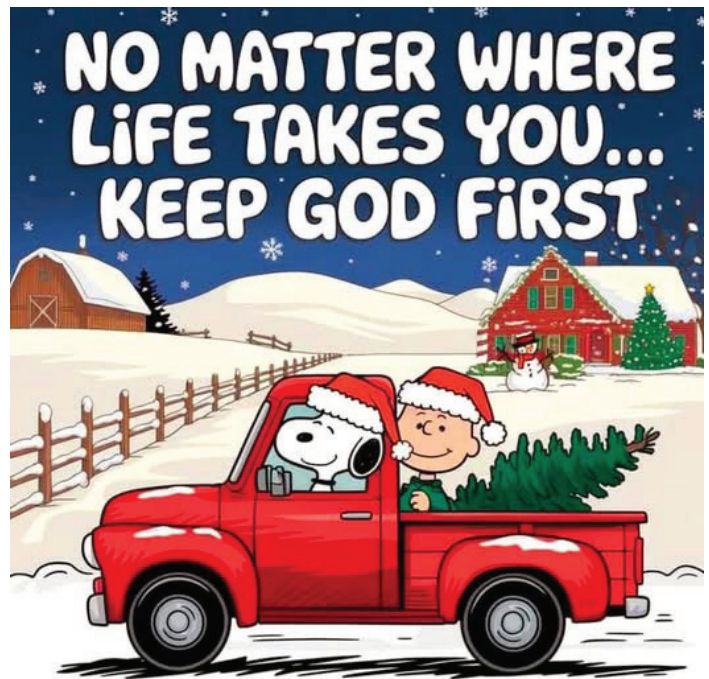


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Monday, Dec. 16

Senior Menu: Chicken tetrazzine, peas and carrots, pineapple tidbits, breadsticks.

School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.

School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.

Groton Senior Citizens meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Christian Literature Circle, 7:30 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

JH GBB at Sisseton, one game at 4 p.m.; Boys JH Wrestling at Webster, 4:30 p.m.; Boys JV Invitational Wrestling at Madison, 5 p.m.

Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Groton Community Center

Tuesday, Dec. 17

Senior Menu: Beef and broccoli stir fry, rice, mixed vegetables, firve cup salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Hot dogs, chips.

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.

Basketball Doubleheader - Hosts Sisseton: Boys C at 4 p.m. and Girls C at 5 p.m. in the gym; Girls JV at 4 p.m. and Boys JV at 5 p.m. followed by girls varsity and boys varsity in the Arena.

Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center

Groton United Methodist: Bible Study with Pastor Rob, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, Dec. 18

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, oriental blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Sweet and sour pork, rice.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; DFC Youth supper, 6 p.m.; Advent Service, 7 p.m.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

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

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1440

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

New Jersey Drone Mystery

Many reported drone sightings in New Jersey since mid-November are lawful manned aircraft, the Department of Homeland Security and FBI said Saturday. DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas nonetheless acknowledged yesterday some remain unidentified and said the agency is monitoring the situation and deploying additional resources.

The statement comes as the FBI has received over 5,000 tips since November regarding drone sightings in New Jersey and five other East Coast states, including sightings over a military air base. Many of these objects, largely observed at night, are described as larger than typical hobbyist drones, with some reportedly as large as cars. The activity has even temporarily shut down a runway in New York.

The activity has sparked comparisons to last year's Chinese spy balloon sightings, with Rep. Jeff Van Drew (R, NJ-2) suggesting Iran is behind the recent drones. The FBI and US Coast Guard maintain there is no evidence to date of foreign involvement or illegal or malicious activity.

South Korea Impeachment

South Korea's highest court will meet today to begin discussing whether to uphold the impeachment of conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol. The court has six months to determine whether to remove Yoon from office or reinstate him following parliament's impeachment vote Saturday.

The vote was the second of two such attempts after Yoon temporarily returned the country to martial law for the first time since the 1980s. Saturday's impeachment attempt proved successful, with 204 legislators surpassing the two-thirds majority threshold needed to suspend Yoon's powers. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, appointed by Yoon, is serving as interim president while Yoon has been stripped of his powers pending the court's determination.

Lawmakers are meanwhile investigating Yoon and his inner circle for rebellion. Yoon's office was raided by police last week, and he has reportedly defied a summons from prosecutors. Arrest warrants have been issued against multiple high-level officials, including the country's former defense minister, who resigned after allegedly recommending martial law to Yoon.

Hunter Wins Heisman

Colorado standout Travis Hunter won the Heisman Trophy Saturday night, becoming the second player in school history to earn the honor. The two-way star—excelling in both offense and defense—beat out Ashton Jeanty (Boise State, RB), Dillon Gabriel (Oregon, QB), and Cam Ward (Miami, QB).

Considered the top overall recruit in the 2022 class, Hunter began his career at Jackson State—then led by ex-NFL star and current Colorado coach Deion Sanders—becoming the first five-star recruit of the modern era to commit to a historically Black school. He later followed Sanders to Colorado in 2023.

A rare full-time two-way player, Hunter played 1,380 snaps this season—670 on offense, 686 on defense, and 24 on special teams. At wide receiver, he notched 1,152 yards and 15 touchdowns; at cornerback, he accounted for four interceptions and one forced fumble. He also became the first player in the sport's history to win awards honoring the best defensive player and wide receiver.

Hunter is widely projected as the first overall pick in the 2025 NFL draft.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Zakir Hussain, legendary Indian tabla player and four-time Grammy winner, dies at age 73.

Taylor Swift No. 1 on Billboard's year-end Top Artist chart for second straight year, first artist to top the year-end chart four times since it launched in 1981.

Milwaukee Bucks beat the Atlanta Hawks and Oklahoma City Thunder defeat Houston Rockets in 2024 NBA Cup semifinals; Bucks and Thunder matchup in second-ever NBA Cup final tomorrow.

Warner Bros. Discovery opts not to renew deal to air new episodes of "Sesame Street" on HBO and Max. "Kraven The Hunter" brings in just \$11M in its opening weekend, lowest-ever opener for a Sony-produced Marvel film.

Science & Technology

Louisiana reports its first human case of H5N1 bird flu, patient hospitalized; around 60 human cases have been confirmed nationwide but no human-to-human transmission observed; officials say threat to public remains low.

AI-powered blood screening detects signs of breast cancer at stages earlier than existing tests; technique detected stage 1A tumor presence with 98% accuracy.

Astronomers observe a particle jet emanating from M87*—the first black hole to ever be imaged—with energy tens of millions of times greater than visible light.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed Friday (S&P 500 -0.0%, Dow -0.2%, Nasdaq +0.1%), with Dow's seven-day losing streak the longest since 2020.

Broadcom's stock jumps 24% to all-time high Friday, pushing the company past \$1T valuation; news came after Broadcom's quarterly earnings call spurred reports the company is working to develop AI server chips for Apple and OpenAI.

Amazon workers at two New York warehouses authorize possible strike after setting a Dec. 15 deadline for union contract bargaining dates; roughly 5,500 workers threaten to walk out days before Christmas.

Politics & World Affairs

Cyclone Chido hits French territory of Mayotte as Category 4 storm, the most destructive cyclone to hit the Indian Ocean island in 90 years; 11 people confirmed dead and 250 injured as of this writing, with death toll expected to rise to several hundred or more.

ABC News agrees to pay \$15M and \$1M in attorneys' fees to settle President-elect Donald Trump's defamation case over anchor George Stephanopoulos' false claims Trump had been found civilly liable of raping E. Jean Carroll; a Manhattan court found Trump civilly liable of sexual battery, not rape.

An alleged Chinese spy attended a 2020 birthday party for Britain's Prince Andrew and was authorized to act on the prince's behalf in Chinese business dealings, UK court hears.

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Pictured with Santa are Halle with her dad, Ben Dolen. Her mom is Michelle Fordham. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Brielle, 8; Collyns, 5; and Maci, 10. Children of Kassie Dunbar and Michael Dunbar. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Whitney Sombke with Drew, 3; Maryn, 9; and Teagan, 6. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Amber Sombke with her daughter, Henley. Henley's dad is Bryce Sombke. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Shannon Hjernstad with Dawson, 8 months. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa is Roa, child of Jasmine Schinkel. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Swayze, Zeke and Jax from the Dave and Becky Hunter family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Dayton, 2 years; and Lealand, 5 months, from the Alyson and Jared Anderson family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by

Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Logan, 9; Novalyn, 1; and Kinsley, 5; from the Jason and Bridget Osterman family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by

Jeslyn Kosel)

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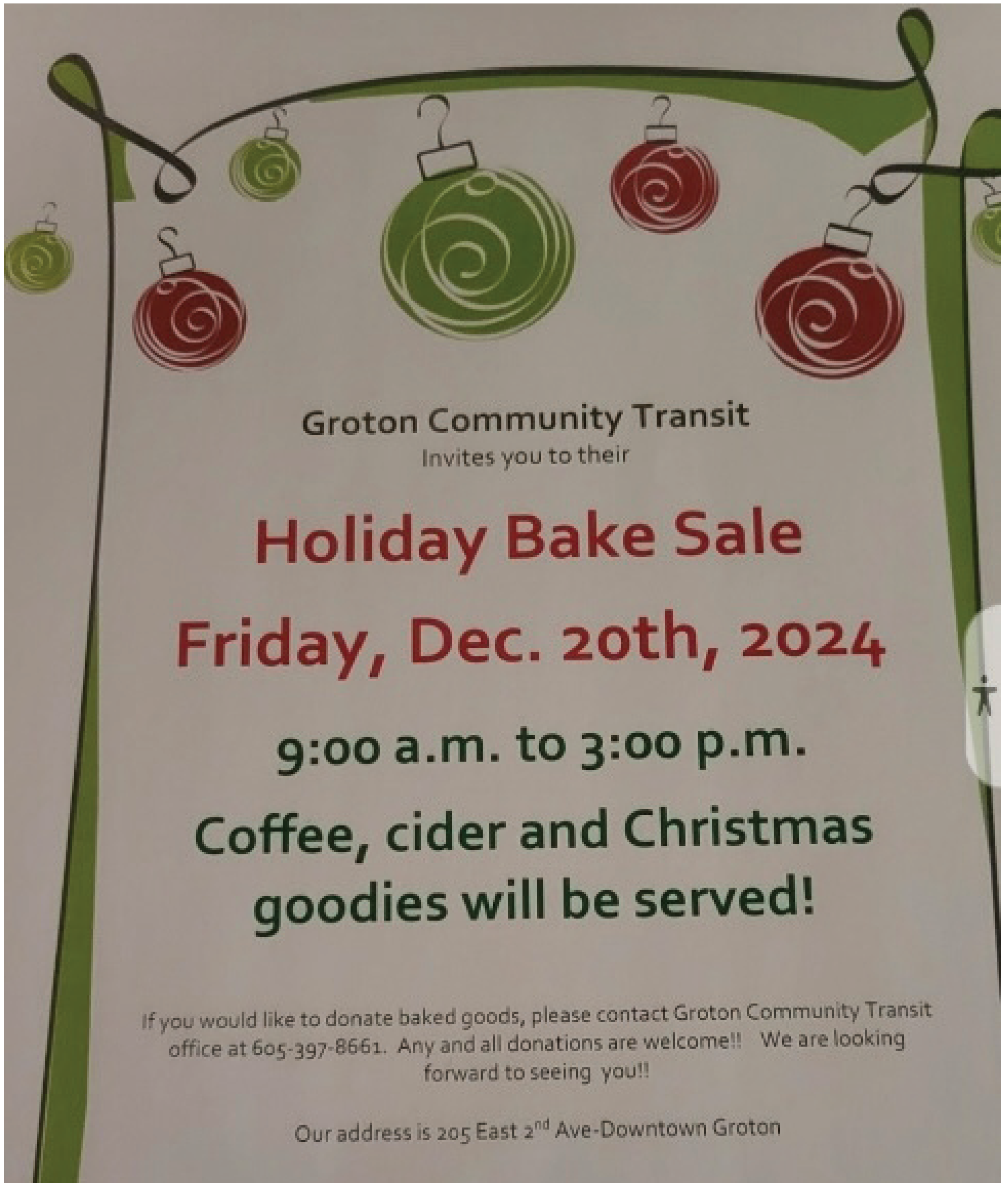
Pictured with Santa are Ledger, 3; and Creed, 1; from the Haley Ellingson family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Avery, 5; and Welles, 2, from the Bethany and Cody Hanson family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



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



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Card Shower

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



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

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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

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Groton Tuff Tigers had three wrestlers that went to Marshall, Minn., on Saturday. Pictured left to right are Roman Bahr placing first, Ryker Herron placing first and Watson Herron placing third. (Courtesy Photo)



Death Notice: Betty Oliver

Betty Oliver, 79, of Groton passed away December 15, 2024 at her home near Groton. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Boom!

A loud boom was heard Sunday afternoon that left residents wondering what was going on. Tannerite was used to blow up a pumpkin about four miles outside of Groton.

Minnehaha County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: Interstate 229 Near Interstate 29, Sioux Falls, SD
When: 4:38 p.m., December 14, 2024

Driver 1: 22-year-old female from Sioux Falls, SD, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2020 Chevrolet Malibu
Seat belt Used: Yes

Minnehaha County, S.D.- A 22-year-old woman died in a single vehicle accident on Interstate 229 Saturday afternoon in Sioux Falls, SD.

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

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2020 Chevrolet Malibu was traveling southbound on Interstate 229 exiting onto Interstate 29 South. The driver lost control of the vehicle and entered the westbound ditch then collided with a tree. The driver was pronounced deceased at the scene.

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.

“Plastic Surgery: Transforming Lives Inside and Out”

When many people hear the term plastic surgery images of Hollywood stars trying to fight back the effects of aging come to mind. It is easy to assume that plastic surgeons just deal in vanity. However, that would minimize everything that these talented surgeons accomplish with their scalpels. The term “Plastic Surgery” comes from the Greek term “Plastikos” meaning “to shape or form.”

Plastic surgeons work to form or change the outward appearance of people for a variety of reasons. They work on reconstructing how a person looks after having a disfiguring injury such as a severe burn or major trauma. They can also help with patients who have had an amputation. The goal is to try to give the person the appearance closer to what they had prior to the injury or minimize the outward appearance of damage.

For patients who were born with cleft lip and/or palate, plastic surgeons perform surgeries to close the defects in the lip and roof of the mouth that did not close properly prior to the patient being born. These abnormalities can make eating and speech development difficult. Plastic surgeons will often need to perform a series of surgeries to slowly repair and restore the appearance and function of the lips, nose, and mouth.

Women who have suffered from breast cancer may elect to have surgeries to repair or replace the breast tissue that was removed in order to remove the cancer to save their life. After major weight loss, many patients have excess skin folds that do not go away when the weight is lost. The extra abdominal skin can hang down like an apron and chafe surrounding skin as well as get skin infections. Plastic surgery can be performed to remove this excess skin.

Whether for cosmetic or reconstructive reasons, the surgeon’s job is the same. Their job is to help improve how someone feels about their appearance and improve function. What may seem like a minor issue to a stranger could be the only thing that patient sees when they look in the mirror. While we say beauty is only skin deep, many people have been teased or criticized for the way they look. Plastic surgery can change this if the patient desires.

The plastic surgeon can help change the outward appearance of a person to help them feel more confident and comfortable with their body. The various applications of their skills are so numerous, that it is hard to list them all. In the hands of a skilled plastic surgeon, the transformation goes far beyond appearances, helping patients reclaim their confidence, functionality, and quality of life. Thus, plastic surgeons truly can transform lives both inside and out.

Jill Kruse, D.O. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices as a hospitalist in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org and on Facebook, Instagram, and Threads featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc®, a medical Q&A show on SDPB, 2 podcasts, and a Radio program, providing health information based on science, built on trust, streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central and wherever podcast can be found.



Jill Kruse, DO

EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: Is climate change decimating the U.S. cranberry industry? -- D.K., Chico, CA

Cranberries are a vital crop in the U.S., deeply intertwined with the nation's agricultural economy and cultural identity. Grown predominantly in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Wisconsin, cranberries contribute significantly to regional economies. However, the industry now faces growing challenges due to climate change, threatening its sustainability and economic viability.

Cranberry farming relies on precise environmental conditions, so it is especially vulnerable to climate change. Rising temperatures disrupt the delicate timing of cranberry flowering and fruiting cycles. According to a study in PLOS Climate, this affects crop yields and overall quality. Precipitation patterns have also become unpredictable. Cranberries need controlled water levels, but climate change has brought frequent droughts and floods, both which stress the crops. According to Yale Climate Connections, these extremes have left farmers grappling with inconsistent harvests. Warmer climates are also fostering ideal conditions for pests and diseases that harm the plants, exacerbating the challenges faced by growers.

The effects of climate change on cranberry production vary by region, but the challenges are universal. In Massachusetts, unpredictable weather patterns have slashed yields and driven up production costs. Farmers often face additional expenses to manage water resources and protect crops from extreme weather events. Wisconsin, a leading cranberry-producing state, has seen erratic spring temperatures disrupting the growth cycles of its crops. Meanwhile, New Jersey cranberry farms are contending with coastal flooding and rising soil salinity, which are direct consequences of climate change in the region.

Despite these mounting challenges, farmers are fighting back. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is emerging as a powerful tool, helping farmers make informed decisions. According to CNBC, farmers are using AI to monitor and predict weather patterns, optimize irrigation and manage pest outbreaks. Sustainable farming practices are also gaining traction, from water-efficient irrigation systems to crop rotation methods that preserve soil health. Also, collaboration with scientists has become crucial. Researchers are working to breed more resilient cranberry varieties that can withstand the changing climate.

While the challenges facing cranberry farmers are formidable, the resilience and innovation within the industry provide a glimmer of hope. From cutting-edge technology to sustainable practices and scientific research, efforts are underway to ensure the longevity of this vital crop. As climate change continues to pose threats, the cranberry industry stands as a testament to the adaptability and determination of farmers and researchers committed to preserving an essential piece of American agriculture and culture.



The cranberry industry now faces growing challenges due to climate change, threatening its sustainability and economic viability.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

State Library budget cut would hamstring local libraries, opponents say

Databases, training, resources for citizens and librarians on chopping block

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 15, 2024 6:00 AM

A cut to the South Dakota State Library's budget would be devastating to local libraries and the citizens who rely on them – including homeschool families – local librarians and library advocates say.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem proposed a \$1 million cut to the State Library during her budget address on Dec. 3, among other cuts in response to the depletion of federal pandemic relief funding and declining sales tax revenue.

