

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, Dec. 21

- FIRST DAY OF WINTER
- Girls Varsity Wrestling vs. South Border at Ashley, N.D., 9 a.m.
- Boys Varsity Wrestling at Sioux Valley Tourney, 10 a.m.
- Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main
- Skating Rink open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.



Sunday, Dec. 22

- St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's at 9 a.m.; at Zion at 11 a.m.; Voter's Meeting, 9:45 a.m.
- Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School, Choir, 6 p.m.
- Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
- First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
- Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.
- United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Monday, Dec. 23

- Senior Menu: Spanish rice, green beans, vanilla pudding with oranges, whole wheat bread.
- Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.
- Groton Senior Citizens meet at the Groton Community Center with a noon potluck.
- Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Groton Community Center

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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.

Government Shutdown Averted

A stopgap funding bill cleared Congress this morning shortly after a midnight deadline, averting a federal government shutdown. The measure from House Speaker Mike Johnson (R, LA-4) was approved by the Republican-led House by a vote of 366-34 Friday, while the Democratic-led Senate followed suit early Saturday morning by a vote of 85-11. President Joe Biden is expected to sign the bill today.

The short-term extension, known as a continuing resolution, funds the government at current levels through March 14 while adding \$100B for disaster aid and \$10B for agricultural assistance to farmers. It eliminates President-elect Donald Trump's demand to raise or suspend the debt ceiling, which Republican leaders indicate will be addressed separately in upcoming tax and border policy discussions next year.

The debt ceiling limits the total amount of money the US can borrow to meet its existing financial obligations. The US debt has risen to roughly \$36T after the ceiling was suspended from June 2023; that suspension expires Jan. 1.

Indiana man found guilty in Delphi murders sentenced to 130 years.

A now-52-year-old Indiana man was sentenced to a maximum of 130 years in prison for the 2017 murders of two teenage girls in Delphi, Indiana. Richard Allen was convicted last month in the killings of Abigail "Abby" Williams, 13, and Liberty "Libby" German, 14. He has maintained his innocence and plans to appeal the verdict following a trial that captured national attention.

Swimming mouse among 27 new species discovered in Peru. (w/photos)

During an expedition in the Alto Mayo region of Peru—part of the Amazon rainforest, researchers identified 27 new species, including an amphibious mouse with webbed feet and a unique "blob-headed" fish. The findings, in collaboration with local Indigenous communities, suggest up to 48 additional species may also be new to science, highlighting the area's rich biodiversity.

Regulator sues three large US banks over Zelle payment fraud.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau filed a lawsuit against Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo, and Zelle's operator, Early Warning Services, alleging they failed to adequately protect consumers from fraud on the Zelle payment network. The CFPB claims customers of the three banks have lost over \$870M due to insufficient fraud prevention and response measures since Zelle's launch in 2017.

Starbucks workers begin strike in three major US cities.

A union representing over 11,000 Starbucks baristas in the US announced a five-day strike starting Friday, protesting issues such as wages, working conditions, and staffing levels, with potential expansions to more stores unless an agreement is reached. The strike, affecting locations in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Seattle, comes amid broader labor disputes, including similar actions by Amazon delivery drivers.

Separately, Volkswagen announced it reached a deal with striking union workers in Germany, who had opposed the automaker's plans to shutter three plants in the country. Volkswagen said it wouldn't close any plants, though more than 35,000 job cuts will occur in the future.

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Iconic Party City going out of business a year after exiting bankruptcy.

Party City is closing all of its stores, effectively ending nearly 40 years of operation, due to ongoing financial difficulties that have persisted since its previous bankruptcy filing in January 2023. CEO Barry Litwin announced the immediate wind-down of operations Friday, stating despite their best efforts, the company could not overcome its substantial debt and competitive pressures from larger retailers.

Malaysia to resume hunt for Flight MH370—10 years after it vanished.

The renewed effort comes after Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, carrying 239 people, mysteriously disappeared March 8, 2014, while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. The aircraft's exact location remains unknown despite extensive international search efforts spanning multiple years (w/visuals). However, satellite data suggests it crashed in a remote area of the southern Indian Ocean, with everyone on board presumed dead. Malaysia is offering \$70M if substantive wreckage is found.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Judi Z. in Belmont, Massachusetts.

"The Thanksgiving holiday this year was bittersweet for me. Although I was delighted to be visiting my son, Jeff, his wife, Olivia, and their children in Hawaii, I was also quite worried about a scary health report I had just received. I did my best to enjoy my time with loved ones. The day after Thanksgiving, we all went to the cinema to see Wicked."

"The temperature in the movie theater was very, very cold, so much so, that I couldn't focus on the movie. I went out to the lobby to ask if they could adjust to make it warmer. The manager, Mark Tokujo, did his best to accommodate in the kindest, most considerate way. Mark went to his car and provided a blanket to keep me warm. Mark's act of kindness warmed my heart and soul at this much-needed time in my life."

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Groton Area Pulls Away in Fourth Quarter to Defeat West Central

In a hard-fought matchup, the Groton Area girls' basketball team outlasted West Central, 45-35, on a night marked by gritty defense, frequent turnovers, and clutch fourth-quarter play.

The lone tie of the game came early at 2-2, and West Central seized the early momentum, building a 10-6 lead after the first quarter. Both teams struggled offensively in the opening period, with Groton shooting just 9% (1 of 11) from the field while West Central managed 21% (3 of 14). However, Groton's ability to get to the free-throw line (4 of 6) kept them within striking distance.

The second quarter saw Groton Area come alive, capitalizing on West Central's shooting woes. West Central shot just 10% (1 of 10) from the field in the period, while Groton improved to 27% (4 of 15). Groton's aggressive defense led to three lead changes in the quarter, and by halftime, they had secured a 19-13 advantage.

The third quarter featured more back-and-forth action. Groton extended its lead to as much as eight points but saw West Central rally late in the period. West Central shot 25% (2 of 8) from the field in the third but stayed in the game with a strong showing at the free-throw line (5 of 8). Groton, shooting 31% (4 of 13), maintained a slim 28-23 lead heading into the final quarter.

The fourth quarter was where Groton Area took control. Building on their biggest lead of the game (35-23), Groton capitalized on key defensive stops and efficient shooting. They posted their best shooting percentage of the game at 44% (4 of 9) and were steady at the free-throw line, converting 8 of 13 attempts. Meanwhile, West Central continued to struggle from the field, shooting 25% (3 of 12) and ultimately couldn't close the gap.

Turnovers plagued both teams throughout the game, with Groton committing 24 and West Central 20. Both squads shot 14 of 23 (61%) from the free-throw line, but Groton's ability to convert in the fourth quarter proved decisive.

Groton's victory was a testament to their resilience and defensive intensity. The team showed grit in overcoming a slow start and executed well in the game's critical moments to secure the 10-point win.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

Groton Area: Jaedyn Penning: 14 points, 8 rebounds, 1 assist, five fouls.

Jerica Locke: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 7 assists, 2 steals, 3 fouls.

Kennedy Hansen: 7 points (1 3-pointer), 4 rebounds, 1 steal, 4 fouls.

Taryn Traphagen: 5 points (1 3-pointer), 2 rebounds, 3 steals, 2 fouls.

Faith Traphagen: 3 points (1 3-pointer), 1 steal.

Rylee Dunker: 2 points, 10 rebounds, 2 assists, 3 fouls.

Chesney Weber: 2 points 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 foul.

Laila Roberts: 1 point, 3 rebounds, 2 fouls.

Totals: Field Goals: 11-28 39 percent, 3-pointers: 3-22 14 percent, Free Throws: 14-23 61 percent, 36 rebounds, 25 turnovers, 11 assists, 8 steals, 23 fouls.

West Central: Kacey Juton 15 points (2 3-pointers), Abbi Thornton 7, Ruyha Goehring 6, Bailey Stallman 3 (1 3-pointer), Marci Schultz 2, Ayla Kramer 2.

Field Goals: 9-44 20 percent, Free Throws: 14-23 61 percent, 22 fouls and 20 turnovers.

West Central Secures Victory Over Groton in Boys Basketball

The West Central boys basketball team jumped out to an early lead and never looked back, holding off a fourth-quarter surge from Groton to secure a 54-38 victory.

West Central set the tone early, using aggressive defense and efficient scoring to take a 14-8 lead after the first quarter. Their momentum carried into the second quarter, where they unleashed a 10-0 scoring run, building a commanding 29-10 advantage by halftime.

Coming out of the break, West Central extended their lead to its largest margin of the night at 31-10. However, the Tigers refused to fold. Groton began chipping away at the deficit, spurred on by a determined effort from Ryder Johnson. By the end of the third quarter, Groton had cut the lead to 36-24, setting the stage for an intense final period.

In the fourth quarter, Groton inched closer, narrowing the margin to 37-27. Johnson was electric, scoring 10 points in the quarter and finishing with a game-high 20 points. Despite his efforts, West Central's steady free-throw shooting and composure under pressure kept the Tigers at bay.

Will Kuhl led West Central with a standout performance, tallying 23 points and anchoring the offense throughout the contest. West Central capitalized on their opportunities at the line, converting 15 of 26 free throws, while Groton managed just 4 of 8.

West Central's discipline and defensive intensity were key, overcoming 30 team fouls to maintain control. Groton, battling through 22 team fouls of their own, fought valiantly but couldn't overcome the early deficit.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

Ryder Johnson: 20 points (4 3-pointers), 3 rebounds, 1 steal, 4 fouls.

Karson Zak: 10 points, 7 rebounds, 1 assist, 3 fouls, 1 block.

Keegen Tracy: 2 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal, 3 fouls.

Becker Bosma: 2 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 steal, 3 fouls.

Easton Weber: 2 points, 1 turnover, 3 fouls.

Turner Thompson: 2 points, 1 rebound, 2 fouls.

Jayden Schwan: 1 foul, 1 block.

Gage Sippel: 4 rebounds, 1 foul.

Blake Pauli: 1 steal, 2 fouls.

Totals: Field Goals: 8-27 29%, 3-Pointers: 6-17 35%, Free Throws: 4-8, 50%, 21 rebounds, 11 turnovers, 6 assists, 4 steals, 22 fouls, 2 blocks.

West Central: Will Kuhl 23 points (2 3-pointers), Kolte Garry 8 points, Carter Gross 7 (1 3-pointer), Hayden Heier 5, Luke Knight 4, Connor Mebius 3, Carter Tetzlaff 2.

Free Throws: 15-26, 30 fouls.

Both Varsity games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meathouse in Andover. Shane Clark called the girls game and Paul Kosel the boys game. Jeslyn Kosel operated the camera.

West Central Edges Groton Area in Nail-Biting Junior Varsity

In a thrilling boys' junior varsity basketball game, West Central overcame Groton Area with a 41-36 victory in a contest that was tightly contested from start to finish.

The game began with Groton jumping out to a quick 7-4 lead, but West Central answered with a strong push to close out the first quarter, surging ahead 8-7.

The back-and-forth battle continued in the second quarter. The game saw three ties, but West Central never relinquished its lead, heading into halftime with a 20-15 advantage.

West Central seemed poised to pull away early in the third quarter, opening up a 24-15 lead. However, Groton Area responded with an impressive 8-point run, briefly taking a 27-26 lead. West Central reclaimed the lead before the end of the quarter, holding a slim 28-27 edge heading into the final frame.

The fourth quarter was a rollercoaster of emotions for both teams. The lead changed hands four times, and the score was tied on three separate occasions, the last coming at 36 with less than a minute remaining. With the game on the line, West Central delivered clutch baskets down the stretch to secure the hard-fought victory.

Ethan Kroll led Groton Area with 11 points followed by Easton Weber with 10, Anthony Tracy 5, Jayden Schwan 4, Logan Warrington 4 and Jace Johnson 2. Carter Gross led the way for West Central with 11 points followed by Tanner Wagner with 9, Hayden Heier 8, Bubba Kono 6, Dylan Bettcher 3, Boche Knight 2 and Elliot DeJong 2.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by an anonymous person.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

West Central wins boys C game

Scoring for Groton Area: Jace Johnson 12, Zac Flihs 3, Anthony Tracy 4, Asher Johnson 12, Ethan Kroll 4.

Groton Tigers Secure Thrilling Victory Over West Central in JV Basketball Clash

The Groton Area Tigers and West Central Trojans squared off in an exhilarating junior varsity girls' basketball game that kept fans on the edge of their seats from start to finish. With momentum swinging back and forth, the Tigers came out on top, edging the Wildcats 29-27 in a nail-biting finish.

The game began with intensity, as both teams traded baskets in a first quarter that featured three lead changes. Groton managed to gain the upper hand late in the quarter, taking a slim 9-6 lead into the break.

In the second quarter, the Tigers found their rhythm. A 7-point scoring run extended their lead, and their defense held firm. Despite a push from West Central, Groton maintained a 16-12 advantage heading into halftime, with Chesney Weber leading the charge offensively.

The third quarter saw a determined West Central team claw their way back into the game. The Trojans tied the score at 18 and again at 20, matching Groton's defensive intensity and making clutch plays on both ends of the court. Neither team could pull away, and the quarter ended in a deadlock, 20-20.

The fourth quarter was a test of composure and grit. West Central struck first, taking an early lead and maintaining it for much of the period. Groton, however, refused to back down. The Tigers showed their poise at the free-throw line, going 7-for-10 in the quarter to keep the game within reach. With just two minutes remaining, Groton tied the game at 27, setting the stage for a dramatic finish.

With time winding down, Groton's McKenna Tietz stepped up in the clutch, sinking the Tigers' only field goal of the quarter with 34 seconds left on the clock. Her basket gave Groton a 29-27 lead, and their defense held strong in the final moments to secure the hard-fought victory.

Chesney Weber led the Tigers 12 points followed by McKenna Tietz with eight, Kella Tracy four, Makenna Krause 3 and Talli Wright 2.

Aubrey Borns led West Central with nine points followed by Bailey Stallman and Avery Eberhard with six each, Kaylie Schultz had three and Elisabeth Miller 2.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Dorene Nelson.

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Groton Area has three NEC Wrestling Champions

The Northeast Conference Wrestling Tournament was held Friday at the GHS Gym with Groton Area having three champions, one runner-up, two in third place and two in fourth place.

The champions were Liza Krueger in the girl's division at 107 pounds, Korbin Kucker in the boys 175 division and Gavin Englund in the boys 285 pound division. Christian Ehresmann placed second at 157 pounds. Those in third were Wyatt Hagen at 106 pounds and Kyson Kucker at 120 pounds. In fourth place were Lincoln Krause at 126 pounds and Donovan Block at 132 pounds.



Groton's Gavin Englund vs. Milbank's Law-son Navy. Englund won.

NEC Wrestling Photos by Elizabeth Varin



Groton's Gavin Englund vs. Milbank's Law-son Navy. Englund won.



Groton's Gavin Englund vs. Deuel's Tytian Lauseng. Englund won.

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Groton's Donavon Block vs. Milbank's Kyle Schneck. Block won.



Groton's Christian Ehresmann vs. Deuel's Gavin Klaus. Ehresmann won.



Groton's Donavon Block vs. Clark-Willow Lake's Isaac Johnson. Johnson won.



Groton's Christian Ehresmann vs. Sisseton's Holden Hawkins. Hawkins won.



Groton's Donavon Block vs. Redfield's Kasey Hermann. Hermann won.



Groton's Christian Ehresmann vs. Sisseton's Holden Hawkins. Hawkins won.

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Groton's Wyatt Hagen vs. Clark-Willow Lake's Benny Pommer. Pommer won.



Groton's Ben Hoelt vs. Milbank's Reese Rabe. Rabe won.



Groton's Wyatt Hagen vs. Clark-Willow Lake's Benny Pommer. Pommer won.



Groton's Ben Hoelt vs. Milbank's Reese Rabe. Rabe won.



Groton's Wyatt Hagen vs. Sisseton's Aykre Piottner. Hagen won.



Groton's Ben Hoelt vs. Milbank's Reese Rabe. Rabe won.

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Groton's Korbin Kucker vs. Britton-Hecla's Ben Suther. Kucker won.



Groton's Korbin Kucker vs. Milbank's Tate Schlueter. Kucker won.



Groton's Korbin Kucker vs. Britton-Hecla's Ben Suther. Kucker won.



Groton's Layne Johnson vs. Sisseton's Taylor Snaza. Snaza won.

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Groton's Lincoln Krause vs. Milbank's Jacob Giles. Krause won.



Groton's Liza Krueger vs. Clark-Willow Lake's Emma Bochek. Krueger won.



Groton's Lincoln Krause vs. Deuel's Aiden Warren. Warren won.



Groton's Liza Krueger vs. Sisseton's Clara Iverson. Krueger won.



Groton's Liza Krueger vs. Sisseton's Clara Iverson. Krueger won.

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Groton's Kyson Kucker vs. Milbank's Tayson Tillma. Kucker won.



Groton's Kyson Kucker vs. Redfield's Chace Odland. Kucker won.



Groton's Kyson Kucker vs. Redfield's Chace Odland. Kucker won.



Groton's Chris Schwab vs. Hamlon's Dante DeGeest. Schwab won.

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Groton Area Elementary Christmas Program



The Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten students sang, "Jingle Bells" and "We Wish You A Merry Christmas." (Photos by Elizabeth Varin)



Landon Brown was the director for the Elementary Christmas Program. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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The first grade students sang, "Go Tell It On The Mountain" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



The second grade students sang, "We Three Kings" and "Joy to the World." (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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The third grade students sang, "Angels We Have Heard on High" and "Deck the Halls." (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



The fifth grade students sang, "Camouflage and Christmas Lights" which was dedicated to all the people who may not get to be home for Christmas, "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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The fourth grade students sang, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and "My Favorite Things."

(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



There were lots of phones being used to record the children during the Elementary Christmas Program held Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

Varin)



Macee Benthin (on top) and Maci Dunbar during the class' performance of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Congress clears bill to avert government shutdown, extend farm bill

South Dakota's Thune, Rounds, Johnson all vote yes

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 20, 2024 5:18 PM

WASHINGTON — Congress finally approved a stopgap spending bill early Saturday that will keep the government open for a few more months, after a raucous 48 hours that served as a preview of what President-elect Donald Trump's second term in office might look like.

The short-term spending package, the third version of a bill to be released this week, will give lawmakers until mid-March to negotiate agreement on the dozen full-year government funding measures and provide about \$100 billion in natural disaster assistance.

Although it technically was passed by the Senate after the midnight deadline for a shutdown, deputy White House press secretary Emilie Simons said on X that agencies would continue normal operations.

The House passed the bill Friday evening following a 366-34 vote with one Democrat voting "present." The Senate voted 85-11 shortly after midnight Saturday. President Joe Biden signed the bill Saturday morning.

The legislation did not include any language either raising or suspending the debt limit, rejecting a demand by Trump that it be addressed. Congress and Trump will have to deal with that next year when they control the House, Senate and the White House.

The 118-page bill will extend programs in the five-year farm bill through September, giving the House and Senate more time to broker a deal, even though they are already more than a year late.

The package would not block members of Congress from their first cost-of-living salary adjustment since January 2009, boosting lawmakers' pay next year from \$174,000 to a maximum of \$180,600.

It does not include a provision considered earlier this week that would have allowed the year-round sale of E15 blended gasoline nationwide in what would have been a win for corn growers and biofuels.

The White House announced during the House vote that Biden supports the legislation.

"While it does not include everything we sought, it includes disaster relief that the President requested for the communities recovering from the storm, eliminates the accelerated pathway to a tax cut for billionaires, and would ensure that the government can continue to operate at full capacity," press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre wrote. "President Biden supports moving this legislation forward and ensuring that the vital services the government provides for hardworking Americans — from issuing Social Security checks to processing benefits for veterans — can continue as well as to grant assistance for communities that were impacted by devastating hurricanes."

Appropriators at odds

House Appropriations Chairman Tom Cole, R-Okla., urged support for the bill during floor debate, saying it would avoid a partial government shutdown, provide disaster aid and send economic assistance to farmers.

"Governing by continuing resolution is never ideal, but Congress has a responsibility to keep the government open and operating for the American people," Cole said. "The alternative, a government shutdown, would be devastating to our national defense and for our constituents and would be a grave mistake."

Connecticut Democratic Rep. Rosa DeLauro, ranking member on the Appropriations Committee, spoke against the bill and criticized GOP negotiators from walking away from the original, bipartisan version released Tuesday.

She rejected billionaire Elon Musk, a close Trump ally, seemingly calling the shots as if he were an elected lawmaker, though she ultimately voted for passage.

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"The United States Congress has been thrown into pandemonium," DeLauro said. "It leads you to the question of who is in charge?"

Trump, Musk objections

Democrats and Republicans reached an agreement earlier this week to fund the government, provide disaster aid, extend the agriculture and nutrition programs in the farm bill, extend various health care programs and complete dozens of other items. But Trump intervened, preventing House GOP leaders from putting that bill on the floor for an up-or-down vote.

Trump and Musk were unresponsive of some of the extraneous provisions in the original bill and Trump began pressing for lawmakers to address the debt limit now rather than during his second term.

House Republicans tried to pass their first GOP-only stopgap bill on Thursday night, but failed following a 174-235 vote, with 38 GOP lawmakers voting against the bill. That bill included a two-year debt limit suspension, but that was dropped from the version passed Friday.

Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, said Friday before the vote that the GOP was united on its plan forward.

"We have a unified Republican Conference. There is a unanimous agreement in the room that we need to move forward," Johnson said following a 90-minute closed-door meeting. "I expect that we will be proceeding forward. We will not have a government shutdown. And we will meet our obligations for our farmers, for the disaster victims all over the country, and for making sure the military and essential services and everyone who relies on the federal government for a paycheck is paid over the holidays."

A total of 34 House Republicans voted against the bill. No House Democrats voted against passage.

No shutdown, for now

The House and Senate not agreeing on some sort of stopgap spending bill before the Friday midnight deadline would have led to a funding lapse that would likely have led to a partial government shutdown just as the holidays begin.

During a shutdown, essential government functions that cover the protection of life and property continue, though no federal workers would have received their paychecks until after the shutdown ends. That loss of income would have extended to U.S. troops as well.

"If there is going to be a shutdown of government, let it begin now, under the Biden Administration, not after January 20th, under "TRUMP," the president-elect posted on social media Friday morning. "This is a Biden problem to solve, but if Republicans can help solve it, they will!"

In a separate post that went up just after 1 a.m. Eastern, Trump doubled down on his insistence that any short-term spending bill suspend the debt limit for another four years or eliminate the borrowing ceiling entirely.

"Congress must get rid of, or extend out to, perhaps, 2029, the ridiculous Debt Ceiling," Trump wrote. "Without this, we should never make a deal. Remember, the pressure is on whoever is President."

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

COMMENTARY

Well, it's official. Kristi Noem is breaking up with South Dakota.

by Dana Hess

She didn't really say it in so many words, but it was obvious to anyone who listened to Gov. Kristi Noem's budget speech. She's breaking up with us. Maybe she didn't want to jinx the next chapter of her life, so she never really came out and said she was leaving us. Read between the lines, though, and you can tell that her bags are packed.

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It seems like only yesterday we renewed our vows for another four years. Now, suddenly, it's over. We always knew that in her role as governor, there was an expiration date on our relationship. Still, we have to wonder why we weren't good enough, why South Dakota wasn't good enough to keep her here. It seems the lure of the nation's capital and a new job as secretary of Homeland Security was just too enticing, even after all we've shared.

There are some hurt feelings in any breakup. In her speech, Noem stressed the state government's role in providing safety for its citizens. She didn't mention the way she stretched her notion of providing safety for South Dakotans all the way to the Texas border. Her idea of keeping us safe cost us millions of dollars. It was her investment in those National Guard deployments that was likely one of the factors that led to her big new job. A thank-you would have been nice.

Sometimes in a breakup the most important words are those that are left unsaid. Her budget speech used 3,700 words yet never touched on increasing teacher pay, property tax reform or tribal relations.

She knows the last time the state stepped in to raise teacher pay out of the basement of national rankings, it took a task force and a sales tax increase. She knows that property tax reform is so complex that the best ideas floated by lawmakers so far include raising the sales tax to decrease property taxes. That amounts to a wash for those of us who happen to own property and buy things. She knows that the hurt feelings of the tribes are best healed with time and a new governor who won't let a zeal for public safety lead to a claim that tribal leaders are in cahoots with drug cartels.

It must have taken quite an effort for her to quell her natural inclination for leadership to avoid tackling these problems. You can tell by these things Noem didn't say that it's only a matter of time before she's out the door, leaving those challenges for our next governor.

In every relationship there are mysteries — things that aren't so easily explained. They say some mystery keeps a relationship healthy. With Noem, that's hard to tell. In her speech, she went on at some length to praise the economy we shared. She said South Dakota's economy is the best in the nation. If our economy is so good, why is the budget she proposed so austere? She admonished legislators to "make a permanent tax cut for the people of South Dakota," but isn't that cut one of the reasons why sales tax collections have been so sluggish?

It's hard not to be bitter about the sudden end of a six-year relationship. It's probably best to concentrate on the good times: the Custer State Park Buffalo Roundups, the balanced budgets and that fireworks-filled night at Mount Rushmore, although that celebration was centered on the man who will take her away from us.

It hurts to imagine her renting a new place to live in Washington, D.C. It's impossible to know if her new landlord will allow pets. It's a little late now, but there are plenty of us who would have offered to take care of Cricket.

It's likely Noem would say that instead of the end, this is the start of a new relationship. Rather than leading us as our governor, she'll be protecting us from her perch at Homeland Security. And we'll see her when she comes home. We'll see her on TV. But it just won't be the same. With luck, the pain of loss will heal in time. After a breakup, maybe the best we can hope for is that we can still be friends.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

Trump election offers possible reprieve for five South Dakotans involved in Jan. 6 riot

Four have pending charges, one has been sentenced for 2021 Capitol insurrection

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 20, 2024 4:41 PM

Amy Willis says she's not a criminal.

When she entered the U.S. Capitol with a crowd of protesters who'd been urged by Donald Trump to "stop the steal" of the 2020 election on Jan. 6, 2021, she claimed it felt more like a tour than a group of

insurrectionists.

"I didn't know it was an insurrection until I saw it on the news the next day," Willis said in a recent interview with South Dakota Searchlight.

In July, Willis was indicted on misdemeanor charges, including knowingly entering or remaining in a restricted building. The Sioux Falls herbalist became one of at least five South Dakotans and around 1,600 total people charged in federal court for their behavior that day — a group of people President-elect Trump has vowed to pardon upon returning to office next month.

A court document paints a starkly different picture than Willis' description. A photo of her in the crowd before she entered the Capitol shows her amid a throng of people, some of whom held Trump flags and Gadsen flags — emblazoned with a coiled snake and the phrase "don't tread on me" — or American flags. A puff of what appears to be smoke billows over the crowd. Another image from inside the Capitol shows Willis "appearing to film with her cell phone as rioters continued to pour in through the door and windows," the document says.

Willis was allegedly part of a group that pushed past a police line, "forcing the officers to retreat." The document also says Capitol police were actively attempting to push back the rioters.

Willis twice pulled away from an officer who'd attempted to remove her, the document says. She told Searchlight her resistance was a trauma response tied to a physically abusive relationship, and said she was planning to leave the building as instructed.

South Dakotans charged for alleged insurrectionist behavior

At least four South Dakotans have pending charges for their alleged actions on Jan. 6, and another South Dakotan has been sentenced.

Trump has referred repeatedly to Jan. 6 rioters as political prisoners and otherwise downplayed the riot, where four people in the crowd died and more than 100 police officers were injured. One officer died the day after the riot, and four others committed suicide within seven months. Once in office, Trump will have the authority to pardon each alleged rioter, including those like Willis whose cases are still working their way through the federal court system.

Judges have granted delays for at least two Jan. 6 defendants based on their argument that Trump might issue blanket pardons, Politico reported in November. Trump own's potential criminal liability — he was indicted for his alleged efforts to subvert the 2020 election — have mostly dissolved in the wake of his election victory.

On Thursday, a judge signed an order allowing a Kansas City man who pleaded guilty to Jan. 6-related charges to attend Trump's inauguration next month.

In a televised Dec. 8 interview with NBC News, Trump promised to "be acting very quickly" to pardon Jan. 6 defendants.

Newell man faces nine counts

Darrell Goins of Newell is charged with nine counts, including engaging in physical violence in a restricted building or grounds with a deadly and dangerous weapon — listed as a "20-ounce plastic soft drink bottle" in his indictment — as well as disorderly and disruptive conduct, entering and remaining in a restricted building and assaulting or impeding certain officers.

The Goins case opened in May. He was arrested and released on his own recognizance that month. He's pleaded not guilty to all charges, and a judge granted a continuance for his case in a virtual hearing held Dec. 17. His next hearing is set to take place eight days after Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration.

The FBI found Goins after getting a tip in mid-2022 identifying him in images and videos from Jan. 6, according to court documents. An agent interviewed a former coworker of Goins, who identified him in photos showing him raising a fist on the Capitol's West Plaza "at the very front of the crowd, standing directly in front of the line of the U.S. Capitol Police."

The court documents include a photo of a man, alleged to be Goins, tossing a plastic bottle at an of-

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ficer, and say that “the bottle thrown by Goins appears to have narrowly missed” the officer’s head. The documents allege that Goins “physically engaged” with several officers on the way into the Capitol building alongside other rioters, and that a special agent with the Capitol police “recalled Goins actively rushing at the police line.”

They also allege that he used an officer’s riot shield to push into law enforcement while standing in front of a police line. He spent about 16 minutes inside the Capitol building before leaving, the documents say. Calls placed by South Dakota Searchlight to numbers listed for Goins were not returned.

Bench warrant issued for Rapid City defendant

Calls to numbers listed for William George Knight of Rapid City also went unreturned.

Knight is charged with eight counts, including civil disorder, assaulting, impeding or resisting officers with a deadly and dangerous weapon — “a large metal sign,” according to his indictment — as well as disorderly conduct and entering and remaining in a restricted building.

A judge issued a bench warrant for Knight’s arrest in early October for failure to appear at a status hearing. U.S. Marshals Service spokesman Brady McCarron told South Dakota Searchlight via email that the “only status” they have for Knight is that he is out on bond.

The oldest open case involving a South Dakotan is that of Rapid City’s James Haffner.

Haffner moved to Rapid City from the Seattle area after Jan. 6. He was arrested three years ago in Rapid City on charges of assaulting, resisting or impeding law enforcement, violent and unlawful entry of restricted buildings, obstructing law enforcement during a civil disorder and entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

Haffner’s case is still pending in D.C. district court. His next case status hearing is scheduled for Jan. 23.

When reached by South Dakota Searchlight, Haffner wrote that talking to the outlet would not be “in my best interests.”

“From my perspective, most journalists and news sources are scumbags,” Haffner wrote.

Sentenced from South Dakota

Like Haffner, rapper and Jan. 6 defendant Billy Knutson is an out-of-state transplant.