Trimming the State Library's budget would eliminate the vast majority of funding for the organization, which is an arm of the state Department of Education. The library currently has 21 employees; the budget cut would lay off a dozen of them, according to the governor's proposal.

Nancy Van Der Weide, spokesperson for the department, said via email that the cuts will reduce database access and interlibrary loan support.

The office "will continue to support South Dakota Accessible Library Services (Braille and Talking Books) and professional development programming for public and school libraries" with the remaining nine employees, she wrote.

Seven State Library employees work in accessibility services. The budget cut would keep them but leave just two people to handle everything else. Opponents doubt the state will be able to afford to continue training or professional development if only two people remain on staff to service the entire state.

One program, for example, allows librarians and staff to earn a certificate of public library management



Gov. Kristi Noem presents her annual budget address to lawmakers in the South Dakota State Capitol on Dec. 3, 2024. Behind her, from left, are House Speaker nominee Jon Hansen and Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

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through a four-year course whose students meet once a month all year and meet in-person for a full week of training once a year. Van Der Weide did not respond to a message asking if that program specifically would remain if Noem's proposal goes through.

Elizabeth Fox, president of the South Dakota Library Association and librarian for the H.M. Briggs Library at South Dakota State University, cannot envision the state offering anything that intensive with a dozen fewer people.

"With two people, they cannot do the training," Fox said.

Fox and others in the library community say Noem's proposal endangers public access to information and could leave local librarians floundering as they work to serve their communities without an adequately funded State Library to guide them.

"I'd say it would be like chopping them off at the knees, but it's not even that," said Jane Norling, vice president of the State Library Board and director of the Beresford Public Library. "It's chopping off at the head, because three-fourths of the staff will be gone."

Librarians: State Library benefits all South Dakotans

The state Library Association recently updated its homepage with a link to talking points on how to advocate for the State Library.

Librarians are concerned not just by the proposed \$1 million state funding cut, but by the loss of another \$1.3 million in grant funding through the federal Institute for Museum and Library Sciences. States are expected to match their grant funding at a 34% rate. Noem's proposed budget wouldn't leave enough money to do that, and notes that the budget cuts include a \$1.3 million loss of federal funding.

The State Library uses grants to pay for a wide range of educational databases and resources like study guides and practice tests for the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

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Other databases accessible through the State Library include ancestry.com and Swank K-12 Streaming, which allows schools to stream films for educational purposes without paying licensing fees.

"Without this statewide subscription, schools would need to pursue individual licenses in order to legally stream movies," Doris Ann Mertz, library coordinator at Custer School District, wrote in an email to Searchlight. "This is so cost-prohibitive."

Norling noted that homeschooling families in the Beresford area rely heavily on local libraries, ordering books through interlibrary loans and using the databases funded by the State Library.

"We do borrow books for them, so that's an impact to them," Norling said.

The State Library offers a courier service for interlibrary loan materials.

The professionally curated databases and information sources like World Book Encyclopedia for general information or PubMed for scholarly publications are important for students and the public, Fox said.

There are other options like Wikipedia or Google Scholar, the library association president said, but those free resources can be manipulated and don't have the reliability of an encyclopedia. Anyone can edit Wikipedia entries, she said, and Google Scholar ingests scientific research without filtering out questionably sourced materials.

It's unclear what database resources might remain if the State Library were to be stripped to a bare bones budget. A single three-year state contract with a company called ProQuest that pays for citizen access to databases like the ProQuest Research Library, U.S. Newstream and Heritage Quest has a \$512,000 price tag.

Van Der Weide did not reply to a question asking her to elaborate on what database resources would remain available if Noem's cut takes effect.

Training, coordination

Custer County Librarian Sarah Myers earned her public library certificate through the State Library's Public Library Training Institute. Myers said the four-year training offered her the kind of education that would otherwise require a master's degree.

No school in South Dakota offers an accredited master's in library science degree, according to the American Library Association's database of accredited programs.

Myers sees the opportunity for librarians like her to train without moving out of state, paying tuition and leaving their local libraries in the process as invaluable to a state where few counties or cities can afford to attract a degreed librarian.

"Librarians need training. They need to know how to do their jobs," Myers said. "One way to get that is to get a master's in library science, but that's not always affordable to everyone."

The national association's president told Searchlight that state librarians – all 50 states have one – coordinate a host of services for local libraries, and do so with an eye to meeting local needs.

Beresford's Norling and others pointed out that the State Library coordinates summer reading programs and trains librarians as each summer approaches. American Library Association President Cindy Hohl said that's a common role for state libraries.

Beyond state-level help with program set-up, there are nationwide summer reading resources available each year, and local librarians connect with them through their state libraries.

"Educators are always interested in how we can decrease the summer slide," Hohl said, referring to the tendency of kids to lose ground in literacy in the summer months if they aren't reading.

Hohl said state libraries are in the best position to make sure citizens have access to the most valuable information to local audiences, through database subscriptions or otherwise offering guidance to locals

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on content curation.

"Whether it's helping a small business owner research the market or helping our homeschool parents find resources that are designed for children and their special learning needs, that's what a state library does," Hohl said.

Cut could present difficulties for digital content

The State Library acts as facilitator for a consortium of local libraries that offer e-books and other materials through an app called Libby.

Local libraries pay a population-based fee to join the "South Dakota Titles To Go" consortium, with the state librarian facilitating the program and serving as the contact point for OverDrive, the company that owns Libby.

That's a big concern for Ashia Gustafson, director of the Brookings Public Library. Libby has grown incredibly popular since 2020, she said.

"It got a lot of people through the pandemic, because we couldn't physically be open," Gustafson said.

Fox, who works across town at SDSU, suspects the Libby consortium will ultimately survive, but she also expects it'll take a few messy years for the group to find its bearings without a state-level coordinator.

"The State Library has the expertise to negotiate contracts and to run the sort of behind-the-scenes, techie stuff that many of the librarians involved in this don't have that expertise in," Fox said.

Tom Nelson, president of the State Library Board and a former legislator, told South Dakota Searchlight "there's going to be a fight, or at least a very, very good discussion" on the State Library cut.

The personnel at the library now do more for the state than most citizens realize, he said.

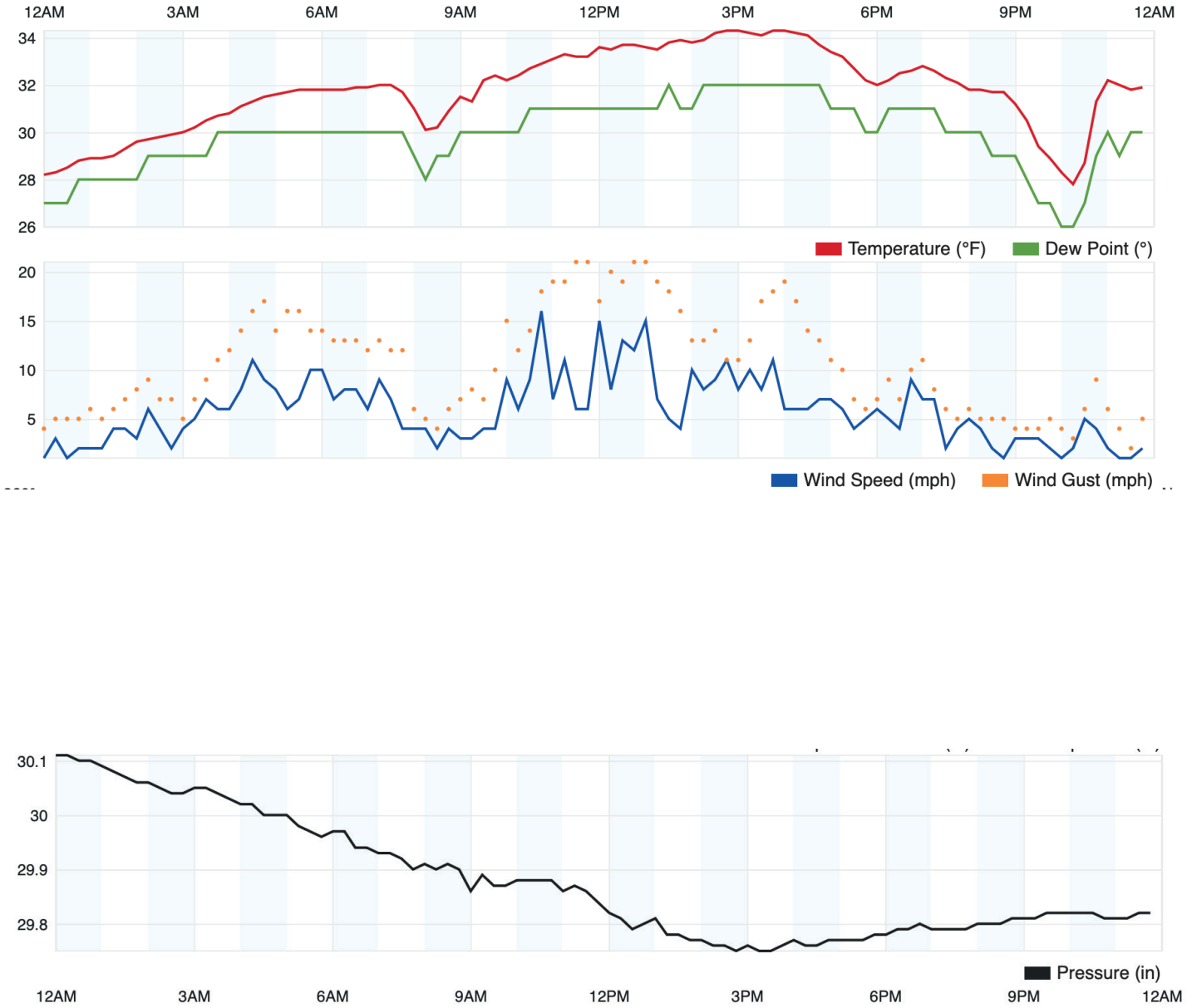
"Each one of those employees has a face, name and a job to do," Nelson said. "I just think that the people who made these recommendations to the governor either didn't do the research, or they ignored it."

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 34 °F

Mostly Cloudy and Breezy

Tonight



Low: 17 °F

Mostly Cloudy

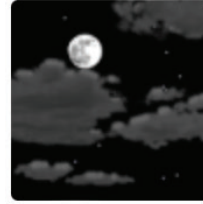
Tuesday



High: 24 °F

Chance Snow

Tuesday Night



Low: 8 °F

Partly Cloudy

Wednesday



High: 19 °F

Mostly Sunny

Gusty Winds Today

December 16, 2024
4:26 AM

Elevated Fire Weather Concerns Over South Central SD

Wind Advisory
Valid Through 1 PM MST

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Dec 16, 2024 3:20 AM CST

→ Sustained west to northwest winds between 20 to 35 mph with gusts of 30 to 45 mph

- ◆ Highest gusts over central SD
- ◆ **Elevated Fire Weather Concerns** over south central SD
 - Combination of gusty winds, ongoing dry conditions, and relative humidity around 40 percent

	Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)						Maximum
	12/16						
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	
Aberdeen	30	33	35	31	21	15	35
Britton	28	33	35	35	25	20	35
Brookings	29	33	36	32	23	17	36
Chamberlain	36	40	41	37	17	8	41
Clark	28	33	35	32	23	18	35
Eagle Butte	44	46	46	38	22	15	46
Ellendale	32	37	37	35	24	20	37
Eureka	38	43	43	40	29	22	43
Gettysburg	36	41	40	36	22	15	41
Huron	29	35	36	31	17	12	36
Kennebec	39	43	45	38	20	10	45
McIntosh	41	44	44	38	22	15	44
Milbank	26	33	36	36	29	22	36
Miller	38	41	41	36	21	14	41
Mobridge	36	37	36	33	21	15	37
Murdo	38	43	43	37	17	10	43
Pierre	39	39	39	35	17	8	39
Redfield	30	35	37	31	18	13	37
Sisseton	31	35	36	36	28	24	36
Watertown	31	38	38	36	29	21	38
Webster	32	35	37	37	30	24	37
Wheaton	24	31	32	31	25	23	32

Winds will be breezy out of the west/northwest today, sustained between 20 to 35 mph with gusts up to 45 mph, highest over central SD. This leads to an elevated fire weather concern over south central SD due to the combination of the gusty winds, dry conditions, and relative humidity dropping to 40 percent.

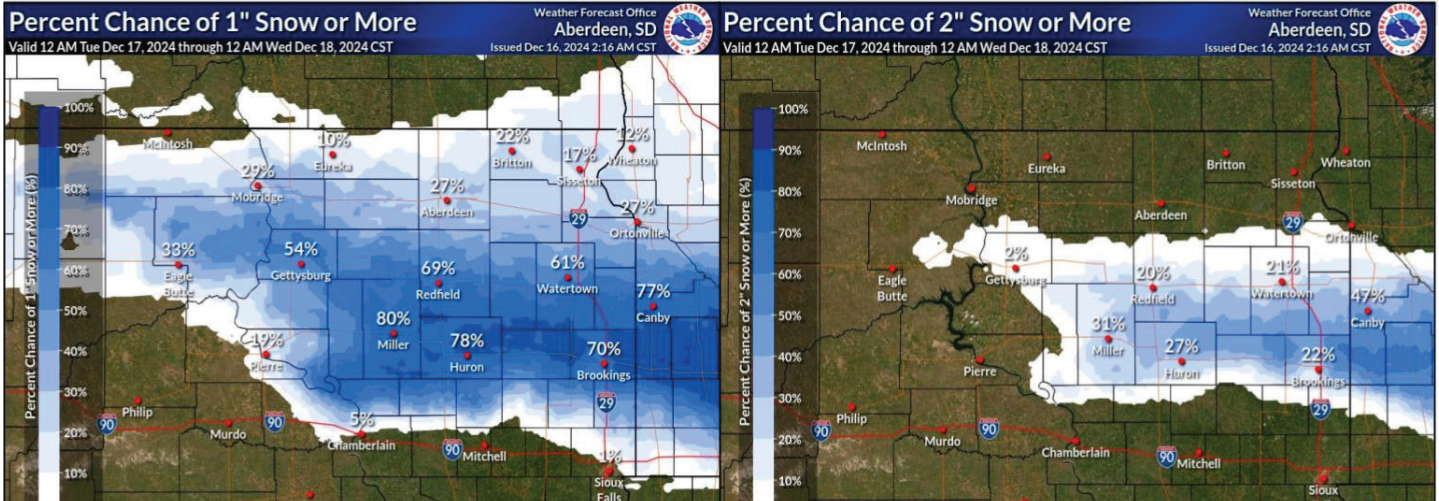
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Probability of One to Two Inches of Snow Tuesday

December 16, 2024

4:30 AM



- A relatively weak system will move through Tuesday bringing light to moderate snow to the area
- Around and north of I-90 will be the favored location for receiving the highest snowfall amounts
 - 20 to 30% of receiving 2 or more inches of snow
- Exact amounts remain uncertain and are subject to change. Stay up-to-date with the latest winter weather information at weather.gov/abr/winter

A relatively weak system will bring light snow to the area Tuesday with accumulations generally between 1 to 2 inches, highest around and north of I90. However, exact amounts remain uncertain and are subject to change.

The Challenges of "Banded Snowfall"

A Small Shift In Track Or Change In Location = Big Difference In Snow Totals

What is Banded Snowfall:

- A narrow corridor of heavier snowfall within a broader area of light amounts
- Usually has very tight gradients in snow amounts on the edges of the heavier band
- Very difficult to forecast, especially more than 12-24 hours out from event

What Should You Do:

Always monitor the latest forecast from a reliable source. Banded snow events often result in frequent and sometime drastic forecast changes.



City A Light Snow Totals (Less than 2")
City B Heavy Snow Totals (Greater than 6")
City C Moderate Snow Totals (2 to 6")



Photo taken by Leigh Marts (via NWS Wichita, KS)

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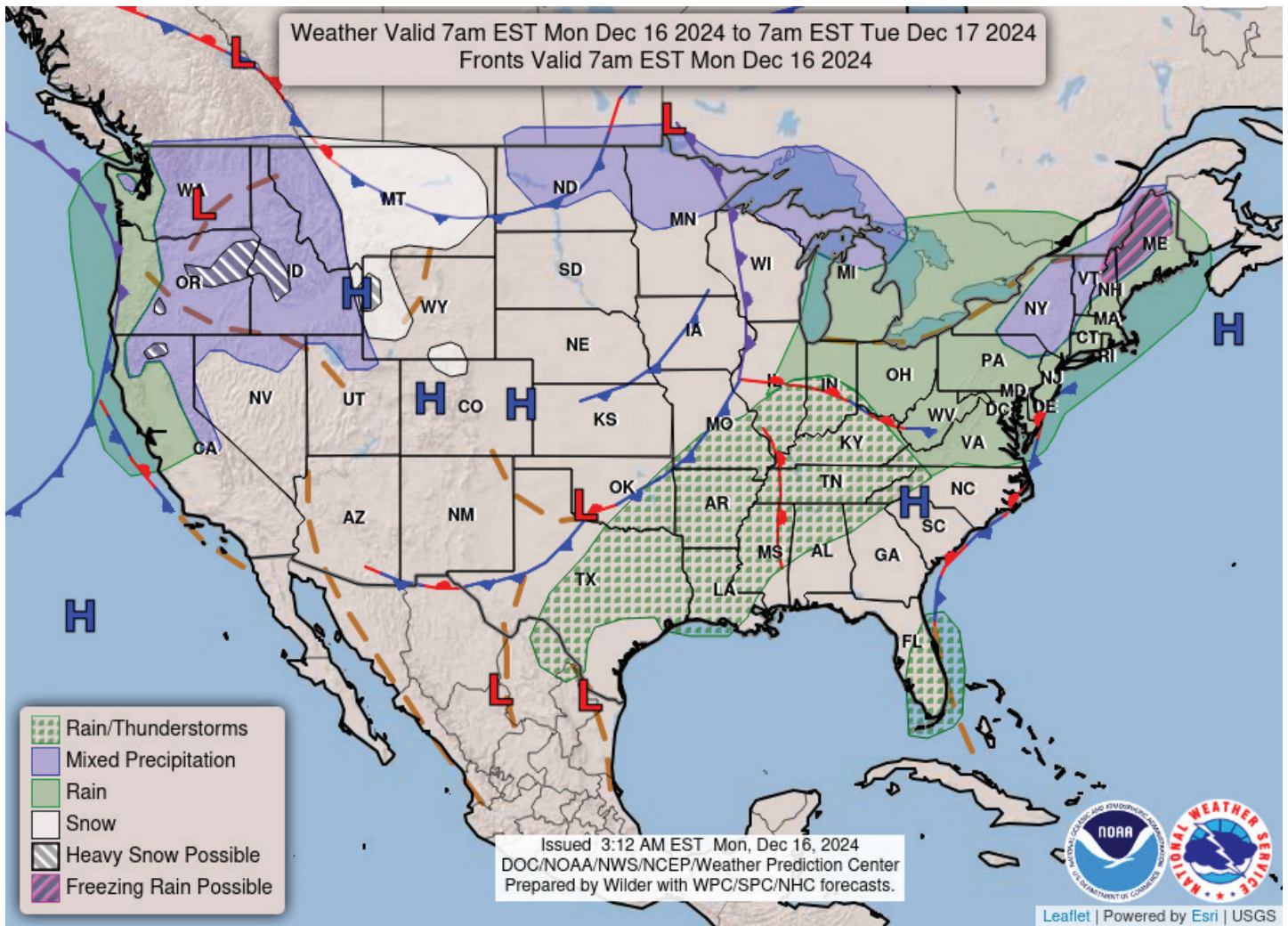
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 2:37 PM
Low Temp: 28 °F at 10:20 PM
Wind: 21 mph at 11:30 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1962
Record Low: -28 in 1951
Average High: 28
Average Low: 8
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.31
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.52
Precip Year to Date: 21.71
Sunset Tonight: 4:51:53 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:05:30 am



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Today in Weather History

December 16, 1967: With temperatures in the upper 20s, heavy freezing rain fell in west central and southwest Minnesota at night on the 16th, causing widespread ice accumulations on all exposed surfaces, and power and telephone poles and lines went down over a vast region. Some places were without power and phone service for three to four days. This storm was classified as the most severe ice storm in the past 20 years in some areas. Reports were received of turkeys and other poultry dying due to the cold in the countryside. 20 to 30 cars were in the ditch on one slick stretch of road in Rock County. Further west, throughout eastern South Dakota, freezing rain for most of the day formed ice from 3/8 to 3/4 inch on exposed surfaces. Extensive damage was caused to utility lines. All roads became dangerous for traveling, and one death was directly linked to the ice storm. The ice cut off a regular water supply, causing one person to attempt to get water from a cistern. She slipped on the ice into the cistern. Three deaths were indirectly related to the ice storm; two due to automobile accidents, and one due to a heart attack.