Knutson, who goes by the name “Playboythebeast,” moved to Mitchell from North Carolina in 2021. His lyrical themes are heavily political — he has songs called “Let’s Go Brandon (fjb)” and “Kyle Rittenhouse” — and they often reference his affiliation with the Proud Boys, a far-right group whose founder once sued the Southern Poverty Law Center for labeling it a hate group.

The former song is a coded insult of President Joe Biden. The latter song is a reference to the real Kyle Rittenhouse, who shot and killed a Black Lives Matter protester in Wisconsin in 2020. Rittenhouse was later acquitted of homicide charges on self-defense grounds.

“Free all my homies from the 6th that whole s— was a scam,” Knutson raps in that song, which also includes the line “AR-15 at my side like I’m Kyle Rittenhouse.”

Once the rapping ends, Knutson uses his speaking voice to end the song with a shoutout to the Proud Boys founder, and another spoken shoutout to Jan. 6 defendants.

Knutson served six months in federal prison on Jan. 6-related charges.

In a sentencing memorandum filed in Knutson’s case, U.S. Attorney Matthew Graves of the D.C. district pointed to Knutson’s lyrics as a reason to give him a more significant sentence than some of his fellow Jan. 6 defendants. The document includes screenshots of Knutson’s music videos, including one in which the rapper holds up finger guns under a shower of bullet-shaped graphics.

Knutson pleaded guilty to one count of entering and remaining in a restricted building or grounds. He released songs about the riot before and after that.

“Knutson’s participation in a riot that actually succeeded in halting the Congressional election-certification, combined with his violent criminal history, his celebration and endorsement of the violence on January 6, and his public condoning of future violence — including gun violence — renders a significant jail sentence

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both necessary and appropriate in this case," the memo reads.

The sentencing memorandum notes that Knutson moved to Mitchell because the Proud Boys' state headquarters was located there.

Knutson was released from federal custody on March 31, 2023. Messages sent to Knutson's artist contact page were not returned.

Willis hopeful for pardon

Willis, the Sioux Falls herbalist, didn't stay up to hear the results of the presidential election on Nov. 5. But when she awoke the next morning to learn that Trump had won a second term, she was relieved on two levels.

First, she was pleased that her preferred candidate had emerged victorious. Second, she was hopeful that she might avoid being forced to stand trial.

Her interview with Searchlight marked the first time Willis had spoken to the media. It's also "one of the first times" she's admitted being in the Capitol that day, she said, though she's been contacted by law enforcement and appeared virtually in court a few times since being indicted earlier this year.

"They have a lot of pictures of me anyway," Willis said. "Now Trump's in office, so that's why I'm OK with this."

Her next hearing is scheduled to take place virtually on Jan. 3.

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.

Social Security benefits boosted for millions in bill headed to Biden's desk

SD's Thune and Rounds vote no after Johnson voted yes

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 21, 2024 6:50 AM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate approved a broadly bipartisan bill early Saturday that would increase Social Security benefits for millions of Americans with pensions by ending two of the program's policies in place for decades — the windfall elimination provision and government pension offset.

The legislation, which would cost more than \$195 billion over 10 years, now goes to President Joe Biden for his signature. While he hasn't released a public endorsement of the bill, extensive support in the House and Senate could signal he's likely to support the measure becoming law.

The Senate vote was 76-20 and the House vote in November was 327-75.

Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins said during floor debate Wednesday that a fix for the two provisions has been decades in the making, noting she held the first hearing on the issue in the upper chamber in 2003.

Collins later partnered with the late California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein to introduce the first version of the bill in 2005, before working with former Maryland Democratic Sen. Barbara Mikulski in 2007 on another version.

"Social Security is the foundation of retirement income for most Americans, yet many teachers, firefighters, police officers and other public servants often see their earned Social Security benefits unfairly reduced by two provisions," Collins said.

The windfall elimination provision, she said, "affects public servants who receive a pension from a job not covered by Social Security, but who also worked long enough in another job to qualify for Social Security benefits."

The government pension offset affects people who worked in jobs that weren't eligible for Social Security, but were eligible for a spousal benefit. That pension offset, Collins said, can reduce a spouse's Social

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Security benefit by two-thirds of the non-covered pension, leading to 70% of those affected by the GPO to lose the entire Social Security benefit.

"This issue is extraordinarily important in my state of Maine because the state's pension system does not include a Social Security component," Collins said. "And among those most affected are Maine school teachers."

Collins called the WEP and the GPO "an unfair, inequitable penalty."

Hit to trust fund

North Carolina Republican Sen. Thom Tillis said the bill's title made it sound like "motherhood and apple pie," but argued it wasn't the right approach to address the problem.

He expressed concern the bill would reduce the Social Security trust fund by an additional \$200 billion during the next decade, moving up the insolvency date by six months.

"This chamber needs courage and needs to say what needs to be said — we are about to pass an unfunded \$200 billion spending package for a trust fund that is likely to go insolvent over the next nine to ten years and we're going to pretend like somebody else has to fix it," Tillis said. "Well, when you're a U.S. senator and you have your election certificate, that falls on us."

Tillis said he agreed with Collins and others who support the bill that the WEP and the GPO must be fixed, but said that should be part of a larger conversation about addressing Social Security's upcoming insolvency.

"We do not disagree with what we ultimately need to do," Tillis said. "This is a disagreement in how to get here and how to have something that assesses the downstream risk. So it is with some trepidation that I come to the floor and criticize the good work of Sen. Collins. But I do it because there is so much riding on us getting this right and having the courage to fix Social Security over the next few years."

Ohio Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown said during floor debate Wednesday that people who paid into Social Security for the required amount of time should receive their full benefits.

"Social Security we know is a bedrock of our middle class — it's retirement security that Americans pay into and earn over a lifetime," Brown said. "You pay in for 40 quarters, you pay in essentially for 10 years. You've earned it. It should be there when you retire."

Brown said it "makes no sense" that workers in certain public service jobs, like teachers, police officers and firefighters, cannot draw their full benefits.

"They protect our communities, they teach our kids, they pay into Social Security just like everyone else," Brown said.

How do these provisions work?

The pension offset reduces a "spousal or widow(er)'s benefits of most people who also receive pensions based on federal, state, or local government employment not covered by Social Security," according to a report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

The windfall elimination provision changes the formula to reduce Social Security benefits for people "who are also entitled to pension benefits based on earnings from jobs that were not covered by Social Security," the report said.

The pension offset affects about 746,000 Americans while the windfall provision affects 2.1 million.

"The share of Social Security beneficiaries affected by the GPO varies widely by state," the CRS report says. "States with a relatively larger share of GPO-affected beneficiaries are usually those with a larger share of state and local government employees not covered by Social Security or those with more (Civil Service Retirement System) retirees."

The pension offset has a disproportionate impact on Social Security beneficiaries in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, Texas and Utah.

The windfall elimination provision affects a larger percentage of residents in Arizona, California, Colorado,

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Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Virginia and Washington, Wyoming.

"Similar to the GPO, the share of Social Security beneficiaries affected by the WEP varies by state," CRS wrote. "Typically, states that have a larger share of state and local government employees not covered by Social Security or more CSRS retirees have a relatively larger share of Social Security beneficiaries affected by the WEP."

Bipartisan House support

The U.S. House voted 327-75 in November to approve the four-page bill, sponsored by Louisiana Republican Rep. Garret Graves and Virginia Democratic Rep. Abigail Spanberger.

Graves said during floor debate that for 40 years, Social Security worked by "treating people differently, discriminating against a certain set of workers."

"These are police officers, teachers, firefighters, and other public servants," Graves said at the time. "I worked side by side with these folks. They are not people who are overpaid. They are not people who are underworked."

Spanberger called the windfall elimination provision and the government pension offset "two misguided provisions that were added to the Social Security Act in 1983 (and) have denied Americans the retirement security they worked for and expected to receive."

"For more than 40 years, public servants have tirelessly implored their representatives in Congress to listen to their stories and to correct this glaring injustice," Spanberger said. "Today, for the first time, Congress will vote on the Social Security Fairness Act, to repeal the WEP and the GPO, and to finally put an end to this theft."

Opposition to bill

Missouri Republican Rep. Jason Smith, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, said the two provisions affect around 4% of all Social Security beneficiaries, more than 60% of whom are concentrated in 10 states.

The two provisions, he said, "were put in place more than four decades ago to prevent workers with earnings that were exempt from Social Security payroll taxes from getting more generous treatment from Social Security than workers who spent their whole careers contributing to Social Security."

"Unfortunately, these policies still result in overly generous benefits for some while unfairly penalizing others," Smith said, before arguing the bill wasn't the right way to address the two provisions.

Smith said that getting rid of the two provisions "without a replacement potentially trades unfair treatment for preferential treatment."

He also expressed concern about how pulling more money from the Social Security trust fund would impact solvency.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated the bill would cost \$195.65 billion during the next 10 years and wrote in a letter to Iowa Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley that it would likely move up the Social Security insolvency date by six months.

"If H.R. 82 was enacted, the balance of the (Old-Age and Survivors Insurance) trust fund would, CBO projects, be exhausted roughly half a year earlier than it would be under current law," CBO Director Phillip L. Swagel wrote. "The agency estimates that under current law, the balance of the OASI trust fund would be exhausted during fiscal year 2033."

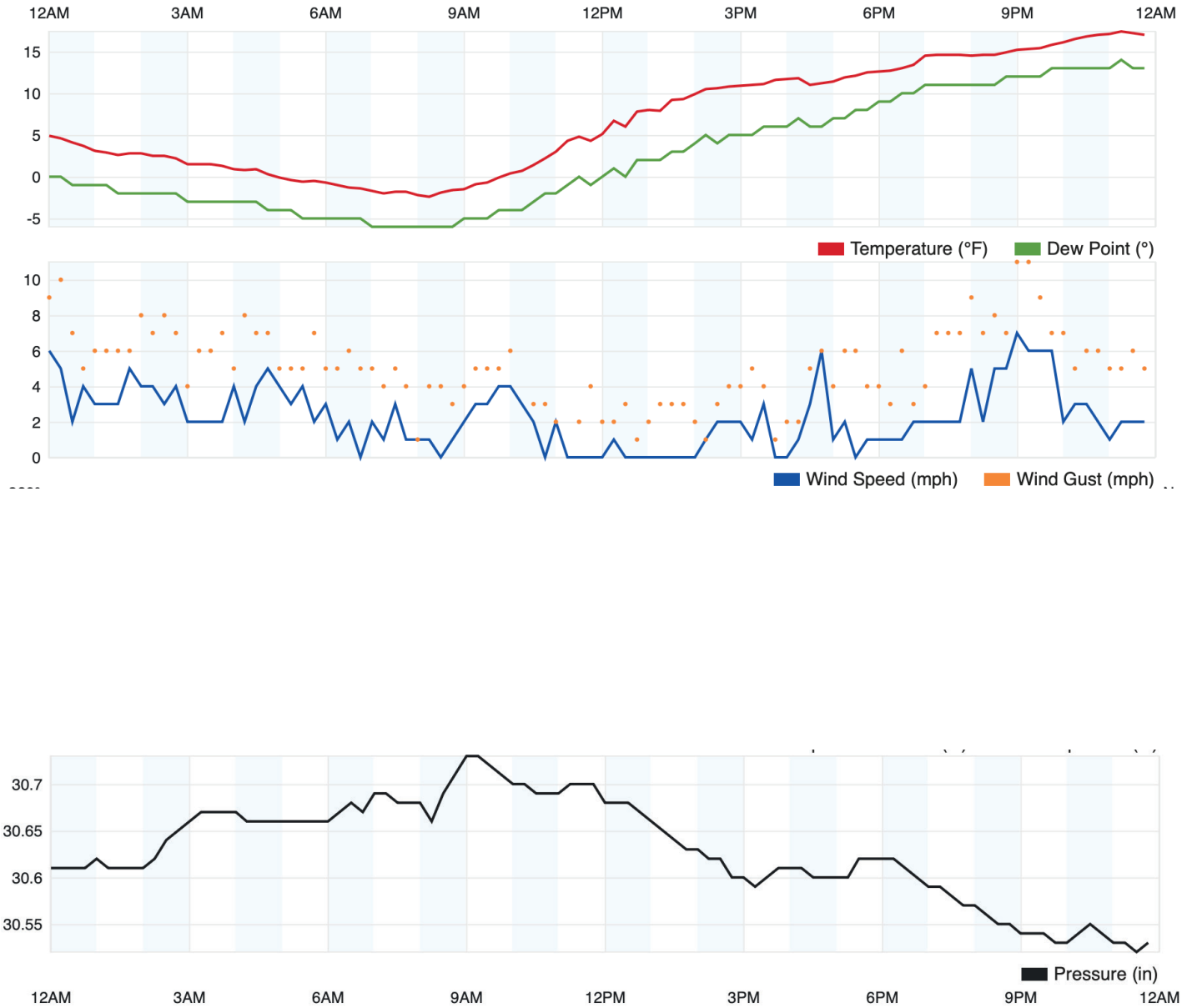
The Social Security trustees report for 2024 says that the program will be able to pay full benefits until 2035. After that, if Congress hasn't brokered a solution, Social Security would be able to pay about 83% of benefits.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 22 °F

Partly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 13 °F

Partly Cloudy

Sunday



High: 30 °F

Partly Sunny

Sunday Night



Low: 14 °F

Slight Chance
Wintry Mix
then Mostly
Cloudy

Monday



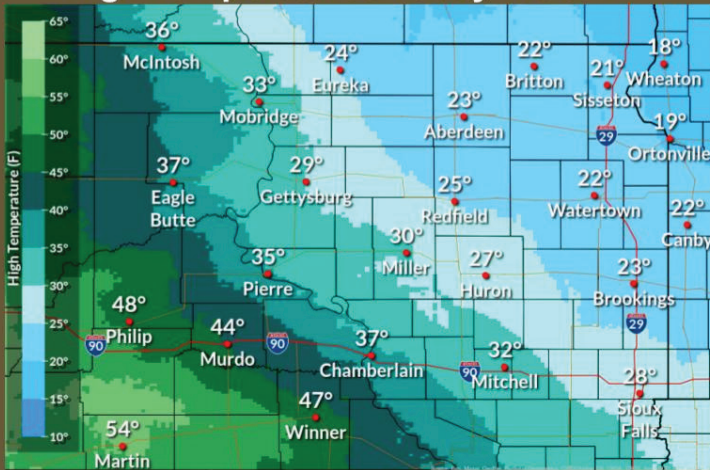
High: 25 °F

Partly Sunny

Warmer Air on the Way



High Temperatures Today: 18 to 44°



High Temperatures Sunday through Friday

	12/22 Sun	12/23 Mon	12/24 Tue	12/25 Wed	12/26 Thu	12/27 Fri
Aberdeen	30	25	32	35	35	38
Miller	34	33	39	40	40	42
Mobridge	40	37	45	43	42	44
Murdo	46	43	47	46	44	45
Ortonville	28	23	30	32	33	36
Pierre	43	41	46	46	43	46
Sisseton	28	23	32	33	34	36
Watertown	30	25	31	33	33	36

Dry weather expected through much of the next week! The exception is a **20% chance of a wintry mix over north central South Dakota Sunday afternoon that will move over northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota Sunday night.** Although precipitation will be light, a light glaze of freezing rain will be possible.

Stay prepared for winter weather no matter where your travels take you. Check the latest forecast and road conditions!

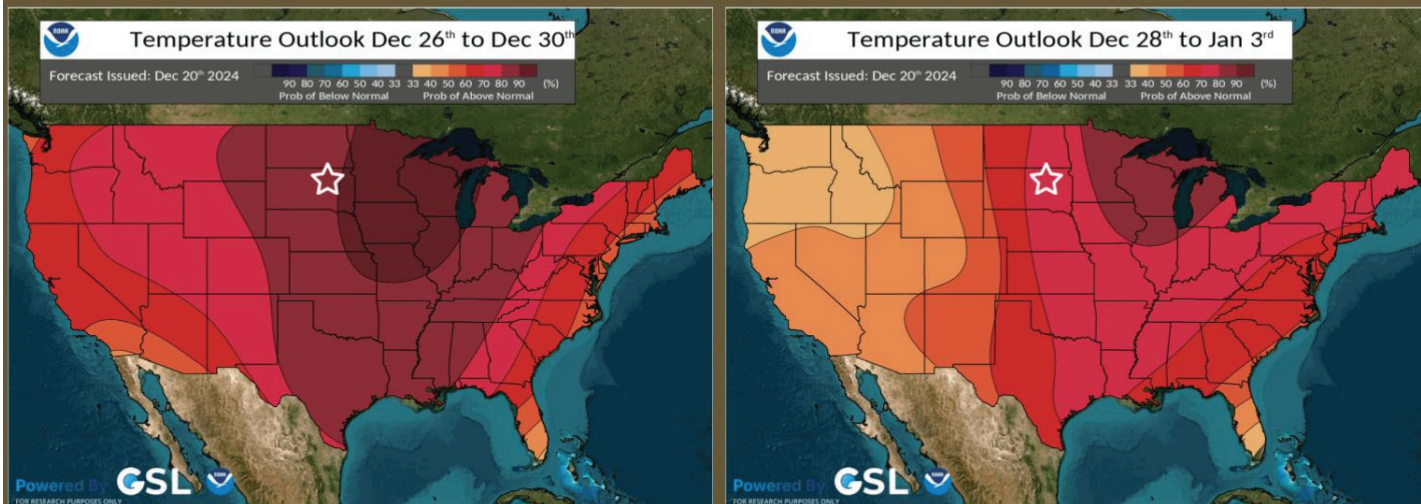


Highs today will be within a few degrees of normal for this time of year, before increasing into the 30s to mid 40s Sunday on. Dry weather expected through much of the next week. The exception is a 20 percent chance of a wintry mix over north central South Dakota Sunday afternoon that will move over northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota Sunday night. Although precipitation will be light, a light glaze of freezing rain will be possible. Stay prepared for winter weather no matter where your travels take you. Check the latest forecast and road conditions!

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Very High Probability of Above Normal Temperatures
to close out the year!



Normal high temperatures are in the low 20s to near 30 degrees for December 26 to January 3rd across central to northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota (highest over central South Dakota)

There is a very high probability of above normal temperatures to close out the year. Normal high temperatures are in the low 20s to near 30 degrees for December 26 to January 3rd across central to northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota, highest over central South Dakota.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 17 °F at 11:11 PM

Low Temp: -2 °F at 8:13 AM

Wind: 12 mph at 9:06 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 50 in 1979

Record Low: -31 in 1916

Average High: 27

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.40

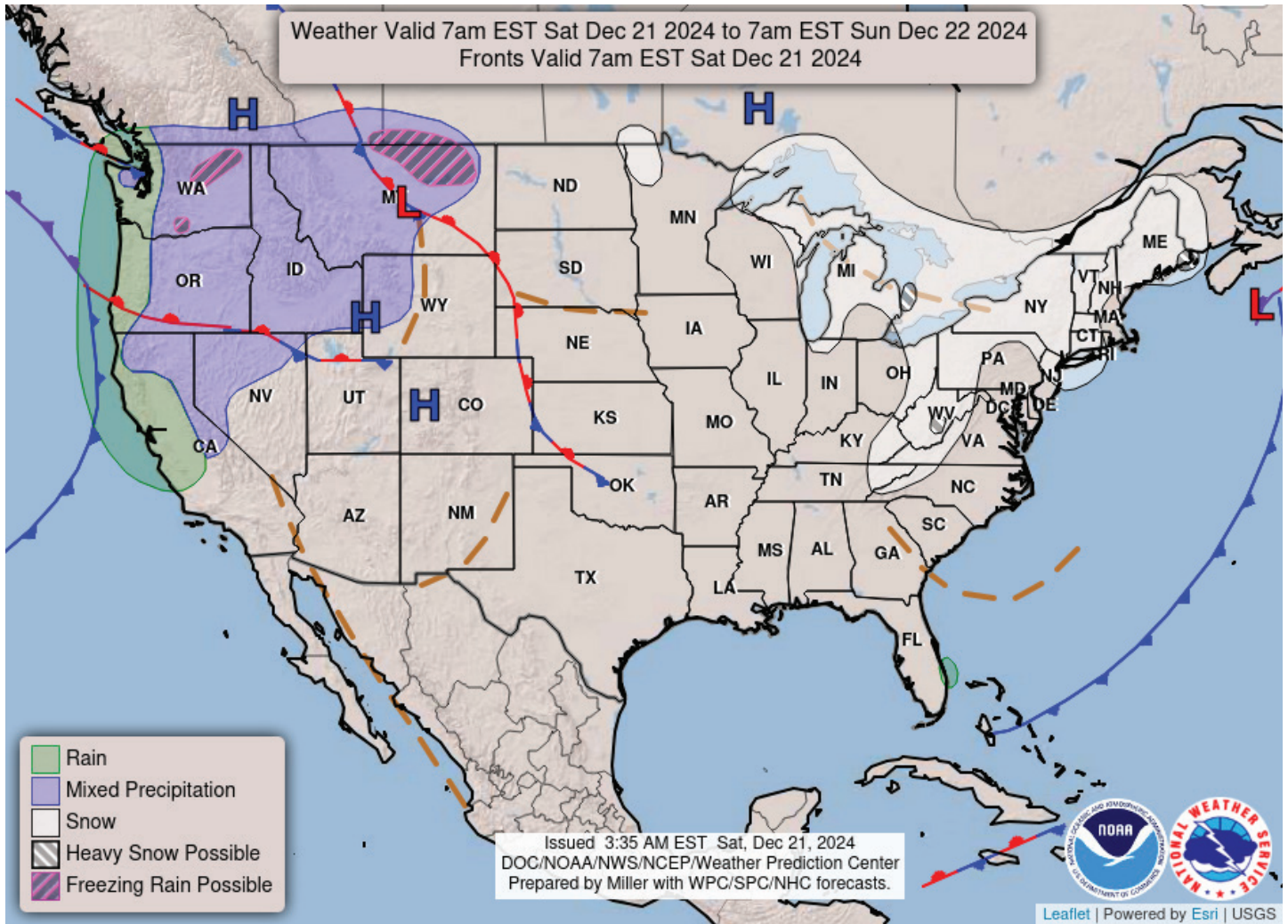
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.61

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:53:55 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:12 am



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Today in Weather History

December 21, 1968: A blizzard visited South Dakota and Minnesota on the 21st and 22nd. Snowfall during the storm was generally 1 to 2 inches in the western part of South Dakota, to 5 to 10 inches in Minnesota. More than 12 inches of snow was reported from Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County to the southeast in Minnesota and up to 18 inches in east-central and southeast South Dakota. The snowfall, on top of an already-existing deep snowpack, was whipped by 30-50 mph winds causing reduced visibility to near zero, created snowdrifts up to 10 feet or more. Almost all forms of traffic were blocked on highways for Sunday and blocked most of the secondary roads as well as some other roads for nearly a week.

Early blizzard warnings and the fact that the blizzard occurred late Saturday through Sunday, the highway patrol reported a minimum of accidents and stranded travelers. Most schools were closed, and other activities were curtailed. Many utility lines were down. Record December snowfall amounts were recorded for more than 40 locations in Minnesota. Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County received 16 inches of snow from this storm, by far its largest daily snowfall on record for any month of the year. Clear Lake, in Deuel County, measured 18 inches of snow, which also remains the most substantial daily snowfall on record for any month in that location. Watertown and Bryant received nine inches from this blizzard, while Castlewood reported seven inches.

1892: From December 21st to the 23rd, Portland, Oregon saw 26 inches of snow!

1929 - An exceptional storm produced snow from the Middle Rio Grande Valley of Texas to southern Arkansas. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Hillsboro TX, 18 inches at El Dorado AR, and 14 inches at Bossier LA. (21st-22nd) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1964 - A great warm surge from the Pacific Ocean across Oregon and northern California brought torrential rains on a deep snow cover resulting in record floods. (David Ludlum)

1967: An F4 tornado traveled 33 miles across Iron and Washington Counties in Missouri during an unusual time of day, 12:45 to 1:20 am. The tornado killed 3 and injured 52 others. Most of the intense damage occurred in the town of Potosi, about 55 miles southwest of St. Louis. The tornado swept through the business district, destroying City Hall, library, a large supermarket, and a shopping center complex. Northeast of town, two people were killed when their home was swept from its foundation. The Red Cross reported 24 homes and trailers, along with 14 businesses destroyed. 81 other houses and trailers were damaged.

1987 - High winds continued along the eastern slopes of the Rockies. During the morning hours winds gusted to 64 mph at Cheyenne WY, and reached 97 mph near Boulder CO. Gale force winds prevailed across the Great Lakes Region. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Seven cities in the eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including Charleston SC with a reading of 78 degrees. A storm in the northwestern U.S. produced 22 inches of snow at Idaho City ID in two days, and up to two feet of snow at Happy Camp CA. Ski resorts in Idaho reported three to six feet of snow on the ground. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Forty cities in the north central U.S., including thirteen in Iowa, reported record low temperatures for the date. Havre and Jordan, MT, tied for honors as the cold spot in the nation with morning lows of 43 degrees below zero, and the temperature remained close to 40 degrees below zero through the daylight hours. Dickinson ND reported a morning low of 33 degrees below zero and a wind chill reading of 86 degrees below zero. The high for the date of 16 degrees below zero at Sioux Falls SD was December record for that location. (The National Weather Summary)

1998 - Cold air spread into the southern San Joaquin Valley of California. For the next four nights, temperatures in the agricultural portions of Fresno, Tulare, and Kern counties dropped below 28 degrees for several hours at a time. In some locations, temperatures dipped into the teens. The California citrus industry suffered more than \$600 million in damages due to the extreme cold.



The Joy That Comes From Christmas

A young run-away girl collapsed on the streets of a large city at the beginning of the Christmas season. She was rushed to a hospital, placed in intensive care, and finally made it to a room where she made slow progress in regaining her health.

One evening a group of carolers stopped by her room and sang the beautiful songs that describe the birth of Jesus. After they sang, a young lady approached her bed and asked if she knew the Baby that they had been singing about.

Quietly, barely above a whisper, she said, "I heard about Him when I went to Sunday school. But don't remember too much about Him."

The young lady reminded her of the story and the meaning of the birth of Jesus and the plan of salvation. When she heard the story, she accepted the Lord as her Savior.

Finally, it was time for her to leave and a nurse said, "Well, now that you're better, it's time for you to leave."

Happily, she said, "Yes, but I'm not leaving alone. I'm taking Jesus with me. Do you know Jesus?"

"Oh, yes," replied the nurse, in a grumpy voice.

"Well, then," she asked, "why aren't you filled with joy like I am? If you truly know Jesus, you'll be happy all the time."

David said, "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation!"

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we surrender our joy to the stress and strains of life. Come now and return the joy we once had when we accepted Christ as our Savior. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

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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Password _____

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paypal.me/paperpaul

Pay with Venmo: [@paperpaul](https://venmo.com/paperpaul) Phone Number to Confirm: 7460

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.20.24

2 20 51 56 67 19

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$944,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

5 10 35 39 47 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$17,920,000

NEXT DRAW: 10 Hrs 8 Mins 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.20.24

9 20 21 35 36 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 10 Hrs 23 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

3 12 23 25 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$164,000

NEXT DRAW: 10 Hrs 23 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

41 45 52 56 67 6

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 10 Hrs 52 Mins 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

6 15 18 33 49 7

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$88,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 10 Hrs 52 Mins 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

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

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Bennett County 43, Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 34
Britton-Hecla 56, Webster 46
Dakota Valley 81, Canton 21
Dell Rapids St Mary 66, Colman-Egan 57
Deubrook 75, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 40
Douglas 67, Gering, Neb. 65
Elkton-Lake Benton 59, Iroquois-Lake Preston 54
Florence-Henry 59, Faulkton 49
Great Plains Lutheran 49, Tri-State, N.D. 23
Hanson 72, Scotland/Menno 44
Harrisburg 75, Sioux Falls Washington 66
Howard 49, McCook Central-Montrose 43
Huron 73, Rapid City Central 65
Mitchell 55, Rapid City Stevens 52
Morrill, Neb. 63, Edgemont 39
Newcastle, Wyo. 70, Lead-Deadwood 49
North Central 64, South Border, N.D. 54
Potter County 60, Northwestern 56
Sioux Falls Christian 91, Elk Point-Jefferson 27
Sioux Falls Lincoln 69, Yankton 29
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 55, Sioux Falls Jefferson 51
Sioux Valley 62, Baltic 55
Spearfish 48, Aberdeen Central 42
St Thomas More 62, Cheyenne East, Wyo. 47
Stuart, Neb. 66, Burke 41
Sturgis Brown High School 55, T F Riggs High School 52
Sundance High School, Wyo. 57, Belle Fourche 43
Timber Lake 52, New Underwood 48
Tri-Valley 67, Garretson 41
Viborg-Hurley 74, Irene-Wakonda 45
Waubay/Summit 35, Waverly-South Shore 33
West Central 54, Groton 38
Wilmot 53, Ortonville, Minn. 46
Wolsey-Wessington 63, Highmore-Harrold 20
Lakota Nations Invitational=
He Sapa Bracket=
Championship Semifinal=
Dupree 67, Crow Creek Tribal School 35
Marty 77, Crazy Horse 70, OT
Consolation Semifinal=
Tiospaye Topa 62, Oelrichs 56
Wakpala 80, Takini 28
Matosica Bracket=

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Championship Semifinal=
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 66, White River 43
Todd County 59, Santee, Neb. 56
Consolation Semifinal=
Lower Brule 70, McLaughlin 43
Omaha Nation, Neb. 86, Tiospa Zina 33
Oceti Sakowin Bracket=
Championship Semifinal=
Custer 25, Pine Ridge 21
Rapid City Christian 76, Lakota Tech 46
Consolation Semifinal=
Little Wound 66, Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 59
St. Francis Indian 70, Wall 68

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 66, Spearfish 64, OT
Belle Fourche 44, Sundance High School, Wyo. 29
Bennett County 66, Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 18
Brandon Valley 56, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 32
Bridgewater-Emery 53, Canistota 45
Burke 49, Stuart, Neb. 29
Dakota Valley 68, Canton 52
Deubrook 64, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 25
Edgemont 44, Morrill, Neb. 25
Elkton-Lake Benton 39, Iroquois-Lake Preston 34
Gering, Neb. 55, Douglas 41
Groton 45, West Central 35
Hanson 38, Scotland/Menno 30
Huron 59, Rapid City Central 41
Ipswich 46, Langford 37
Kadoka 61, Newell 28
Lead-Deadwood 52, Newcastle, Wyo. 38
McCook Central-Montrose 48, Howard 38
Mitchell 56, Rapid City Stevens 52
North Central 64, South Border, N.D. 54
Platte-Geddes 35, Gregory 32
Sioux Falls Christian 63, Elk Point-Jefferson 57
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 63, Sioux Falls Jefferson 50
St Thomas More 43, Cheyenne East, Wyo. 41
Sully Buttes 61, Herreid-Selby 43
T F Riggs High School 65, Sturgis Brown High School 36
Tea 58, Sioux Falls Lincoln 29
Viborg-Hurley 68, Irene-Wakonda 34
Webster 50, Britton-Hecla 29
Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D. 68, Wilmot 55
Lakota Nations Invitational=
He Sapa Bracket=
Championship Semifinal=
Pine Ridge 71, Santee, Neb. 53
Tiospa Zina 43, Wakpala 37

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Consolation Semifinal=
St. Francis Indian 62, Oelrichs 23
Takini 40, Crazy Horse 29
Makosica Bracket=
Championship Semifinal=
Crow Creek Tribal School 54, Lower Brule 44
Tiospaye Topa 78, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 50
Consolation Semifinal=
Little Wound 47, Marty 45
Todd County 42, Dupree 34
Oceti Sakowin Bracket=
Championship Semifinal=
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 58, Wall 33
Consolation Semifinal=
Omaha Nation, Neb. 46, Custer 41, OT
White River 64, McLaughlin 18
Oceti Sakowin Bracket=
Championship Semifinal=
Rapid City Christian 60, Lakota Tech 43

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

Canyon de Chelly in Arizona will become latest national park unit to ban commercial air tours

CANYON DE CHELLY NATIONAL MONUMENT, Ariz. (AP) — Commercial air tours will soon be prohibited over Canyon de Chelly National Monument in northeastern Arizona under a plan approved this week by the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Park Service.