December 16, 2000: Northwest winds of 30 to 50 mph, with gusts to 60 mph, combined with newly fallen snow and arctic air to bring widespread blizzard conditions and extreme wind chills as low as 70 below zero to west central Minnesota and much of South Dakota from late on the 15th through the 16th. Events were canceled, travel was shut down, and some motorists were stranded. Both US Highway 12 and Interstate 29 in South Dakota were closed throughout the day. As an indirect result of the low visibility, a semi-truck hit and totaled a pickup truck in the snow just west of Clark.

1811: An estimated Magnitude 7.5 earthquake struck the Mississippi Valley near the town of New Madrid in Missouri at 2:15 am local time. People were awakened by the shaking in New York City, Washington D.C., and Charleston, South Carolina. The ground motions were described as most alarming and frightening in places like Nashville, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky. In the epicentral area, the ground surface was described as in great convulsion with sand and water ejected tens of feet into the air.

1835 - New England experienced one of their coldest days of record. At noon on that bitterly cold Wednesday the mercury stood at four degrees below at Boston, 15 degrees below at Norfolk CT, and 17 degrees below at Hanover NH. The temperature at Boston was 12 degrees below zero by sunset. Gale force winds accompanied the severe cold, and that night a great New York City fire destroyed much of the financial district. (David Ludlum)

1917 - An ice jam closed the Ohio River between Warsaw, KY, and Rising Sun, IN. The thirty foot high ice jam held for 58 days, and backed up the river a distance of 100 miles. (David Ludlum)

1941: In 1941, only two women were employed by the Weather Bureau. By 1945, more than 900 women are employed by the Weather Bureau as observers and forecasters, as a result of filling positions of men during World War II. Eleven days after Pearl Harbor, the Army requested that all weather broadcasts be discontinued. The fear was that the enemy would use this information to plan an attack on the United States.

1987 - A Pacific storm battered the coast of California with rain and high winds, and dumped heavy snow on the mountains of California. Winds along the coast gusted to 70 mph at Point Arguello, and winds in the Tehachapi Mountains of southern California gusted to 100 mph at Wheeler Ridge. Snowfall totals ranged up to 24 inches at Mammoth Mountain. Snow fell for two minutes at Malibu Beach, and Disneyland was closed due to the weather for only the second time in twenty-four years. A winter storm which began in the Southern Rockies four days earlier finished its course producing snow and high winds in New England. Snowfall totals ranged up to 19 inches at Blanchard ME. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Fairbanks, AK, reported freezing rain and record warm temperatures. The afternoon high of 41 degrees was 43 degrees above normal. Snow and high winds continued to plague the mountains of southern California. Mount Wilson CA reported two inches of rain in six hours during the early morning, and a storm total of more than 3.50 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary)

2000 - An F4 tornado hits communities near Tuscaloosa, AL, killing 11 people and injuring 125 others. It was the strongest December tornado in Alabama since 1950.



Planning Ahead

It was the Sunday before Christmas and the teacher of the fifth-grade class was reviewing the details of the birth of Jesus. With carefully chosen words, she talked about the difficult journey to Bethlehem. Then she said with sadness, "And when they arrived, there was no room for them in the inn. Wasn't that terrible?"

George, after thinking for a moment about the vacations his family had taken and the careful, detailed plans they made said without thinking, "Why didn't Joseph make a reservation?"

There will be many around us during this holiday season who will make no room – no reservation – for Jesus to be with them this year. We often remind each other that "He's the reason for the Season" but do not take time to explain to others what that "reason" is. We are quick to condemn those who want to take "Christ out of Christmas" but do not take time to plant the message of Christ in their minds and hearts at Christmas. We place the manger scene under the tree, cover it with presents and then wrap it back up and forget about His birth and its significance for another year.

Hanging next to Jesus on a cross was a thief who was dying for crimes he committed. In his final moments, he turned to Him and said, "Jesus, remember me." And Jesus said, "I certainly will! Today you will be with me in paradise." The best day to make your reservation to be with Him is this day if you have not done so. Don't delay!

Prayer: Your Word, Lord, declares with certainty: "Today is the day of salvation." May we take advantage of this day and not risk the uncertainties of life! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:1-7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

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:

12.13.24

36 43 52 58 65 16

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$740,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 12
DRAW: Mins 10 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.14.24

2 8 47 51 52 3

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$17,460,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 27 Mins
DRAW: 10 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.15.24

9 12 22 36 45 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 42 Mins
DRAW: 11 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.14.24

1 9 19 21 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$156,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 42
DRAW: Mins 11 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.14.24

12 16 36 55 64 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 11 Mins 10
DRAW: Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.14.24

12 17 23 52 67 1

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$55,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 11 Mins 10
DRAW: 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

Death toll in Gaza Strip from Israel-Hamas war tops 45,000, Palestinians say

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The death toll in the Gaza Strip from the 14-month war between Israel and Hamas militants has topped 45,000 people, Palestinian health officials said Monday, with 52 dead arriving at hospitals across the bombed-out strip over the past 24 hours.

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

The Health Ministry said 45,028 people have been killed and 106,962 have been wounded since the start of the war. It has said the real toll is higher because thousands of bodies are still buried under rubble or in areas that medics cannot access. The latest war has been by far the deadliest round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, with the death toll now amounting to roughly 2% of Gaza's entire prewar population of about 2.3 million.

Among the dead reported in the overall toll were 10 people, including a family of four, who were killed in an overnight Israeli strike in Gaza City, Palestinian medics said.

The strike late Sunday hit a house in Gaza City's eastern Shijaiyah neighborhood, according to the Health Ministry's emergency service. Rescuers recovered the bodies of 10 people from under the rubble, including those of two parents and their two children, it said.

Israel claims Hamas is responsible for the civilian death toll because it operates from within civilian areas in the densely populated Gaza Strip. Rights groups and Palestinians say Israel has failed to take sufficient precautions to avoid civilian deaths.

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

A separate strike on a school on Sunday in the southern city of Khan Younis killed at least 13 people, including six children and two women, according to Nasser Hospital where the bodies were taken. The hospital initially reported the strike had killed 16 people, but it later revised the death toll as the three other bodies had been from a separate strike that hit a house.

The Israeli military said it had "conducted a precise strike on Hamas terrorists who were operating inside a command and control center embedded within a compound" that had served as a school in Khan Younis. It did not provide evidence.

In central Gaza's Nuseirat urban refugee camp, mourners gathered for the funeral of a Palestinian journalist working for the Qatari-based Al Jazeera TV network who was killed Sunday in a strike on a point for Gaza's civil defense agency. They carried his body through the street from the hospital, his blue bulletproof vest resting atop.

The strike also killed three civil defense workers, including the local head of the agency, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. The civil defense is Gaza's main rescue agency and operates under the Hamas-run government.

Al Jazeera said Ahmad Baker Al-Louh, 39, had been covering rescue operations of a family wounded in an earlier bombing when he was killed.

The International Federation of Journalists said last week that 104 journalists and media workers have been killed so far in 2024, with more than half of them perishing during the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip.

The group said that since the Oct. 7, 2023, start of the war, at least 138 had been killed, including 55

Palestinian media professionals in the calendar year.

The Israeli military said its strike had targeted Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants "who were operating in a command and control center embedded in the offices of the 'Civil Defense' organization in Nuseirat." It accused the journalist of having been a member of Islamic Jihad, an accusation his colleagues in Gaza denied.

Gaza's civil defense also rejected the claims that militants had been operating from the site.

"We were stunned by the Israeli occupation statement," Mahmoud al-Lawh, the journalist's cousin, told The Associated Press. "These claims are lies and misleading to cover up this crime."

Middle East latest: Death toll from Israel-Hamas war tops 45,000. Israel strikes Syrian targets

By The Associated Press undefined

Palestinian health officials said Monday the death toll from the Israel-Hamas war, now in its 14th month, topped 45,000 people.

This comes as an Israeli strike killed at least 10 people, including a family of four, in Gaza City overnight, according to Palestinian medics.

The Israel-Hamas war erupted on Oct. 7 last year when Hamas militants stormed southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people and taking another 250 hostage. Israel responded with heavy bombardment and a ground incursion into the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, a UK-based war monitor says Israeli airstrikes early Monday hit missile warehouses in Syria and called it the "most violent strikes" since 2012.

Israel has been pounding what it says are military sites in Syria after the dramatic collapse of President Bashar Assad's rule, wiping out air defenses and most of the arsenal of the former Syrian army. Israeli troops have also seized a border buffer zone, sparking condemnation, with critics accusing Israel of violating the 1974 ceasefire and possibly exploiting the chaos in Syria for a land grab.

The Assad family's rule, which lasted more than half a century, collapsed just over a week ago following a stunning rebel advance.

The new Syrian administration, led by the former insurgents who toppled Assad, has complained to the U.N. Security Council about the Israeli bombardment and incursions into Syrian territory in the Golan Heights. However, it has also said it does not want a military confrontation with Israel.

Here is the latest:

Death toll from Israel-Hamas war tops 45,000

Health officials in the Gaza Strip say the death toll from the 14-month war between Israel and Hamas militants has reached 45,028 people.

The Gaza Health Ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. It said more than half of the fatalities were women and children. The Israeli military says it has killed more than 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The Health Ministry also said 106,962 have been wounded since the start of the war.

Turkey condemns Israeli plan to expand settlements in the occupied Golan Heights

ANKARA, Turkey — A Turkish Foreign Ministry statement said Monday the decision marked a "new stage in Israel's goal of expanding its borders through occupation," adding that Ankara was concerned that the move would harm efforts to establish peace and stability in Syria.

"The international community must show the necessary reaction to Israel and ensure that the illegal activities of (Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu's government come to an end," the statement read.

Qatar also condemned the decision, calling it "a new episode in a series of Israeli aggressions on Syrian territories and a blatant violation of international law."

The Israeli government approved Netanyahu's plan on Sunday with the aim to encourage population growth in the area.

Israel captured the Golan Heights in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it, though the international

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community except for the U.S. regards it as occupied. Israeli figures show the remote territory is home to about 50,000 people, about half of them Jewish Israelis and the other half Arab Druze, many of whom still consider themselves Syrians.

Mourners in Gaza gather for funeral of Al Jazeera journalist

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — In central Gaza's Nuseirat urban refugee camp, mourners carried Monday the body of Ahmad Baker Al-Louh, 39, a Palestinian journalist working for Al Jazeera, from the hospital through the streets. His blue bulletproof vest rested atop him.

Al-Louh was killed the day before in a strike on a point for Gaza's civil defense agency and Al Jazeera said had been covering rescue operations of a family wounded in an earlier bombing when he was killed.

Sunday's strike also killed three civil defense workers, including the local head of the agency, according to al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. The civil defense is Gaza's main rescue agency and operates under the Hamas-run government.

Israeli strike kills 10 in Gaza City

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — The 10 included a family of four, Palestinian medics said Monday, as the Israel-Hamas war raged on for the 14th month in the Gaza Strip.

The strike late Sunday hit a house in Gaza City's eastern Shijaiyah neighborhood, according to the Health Ministry's ambulance and emergency service. Rescuers recovered the bodies of 10 people from under the rubble, including those of two parents and their two children, it said.

US embassy advises Americans to leave Syria

DAMASCUS, Syria — The U.S. embassy in Damascus advised Americans to leave Syria, saying the security situation there continues to be volatile and unpredictable with armed conflict and "terrorism throughout the country."

The embassy, which has been closed since 2012, posted a statement on X, warning U.S. citizens who were unable to leave the country to prepare "contingency plans for emergency situations." It didn't give further details.

The statement also said that the U.S. government is unable to provide any routine or emergency consular services to U.S. citizens and those who need "emergency assistance to depart should contact the U.S. Embassy in the country they plan to enter."

Sleeper cells of the Islamic State group have claimed responsibility for deadly attacks over the past months in different parts of Syria. Despite their defeat in March 2019, the extremists still pose a threat in the war-torn country.

War monitor says Israel targets missile warehouses

DAMASCUS, Syria — The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based war monitor, reported early Monday that Israeli airstrikes pounded missile warehouses and other former Syrian army sites along Syria's coast in the "most violent strikes in the Syrian coast region since the beginning of the (Israeli) strikes in 2012."

The Israeli military declined to comment on the strikes.

The observatory said that "violent explosions" were heard in the coastal city of Tartous "as a result of the successive strikes and the flying of ground-to-ground missiles from the warehouses."

France rushes help to Mayotte, where hundreds or even thousands died in Cyclone Chido

By GERALD IMRAY Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — France was rushing help by ship and military aircraft to its poor overseas territory of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean on Monday after the island was shattered by its worst storm in nearly a century.

Authorities in Mayotte fear hundreds and possibly thousands of people have died in Cyclone Chido, although the official death toll on Monday morning stood at 14. Rescue teams and medical personnel have been sent to the island off the east coast of Africa from France and from the nearby French territory of

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Reunion, as well as tons of supplies.

French television station TF1 reported Monday morning that Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau had arrived in Mamoudzou, the capital of Mayotte.

"It will take days and days to establish the human toll," he told French media.

French authorities said more than 800 more personnel were expected to arrive in the coming days as rescuers comb through the devastation caused by Chido when it hit the densely populated archipelago of around 300,000 people on Saturday.

Mayotte Prefect François-Xavier Bieuville, the top French government official in Mayotte, told local TV station Mayotte la 1ere on Sunday that the death toll was several hundred people and could even be in the thousands.

He said Mayotte's poor slums of metal shacks and other informal structures had suffered terrible damage and authorities were struggling to get an accurate count of the dead and injured after the worst cyclone to hit Mayotte since the 1930s.

Entire neighborhoods have been flattened, while public infrastructure like the main airport and hospital have been badly damaged and the electricity supply has been knocked out, French authorities said. The damage to the airport control tower means only military aircraft can fly into Mayotte, complicating the response.

Mayotte is France's poorest department and is regarded as the poorest territory in the European Union, but it is a target for economic migration from even poorer countries like nearby Comoros and even Somalia because of a better standard of living and the French welfare system.

Bieuville, the Mayotte prefect, said it would be extremely hard to count all the dead and many might never be recorded, partly due to the Muslim tradition of burying people within 24 hours of their deaths and also because of many undocumented migrants living on the island.

Chido ripped through the southwestern Indian Ocean on Friday and Saturday, also affecting the nearby islands of Comoros and Madagascar. Mayotte was directly in the cyclone's path, though, and took the brunt. Chido brought winds in excess of 220 kph (136 mph), according to the French weather service, making it a category 4 cyclone, the second strongest on the scale.

It made landfall in Mozambique on the African mainland late Sunday, where authorities and aid agencies have said more than 2 million people may be impacted in another poor country where health facilities are already limited. Mozambique media reported three people had died in the north of the country where the cyclone made landfall, but said that was a very early toll.

Further inland, Malawi and Zimbabwe have also made preparations for possible evacuations because of flooding as Chido continues its eastern trajectory, although the cyclone has weakened as it passes over land.

December through to March is cyclone season in the southwestern Indian Ocean and southern Africa has been pummeled by a series of strong ones in recent years. Cyclone Idai in 2019 killed more than 1,300 people, mostly in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Cyclone Freddy left more than 1,000 dead across several countries in the Indian Ocean and southern Africa last year.

South Korea's impeached leader avoids investigators as court begins meeting to determine his fate

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol dodged requests by investigative agencies to appear for questioning over his short-lived martial law decree, as the Constitutional Court began its first meeting Monday on Yoon's case to determine whether to formally unseat or reinstate him.

A joint investigative team involving police, an anti-corruption agency and the Defense Ministry said it wants to question Yoon on charges of rebellion and abuse of power in connection with his ill-conceived power grab.

The team on Monday tried to convey a request to officials at Yoon's office or residence but they refused

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to accept it, according to the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials.

Agency investigator Son Yeong-jo cited presidential secretarial staff at Yoon's office as claiming they were unsure whether conveying the request to the impeached president was part of their duties. Son said his team had also mailed the request to Yoon, but declined to provide specifics when asked how investigators would respond if Yoon refuses to appear.

Yoon was impeached by the opposition-controlled National Assembly on Saturday over his Dec. 3 martial law decree. His presidential powers have been subsequently suspended, and the Constitutional Court is to determine whether to formally remove him from office or reinstate him. If Yoon is dismissed, a national election to choose his successor must be held within 60 days.

Yoon has justified his martial law enforcement as a necessary act of governance against the main liberal opposition Democratic Party that he described as "anti-state forces" bogging down his agendas and vowed to "fight to the end" against efforts to remove him from office.

Hundreds of thousands of protesters have poured onto the streets of the country's capital, Seoul, in recent days, calling for Yoon's ouster and arrest.

It remains unclear whether Yoon will grant the request by investigators for an interview. South Korean prosecutors, who are pushing a separate investigation into the incident, also reportedly asked Yoon to appear at a prosecution office for questioning on Sunday but he refused to do so. Repeated calls to a prosecutors' office in Seoul were unanswered.

Yoon's presidential security service has also resisted a police attempt to search Yoon's office for evidence. The Constitutional Court on Monday met for the first time to discuss the case. The court has up to 180 days to rule. But observers say a ruling could come faster.

In the case of parliamentary impeachments of past presidents — Roh Moo-hyun in 2004 and Park Geun-hye in 2016 — the court spent 63 days and 91 days respectively before determining to reinstate Roh and dismiss Park.

Kim Hyungdu, a court justice, told reporters earlier Monday that the court will "swiftly and fairly" make a decision in the case. He said Monday's court meeting was meant to discuss preparatory procedures and how to arrange arguments at formal trials.

Court spokesperson Lee Jean later said the court's first pretrial hearing is set for Dec. 27.

Upholding Yoon's impeachments needs support from at least six out of the court's nine justices, but three seats are vacant now. This means a unanimous ruling by the court's current six justices in favor of Yoon's impeachment is required to formally end his presidency. Kim said he expected the three vacant seats to be filled by the end of this month.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who became the country's acting leader after Yoon's impeachment, and other government officials have sought to reassure allies and markets after Yoon's surprise stunt paralyzed politics, halted high-level diplomacy and complicated efforts to revive a faltering economy.

Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung urged the Constitutional Court to rule swiftly on Yoon's impeachment and proposed a special council for policy cooperation between the government and parliament. Yoon's conservative People Power Party criticized Lee's proposal for the special council, saying that it's "not right" for the opposition party to act like the ruling party.

Lee, a firebrand lawmaker who drove a political offensive against Yoon's government, is seen as the frontrunner to replace him. He lost the 2022 presidential election to Yoon by a razor-thin margin.

Yoon's impeachment, which was endorsed in parliament by some of his ruling party lawmakers, has created a deep rift within the party between Yoon's loyalists and his opponents. On Monday, PPP chair Han Dong-hun, a strong critic of Yoon's martial law, announced his resignation.

"If martial law had not been lifted that night, a bloody incident could have erupted that morning between the citizens who would have taken to the streets and our young soldiers," Han told a news conference.

Yoon's Dec. 3 imposition of martial law, the first of its kind in more than four decades, harkened back to an era of authoritarian leaders the country has not seen since the 1980s. Yoon was forced to lift his decree hours later after parliament unanimously voted to overturn it.

Yoon sent hundreds of troops and police officers to the parliament in an effort to stop the vote, but they withdrew after the parliament rejected Yoon's decree. No major violence occurred.

Opposition parties have accused Yoon of rebellion, saying a president in South Korea is allowed to declare martial law only during wartime or similar emergencies and would have no right to suspend parliament's operations even in those cases.

Zakir Hussain, one of India's most accomplished classical musicians, dies at 73

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Zakir Hussain, one of India's most accomplished classical musicians who defied genres and introduced tabla to global audiences, died on Sunday. He was 73.

The Indian classical music icon died from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a chronic lung disease, at a hospital in San Francisco, his family said in a statement.

"His prolific work as a teacher, mentor and educator has left an indelible mark on countless musicians. He hoped to inspire the next generation to go further. He leaves behind an unparalleled legacy as a cultural ambassador and one of the greatest musicians of all time," the statement read.

Hussain was the most recognizable exponent of tabla, a pair of hand drums that is the main percussion instrument in Indian classical music.

Considered the greatest tabla player of his generation, Hussain had a career that spanned six decades in which he collaborated with the likes of singer-songwriter George Harrison, jazz saxophonist Charles Lloyd, drummer Mickey Hart and cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

The son of legendary tabla artist Alla Rakha, Hussain was born in 1951 in Mumbai and was taught how to play the instrument by his father at the age of 7. A child prodigy, he was touring by age 12 and performing alongside India's classical music legends during his teens.

In an interview that was shared widely on social media in India, Hussain says his father welcomed him into the world after he was born by speaking tabla rhythms into his ears.

"I was brought home, handed over to my dad in his arms. The tradition was that the father is supposed to recite a prayer in the baby's ear ... So he takes me in his arms, puts his lips to my ear and recites the tabla rhythms into my ears," Hussain says in the interview, verbally imitating the rhythmic pattern of the instrument.

Both Alla Rakha and Hussain were given the honorific "Ustad," an Urdu word that means master.

In 1973, Hussain formed the Indian jazz fusion band "Shakti" with jazz guitarist John McLaughlin. The band played acoustic fusion music that combined Indian music with elements of jazz, introducing a new sound to Western audiences.

In 2024, Hussain became the first musician from India to win three Grammy awards in the same year.

Hussain's "Shakti" won Best Global Music Album, and his collaboration with Edgar Meyer, Béla Fleck and flutist Rakesh Chaurasia won Best Global Music Performance and Best Contemporary Instrumental Album. He had earlier won a Grammy in 2009.

In 2023, Hussain received the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi called Hussain a "true genius who revolutionized the world of Indian classical music" and "an icon of cultural unity."

"He also brought the tabla to the global stage, captivating millions with his unparalleled rhythm," Modi wrote in a post on social platform X.

Hussain is survived by his wife and two daughters.

Journalists anticipate a renewed hostility toward their work under the incoming Trump administration

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For the press heading into a second Trump administration, there's a balancing act between being prepared and being fearful.

The return to power of Donald Trump, who has called journalists enemies and talked about retribution against those he feels have wronged him, has news executives nervous. Perceived threats are numerous: lawsuits of every sort, efforts to unmask anonymous sources, physical danger and intimidation, attacks on public media and libel protections, day-to-day demonization.

In a closely-watched case settled over the weekend, ABC chose to settle a defamation lawsuit brought by the president-elect over an inaccurate statement made by George Stephanopoulos by agreeing to pay \$15 million toward Trump's presidential library.

"The news media is heading into this next administration with its eyes open," said Bruce Brown, executive director of the Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press.

"Some challenges to the free press may be overt, some may be more subtle," Brown said. "We'll need to be prepared for rapid response as well as long campaigns to protect our rights — and to remember that our most important audiences are the courts and the public."

One prominent editor warned against going on war footing with an administration that hasn't taken office yet. "There may be a moment to cry wolf here," said Stephen Engelberg, editor-in-chief of the nonprofit news outlet ProPublica. "But I don't think we've reached it."

A second chance, a third chance — but not a fourth

Speaking to Fox News two weeks after his election, Trump said he owed it to the American people to be open and available to the press — if he's treated fairly.

"I am not looking for retribution, grandstanding or to destroy people who treated me very unfairly, or even badly beyond comprehension," he told Fox. "I am always looking to give a second or even a third chance, but never willing to give a fourth chance. That is where I hold the line."

News organizations are heading into the second Trump era weak both financially and in public esteem. To a large extent, Trump sidestepped legacy media outlets during his campaign in favor of podcasters, yet still had time for specific beefs against ABC, CBS and NBC.

The Trump team knows that many of its followers despise a probing press, and stoking that fury has political advantages. Two examples in the campaign to install Trump nominee Pete Hegseth as defense secretary shows how routine reporting activities can be characterized as an attack.

When The New York Times was tipped to an email that Hegseth's mother once sent to him criticizing his treatment of women, it called her for comment. Penelope Hegseth later told Fox News that she perceived that as a threat, even though it enabled the newspaper to report that she had quickly apologized for sending the email and says she doesn't feel that way about him now.

Pete Hegseth also used social media to say that ProPublica — he called it a "Left Wing hack group" — was about to knowingly publish a false report that he hadn't been accepted into West Point decades ago. The news site had contacted him after officials at the military academy contradicted Hegseth's claim of acceptance. Hegseth provided proof that those officials were mistaken, and ProPublica never published a story.

"That's journalism," noted ProPublica's Jesse Eisinger. But a narrative had taken hold: "ProPublica's botched Pete Hegseth smear," the New York Post called it in a headline.

Keeping an eye on how journalists' work is portrayed

During the presidential campaign, Trump sued CBS News for the way it edited an interview with opponent Kamala Harris; suggested ABC News lose its broadcast license for fact-checking him during his lone debate with Harris; and successfully called for equal time on NBC after Harris appeared on "Saturday Night Live." In the Stephanopoulos lawsuit, the ABC anchor said Trump had been "found liable for rape" in writer E. Jean Carroll's civil trial, when he had not.

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Trump engages with the mainstream media — he gave a newsmaking interview to NBC's "Meet the Press" this month — but journalists have to be alert to how their work will be portrayed.

Trump's appointments, and what they've said about journalists, have raised alarms.

Kash Patel, Trump's choice to lead the FBI, said on a podcast last year that "we're going to come after people in the media who lied about American citizens." Two appointees who have expressed hostility toward the media will be in a position to impact the work of journalists: Brendan Carr as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and Kari Lake as director of Voice of America.

News organizations are worried that a Justice Department policy that has generally prohibited prosecutors from seizing the records of journalists in order to investigate leaks will be reversed, and are already urging journalists to protect their work. "If you have something you don't want to share with a broader audience, don't put it on the cloud," ProPublica's Engelberg said.

During the first Trump administration, some journalists who covered immigration issues were pulled aside for screening and questioning. The Reporter's Committee wonders if this might happen again — and whether similar practices might extend toward reporting on expected deportations.

The literary and human rights organization PEN America is concerned about journalists facing physical danger and digital hostility. It may have seemed like a flippant remark to some of his supporters when Trump, months after an attempt on his life, said at a rally that he wouldn't mind if somebody had to "shoot through the fake news" to get to him. But it wasn't for people standing on media risers.

"It's important that the president act with responsibility to reduce physical violence against the press rather than encourage it," said Viktorya Vilks, PEN America's program director for digital safety and free expression.

Sen. John Kennedy of Louisiana recently introduced a bill that would end taxpayer funding for public radio and television, a longtime goal of many Republicans that may get momentum with the party back in power. Some U.S. Supreme Court justices are eager to revisit a legal precedent that has made it difficult to prove defamation against news organizations.

It's apparent that the new administration will come after the press in every conceivable way, former Washington Post editor Martin Baron said recently on NPR. "I do think he will use every tool in his toolbox," Baron said, "and there are a lot of tools."

Hungary's experience inspires pessimism — but maybe a glimmer of hope

In their most pessimistic moments, advocates for the press look at what has happened in Hungary under the control of Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Since Orban took control in 2010, he and his supporters have taken control of most media and turned it into a propaganda arm.

Don't think that can't happen in the United States, warns Andras Petho, an investigative journalist in Hungary who left a news website when it was pressured to stifle his work, and started the investigative journalism center Direkt36.

Despite repression, there is still a market for independent journalism in Hungary, he said. Earlier this year, two Hungarian officials resigned following an outcry when it was revealed that they had pardoned a man who had forced children to retract sexual abuse claims made against the director of a government-run facility.

Petho said it is important for journalists not to portray themselves as any sort of resistance, because that makes it easier for the government to dismiss them. Instead, they should just do the work.

"To be honest, we all have to accept and admit that our power as media has declined," said Petho, who participated in the Nieman fellowship for journalists at Harvard University. "Our stories don't have the same impact that they had a decade ago. But I wouldn't underestimate the power of the news media, either."

Biden, Harris thank major Democratic donors and urge them to stay engaged after tough loss to Trump

By MORIAH BALINGIT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris on Sunday thanked deep-pocketed Democratic donors who raised record sums in last month's election loss to President-elect Donald Trump and urged them not to lose hope and to remain politically engaged.

Biden and Harris, along with their spouses, in remarks at the Democratic National Committee holiday reception sought to buck up key donors who the Democratic Party needs to stay committed as it tries to pick up the pieces. Republicans scored a decisive victory taking the White House and Senate while maintaining control of the House in an election where donors of all political stripes spent about \$4.7 billion.

"We all get knocked down. My dad would say when you get knocked down, you just got to get up," Biden said. "The measure of a person or a party is how fast they get back up."

Harris, who stepped in as the party's presidential nominee after Biden ended his campaign in July following his disastrous debate performance, praised donors for putting their time — and checkbooks — into backing her and Democrats that they believed in.

Democrats, their allied super PACs and other groups raised about \$2.9 billion, compared to about \$1.8 billion for the Republicans. Harris noted that Democrats raised a whopping \$700 million over just 700 events organized by the Democratic finance committee.

"You rallied, you opened your homes, you reached out to your friends and your family," said Harris, who will soon begin weighing in earnest her own future and whether to make another White House run. "You put your personal capital — and by that I mean your relationships — at stake to talk with people because you care so deeply, and you connected with people and took the time to remind them of what is at stake and what was at stake."

While Biden acknowledged the sting that Democrats continue to feel about last month's loss, he said they should take pride in what they accomplished.

The administration's signature achievements include a \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill, the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act to boost semiconductor manufacturing in the U.S., and a surge in federal environmental spending through the Inflation Reduction Act, which Biden signed into law in 2022 after it cleared Congress solely with Democratic votes.

"We could never have gotten as much done as we did without you," Biden said. "You not only contributed to the campaign, but you did something, I think, even more important. You were willing to lend your names, your reputation, your character to the effort."

Biden said that he intended to remain engaged with party politics once he leaves office on Jan. 20. He also predicted that he expected Harris would remain a central character in the party's future.

"You're not going anywhere kid. We aren't letting you," Biden said to Harris.

Survivors seek a reckoning as FBI investigates child sex abuse in little-known Christian sect

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Nearly every detail about the religious group Lisa Webb's family belonged to was hidden from the outside world. Its followers met in homes rather than churches. Its leadership structure was hard to discern, its finances opaque. It didn't even have an official name.

But for decades, no secret was as closely guarded as the identities of the sexual predators inside the group known as the "Two by Twos."

Now a growing number of public allegations from around the world have prompted a broad investigation by the FBI and placed an uncomfortable spotlight on the long-quiet Christian sect. Survivors say the group's leaders protected child-abusing ministers by pressuring victims to forgive, ignoring legal reporting

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requirements and by transferring abusers to new locations to live with unsuspecting families.

Ministry leaders have publicly condemned the abuse but several declined to answer questions from The Associated Press.

For Webb, who was sexually abused by one of the group's ministers as a child, the attention has brought an unexpected sense of "strength in numbers."

"There are so many who are frustrated and disheartened," said Webb. "But there's also camaraderie in that, and support."

A website, a hotline and social media pages established by victims have documented allegations against more than 900 abusers, with survivors in more than 30 countries and cases continuing to emerge. In the past year, news stories and a Hulu documentary have focused on the sect's predator preachers and the leaders who enabled them.

While perpetrators have been sentenced to prison in isolated cases, the sect has largely avoided legal repercussions, protected by its decentralized structure, hidden finances and state laws that limit the timeline for criminal charges.

The secret sect's origin story

The sect, also known to its members as "The Way" or "The Truth," was founded in Ireland in 1897 by William Irvine, who railed against the existence of churches. The only way to spread Christianity, he argued, was to do as Jesus instructed in the Book of Matthew: to send apostles out to live among those they sought to convert.

The sect grew as volunteer preachers — known as workers — went "two by two" to live in the family homes of followers for days or weeks at a time. Sect historians say there were up to a few million members just a few decades ago, but current estimates put the figure at 75,000 to 85,000 worldwide.

Unlike the Boy Scouts or the Catholic Church, which have paid out billions to sex abuse victims, the sect's aversion to property leaves it without apparent assets that might be used to pay settlements, legal experts say.

Workers are supposed to shun worldly possessions, relying on followers for food, shelter and transportation. But that also ensures abusive workers have access to potential victims.

Webb was abused by a preacher who stayed with her family in Michigan when she was 11. The man, Peter Mousseau, was convicted much later — after he expressed an interest in visiting her in 2008 and she decided to pursue charges. A regional overseer to whom she previously reported the abuse was later convicted for failing to report abuse allegations against another local worker.

"You have this mindset that they are angels in your home. They can do no wrong, so you don't have any kind of wall up," she said. "It was just the perfect storm created, the perfect recipe for this kind of behavior."

Abusers live among their victims

Sheri Autrey had just turned 14 when a 28-year-old worker moved into her family's home in Visalia, California, for two months.

He began abusing her immediately, sneaking to her room at night and taking her for daytime drives. He turned up the radio whenever the Hall & Oates song "Maneater" came on, singing: "Watch out boy, she'll chew you up."

When Autrey revealed the abuse to her mother a few years later, her mom reported it to the sect's regional overseer, who was in charge of all the workers in the area.

The overseer refused to warn other families. Instead, he sent the worker back to Autrey's home to apologize.

Autrey, raised to be meek, erupted. Her family took her to the district attorney's office but declined to put her through a prosecution.

"I would have to explain, explicitly, what happened," Autrey said. "And I was in no way prepared for that."

Decades later, Autrey was at a baseball game when "Maneater" came on. She had to walk around the stadium to calm herself down, and she resolved to send a letter about the abuse to hundreds of sect members.

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"I wanted anyone else who was a victim to know she is not the only one," Autrey said. "She needs to know there is help."

Many more cases of abuse

One worker from Peru, Americo Quispe, was sent to Garland, Texas, in the early 2000s after facing allegations of inappropriate behavior in his home country. He soon found new victims, some of whose families went to police. He returned to Peru before he could be arrested.

Quispe was later convicted of molestation in Peru and sentenced to 30 years. He has never faced the charges in Texas.

Another worker, Ruben Mata, abused dozens of boys, among them 10-year-old Douglas Patterson, who was lured away from his family during a sect convention in the early 1990s. Patterson said he kept quiet about it because he feared his family would leave the sect — and thus be barred from eternal salvation — if he told.