The park service said in a statement that the plan was signed Thursday and will take effect in 180 days, barring any legal challenges. It will ban the tours over the park and within a half mile (800 meters) outside its boundary.

"Prohibiting commercial air tours protects these lands' cultural and spiritual significance to the Navajo Nation," said park Superintendent Lyn Carranza. "Canyon de Chelly National Monument's Air Tour Management Plan honors the unique nation-to-nation relationship regarding decisions affecting the park and helps to preserve one of the most important archeological landscapes in the southwest."

What is Canyon de Chelly National Monument?

The park lies within the Four Corners region inside the Navajo Nation and is among the most visited national monuments in the United States. It's known for its soaring sandstone cliffs and 800-foot (244-meter) high Spider Rock spire. Prehistoric rock art is found throughout the area, which has been home to Native Americans for millennia.

What's the history of air tours at U.S. national parks and monuments?

The sightseeing flights reportedly date back to the 1930s, when crews building the Hoover Dam on the Arizona-Nevada border asked helicopter pilots working on the project to give flyovers to their families.

The tours offering a unique overhead view of spectacular landscapes have long been popular at Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona. Some of the nation's busiest spots for tour operators have included Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, which is home to one of the world's most active volcanoes, and Haleakala National Park.

What are some objections to the tours?

Supporters of the tours say they offer an exciting experience to tourists and allow older people and those with disabilities to see and enjoy the parks. Critics say the flights are an unnecessarily dangerous way to

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view some of the most stunning public lands in the United States.

Rules designating routes and minimum altitudes were set in 1986 after two tour aircraft collided over the Grand Canyon, killing 25 people. Still, there are currently numerous options for helicopter tours to the Grand Canyon, departing from places including Las Vegas and Sedona, Arizona.

Critics also complain that the buzz of helicopters drowns out the sounds of nature, disrupting the experiences of visitors on the ground and tribal members who call the land around the parks home.

What regulations exist to manage the tours?

The park service works with the FAA to implement the National Park Air Tour Management Act of 2000, which requires tour operators who want to conduct such commercial air tours to get FAA approval. The law also requires the FAA, in conjunction with the park service, to establish management plans for air tours for those parks and nearby tribal lands where applications are made.

What other parks have air tour regulations?

Canyon de Chelly is the last of roughly two dozen national park units where the group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility had fought for flyover restrictions. Other national parks where such commercial flyovers essentially are or will be banned in coming years include Badlands National Park and Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota, Glacier National Park in Montana, and Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico. Only two air tours per year are allowed at Death Valley National Park along the California-Nevada border.

Eaglestaff scores 19 as North Dakota knocks off South Dakota Mines 80-48

By The Associated Press undefined

GRAND FORKS, N.D. (AP) — Treysen Eaglestaff had 19 points in North Dakota's 80-48 victory against South Dakota Mines on Friday night.

Eaglestaff shot 9 for 15, including 0 for 4 from beyond the arc for the Fightin' Hawks (5-9). Mier Panoam went 4 of 5 from the field to add 10 points. Zach Kraft shot 3 for 7, including 3 for 6 from beyond the arc to finish with nine points.

The Hardrockers were led by Luke Stoddard, who posted eight points and two blocks. Gavin Soukup added eight points for South Dakota Mines. Guillem Garcia finished with eight points.

North Dakota hosts Waldorf in its next matchup on December 29.

37 people die in a crash between a passenger bus and a truck in Brazil

By GABRIELA SÁ PESSOA Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — A crash between a passenger bus and a truck early Saturday killed 37 people on a highway in Minas Gerais, a state in southeastern Brazil, officials said.

The Minas Gerais fire department, which responded to the scene, said 13 others were taken to hospitals near the city of Teofilo Otoni. The bus had reportedly departed from Sao Paulo and was carrying 45 passengers.

Authorities said Saturday afternoon that all victims had been removed from the site and an investigation would determine the cause of the accident. Witnesses told rescue teams that the bus blew a tire, causing the driver to lose control and collide with a truck. Others said that a granite block hit the bus, the fire department added.

A car with three passengers also collided with the bus, but all three survived.

Gov. Romeu Zema wrote on X that he ordered "full mobilization" of the Minas Gerais government to assist the victims.

"We are working to ensure that families of the victims are supported to face this tragedy in the most humane way possible, especially as it comes just before Christmas," Zema said.

In 2024, more than 10,000 people died in traffic accidents in Brazil, according to the Ministry of Transportation.

In September, a bus carrying a football team flipped on a road and killed three people. The Coritiba Crocodiles, a team from the southern Brazilian city of Curitiba, was headed to a game in Rio de Janeiro, where they were set to play in the country's American football championship. The game was canceled following the deadly accident.

Biden signs bill that averts government shutdown and brings a close to days of Washington upheaval

By LISA MASCARO, FARNOUSH AMIRI and MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden signed a bill into law Saturday that averts a government shutdown, bringing a final close to days of upheaval after Congress approved a temporary funding plan just past the deadline and refused President-elect Donald Trump's core debt demands in the package.

The deal funds the government at current levels through March 14 and provides \$100 billion in disaster aid and \$10 billion in agricultural assistance to farmers.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., had insisted lawmakers would "meet our obligations" and not allow federal operations to close. But the outcome at the end of a tumultuous week was uncertain after Trump had insisted the deal include an increase in the government's borrowing limit. If not, he had said, then let the closures "start now."

Johnson's revised plan was approved 366-34, and it was passed by the Senate by a 85-11 vote after midnight. By then, the White House said it had ceased shutdown preparations.

"There will be no government shutdown," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

Johnson, who had spoken to Trump after the House vote, said the compromise was "a good outcome for the country" and that the president-elect "was certainly happy about this outcome, as well."

The final product was the third attempt from Johnson, the beleaguered speaker, to achieve one of the basic requirements of the federal government — keeping it open. The difficulties raised questions about whether Johnson will be able to keep his job, in the face of angry Republican colleagues, and work alongside Trump and his billionaire ally Elon Musk, who was calling the legislative plays from afar.

The House is scheduled to elect the next speaker on Jan. 3, 2025, when the new Congress convenes. Republicans will have an exceedingly narrow majority, 220-215, leaving Johnson little margin for error as he tries to win the speaker's gavel.

One House Republican, Rep. Andy Harris of Maryland, criticized Republicans for the deficit spending in the bill and said he was now "undecided" about the GOP leadership. Others are signaling unhappiness with Johnson as well.

Yet Trump's last-minute debt limit demand was almost an impossible ask, and Johnson had almost no choice but to work around that pressure. The speaker knew there wouldn't be enough support within the slim Republican majority alone to pass any funding package because many Republican deficit hawks prefer to cut the federal government and would not allow more debt.

Instead, the Republicans, who will have full control of the White House, House and Senate in the new year, with big plans for tax cuts and other priorities, are showing they must routinely rely on Democrats for the votes needed to keep up with the routine operations of governing.

The federal debt stands at roughly \$36 trillion, and the spike in inflation after the coronavirus pandemic has pushed up the government's borrowing costs such that debt service next year will exceed spending on national security. The last time lawmakers raised the debt limit was June 2023. Rather than raise the limit by a dollar amount, lawmakers suspended the debt limit through Jan. 1, 2025.

There is no need to raise that limit right now because the Treasury Department can begin using what it calls "extraordinary measures" to ensure that America does not default on its debts. Some estimate these accounting maneuvers could push the default deadline to the summer of 2025. But that's what Trump

wanted to avoid because an increase would be needed while he was president.

GOP leaders said the debt ceiling would be debated as part of tax and border packages in the new year. Republicans made a so-called handshake agreement to raise the debt limit at that time while also cutting \$2.5 trillion in spending over 10 years.

It was essentially the same deal that flopped Thursday night — minus Trump's debt demand. But it's far smaller than the original deal Johnson struck with Democratic and Republican leaders — a 1,500-page bill that Trump and Musk rejected, forcing him to start over. It was stuffed with a long list of other bills — including much-derided pay raises for lawmakers — but also other measures with broad bipartisan support that now have a tougher path to becoming law.

Trump, who has not yet been sworn into office, is showing the power but also the limits of his sway with Congress, as he intervenes and orchestrates affairs from Mar-a-Lago alongside Musk, who is heading up the new Department of Government Efficiency.

Senate review of Supreme Court ethics finds more luxury trips and urges enforceable code of conduct

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A nearly two-year investigation by Democratic senators of Supreme Court ethics details more luxury travel by Justice Clarence Thomas and urges Congress to establish a way to enforce a new code of conduct.

Any movement on the issue appears unlikely as Republicans prepare to take control of the Senate in January, underscoring the hurdles in imposing restrictions on a separate branch of government even as public confidence in the court has fallen to record lows.

The 93-page report released Saturday by the Democratic majority of the Senate Judiciary Committee found additional travel taken in 2021 by Thomas but not reported on his annual financial disclosure form: a private jet flight to New York's Adirondacks in July and jet and yacht trip to New York City sponsored by billionaire Harlan Crow in October, one of more than two dozen times detailed in the report that Thomas took luxury travel and gifts from wealthy benefactors.

The court adopted its first code of ethics in 2023, but it leaves compliance to each of the nine justices.

"The highest court in the land can't have the lowest ethical standards," the committee chairman, Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, said in a statement. He has long called for an enforceable code of ethics.

Republicans protested the subpoenas authorized for Crow and others as part of the investigation. No Republicans signed on to the final report, and no formal report from them was expected.

Attorney Mark Paoletta, a longtime friend of Thomas who has been tapped for the incoming Trump administration, said the report was aimed at conservatives whose rulings Democrats disagreed with.

"This entire investigation was never about 'ethics' but about trying to undermine the Supreme Court," Paoletta said in a statement posted on X.

The court did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Thomas has said he was not required to disclose the trips that he and his wife, Ginni, took with Crow because the big donor is a close friend of the family and disclosure of that type of travel was not previously required. The new ethics code does explicitly require it, and Thomas has since gone back and reported some travel. Crow has maintained that he has never spoken with his friend about pending matters before the court.

The report traces back to Justice Antonin Scalia, saying he "established the practice" of accepting undisclosed gifts and hundreds of trips over his decades on the bench. The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and retired Justice Stephen Breyer also took subsidized trips but disclosed them on their annual forms, it said.

The investigation found that Thomas has accepted gifts and travel from wealthy benefactors worth more than \$4.75 million by some estimates since his 1991 confirmation and failed to disclose much of it. "The number, value, and extravagance of the gifts accepted by Justice Thomas have no comparison in modern American history," according to the report.

It also detailed a 2008 luxury trip to Alaska taken by Justice Samuel Alito. He has said he was exempted from disclosing the trip under previous ethical rules.

Alito also declined calls to withdraw from cases involving Donald Trump or the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol after flags associated with the riot were seen flying at two of Alito's homes. Alito has said the flags were raised by his wife.

Thomas has ignored calls to step aside from cases involving Trump, too. Ginni Thomas supported Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election that the Republican lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

The report also pointed to scrutiny of Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who, aided by her staff, has advanced sales of her books through college visits over the past decade. Justices have also heard cases involving their book publishers, or involving companies in which justices owned stock.

Biden has been the most prominent Democrat calling for a binding code of conduct. Justice Elena Kagan has publicly backed adopting an enforcement mechanism, though some ethics experts have said it could be legally tricky.

Justice Neil Gorsuch recently cited the code when he recused himself from an environmental case. He had been facing calls to step aside because the outcome could stand to benefit a Colorado billionaire whom Gorsuch represented before becoming a judge.

The report also calls for changes in the Judicial Conference, the federal courts' oversight body led by Chief Justice John Roberts, and further investigation by Congress.

A 9-year-old is among 5 killed in the Christmas market attack in Germany

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER, GEIR MOULSON and VANESSA GERA Associated Press

MAGDEBURG, Germany (AP) — A 9-year-old was among five people killed when a Saudi doctor drove into a Christmas market teeming with holiday shoppers in the German city of Magdeburg, an official said Saturday, as people mourned the victims and their shaken sense of security.

City official Ronni Krug said he didn't have further information on the adults who were killed on Friday night. He said 200 people were injured, of whom 41 in serious or very serious condition.

Prosecutor Horst Nopens said the suspect, a 50-year-old Saudi doctor, is under investigation on suspicion of murder, attempted murder and bodily harm. He is currently being questioned. He has lived in Germany since 2006, practicing medicine in Bernburg, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) south of Magdeburg, officials said.

"There is no more peaceful and cheerful place than a Christmas market," Chancellor Olaf Scholz said. "What a terrible act it is to injure and kill so many people there with such brutality."

Neurosurgeon Mahmoud Elenbaby said some 80 patients were brought to Magdeburg's university hospital on Friday night.

"We managed to stabilize most of them, but many are still in intensive care, and some are also in critical condition," Elenbaby told The Associated Press as he dashed into the hospital cafeteria to buy himself a cola.

Several German media outlets identified the suspect as Taleb A., withholding his last name in line with privacy laws, and reported that he was a specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy.

Mourners lit candles and placed flowers outside a church near the market on the cold and gloomy day. Several people stopped and cried. A Berlin church choir whose members witnessed a previous Christmas market attack in 2016 sang Amazing Grace, a hymn about God's mercy, offering their prayers and solidarity with the victims.

The man behind the attack

There were still no answers Saturday as to what motivated the man to drive his black BMW into a crowd in the eastern German city.

Describing himself as a former Muslim, the suspect shared dozens of tweets and retweets daily focusing on anti-Islam themes, criticizing the religion and congratulating Muslims who left the faith.

He also accused German authorities of failing to do enough to combat what he said was the "Islamism

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of Europe.”

Nopens, the prosecutor, said the motive may have been “dissatisfaction with the treatment of Saudi refugees in Germany” but investigators are still trying to get to the bottom of what was behind the attack.

“He has at least talked about the motive,” Nopens said. “And we have to clear up how much of that is true.”

Investigators have to analyze computers, mobile devices and other evidence, “and at the end of the day we will know, or at least hope to know, what drove him to this act.”

“We have talked about an attack,” he said. “Whether it was a terror attack, we don’t know yet.”

Magdeburg is shaken

The violence shocked Germany and the city, bringing its mayor to the verge of tears and marring a festive event that’s part of a centuries-old German tradition. It prompted several other German towns to cancel their weekend Christmas markets as a precaution and out of solidarity with Magdeburg’s loss. Berlin kept its markets open but has increased its police presence at them.

Germany has suffered a string of extremist attacks in recent years, including a knife attack that killed three people and wounded eight at a festival in the western city of Solingen in August.

Those attacks have led cities to beef up security at Christmas markets and other events.

On Friday the suspect used a special escape and rescue route to enter the market, according to Tom-Oliver Langhans, director of the Magdeburg police.

Magdeburg is a city of about 240,000 people, west of Berlin, that serves as Saxony-Anhalt’s capital. Friday’s attack came eight years after an Islamic extremist drove a truck into a crowded Christmas market in Berlin, killing 13 people and injuring many others. The attacker was killed days later in a shootout in Italy.

Chancellor Scholz and Interior Minister Nancy Faeser traveled to Magdeburg on Saturday, and a memorial service is to take place in the city cathedral in the evening. Faeser ordered flags lowered to half-staff at federal buildings across the country.

A recount of the horrifying attack

Verified bystander footage distributed by the German news agency dpa showed the suspect’s arrest at a tram stop in the middle of the road. A nearby police officer pointing a handgun at the man shouted at him as he lay prone, his head arched up slightly. Other officers swarmed around the suspect and took him into custody.

Thi Linh Chi Nguyen, a 34-year-old manicurist from Vietnam whose salon is located in a mall across from the Christmas market, was on the phone during a break when she heard loud bangs and thought at first they were fireworks. She then saw a car drive through the market at high speed. People screamed and a child was thrown into the air by the car.

Shaking as she described the horror of what she witnessed, she recalled seeing the car bursting out of the market and turning right onto Ernst-Reuter-Allee street and then coming to a standstill at the tram stop where the suspect was arrested.

The number of injured people was overwhelming.

“My husband and I helped them for two hours. He ran back home and grabbed as many blankets as he could find because they didn’t have enough to cover the injured people. And it was so cold,” she said.

The market itself was still cordoned off Saturday with red-and-white tape and police vans every 50 meters (yards). Police with machine pistols guarded every entry to the market. Some thermal security blankets still lay on the street.

Christmas markets are a German holiday tradition cherished since the Middle Ages, now successfully exported to much of the Western world.

Pope has a cold and will skip outdoor Sunday prayer ahead of a busy week

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis is suffering from a cold and will deliver his Sunday blessing from indoors, the Vatican said, announcing the precautions ahead of a busy Christmas period and launch of the Holy Year that will sorely test Francis' stamina and health.

The Vatican cited the cold temperatures outside and Francis' strenuous week ahead, after a wheezing and congested-sounding pope delivered his annual Christmas greeting to Vatican bureaucrats earlier Saturday.

Francis, who turned 88 this past week, on Tuesday is due to inaugurate his big Holy Year and preside over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day celebrations in St. Peter's Basilica. On Thursday, he is scheduled to travel to Rome's main prison to inaugurate the Jubilee there.

Francis has long suffered bouts of bronchitis, especially in winter. In 2023, he ended up the hospital to receive intravenous antibiotics. He had part of one lung removed as a young man and frequently seems out of breath, especially after walking or exerting himself.

Criticism of gossip

He took several minutes to catch his breath on Saturday, when he delivered his annual Christmas greetings to Vatican bureaucrats and lay employees. Once again, he used the occasion to admonish the backstabbing and gossiping among his closest collaborators and urge them instead to speak well of one another.

"A church community lives in joyful and fraternal harmony to the extent that its members walk in the life of humility, renouncing evil thinking and speaking ill of others," Francis said. "Gossip is an evil that destroys social life, sickens people's hearts and leads to nothing. The people say it very well: Gossip is zero."

"Beware of this," he added.

By now Francis' annual Christmas address to the priests, bishops and cardinals who work in the Vatican Curia has become a lesson in humility -- and humiliation -- as Francis offers a public dressing down of some of the sins in the workplace at the headquarters of the Catholic Church.

In the most biting edition, in 2014, Francis listed the "15 ailments of the Curia," in which he accused the prelates of using their Vatican careers to grab power and wealth. He accused them of living "hypocritical" double lives and forgetting — due to "spiritual Alzheimer's" — that they're supposed to be joyful men of God.

In 2022, Francis warned them that the devil lurks among them, saying it is an "elegant demon" that works in people who have a rigid, holier-than-thou way of living the Catholic faith.

This year, Francis revisited a theme he has often warned about: gossiping and speaking ill of people behind their backs. It was a reference to the sometimes toxic atmosphere in closed environments such as the Vatican or workplaces where office gossip and criticism circulate but are rarely aired in public.

Francis has long welcomed frank and open debates and even has welcomed criticism of his own work. But he has urged critics to tell it to his face, and not behind his back.

Francis opened his address Saturday with a reminder of the devastation of the war in Gaza, where he said even his patriarch had been unable to enter due to Israeli bombing.

"Yesterday children have been bombed. This is cruelty, this is not war," he said.

The annual appointment kicks off Francis' busy Christmas schedule, this year made even more strenuous because of the start of the Vatican's Holy Year on Christmas Eve. The Jubilee is expected to bring some 32 million pilgrims to Rome over 2025, and Francis has a dizzying calendar of events to minister to them.

A gentler message for lay employees

After addressing the Vatican prelates, Francis issued a less critical address to the Vatican's lay employees who gathered in the city state's main audience hall along with their families. Francis thanked them for their service and urged them to make sure they take time to play with their children and visit grandparents.

"If you have any particular problems, tell your bosses, we want to resolve them," he added at the end. "You do this with dialogue, not by keeping quiet. Together we'll try to resolve the difficulties."

It was an apparent reference to reports of growing unease within the Vatican workforce that has been called out by the Association of Vatican Lay Employees, the closest thing the Vatican has to a labor union. The association has in recent months voiced alarm about the health of the Vatican pension system and fears of even more cost-cutting, and demanded the Vatican leadership listen to workers' concerns.

Earlier this year 49 employees of the Vatican Museums — the Holy See's main source of revenue — filed a class-action lawsuit in the Vatican tribunal complaining about labor woes, overtime and working conditions.

A rocket from Yemen strikes Tel Aviv, injuring 16, and Palestinians mourn a dozen children in Gaza

By MELANIE LIDMAN and WAAFA SHURAFU Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — A rocket fired from Yemen hit an area of Tel Aviv overnight, leaving 16 people injured by shattered glass, the Israeli military said Saturday, days after Israeli airstrikes hit Houthi rebels who have been launching missiles in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.

Another 14 people sustained minor injuries as they rushed to shelters when air raid sirens sounded before dawn Saturday, the military said.

The Houthis issued a statement on Telegram saying they had aimed a hypersonic ballistic missile at a military target, which they did not identify. Israel's military said it was investigating, adding that "we emphasize that aerial defense is not hermetic."

"A flash of light, a blow and we fell to the ground. Big mess, broken glasses all over the place," said Bar Katz, a resident of a damaged building.

The attack came after Israeli airstrikes on Yemen's Houthi-held capital, Sanaa, and port city of Hodeida killed at least nine people Thursday. The strikes came hours after a missile from Yemen hit a school building in central Israel. The Houthis also claimed a drone strike targeting an unspecified military target in central Israel on Thursday.

Israel's military says the Iran-backed Houthis have launched more than 200 missiles and drones during the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. The Houthis have also attacked shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and say they won't stop until there is a ceasefire in Gaza.

The Israeli strikes Thursday caused "considerable damage" to the Houthi-controlled Red Sea ports that will lead to the "immediate and significant reduction in port capacity," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. The Hodeida port has been key for food shipments into Yemen in its decade-long civil war.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said both sides' attacks risk further escalation in the region.

Israeli strikes in Gaza kill a dozen children

Mourners in Gaza held funerals for 19 people — 12 of them children — killed in Israeli strikes on Friday and overnight.

One strike hit a residential building in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza, killing at least seven Palestinians, including five children and one woman, and injuring 16 others, health officials said.

In Gaza City, a strike on a house killed 12 people, including seven children and two women, according to Al-Ahli Hospital where the bodies were taken.

One man cradled a tiny shroud-wrapped body as mourners gathered at the hospital in Gaza City. Women comforted each other as they wept.

Overall, Gaza's Health Ministry said 21 people had been killed over the past 24 hours.

More than 45,200 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since October 2023, when a Hamas attack in Israel killed about 1,200 people and triggered the 14-month war. The health ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants but has said more than half of fatalities are women and children.

Israel faces heavy international criticism over the unprecedented levels of civilian deaths in Gaza. It says it only targets militants and blames Hamas for civilian deaths because its fighters operate in residential areas.

Urgent appeal for supplies for northern Gaza hospital

Gaza's Health Ministry issued an urgent appeal for medical and food supplies to be delivered to Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahiya in largely isolated northern Gaza, while the hospital director described con-

ditions as dire, as Israel's military presses its latest offensive.

The ministry reported continuous gunfire and Israeli shelling near the hospital, saying "shells have struck the third floor and the hospital's entrances, creating a state of panic."

Hospital director Dr. Husam Abu Safiyeh said the facility faced "severe shortages" and asserted that requests for essential medical supplies and ways to maintain oxygen, water and electricity systems "have largely gone unmet."

He said 72 wounded people were being treated at the hospital.

"Food is very scarce, and we cannot provide meals for the wounded," Safiyeh added. "We are urgently calling on anyone who can provide supplies to help us."

Aid groups have said Israeli military operations and armed gangs have hindered their ability to distribute aid.

The Israeli military organization dealing with humanitarian affairs for Gaza said Saturday it had led an operation delivering thousands of food packages, flour and water to the Beit Hanoun area in the north. It said trucks with the U.N. World Food Program transported them to distribution centers in the area Friday.

A killing in Syria

Iran on Saturday said unknown gunmen had killed a local staffer of the Iranian Embassy in Syria in Damascus, the official IRNA news agency said.

Its report quoted Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei as saying "terrorists" opened fire on Davood Bitaraf's car last Sunday. It did not say what he did with the embassy.

Baghaei said Iran considers Syria's interim government responsible for finding and prosecuting those behind the killing. Iran had been a key ally of recently ousted Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

Government shutdown is averted just after deadline as Congress rejects Trump's debt limit demands

By LISA MASCARO, FARNOUSH AMIRI and MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing a government shutdown deadline, the Senate rushed through final passage early Saturday of a bipartisan plan that would temporarily fund federal operations and disaster aid, dropping President-elect Donald Trump's demands for a debt limit increase into the new year.

House Speaker Mike Johnson had insisted Congress would "meet our obligations" and not allow federal operations to shutter ahead of the Christmas holiday season. But the day's outcome was uncertain after Trump doubled down on his insistence that a debt ceiling increase be included in any deal — if not, he said in an early morning post, let the closures "start now."

The House approved Johnson's new bill overwhelmingly, 366-34. The Senate worked into the night to pass it, 85-11, just after the deadline. At midnight, the White House said it had ceased shutdown preparations.

"This is a good outcome for the country," Johnson said after the House vote, adding he had spoken with Trump and the president-elect "was certainly happy about this outcome, as well."

President Joe Biden, who has played a less public role in the process throughout a turbulent week, was expected to sign the measure into law Saturday.

"There will be no government shutdown," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said.

The final product was the third attempt from Johnson, the beleaguered House speaker, to achieve one of the basic requirements of the federal government — keeping it open. And it raised stark questions about whether Johnson will be able to keep his job, in the face of angry GOP colleagues, and work alongside Trump and billionaire ally Elon Musk, who called the legislative plays from afar.

Trump's last-minute demand was almost an impossible ask, and Johnson had almost no choice but to work around his pressure for a debt ceiling increase. The speaker knew there wouldn't be enough support within the GOP majority to pass any funding package, since many Republican deficit hawks prefer to slash the federal government and certainly wouldn't allow more debt.

Instead, the Republicans, who will have full control of the White House, House and Senate next year,

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with big plans for tax cuts and other priorities, are showing they must routinely rely on Democrats for the votes needed to keep up with the routine operations of governing.

"So is this a Republican bill or a Democrat bill?" scoffed Musk on social media ahead of the vote.

The drastically slimmed-down 118-page package would fund the government at current levels through March 14 and add \$100 billion in disaster aid and \$10 billion in agricultural assistance to farmers.

Gone is Trump's demand to lift the debt ceiling, which GOP leaders told lawmakers would be debated as part of their tax and border packages in the new year. Republicans made a so-called handshake agreement to raise the debt limit at that time while also cutting \$2.5 trillion in spending over 10 years.

It's essentially the same deal that flopped the night before in a spectacular setback — opposed by most Democrats and some of the most conservative Republicans — minus Trump's debt ceiling demand.

But it's far smaller than the original bipartisan accord Johnson struck with Democratic and Republican leaders — a 1,500-page bill that Trump and Musk rejected, forcing him to start over. It was stuffed with a long list of other bills — including much-derided pay raises for lawmakers — but also other measures with broad bipartisan support that now have a tougher path to becoming law.

House Democrats were cool to the latest effort after Johnson reneged on the hard-fought bipartisan compromise.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the top Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, said it looked like Musk, the wealthiest man in the world, was calling the shots for Trump and Republicans.

"Who is in charge?" she asked during the debate.

Still, the House Democrats put up more votes than Republicans for the bill's passage. Almost three dozen conservative House Republicans voted against it.

"The House Democrats have successfully stopped extreme MAGA Republicans from shutting down the government, crashing the economy and hurting working-class Americans all across the nation," House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said, referring to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

In the Senate, almost all the opposition came from the Republicans — except independent Sen. Bernie Sanders, who said Musk's interference was "not democracy, that's oligarchy."

Trump, who has not yet been sworn into office, is showing the power but also the limits of his sway with Congress, as he intervenes and orchestrates affairs from Mar-a-Lago alongside Musk, who is heading up the new Department of Government Efficiency.

The incoming Trump administration vows to slash the federal budget and fire thousands of employees and is counting on Republicans for a big tax package. And Trump's not fearful of shutdowns the way lawmakers are, having sparked the longest government shutdown in history in his first term at the White House.

"If there is going to be a shutdown of government, let it begin now," Trump posted early in the morning on social media.

More important for the president-elect was his demand for pushing the thorny debt ceiling debate off the table before he returns to the White House. The federal debt limit expires Jan. 1, and Trump doesn't want the first months of his new administration saddled with tough negotiations in Congress to lift the nation's borrowing capacity. Now Johnson will be on the hook to deliver.

"Congress must get rid of, or extend out to, perhaps, 2029, the ridiculous Debt Ceiling," Trump posted — increasing his demand for a new five-year debt limit increase. "Without this, we should never make a deal."

Government workers had already been told to prepare for a federal shutdown that would send millions of employees — and members of the military — into the holiday season without paychecks.

Biden has been in discussions with Jeffries and Schumer, but White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said: "Republicans blew up this deal. They did, and they need to fix this."

As the day dragged on, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell stepped in to remind colleagues "how harmful it is to shut the government down, and how foolish it is to bet your own side won't take the blame for it."

At one point, Johnson asked House Republicans at a lunchtime meeting for a show of hands as they tried to choose the path forward.

It wasn't just the shutdown, but the speaker's job on the line. The speaker's election is the first vote of

the new Congress, which convenes Jan. 3, and some Trump allies have floated Musk for speaker.

Johnson said he spoke to Musk ahead of the vote Friday and they talked about the "extraordinary challenges of this job."

What we know about the suspect behind the German Christmas market attack

By SARA ABOUBAKR Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Authorities have not formally named the suspect in the car ramming in the city of Magdeburg that killed at least five people and wounded hundreds, saying only that he is a Saudi doctor who has lived in Germany for nearly two decades and that he acted alone.