Mata was eventually convicted in 2006 in a separate sex abuse case. He died in a California prison.

Members told to keep abuse reports quiet

A few months before Mata's trial, the Saskatchewan, Canada, overseer, Dale Shultz, sent two letters to colleagues.

One was to be shown to any concerned members. It acknowledged Mata was a pedophile and that workers had been alerted to his abuse at least three times. The sect only notified authorities after Mata resigned, according to the letter.

The second was for staff. It said no copies should be made of the first letter.

"The purpose of the letter is to help those who have concerns, not to advertise a kingdom problem to those who either do not know about it or are not having a problem with it," Shultz wrote.

In another case, a regional overseer for Arizona, Ed Alexander, wrote a letter to a child-molesting elder in 2005 observing that "we love our people very much and don't want to report their misdeeds."

The letter suggested the sect could fulfill its mandatory abuse-reporting obligations by recommending offenders get professional counseling, because then the counselors — rather than sect leaders — would be obligated to make the reports to police.

"They believe that child sexual assault is just a sin. Like, you're a sinner, they are a sinner, it's all just sin," said Eileen Dickey, one of the man's victims. She reported the abuse to sect leaders because she was worried other children would be targeted.

"I was told never to talk about it," she said.

Alexander would not speak with The Associated Press: "Unfortunately, the media coverage has been so negative and one-sided that I am going to have to decline an interview," he texted.

Former minister recounts culture of downplaying misdeeds

Jared Snyder spent more than two decades as an itinerant minister before becoming disillusioned and quitting. No one told him directly about abuse, Snyder said, but he occasionally heard rumors.

The sect's culture — which makes gossip taboo and places tremendous pressure on members to be merciful — meant that misdeeds big or small were downplayed, he said.

"One overseer just explicitly told me, 'The less you know, the better off you are,'" he said.

As a worker, Snyder received no paychecks, retirement benefits or health insurance benefits, and he was discouraged from using banks. But he was never without spending money: Followers regularly offer cash to the workers, and Snyder said he frequently had thousands of dollars in his pockets.

Most of that money would get spent on building materials, food or other supplies at regional conventions, Snyder said.

The case that exposed the sect to more scrutiny

In June 2022, a regional overseer named Dean Bruer died in an Oregon motel room. Bruer, 67, had served in at least 22 states and territories and seven countries since 1976, according to a timeline compiled by Pam Walton, a former member who has used historical records and photographs to track the movements of predatory preachers.

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Nine months after Bruer died, Doyle Smith, the overseer for Idaho and Oregon, wrote a letter to members. Evidence left on Bruer's phone and laptop showed he had raped and abused multiple underage victims, Smith wrote.

"Dean was a sexual predator," Smith wrote. "We never respect or defend such totally inappropriate behavior among us. There is a very united consensus among us that the only thing to do is to be transparent with all of you for obvious reasons, though this is very difficult."

That transparency did not extend to dealings with local police. It was only after Autrey, another abuse survivor, and private investigator Cynthia Liles — all former sect members — pressured Smith that he turned Bruer's laptop over to detectives, Autrey told the AP.

By then, the computer had been tampered with, according to records from the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office in Oregon. The web browser search history was cleared. Bruer's Apple ID had been changed and files transferred out of his DropBox account. Bruer's phone was never provided to police, and the "Find My iPhone" feature had been disabled.

"What web browsing history was present on the laptop that someone didn't want anyone else knowing about?" Detective Jeffrey Burlew wrote in a police report. Unable to find any evidence of a crime within its jurisdiction, the office closed the investigation.

Smith did not respond to phone messages from the AP.

Survivors and law enforcement dig deeper

Though Autrey and others had long sought reforms in the sect, Bruer's death proved to be a catalyst. Autrey, Liles and another survivor launched a hotline, website and Facebook pages for survivors.

In February, the FBI's field office in Omaha, Nebraska, announced an investigation.

The outcry prompted some sect leaders to condemn the abuse and to ask consultants for advice on how to better protect members. But at least some regional overseers have ultimately declined to adopt recommended child abuse prevention policies — saying the only true code of conduct is the New Testament.

And some leaders still warn members against criticizing the sect.

At an August convention in Duncan, British Columbia, a worker helping to lead the event did not mention the abuse scandal directly but told members to lay aside "evil speakings."

"It's more easy to be critical than to be correct," preached Robert Doecke, a worker from Australia. "If you feed on problems, it will only make more problems. But if you focus on the Lord, it will lead to solutions."

2024 was big for bitcoin. States could see a crypto policy blitz in 2025 in spite of the risks

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — The new year will usher in the bitcoin-friendly administration of President-elect Donald Trump and an expanding lobbying effort in statehouses that, together, could push states to become more open to crypto and for public pension funds and treasuries to buy into it.

Proponents of the uniquely volatile commodity argue it is a valuable hedge against inflation, similar to gold.

Many bitcoin enthusiasts and investors are quick to criticize government-backed currencies as prone to devaluation and say increased government buy-in will stabilize bitcoin's future price swings, give it more legitimacy and further boost an already rising price.

But the risks are significant. Critics say a crypto investment is highly speculative, with so much unknown about projecting its future returns, and warn that investors should be prepared to lose money.

Only a couple public pension funds have invested in cryptocurrency and a new U.S. Government Accountability Office study on 401(k) plan investments in crypto, issued in recent days, warned it has "uniquely high volatility" and that it found no standard approach for projecting the future returns of crypto.

It has already been a landmark year for crypto, with bitcoin hitting \$100,000, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission approving the first exchange-traded funds that hold bitcoin and crypto enthusiasts being cheered by Trump's promise to make the United States the "bitcoin superpower" of the world.

More legislation on crypto could be coming

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Lawmakers in more states can expect to see bills in 2025 to make them crypto-friendly as analysts say crypto is becoming a powerful lobby, bitcoin miners build new installations and venture capitalists underwrite a growing tech sector that caters to cryptocurrencies.

Meanwhile, a new crypto-friendly federal government under Trump and Congress could consider legislation from Sen. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyoming, to create a federal bitcoin reserve on which states can piggyback.

A bill introduced last month in Pennsylvania's House of Representatives sought to authorize the state's treasurer and public pension funds to invest in bitcoin. It went nowhere before the legislative session ended, but it caused a stir.

"I had a friend who is a rep down the road text me, 'Oh my god, I'm getting so many emails and phone calls to my office,' more than he ever did about any other bill," said the measure's sponsor, Republican Mike Cabell.

Cabell — a bitcoin enthusiast who lost his reelection bid — expects his bill to be reintroduced by a colleague. And leaders of bitcoin advocacy group Satoshi Action say they expect bills based on their model bill to be introduced in at least 10 other states next year.

But what about public pension funds?

Keith Brainard, research director for the National Association of State Retirement Administrators, said he doesn't expect many public pension fund investment professionals, who oversee nearly \$6 trillion in assets, to invest in crypto.

Pension fund professionals take risks they deem to be appropriate, but bitcoin investing has a short track record, might only fit into a niche asset class and may not fit the risk-to-reward profile they seek.

"There might be a bit of dabbling in bitcoin," Brainard said. "But it's difficult to envision a scenario in which pension funds right now are willing to make a commitment."

In Louisiana, Treasurer John Fleming helped make the state the first to introduce a system by which people can pay a government agency in cryptocurrencies.

Fleming said he's not trying to promote cryptocurrency, but rather sees the step as a recognition that government must innovate and be flexible in helping people make financial transactions with the state. He said he would never invest his money, or the state's, in crypto.

Fleming recalled meeting with a bitcoin lobbyist recently and came away unconvinced that bitcoin makes for a good investment.

"My concern is that at some point it'll stop growing and then people will want to cash in," Fleming said. "And when they do, it could tank the value of a bitcoin."

In Pennsylvania, Treasury Department officials said they have the authority to decide for themselves if cryptocurrencies meet the agency's investment standards under state law and don't need new legislation.

Still, a highly volatile asset is ill-suited to the agency's need for predictability, considering it writes millions of checks a year. The overwhelming majority of the roughly \$60 billion it invests at any given time is in short-term, conservative investments designed for an investment period of months, officials there said.

Pension boards, which invest on a 30-year time horizon, may already hold small investments in companies involved in mining, trading and storing cryptocurrencies. But they have been slow to embrace bitcoin.

That could change, said Mark Palmer, managing director and a senior research analyst at The Benchmark Company in New York.

Pension boards got investment tools they like this year when the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission approved the first exchange-traded funds that hold bitcoin and, in October, approved listings of options on those funds, Palmer said.

Many "are likely in the process of getting up to speed on what it means to invest in bitcoin and kicking the tires, so to speak, and that's a process that typically takes a while at the institutional level," Palmer said.

Several major asset managers like BlackRock, Invesco and Fidelity have bitcoin ETFs.

Some states already are investing in crypto

In May, the State of Wisconsin Investment Board became the first state to invest when it bought \$160 million worth of shares in two ETFs, or about 0.1% of its assets. It later scaled back that investment to

\$104 million in one ETF, as of Sept. 30. A spokesperson declined to discuss it.

Michigan's state investment board later reported about \$18 million in bitcoin ETF purchases while a candidate for New Jersey governor, Steven Fulop, said that if elected he would push the state's pension fund to invest in crypto.

Fulop, the Democratic mayor of Jersey City, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, has been preparing for months to buy bitcoin ETF shares for up to 2% of the city's \$250 million employee pension fund.

"We were ahead of the curve," Fulop said. "And I think that's what you're eventually going to see is this is widely accepted, with regard to exposure in all pension funds, some sort of exposure."

Former FBI informant will plead guilty to lying about phony bribery scheme involving the Bidens

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A former FBI informant is set to plead guilty on Monday to lying about a phony bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden and his son Hunter that became central to the Republican impeachment inquiry in Congress.

Alexander Smirnov is expected to make the plea in Los Angeles to a felony charge in connection with the bogus story, along with a tax evasion charge stemming from a separate indictment accusing him of concealing millions of dollars of income, according to court papers.

Smirnov has been behind bars since his arrest in February on charges that he told his FBI handler that executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma had paid President Biden and Hunter Biden \$5 million each around 2015.

Prosecutors and the defense have agreed to recommend a sentence of between four and six years in prison, according to the plea agreement.

Smirnov had been an informant for more than a decade when he made the explosive allegations about the Bidens in June 2020, after "expressing bias" about Joe Biden as a presidential candidate, prosecutors said.

But Smirnov had only routine business dealings with Burisma starting in 2017, according to court documents. An FBI field office investigated the allegations and recommended the case be closed in August 2020, according to charging documents.

No evidence has emerged that Joe Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes in his current role or previous office as vice president.

While his identity wasn't publicly known before the indictment, Smirnov's claims played a major part in the Republican effort in Congress to investigate the president and his family, and helped spark a House impeachment inquiry into Biden. Before Smirnov's arrest, Republicans had demanded the FBI release the unredacted form documenting the unverified allegations, though they acknowledged they couldn't confirm if they were true.

During a September 2023 conversation with investigators, Smirnov also claimed the Russians likely had recordings of Hunter Biden because a hotel in Ukraine's capital where he had stayed was "wired" and under their control — information he said was passed along to him by four high-level Russian officials.

But Hunter Biden had never traveled to Ukraine, according to Smirnov's indictment.

Smirnov claimed to have contacts with Russian intelligence-affiliated officials, and told authorities after his arrest earlier this year that "officials associated with Russian intelligence were involved in passing a story" about Hunter Biden.

The case against Smirnov was brought by special counsel David Weiss, who also prosecuted Hunter Biden on gun and tax charges. Hunter Biden was supposed to be sentenced this month after being convicted at trial in the gun case and pleading guilty to federal charges in the tax case. But he was pardoned earlier this month by his father, who said he believed "raw politics has infected this process and it led to a miscarriage of justice."

Germany's Scholz faces a confidence vote. It's expected to lead to an election in February

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Chancellor Olaf Scholz faces a confidence vote in the German parliament on Monday that he's expected to lose, paving the way for the European Union's most populous member and biggest economy to hold an early election in February.

Scholz's notoriously rancorous three-party government collapsed on Nov. 6 when the chancellor fired his finance minister in a long-running dispute over how to revitalize Germany's stagnant economy, and the minister's pro-business party quit the coalition. That left the remaining two center-left partners without a majority in parliament.

Leaders of several major parties then agreed that a parliamentary election should be held on Feb. 23, seven months earlier than originally planned. Post-World War II Germany's constitution doesn't allow parliament's lower house, or Bundestag, to dissolve itself — so a confidence vote is needed to set in motion the early election.

What is likely to happen?

Scholz's Social Democrats hold 207 seats in the Bundestag and are expected to vote for the chancellor. Their remaining coalition partners, the environmentalist Greens, have 117 and plan to abstain. That should mean Scholz gets nowhere near the majority of 367 in the 733-seat chamber needed to win the confidence vote.

If Scholz loses, it will up to President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to decide whether to dissolve the Bundestag. Steinmeier, who said last month that "this country needs stable majorities and a government that is capable of acting," has 21 days to make that decision. Once parliament is dissolved, the election must be held within 60 days.

In practice, the campaign is already well underway.

Who is in the race?

As he formally requested the confidence vote on Wednesday, Scholz said that voters will "decide in the election how we answer the big questions that we face."

Those, he said, include whether Germany decides to "invest strongly in our future," secure jobs and modernize its industry, keep pension levels stable and "come closer to a just peace in Ukraine without Germany being drawn into the war." Germany has become Ukraine's biggest military supplier in Europe, but Scholz also has refused to supply long-range Taurus cruise missiles over concerns of escalating the war with Russia.

Center-right challenger Friedrich Merz on Saturday predicted "one of the hardest election campaigns" in modern German history, as Scholz's Social Democrats "have their backs to the wall." He said that it's crucial to make the economy more competitive, because "the competitiveness of our economy is the precondition for everything else."

Polls show Scholz's party trailing behind Merz's main opposition Union bloc. Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck, whose Greens are further back, is also bidding for the top job.

The far-right Alternative for Germany, which is polling strongly, has nominated Alice Weidel as its candidate for chancellor but has no chance of taking the job because other parties refuse to work with it.

Confidence votes are rare in Germany, a country of 83 million people that prizes stability. This is only the sixth time in its postwar history that a chancellor has called one.

The last was in 2005, when then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder engineered an early election that was narrowly won by center-right challenger Angela Merkel.

As Trump threatens mass deportations, Central America braces for an influx of vulnerable migrants

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras (AP) — As dozens of deported migrants pack into a sweltering airport facility in San Pedro Sula, Norma sits under fluorescent lights clutching a foam cup of coffee and a small plate of eggs — all that was waiting for her in Honduras.

The 69-year-old Honduran mother had never imagined leaving her Central American country. But then came the anonymous death threats to her and her children and the armed men who showed up at her doorstep threatening to kill her, just like they had killed one of her relatives days earlier.

Norma, who requested anonymity out of concern for her safety, spent her life savings of \$10,000 on a one-way trip north at the end of October with her daughter and granddaughter.

But after her asylum petitions to the U.S. were rejected, they were loaded onto a deportation flight. Now, she's back in Honduras within reach of the same gang, stuck in a cycle of violence and economic precarity that haunts deportees like her.

"They can find us in every corner of Honduras," she said in the migrant processing facility. "We're praying for God's protection, because we don't expect anything from the government."

Now, as U.S. President-elect Donald Trump is set to take office in January with a promise of carrying out mass deportations, Honduras and other Central American countries people have fled for generations are bracing for a potential influx of vulnerable migrants — a situation they are ill-prepared to handle.

'We don't have the capacity'

Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, which have the largest number of people living illegally in the U.S., after Mexico, could be among the first and most heavily impacted by mass deportations, said Jason Houser, former Immigration & Customs Enforcement chief of staff in the Biden administration.

Because countries like Venezuela refuse to accept deportation flights from the U.S., Houser suggests that the Trump administration may prioritize the deportation of "the most vulnerable" migrants from those countries who have removal orders but no criminal record, in an effort to rapidly increase deportation numbers.

"Hondurans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans need to be very, very nervous because (Trump officials) are going to press the bounds of the law," said Houser.

Migrants and networks aiding deportees in those Northern Triangle countries worry their return could thrust them into even deeper economic and humanitarian crises, fueling migration down the line.

"We don't have the capacity" to take so many people, said Antonio García, Honduras' deputy foreign minister. "There's very little here for deportees." People who return, he said, "are the last to be taken care of."

Making their way back to the US

Since 2015, Honduras has received around half a million deportees. They climb down from planes and buses to be greeted with coffee, small plates of food and bags of toothpaste and deodorant. While some breathe a sigh of relief, free from harsh conditions in U.S. detention facilities, others cry, gripped with panic.

"We don't know what we'll do, what comes next," said one woman in a cluster of deportees waiting for their names to be called by a man clacking at a keyboard.

Approximately 560,000 Hondurans, about 5% of the country's population, live in the U.S. without legal status, according to U.S. government figures. Of those, migration experts estimate about 150,000 can be tracked down and rapidly expelled.

While García said the government offers services to help returnees, most are released with little aid into a country gripped by gangs. They have few options for work to pay off crippling debts. Others like Norma have nowhere to go, unable to return home because of the gang members circling her home.

Norma said she's unsure of why they were targeted, but she believes it was because the relative who was killed had problems with a gang.

Despite the crackdown, García estimates up to 40% of Honduran deportees make their way back to the U.S.

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A looming humanitarian crisis

Larissa Martínez, 31, is among those who have struggled to reintegrate into Honduran society after being deported from the U.S. in 2021 with her three children. Driven by economic desperation and the absence of her husband, who had migrated and left her for another woman, the single mother sought a better life in the U.S.

Since her return to Honduras, Martínez has spent the past three years searching for a job, not just to support her kids, but also to pay off the \$5,000 she owes to relatives for the trip north.

Her efforts have been unsuccessful. She built a wobbly wooden home tucked away in the hilly fringes of San Pedro Sula, where she sells meat and cheese to get by, but sales have been slim and tropical rains have eaten away at the flimsy walls where they sleep.

So she's begun to repeat a chant in her head: "If I don't find work in December, I'll leave in January."

César Muñoz, a leader at Mennonite Social Action Commission, said Honduran authorities have abandoned deportees like Martínez, leaving organizations like his to step in. But with three deportation flights arriving weekly, aid networks are already stretched thin.

A significant uptick could leave aid networks, migrants and their families reeling. Meanwhile, countries like Honduras, heavily reliant on remittances from the U.S., could face severe economic consequences as this vital lifeline is cut.

"We're at the brink of a new humanitarian crisis," Muñoz said.

Trump's return has been met with a range of reactions by Latin American nations connected to the U.S. through migration and trade.

Guatemala, a country with more than 750,000 citizens living unauthorized in the U.S., announced in November it was working on a strategy to take on potential mass deportations. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Mexico is already beefing up legal services in its U.S. consulates and that she would ask Trump to deport non-Mexicans directly to their countries of origin.

Honduras' Deputy Foreign Minister García expressed skepticism about Trump's threat, citing the economic benefits immigrants provide to the U.S. economy and the logistical challenges of mass deportations. Aid leaders like Muñoz say Honduras isn't sufficiently preparing for a potential surge in deportations.

Even with a crackdown by Trump it would be "impossible" to stop people from migrating, García said. Driven by poverty, violence and the hope for a better life, clusters of deportees climb aboard buses on their way back to the U.S.

As deportations by both U.S. and Mexican authorities spike, smugglers are offering migrants packages in which they get three tries to make it north. If migrants get captured on their journey and sent back home, they still have two chances to get to the U.S.

Freshly returned to Honduras, 26-year-old Kimberly Orellana said she spent three months detained in a Texas facility before being sent back to San Pedro Sula, where she waited in a bus station for her mother to pick her up.

Yet, she was already planning to return, saying she had no choice: her 4-year-old daughter Marcelle was waiting for her, cared for by a friend in North Carolina.

The two were separated by smugglers crossing the Rio Grande, in hopes to increase their chances of successfully crossing over. Orellana vowed to her daughter that they would be reunited.

"Mami, are you sure you're coming?" Marcelle asks her over the phone.

"Now, being here it's difficult to know if I'll ever be able to follow through with that promise," Orellana said, clinging to her Honduran passport. "I have to try again. ... My daughter is all I have."

US agencies should use advanced technology to identify mysterious drones, Schumer says

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS and DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — After weeks of fear and bewilderment about the drones buzzing over parts of New York and New Jersey, elected officials are urging action to identify and stop the mysterious flights.

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"There's a lot of us who are pretty frustrated right now," Rep. Jim Himes, D-Conn., the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said on "Fox News Sunday."

"'We don't know' is not a good enough answer," he said.

National security officials have said the drones don't appear to be a sign of foreign interference or a public safety threat. But because they can't say with certainty who is responsible for the sudden swarms of drones over parts of New Jersey, New York and other eastern parts of the U.S. — or how they can be stopped — leaders of both political parties are demanding better technology and powers to deal with the drones.

Sen. Chuck Schumer called Sunday for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to deploy better drone-tracking technology to identify the drones and their operators.

"New Yorkers have tremendous questions about it," Schumer, the Senate majority leader, told reporters about the drone sightings. "We are going to get the answers for them."

The federal government did little to answer those questions in its own media briefings Sunday morning. "There's no question that people are seeing drones," U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told ABC's George Stephanopoulos. "But I want to assure the American public that we are on it. We are working in close coordination with state and local authorities."

Some of the drones reported above parts of New York and New Jersey have turned out to be "manned aircraft that are commonly mistaken for drones," Mayorkas said. "We know of no foreign involvement with respect to the sightings in the Northeast. And we are vigilant in investigating this matter."

Last year, federal aviation rules began requiring certain drones to broadcast their remote identification, including the location of their operators. It's not clear whether that information has been used to determine who is behind the drones plaguing locations over New York and New Jersey. Mayorkas' office didn't respond to questions about whether they've been able to identify drones using this capability.

Schumer wants the federal government to use a recently declassified radio wave technology in New York and New Jersey. The radio wave detector can be attached to a drone or airplane and can determine whether another flying object is a bird or a drone, read its electronic registration, and follow it back to its landing place. Schumer said state and local authorities do not have the authority to track drones.

On Sunday, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said federal officials were sending a drone detection system to the state.

"This system will support state and federal law enforcement in their investigations," Hochul said in a statement. The governor did not immediately provide additional details, including where the system will be deployed.

Dozens of mysterious nighttime flights started last month over parts of New Jersey, raising concerns 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.

Drones are now being reported all along the northern East Coast, with suspicious sightings in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Virginia, according to news reports.

Some U.S. political leaders, including Trump, have called for much stronger action against the drones, including shooting them down.

Certain agencies within the Department of Homeland Security have the power to "incapacitate" drones, Mayorkas said Sunday. "But we need those authorities expanded," he said.

A bill before the U.S. Senate would enhance some federal agencies' authority and give new abilities to local and state agencies to track drones. It would also start a pilot program allowing states and local authorities to disrupt, disable or seize a drone without prior consent of the operator.

"What the drone issue points out are gaps in our agencies, gaps in our authorities between the Department of Homeland Security, local law enforcement, the Defense Department," Rep. Mike Waltz, R-Fla., Trump's pick to be his national security adviser, said on CBS' "Face the Nation" on Sunday. "Americans are finding it hard to believe we can't figure out where these are coming from."

Storms across US bring heavy snow, dangerous ice and a tornado in California

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A tornado near a mall in central California swept up cars, uprooted trees and sent several people to the hospital. In San Francisco, authorities issued the first-ever tornado warning.

Elsewhere, inclement weather plagued areas of the U.S., with dangerous conditions including heavy snow in upstate New York, a major ice storm in Midwest states and severe weather warnings around Lake Tahoe.

The ice storm beginning Friday evening created treacherous driving conditions across Iowa and eastern Nebraska on Friday and into Saturday and prompted temporary closures of Interstate 80 after numerous cars and trucks slid off the road. In upstate New York, more than 33 inches (84 centimeters) was reported near Orchard Park, which is often a landing point for lake-effect snow.

On Saturday, a tornado touched down around 1:40 p.m. near a shopping mall in Scotts Valley, California, about 70 miles (110 kilometers) south of San Francisco. The tornado overturned cars and toppled trees and utility poles, the National Weather Service said. The Scotts Valley Police Department said several people were injured and taken to hospitals.

In San Francisco, some trees toppled onto cars and streets and damaged roofs. The damage was due to 80-mph (130-kph) straight-line winds, not a tornado, weather service meteorologist Dalton Behringer said Sunday.

Roger Gass, a meteorologist in the weather service's office in Monterey, California, said the warning of a possible tornado in San Francisco was a first for the city, noting an advanced alert did not go out before the last tornado struck nearly 20 years ago.

"I would guess there wasn't a clear signature on radar for a warning in 2005," said Gass, who was not there at the time.

The fast-moving storm prompted warnings for residents to take shelter, but few people have basements in the area.

Heavy snow fell at some Lake Tahoe ski resorts, and a 112-mph (181-kph) gust of wind was recorded at the Mammoth Mountain resort south of Yosemite National Park, according to the weather service's office in Reno, Nevada. Up to 3 feet (91 centimeters) of snow was forecast for Sierra Nevada mountaintops.

The weekend Tahoe Live music festival at Palisades Tahoe ski resort in California went ahead as planned in spite of a snowstorm Saturday. Lil Wayne and Diplo were scheduled to perform Sunday, the festival's website said. The resort said it has received 3.5 feet (1 meter) of snow since Friday. An avalanche warning was in effect at least until Monday morning in the area.

Interstate 80 was closed along an 80-mile (130-kilometer) stretch from Applegate, California, to the Nevada line just west of Reno on Saturday. The California Highway Patrol reopened the road in the afternoon for passenger vehicles with chains or four-wheel drive and snow tires.

The severe weather in the Midwest resulted in at least one death. The Washington County Sheriff's office in Nebraska said a 57-year-old woman died after she lost control of her pickup on Highway 30 near Arlington and hit an oncoming truck. The other driver sustained minor injuries.

Businesses announced plans to open late Saturday as temperatures rose high enough in the afternoon to melt the ice in most places.

"Luckily some warmer air is moving in behind this to make it temporary," said Dave Cousins, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's office in Davenport, Iowa.

Tens of thousands of people in western Washington state lost electricity Saturday as the system delivered rain and gusty winds, local news outlets reported.

The GOP stoked fears of noncitizens voting. Cases in Ohio show how rhetoric and reality diverge

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

AKRON, Ohio (AP) — Before the November presidential election, Ohio's secretary of state and attorney general announced investigations into potential voter fraud that included people suspected of casting ballots even though they were not U.S. citizens.

It coincided with a national Republican messaging strategy warning that potentially thousands of ineligible voters would be voting.

"The right to vote is sacred," Attorney General Dave Yost, a Republican, said in a statement at the time. "If you're not a U.S. citizen, it's illegal to vote — whether you thought you were allowed to or not. You will be held accountable."

In the end, their efforts led to just a handful of cases. Of the 621 criminal referrals for voter fraud that Secretary of State Frank LaRose sent to the attorney general, prosecutors have secured indictments against nine people for voting as noncitizens over the span of 10 years — and one was later found to have died. That total is a tiny fraction of Ohio's 8 million registered voters and the tens of millions of ballots cast during that period.

The outcome and the stories of some of those now facing charges illustrate the gap — both in Ohio and across the United States — between the rhetoric about noncitizen voting and the reality: It's rare, is caught and prosecuted when it does happen and does not occur as part of a coordinated scheme to throw elections.

The Associated Press attended in-person and virtual court hearings for three of the Ohio defendants over the past two weeks. Each of the cases involved people with long ties to their community who acted alone, often under a mistaken impression they were eligible to vote. They now find themselves facing felony charges and possible deportation.

Among them is Nicholas Fontaine, a 32-year-old precision sheet metal worker from Akron. He was indicted in October on one count of illegal voting, a fourth-degree felony.

Fontaine is a Canadian-born permanent resident who moved to the U.S. with his mother and sister when he was 2 years old. He is facing a possible jail term and deportation on allegations that he voted in the 2016 and 2018 elections.

He recalls being a college student when he was approached on the street about registering to vote.

"I think in my young teenage brain, I thought, 'Well, I have to sign up for the draft, I should be able to vote,'" Fontaine said in an interview.

Permanent residents such as Fontaine are just one of several categories of immigrants who must register for a potential military draft through the Selective Service but who cannot legally vote.

Fontaine said he received a postcard from the local board of elections in 2016 informing him of his polling place. He voted without issue. He even showed his ID before receiving his ballot.

"No problems. Went in, voted, turned my voter stuff in, that was it," he said. "There was no, like, 'Hey, there's an issue here,' or, 'There's a thing here.' Just, here's your paper (ballot)."

Fontaine said a Department of Homeland Security official visited him at his home in either 2018 or 2019, alerted him to the fact that his votes in 2016 and 2018 had been illegal and warned him not to vote again. Since then, he never has. That's one reason why his indictment this fall came as a shock.

He said he never received notice that he was indicted and missed his court hearing in early December, being informed of the charges only when an AP reporter knocked on his door after the scheduled hearing and told him.

Fontaine said he was raised in a household where his American stepfather taught him the value of voting. He said he would never have cast an illegal vote intentionally.

"I don't know any person, even like Americans I've talked to about voting, who would consider illegally voting for any reason," he said. "Like, why would you do that? It doesn't make sense. They're going to find out — clearly, they're going to find out. And it's turning one vote into two. Even doing that, can you

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get a hundred? There's how many millions of voters in America?"

Faith Lyon, the Portage County election director, said local officials in the county where Fontaine is charged would not have had any way to independently verify his immigration status. Each voter registration form includes a checkbox asking whether a person is a U.S. citizen or not and explaining that people cannot vote unless they are, she said.

In two other illegal voting cases moving through the Ohio courts, the defendants left that box unchecked, according to their lawyers, believing the omission would result in the election board not registering them if they were indeed ineligible. Yet they were registered anyway, and now face criminal prosecution for voting.

A day before Fontaine's scheduled hearing, one of those defendants, 40-year-old Fiona Allen, wept outside a Cleveland courtroom when a public defender explained the charges she faced.

She had moved to the U.S. from Jamaica nine years ago. After turning in the voter registration form and receiving her registration, Allen voted in 2020, 2022 and 2023, prosecutors say. The mother of two, including a son in the U.S. Navy, and her husband of 13 years, a naturalized citizen who also is a serviceman, declined to comment at the courthouse. Allen has pleaded not guilty.

Another, 78-year-old Lorinda Miller, appeared before a judge over Zoom last week. She appeared shellshocked about facing charges.

Her attorney said Miller, who arrived in the U.S. from Canada as a child, is affiliated with an Indigenous tribe that issued her paperwork identifying her as "a citizen of North America." She was told that was sufficient to allow her to register and vote. She's even been called for jury duty, said lawyer Reid Yoder.

He plans to take the case to trial after Miller pleaded not guilty to the charges.

"I think the integrity of the vote should be protected, wholeheartedly," Yoder said. "I think the intent of the law is to punish people who defrauded the system. That is not my client. To really defraud the system, you have to know you're doing it. My client's nothing like that. She believes in the sanctity of the vote, which is why she participated. She didn't know she was doing anything wrong."

The Ohio cases are just one example of what is true nationally — that the narrative of widespread numbers of immigrants without the necessary legal documents registering to vote and then voting is simply not backed up by the facts, said Jay Young, senior director of the Voting and Democracy Program for Common Cause.

State voter rolls are cleaned regularly, he said, and the penalties for casting an illegal ballot as a non-citizen are severe: fines, the potential for a prison sentence and deportation.

He said the role of such immigrants and their potential to sway the election "was the most enduring false narrative that we saw throughout this election." But he also said it served a purpose, to keep the country divided and sow distrust in the election system.

"If your guy doesn't win or you're a candidate that doesn't win, you have an excuse that you can tell yourself to justify it," he said.

Israel will close its Ireland embassy over Gaza tensions as Palestinian death toll nears 45,000

By WAFAA SHURAFU and NATALIE MELZER Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel said Sunday it will close its embassy in Ireland as relations deteriorated over the war in Gaza, where Palestinian medical officials said new Israeli airstrikes killed over 46 people including several children.

The decision to close the embassy came in response to what Israel's foreign minister has described as Ireland's "extreme anti-Israel policies." In May, Israel recalled its ambassador to Dublin after Ireland announced, along with Norway, Spain and Slovenia, it would recognize a Palestinian state.

The Irish Cabinet last week decided to formally intervene in South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, which accuses Israel of committing genocide in Gaza. Israel denies it.

"We are concerned that a very narrow interpretation of what constitutes genocide leads to a culture of impunity in which the protection of civilians is minimized," said Ireland's foreign affairs minister, Micheal

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Martin.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar's statement on the embassy closure said "Ireland has crossed every red line in its relations with Israel."

Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris called the decision to close the embassy "deeply regrettable." He added on X: "I utterly reject the assertion that Ireland is anti-Israel. Ireland is pro-peace, pro-human rights and pro-international law."

Israeli strikes in Gaza kill a journalist and children

Israeli forces continued Sunday to pound Gaza, including the largely isolated north, as the Palestinian death toll in the war approached 45,000.

A large explosion lit up the southern Gaza skyline on Sunday night. An Israeli airstrike hit a school and killed at least 16 people in the southern city of Khan Younis, according to Nasser Hospital, where the bodies were taken. There was no immediate Israeli military statement.

In the north, an airstrike hit the Khalil Aweida school in the town of Beit Hanoun and killed at least 15 people, according to nearby Kamal Adwan Hospital where casualties were taken. The dead included two parents and their daughter and a father and his son, the hospital said.

And in Gaza City, at least 17 people including six women and five children were killed in three airstrikes that hit houses sheltering displaced people, according to Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital.

"We woke up to the strike. I woke up with the rubble on top of me," said a bandaged Yahia al-Yazji, who grieved for his wife and daughter. "I found my wife with her head and skull visible, and my daughter's intestines were gone. My wife was three months pregnant." His hand rested on a body wrapped in a blanket on the floor.

Israel's military in a statement said it struck a "terrorist cell" in Gaza City and a "terrorist meeting point" in the Beit Hanoun area.

Another Israeli airstrike killed a Palestinian journalist working for Al Jazeera, Ahmed al-Lawh, in central Gaza, a hospital and the Qatari-based TV station said.

The strike hit a point for Gaza's civil defense agency in the urban Nuseirat refugee camp, Al-Awda Hospital said. Also killed were three civil defense workers including the local head of the agency, according to al-Aqsa Martyrs hospital. The civil defense is Gaza's main rescue agency and operates under the Hamas-run government.

One of the bodies was covered with an orange work jacket marked "ambulance" in English.

"We, the civil defense, are carrying out humanitarian work like in any country in the world. Why are we being targeted?" said colleague Kerem Al Dalou.

Israel's military said it struck a militant command center embedded in the civil defense offices.

The war in Gaza began after Hamas and other militants from Gaza stormed southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people and taking well over 200 hostage.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed almost 45,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The ministry's count does not distinguish between combatants and civilians, but it says over half of the dead have been women and children.

Most of Gaza's population of over 2 million has been displaced, often multiple times. The hospitals that are still functioning say they lack medicines, fuel and other basic supplies, while aid groups warn of widespread hunger.

The head of the World Food Program, Cindy McCain, told CBS on Sunday that the U.N. agency was able to get just two trucks of supplies into Gaza in November, citing insecurity there.

"We need a ceasefire, and we need it now," she said. "We can no longer sit by and just allow these people to starve to death."

After a 15-year pause in executions, Indiana prepares to put to death a man who killed 4

By RICK CALLAHAN Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Indiana officials are preparing to execute the state's first death row inmate in 15 years, who was convicted a quarter-century ago of killing his brother and three other men.

Joseph Corcoran, 49, has been on Indiana's death row since 1999. If he is put to death as scheduled Wednesday, it will be the state's first execution since 2009. In that time, 13 executions were carried out in Indiana but those were initiated and performed by federal officials in 2020 and 2021 at a federal prison.

Corcoran is scheduled to be executed before sunrise Wednesday at the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City, about 45 miles (72 kilometers) east of Chicago.

Indiana's resumption of executions is refocusing attention on Corcoran's case and questions about how the state has been able to obtain a drug for lethal injections.

What was Corcoran convicted of?

Corcoran was 22 on July 26, 1997, when he fatally shot his brother, 30-year-old James Corcoran, and three other men: Douglas A. Stillwell, 30, Timothy G. Bricker, 30, and Robert Scott Turner, 32.

According to court records, Joseph Corcoran was under stress because the forthcoming marriage of his sister to Turner would necessitate moving out of the Fort Wayne, Indiana, home he had shared with his brother and sister.