Local media say he is 50-year-old Taleb A, a psychiatry and psychotherapy specialist.

He was arrested on site after plowing a black BMW into a Christmas market crowded with holiday shoppers Friday evening.

Taleb's X account describes him as a former Muslim. It is filled with tweets and retweets focusing on anti-Islam themes and criticism of the religion, while sharing congratulatory notes to Muslims who left the faith.

He was critical of German authorities, saying they had failed to do enough to combat the "Islamism of Europe."

He has also voiced support for the far-right and anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

Some described Taleb as an activist who helped Saudi women flee their homeland. Recently, he seemed focused on his theory that German authorities have been targeting Saudi asylum-seekers.

Prominent German terrorism expert Peter Neumann posted on X that he had never before come across a suspect in an act of mass violence with that profile.

"After 25 years in this 'business' you think nothing could surprise you anymore. But a 50-year-old Saudi ex-Muslim who lives in East Germany, loves the AfD and wants to punish Germany for its tolerance toward Islamists — that really wasn't on my radar," he wrote.

On Saturday, German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser told reporters: "At this point, we can only say for sure that the perpetrator was evidently Islamophobic — we can confirm that. Everything else is a matter for further investigation and we have to wait."

A German-based organization called Atheist Refugee Relief said the alleged attacker was not a part of the group and claimed that he made "numerous accusations and claims" against it and former board members, which it said were false.

Originally, there was a plan to work together to coordinate aid for atheist refugees from Saudi Arabia, it said. However, this cooperation failed.

"We distance ourselves from him in the strongest terms," the group said in a statement on its website, adding that members of Atheist Refugee Relief filed a criminal complaint against him in 2019 following "the most foul slander and verbal attacks."

US flu season is underway, as cases surge in some areas and vaccinations lag

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. flu season is underway, with cases surging across much of the country, health officials said Friday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted sharp increases in several measures, including lab tests and emergency room visits.

"It's been increasing at a pretty steady pace now for the past several weeks. So yeah, we are certainly in flu season now," said the CDC's Alicia Budd.

Thirteen states reported high or very high levels of flu-like illness last week, about double from the week before. One is Tennessee, where a sickness spike is hitting the Nashville area, said Dr. William Schaffner,

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an infectious diseases expert at Vanderbilt University.

"Flu has been increasing, but just this last week has exploded," Schaffner said. He noted that in a local clinic that serves as an indicator of illness trends, as many as a quarter of the patients have flu symptoms.

Louisiana is another early hot spot.

"Just this week is really that turning point where people are out because of the flu," said Dr. Catherine O'Neal, an infectious diseases doctor at the largest private hospital in the state, Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge. "You hear parents saying, 'I can't come to work because of the flu' and 'Where can I get a flu test?'"

Of course, there are a number of bugs that cause fever, cough, sore throat and other flu-like symptoms. One is COVID-19. Another is RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus, which is a common cause of cold-like symptoms but can be dangerous for infants and the elderly.

The most recent CDC data show COVID-19 hospitalizations have been declining since summer. COVID-19 activity is moderate nationally, but high in the Midwest, according to CDC wastewater data.

RSV hospitalizations started rising before flu did and now show signs of possibly leveling off, but they remain a little more common than admissions for flu. Overall, RSV activity is low nationally, but high in the South, the wastewater data show.

The CDC called the start of flu season based on several indicators, include lab results for patients in hospitals and doctor's offices, and the percentage of emergency department visits that had a discharge diagnosis of flu.

No flu strain seems to be dominant, and it's too early in the season to know how good a match the flu vaccine will be, Budd said.

Last winter's flu season was considered "moderate" overall, but it was long — 21 weeks — and the CDC estimated there were 28,000 flu-related deaths. It was unusually dangerous for children, with 205 pediatric deaths reported. That was the highest number ever reported for a conventional flu season.

The long season was likely a factor, Budd said. Another factor was a lack of flu vaccinations. Among the children who died who were old enough for flu vaccinations — and for whom their vaccination status was known — 80% were not fully vaccinated, according to the CDC.

Vaccination rates for children are even lower this year. As of Dec. 7, about 41% of adults had received a flu vaccination, similar to the rate at the same point last year. The percentage is the same for kids, but for them that's a drop from a year ago, when 44% were vaccinated against the flu, according to CDC data.

Vaccination rates are lower still against COVID-19, with about 21% of adults and 11% of children up to date.

Flu experts suggest everyone get vaccinated, especially as people prepare to attend holiday gatherings where respiratory viruses can spread widely.

"All those gatherings that are so heartwarming and fun and joyous are also an opportunity for this virus to spread person to person," Schaffner said. "It's not too late to get vaccinated."

Even so, Louisiana's health department said in a statement Friday that it was actually backing away from recommending flu and COVID-19 vaccinations. An official wrote that the department's latest position is that people should talk to their doctors about whether the shots make sense for them.

A department spokeswoman, Emma Herrock, did not respond to follow-up questions about the policy. The state's surgeon general, Dr. Ralph Abraham, previously expressed concerns about the safety and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Vaccines save lives and policies that dissuade people from getting protected are irresponsibly dangerous, public health experts and advocates say.

"People are going to die because of this policy," said Jennifer Herricks, founder of a group called Louisiana Families for Vaccines.

Ukrainian drones strike deep into Russian territory, hundreds of miles from the front line

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine brought the war into the heart of Russia Saturday morning with drone attacks that local authorities said damaged residential buildings in the city of Kazan in the Tatarstan region, over 600 miles (1,000 kilometers) from the front line.

The press service of Tatarstan's governor, Rustam Minnikhanov, said that eight drones attacked the city. Six hit residential buildings, one hit an industrial facility and one was shot down over a river, the statement said.

A video posted on local Telegram news channel Astra, verified by The Associated Press, shows a drone flying into the upper floors of a high-rise building.

Local authorities said there were no casualties. Flights were halted at Kazan's airport and all mass gatherings canceled on Saturday and Sunday.

The attacks, which Ukraine didn't acknowledge in keeping with its security policy, comes after a Ukrainian attack Friday on a town in Russia's Kursk border region using U.S.-supplied missiles killed six people, including a child.

Moscow sent 113 drones into Ukraine overnight into Saturday, Ukrainian officials said. According to Ukraine's Air Force, 57 drones were shot down during the attacks. A further 56 drones were "lost," likely having been electronically jammed.

The governor of Ukraine's Kharkiv region, Oleh Syniehubov, said eight people were wounded Friday night in drone attacks on the regional capital, also called Kharkiv.

In the city of Zaporizhzhia, four people were wounded when a nine-story residential building was damaged by falling drone debris on Friday night, regional Gov. Ivan Fedorov said.

Moscow's troops also continue to slowly advance in eastern Ukraine. Russia's Defense Ministry said Saturday that its forces had taken control of the village of Kostiantynopolske in Ukraine's Donetsk province, just six miles from the besieged city of Kurakhove, which they are trying to encircle.

Farmers are still reeling months after Hurricane Helene ravaged crops across the South

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

LYONS, Ga. (AP) — Twisted equipment and snapped tree limbs still litter Chris Hopkins' Georgia farm more than two months after Hurricane Helene made its deadly march across the South.

An irrigation sprinkler system about 300 feet (92 meters) long lay overturned in a field, its steel pipes bent and welded joints broken. The mangled remains of a grain bin sat crumpled by a road. On a Friday in early December, Hopkins dragged burly limbs from the path of the tractor-like machine that picks his cotton crop six rows at a time.

"I have wrestled with lots of emotions the past two months," said Hopkins, who also grows corn and peanuts in rural Toombs County, about 75 miles (120 kilometers) west of Savannah. "Do we just get through this one and quit? Do we build back? It is emotionally draining."

Hopkins is among farmers across the South who are still reeling from Helene's devastation. The storm made landfall in Florida on Sept. 26 as a major Category 4 storm and then raced north across Georgia and neighboring states.

Experts estimate the cost to farmers, timber growers and other agribusinesses from Florida to Virginia will reach more than \$10 billion. The toll includes ravaged crops, uprooted timber, wrecked farm equipment and mangled chicken houses, as well as indirect costs such as lost productivity at cotton gins and poultry processing plants.

For cotton growers like Hopkins, Helene hit just as the fall harvest was starting. Many put most cleanup on hold to try to salvage what remained of their crops.

'Staggering' losses to cotton, pecans and fall vegetables

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Georgia farmers suffered storm losses of at least \$5.5 billion, according to an analysis by the University of Georgia. In North Carolina, a state agency calculated farmers suffered \$3.1 billion in crop losses and recovery costs after Helene brought record rainfall and flooding. Separate economic analyses of farm damage tallied losses of up to \$630 million in Virginia, \$452 million in South Carolina and \$162 million in Florida.

Hopkins figures he lost half the cotton on his 1,400 acres (560 hectares).

"We were at the most vulnerable stage we could be," he said. "The lint was open and fluffy and hanging there, waiting to be defoliated or picked. About 50% of the harvestable lint ended up on the ground."

Even with insurance, Hopkins said, he won't recoup an estimated \$430,000 in losses from his cotton crop alone. That doesn't include the cost of debris removal, repairing or replacing damaged machinery and the loss of two small pecan orchards uprooted by the storm.

The storm ripped through blooming cotton fields, pecan orchards laden with nuts and fields where fall vegetables like cucumbers and squash awaited picking. Hundreds of large poultry houses used to raise thousands of chickens at a time got destroyed.

Farmers far from Helene's center weren't spared, as tropical-storm force winds reached outward up to 310 miles (499 kilometers).

"It was staggering," said Timothy Coolong, a University of Georgia horticulture professor. "This may be just too much for some folks."

Helene was one of the deadliest U.S. hurricanes in nearly two decades, killing more than 200 people. It left more than 100,000 homes damaged or destroyed across the South.

Will aid to farmers come soon enough?

Georgia's government in November diverted \$100 million that had been set aside for construction projects or paying off existing debt to fund emergency loans to farmers and cleanup in Helene's aftermath. Republican Gov. Brian Kemp has made additional storm relief a priority for the upcoming legislative session.

But Georgia's constitution prohibits using state funds to give direct disaster aid to individuals and private businesses.

In Congress, a spending bill passed early Saturday to avoid a government shutdown included \$21 billion in disaster aid to U.S. farmers.

"We need help, but we need it quick," said Jeffrey Pridgen, a fifth-generation farmer who raises chickens in south Georgia's Coffee County.

Pridgen operated a dozen poultry houses, each large enough to raise up to 20,000 chickens at a time. Helene destroyed four of them, along with thousands of chickens. Only one of Pridgen's houses remains in working condition, the others having been badly damaged.

Pridgen said new chicken houses will cost about \$450,000 apiece. Because most of his were decades old, he expects insurance to cover just half the cost.

"I was looking at retirement, but I lost my retirement and my income in one day," said Pridgen, 62. "It'll be two years before we get fully operational again. I'm basically starting over."

'Everybody lost something'

Georgia's poultry industry took an estimated \$683 million hit, with farmers having to rebuild about 300 chicken houses and repair hundreds more.

The poultry processing plant that relies on Pridgen and other storm-impacted farmers for chickens is now operating just four days per week, he said.

"Now for at least a year, perhaps a little bit longer, we're in rebuilding mode," said Mike Giles, president of the Georgia Poultry Federation. "That affects production in an area for an extended period of time."

Helene's devastation shouldn't have much impact on consumer prices because crops grown elsewhere can make up for most shortages, said Michael Adjemian, a University of Georgia professor of agricultural economics. Pecans are one possible exception. Georgia is responsible for roughly one-third of U.S. production.

"In most cases, even a terrible storm like this is going to have a relatively small impact," Adjemian said. "And maybe it's not even noticeable, depending on the product."

Helene cost Georgia cotton farmers roughly one-third of their crop, with direct and indirect losses valued

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at \$560 million. Some were still recovering from Hurricane Michael in 2018.

Cotton growers also were facing low prices this harvest season of around 70 cents per pound (per 0.45 kilograms), said Taylor Sills, executive director of the Georgia Cotton Commission. That meant they needed a big yield to turn any profit.

"Times were awful, and then they got hit by a hurricane," Sills said. "There are people who lost everything and there are people who didn't. But everybody lost something."

German Christmas market ramming is the latest attack to use vehicles as deadly weapons

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A car-ramming at a Christmas market in Germany, which police are treating as an attack, is the latest in a grim series of events in which vehicles have been used as deadly weapons.

There have been a spate of such attacks over the past decade, some committed by groups but most by individuals. The motives — where they could be established — have varied widely. Some were inspired by Islamic militant groups such as al-Qaida and ISIS, which encouraged followers to carry out low-cost, low-tech attacks with cars and trucks. Others have been linked to mental illness, far-right extremism and online misogyny.

What law-enforcement authorities term "vehicle as a weapon attacks" have reshaped cities around the world, as planners erect concrete barriers around public spaces and build anti-vehicle obstacles into new developments.

Here are some major vehicle attacks:

MAGDEBURG, Germany, Dec. 20, 2024 — At least five people are killed and more than 200 injured when a car slams into a Christmas market in eastern Germany. The suspect, who was arrested, is a 50-year-old doctor originally from Saudi Arabia who had expressed anti-Muslim views and support for the far-right AFD party.

ZHUHAI, China, Nov. 11, 2024 — A 62-year-old driver rams his car into people exercising at a sports complex in southern China, killing 35 people in the country's deadliest mass slaying in years. Authorities said the perpetrator was upset about his divorce but offered few other details.

LONDON, Ontario, June 6, 2021 — Four members of a Muslim family die when an attacker hits them with a pickup truck while they are out for a walk, in what Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau calls "a terrorist attack, motivated by hatred." White nationalist attacker Nathaniel Veltman was sentenced to life in prison.

TORONTO, April 23, 2018 — A 25-year-old Canadian man, Alek Minassian, drives a rented van into mostly female pedestrians on Yonge St., the main thoroughfare in Toronto, killing 10 people and injuring 16. Minassian told police he belonged to the online "incel" community of sexually frustrated men.

NEW YORK, Oct. 31, 2017 — Sayfullo Saipov, an Islamic extremist from Uzbekistan, drives a pickup truck onto a popular New York City bike path, killing eight.

BARCELONA, Aug. 17, 2017 — A man driving a van slams into people on the Spanish city's crowded Las Ramblas boulevard, killing 14 and injuring many others. Several members of the same cell carry out a similar vehicle attack in the nearby resort town of Cambrils before they are shot dead by police. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility.

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Virginia, Aug. 12, 2017 — During a "Unite the Right" rally, white supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. intentionally drives his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one woman and injuring dozens of people.

LONDON: March 22, 2017 — British man Khalid Masood rams an SUV into people on Westminster Bridge, killing four, before stabbing to death a policeman guarding the Houses of Parliament nearby. He is shot dead. June 3, 2017 — three attackers drive a van at pedestrians on London Bridge before stabbing people in nearby Borough Market. Eight people are killed and the attackers shot dead by police. June 19, 2017 — Darren Osborne, a man radicalized by far-right ideas, drives a van at worshippers outside a mosque in

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London's Finsbury Park area, killing one man and injuring 15 people.

MELBOURNE, Australia, Jan 20, 2017 – Six people are killed and more than 30 injured when a car hits lunchtime crowds at a pedestrian mall in Australia's second-largest city. Perpetrator James Gargasoulas is found to have been in a state of drug-induced psychosis.

BERLIN, December 19, 2016 — Anis Amri, a rejected asylum-seeker from Tunisia, plows a hijacked truck into a Christmas market in the German capital, killing 13 people and injuring dozens. The attacker is killed days later in a shootout in Italy.

NICE, France, July 14, 2016 — Tunisian-born French resident Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel drives a rented truck for more than a mile (almost 2 kilometers) along a packed seaside promenade in the French Riviera resort on the Bastille Day holiday, killing 86 people in the deadliest attack of its kind.

APELDOORN, Netherlands, April 28, 2009 – Former security guard Karst Tate drives a car into parade spectators in an attempt to hit an open-topped bus carrying members of the Dutch royal family. Six people are killed and Tate dies of injuries the next day, leaving his full motive a mystery.

CHAPEL HILL, North Carolina, March 3, 2006 — University of North Carolina graduate Mohammed Taheri-Azar drives an SUV into a crowd at the university, lightly injuring nine people, in a self-professed bid to avenge Muslim deaths overseas.

NORAD's Santa tracker was a Cold War morale boost. Now it attracts millions of kids

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

The Christmas tradition has become nearly global in scope: Children from around the world track Santa Claus as he sweeps across the earth, delivering presents and defying time.

Each year, at least 100,000 kids call into the North American Aerospace Defense Command to inquire about Santa's location. Millions more follow online in nine languages, from English to Japanese.

On any other night, NORAD is scanning the heavens for potential threats, such as last year's Chinese spy balloon. But on Christmas Eve, volunteers in Colorado Springs are fielding questions like, "When is Santa coming to my house?" and, "Am I on the naughty or nice list?"

"There are screams and giggles and laughter," said Bob Sommers, 63, a civilian contractor and NORAD volunteer.

Sommers often says on the call that everyone must be asleep before Santa arrives, prompting parents to say, "Do you hear what he said? We got to go to bed early."

NORAD's annual tracking of Santa has endured since the Cold War, predating ugly sweater parties and Mariah Carey classics. The tradition continues regardless of government shutdowns, such as the one in 2018, and this year.

Here's how it began and why the phones keep ringing.

The origin story is Hollywood-esque

It started with a child's accidental phone call in 1955. The Colorado Springs newspaper printed a Sears advertisement that encouraged children to call Santa, listing a phone number.

A boy called. But he reached the Continental Air Defense Command, now NORAD, a joint U.S. and Canadian effort to spot potential enemy attacks. Tensions were growing with the Soviet Union, along with anxieties about nuclear war.

Air Force Col. Harry W. Shoup picked up an emergency-only "red phone" and was greeted by a tiny voice that began to recite a Christmas wish list.

"He went on a little bit, and he takes a breath, then says, 'Hey, you're not Santa,'" Shoup told The Associated Press in 1999.

Realizing an explanation would be lost on the youngster, Shoup summoned a deep, jolly voice and replied, "Ho, ho, ho! Yes, I am Santa Claus. Have you been a good boy?"

Shoup said he learned from the boy's mother that Sears mistakenly printed the top-secret number. He hung up, but the phone soon rang again with a young girl reciting her Christmas list. Fifty calls a day fol-

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lowed, he said.

In the pre-digital age, the agency used a 60-by-80 foot (18-by-24 meter) plexiglass map of North America to track unidentified objects. A staff member jokingly drew Santa and his sleigh over the North Pole.

The tradition was born.

"Note to the kiddies," began an AP story from Colorado Springs on Dec. 23, 1955. "Santa Claus Friday was assured safe passage into the United States by the Continental Air Defense Command."

In a likely reference to the Soviets, the article noted that Santa was guarded against possible attack from "those who do not believe in Christmas."

Is the origin story humbug?

Some grinchy journalists have nitpicked Shoup's story, questioning whether a misprint or a misdialed prompted the boy's call.

In 2014, tech news site Gizmodo cited an International News Service story from Dec. 1, 1955, about a child's call to Shoup. Published in the Pasadena Independent, the article said the child reversed two digits in the Sears number.

"When a childish voice asked COC commander Col. Harry Shoup, if there was a Santa Claus at the North Pole, he answered much more roughly than he should — considering the season:

"There may be a guy called Santa Claus at the North Pole, but he's not the one I worry about coming from that direction," Shoup said in the brief piece.

In 2015, The Atlantic magazine doubted the flood of calls to the secret line, while noting that Shoup had a flair for public relations.

Phone calls aside, Shoup was indeed media savvy. In 1986, he told the Scripps Howard News Service that he recognized an opportunity when a staff member drew Santa on the glass map in 1955.

A lieutenant colonel promised to have it erased. But Shoup said, "You leave it right there," and summoned public affairs. Shoup wanted to boost morale for the troops and public alike.

"Why, it made the military look good — like we're not all a bunch of snobs who don't care about Santa Claus," he said.

Shoup died in 2009. His children told the StoryCorps podcast in 2014 that it was a misprinted Sears ad that prompted the phone calls.

"And later in life he got letters from all over the world," said Terri Van Keuren, a daughter. "People saying 'Thank you, Colonel, for having, you know, this sense of humor.'"

A rare addition to Santa's story

NORAD's tradition is one of the few modern additions to the centuries-old Santa story that have endured, according to Gerry Bowler, a Canadian historian who spoke to the AP in 2010.

Ad campaigns or movies try to "kidnap" Santa for commercial purposes, said Bowler, who wrote "Santa Claus: A Biography." NORAD, by contrast, takes an essential element of Santa's story and views it through a technological lens.

In a recent interview with the AP, Air Force Lt. Gen. Case Cunningham explained that NORAD radars in Alaska and Canada — known as the northern warning system — are the first to detect Santa.

He leaves the North Pole and typically heads for the international dateline in the Pacific Ocean. From there he moves west, following the night.

"That's when the satellite systems we use to track and identify targets of interest every single day start to kick in," Cunningham said. "A probably little-known fact is that Rudolph's nose that glows red emanates a lot of heat. And so those satellites track (Santa) through that heat source."

NORAD has an app and website, www.noradsanta.org, that will track Santa on Christmas Eve from 4 a.m. to midnight, mountain standard time. People can call 1-877-HI-NORAD to ask live operators about Santa's location from 6 a.m. to midnight, mountain time.

Senate passes Social Security benefits boost for many public service retirees

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate passed legislation early Saturday to boost Social Security payments for millions of people, pushing a longtime priority for former public employees through Congress in one of its last acts for the year.

The bipartisan bill, which next heads to President Joe Biden, will eliminate longtime reductions to Social Security benefits for nearly 3 million people who receive pensions from work in federal, state and local government, or public service jobs like teachers, firefighters and police officers. Advocates say the Social Security Fairness Act rights a decades-old disparity, though it will also put further strain on Social Security Trust Funds.

The legislation has been decades in the making but the push to pass it came together in the final weeks — and was completed in the final minutes — that lawmakers were in Washington before Congress resets next year. All Senate Democrats, as well as 27 Republicans, voted for the bill, giving it a final tally of 76-20.

“Millions of retired teachers and firefighters and letter carriers and state and local workers have waited decades for this moment. No longer will public retirees see their hard-earned Social Security benefits robbed from them,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The bill repeals two provisions — the Windfall Elimination Provision and the Government Pension Offset — that limit Social Security benefits for certain recipients if they receive retirement payments from other sources such as the public retirement program for a state or local government.

“Social Security is a bedrock of our middle class. It’s retirement security that Americans pay into and earn over a lifetime,” said Sen. Sherrod Brown, an Ohio Democrat who has pushed for the proposal for years and will leave Congress after losing reelection.

He added that the current restrictions make “no sense. These workers serve the public. They protect our communities. They teach our kids. They pay into Social Security just like everyone else.”

People who currently have reductions in their Social Security benefits under the exceptions would soon see a boost in their monthly payments. But those increased payments would also add an estimated \$195 billion to federal deficits over 10 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Social Security Trust Funds were already estimated to be unable to pay out full benefits beginning in 2035, and the change will hasten the program’s insolvency date by about half a year. A typical dual-income couple retiring in 2033 would see an additional \$25,000 lifetime reduction in their benefits, according to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

Many of the bill’s opponents acknowledged that the current reductions are not fair to public service retirees, but said they could not support the bill when the entire program faces challenges.

“We caved to the pressure of the moment instead of doing this on a sustainable basis,” said Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican who opposed the bill.

The policy changes will also heap more work on the Social Security Administration when the agency is already at its lowest staffing level in 50 years. The agency currently has a staff of about 56,400 — the lowest level since 1972, according to an agency spokesperson — even as it serves more people than ever. The stopgap government funding bill that also passed early Saturday did not include increased funding for the agency, which is currently in a hiring freeze.

Still, Republican supporters of the bill said there was a rare opportunity to address what they described as an unfair section of federal law that hurts public service retirees.

“They have earned these benefits. This is an unfair, inequitable penalty,” said Sen. Susan Collins, a Maine Republican.

GOP supporters of the bill also said they would return to work on larger fixes to Social Security. President-elect Donald Trump, however, has said he will not touch the benefits, even as his administration looks to make deep budget cuts elsewhere.

Senate Republicans are nonetheless working on ideas that would put the program on better financial

footing, but also inevitably require a scale-back in benefits. One fiscal hawk, Sen. Rand Paul, pushed Friday for a proposal to gradually raise the Social Security retirement age to 70, although a vote to add that provision to the bill only received three votes in favor of it.

"There's so much riding on us getting this right and having the courage to fix Social Security over the next few years," Tillis said. "We will rue the day that we failed to do it."

Musk helped kill a congressional spending bill. But much of what he spread was misinformation

By MELISSA GOLDIN Associated Press

President-elect Donald Trump's billionaire ally Elon Musk played a key role this week in killing a bipartisan funding proposal that would have prevented a government shutdown, railing against the plan in a torrent of more than 100 X posts that included multiple false claims.

The X owner, an unelected figure, not only used his outsize influence on the platform to help sway Congress, he did so without regard for the facts and gave a preview of the role he could play in government over the next four years.

"Trump has got himself a handful with Musk," John Mark Hansen, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, said in an email. "Trump's done this kind of thing before, blowing up a bill at the last minute. This time, though, it looks like he was afraid of Musk upstaging him. Now there's a new social media bully in town, pushing the champion social media bully around."

Hansen added: "We'll see what Musk's influence is when he runs up against reality — like when he proposes cutting off 'wasteful' spending for other people but not NASA contracts for Space-X."

Musk's objections to the 1,547-page omnibus bill included misinformation about congressional salaries, federal funding and public health preparedness, among other topics.

He alleged that the plan included a 40% raise for lawmakers. But the maximum pay increase possible through the proposal would have been 3.8%, according to the Congressional Research Service.

One way that members of Congress can receive a pay raise is through automatic adjustments that go into effect unless denied by law. Most members make \$174,000 per a year after their last increase of 2.8% in 2009. Congressional leadership is the exception, with the Speaker of the House earning the most at \$223,500 annually.

The rejected bill struck a section from a previous appropriations act that denied members of Congress this automatic pay raise. A maximum increase of 3.8% would have bumped their annual salary by about \$6,600, to approximately \$180,000 annually.

Musk also shared a post from another user that falsely claimed the bill provided \$3 billion in funding for a potential new stadium for the NFL's Washington Commanders, commenting: "This should not be funded by your tax dollars!"

The bill included a provision to transfer control of the land that houses RFK Stadium from the federal government to the District of Columbia. That transfer is necessary to pave the way for the Commanders to possibly build a new stadium in the franchise's old home — though the team is still considering other locations.

However, no such funding is provided by the bill. It states, in fact, that the federal government "shall not be responsible for payment or any costs or expenses" that the District of Columbia incurs after the transfer is complete aside from responsibilities related to specific environmental issues.

District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser addressed false claims about the stadium's funding on Thursday, calling them "frustrating."

"It was stated that the C.R. contains \$3 billion for a stadium," she said at a press conference. "All wrong. There are no federal dollars related to the transfer of RFK and in fact, the legislation does not require or link at all to a stadium.

Bowser added that she has reached out to the Trump administration to correct misinformation about this issue.

In a third post, Musk incorrectly claimed that "We're funding bioweapon labs in this bill!"

The plan provided funds for up to 12 regional biocontainment research laboratories, not facilities for creating bioweapons. It stipulates that among their uses, the labs will conduct biomedical research to prepare for biological agents such as emerging infectious diseases.

A spokesperson for Musk did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the Associated Press.

Some members of Congress expressed dismay that Musk had disseminated misinformation about the bill.

"I love you Elon but you need to take 5 seconds to check your sources before highlighting bottom feeders looking for clicks," Rep. Dan Crenshaw, a Texas Republican, wrote on X.

In a hastily convened Thursday evening vote, the House rejected a new Trump-backed bill whittled down to 116 pages, with the bill failing 174-235. Dozens of Republicans joined Democrats in opposition.

The House finally approved a third spending deal Friday evening, and the Senate followed suit early Saturday. President Joe Biden planned to sign it into law later Saturday.

Trump led Republicans into the longest government shutdown in history in his first term during the 2018 Christmas season, and interrupted the holidays in 2020 by tanking a bipartisan COVID-relief bill and forcing a do-over.

Government funding difficulties create gloom for federal workers before Christmas

By BRIAN WITTE Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) — Johnny Zuagar says he's tried to hide his worries about a potential government shutdown from his three boys as he weighs how much to spend on Christmas presents.

"I've got to keep a poker face," Zuagar, a statistician at the U.S. Census Bureau, said when thinking about his boys, ages 14, 12 and 6. "You're just trying to take that worry off of your family."

Like thousands of federal workers, Zuagar is navigating the holidays with the spirit of the season overtaken by an air of gloom and uncertainty.

The turbulent efforts in Congress to reach an agreement on funding the federal government have cast a cloud over the holidays for many federal workers facing possible furloughs in the days before Christmas. The House on Friday passed a three-month government spending bill just hours before a government shutdown. The Senate approved it early Saturday, sending it to President Joe Biden for his signature.

Many federal workers were already anxious about the possibility of future workforce reductions under the incoming Trump administration.

Zuagar, who is president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 2782, which represents federal workers at the census, has lived through unexpected shutdowns before — including right before the holidays.

This time, it comes on the heels of promises from Trump and his allies that there will be sweeping cuts in the federal workforce.

"We really don't know anymore," Zuagar said during a telephone interview Friday, with hours to go before a midnight deadline to approve a spending measure to avoid furloughs. "Again, the rhetoric out there is that federal employees are the problem."

The contentiousness of the current debate has left him wondering: "Are we the scapegoat for every ill and grievance in America?"

He says federal workers are worried not just about how long a potential shutdown could last, but also about what will happen after Trump takes office.

"They're fearful of what's to come, like this is the beginning of something, or they don't care about us," Zuagar said.

Jesus Soriano, president of the AFGE Local 3403 representing workers at the National Science Foundation and several other agencies, also said the budget difficulties in Congress feel different from those of previous years.

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"I think Americans should know that history is being written as we speak," Soriano said in an interview in Chevy Chase, Maryland, near the state's border with the nation's capital. "Americans need to decide what type of services the government should provide, whether we are talking about national security, the safety of our borders, the safety of our food, Social Security or others."

Anxiety about furloughs from a government shutdown this time could be a prelude, Soriano said.

"Federal employees that we represent in the American Federation of Government Employees are scared for the jobs, given the public discourse that we are all witnessing," Soriano said.

Mac Johnson, a retired Transportation Security Administration employee who is now an executive vice president for the union's TSA Council, said TSA employees were on "pins and needles" Friday afternoon.

Johnson said about half the TSA's workforce was on the job during the 2018 shutdown. While TSA employees would still work at the nation's airports during a shutdown, there's a chance they would not be paid until a government funding measure is approved.