He awoke to hear his brother and others downstairs talking about him, loaded his rifle and then shot all four men, records show.

While jailed, Corcoran reportedly bragged about shooting his parents in 1992 in northern Indiana's Steuben County. He was charged in their killings but acquitted.

Corcoran's sibling opposes execution

Corcoran's sister, Kelly Ernst, who lost a brother and her fiancé in the 1997 shootings, declined to discuss whether she believes her younger brother killed their parents.

But Ernst, who lives in northeastern Indiana, said she believes the death penalty should be abolished and her brother's execution won't solve or change anything. She does not plan to attend his execution.

Ernst said she had been out of contact with her brother for 10 years until recently. She believes it's "fairly obvious" he has a serious mental illness.

"I kind of just feel that there's no such thing as closure," Ernst, 56, said Friday. "I just don't know what else to say. I haven't slept in weeks."

Why did Indiana stop executions?

Indiana last executed Matthew Wrinkles, who was put to death in 2009 for killing his wife, her brother and sister-in-law in 1994.

State officials said they couldn't continue executions because a combination of drugs used in lethal injections had become unavailable. There has been a yearslong nationwide shortage because pharmaceutical companies — particularly in Europe, where opposition to capital punishment is strongest — have refused to sell their products for that purpose.

That has prompted states to turn to compounding pharmacies, which manufacture drugs specifically for a client. Some states have switched to more accessible drugs such as the sedatives pentobarbital or midazolam, both of which, critics say, can cause excruciating pain.

Indiana is following that lead, planning to use pentobarbital to execute Corcoran.

The federal government also used pentobarbital in the 13 federal executions carried out during the final six months of then-President Donald Trump's first term.

Secret source of the drug

Many states, including Indiana, refuse to divulge where they get the drugs. When asked how the state obtained the pentobarbital it plans to use in Corcoran's execution, the Indiana Department of Correction directed The Associated Press to a state law labeling the source of lethal injection drugs as confidential.

In June, Gov. Eric Holcomb announced the state had acquired pentobarbital and asked the Indiana

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Supreme Court to set a date for Corcoran's execution. The high court set his Dec. 18 execution date in September.

The state's execution plan

State law lays out the specific timing and process. It also limits the people who have a role in an execution and shields their identities and specifies who can witness executions at the Indiana State Prison.

At the time of an execution, Indiana code states that the only people allowed to be present are the prison warden, those selected to assist in the execution, the prison physician, one additional physician, the condemned person's spiritual adviser and the prison chaplain.

Up to five friends or relatives of the person being executed and up to eight relatives of the victims of the crime are allowed to view the process.

The Indiana Department of Correction did not respond to multiple queries from the AP asking whether any of the staffers who will help carry out Corcoran's execution have previously taken part in a state execution.

No media can witness Indiana executions

Indiana is one of only two states, along with Wyoming, that do not allow for members of the news media to witness state executions, according to a recent report by the Death Penalty Information Center.

That report states "unobstructed media access to executions is critical because the media observes what the public cannot. States generally prohibit citizens from attending executions, so the media becomes the public's watchdog, providing important information about how the government is following the law and using taxpayer funds."

Is there a fight to stop the execution?

Corcoran had exhausted his federal appeals in 2016.

His attorneys asked the Indiana Supreme Court to stop his execution but were denied on Dec. 5. The high court also denied petitions to argue whether he is competent to be executed.

In a handwritten affidavit to the justices, Corcoran said he no longer wanted to litigate his case.

"I am guilty of the crime I was convicted of, and accept the findings of all the appellate courts," he wrote.

On Wednesday, his attorneys filed a petition in U.S. District Court of Northern Indiana asking the court to stop his execution and hold a hearing to decide if it would be unconstitutional because Corcoran has a serious mental illness.

They argued he has "severe and longstanding paranoid schizophrenia" and his condition "manifests as auditory hallucinations and delusions that prison guards are torturing him with an ultrasound machine."

"Indeed, he has volunteered to be executed, and is eager to be executed, because he believes his execution will give him relief from the perceived pain his delusions and hallucinations inflict upon him," the filing states.

But on Friday, the federal district court declined to intervene, prompting defense attorneys to appeal to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit.

There's also the possibility that outgoing Gov. Eric Holcomb, who has said he would let the legal process "play out," could step in.

Indiana Disability Rights, a disability rights organization, asked Holcomb in a Dec. 6 letter to commute the death sentence to life in prison without parole.

"Executing individuals who cannot fully comprehend their circumstances, or the consequences of their actions, violates fundamental principles of human dignity and equity," the letter said.

Pope Francis makes 1st papal visit to France's Corsica awash in expressions of popular piety

By PAOLO SANTALUCIA and SILVIA STELLACCI Associated Press

AJACCIO, Corsica (AP) — Pope Francis on the first papal visit ever to the French island of Corsica on Sunday called for a dynamic form of laicism, promoting the kind of popular piety that distinguishes the Mediterranean island from secular France as a bridge between religious and civic society.

Francis appeared relaxed and energized during the one-day visit, just two days before his 88th birthday,

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still displaying a faded bruise from a fall a week ago.

He frequently deviated from his prepared homily during Mass at the outdoor La Place d'Austerlitz, remarking at one point that he had never seen so many children as in Corsica — except, he added, in East Timor on his recent Asian tour.

"Make children," he implored. "They will be your joy and your consolation in the future."

Earlier, at the close of a Mediterranean conference on popular piety, Papa Francesco, as he is called in Corsican, described a concept of secularity "that is not static and fixed, but evolving and dynamic," that can adapt to "unforeseen situations" and promote cooperation "between civil and ecclesial authorities."

The pontiff said that expressions of popular piety, including processions and communal prayer of the Holy Rosary "can nurture constructive citizenship" on the part of Christians. At the same time, he warned against such manifestations being seen only in terms of folklore, or even superstition.

The visit to Corsica's capital Ajaccio, the birthplace of Napoleon, is one of the briefest of his papacy beyond Italy's borders, just about nine hours on the ground, including a 40-minute visit with French President Emmanuel Macron. Francis met privately with Macron at the airport before flying back to Rome.

Francis was joined on the dais by the bishop of Ajaccio, Cardinal Francois-Xavier Bustillo, who organized the conference that brought together some 400 participants from Spain, Sicily, Sardinia and southern France. The two-day meeting examined expressions of faith that often occur outside formal liturgies, such as processions and pilgrimages.

Often specific to the places where they are practiced, popular piety in Corsica includes the cult of the Virgin Mary, known locally as the "Madunnuccia," which protected the island from the plague in 1656 when it was still under Genoa.

Corsica stands out from the rest of secularized France as a particularly devout region, with 92 confraternities, or lay associations dedicated to works of charity or piety, with over 4,000 members.

"It means that there is a beautiful, mature, adult and responsible collaboration between civil authorities, mayors, deputies, senators, officials and religious authorities," Bustillo told The Associated Press ahead of the visit. "There is no hostility between the two. And that is a very positive aspect because in Corsica there is no ideological hostility."

The visit was awash in signs of popular piety. The pope was greeted by children in traditional garb and was continually serenaded by bands, choruses and singing troupes that are central to Corsican culture from the airport, to the motorcade route, convention center and cathedral. Thousands stood along the roadside to greet the pontiff and more waved from windows.

Renè Colombani traveled with 2,000 others by ship from northern Corsica to Ajaccio, on the western coast, to see the pope.

"It is an event that we will not see again in several years. It may be the only time that the pope will come to Corsica. And since we wanted to be a part of it, we have come a long way" Colombani said.

The island, which Genoa ceded to France in 1768, is located closer to the Italian mainland than France.

From the conference, the pope traveled to the 17th-century cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta to meet with clergy, stopping along the way at the statue of the Madunnuccia where he lit a devotional candle.

The pope celebrated Mass beneath a looming statue of Napoleon Bonaparte, the French emperor whose armies in 1808 annexed the papal states and imprisoned two of Francis' predecessors — Popes Pius VI and VII — before being excommunicated and eventually defeated on the battlefield. Thousands packed the esplanade where Napoleon is said to have played as a child.

Francis met with Macron at the airport before departing for the 50-minute flight back to Rome.

They discussed Russia's war in Ukraine, the Middle East and security issues in Africa's Sahel and Great Lakes regions, Haiti and Sudan, Macron's office said in a statement. Macron welcomed the pope's "calls for peace, non-violence and respect for human rights," the statement said.

Both Macron and Francis expressed their "deep concern" regarding the situation in Gaza and called for "an immediate and lasting ceasefire" and "the massive delivery of much-needed humanitarian aid," according to Macron's office. On Syria, they reiterated their wish to see a "fair and inclusive political transition,"

the statement said.

Macron presented the pope with two books about Notre Dame Cathedral.

The pontiff pointedly did not make the trip to Paris earlier this month for the pomp surrounding the reopening of the Notre Dame Cathedral following the devastating 2019 fire. The visit to Corsica seems far more suited to Francis' priorities than a grand cathedral reopening, emphasizing the "church of the peripheries."

It was Francis' third trip to France, each time avoiding Paris and the protocols that a state visit entails. He visited the port of Marseille in 2023, on an overnight visit to participate in an annual summit of Mediterranean bishops, and went to Strasbourg in 2014 to address the European Parliament and Council of Europe.

Corsica is home to more than 340,000 people and has been part of France since 1768. But the island has also seen pro-independence violence and has an influential nationalist movement. Last year, Macron proposed granting it limited autonomy.

Given the short flight back to Rome, Francis didn't hold an airborne press conference en route home, the first time he has skipped the traditional briefing in 47 foreign trips as pope. Francis did come to the back of the plane though to greet reporters and receive a pretend birthday cake.

Death toll in French territory of Mayotte from Cyclone Chido is 'several hundred,' top official says

By GERALD IMRAY and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — The death toll in the French territory of Mayotte from Cyclone Chido is "several hundred" and may run into the thousands, the island's top government official told a local broadcaster Sunday.

France rushed rescue teams and supplies to its largely poor overseas department in the Indian Ocean that has suffered widespread destruction.

"I think there are some several hundred dead, maybe we'll get close to a thousand. Even thousands ... given the violence of this event," Mayotte Prefect François-Xavier Bieuville told TV station Mayotte la 1ere. He had previously said it was the worst cyclone to hit Mayotte in 90 years.

Bieuville said it was extremely difficult to get an exact number of deaths and injuries after Mayotte was pummeled by the intense tropical cyclone on Saturday, causing major damage to public infrastructure, including the airport, flattening neighborhoods and knocking out electricity supplies.

The French Interior Ministry confirmed at least 11 deaths and more than 250 injuries earlier Sunday but said that was expected to increase substantially.

Mayotte in the southwestern Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa is France's poorest island and the poorest territory in the European Union. It has a population of just over 300,000 spread over two main islands.

Bieuville said the worst devastation had been seen in the slums of metal shacks and informal structures that mark much of Mayotte. Referring to the official death toll so far, he said "this figure is not plausible when you see the images of the slums."

"I think the human toll is much higher," he added.

Mayotte took the brunt of Chido

Chido blew through the southwestern Indian Ocean on Friday and Saturday, also affecting the nearby islands of Comoros and Madagascar. Mayotte was directly in the cyclone's path, though, and took the brunt. Chido brought winds in excess of 220 kph (136 mph), according to the French weather service, making it a category 4 cyclone, the second strongest on the scale.

Later, Chido made landfall in Mozambique on the African mainland and there were fears for more than 2 million people in the country's north who could be impacted, according to authorities there.

French President Emmanuel Macron said his "thoughts" were with the Mayotte people and Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau was due to travel to Mayotte on Monday. Retailleau had warned Saturday night after an emergency meeting in Paris that the death toll "will be high," while new Prime Minister François Bayrou, who took office on Friday, said infrastructure had been severely damaged or destroyed across Mayotte.

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Pope Francis offered prayers for the victims while on a visit Sunday to the French Mediterranean island of Corsica.

France wants to open an air and sea bridge to Mayotte

Rescuers and firefighters were sent from France and the nearby French territory of Reunion and supplies were also rushed in on military aircraft and ships. Damage to the airport's control tower meant only military aircraft were able to fly in.

Patrice Latron, the prefect of Reunion, said authorities aim to establish an air and sea bridge from Reunion to Mayotte. About 800 more rescuers were to be sent in the coming days and more than 80 tons of supplies had been flown in or were on their way by ship. Some of the priorities were restoring electricity and access to drinking water, Latron said.

The French Interior Ministry said 1,600 police and gendarmerie officers have been deployed to "help the population and prevent potential looting."

In some parts of Mayotte, entire neighborhoods of metal shacks and huts were flattened, while residents reported trees had been uprooted, boats flipped or sunk and many areas were without power.

Chad Youyou, a resident in Hamjago in the north of the island, posted videos on Facebook showing the extensive damage in his village and across the surrounding fields and hills, where almost every tree had been leveled.

"Mayotte is destroyed ... we are destroyed," he said.

The cyclone slams into northern Mozambique

Chido continued its eastern trajectory and into northern Mozambique where it continued to cause serious damage, while farther inland landlocked Malawi and Zimbabwe warned they might have to evacuate people because of flooding.

In Mozambique, UNICEF said Cabo Delgado province, home to around 2 million people, was the first region to be hit and many homes, schools and health facilities have been partially or completely destroyed.

UNICEF Mozambique spokesman Guy Taylor said that communities faced the prospect of being cut off from schools and health facilities for weeks and Mozambique authorities warned there was a high danger of landslides.

December through to March is cyclone season in the southwestern Indian Ocean and southern Africa has been pummeled by a series of strong ones in recent years. Cyclone Idai in 2019 killed more than 1,300 people, mostly in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Cyclone Freddy left more than 1,000 dead across several countries in the Indian Ocean and southern Africa last year.

The cyclones bring the risk of flooding and landslides, but also stagnant pools of water may later spark deadly outbreaks of the waterborne disease cholera as well as dengue fever and malaria.

Studies say the cyclones are getting worse because of climate change. They can leave poor countries in Africa, which contribute a tiny amount to global warming, having to deal with large humanitarian crises, underlining their call for more help from rich nations to deal with the impact of climate change.

Small businesses say cautious shoppers are seeking 'cozy' and 'festive' this holiday season

By MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writer

After the busy Black Friday holiday weekend, Kristen Tarnol, owner of Emerald City Gifts in Studio City, California, is already asking her supplier to send more more fuzzy alpaca scarves and warm slippers that were best sellers over the weekend.

"Even though it's Los Angeles ... I think people are looking for cozy items, really," she said.

With a late Thanksgiving, the holiday shopping season is five days shorter than last year, and owners of small retail shops say people have been quick to snap up holiday décor early, along with gifts for others and themselves. Cozy items like sweaters are popular so far. But there's little sense of the freewheeling spending that occurred during the pandemic.

Overall, The National Retail Federation predicts retail sales in November and December will rise between

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2.5% and 3.5% compared with same period a year ago. Online shopping is expected to grow too. Adobe Digital Insights, a division of software company Adobe, predicts an 8.4% increase online for the full season.

Comfort and 'whimsy'

Some owners say shopping has been erratic so far this holiday season. Nathan Waldon, who owns Nathan & Co., with two gift shops in Oakland, California, said he had his best Black Friday ever, with sales up 32%. But business slowed dramatically after that. He's hoping it picks up again soon.

"I still feel like I'm optimistic for the season," he said. "But it's definitely going to be one of those roller coaster seasons again."

He said comforting items are selling: Scarves, hats and gloves, humorous Christmas and Hanukkah cards and bright colors.

"People want that sense of whimsy, that sense of fun," he said. "A couple of seasons ago everything was sort of muted and earthy, and now everyone is craving happy colors."

One of his top sellers is a bright pink sweater with the word "Merry" written in big letters that sells for \$120. But generally, shoppers are looking to spend less than half of that, he said.

"It could be they could buy the \$25 item, but then they'll add on a little something extra," he said. "It seems to me that the sweet spot is between 40 and 50 bucks."

Bouncing back

Small businesses in some parts of the country are hoping holiday shopping helps them recover from extreme weather during the year. In Florida, Jennifer Johnson, owner of consignment shop True Fashionistas in Naples, Florida, had a slow summer season, partly because the area was hit by three hurricanes this year. She decided to increase her Black Friday weekend discount this year to draw in shoppers – offering a 25%-off deal rather than the 18% to 20% she normally offers.

It worked. The store had record sales days over the weekend. People snapped up festive Christmas outfits and Christmas décor. The Christmas décor, including ornaments, candles and other home decorations, is selling faster than last year, she said.

"Last year we were out of Christmas stuff like by the second week of December, and we're almost out of it now and it's only the first week of December," Johnson said.

As for clothing: "anything sequins, anything that has had bedazzling on it, anything that looks fine and festive is what they were buying," she said.

At her three Philadelphia-area Serendipity shops that sell clothing, accessories and home goods, owner Nicole Beltz also faced weather-related challenges in foot traffic over the year, including snow in the first quarter, a lot of rain in the second quarter and extreme heat in the third quarter. An unpredictable economy and tough competition on pricing from bigger chains were also obstacles during the year.

During the Black Friday weekend, she offered 20% off for orders of \$75 or more and 30% off orders of \$150 and more. Last year she just offered discounts on select items, not blanket discounts.

"We gave out our biggest incentive ever for shoppers to come out with discounts and promos. I certainly think that that was necessary this year," she said.

Beltz' customers gravitated toward prices either under \$20 or around \$100. At her shops, Philadelphia Eagles and Taylor Swift merchandise were the top sellers, including \$14 socks and \$99 sweaters.

"One is the impulse category, where if it's under \$20, they'll buy it. No matter what," she said. "And then the second category would be for really people that are coming in looking for a gift. We're pushing the \$100 sale. We try to keep our best sellers, like those sweaters and those items that people are really grabbing for a nice holiday gift at \$99, right under the \$100 mark."

'Extra touch'

Not all small businesses can use discounts to drive business, since margins are often tight.

Between Friends Boutique in Philadelphia is using events to drive holiday traffic instead. They held a "Sweater Explosion" event at 8 a.m. on Black Friday where they served hot apple cider and hot chocolate with marshmallows and promoted different styles of sweaters.

Sweaters under \$100 were big sellers, along with \$25 reversible silk scarves that feature art from impressionists like Monet.

"Our customers appreciated that little extra touch of laughs during the holidays. Coming in and smelling the cinnamon in the air felt like the holidays have arrived," co-owner Claudia Averette said. Sales are up so far from last year, she added.