That's hard to bear when many employees live paycheck to paycheck.

"It is a double whammy," Johnson said in a telephone interview from Charlotte, North Carolina. "One, you're not getting paid, and I think it's going to affect the ability of any federal agency, not only TSA. You know, once upon a time, there was job security working for the federal government, but going through all of these shutdowns does not do a lot for the confidence of those potential candidates for future government employment."

Zuagar said he's more confused about the budget debate this time around than in previous years.

"The rhetoric is just all over the place," he said. "There's all these different factions of people."

Government shutdowns not only are demoralizing to federal workers, Soriano said, but recovery takes a long time. For individuals, savings are depleted, spending is deferred and some things that once seemed necessary are suddenly out of reach.

For government agencies, a lot has to be rebuilt.

"So, it is not that the shutdown disappears, and everything goes back to normal," Soriano said. "It takes time and effort to put a shutdown into place. It takes even more time to address all the deficiencies created by a shutdown."

Despite the anxiety, Zuagar says he's avoiding blaming anyone specifically for the turbulent negotiations. For now, he's trying to be optimistic that what he's hearing is mostly rhetoric, and support for funding federal employees and the services they provide will be there.

Still, he said it's "shocking" to be blindsided by a crisis right before the holiday. He said he would receive his last paycheck until the impasse is resolved this weekend.

"It's your last paycheck before Christmas, so for some of us, for myself, you've got to think: Do I spend it on Christmas gifts for my family, or do I hold some of that?" Zuagar said. "Because we've also got to pay our bills in January. It will affect people in the sense of how they spend this weekend."

That's the kind of thing he wishes lawmakers would remember as they negotiate.

"There's real people behind all this stuff, and our hope is that, you know, they think about that," Zuagar said.

Sectarian violence in Syria has been less intense than feared since Assad's ouster

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — The toppling of Bashar Assad has raised tentative hopes that Syrians might live peacefully and as equals after a half century of authoritarian rule.

While there have been bursts of deadly sectarian violence in the days since Assad was ousted, it's nothing close to what was feared after nearly 14 years of civil war.

Much credit for the relative calm so far is being given to the Islamic militant group that led the insurgency against Assad and is helping to rebuild the country and unite its many factions. The group — Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS — had ties to al-Qaida, but it has vowed not to discriminate against any religion

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or ethnicity, and it has denounced revenge killings.

In the days since Assad's fall, dozens of Syrians have been killed in acts of revenge, according to activists and experts who monitor Syria. The vast majority have been from the minority Alawite community, an offshoot of Shia Islam that the Assad family adheres to.

Given the key role Alawites played in Assad's brutally repressive government, experts had expected sectarian violence to be more widespread. But HTS has worked to reduce tensions in villages where revenge killings — as well as looting and harassment — have taken place, according to local activists.

Whether peace and pluralism will prevail longer-term remains to be seen, experts caution.

"The extent of the reprisals has been quite limited," said Hilal Khashan, a political science professor at the American University of Beirut. "We hope this violence will not escalate, leading to an outburst of civil strife."

During the Assad family's 50 years of iron-fisted rule, Alawites held many top positions in the military and in the intelligence and security services, which ran prisons where thousands of people accused of anti-government activities were tortured and killed, according to human rights groups.

The interim government led by HTS has vowed to gather evidence and hold trials in a special court against former officials who oversaw, or worked in, Assad's notorious prisons. It has also promised amnesty for other government workers and former members of the military, some of whom have started handing in their weapons.

"If we want to establish social peace there must be justice, and there is no justice without accountability," said Obeida Arnaout, a spokesman for the interim government. "Those who have blood on their hands will get no amnesty."

The interim government has urged reconciliation among the country's different ethnic factions — mainly Arabs and Kurds — and mutual respect among its religious groups. Three-quarters of Syria's 23 million citizens are Sunnis, one-tenth are Alawites, and the rest are a mix of Christians, Ismaili Shiites and Druze.

Under Assad, Syrians enjoyed religious and other freedoms. Men and women mingled freely at beaches and other public places; restaurants served alcoholic beverages; and women held senior posts in government.

Now that power resides in the hands of HTS, many Syrians — as well as Western governments and human rights groups — are concerned the country could be transformed into a theocracy.

So far, the HTS-led coalition has not imposed any strict religious rules, such as forcing women to wear veils, and it has allowed journalists from around the world to report freely. Over years of control in the northwest Syrian province of Idlib, HTS allowed Christians and Druze to practice without interference.

HTS is led by a former al-Qaida member who has renounced extremism and spent years working to remake his public image, depicting himself as a champion of pluralism and tolerance. Still, the United States, other Western countries and the U.N. still consider HTS a terrorist organization — a branch of al-Qaida in Syria, but with a different name.

One of the top priorities of HTS and its leader — Ahmad al-Sharaa — is to get the terror designation removed, which could then lead to economic sanctions against Syria being lifted.

U.S. officials say al-Sharaa's public statements about protecting minority and women's rights are welcomed. But they are skeptical he will follow through on them in the long run.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said last weekend that the U.S. is in contact with HTS and that its "message to the Syrian people is this: We want them to succeed and we're prepared to help them do so."

Since Assad fled the country, at least 72 men and women have been killed in sectarian violence, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor based in Britain. It says the killings occurred in four religiously mixed provinces — Hama and Homs in central Syria, and Tartus and Latakia along its eastern coast.

Gunmen stormed the village of Bahra in Hama province on Dec. 9, and killed a dozen Alawites over three days — eight of whom were from the same family, according to a resident of the village who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisals. In nearby Mouaa, six men were

killed, and in Um al-Amad, a man and his son were shot dead, the resident of Bahra said.

The three villages are now almost empty after the most residents fled to the Alawite heartland, in the coastal province of Tartus, the Bahra resident said. "The reason why I am speaking is to try stop the killings," he said.

In the Assad stronghold of Masyaf, gunmen last week kidnapped Muhieddine al-Haybe, the brother of a Shiite cleric who fled the town in Hama province shortly after the fall of Assad's government, according to an anti-Assad activist who would only provide his first name, Hussein, out of concern for his safety. He said al-Haybe's body and three other unidentified dead bodies were later found near a military post.

A third person from the area said the situation was tense for days until HTS hosted a meeting over the weekend that brought together Sunni and Alawite dignitaries from nearby villages, including Rabia, Tizin, Metnine and Mouaa. By the end of the meeting, the participants reconciled and agreed to end any acts of violence, according to this person, who is Alawite and insisted on anonymity out of fear.

"We were also the victims of the regime," the person said, adding that the Assad government did not offer civilian jobs to Alawites, which put pressure on them to join the military and security services.

The man said his house was looted and his six cows were stolen.

There have been reports of al-Sharaa himself trying to keep the peace among Syria's many factions.

Syrian media reported that he met in Damascus on Monday with a delegation from the Druze community and told them that his goal was to unite Syria and create a free society.

Some Syrians say there might have been more sectarian violence in the aftermath of Assad's ouster had his forces mounted a serious fight against HTS and other militants behind the insurgency. Instead, Assad's army essentially melted away and chose not to defend his government.

"We are witnessing some sectarian incidents, but they are all individuals acts," said Rayan Maarouf, an anti-Assad activist who is a member of Syria's Druze minority in the southern city of Sweida.

At least 2 dead and 60 hurt after a car drives into a German Christmas market in a suspected attack

By EBRAHIM NOROOZI, CHRIS STERN and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

MAGDEBURG, Germany (AP) — A car plowed into a busy outdoor Christmas market in the eastern German city of Magdeburg on Friday, killing at least two people and injuring at least 60 others in what authorities called a deliberate attack.

The driver was arrested at the scene shortly after the car barreled into the market at around 7 p.m., when it was teeming with holiday shoppers looking forward to the weekend.

Verified bystander footage distributed by the German news agency dpa showed the suspect's arrest on a walkway in the middle of the road. A nearby police officer pointing a handgun at the man shouted at him as he lay prone. Other officers soon arrived to take the man into custody.

The two people confirmed dead were an adult and a toddler, but officials said additional deaths couldn't be ruled out because 15 people had been seriously injured.

The violence shocked the city, bringing its mayor to the verge of tears and marring a festive event that's part of a centuries-old German tradition. It also prompted several other German towns to cancel their weekend Christmas markets as a precaution and out of solidarity with Magdeburg's loss.

The suspect is a 50-year-old Saudi doctor who moved to Germany in 2006, Tamara Zieschang, the interior minister for the state of Saxony-Anhalt, said at a news conference. He has been practicing medicine in Bernburg, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) south of Magdeburg, she said.

"As things stand, he is a lone perpetrator, so that as far as we know there is no further danger to the city," Saxony-Anhalt's governor, Reiner Haseloff, told reporters. "Every human life that has fallen victim to this attack is a terrible tragedy and one human life too many."

The violence occurred in Magdeburg, a city of about 240,000 people west of Berlin that serves as Saxony-Anhalt's capital. Friday's attack came eight years after an Islamic extremist drove a truck into crowded Christmas market in Berlin, killing 13 people and injuring many others. The attacker was killed days later

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in a shootout in Italy.

Christmas markets are a huge part of German culture as an annual holiday tradition cherished since the Middle Ages and successfully exported to much of the Western world. In Berlin alone, more than 100 markets opened late last month and brought the smells of mulled wine, roasted almonds and bratwurst to the capital. Other markets abound across the country.

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said late last month that there were no concrete indications of a danger to Christmas markets this year, but that it was wise to be vigilant.

Hours after Friday's tragedy, the wail of sirens clashed with the market's festive ornaments, stars and leafy garlands.

Magdeburg resident Dorin Steffen told dpa that she was at a concert in a nearby church when she heard the sirens. The cacophony was so loud "you had to assume that something terrible had happened."

She called the attack "a dark day" for the city.

"We are shaking," Steffen said. "Full of sympathy for the relatives, also in the hope that nothing has happened to our relatives, friends and acquaintances."

The attack reverberated far beyond Magdeburg, with Haseloff calling it a catastrophe for the city, state and country. He said flags would be lowered to half-staff in Saxony-Anhalt and that the federal government planned to do the same.

"It is really one of the worst things one can imagine, particularly in connection with what a Christmas market should bring," the governor said.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the attack interrupted the anticipation of a peaceful Christmas.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz posted on X: "My thoughts are with the victims and their relatives. We stand beside them and beside the people of Magdeburg."

NATO's secretary-general, the European Commission's president and U.S. Vice President-elect JD Vance also expressed their condolences on X.

"Our prayers go to the people affected by this terrible attack on a Christmas market in Germany. What a ghastly attack so close to Christmas," Vance wrote.

Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry also condemned the attack on X but did not mention the suspect's connection to the kingdom.

Magdeburg Mayor Simone Borris, who was on the verge of tears, said officials plan to arrange a memorial at the city's cathedral on Saturday.

After a soccer match Friday evening between Bayern Munich and Leipzig, Bayern CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen asked fans at the club's stadium to observe a minute of silence.

Indonesians mark 2 decades since the tragic tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands

By EDNA TARIGAN, ACHMAD IBRAHIM, and FADLAN SYAM Associated Press

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia (AP) — Two decades after a catastrophic tsunami destroyed her village, Tria Asnani still cries when she recalls how she lost her mother while trying to escape the giant waves.

Asnani, now a school teacher, was only 17 at the time. Her father, who was a fisherman, never returned home from sea. She doesn't know how she survived. "I cannot swim. I could only rely on dhikr (Islamic prayer)."

On Dec. 26, 2004, a powerful 9.1-magnitude earthquake off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra triggered a tsunami that killed around 230,000 people across a dozen countries, reaching as far as East Africa.

But Indonesia's Aceh province, located closest to the earthquake's epicenter and with 18 of 23 districts and cities located in the coastal line in the Northern side of Sumatra, bore the brunt of the disaster with more than half of the total death toll reported.

The worst-hit areas were in Aceh Besar and Banda Aceh, according to the Aceh Disaster Management

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Agency.

Asnani's Lampuuk village lies in a fishermen's community in Aceh Besar, known for its white sandy beaches and turquoise waters. However, on that day, it was among the hardest hit, with waves more than 30 meters (98 feet) high which changed the coastline in Aceh and led to land subsidence after the earthquake.

Buildings by the coast were flattened to the ground except for Rahmatullah Mosque, 500 meters (1,600 feet) from the shore, and about 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) from Asnani's house. The photo of the place of worship, left pretty much unscathed, later became iconic.

After the disastrous event, thousands, including Asnani, had to relocate to start afresh. She moved with her uncle to another region in Aceh to continue her studies. After she got married, she returned in 2007 to her parents' house which was rebuilt with assistance from the Turkish government and lived there for 10 years.

Many international donors and organizations poured in money to help rebuild the affected areas that lost schools, hospitals and basic infrastructure, made stronger than before the tsunami hit.

Tsunami and Disaster Mitigation Research Center at Syiah Kuala University in Aceh recorded more than 1,400 wrecked schools and about 150,000 students had their education process disrupted by the destructive waves in a report published in 2019.

Three "escape buildings" were also constructed in a relatively safer area to accommodate thousands of people if an earthquake and tsunami strike.

Across the province, memories of the tsunami can be felt almost everywhere.

The Aceh Tsunami Museum in Banda Aceh houses photos of the aftermath and vehicle debris, serving as a constant reminder of what was lost that day. Local authorities have also turned a former floating diesel-powered power plant barge that washed about 6 kilometers (about 4 miles) inland by the tsunami into another memorial place.

Both places have become the most popular tourist destinations in the area.

But development never stops and 20 years after the tsunami the Aceh coast is brimming with residential housing, cafes and restaurants, as well as tourism support facilities, while the hills in some areas from which people are currently being mined for sand and stone.

Fazli, the head of Preparedness in Aceh Disaster Management Agency, said that the government initially stipulated that there should be no activity up to 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) from the coast. Over time, many displaced fishermen returned to their original coastal homes, drawn by their livelihoods and ties to the sea, despite having received housing elsewhere.

He also said the agency has "provided the Acehnese people with information " to deal with a potential tsunami. "People already know what to do," said Fazli, who, like other Indonesians, uses a single name.

Siti Ikramatoun, a sociologist in Banda Aceh, said that despite years of recovery and rebuilding, the people of Aceh must stay vigilant.

"If people experienced (the tsunami), they may have an instinct to anticipate it. But those who do not have the experience, they won't get what to do," Ikramatoun said.

Various communities in Aceh commemorate the tsunami yearly along with the government and local authorities.

In Banda Aceh, art communities in early December spread disaster awareness through theatrical or musical performances that can be easier for people to follow and target all groups, including those born after the tsunami.

Muslina, 43, a civil servant, took her youngest son to the Aceh Tsunami Museum to watch one of the shows. She lost relatives and loved ones 20 years ago and she wants to make sure she always remembers them.

"Earlier my son asked me if there might be another tsunami when he grows up," she said. "I told him I do not know. Only God knows, but if there is a strong earthquake and the seawater recedes, we run, run, run to find higher ground."

Senate approves 235th judge of Biden's term, beating Trump's tally

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden secured the 235th judicial confirmation of his presidency Friday, an accomplishment that exceeds his predecessor's total by one after Democrats put extra emphasis on the federal courts following Donald Trump's far-reaching first term, when he filled three seats on the Supreme Court.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., teed up votes Friday on two California district judges, and they were the last judicial confirmations this year before Congress adjourns and makes way for a new, Republican-led Senate.

The confirmation of Serena Raquel Murillo to be a district judge for the Central District of California broke Trump's mark. The tally also marks the largest number of confirmations in a single term since the Jimmy Carter administration. Come next year, Republicans will look to boost Trump's already considerable influence on the makeup of the federal judiciary in his second term.

Biden and Senate Democrats placed particular focus on adding women, minorities and public defenders to the judicial rank. About two-thirds of Biden's appointees are women and a solid majority of appointees are people of color. The most notable appointee was Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first African American woman to serve on the nation's highest court.

"When I ran for President, I promised to build a bench that looks like America and reflects the promise of our nation. And I'm proud I kept my commitment to bolstering confidence in judicial decision-making and outcomes," Biden said in a statement.

Sen. Dick Durbin, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said that prior to the Democrats' efforts, the number of women on the bench had been diminished, and it was made up overwhelmingly of white males.

"We consciously moved forward to bring more women to the bench, and believe me, we had a great talent pool to work with," Durbin said. "So I think it'll enhance the image of the court and its work product to bring these new judges on."

Biden also placed an emphasis on bringing more civil rights lawyers, public defenders and labor rights lawyers to expand the professional backgrounds of the federal judiciary. More than 45 appointees are public defenders and more than two dozen served as civil rights lawyers.

While Biden did get more district judges confirmed than Trump, he had fewer higher-tier circuit court appointments than Trump — 45 compared to 54 for Trump. And he got one Supreme Court appointment compared with three for Trump. Republicans, much to Democrats' frustration, filled Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat on the court the week before the 2020 presidential election. Ginsburg had passed away in September.

Democrats also faced the challenge of confirming nominees during two years of a 50-50 Senate. Rarely a week went by in the current Congress when Schumer did not tee up votes on judicial confirmations as liberal groups urged Democrats to show the same kind of urgency on judges that Republicans exhibited under Trump.

Some Senate Republicans were harshly critical of Biden's choices. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, said talk of diversity did not extend to the views of the nominees.

"One of the consequences of the age of Trump is that it drove Democrats insane and it drove them to the extreme left, so they put people on the bench who were selected because they were extreme partisans," Cruz said.

Liberal-leaning advocacy groups said they are delighted with the number of judges Democrats secured, but even more so with the quality of the nominees. They said diversity in personal and professional backgrounds improves judicial decision-making, helps build public trust and inspires people from all walks of life to pursue legal careers.

"For our federal judiciary to actually deliver equal justice for all, it really has to be for all, and that is one

reason why we certainly applaud this administration for prioritizing both professional but also demographic diversity," said Lena Zwarenstejn, senior director of the fair courts program at The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, and the next chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said Democrats showed newfound resolve on judicial confirmations.

"They learned a lesson from the first Trump administration," Grassley said. "Paying attention to the number of judges you get and the type of judges you put on the court is worth it."

Part of the urgency from Democrats came as they watched the nation's highest court overturn abortion protections, eliminate affirmative action in higher education and weaken the federal government's ability to protect the environment, public health and workplace safety through regulations. The cases showed that the balance of power in Washington extends to the judicial branch.

Schumer was jubilant after the vote, saying that one out of four active judges has been appointed under Biden. He said that when it came to judicial nominees, Democrats "cast a wider net" than what he referred to as a "privileged pool."

"I'm very proud of this milestone, not because the number alone, but because of what the number means," Schumer said. "It means our bench is now far more balanced in its experiences, expertise and qualifications than four years ago."

Trump will inherit nearly three dozen judicial vacancies, but that number is expected to rise because of Republican-appointed judges who held off on retirement in hopes that a Republican would return to office and pick their replacements.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., acknowledged that the sense of accomplishment for Democrats is muted somewhat knowing that Trump will have another term to continue shaping the federal judiciary.

"I'm not ready to uncork the champagne just because we've done some really good work over the last four years," Blumenthal said. "We need to be prepared to work, hope for the best and try to defeat nominees who are simply unqualified. We have our work cut out for us. The prospects ahead are sobering."

Grassley promised that he'll work to best Biden's number.

"Let me assure you, by January 20th of 2029, Trump will be bragging about getting 240 judges," Grassley said.

A judge says Missouri's abortion ban isn't enforceable, but there's no start date for abortions

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — A judge ruled Friday that Missouri's near-total abortion ban is unenforceable under a new constitutional amendment, though Planned Parenthood said the decision is still not sufficient for it to resume providing abortions in the state.

Jackson County Circuit Court Judge Jerri Zhang said the abortion ban "is directly at odds" with a constitutional amendment creating a right to abortion that won voter approval in the November election. The judge also blocked the state from enforcing numerous other abortion restrictions, including a 72-hour waiting period and an informed consent law that required patients to be given certain state-mandated information before receiving an abortion.

But the judge declined to block several other contested abortion laws, including one requiring abortion facilities to be licensed by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. Planned Parenthood said most of its facilities cannot comply with some of the licensing requirements, including "medically irrelevant" size requirements for hallways, rooms and doors.

"While Planned Parenthood stands ready to start providing abortions in Missouri again as soon as the Court permits, the abortion restrictions remaining in effect — including Missouri's medically unnecessary and discriminatory clinic licensing requirement — make this impossible," Planned Parenthood said in a statement Friday night.

Missouri is one of five states where voters approved ballot measures in the 2024 general election to add

the right to an abortion to their state constitutions. The Missouri amendment did not specifically override any laws. Instead, advocates had to ask a court to knock down specific laws that they believe are now unconstitutional.

Zhang's injunction is preliminary, but it signals that the judge is likely to ultimately find the abortion ban unconstitutional as the lawsuit plays out.

Missouri had been among the first states to implement a prohibition on most abortions after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in June 2022 overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* precedent establishing a nationwide right to abortion.

Attorney General Andrew Bailey's office did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment Friday. Bailey, a Republican and abortion opponent, previously issued an opinion agreeing that most abortions would be legal when the amendment took effect.

But Bailey's office is still fighting for a ban on most abortions after viability, along with a number of regulations that Planned Parenthood argues made it nearly impossible to offer abortions in the state even before abortion was almost completely banned in 2022.

Zhang declined to block several contested Missouri abortion laws, including the licensure law, another limiting only physicians to performing abortions and still another requiring in-person appointments before abortions.

Among the laws blocked by Friday's order was one prohibiting abortions solely because of a diagnosis indicating Down Syndrome. Also blocked was a telemedicine ban that requires a physician to be physically present in the room while a patient takes an abortion-causing medication. And the judge barred enforcement of another law requiring physicians who perform abortions to have admitting privileges at certain types of hospitals located within 30 miles (48 kilometers) or 15 minutes of where an abortion is performed.

Missouri's constitutional amendment allows lawmakers to restrict abortion after viability, with exceptions to "protect the life or physical or mental health of the pregnant person."

The term "viability" is used by health care providers to describe whether a pregnancy is expected to continue developing normally or whether a fetus might survive outside the uterus. Though there's no defined time frame, doctors say it is sometime after the 21st week of pregnancy.

Amazon and Starbucks workers are on strike. Trump might have something to do with it

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

Amazon delivery drivers and Starbucks baristas are on strike in a handful of U.S. cities as they seek to exert pressure on the two major companies to recognize them as unionized employees or to meet demands for an inaugural labor contract.

The strikes that started Thursday and Friday followed other recent standoffs between corporate America and organized labor. Large and established labor unions secured meaningful employer concessions this year following strikes by Boeing factory workers, dockworkers at East and Gulf coast ports, video game performers, and hotel and casino workers on the Las Vegas Strip.

But workers at Starbucks, Amazon and some other prominent consumer brands still are fighting for their first contracts. Amazon refuses to acknowledge the organizing efforts of drivers and warehouse workers — many of whom have voted to unionize — even though the powerful Teamsters union says it represents them. Starbucks long resisted the unionization of its stores, but had agreed to negotiate a contract by the end of the year.

Why are the strikes happening now?

Strikes — particularly ones that happen during the holidays, a time of high economic activity — can help unions exercise leverage during negotiations or flex their muscles by garnering support from workers and sympathetic consumers.

Both Amazon and Starbucks saw a wave of organizing efforts following the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic focused attention on front-line workers and the impact of economic inequality on the lives of

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wage-earning Americans.

Employees organized at bookstores, where unions are rare, and were successful with campaigns at some stores run by Apple, Trader Joe's and the outdoor equipment company REI.

But turning those wins into contracts can be a challenge. At Amazon and Starbucks, which were not unionized before the pandemic, workers have yet to secure an agreement with the e-commerce and coffee giants, which both have their headquarters in Seattle.

John Logan, director of labor and employment studies at San Francisco State University, said he thinks the Amazon and Starbucks workers are "desperate" to make progress before President-elect Donald Trump gets to appoint a Republican majority to the National Labor Relations Board, which is expected to be less friendly to unions during his administration.

"The unions want to make these disputes public and bring political pressures on the companies," Logan said in a written statement. "If these disputes drag on until next year, and if they are fought largely through the labor board and the courts, the unions and workers will almost certainly lose. This might be their last, best chance to pressure the companies in public before Trump comes into office."

However, Trump has also given some signs that he might be friendlier to labor during his second term compared to his first term. Last month, he picked Oregon Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer to lead the Department of Labor in his new administration, elevating a Republican congresswoman who has strong support from unions, including the Teamsters. Teamsters President Sean O'Brien also spoke at the Republican National Convention this past summer.

Teamster-led strikes at Amazon

The Teamsters say workers at Amazon are striking at seven delivery stations in Southern California, San Francisco, New York City, Atlanta and Skokie, Illinois, because the company ignored a Sunday deadline the union had set for contract negotiations. At midnight on Saturday, the Teamsters say workers will also strike at a prominent warehouse in New York, which voted to join the fledgling Amazon Labor Union in 2022 and have since elected to affiliate with the Teamsters.

The prominent labor group says it's fighting for higher wages, better benefits and safer working conditions for Amazon employees, many of whom experience economic insecurity while working for a company worth \$2.3 trillion. It has not said how many Amazon warehouse workers or drivers are joining the striking.

The union has mainly focused on organizing delivery drivers, which the company says are not its workers because they are directly employed by contractors Amazon recruited to handle package deliveries.

That type of setup gives the Amazon more cover from unionization attempts in an industry — transportation and trucking — that's dominated by the Teamsters. However, the union has argued before the National Labor Relations Board that the drivers, who wear Amazon's ubiquitous gray-blue vests and drive similarly colored vans, should be classified as company employees.

Meanwhile, the online retailer has accused the union of pushing a "false narrative" about the thousands of workers it claims to represent. Amazon has also touted its pay, saying it provides warehouse and transportation employees a base wage of \$22 per hour plus benefits. It also recently boosted hourly pay for the subcontracted delivery drivers.

In September, the NLRB, which has taken a more pro-labor stance under President Joe Biden, filed a complaint that found the drivers to be joint employees of Amazon. The agency also accused Amazon of unlawfully failing to bargain with the Teamsters on a contract for drivers at a California delivery hub.

The Teamsters union says it also represents Amazon warehouse workers, including thousands of employees at the major New York City fulfillment center who voted to be represented by the Amazon Labor Union.

Amazon objected to the 2022 warehouse election results, alleging the Amazon Labor Union and the federal labor board had tainted the vote. A regional NLRB director issued a complaint last year that accused Amazon of violating the law by refusing to bargain with the union.

Amazon, in turn, is challenging the constitutionality of the NLRB in federal court along with Elon Musk's SpaceX. In June, the Supreme Court made it harder for the agency to win court orders in labor disputes, siding with Starbucks in a case brought by the company.

Contract negotiations at Starbucks

Unlike Amazon, contract negotiation have been underway at Starbucks.

But Starbucks Workers United, the union that has organized workers at 535 company-owned U.S. stores since 2021, said the company has failed to honor a commitment made in February to reach a labor agreement this year.

The union also wants Starbucks to resolve outstanding legal issues, including hundreds of unfair labor practice charges that workers have filed with the National Labor Relations Board. The agency also has opened or settled hundreds of charges against Amazon.

In launching the strikes that started Friday in Chicago, Los Angeles and Seattle, Workers United said Starbucks proposed an economic package with no new wage increases for unionized baristas now and a 1.5% increase in future years.

Starbucks said Workers United prematurely ended a bargaining session this week. The company also says it already offers pay and benefits worth \$30 per hour for baristas who work at least 20 hours per week.

Starbucks workers walked off the job on two occasions last year. Workers United has said the latest strikes could spread to hundreds of stores across the country by Christmas Eve.

Patricia Campos-Medina, who recently ran for the U.S. Senate as a Democrat in New Jersey and leads Cornell University's Worker Institute at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, said she expects there to be more union activity before Trump takes office.

Trump's reactions will give the public a chance to see what his "commitments are to the working class," Campos-Medina said.

Indiana man sentenced to the maximum of 130 years in prison for 2017 killings of 2 teenage girls

By RICK CALLAHAN Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — An Indiana man convicted in the 2017 killings of two teenage girls who vanished during a winter hike was sentenced to a maximum of 130 years in prison Friday in the case that's long cast a shadow over the teens' small hometown of Delphi.

Allen, 52, was convicted on Nov. 11 in the killings of Abigail Williams, 13, and Liberty German, 14, known as Abby and Libby. A jury found him guilty of two counts of murder and two counts of murder while committing or attempting to commit kidnapping.

The special judge in the case, Allen County Superior Court Judge Fran Gull sentenced Allen on two of the four murder counts and imposed the maximum of 65 years for each count, to be served consecutively. The sentencing hearing, which included victim impact statements from six relatives of the teens, lasted less than two hours.

After the hearing concluded, one of Allen's defense attorneys, Jennifer Auger, told reporters they plan to appeal and seek a new trial.

"Thoughts and prayers to the families of the victims. What they went through was unimaginable," Auger said. She added that the defense plans to give a more detailed statement later, "but today is not the day for that."

The Associated Press left messages for Allen's attorneys Friday seeking additional comment on his sentence and their plans for an appeal.

Allen, who has maintained his innocence, had faced between 45 years and 130 years in prison in the killings of the Delphi teens, who were found dead in February 2017, their throats cut, one day after they vanished while hiking during a day off from school.

Allen also lived in Delphi and when he was arrested in October 2022, more than five years after the killings, he was employed as a pharmacy technician at a pharmacy only blocks from the county courthouse where he later stood trial. His weekslong trial came after repeated delays, a leak of evidence, the withdrawal of his public defenders and their reinstatement by the Indiana Supreme Court.

The case, which included tantalizing evidence, has long drawn outsized attention from true-crime en-

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thusiasts.

With Gull's long-running gag order in the case lifted at the end of Friday's sentencing, police and prosecutors held a news conference where they thanked investigators for their work that helped with Allen's arrest and prosecution.

"There is zero doubt that justice has been served and today is the day," said Carroll County Sheriff Tony Liggett.

He and others singled out the work of a retired state government worker who volunteered in March 2017 to help police organize tips received as part of the investigation — and who discovered a key piece of information that led investigators to Allen.

Kathy Shank testified at trial that in September 2022 she found a misplaced "lead sheet" which stated that two days after German's and Williams' bodies were found, a man contacted authorities and said he had been on the trail the afternoon the girls went missing. His name was listed incorrectly as Richard Allen Whiteman and marked "cleared," Shank said.

She determined the man's name was actually Richard Allen and recalled that a young girl had been on the trail at the same location and time and had seen a man.

"I thought there could be a correlation," Shank told the court, adding that she notified officers of her find.

Liggett thanked Shank at Friday's news conference for her crucial discovery and for bringing it to investigators' attention.

"When she would come across something she didn't know she would always bring that to an investigator and every time she brought us something and said, 'Did you know this?' we knew it — except for the tip that she brought us that got us here today," he said.

German's grandfather, Mike Patty, thanked the jury, investigators, prosecutors and Gull as a photo of German and Williams, grinning in winter garb, was projected onto a screen behind him during the news conference.

"Justice has been served for the girls," he said

Gull, the special judge who oversaw Allen's trial, came from northeastern Indiana's Allen County, as did the jury.

The seven women and five men were sequestered throughout the trial, which began Oct. 18 in the Carroll County seat of Delphi, the girls' hometown of about 3,000 residents some 60 miles (100 kilometers) northwest of Indianapolis.

Allen's trial came after repeated delays, a leak of evidence, the withdrawal of his public defenders and their reinstatement by the Indiana Supreme Court.

The case, which included tantalizing evidence, has long drawn outsized attention from true-crime enthusiasts.

A relative dropped the teens off at a hiking trail just outside Delphi on Feb. 13, 2017. The eighth graders didn't arrive at the agreed pickup location and were reported missing that evening. Their bodies were found the next day in a wooded area near an abandoned railroad trestle they had crossed.

In his closing arguments at Allen's trial, Carroll County Prosecutor Nicholas McLeland told jurors that Allen, armed with a gun, forced the youths off the hiking trail and had planned to rape them before a passing van made him change his plans and he cut their throats. McLeland said an unspent bullet found between the teens' bodies "had been cycled through" Allen's .40-caliber Sig Sauer handgun.

An Indiana State Police firearms expert told the jury her analysis tied the round to Allen's handgun.

McLeland said Allen was the man seen following the teens across the Monon High Bridge in a grainy cellphone video German had recorded. And he said Allen's voice could be heard on that video telling the teens, "Down the hill" after they crossed the bridge.

McLeland also noted that Allen had repeatedly confessed to the killings — in person, on the phone and in writing. In one of the recordings he replayed for the jury, Allen could be heard telling his wife, "I did it. I killed Abby and Libby."

Allen's defense argued that his confessions were unreliable because he was facing a severe mental

health crisis while under the pressure and stress of being locked up in isolation, watched 24 hours a day and taunted by people incarcerated with him. A psychiatrist called by the defense testified that months in solitary confinement could make a person delirious and psychotic.

Defense attorney Bradley Rozzi said in his closing trial arguments that no witness explicitly identified Allen as the man seen on the hiking trail or the bridge the afternoon the girls went missing. He also said no fingerprint, DNA or forensic evidence links Allen to the murder scene.

A Russian official says a Ukrainian strike with US-supplied missiles kills 6

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A Ukrainian attack Friday on a town in Russia's Kursk border region using U.S.-supplied missiles killed six people, including a child, a senior local official said. The attack came hours after Ukrainian authorities said a Russian ballistic missile strike on Kyiv killed at least one person and wounded 13.

Moscow claimed the Kyiv strike was in response to a Ukrainian strike on Russian soil using American-made weapons earlier this week.

Ten other people in the Kursk town of Rylsk, including a 13-year-old, were hospitalized after Friday's strike with HIMARS missiles, Kursk acting Gov. Alexander Khinshtein said. He provided no further details.

Russia is trying to push back a Ukrainian incursion into Kursk that was launched in early August, but Ukraine's troops are dug in.

The truck-mounted HIMARS launchers fire GPS-guided missiles capable of hitting targets up to 80 kilometers (50 miles) away. The mobile launchers are hard for the enemy to spot and can quickly change position after firing to escape airstrikes.

President Joe Biden last month authorized Ukraine to use U.S.-supplied missiles to strike deeper inside Russia, easing limitations on the longer range weapons. The move was a response to Russia deploying thousands of North Korean troops to reinforce its war effort, officials said.

Shortly before sunrise Friday, at least three loud blasts were heard in Kyiv. Ukraine's air force said it intercepted five Iskander short-range ballistic missiles fired at the city. The attack knocked out heating to 630 residential buildings, 16 medical facilities and 30 schools and kindergartens, the city administration said. Falling missile debris caused damage and sparked fires in three districts.

"We ask citizens to immediately respond to reports of ballistic attack threats, because there is very little time to find shelter," the air force said.

During the nearly three years since the war began, Russia has regularly bombarded civilian areas of Ukraine, often in an attempt to cripple the power grid and unnerve Ukrainians. Ukraine, struggling to hold back Russia's bigger army on the front line, has attempted to strike Russian infrastructure supporting the country's war effort.

The falling debris in Kyiv caused damage to around two dozen high-rise office buildings in the city center as well as the landmark Catholic Church of St. Nicholas and the Kyiv National Linguistic University.

What may have been the blast wave from an intercepted low-flying missile also blew out windows and caused other damage at six embassies, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry said.

About five hours later, air raid sirens rang out again. Valeriia Dubova, a 32-year-old photographer, took cover with many others in a crowded subway station.

She said that in the morning attack, she sheltered at home and could feel the walls shaking. Outside, fire engines and ambulances raced down city streets, she said.

"You could see that many buildings, high-rises, were damaged, with glass shards on the ground, far from the explosion epicenter," she said.

The Russian Defense Ministry said that the strike was in response to a Ukrainian missile attack on Russia's Rostov border region two days earlier. That attack used six American-made Army Tactical Missile System, known as ATACMS, missiles and four Storm Shadow air-launched missiles provided by the United Kingdom, it said.

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That day, Ukraine claimed to have targeted a Rostov oil refinery as part of its campaign to strike Russian infrastructure supporting the country's war effort.

Ukraine's use of Western-supplied weapons to strike Russia has angered the Kremlin.

At the United Nations on Friday, Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia asserted that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "is doing everything he can to undermine any peaceful initiatives and to provoke Russia into escalating the conflict."

Ukraine fired several American-supplied longer-range missiles into Russia for the first time on Nov. 19 after Washington eased restrictions on their use.

That development prompted Russia to use a new hypersonic missile, called Oreshnik, for the first time. Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested that the missile could be used to target government buildings in Kyiv, though there have been no reports of an Oreshnik being used for a second time.

Answering the Ukrainian attack on Rostov on Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said the military carried out a group strike with "high-precision, long-range weapons" on the command center of Ukraine's military intelligence agency and another location where it said Ukraine's Neptune missile systems are designed and produced.

The attack also targeted Ukrainian ground-based cruise missile systems and U.S.-made Patriot air defense systems, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

"The objectives of the strike have been achieved. All objects are hit," the ministry said in a Telegram post.

Its claims could not immediately be verified.

In other Russian attacks on civilian areas of Ukraine, six people, including a 15-year-old girl, were injured by missiles in Kryvyi Rih, regional authorities said. It was the second straight night of attacks in Zelenskyy's hometown.

Also, Russian artillery shelled the southern city of Kherson Friday morning, causing widespread damage and leaving around 60,000 people without power, regional Gov. Olesksandr Prokudin said.

Canada's Trudeau reshuffles his Cabinet as resignation calls mount and new election threat looms

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's chances of staying on in power have become more tenuous after the opposition party that backed his government for years announced it will vote no confidence in the government when Parliament resumes.

An embattled Trudeau reshuffled his Cabinet on Friday — but whether he will step aside in the coming days or weeks remains an open question.

Trudeau did not address his future or take questions after he left the meeting with his new Cabinet. But Trudeau said his government is preparing for Donald Trump and his threat to impose 25% tariffs on all Canadian products.

"In exactly one month the new president will be inaugurated and we are preparing Canada to face that," Trudeau said in his first remarks to reporters since his finance minister quit.

"Whatever the U.S. administration may do, that is our priority, and that is that we're working on and we have a lot of work to do."

But Trudeau is facing rising discontent over his leadership, and the abrupt departure of his finance minister on Monday could be something he can't recover from.

"The prime minister has simply asked for some time to reflect on his own future," said David McGuinty, the new Public Safety Minister.

Rachel Bendayan, the official languages minister, said Trudeau "told us he had a difficult choice to make."

The political upheaval comes at a difficult moment for Canada.

Trump keeps calling Trudeau the governor of the 51st state and has threatened to impose sweeping tariffs if Canada does not stem what he calls a flow of migrants and drugs in the United States — even though

far fewer of each cross into the U.S. from Canada than from Mexico, which Trump has also threatened. "We have in the next 60 days an existential threat for the Canadian economy, for people that could lose their jobs. The unemployment rate could double. We need to focus on that," said Marc Miller, the immigration minister and a close friend of Trudeau's.

"I think he's the best to lead us in a very difficult situation. We can't be in a position where the government has no ability to fight back."

Parliament is now shut for the holidays until late next month, but the leftist New Democratic Party said Friday it would trigger a vote of no confidence in Trudeau after lawmakers reconvene on Jan. 27.

Because Trudeau's Liberals do not hold an outright majority in Parliament, they have for years depended on the support of the NDP to pass legislation and stay in power. But that support has vanished — NDP leader Jagmeet Singh has called on Trudeau to resign — and he made clear Friday the NDP will vote to bring down the government.

"No matter who is leading the Liberal Party, this government's time is up. We will put forward a clear motion of non-confidence in the next sitting of the House of Commons," Singh said in letter released just before the Cabinet shuffle.

The Liberals could delay Parliament's return. Trudeau could decide not to run in the next year's election and allow for a party leadership race.

Liberal Rob Oliphant became the latest lawmaker to call for the prime minister to step aside, saying there should be a "robust, open leadership contest."

Trudeau, who has led the country for nearly a decade, has become widely unpopular in recent years over a wide range of issues, including the high cost of living and rising inflation.

There is no mechanism for Trudeau's party to force him out in the short term. He could say he will step aside when a new party leader is chosen, or his Liberal party could be forced from power by a "no confidence" vote in Parliament that would trigger an election that would very likely favor the opposing Conservative Party.

Opposition Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre said Canada needs an immediate election and requires a prime minister who can face Trump from a position of strength.

"We cannot have a chaotic clown show running our government into the ground," he said.

Concerns about Trudeau's leadership were exacerbated Monday when Chrystia Freeland, Trudeau's finance minister and deputy prime minister, resigned from the Cabinet. Freeland was highly critical of Trudeau's handling of the economy in the face of steep tariffs threatened by Trump.

Shortly before Freeland announced her decision, the housing minister also quit.

Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal, said Friday's Cabinet reshuffle was necessary because of recent departures but said for many Canadians "it might simply appear as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

France's anti-terrorism court convicts 8 people of involvement in the 2020 beheading of a teacher

By TOM NOUVIAN and SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France's anti-terrorism court on Friday convicted eight people of involvement in the beheading of teacher Samuel Paty outside his school near Paris four years ago, a horrific death that shocked the country.

Paty, 47, was killed by an Islamic extremist outside his school on Oct. 16, 2020, days after showing his class cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad during a debate on free expression. The assailant, an 18-year-old Russian of Chechen origin, was shot to death by police.

Those who have been on trial on terrorism charges at a special court in Paris since the end of November were accused, in some cases, of providing assistance to the perpetrator and, in others, of organizing a hate campaign online before the murder took place.

The 540-seat courtroom was packed for the verdict, which marked the final chapter of the Paty trial.

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Heavy surveillance was in place, with more than 50 police officers guarding the proceedings.

Seated in the front row was Paty's 9-year-old son, accompanied by family members. As the lead judge, Franck Zientara, delivered sentences one after the other, emotions in the room ran high.

"I am moved, and I am relieved," said Gaëlle Paty, Samuel Paty's sister, as she addressed a crowd of reporters after the verdict. "Hearing the word 'guilty' — that's what I needed."

"I spent this week listening to a lot of rewriting of what happened, and it was hard to hear, but now the judge has stated what really happened, and it feels good," she added, her voice breaking as tears filled her eyes.

Families of the accused reacted with gasps, cries, shouts, and ironic clapping, prompting the judge to pause multiple times and call for silence.

"They lied about my brother," shouted one relative. Another woman, sobbing, exclaimed, "They took my baby from me," before being escorted out by police officers.

The seven-judge panel met or went above most of the terms requested by prosecutors, citing "the exceptional gravity of the facts."

Naim Boudaoud, 22, and Azim Epsirkhanov, 23, friends of the attacker, were convicted of complicity in murder and sentenced to 16 years in prison each. Neither can be paroled for two thirds of their term, about 10 years. Boudaoud was accused of driving the attacker to the school, while Epsirkhanov helped him procure weapons.

Brahim Chnina, 52, the Muslim father of the schoolgirl whose lies sparked the events leading to Paty's death, was sentenced to 13 years for association with a terrorist enterprise. Prosecutors had sought 10 years for him.

Abdelhakim Sefrioui, a Muslim preacher, was given 15 years for organizing a hate campaign online against Paty.

The shocking death of the 47-year-old teacher left an indelible mark on France, with several schools now named after him.

The trial had begun in late November. The defendants were accused of assisting a perpetrator or organizing a hate campaign online in lead-up to the murder.

At the time of the attack, there were protests in many Muslim countries and calls online for violence targeting France and the satirical French newspaper Charlie Hebdo. The newspaper had republished its caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad a few weeks before Paty's death to mark the opening of the trial over deadly 2015 attacks on its newsroom by Islamic extremists.

The cartoon images deeply offended many Muslims, who saw them as sacrilegious. But the fallout from Paty's killing reinforced the French state's commitment to freedom of expression and its firm attachment to secularism in public life.

Chnina's daughter, who was 13 at the time, claimed that she had been excluded from Paty's class when he showed the caricatures on Oct. 5, 2020.

Chnina sent a series of messages to his contacts denouncing Paty, saying that "this sick man" needed to be fired, along with the address of the school in the Paris suburb of Conflans Saint-Honorine. In reality, Chnina's daughter had lied to him and had never attended the lesson in question.

Paty was teaching a class mandated by the National Education Ministry on freedom of expression. He discussed the caricatures in this context, saying students who did not wish to see them could temporarily leave the classroom.

An online campaign against Paty snowballed, and 11 days after the lesson, Anzorov attacked the teacher with a knife as he walked home, and displayed the teacher's head in a post on social media. Police later fatally shot Anzorov as he advanced toward them, armed.

Chnina's daughter was tried last year in a juvenile court and given an 18-month suspended sentence. Four other students at Paty's school were found guilty of involvement and given suspended sentences; a fifth, who pointed out Paty to Anzorov in exchange for money, was given a 6-month term with an electronic bracelet.

Sefrioui, the preacher on trial, had presented himself as a spokesperson for Imams of France although

he had been dismissed from that role. He had filmed a video in front of the school with the father of the student. He referred to the teacher as a “thug” multiple times and sought to pressure the school administration via social media.

Some of the defendants expressed regrets and claimed their innocence on the eve of the verdict. They did not convince Paty’s family.

“It’s something that really shocks the family,” lawyer Virginie Le Roy said ahead of the verdicts. “You get the feeling that those in the box are absolutely unwilling to admit any responsibility whatsoever.”

“Apologies are pointless, they won’t bring Samuel back, but explanations are precious to us,” Le Roy said. “We haven’t had many explanations of the facts.”

Alabama profits off prisoners who work at McDonald’s but deems them too dangerous for parole

By ROBIN McDOWELL and MARGIE MASON Associated Press

DADEVILLE, Ala. (AP) — A storm was looming when the inmate serving 20 years for armed robbery was assigned to transport fellow prisoners to their jobs at private manufacturers supplying goods to companies like Home Depot and Wayfair. It didn’t matter that Jake Jones once had escaped or that he had failed two drug and alcohol tests while in lockup — he was unsupervised and technically in charge.

By the time Jones was driving back to the work release center with six other incarcerated workers, it was pelting rain. Jones had a reputation for driving fast and some of his passengers said he was racing along the country road, jamming to music in his earbuds. Suddenly, the transport van hit a dip and swerved on the wet pavement, slamming into a tree.

Two men died after being thrown out of the van. And Jones, who was critically hurt and slumped over the blaring horn, had to be cut out of the vehicle. As the other men staggered into the storm to flag down help, they wondered: Why would the Alabama Department of Corrections place their lives in Jones’ hands?

“They knew he had a propensity to drink,” said Shawn Wasden, who survived the crash. “And they put him behind the wheel of a van anyway.”

No state has a longer, more profit-driven history of contracting prisoners out to private companies than Alabama. With a sprawling labor system that dates back more than 150 years — including the brutal convict leasing era that replaced slavery — it has constructed a template for the commercialization of mass incarceration.

Best Western, Bama Budweiser and Burger King are among the more than 500 businesses to lease incarcerated workers from one of the most violent, overcrowded and unruly prison systems in the U.S. in the past five years alone, The Associated Press found as part of a two-year investigation into prison labor. The cheap, reliable labor force has generated more than \$250 million for the state since 2000 through money garnished from prisoners’ paychecks.

Most jobs are inside facilities, where the state’s inmates — who are disproportionately Black — can be sentenced to hard labor and forced to work for free doing everything from mopping floors to laundry. But more than 10,000 inmates have logged a combined 17 million work hours outside Alabama’s prison walls since 2018, for entities like city and county governments and businesses that range from major car-part manufacturers and meat-processing plants to distribution centers for major retailers like Walmart, the AP determined.

While those working at private companies can at least earn a little money, they face possible punishment if they refuse, from being denied family visits to being sent to higher-security prisons, which are so dangerous that the federal government filed a lawsuit four years ago that remains pending, calling the treatment of prisoners unconstitutional.

Though they make at least \$7.25 an hour, the state siphons 40% off the top of all wages and also levies fees, including \$5 a day for rides to their jobs and \$15 a month for laundry.

Turning down work can jeopardize chances of early release in a state that last year granted parole to only 8% of eligible prisoners — an all-time low, and among the worst rates nationwide — though that

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number more than doubled this year after public outcry.

"It is a symptom of a completely, utterly broken system," said Chris England, an Alabama lawmaker pushing for criminal justice reform.

Many prisoners work 40 hours a week outside their facilities and then get weekend passes, allowing them to go home without any supervision or electronic monitoring. So when prisoners are then told they're too dangerous to be permanently released, England said, it looks like "another way to create a cheap labor force that is easily exploited and abused."

Arthur Ptomey, who has worked at various private companies over the past six years, said he was denied parole in 2022 after losing his job at KFC, where he had complained about his low wages. A full-time cook, he was upset that even teenagers working the register were outearning him despite the fact that he had worked there for over a year.

Ptomey is one of 10 current and former prisoners who filed a class-action federal lawsuit last year against state officials, local governments and businesses like McDonald's and Wendy's franchises, contending they perpetuate a system of forced labor akin to a "modern-day form of slavery" that keeps the best workers from being released.

He currently works at Progressive Finishes, one of the state's biggest contractors of prison labor, which says on its website that it has served as a third-party supplier to automotive companies including Honda, General Motors, Ford, Toyota, Nissan, Kia, Volvo, Chrysler and Hyundai.

"For a lot of these jobs, the attitude is the same ... if you don't meet our expectations, we'll just call for somebody else," Ptomey said while on a 48-hour home pass at his mother's house. "I'm grateful to come out and work, but I ain't come in here to be a slave."

Kelly Betts of the corrections department defended the work programs, calling them crucial to the success of inmates preparing to leave prison. But she acknowledged that even those sentenced to life without the possibility of parole are eligible for so-called work release jobs.

That's because in Alabama the department determines which prisoners are employed off site largely based on how well they've behaved behind bars, instead of what put them there. Those working among the civilian population include men and women with records for violent crimes like murder and assault. Many are serving 15 years or longer.

"Many choose work to being confined to a facility all day," Betts said. "In many cases, it is a matter of quality of life. But ultimately, the inmate chooses and is not penalized for non-participation."

Alabama's lockups are chronically understaffed, and it's not unusual for prisoners to work outside their facilities without any correctional oversight. And in some cases, there is no supervision of any kind, which has led to escapes, often referred to as "walkaways."

Asked how prisoners are chosen to work without monitoring, Betts said, "Each inmate's situation is unique, and each inmate is evaluated on his or her own record."

Most companies did not respond to requests for comment, but the handful that did said they had no direct involvement with work release programs.

Home Depot said it would investigate its connection to outdoor furniture maker Wadley Holdings, where some men in the van crash were working. It said it prohibits suppliers from using prison labor and would take action if policy violations are found.

McDonald's said in a statement it does not permit the use of prison labor within its supply chain or at its corporate-owned restaurants and is "committed to promoting ethical employment practices." The fast food giant added that while franchisees operate independently, they are expected to respect human rights and are encouraged to develop similar policies.

Best Western also said it does not participate in personnel matters at its independently owned and operated hotels. Hyundai said it knew some of its suppliers hired inmates for jobs but was not involved in the decision to do so. Honda said it was not aware of any business relationship with Progressive Finishes, which is common with companies and third-party suppliers.

As part of its investigation, the AP analyzed 24 years of Alabama corrections department monthly statistical reports to calculate the amount of money generated via contracts with private companies and

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deductions taken out of prisoners' paychecks.

Reporters also parsed information from more than 83,000 pages of data obtained through a public records request, including the names of inmates involved in Alabama's work programs. In addition to working for public entities — everywhere from landfills to the governor's mansion — they were leased out to at least 500 private businesses between 2018 and mid-March 2024. That information was cross-referenced with an online state database, detailing the crimes that landed people in prison, their sentences, time served, race and good-time credits earned and revoked. The AP analysis faced limitations because some workplace entries were insufficiently defined.

Few prisoner advocates believe outside jobs should be abolished. In Alabama, for instance, those shifts can offer a reprieve from the excessive violence inside the state's institutions. Last year, and in the first six months of 2024, an Alabama inmate died behind bars nearly every day, a rate five times the national average.

But advocates say incarcerated workers should be paid fair wages, given the choice to work without threat of punishment, and granted the same workplace rights and protections guaranteed to other Americans.

Prisoners nationwide cannot organize, protest or strike for better conditions. They also aren't typically classified as employees, whether they're working inside correctional facilities or for outside businesses through prison contracts or work release programs. And unless they are able to prove "willful negligence," it is almost impossible to successfully sue when incarcerated workers are hurt or killed.

Though the Alabama corrections department said it could not provide information about the number of prisoners who died while on outside jobs, the AP tracked down family members of prisoners who lost their lives. One man was killed after being sucked into a machine at a plant operated by massive poultry processor Koch Foods and others died after being struck by vehicles while picking up trash or doing road maintenance on the side of busy highways.

The day of the van accident, Jake Jones had finished his shift at a nearby Quality Inn, where his boss and co-workers told the AP that nothing seemed amiss. He headed to the Alexander City work center, where he was a go-to driver, and grabbed the keys to the white Ford Econoline so he could shuttle his fellow prisoners to their jobs. He had about four hours of driving ahead of him, zipping between a string of companies up to 40 minutes apart.

Tyrone Heard, one of the passengers dropped off before the crash, said Jones had been drinking and that he believed staff knew it. Before heading out, he said he overheard two officers discussing whether they should find another driver.

An hour into the trip, Heard said, Jones "told us he was drunk." At one point, he added, Jones smashed his foot on the gas until the speedometer topped 90 mph.

About two hours later, the van was wrapped around the tree. Heard's uncle, Willie Crayton, was killed instantly. Bruce Clements struggled to breathe and died on the way to the hospital.

The accident report estimated the van's speed was 67 mph upon impact — more than 20 mph over the speed limit. Blood tests were conducted to determine if drugs or alcohol were in the driver's system, but those results have never been released. Police, volunteer firefighters and emergency medical responders would not comment, saying the case remained under investigation.

Betts, the corrections department spokeswoman, said Jones met all the criteria to be an inmate driver: Though he failed drug and alcohol tests in 2018 and 2022 — and another about a month after the accident — he passed his screening test two days before the deadly crash.

And prison guidelines only bar participation of prisoners who escaped or were recaptured within a 10-year period. His escape was in 2010.

Jones, who since has been moved to a higher-security facility, did not respond to questions from the AP.

Some of the men involved in the crash have been released from prison after serving their sentences, but others continue to report to outside jobs.

They still ride past the crash site, marked by a simple cross — with Willie Crayton's hat resting on top. "One dies, get another"

Prison labor is enshrined in the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which banned slavery and

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involuntary servitude – except for those convicted of a crime. That language also was added to the constitutions of many states, though eight of them have removed the so-called punishment clause in recent years after taking the issue to voters.

In 2022, Alabama became one of them, but Gov. Kay Ivey signed an executive order last year giving the corrections department the authority to revoke good-time credits — days shaved off sentences rewarding model behavior — for “refusing to work,” making it harder for even the best prisoners to accelerate their release.

“The people just say that they thought it was unconstitutional, inhumane ... and you come back and say, ‘I don’t care,’” said Robert Earl Council, who is part of the federal lawsuit filed last year that calls for an end to all forced prison labor. “It verifies clearly to me the point that we’ve been trying to drive home ... this is strictly, explicitly about the money.”

Council, also known as Kinetik Justice, spent five years in solitary confinement for helping lead prison work stoppages — including one that spread to facilities in several other states. At one point, he and other inmates also began hunger strikes, demanding an end to free labor.

Throughout the state’s history of prison labor, money has been a key driver.

Soon after the Civil War, when the South’s once-booming economy was in tatters, Alabama turned to convict leasing. Young, mostly Black men were arrested for petty crimes like gambling or vagrancy and hired out to private companies. They were forced to build railroads, work in sawmills and toil under deplorable conditions in coal mines, including those owned by U.S. Steel — the biggest company in the world at the time.

No state in America earned more from convict leasing than Alabama — at one point, it accounted for more than 70% of all annual revenue. It was also where companies made the most money. By the time Alabama became the last state to officially ban the practice in 1928, thousands of prisoners had died from rampant disease, dangerous working conditions and poor treatment. Incarcerated workers were treated as disposable, reflected in a quote at the time: “One dies, get another.”

Alabama shifted its strategy when industries began to modernize and mechanize, said Douglas Blackmon, whose book “Slavery by Another Name” chronicles the state’s dark past of convict leasing.

“Up until that moment, the practices were so profitable for both government officials and industry ... that they would always find a way to continue the system,” he said. “It’s something that people have figured out how to make a lot of money on again. And so the practice reemerges.”

Fast forward to the 1970s, when conditions were so bad — from abysmal treatment of inmates with mental illnesses to extreme violence — that a U.S. federal judge took control of Alabama’s entire prison system.

That’s when the Department of Corrections decided to classify inmates largely by their behavior behind bars rather than their criminal histories, ostensibly to help alleviate overcrowding. Under the new standards, eligible participants would not only get paid for their outside jobs, but also have their sentences reduced for every day worked.

The system was adopted over the objections of Oscar Adams, the state’s first Black Supreme Court justice, who noted that the vast majority of those accepted would not get “good time” because prisoners sentenced to more than 10 years — later pushed to 15 — were ineligible. At the time, they represented the bulk of the prison population.

That population continued to grow, mostly due to historically harsh sentencing laws that put people away for life, even if they were convicted of nonviolent crimes. And so did its workforce.

Today, the state has a patchwork of programs that includes not just work centers — including jobs for the city and state paying \$2 a day — but also work release programs operated at the county level, sometimes by nonprofit organizations. They receive about \$10 a day for every person they house, plus hefty fees paid by prisoners for things like mandatory drug testing.

Some see the largely autonomous county programs as exploitative, but others call them a lifeline.

“It taught me how to be a man,” said Matthew Smith, who has a history of drug addiction and worked at a poultry plant through a community corrections work release program. “It taught me how to get up and go to work every day.”

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Even prisoners who are happy working often complain about the steep pre-tax deductions taken by the state. After a 40-hour week, many say they end up pocketing only about \$100 to \$200.

But for the hundreds of private companies that hire them, the benefits are robust. Businesses pay at least minimum wage, but can earn up to \$2,400 in tax credits for some inmates hired. Amid crushing staff shortages, they can rely on a steady, pliable workforce available to take extra shifts, fill in at the last minute when civilian workers call in sick and also work holidays. And if an incarcerated worker is injured or even killed on the job, the company may not be liable.

The same is true for businesses across the country. As part of its larger investigation, the AP spoke to more than 120 current and former prisoners and relatives of those who died on the job. Reporters found that the use of incarcerated workers is so pervasive nationwide that prison labor has seeped into the supply chains of some of the country's largest companies and retailers — and also goods being exported.

Trader Joe's, Cargill, McDonald's and other companies responded to that reporting earlier this year by either cutting ties with correctional departments or third-party suppliers or indicating they were in the process of doing so.

In Alabama, the roster of companies hiring inmates is vast.

In the past five years, over 500 prisoners have worked at local Wendy's, McDonald's, Burger King and Applebee's restaurants alone. They also have cleaned hotels, manufactured kitchen cabinets, made yarn used in carpets, constructed doors for houses sold at national home stores like Lowe's, and built trailers pulled behind semi trucks. They've helped keep cities running across the state, and worked at public country clubs and even the Supreme Court.

Alabama collected more than \$13 million in work release fees in fiscal year 2024. But the prisoner lawsuit filed in federal court late last year with backing from the powerful AFL-CIO federation of unions, estimates the corrections department actually rakes in about \$450 million in benefits from prison labor annually. That takes into consideration money saved by not having to hire civilians to maintain the sprawling prison system or work for government agencies.

The suit also alleges that prisoners participating in work programs with good disciplinary records have been hardest hit by plummeting parole rates, with Black workers disproportionately affected.

A decade ago, nearly half the prisoners coming up for parole were released, with no clear racial disparity, it noted. But that changed several years ago when the board began disregarding its own guidelines and denying early releases to those who scored high enough to qualify, based on criteria like their crimes, perceived risk to society and behavior behind bars. In fiscal year 2023, there were 3,583 parole hearings that resulted in 3,286 denials — including one involving a man who had been dead for 10 days.

Alabama's attorney general's office did not respond to a request for comment. But in successfully moving for dismissal of a similar state lawsuit filed by inmates last year, it said "slavery and involuntary servitude do not exist in the state's prison system."

Those who take part in work release programs do so voluntarily, the motion noted.

For members of the public buying a Blizzard at Dairy Queen or having their cars worked on in a local garage, it can be hard to distinguish incarcerated employees from their civilian counterparts. In most cases, they dress in the same clothes or uniforms. And even those clearly identified as prisoners doing more traditional jobs like road work go unnoticed by most busy motorists speeding down the state's roads.

That was true of Braxton Moon, his mother said. He told her how terrified he was by how dangerously close cars whizzed past him, even as he held a sign warning drivers to slow down.

Angela Lindsey pleaded with her son to quit — he was making only \$2 a day. But he told her that working beat being locked up around the clock.

Two weeks later, in August 2015, Lindsey received a phone call from her cousin asking: "Is it true?" An officer at the work center had posted a picture of her son on Facebook with the words "Rest in peace."

She frantically called the center over and over, only to be hung up on each time. "All of this was before I even got anything — anything — from the state," she said. "It was on social media. It was on the news."

And then it was confirmed: Her son had been struck by a tractor-trailer in a hit and run along the side of Interstate 65.

He had died instantly. He was just 21.

What's next for the man charged with killing UnitedHealthcare's CEO?

By PHILIP MARCELO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The man accused of gunning down United Healthcare's CEO outside a Manhattan hotel is now jailed in New York, awaiting arraignment Monday on a state murder indictment after he was returned to the city in dramatic fashion to face charges in multiple courts.