They're also hosting a "Bourbon and Bow Tie" event on Dec. 20 to promote the fact that they carry men's accessories as well, like bow ties, socks and scarves.

An event helps get exposure, Averette said. "It's a great marketing strategy," she said.

West Africa regional bloc approves exit timeline for 3 coup-hit member states

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — West Africa's regional bloc ECOWAS approved Sunday an exit timeline for three coup-hit nations after a nearly yearlong process of mediation to avert the unprecedented disintegration of the grouping.

In a first in the 15-nation bloc's nearly 50 years of existence, the military juntas of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso announced in January that they decided to leave ECOWAS, accusing it of "inhumane and irresponsible" coup-related sanctions and of failing to help them solve their internal security crises.

"The authority decides to set the period from 29 January, 2025 to 29 July 2025 as a transitional period and to keep ECOWAS doors open to the three countries during the transition period," ECOWAS Commission President Omar Alieu Touray said in his closing remarks Sunday at the summit of regional heads of state in Nigeria's capital, Abuja.

The three coup-hit countries have largely rebuffed ECOWAS' efforts to reverse their withdrawal. They have started to consider how to issue travel documents separately from ECOWAS and are forming their own alliance. The one-year notice for their departure is expected to be completed in January.

Touray commended efforts by the bloc's envoys to resolve the crisis. "These efforts underscore your collective commitment to preserving peace and unity in our region," he said.

Bola Tinubu, the president of Nigeria and chairman of ECOWAS, said the challenges faced around the world and in the region test its ability to work together. "We must not lose sight of our fundamental responsibility, which is to protect our citizens and create an enabling environment where they can prosper," he said.

One major benefit of being a member of ECOWAS is visa-free movement to member states, and it is not clear how that could change after the three countries leave the bloc. Asked about such an implication in July, the ECOWAS commission president said: "When you get out of an agreement ... if it is about free trade, free movement of people, the risk of losing those concessions remains."

On Saturday, the three countries said in a joint statement that while access to their territories would remain visa-free for other West African citizens, they "reserve the right ... to refuse entry to any ECOWAS national falling into the category of inadmissible immigrants."

As West Africa's top political authority since it was formed in 1975, such a division is ECOWAS' biggest challenge since inception, said Babacar Ndiaye, senior fellow with the Senegal-based Timbuktu Institute for Peace Studies.

The chances of ECOWAS getting the three countries back into their fold are slim mostly because the bloc wants a quick return to democracy, which the juntas have not committed to, said Mucahid Durmaz, a senior analyst at global risk consultancy Verisk Maplecroft. Allowing the juntas to remain in power "could risk further regional fragmentation" while recognizing them as legitimate authorities would represent "a serious departure from ECOWAS's founding principles," Durmaz said.

The regional bloc also failed to manage the situation in the best possible way, he said.

"The bloc's inconsistent responses to coups in the region have given an impression that its stance is influenced more by the political ambitions of member states than by its founding principles of promoting democratic governance," Durmaz said.

Trump nominees should 'steer clear' of undermining polio vaccine, McConnell says

By MORIAH BALINGIT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who had polio as a child, says any of President-elect Donald Trump's nominees seeking Senate confirmation should "steer clear" of efforts to discredit the polio vaccine.

"Efforts to undermine public confidence in proven cures are not just uninformed — they're dangerous," McConnell said in a statement Friday. "Anyone seeking the Senate's consent to serve in the incoming Administration would do well to steer clear of even the appearance of association with such efforts."

The 82-year-old lawmaker's statement appeared to be directed at Trump's pick for health secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., after a report that one of his advisers filed a petition to revoke approval for the polio vaccine in 2022. That vaccine is widely considered to have halted the disease in most parts of the world.

McConnell's words were a sign that Kennedy, who has long advanced the debunked idea that vaccines cause autism, could face some resistance in the soon-to-be GOP-controlled Senate.

"Mr. Kennedy believes the Polio Vaccine should be available to the public and thoroughly and properly studied," said Katie Miller, the transition spokeswoman for Kennedy, in response to questions.

The New York Times reported that the petition was filed by a lawyer now helping Kennedy select candidates for federal health positions in the incoming administration.

Any individual or company can file a petition with the Food and Drug Administration, which typically fields hundreds of requests at any time relating to various food, drug and medical issues. Most petitions are denied, but the FDA is required to respond to each one in writing.

Vaccines have been proven to be safe and effective in laboratory testing and in real-world use in hundreds of millions of people over decades — they are considered among the most effective public health measures in history.

McConnell contracted polio at 2 years old but survived because of "the miraculous combination of modern medicine and a mother's love," according to the statement. He praised the "saving power" of the polio vaccine for the "millions who came after me."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said in a post on X that it was "outrageous and dangerous for people in the Trump Transition to try and get rid of the polio vaccine that has virtually eradicated polio in America and saved millions of lives.

He said Kennedy should clarify his own position on it.

Trump announced last month his selection of Kennedy, saying Kennedy would work to protect Americans "from harmful chemicals, pollutants, pesticides, pharmaceutical products, and food additives."

But that pick was met with alarm from scientists and public health officials, who fear Kennedy would unwind lifesaving public health initiatives such as vaccines.

Kennedy has pushed other conspiracy theories regarding vaccines, such as that COVID-19 could have been "ethnically targeted" to spare Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people, comments he later said were taken out of context. He has repeatedly brought up the Holocaust when discussing vaccines and public health mandates.

Kennedy said he plans to remake the Department of Health and Human Services, an agency with sprawling reach and a \$1.3 trillion budget, if he is approved. He has suggested the FDA is beholden to "big pharma," and his anti-vaccine nonprofit has called on it to stop using COVID-19 vaccines.

During the COVID-19 epidemic, his nonprofit group, Children's Health Defense, petitioned the FDA to halt the use of all COVID vaccines. The group has alleged that the FDA is beholden to "big pharma" because it receives much of its budget from industry fees and some employees who have departed the agency have gone on to work for drugmakers.

Children's Health Defense currently has a lawsuit pending against a number of news organizations, among them The Associated Press, accusing them of violating antitrust laws by taking action to identify misinformation, including about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. Kennedy took leave from the group when he announced his run for president but is listed as one of its attorneys in the lawsuit.

One week into a new Syria, rebels aim for normalcy and Syrians vow not to be silent again

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

DAMASCUS (AP) — At Damascus' international airport, the new head of security — one of the rebels who marched across Syria to the capital — arrived with his team. The few maintenance workers who showed up for work huddled around Maj Hamza al-Ahmed, eager to learn what will happen next.

They quickly unloaded all the complaints they had been too afraid to express during the rule of President Bashar Assad, which now, inconceivably, is over.

They told the bearded fighter they were denied promotions and perks in favor of pro-Assad favorites, and that bosses threatened them with prison for working too slowly. They warned of hardcore Assad supporters among airport staff, ready to return whenever the facility reopens.

As Al-Ahmed tried to reassure them, Osama Najm, an engineer, announced: "This is the first time we talk."

This was the first week of Syria's transformation after Assad's unexpected fall.

Rebels, suddenly in charge, met a population bursting with emotions: excitement at new freedoms; grief over years of repression; and hopes, expectations and worries about the future. Some were overwhelmed to the point of tears.

The transition has been surprisingly smooth. Reports of reprisals, revenge killings and sectarian violence have been minimal. Looting and destruction have been quickly contained, insurgent fighters disciplined. On Saturday, people went about their lives as usual in the capital, Damascus. Only a single van of fighters was seen.

There are a million ways it could go wrong.

The country is broken and isolated after five decades of Assad family rule. Families have been torn apart by war, former prisoners are traumatized by the brutalities they suffered, tens of thousands of detainees remain missing. The economy is wrecked, poverty is widespread, inflation and unemployment are high. Corruption seeps through daily life.

But in this moment of flux, many are ready to feel out the way ahead.

At the airport, al-Ahmed told the staffers: "The new path will have challenges, but that is why we have said Syria is for all and we all have to cooperate."

The rebels have so far said all the right things, Najm said. "But we will not be silent about anything wrong again."

Idlib comes to Damascus

At a torched police station, pictures of Assad were torn down and files destroyed after insurgents entered the city Dec. 8. All Assad-era police and security personnel have vanished.

On Saturday, the building was staffed by 10 men serving in the police force of the rebels' de facto "salvation government," which for years governed the rebel enclave of Idlib in Syria's northwest.

The rebel policemen watch over the station, dealing with reports of petty thefts and street scuffles. One woman complains that her neighbors sabotaged her power supply. A policeman tells her to wait for courts to start operating again.

"It will take a year to solve problems" he mumbled.

The rebels sought to bring order in Damascus by replicating the structure of its governance in Idlib. But there is a problem of scale. One of the policemen estimates the number of rebel police at only around 4,000; half are based in Idlib and the rest are tasked with maintaining security in Damascus and elsewhere. Some experts estimate the insurgents' total fighting force at around 20,000.

Right now, the fighters and the public are learning about each other.

The fighters drive large SUVs and newer models of vehicles that are out of reach for most residents in Damascus, where they cost 10 times as much because of custom duties and bribes. The fighters carry Turkish lira, long forbidden in government-held areas, rather than the plunging Syrian pound.

Most of the bearded fighters hail from conservative, provincial areas. Many are hardline Islamists.

The main insurgent force, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, has renounced its al-Qaida past, and its leaders are

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working to reassure Syria's religious and ethnic communities that the future will be pluralist and tolerant.

But many Syrians remain suspicious. Some fighters sport ribbons with Islamist slogans on their uniforms and not all of them belong to HTS, the most organized group.

"The people we see on the streets, they don't represent us," said Hani Zia, a Damascus resident from the southern city of Daraa, where the 2011 anti-Assad uprising began. He was concerned by reports of attacks on minorities and revenge killings.

"We should be fearful," he said, adding that he worries some insurgents feel superior to other Syrians because of their years of fighting. "With all due respect to those who sacrificed, we all sacrificed."

Still, fear is not prevalent in Damascus, where many insist they will no longer let themselves be oppressed. Some restaurants have resumed openly serving alcohol, others more discretely to test the mood.

At a sidewalk café in the historic Old City's Christian quarter, men were drinking beer when a fighter patrol passed by. The men turned to each other, uncertain, but the fighters did nothing. When a man waving a gun harassed a liquor store elsewhere in the Old City, the rebel police arrested him, one policeman said.

Salem Hajjo, a theater teacher who participated in the 2011 protests, said he doesn't agree with the rebels' Islamist views, but is impressed at their experience in running their own affairs. And he expects to have a voice in the new Syria.

"We have never been this at ease," he said. "The fear is gone. The rest is up to us."

The fighters make a concerted effort to reassure

On the night after Assad's fall, gunmen roamed the streets, celebrating victory with deafening gunfire. Some security agency buildings were torched. People ransacked the airport's duty free, smashing all the bottles of liquor. The rebels blamed some of this on fleeing government loyalists.

The public stayed indoors, peeking out at the newcomers. Shops shut down.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham moved to impose order, ordering a nighttime curfew for three days. It banned celebratory gunfire and moved fighters to protect properties.

After a day, people began to emerge.

For tens of thousands, their first destination was Assad's prisons, particularly Saydnaya on the capital's outskirts, to search for loved ones who disappeared years ago. Few have found any traces.

It was wrenching but also unifying. Rebels, some of them also searching, mingled with relatives of the missing in the dark halls of prisons that all had feared for years.

During celebrations in the street, gunmen invited children to hop up on their armored vehicles. Insurgents posed for photos with women, some with their hair uncovered. Pro-revolution songs blared from cars. Suddenly shops and walls everywhere are plastered with revolutionary flags and posters of activists killed by Assad's state.

TV stations didn't miss a beat, flipping from praising Assad to playing revolutionary songs. State media aired the flurry of declarations issued by the new insurgent-led transitional government.

The new administration called on people to go back to work and urged Syrian refugees around the world to return to help rebuild. It announced plans to rehabilitate and vet the security forces to prevent the return of "those with blood on their hands." Fighters reassured airport staffers — many of them government loyalists — that their homes won't be attacked, one employee said.

But Syria's woes are far from being resolved.

While produce prices plunged after Assad's fall, because merchants no longer needed to pay hefty customs fees and bribes, fuel distribution was badly disrupted, jacking up transportation costs and causing widespread and lengthy blackouts.

Officials say they want to reopen the airport as soon as possible and this week maintenance crews inspected a handful of planes on the tarmac. Cleaners removed trash, wrecked furniture and merchandise.

One cleaner, who identified himself only as Murad, said he earns the equivalent of \$15 a month and has six children to feed, including one with a disability. He dreams of getting a mobile phone.

"We need a long time to clean this up," he said.

South Korean leaders seek calm after Yoon is impeached

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's opposition leader offered Sunday to work with the government to ease the political tumult as officials sought to reassure allies and markets, a day after the opposition-controlled parliament voted to impeach conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol over a short-lived attempt to impose martial law.

Liberal Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung, whose party holds a majority in the National Assembly, urged the Constitutional Court to rule swiftly on Yoon's impeachment and proposed a special council for policy cooperation between the government and parliament.

Yoon's powers have been suspended until the court decides whether to remove him from office or reinstate him. If Yoon is dismissed, a national election to choose his successor must be held within 60 days.

Lee, who has led a fierce political offensive against Yoon's embattled government, is seen as the front-runner to replace him. He lost the 2022 presidential election to Yoon by a razor-thin margin.

He told a televised news conference that a swift court ruling would be the only way to "minimize national confusion and the suffering of people."

The court will meet to discuss the case Monday, and has up to 180 days to rule. But observers say that a court ruling could come faster. In the case of parliamentary impeachments of past presidents — Roh Moo-hyun in 2004 and Park Geun-hye in 2016 — the court spent 63 days and 91 days respectively before determining to reinstate Roh and dismiss Park.

Lee also proposed a national council where the government and the National Assembly would work together to stabilize state affairs, and said his party won't seek to impeach Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, a Yoon appointee who's now serving as acting president.

"The Democratic Party will actively cooperate with all parties to stabilize state affairs and restore international trust," Lee said. "The National Assembly and government will work together to quickly resolve the crisis that has swept across the Republic of Korea."

It's unclear if Lee's proposed council will be realized.

In a meeting with the parliament speaker, who touched upon Lee's idea, Han said he will closely cooperate and communicate with the National Assembly but didn't specifically say whether the government intends to join the council. Kweon Seong-dong, floor leader of the ruling People Power Party, separately criticized Lee's proposal, saying that it's "not right" for the opposition party acting like the ruling party.

Kweon, a Yoon loyalist, said that his party will use existing PPP-government dialogue channels "to continue to assume responsibility as the governing party until the end of President Yoon's term."

The Democratic Party has already used its parliamentary majority to impeach the justice minister and the chief of the national police over the martial law decree, and had previously said it was also considering impeaching the prime minister.

Upon assuming his role as acting leader, Han ordered the military to bolster its security posture to prevent North Korea from launching provocations. He also asked the foreign minister to inform other countries that South Korea's major external policies will remain unchanged, and the finance minister to work to minimize potential negative impacts on the economy from the political turmoil.

On Sunday, Han had a phone call with U.S. President Joe Biden, discussing the political situation in South Korea and regional security challenges including North Korea's nuclear program. Biden expressed his appreciation for the resiliency of democracy in South Korea and reaffirmed "the ironclad commitment" of the United States, according to both governments.

Yoon's Dec. 3 imposition of martial law, the first of its kind in more than four decades, lasted only six hours, but has caused massive political tumult, halted diplomatic activities and rattled financial markets. Yoon was forced to lift his decree after parliament unanimously voted to overturn it.

Yoon sent hundreds of troops and police officers to the parliament in an effort to stop the vote, but they withdrew after the parliament rejected Yoon's decree. No major violence occurred.

Opposition parties have accused Yoon of rebellion, saying a president in South Korea is allowed to declare

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martial law only during wartime or similar emergencies and would have no right to suspend parliament's operations even in those cases.

Yoon has rejected the charges and vowed to "fight to the end." He said the deployment of troops to parliament was aimed at issuing a warning to the Democratic Party, which he called an "anti-state force" that abused its control of parliament by holding up the government's budget bill for next year and repeatedly pushing to impeach top officials.

Law enforcement institutions are investigating Yoon and others involved in the martial law case over possible rebellion and other allegations. They've arrested Yoon's defense minister and police chief and two other high-level figures.

Yoon has immunity from most criminal prosecution as president, but that doesn't extend to allegations of rebellion or treason. He's been banned from leaving South Korea, but observers doubt that authorities will detain him because of the potential for clashes with his presidential security service.

South Korean media reported that prosecutors asked Yoon to appear at a prosecution office for questioning on Sunday but he refused to do so. The reports said prosecutors plan to ask him to appear again. Repeated calls to a prosecutors' office in Seoul were unanswered.

Lee called for authorities to speed up their probes and said that an independent investigation by a special prosecutor should be launched as soon as possible. Last week, the National Assembly passed a law calling for such an investigation.

Today in History: December 16, the Boston Tea Party

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Monday, Dec. 16, the 351st day of 2024. There are 15 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 16, 1773, the Boston Tea Party took place as American colonists boarded a British ship and dumped more than 300 chests of tea into Boston Harbor to protest tea taxes.

Also on this date:

In 1907, 16 U.S. Navy battleships, which came to be known as the "Great White Fleet," set sail on a 14-month, round-the-world voyage to demonstrate American sea power.

In 1944, the World War II Battle of the Bulge began as German forces launched a surprise attack against Allied forces through the Ardennes Forest in Belgium and Luxembourg.

In 1960, 134 people were killed when a United Air Lines DC-8 and a TWA Super Constellation collided over New York City.

In 2000, President-elect George W. Bush selected Colin Powell to become the first African American secretary of state.

In 2014, Taliban gunmen stormed a military-run school in the northwestern Pakistan city of Peshawar, killing at least 148 people, including more than 130 schoolchildren.

Today's Birthdays: Artist Edward Ruscha is 87. Actor Liv Ullmann is 86. CBS news correspondent Lesley Stahl is 83. Pop singer Benny Andersson (ABBA) is 78. Rock singer-musician Billy Gibbons (ZZ Top) is 75. Actor Benjamin Bratt is 61. Filmmaker James Mangold is 61. Actor-comedian JB Smoove is 59. Actor Miranda Otto is 57. Actor Krysten Ritter is 43. Actor Theo James is 40. Actor Anna Popplewell is 36. Actor Stephan James is 31.