Shackled and wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, 26-year-old Luigi Mangione was escorted Thursday by heavily armed police officers and whisked by air from Pennsylvania to Manhattan, where he appeared in a packed courtroom on federal charges that could bring the death penalty.

The Ivy League graduate, who prosecutors say inveighed against the health insurance industry and wealthy executives in his writings, was not required to enter a plea to federal charges of murder, stalking and firearms charges in the Dec. 4 killing of Brian Thompson. The state indictment charges Mangione with murder as a terrorist act.

Here's what's next in the cases:

Jailed in Brooklyn

Mangione is being held without bail at Metropolitan Detention Center, the same federal jail where hip-hop mogul Sean "Diddy" Combs and cryptocurrency fraudster Sam Bankman-Fried are currently detained.

The notorious Brooklyn facility, the only federal lockup in the city, has been variously described as "hell on earth" and an "ongoing tragedy" because of deplorable conditions, rampant violence, dysfunction and multiple deaths.

The federal Bureau of Prisons has said it is increasing staffing to make up for staggering shortfalls, but conditions have been so stark at the jail, which houses about 1,100 inmates, that some judges have refused to send people there.

State charges pending

Besides the federal charges filed Thursday, Mangione must still answer to a state murder indictment.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office charged Mangione with murder as an act of terrorism, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison without parole. He is also charged with state weapons offenses and possession of a fake ID.

Prosecutors have said the two cases will proceed on parallel tracks, with the state charges expected to go to trial first.

Mangione's lawyer, Karen Friedman Agnifilo, argued in court Thursday that the terrorism allegations in the state case and stalking charges in the federal complaint appear to be at odds.

"Those are two completely different theories," she said. "These seem like different cases."

The U.S. Supreme Court in 2019 upheld a longstanding constitutional rule allowing state and federal governments to prosecute someone for the same crime.

Next court appearance

Mangione is set to be arraigned Monday in Manhattan on the state indictment, according to Bragg's office.

The University of Pennsylvania alum, who hailed from a prominent Maryland family and had also lived in Hawaii, had been expected to be arraigned Thursday on the state charges before the federal charges preempted that appearance.

In the federal case, Mangione could next return to court for a bail hearing or for a preliminary hearing if prosecutors don't obtain a grand jury indictment by mid-January.

Death penalty looms

New York effectively effectively abolished its death penalty by 2007 and the last execution in the state was in 1963. But the federal death penalty remains in effect.

The federal complaint filed against Mangione includes a count of murder by firearm, which carries the possibility of the death penalty if he is convicted.

Federal prosecutors have not said if they will seek the death penalty. That decision will be made in coming months by Justice Department officials in Washington, likely after President-elect Donald Trump

is sworn in on Jan. 20.

President Joe Biden's administration put a moratorium on federal executions soon after he took office in 2021, but that hasn't stopped federal prosecutors from seeking the death penalty.

In contrast, Trump's administration carried out 13 executions in the last six months of his first term.

Pennsylvania charges on standby

Mangione also faces forgery and firearms charges in Pennsylvania stemming from his arrest last week, but those will likely not be addressed until the New York charges are resolved.

He initially fought attempts to be returned to New York, but ultimately waived extradition and a preliminary hearing on the Pennsylvania charges on Thursday.

"He is now in their custody," Blair County District Attorney Peter Weeks said after Mangione was extradited to New York. "We intend to keep our case active and we intend to essentially revisit the case when the defendant is available for prosecution in Blair County."

US drops \$10M terrorism bounty offered for capture of Syrian rebel leader who ousted Assad

By ABBY SEWELL and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — The Biden administration said Friday it has decided not to pursue a \$10 million reward it had offered for the capture of a Syrian rebel leader whose forces led the ouster of President Bashar Assad earlier this month.

The announcement followed a meeting in Damascus between the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, Ahmad al-Sharaa, who was once aligned with al-Qaida, and the top U.S. diplomat for the Middle East, Barbara Leaf, who led the first U.S. diplomatic delegation into Syria since Assad's ouster.

HTS remains designated a foreign terrorist organization, and Leaf would not say if sanctions stemming from that designation would be eased. But, she told reporters that al-Sharaa had committed to renouncing terrorism and as a result the U.S. would no longer offer the reward.

"We discussed the critical need to ensure terrorist groups cannot pose a threat inside Syria or externally, including to the U.S. and our partners in the region," she said.

"Based on our discussion, I told him that we would not be pursuing the Rewards for Justice reward offered," Leaf said in a telephone news conference from Jordan where she traveled after visiting Syria.

Leaf and other U.S. officials have said al-Sharaa's public statements about protecting minority and women's rights are welcomed, but they remain skeptical that he will follow through on them in the long run.

"He came across as pragmatic," she said. "It was a good first meeting. We will judge by deeds not just by words."

The U.S. delegation's visit was aimed at pushing for an inclusive government and seeking information on the whereabouts of missing American journalist Austin Tice.

Along with Leaf, former special envoy for Syria Daniel Rubinstein and the Biden administration's chief envoy for hostage negotiations, Roger Carstens, joined the meetings with interim leaders and members of civil society.

Carstens said there was no new information confirming Tice's fate or whereabouts but vowed that efforts to find him would continue. He traveled previously to Lebanon to seek information. More U.S. officials are expected to visit Syria in the coming days to pick up the search, he said.

"We're going to be like bulldogs on this," Carstens said, adding that the U.S. was focusing on about six prisons where it believed Tice may have been held in the past. He said the U.S. also had information about three more prisons where Tice might have been incarcerated, and up to 40 sites may end up being examined for evidence of Tice's presence.

Tice, who has had his work published by The Washington Post, McClatchy newspapers and others, disappeared at a checkpoint in a contested area west of Damascus as the Syrian civil war intensified.

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

holding him.

Leaf's team was the first group of American diplomats to formally visit Syria in more than a decade, since the U.S. shuttered its embassy in Damascus in 2012, although a small number of U.S. diplomats had been assigned to political advisory roles with military units inside Syria since then.

Shortly before the delegation arrived in Damascus, the U.S. military said it had conducted airstrikes in northeastern Syria on Thursday, killing a leader of the Islamic State group and one other militant. The strike was part of an ongoing effort to prevent IS insurgents from taking advantage of the upheaval in Syria, including any plan to release the more than 8,000 IS prisoners held in detention by Kurds who have partnered with the U.S., Central Command said in a statement.

The Pentagon revealed Thursday that the U.S. had doubled the number of its forces in Syria to fight IS before Assad's fall. There are roughly 2,000 there now.

The diplomats' visit to Damascus will not result in the immediate reopening of the U.S. embassy, which is under the protection of the Czech government, according to U.S. officials, who said decisions on diplomatic recognition will be made when the new Syrian authorities make their intentions clear.

Trump adds Europe to the list of US trade partners he's threatening with tariffs

By JOSH BOAK and RAF CASERT Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump on Friday added the 27 countries that make up the European Union to the list of trade partners he's threatening with tariffs — unless the group takes steps to import more U.S. goods.

"I told the European Union that they must make up their tremendous deficit with the United States by the large scale purchase of our oil and gas," Trump posted shortly after 1 a.m. on social media. "Otherwise, it is TARIFFS all the way!!!"

In 2023, the United States' trade imbalance with the EU on goods was \$209 billion, according to the Census Bureau. There were \$576 billion in imports from Europe and \$367 billion in exports from the United States.

Trump's transition team did not respond to questions seeking greater clarity on the message, which for all its bluntness was unclear on next steps.

When Trump threatened Canada and Mexico with 25% tariffs in November, the leaders of both countries spoke with him to try and resolve any tensions. But the European Union lacks a single figure who can make the purchase commitments of natural gas and oil on behalf of its 27 member states that Trump is seeking.

EU Commission spokesman Olof Gill said in reaction to Trump's post that "we are ready to discuss with President-elect Trump how we can further strengthen an already strong relationship, including by discussing our common interests in the energy sector."

Gill noted that the EU is already "committed to phasing out energy imports from Russia and diversifying our sources of supply. We're not going to go into any details about what that might entail in the future, given that the new administration isn't even in place yet."

Scott Lincicome, a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute, said it was difficult to parse what Trump was trying to say relative to European trade, given that natural gas exports to the continent are already up after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

"What we really need to chalk all of this up to is Trump laying the groundwork for future negotiations," Lincicome said. "This is for better or worse a lot of what we're going to see for the next four years."

While there is a \$209 billion trade imbalance, a more complicated relationship lies beneath those numbers. A company such as German automaker BMW can import parts needed to assemble vehicles at its factory in South Carolina, such that the trade totals also reflect the flow of goods within European companies that employ U.S. workers.

More than half of the liquified natural gas imported by the EU and the United Kingdom in 2023 came from the United States, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. The volume of LNG going

to the EU and UK has tripled since 2021.

On Tuesday, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm issued a statement based off a new study that unfettered exports of LNG could increase prices domestically and increase carbon emissions. Trump ran for president on the idea that increased oil and natural gas production would reduce costs for U.S. voters who were left frustrated by a 2022 inflationary spike that still lingers.

Trump's demands on Europe to buy more oil and natural gas were not especially new. He also made them during his initial term as president and in 2018 reached a deal with Jean-Claude Juncker, then-president of the European Commission, to sell more LNG to Europe.

The problem with that agreement, as noted by the University of Pennsylvania's Kleinman Center for Energy Policy, is that the U.S. "cannot force companies to send products to a specific region or country" and the EU cannot force its members to buy American fossil fuels.

What will Syria's future look like? The answer could lie in other Arab countries' recent pasts

By The Associated Press undefined

CAIRO (AP) — Even with hopes running high, so much can go wrong when a country ousts a longtime dictator and tries to start anew. The Middle Eastern and North African nations that attempted to transition to democracy in recent years can attest to that.

Now it's Syria's turn to try to get it right.

It's hard to draw lessons from the experiences of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Sudan since the wave of Arab Spring uprisings that began in 2011, as each country's dynamics are different. But there are common themes.

In some cases, "the Revolution" was lost when armed factions battled it out for power or an ambitious would-be strongman emerged. In others, the military refused to cede control to civilians or foreign countries fueled conflicts by backing one side or another with money and weapons.

Questions must be asked before major decisions are made that can spark a destabilizing backlash: How do you deal with the old police state — purge or compromise? What do you do first, hold elections or write a constitution? And how do you fix a crippled economy riddled with corruption?

So far, Syria's transition has been surprisingly smooth. But it's only been two weeks since President Bashar Assad was toppled, and many of those same dangers lurk in the background.

The insurgents who ousted Assad are rooted in extremist Islamist ideology, and though they have vowed to create a pluralist system, it isn't clear how or whether they plan to share power.

Other armed factions — or even remnants of Assad's feared security forces — could lash out. And it remains to be seen whether the Kurds, who hold autonomous rule in the east, will be brought back into the fold, especially when Turkey fiercely opposes the main Kurdish faction.

Groups such as the Alawites, to whom Assad's family belongs, fear being squeezed out of any role, or worse, being targeted for revenge.

Here's a look at the power dynamics in some of these other countries:

Yemen

Protests forced Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign in November 2011, ending his 33-year rule. Under a deal brokered by Gulf countries, Saleh received immunity and handed his powers to his vice president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

Hadi was to serve as caretaker president for two years, during which a new constitution would be written, leading eventually to elections. But Saleh, who remained in the capital, Sanaa, allied himself with Houthi rebels based in the north — his longtime enemy -- in a bid to regain power.

Backed by Saleh's loyalists, the Houthis seized Sanaa and much of the populated center of the country. Hadi and his government fled south, where they are based in the city of Aden and control southern and much of eastern Yemen.

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A Saudi-led coalition of Arab countries launched a bombardment campaign aimed at restoring Hadi's government. Since then, Yemen has been torn by civil war that has killed more than 150,000 people and caused one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

The war became a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yemen has remained split between the Houthis, who later broke with Saleh's camp and killed Saleh, and Hadi's government. Various militias nominally back Hadi but also have their own interests and are funded by the United Arab Emirates.

Libya

Libya's Moammar Gadhafi met the most violent end of any of the region's strongmen. An uprising turned into a civil war, and then with NATO backing, the rebels seized the capital, Tripoli, and killed a fleeing Gadhafi in October 2011.

The oil-rich nation quickly splintered into regions controlled by a dizzying array of militias, including local and tribal groups, nationalists and mainstream Islamist factions, and diehard jihadis such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State group.

Attempts to stitch it back together with elections or agreements have failed.

A disputed parliamentary election in 2014 led to two rival administrations: one in the east backed by powerful military commander Khalifa Hifter, and the other in the west based in Tripoli that is backed by militias and recognized by the United Nations.

Hifter tried to seize the west in 2019, triggering a 14-month war. Then, an attempt at a unity government and new elections fell apart, and once again Libya was left split between east-west governments.

Foreign powers, including Russia, Turkey and the UAE, backed various sides. European countries have funneled money to the Tripoli government trying to stem the flow of migrants from Africa through Libya toward Europe, but the money has largely helped fund militias. Efforts to end the conflict remain deadlocked.

Sudan

In Sudan, the powerful military has thwarted attempts to transition to an elected civilian government.

Pro-democracy protests prompted the military to remove strongman Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, and the generals took power for themselves. The protesters stayed in the streets, demanding a handover of power to civilians, despite a crackdown that killed hundreds.

Finally, the generals agreed to a power-sharing deal with the pro-democracy alliance that led the protests.

A civilian prime minister led a Cabinet backed by a council headed by two powerful generals, including one notorious for atrocities committed in Darfur and during the 2019 crackdown on protesters. But just before the military was supposed to hand over the council's leadership to civilians, the generals orchestrated a coup.

A few months later, in April 2023, the generals turned on each other, triggering a war in which their forces have battled throughout the country, including in the capital, Khartoum. The war has been marked by atrocities, caused widespread hunger and driven millions from their homes, becoming the world's worst displacement crisis.

Tunisia

The Arab Spring started in Tunisia more than 13 years ago. Until recently, the country was hailed as a role model in the transition to democracy. It held free elections and drafted a constitution lauded by Western rights groups.

But since being elected in 2019, President Kais Saied has increased his powers in what activists call a backslide from democracy. Saied temporarily suspended the parliament, redrafted the constitution and launched a crackdown on his opponents, imprisoning hundreds allegedly for undermining state security — a claim autocrats have long used to stamp out dissent.

Egypt

The military has been the main power player in Egypt. It seized direct control after 18 days of protests forced longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak to resign on Feb. 11, 2011.

Within 15 months, parliamentary and presidential elections were held. The Muslim Brotherhood, the most powerful opposition force during Mubarak's era, swept both votes. Despite repeatedly insisting it wouldn't

seek to dominate politics, it formed a majority in parliament and created a Brotherhood-led government.

Over the next year, turmoil increased over accusations by opponents that the Brotherhood was unfairly imposing its will on the country, including writing an Islamist-leaning constitution. Many, including the large Coptic Christian minority, feared Islamist rule.

Amid anti-Brotherhood protests, the military stepped in and removed President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, a move supported by many secular parties and activists. It launched a ferocious crackdown on the Brotherhood, killing hundreds. Militant violence swelled with attacks on security forces and Christians.

Military chief Abdel Fattah el-Sissi was elected president in 2014 and has since increased the influence of the army on the government and economy. The government has gone further than Mubarak did in stifling dissent, arresting Islamists and secular activists, and silencing media criticism.

A teenager stabs a 7-year-old to death and wounds a teacher and 3 more children in a Croatian school

By DARKO BANDIC Associated Press

ZAGREB, Croatia (AP) — A knife-wielding teenager walked into a school in Croatia's capital on Friday, stabbed a 7-year-old girl to death and wounded three more children and their teacher, authorities said.

The attack took place around 9:50 a.m. on the last day of school before Christmas at the Precko Elementary School in the Zagreb neighborhood of the same name. It caters for children between the ages of 7 and 15.

"The attacker is a 19-year-old who is a former student of that school and still lives nearby," said Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic. "Eventually he started injuring himself. Police prevented him from committing suicide."

Bozinovic said the attacker had mental health problems and had made a previous attempt to kill himself. "It is hard to say this person was mentally balanced."

School attacks are rare in Croatia and in the Balkans as a whole, although in May 2023, a teenager in neighboring Serbia opened fire at a school in the capital, Belgrade, killing nine fellow students and a school guard.

Video footage broadcast by Croatian media on Friday showed children running away from the school building and a medical helicopter landing in the schoolyard.

Authorities in Croatia declared Saturday a day of mourning and canceled some of the Christmas festivities. Candidates for the upcoming presidential election said they were temporarily suspending their campaigns because of the tragedy.

President Zoran Milanovic said "there are no words to describe the grief over the horrible and unthinkable tragedy that shocked us all today." Milanovic called for unity and an effort to ensure that schools are a safe and carefree place for children.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at a government session that he was "appalled" by the attack and that authorities are still working to determine exactly what happened..

Takeaways from The Associated Press' reporting on prison labor in Alabama

By ROBIN McDOWELL and MARGIE MASON Associated Press

DADEVILLE, Ala. (AP) — No state has a longer, more profit-driven history of contracting prisoners out to private companies than Alabama. With a sprawling labor system that dates back more than 150 years — including the brutal convict leasing era that replaced slavery — it has constructed a template for the commercialization of mass incarceration.

Best Western, Bama Budweiser and Burger King are among the more than 500 businesses to lease incarcerated workers from one of the most violent, overcrowded and unruly prison systems in the U.S. in the past five years alone, The Associated Press found as part of a two-year investigation into prison labor.

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The cheap, reliable labor force has generated more than \$250 million for the state since 2000 — money garnished from prisoners' paychecks.

Here are highlights from the AP's reporting:

Where are the jobs and what do they pay?

Most jobs are inside facilities, where the state's inmates — who are disproportionately Black — can be sentenced to hard labor and forced to work for free doing everything from mopping floors to laundry. But in the past five years alone, more than 10,000 inmates have logged a combined 17 million work hours outside Alabama's prison walls, for entities like city and county governments and businesses that range from major car-part manufacturers and meat-processing plants to distribution centers for major retailers like Walmart, the AP determined.

While those working at private companies can at least earn a little money, they face possible punishment if they refuse, from being denied family visits to being sent to high-security prisons, which are so dangerous that the federal government filed a lawsuit four years ago that remains pending, calling the treatment of prisoners unconstitutional.

Turning down work can jeopardize chances of early release in a state that last year granted parole to only 8% of eligible prisoners — an all-time low, and among the worst rates nationwide — though that number more than doubled this year after public outcry.

What is oversight like for the prisoners?

Unlike many states, those working among the civilian population include men and women with records for violent crimes like murder and assault. Many are serving 15 years or longer.

It's not unusual for Alabama prisoners to work outside their facilities without any correctional oversight. And in some cases, there is no supervision of any kind, which has led to escapes, often referred to as "walkaways."

Kelly Betts of the corrections department defended the work programs, calling them crucial to the success of inmates preparing to leave prison. But she acknowledged that even those sentenced to life without the possibility of parole are eligible for so-called work release jobs.

"Each inmate's situation is unique, and each inmate is evaluated on his or her own record," Betts said.

Most companies did not respond to requests for comment, those that did said they had policies against the use of forced labor and prison labor and would investigate.

How much money does this involve?

As part of its investigation, the AP analyzed 20 years of Alabama corrections department monthly statistical reports to calculate the more than \$250 million generated for the state since 2000 — money taken in via contracts with private companies and deductions taken out of prisoners' paychecks.

Reporters also parsed information from more than 83,000 pages of data obtained through a public records request, including the names of inmates involved in Alabama's work programs. Over the past five years, prisoners were hired by public employers — working at landfills and even the governor's mansion — and by around at least 500 private companies. That information was cross-referenced with an online state database, detailing the crimes that landed people in prison, their sentences, time served, race and good-time credits earned and revoked.

What do prisoner advocates say?

Few prisoner advocates believe outside jobs should be abolished. In Alabama, for instance, those shifts can offer a reprieve from the excessive violence inside the state's institutions. Last year, and in the first six months of 2024, an Alabama inmate died behind bars nearly every day, a rate five times the national average.

But advocates say incarcerated workers should be paid fair wages, given the choice to work without threat of punishment, and granted the same workplace rights and protections guaranteed to other Americans.

Prisoners nationwide cannot organize, protest or strike for better conditions. They also aren't typically classified as employees, whether they're working inside correctional facilities or for outside businesses through prison contracts or work release programs. And unless they are able to prove "willful negligence,"

it is almost impossible to successfully sue when incarcerated workers are hurt or killed.

Giant sloths and mastodons lived with humans for millennia in the Americas, new discoveries suggest

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

SAO PAULO (AP) — Sloths weren't always slow-moving, furry tree-dwellers. Their prehistoric ancestors were huge — up to 4 tons (3.6 metric tons) — and when startled, they brandished immense claws.

For a long time, scientists believed the first humans to arrive in the Americas soon killed off these giant ground sloths through hunting, along with many other massive animals like mastodons, saber-toothed cats and dire wolves that once roamed North and South America.

But new research from several sites is starting to suggest that people came to the Americas earlier — perhaps far earlier — than once thought. These findings hint at a remarkably different life for these early Americans, one in which they may have spent millennia sharing prehistoric savannas and wetlands with enormous beasts.

"There was this idea that humans arrived and killed everything off very quickly — what's called 'Pleistocene overkill,'" said Daniel Odess, an archaeologist at White Sands National Park in New Mexico. But new discoveries suggest that "humans were existing alongside these animals for at least 10,000 years, without making them go extinct."

Some of the most tantalizing clues come from an archaeological site in central Brazil, called Santa Elina, where bones of giant ground sloths show signs of being manipulated by humans. Sloths like these once lived from Alaska to Argentina, and some species had bony structures on their backs, called osteoderms — a bit like the plates of modern armadillos — that may have been used to make decorations.

In a lab at the University of Sao Paulo, researcher Mírian Pacheco holds in her palm a round, penny-sized sloth fossil. She notes that its surface is surprisingly smooth, the edges appear to have been deliberately polished, and there's a tiny hole near one edge.

"We believe it was intentionally altered and used by ancient people as jewelry or adornment," she said. Three similar "pendant" fossils are visibly different from unworked osteoderms on a table — those are rough-surfaced and without any holes.

These artifacts from Santa Elina are roughly 27,000 years old — more than 10,000 years before scientists once thought that humans arrived in the Americas.

Originally researchers wondered if the craftsmen were working on already old fossils. But Pacheco's research strongly suggests that ancient people were carving "fresh bones" shortly after the animals died.

Her findings, together with other recent discoveries, could help rewrite the tale of when humans first arrived in the Americas — and the effect they had on the environment they found.

"There's still a big debate," Pacheco said.

Scientists know that the first humans emerged in Africa, then moved into Europe and Asia-Pacific, before finally making their way to the last continental frontier, the Americas. But questions remain about the final chapter of the human origins story.

Pacheco was taught in high school the theory that most archaeologists held throughout the 20th century. "What I learned in school was that Clovis was first," she said.

Clovis is a site in New Mexico, where archaeologists in the 1920s and 1930s found distinctive projectile points and other artifacts dated to between 11,000 and 13,000 years ago.

This date happens to coincide with the end of the last Ice Age, a time when an ice-free corridor likely emerged in North America — giving rise to an idea about how early humans moved into the continent after crossing the Bering land bridge from Asia.

And because the fossil record shows the widespread decline of American megafauna starting around the same time — with North America losing 70% of its large mammals, and South America losing more than 80% — many researchers surmised that humans' arrival led to mass extinctions.

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"It was a nice story for a while, when all the timing lined up," said paleoanthropologist Briana Pobiner at the Smithsonian Institution's Human Origins Program. "But it doesn't really work so well anymore."

In the past 30 years, new research methods — including ancient DNA analysis and new laboratory techniques — coupled with the examination of additional archaeological sites and inclusion of more diverse scholars across the Americas, have upended the old narrative and raised new questions, especially about timing.

"Anything older than about 15,000 years still draws intense scrutiny," said Richard Fariña, a paleontologist at the University of the Republic in Montevideo, Uruguay. "But really compelling evidence from more and more older sites keeps coming to light."

In Sao Paulo and at the Federal University of Sao Carlos, Pacheco studies the chemical changes that occur when a bone becomes a fossil. This allows her team to analyze when the sloth osteoderms were likely modified.

"We found that the osteoderms were carved before the fossilization process" in "fresh bones" — meaning anywhere from a few days to a few years after the sloths died, but not thousands of years later.

Her team also tested and ruled out several natural processes, like erosion and animal gnawing. The research was published last year in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*.

One of her collaborators, paleontologist Thaís Pansani, recently based at the Smithsonian Institution, is analyzing whether similar-aged sloth bones found at Santa Elina were charred by human-made fires, which burn at different temperatures than natural wildfires.

Her preliminary results suggest that the fresh sloth bones were present at human campsites — whether burned deliberately in cooking, or simply nearby, isn't clear. She is also testing and ruling out other possible causes for the black markings, such as natural chemical discoloration.

The first site widely accepted as older than Clovis was in Monte Verde, Chile.

Buried beneath a peat bog, researchers discovered 14,500-year-old stone tools, pieces of preserved animal hides, and various edible and medicinal plants.

"Monte Verde was a shock. You're here at the end of the world, with all this organic stuff preserved," said Vanderbilt University archaeologist Tom Dillehay, a longtime researcher at Monte Verde.

Other archaeological sites suggest even earlier dates for human presence in the Americas.

Among the oldest sites is Arroyo del Vizcaíno in Uruguay, where researchers are studying apparent human-made "cut marks" on animal bones dated to around 30,000 years ago.

At New Mexico's White Sands, researchers have uncovered human footprints dated to between 21,000 and 23,000 years ago, as well as similar-aged tracks of giant mammals. But some archaeologists say it's hard to imagine that humans would repeatedly traverse a site and leave no stone tools.

"They've made a strong case, but there are still some things about that site that puzzle me," said David Meltzer, an archaeologist at Southern Methodist University. "Why would people leave footprints over a long period of time, but never any artifacts?"

Odess at White Sands said that he expects and welcomes such challenges. "We didn't set out to find the oldest anything — we've really just followed the evidence where it leads," he said.

While the exact timing of humans' arrival in the Americas remains contested — and may never be known — it seems clear that if the first people arrived earlier than once thought, they didn't immediately decimate the giant beasts they encountered.

And the White Sands footprints preserve a few moments of their early interactions.

As Odess interprets them, one set of tracks shows "a giant ground sloth going along on four feet" when it encounters the footprints of a small human who's recently dashed by. The huge animal "stops and rears up on hind legs, shuffles around, then heads off in a different direction."

In Florida, the Miccosukee fight to protect the Everglades in the face of climate change

By DORANY PINEDA and REBECCA BLACKWELL Associated Press

EVERGLADES, Fla. (AP) — As a boy, when the water was low Talbert Cypress from the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida rummaged through the Everglades' forests, swam in its swampy ponds and fished in its canals.

But the vast wetlands near Miami have radically changed since Cypress was younger. Now 42 and tribal council chairman, Cypress said water levels are among the biggest changes. Droughts are drier and longer. Prolonged floods are drowning tree islands sacred to them. Native wildlife have dwindled.

"It's basically extremes now," he said.

Tribal elder Michael John Frank put it this way: "The Everglades is beautiful, but it's just a skeleton of the way it used to be."

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is part of a series of on how tribes and Indigenous communities are coping with and combating climate change.

For centuries, the Everglades has been the tribe's home. But decades of massive engineering projects for development and agriculture severed the wetlands to about half its original size, devastating an ecosystem that's sustained them. Tribe members say water mismanagement has contributed to fires, floods and water pollution in their communities and cultural sites. Climate change, and the fossil fuel activities that caused it, are ongoing threats.

The Miccosukee people have long fought to heal and protect what remains. They were historically reluctant to engage with the outside world due to America's violent legacy against Indigenous people. But with a new tribal administration, the tribe has played an increasingly collaborative and leadership role in healing the Everglades.

They're working to stop oil exploration and successfully fought a wilderness designation that would have cut their access to ancestral lands. They've pushed for a project to reconnect the western Everglades with the larger ecosystem while helping to control invasive species and reintroducing raccoons, hawks and other native animals. In August they signed a co-stewardship agreement for some of South Florida's natural landscapes. They've held prayer walks, launched campaigns to raise awareness of important issues and used airboat tours as public classrooms.

Even so, a new report on the progress of Everglades work acknowledges a lack of meaningful and consistent engagement with the Miccosukee and Seminole tribes. It calls for applying Indigenous knowledge to restoration efforts and a steady partnership with tribes, whose longstanding, intimate and reciprocal relationship with the environment can help with understanding historical and present ecological conditions.

The Miccosukee's past fuels their activism today

For generations, the Miccosukee people would make pilgrimages from northern Florida to the Everglades to fish, hunt and hold religious ceremonies. When the Seminole Wars broke out in 1817, the tribe navigated the vast terrain better than the U.S. Army. By the late 1850s, Col. Gustavus Loomis had seared every tribal village and field in a region known as the Big Cypress, forcing the Miccosukee and Seminole people to seek refuge on tree islands deep in the Everglades.

"That's the reason we're here today. We often look at the Everglades as our protector during that time. And so now, it's our turn to protect the Everglades," said Cypress.

Many of the Everglades' modern problems began in the 1940s when the region was drained to build cities and plant crops. Over time, the ecosystems where the Miccosukee people hunted, fished and gathered plants, held sacred rituals and put their deceased to rest, have been destroyed.

A state-federal project to clean the water and rehydrate the landscape aims to undo much of the damage. But water management decisions and restoration efforts have flooded or parched lands where tribe members live and hold ceremonies.

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That's a reason the tribe has pushed for decades for a comprehensive response with the Western Everglades Restoration Project. Members have spoken at public meetings, written letters to federal agencies, lobbied with state and federal leaders while gathering with stakeholders to hear their concerns. If all goes right, the project will clean polluted water, improve hydrology, provide flood protection and reduce the likelihood and severity of wildfires. Groundbreaking for the project began in July there .

Still, there are concerns about community flood risks and whether the project will do enough to improve water quality and quantity after a part of the plan was removed.

A second engineered wetland that would have cleaned water was removed from the project proposal after landowners wouldn't give up their lands. The area's geology was also deemed too porous to sustain it. In the absence of an alternative, some people worry water will not meet standards.

Even so, Curtis Osceola, chief of staff for the Miccosukee Tribe, said of the project: "If we get this done, we will have forever changed the future for the Miccosukee and Seminole."

Victory in fight over wilderness designation

In a region of the Everglades now known as the Big Cypress National Preserve, environmental activist and Miccosukee tribe member Betty Osceola learned as a child to spear hunt and subsist off the land like her ancestors did. It's where she still lives, in one of 15 traditional villages that a few hundred Miccosukee and Seminole people also call home.

In its cypress swamps and sawgrass prairies, they hunt, gather medicinal plants and hold important events. It's home to ceremonial and burial grounds, and to the endangered Florida panther.

The National Park Service wanted to designate the preserve as wilderness to protect it from human impacts. The tribe pushed back, saying it would have significantly affected their traditional ways of life, limited access to their homelands and ignored the critical stewardship they've provided for centuries. Allowing Indigenous people to remain caretakers of their lands and waters, numerous studies have shown, are critical to protecting biodiversity, forests and fighting climate change.

After a stern fight involving campaigns, a petition, testimonials and support from numerous government officials, the tribe succeeded.

The National Park Service listened to the tribe's concerns about the legal conflicts the designation would have on their tribal rights, said Osceola, the Miccosukee's chief of staff. Although they continue objecting to the agency's advancing proposal to expand trail systems in the preserve, which the tribe said are near or past culturally significant sites, "they did listen to us on the wilderness designation and at least they're not, at this time, proceeding with any such designation," he added.

The Miccosukee continue pushing to phase out oil drilling in Big Cypress, writing op-eds and working with local, state and federal governments to stop more oil exploration by acquiring mineral rights in the preserve.

Elders look to the next generation to protect the Everglades

On a windy afternoon, Frank, the tribal elder, and Hector Tigertail, 18, sat under a chickee, or stilt house, on the tribe's reservation. A wooden swing swayed near garden beds where flowers, chilies and other plants sprung from the soil. A plastic deer with antlers lay on the grass nearby, used to teach Indigenous youth how to hunt.

Frank, 67, shared stories of growing up on tree islands. He remembered when the water was so clean he could drink it, and the deer that emerged to play when a softball game was underway.

He spoke of the tribe's history and a time when wildlife in the Everglades was abundant. Of his distrust of government agencies and the tribe's connection to the land. And he spoke often of his grandfather's words, uttered to him decades ago that still resound.

"We were told to never, ever leave the Everglades," said Frank. "The only way to prolong your life, your culture, your identity is to stay here in the Everglades... as long as you're here, your maker's hand is upon you."

Tigertail heard similar stories from his uncles and grandfather growing up. They helped him feel connected to the Everglades and to his culture. Their stories remind him of the importance of being stewards of the lands that have cared for him and his ancestors.

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Tribal elders are teaching youth what Cypress called "the modern" way to protect the Everglades – with policy, understanding government practices and integrating traditional and Western science.

As a tribal youth member, Tigertail is doing what he can to preserve the Everglades for his generation and ones to come. He works with the Miccosukee Tribe's Fish and Wildlife Department to remove invasive species like pythons and fish like peacock bass. And he tries to be a voice for his people.

"To hear that we're losing it slowly and slowly saddens me," said Tigertail. "But also gives me hope that maybe there is a chance to save it."

It's beginning to look like another record for holiday travel

By DAVID KOENIG AP Airlines Writer

Drivers and airline passengers without reindeer and sleighs better make a dash for it: it's beginning to look like another record for holiday travel in the U.S.

The auto club AAA predicts that more than 119 million people will travel at least 50 miles from home between Saturday and New Year's Day, which would top the previous holiday-season high set in 2019. The two weekends on either side of Christmas look to be some of the most crowded times on the road and at airports.

Trade group Airlines for America also foresees record travel, saying it expected U.S. airlines to carry 54 million passengers during a 19-day period that started Thursday and ends Monday, Jan. 6. The number would represent a 6% increase over last year.

A government shutdown that could start as soon as Saturday would likely be too close to the holidays to immediately affect flights and airport operations, but that might change if a shutdown dragged on.

What will be the busiest travel days?

Airlines expect to have their busiest days on Friday and Sunday, and on Dec. 26, Dec. 27 and Dec. 29. Flight traffic is expected to be light on both Christmas Day and New Year's Day. The slowest U.S. air-travel day this year — by a wide margin — was Thanksgiving Day.

The Transportation Security Administration expects to screen 40 million passengers over the holidays and through January 2.

About 90% of Americans traveling far from home over the holidays will be in cars, according to AAA.

"Airline travel is just really high right now, but most people do drive to their destinations, and that is true for every holiday," AAA spokesperson Aixa Diaz said.

Gasoline prices are similar to last year. The nationwide average Thursday was \$3.05 a gallon, down from \$3.08 a year ago, according to AAA. Charging an electric vehicle averages just under 35 cents per kilowatt hour, but varies by state.

Transportation-data firm INRIX says travel times on the nation's highways could be up to 30% longer than normal over the holidays, with Sunday expected to see the heaviest traffic. Boston, New York City, Seattle and Washington, D.C., are the metropolitan areas primed for the greatest delays, according to the company.

Weather and other wildcards

Because the holiday travel period lasts weeks, airports and airlines typically have smaller peak days than they do during the rush around Thanksgiving, but the grind of one hectic day followed by another takes a toll on flight crews. And any hiccups — a winter storm or a computer outage — can snowball into massive disruptions.

That is how Southwest Airlines stranded 2 million travelers in December 2022, and Delta Air Lines suffered a smaller but significant meltdown after a worldwide technology outage in July caused by a faulty software update from cybersecurity company CrowdStrike.

Many flights during the holidays are sold out, which makes cancellations even more disruptive than during slower periods. That is especially true for smaller budget airlines that have fewer flights and fewer options for rebooking passengers. Only the largest airlines, including American, Delta and United, have "interline agreements" that let them put stranded customers on another carrier's flights.

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This will be the first holiday season since a Transportation Department rule took effect that requires airlines to give customers an automatic cash refund for a canceled or significantly delayed flight. Most air travelers were already eligible for refunds, but they often had to request them.

Passengers still can ask to get rebooked, which is often a better option than a refund during peak travel periods. That's because finding a last-minute flight on another airline yourself tends to be very expensive.

"When they rebook you, they will pay for the fare difference. If my flight to visit grandma that I booked six months ago for \$200 gets canceled, and I turn around and book a flight four hours from now for \$400, I have to pay that difference," said Sally French, a travel expert at consumer-affairs company Nerdwallet.

People traveling on budget airlines with fewer flights and no partnerships with other carriers may face a difficult choice in the event of a canceled flight.

"They will put you on the next outgoing Spirit or Frontier flight, but that could be a while from now. Sometimes waiting three days for that next flight is not going to work for you," and paying more to rebook on a big airline might be worthwhile, French said.

Some airlines are taking advantage of a provision in the new Transportation Department rule that defined a significant delay as three hours for a domestic flight and six hours for an international flight. According to Brett Snyder, who runs the Cranky Flyer website, airlines that previously issued refunds for shorter delays — Delta, United and JetBlue, for example — are now using the government standard.

Delayed flights increase the risk that bags will get lost. Passengers who get separated from their bags should report it to the airline and ask what the airline will cover. Links to the customer-service plans of major U.S. airlines are at the bottom of this page.

Would a government shutdown affect flights and airports?

A government shutdown could occur if Congress doesn't pass a funding bill with a midnight Friday deadline. Most TSA workers at airports, air traffic controllers and customs agents are considered essential and would be required to work without pay in the event of a shutdown.

More uncompensated workers might call out sick the longer a shutdown lasts, which could lead to longer security lines and other delays. That appeared to be the case several weeks into a government shutdown that started in December 2019.

"While our personnel have prepared to handle high volumes of travelers and ensure safe travel, an extended shutdown could mean longer wait times at airports," TSA spokesman Carter Langston said in a statement.

AAA advises travelers to "continue with their holiday plans, even if the shutdown materializes," spokesperson Diaz said. "Airport operations will continue as normal, but perhaps run a bit slower than usual, so travelers should be aware of that."

Planning ahead for 2025

Airline fares were up 4.7% in November, compared with a year earlier, according to U.S. government figures. But early 2025 is a good time to start planning next year's trips, including for spring breaks and summer vacations.

"Because travel is so popular, you're not going to find anything that feels very rock-bottom, but January and February are great times to plan for March, April and May," Laura Motta, an editor at travel-guide publisher Lonely Planet, said. "If you want to go to Paris in the spring, you need to be thinking about that in January."

Leap of faith: A few young women in US buck the trends by joining the ranks of Catholic nuns

By JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

PALMYRA, Pa. (AP) — It was a radical idea, and for many years she had been resistant.

But as Zoey Stapleton, 24, walked down a darkened hiking trail, steps behind her parents, she counted back from three and "took a leap of faith," revealing to them that she wanted to become a nun.

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And though there were moments of silence that evening in the woods just over a year ago, the news of her decision — and eventual acceptance into a religious institute — didn't come as a complete surprise to her parents, who say their faith deepened because of their daughter's.

Stapleton, a recent graduate of Franciscan University, a Catholic college in Ohio, will be among the less than 1% of nuns in the United States today who are 30 or younger. That number has remained steady in the past decade but shows little signs of increasing.

Between 100 and 200 young women enter into a religious vocation each year in the U.S. Some never complete the process to become a nun.

Those who do are giving up many trappings of modern life — dating, material wealth, sometimes even cell phones and fashionable clothes — for the sake of an immersive religious life and intergenerational community, at a time when the average age of an American nun is 80.

Just this year Pope Francis urged orders to pray harder for more priests and nuns as he acknowledged the number of men and women entering Catholic religious life continues to plummet in parts of the world, including Europe and the U.S. The number of nuns in the U.S. peaked in 1965 at 178,740, and declined to 39,452 by 2022, according the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

There are just over 500 communities of women religious in the U.S., and most have 50 or fewer members, according to Thomas Gaunt, CARA's executive director.

"Those communities that have younger members and are fairly active tend to attract other younger members," he said.

Stapleton — raised a Catholic, and having attended Catholic schools from pre-K to college — was familiar with nuns, but it was with the Franciscan Sisters, T.O.R. of Penance of the Sorrowful Mother that she found a deeper connection.

"I just found that they were very personally invested with me as a person, not just as a possible sister," said Stapleton.

In August, she and two other women joined the community nestled in the hills of Toronto, Ohio, as postulants.

The former college tennis player and coach has even found an athletic bond with the sisters.

"They really love being active," Stapleton said. "I've played a vicious game of soccer with them before and ultimate Frisbee. There's blood and sweat. It's awesome."

From sharing flip phones to wearing habits, nuns choose a radical life

The Franciscan Sisters, T.O.R., were founded in 1988 — newer than many religious communities.

Others established in that era include the Sisters of Life, which is active in anti-abortion causes and which Stapleton briefly considered joining.

"They're a very blooming order right now. They have a lot of vocations, praise God," she said. Over the past 30 years they've grown from 10 members to more than 120, according to Gaunt.

Both communities are part of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, a U.S. association of orders often seen as more conservative than its larger counterpart, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Before entering the order, Stapleton said one of the challenging transitions would be to give up her sense of style and wear the habit.

"I'm a big pro-habit girl," she said. "You're supposed to be a sign of contradiction in the world. If you look like everyone else, they're not going to know who you're living for."

The order's patron saint, Francis of Assisi, led a life of poverty. In emulation, the sisters dress in modest habits consisting of a long white veil and gray robes that many choose to pair with modern sandals. The sisters think of this as their wedding garments as "brides" of Christ.

The women abstain from other forms of modernity, using only a set of shared flip phones and the internet when necessary for their ministry.

More than anything, Stapleton was drawn to this community because of the joy and freedom in the sisters' relationship with the Lord. "I think it connected with that part of me like wanting to express actually

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how much I do love the Lord," she said.

Sister Philomena Clare DeHitta, whose ministry as vocations director is to facilitate the freedom to choose and "articulate the desire to live a radical life," describes their community as unique in spirituality and size.

"There are communities that have a more broad apostolate or spirituality that is just easier for women to enter into," she said. "Historically our classes have been small."

Some religious communities are more contemplative or cloistered away from the world, while others are active in professions and missions outside of their convents or monasteries. The Franciscan sisters describe themselves as a blend.

Although there have been many new communities officially recognized since the Second Vatican Council, CARA's Gaunt describes them as just a "drop in the bucket" when looking at the larger context of decline.

"There are new religious communities starting all the time," he said, "and there are older religious communities going out of existence."

Student loan debt can be a barrier to a religious vocation

To truly begin the journey of becoming a nun, a woman is asked to relinquish worldly possessions, meeting the expectation of poverty. That includes debt, which can be an issue for educated young women today.

"Like almost half of all those discerning in the U.S., I'm blocked from my vocation because of student loans," said Katie Power, a graduate of Franciscan University like Stapleton.

The 23-year-old from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, is currently an aspirant with the Carmelites of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, in Loretto, Pennsylvania, a cloistered community.

Power found support through the Labouré Society, a Catholic nonprofit that helps young women discerning religious life pay off their student loan debt by gathering donations so they may enter their vocation.

"It is a beautiful program because if I discern out — I hope I don't — I would take on my loan payments again," Power said. Money for her loans would then be passed to another candidate.

Over recent months, Power has shared her call to religious life with church communities and other groups in pursuit of donations that will go toward debt relief.

"I was at a Mass on campus at Franciscan and just experienced the most beautiful intimacy with Jesus in the Eucharist," recalled Power, knowing at that moment she wanted to remain in communion with God. "Ultimately, that's the cloistered life."

She hopes to be officially debt-free soon, and then join the Carmelites as a postulant in the summer.

About half of prospective nuns complete the long process to make final vows

On average the full process to become a Catholic sister takes 7 to 10 years.

Commonly one enters as a postulant and lives at least part-time with the order. A woman is officially called a sister when she enters the novitiate stage followed by the canonical novitiate, which is a year dedicated to prayer and studying the vows of the order.

Then, she makes temporary vows and finally perpetual, or final vows.

For Sister Seyram Mary Adzokpa, there was the added challenge of discerning her vocation during a global pandemic.

It forced the now 30-year-old millennial to meet members of the Sisters of the Holy Family over video calls. A nurse by training, she made the decision at 27 to join the order without ever visiting the community, a common tradition called a "come and see."

In September 2021, she and her family made the trip from Texas to the order in New Orleans. The sisters told her, "If I liked what I saw, I could stay. And if not, I was free to go," Adzokpa said.

Nearly three years later, in August, her family returned to the motherhouse to watch her make temporary vows.

Just behind the motherhouse sits St. Mary's Academy, a K-12 school run by the order. Across the street the Lafon Nursing Facility of the Holy Family, where a number of aging sisters are cared for.

Unlike the Franciscan Sisters, T.O.R., whose median age is 40, the Sisters of the Holy Family, one of the few religious orders founded for Black women in the United States two decades before the Civil War, is among the majority of communities today whose members are on average 80 years old.

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But the New Orleans order continues accepting new vocations, as prospective members are called, unlike many communities that have had to merge or plan to close.

There are three women currently aspiring to join the community, but not all who discern religious life join and not all who join stay.

About 50% of all who enter religious life stay for their final vows, according to Sister Debbie Borneman, director of mission integration with the National Religious Vocation Conference. "There's no stigma behind that," she adds.

Intergenerational living fosters joy and purpose

The Venerable Henriette DeLille and two other women founded the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1837.

Today, Adzokpa is one of four women younger than 40 in the community, which welcomes vocations of any race.

She is among just 6% of U.S. women religious who are Black, African American and or African. The majority remains Anglo-Caucasian, with 10% Latino, and 13% Asian, Pacific Islander and Hawaiian, according to a 2020 survey from CARA.

But the population is slowly changing, following the larger Catholic Church in the U.S.

"I think that newer entrants, they value interculturality. And also, I know they value intergenerational living," said Borneman.

Mindful of the older members, Adzokpa continues to use her nursing skills.

"There was the assumption that going into the convent, you would lose your career," she said. "However, that was not the case. I guess that's kind of why you find where you can serve with your gifts."

As a novice she would wake each morning around 5 a.m. After personal prayers, Adzokpa quietly walks the second floor of the motherhouse, softly knocking on the doors of a handful of sisters, calling out their names and offering her assistance.

She continued her ministry after clearing breakfast trays, taking the sisters' blood pressure, or checking heart rates, all in collaboration with the paid nursing staff.

"I truly find it God's grace that I'm able to not feel isolated, even though the age gap is tremendous," said Adzokpa with a gentle smile. "I enjoy sitting with them, talking with them, easing their aches and pains and just being around them. It's fulfilling."

The sister seemed to carry that smile everywhere she went. She wore it while picking figs in the yard and swimming in the pool. And as the sun shone down on her through the stained-glass windows at morning Mass.

"The joy is undeniable," she said. "I made a deal with Jesus. I said, OK, 'I love being here. However, if this joy, if this smile starts to dissipate, I don't know if I'm going to continue here.' And he has been faithful."

Official says Wisconsin shooter was new student at Christian school where her victims had deep ties

By SCOTT BAUER, GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO and TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The Wisconsin 15-year-old who shot and killed a teacher and a fellow student Monday was only in her first semester at the school but seemed to be settling in, a school official said Thursday as families of the victims remembered them as people of faith who had deep connections within the Christian school.

Abundant Life Christian School student Rubi Patricia Vergara, 14, of Madison and teacher Erin West, 42, of DeForest were killed Monday. Two other students who were shot remained hospitalized Thursday in critical condition.

Barbara Wiers, the school's director for elementary and communications, told The Associated Press that the attack lasted eight minutes — shorter than the school's regular snack break. She said the community's faith and connection to one another has sustained them as they struggle with the possibility that the shooter's motive might remain undetermined.

"Are we broken right now? Yes. Are we bruised and battered? Yes," she said. "But we will laugh again,

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and He will turn our mourning into joy again. And we will go on.”

Police say student Natalie “Samantha” Rupnow shot herself at the school and died at a Madison hospital. Police have said her motivation for the attack remains a key part of their investigation.

This was Rupnow’s first semester at ALCS, Wiers said. The school was working with her family on attendance, but teachers had no significant concerns, she said.

“I pray for this family because right now they’ve lost a daughter and they are wounded,” she said. “And they’re dealing with the fact that their daughter did this terrible thing and hurt these other people. It has to be one of the loneliest, bitterest places to be.”

Vergara’s funeral is set for Saturday at City Church, which is adjacent to the school, and West’s funeral is Monday at Doxa Church in Madison, where she was a member, according to obituaries published Wednesday and Thursday.

West had worked at the school for four years and is the mother of three daughters, according to her obituary. She enjoyed camping with family, attending school sporting events, serving at Doxa Church and spending time with her daughters and the rest of her family, the obituary said.

“ALCS is a better school for the work of Erin West,” the school said in a statement.

West worked three years as a substitute teacher before accepting a staff position as the sub coordinator and in-building substitute teacher, according to the statement.

“She served our teachers and students with grace, humor, wisdom, and — most importantly — with the love of Jesus,” the school said. “Her loss is a painful and deep one and she will be greatly missed not just among our staff, but our entire ALCS family.”

Vergara was a freshman at the school and “an avid reader, loved art, singing and playing keyboard in the family worship band,” according to her obituary.

The school described her as gentle and loving.

“Rubi was a blessing to her class and our school,” the school said. “She was not only a good friend, but a great big sister. Often seen with a book in hand, she had a gift for art and music.”

Attempts to obtain comment from relatives of West and Vergara have been unsuccessful.

The shooter brought two guns to the school. A man in California told authorities he had been messaging her about attacking a government building with a gun and explosives, according to a restraining order issued against him Tuesday under California’s gun red flag law. The order required the 20-year-old Carlsbad man to turn his guns and ammunition in to police within 48 hours, but it’s unclear Thursday whether he complied, would be charged or was in custody.

The order didn’t say what building he had targeted or when he planned to launch his attack. It also didn’t detail his interactions with Rupnow except to state that the man was plotting a mass shooting with her.

A spokesperson for the Carlsbad Police Department said federal authorities were leading the investigation and “we do not believe there is a threat to our city.”

Police, with the assistance of the FBI, were scouring online records and other resources and speaking with the shooter’s parents and classmates in an attempt to determine a motive, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes said Wednesday.

Police don’t know if anyone was targeted or if the attack had been planned in advance, the chief said.

While Rupnow had two handguns, Barnes said he does not know how she obtained them and he declined to say who purchased them, citing the ongoing investigation.

No decisions have been made about whether Rupnow’s parents might be charged, but they have been cooperating, Barnes said.

Online court records show no criminal cases against her father, Jeffrey Rupnow, or her mother, Mellissa Rupnow. They are divorced and shared custody of their daughter, but she primarily lived with her father, according to court documents.

Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school of about 420 students that offers prekindergarten classes through high school.

Adam Rostad, who lives near Madison, went to ALCS from kindergarten through high school. His grandfather was pastor of the church that helped establish the school, and his mother and aunt both worked there.

Rostad said Thursday that even though he graduated about 20 years ago and doesn't even consider himself a "church person" any longer, ALCS is family.

He has collected a list of about 440 people who are eager to either cook meals or buy gift cards for those affected and is coordinating with the school and church to make sure that's the best way to help.

"Bullets don't really care what your faith is, or if you have one," Rostad said. "They really don't."

House rejects Trump-backed plan on government shutdown, leaving next steps uncertain

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A day before a potential government shutdown, the House resoundingly rejected President-elect Donald Trump's new plan to fund operations and suspend the debt ceiling, as Democrats and dozens of Republicans refused to accommodate his sudden demands.

In a hastily convened Thursday evening vote punctuated by angry outbursts over the self-made crisis, the lawmakers failed to reach the two-thirds threshold needed for passage — but House Speaker Mike Johnson appeared determined to reassess before Friday's midnight deadline.

"We're going to regroup and we will come up with another solution, so stay tuned," Johnson said after the vote. The cobbled-together plan didn't even get a majority, with the bill failing 174-235.

The outcome proved a massive setback for Trump and his billionaire ally, Elon Musk, who rampaged against Johnson's bipartisan compromise, which Republicans and Democrats had reached earlier to prevent a Christmastime government shutdown.

It provides a preview of the turbulence ahead when Trump returns to the White House with Republican control of the House and Senate. During his first term, Trump led Republicans into the longest government shutdown in history during the 2018 Christmas season, and interrupted the holidays in 2020 by tanking a bipartisan COVID-relief bill and forcing a do-over.

Hours earlier Thursday, Trump announced "SUCCESS in Washington!" in coming up with the new package which would keep government running for three more months, add \$100.4 billion in disaster assistance including for hurricane-hit states, and allow more borrowing through Jan. 30, 2027.

"Speaker Mike Johnson and the House have come to a very good Deal," Trump posted.

But Republicans, who had spent 24 hours largely negotiating with themselves to cut out the extras conservatives opposed and come up with the new plan, ran into a wall of resistance from Democrats, who were in no hurry to appease demands from Trump — or Musk.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said Democrats were sticking with the original deal with Johnson and called the new one "laughable."

"It's not a serious proposal," Jeffries said as he walked to Democrats' own closed-door caucus meeting. Inside, Democrats were chanting, "Hell, no!"

All day, Johnson had been fighting to figure out how to meet Trump's almost impossible demands — and keep his own job — while federal offices are being told to prepare to shutter operations.

The new proposal whittled the 1,500-page bill to 116 pages and dropped a number of add-ons — notably the first pay raise for lawmakers in more than a decade, which could have allowed as much as a 3.8% bump. That drew particular scorn as Musk turned his social media army against the bill.

Trump said early Thursday that Johnson will "easily remain speaker" for the next Congress if he "acts decisively and tough" in coming up with a new plan to also raise the debt limit, a stunning request just before the Christmas holidays that has put the beleaguered speaker in a bind.

And if not, the president-elect warned of trouble ahead for Johnson and Republicans in Congress.

"Anybody that supports a bill that doesn't take care of the Democrat quicksand known as the debt ceiling should be primaried and disposed of as quickly as possible," Trump told Fox News Digital.

The tumultuous turn of events, coming as lawmakers were preparing to head home for the holidays, sparks a familiar reminder of what it's like in Trump-run Washington.

Musk and Vice President-elect JD Vance tried to blame Democrats, though rank-and-file Republicans

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helped sink Trump's plan.

"They've asked for a shutdown," Vance said of Democrats. "That's exactly what they're going to get."

For Johnson, who faces his own problems ahead of a Jan. 3 House vote to remain speaker, Trump's demands left him severely weakened, forced to abandon his word with Democrats and work into the night to broker the new approach.

Trump's allies even floated the far-fetched idea of giving Musk the speaker's gavel, since the speaker is not required to be a member of the Congress. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., posted she was "open" to the idea.

Democrats were beside themselves, seeing this as a fitting coda after one of the most unproductive congressional sessions in modern times.

"Here we are once again in chaos," said House Democratic Whip Katherine Clark, who detailed the harm a government shutdown would cause Americans. "And what for? Because Elon Musk, an unelected man, said, 'We're not doing this deal, and Donald Trump followed along.'"

As he left the Capitol, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said, "Now it's time to go back to the bipartisan agreement."

The debate in the House chamber grew heated as lawmakers blamed each other for the mess.

At one point, Rep. Marc Molinaro, who was presiding, slammed the speaker's gavel with such force that it broke.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Trump was publicly turning on those who opposed him.

One hardline Republican, Rep. Chip Roy of Texas, drew Trump's ire for refusing to along with the plan. Roy in turn told his own GOP colleagues they had no self-respect for piling onto the nation's debt.

"It's shameful!" Roy thundered, standing on the Democratic side of the aisle and pointing at his fellow Republicans.

The slimmed-down package does include federal funds to rebuild Baltimore's collapsed Key Bridge, but dropped a separate land transfer that could have paved the way for a new Washington Commanders football stadium.

It abandons a long list of other bipartisan bills that had support as lawmakers in both parties try to wrap work for the year. It extends government funds through March 14.

Adding an increase in the debt ceiling to what had been a bipartisan package is a show-stopper for Republicans who want to slash government and routinely vote against more borrowing. Almost three dozen Republicans voted against it.

While Democrats have floated their own ideas in the past for lifting or even doing away with the debt limit caps — Sen. Elizabeth Warren had suggested as much — they appear to be in no bargaining mood to save Johnson from Trump — even before the president-elect is sworn into office.

The current debt limit expires Jan. 1, 2025, and Trump wants the problem off the table before he joins the White House.

Musk, in his new foray into politics, led the charge. The wealthiest man in the world used his social media platform X to amplify the unrest, and GOP lawmakers were besieged with phone calls to their offices telling them to oppose the plan.

Rep. Steve Womack, an Arkansas Republican and senior appropriator, said the bipartisan bill's collapse signaled what's ahead in the new year, "probably be a good trailer right now for the 119th Congress."

The White House's Office of Management and Budget had provided initial communication to agencies about possible shutdown planning last week, according to an official at the agency.

Johnson left the Capitol late Thursday night with only two words when asked about a path forward.

"We'll see," he replied.

Takeaways from AP's reporting on young nuns

By JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

Less than 1% of nuns in the United States today are 30 or younger. That number has remained steady in the past decade but shows little signs of increasing.

Between 100 and 200 young women enter into a religious vocation each year in the U.S., and not all of them will complete the process to become a nun.

For those who do, they are giving up many trappings of modern life — dating, material wealth and sometimes even cell phones and fashionable clothes — for the sake of a radical religious life and inter-generational community, at a time when the average age of an American nun is 80.

Just this year the pope urged orders to pray harder for more priests and nuns as he acknowledged the number of men and women entering Catholic religious life continues to plummet in parts of the world, including Europe and the U.S.

Here are other takeaways from AP's reporting on young nuns.

From sharing flip phones to wearing habits, nuns choose a radical life

In August, Zoey Stapleton, 24, joined the Franciscan Sisters, T.O.R of Penance of the Sorrowful Mother — a community in rural Toronto, Ohio.

It's part of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, a U.S. association of orders often seen as more conservative than its larger counterpart, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The order's patron saint, Francis of Assisi, led a life of poverty. In emulation, the sisters dress in modest habits consisting of a long white veil and grey robes that many choose to pair with modern sandals.

The women abstain from other forms of modernity, using only a set of shared flip phones and the internet when necessary for their ministry.

Stapleton was drawn to the community because of the joy and freedom in the sisters' relationship with the Lord. "I think it connected with that part of me like wanting to express actually how much I do love the Lord," she said.

Student loan debt can be a barrier to a religious vocation

Nuns traditionally relinquish worldly possessions to meet the expectation of poverty. That includes debt, which can be an issue for educated young women today.

"Like almost half of all those discerning in the U.S., I'm blocked from my vocation because of student loans," said Katie Power, 23, who is currently an aspirant with the Carmelites of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, in Loretto, Pennsylvania.

Power found support through the Labouré Society, a Catholic nonprofit organization that helps young women discerning religious life pay off their student loan debt.

Power has shared her call to religious life with church communities and various groups in hopes of gathering donations that will go toward debt relief for her and others in formation.

She hopes to be officially debt-free by December and join the Carmelites as a postulant in the summer.

About half of prospective nuns complete the long process to make final vows

On average the full process to become a Catholic sister or nun takes between 7 and 10 years.

Commonly one enters as a postulant and lives at least part-time with the order. A woman is officially called a sister when she enters the novitiate stage followed by the canonical novitiate, which is a year dedicated to prayer and studying the vows of the order.

Then, she makes temporary vows and finally perpetual, or final vows.

For Sister Seyram Mary Adzokpa, there was the added challenge of discerning her vocation during a global pandemic. It forced the now 30-year-old to meet members of the Sisters of the Holy Family over video call.

A nurse by training, Adzokpa is now one of four women younger than 40 in the New Orleans community.

Unlike the Franciscan Sisters, T.O.R., whose median age is 40, the Sisters of the Holy Family, one of the few religious orders founded for Black women in the United States two decades before the Civil War, is among the majority of communities today whose members are on average 70 and older.

The New Orleans order continues accepting new members, unlike many communities that have had to merge or close, but it can be difficult to recruit and retain prospective sisters.

About 50% of all who enter religious life stay for their final vows and half leave, according to Sister Debbie Borneman, director of mission integration with the National Religious Vocation Conference.

Intergenerational living fosters joy and purpose

The Sisters of the Holy Family now runs a nursing home for aging members, the Lafon Nursing Facility of the Holy Family.

Because of the older sisters, Adzokpa continues to use her nursing skills.

She offers her assistance, takes the sisters' blood pressure, and checks heart rates, all in collaboration with the paid nursing staff on site.

"I truly find it God's grace that I'm able to not feel isolated, even though the age gap is tremendous," said Adzokpa. "I enjoy sitting with them, talking with them, easing their aches and pains and just being around them."

"The joy is undeniable," she said.

Trump was poised to inherit a strong economy. Then things got rocky and he added to the uncertainty

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — The smooth economy that Donald Trump was poised to inherit suddenly looks a bit rockier — with critics saying the president-elect is contributing to the uncertainty.

The Dow Jones stock index essentially ended Thursday flat after having posted 10 days of losses. The Federal Reserve now sees inflation as staying stubbornly elevated as it has become cautious about further interest rate cuts planned for next year.

On Wednesday, Trump blew up a bipartisan budget deal, which means the government could shut down after midnight Saturday. He then promoted a deal reached with Republicans on Thursday that Democratic lawmakers and President Joe Biden see as unacceptable. It failed to get the two-thirds threshold needed for House passage. This comes on top of a spate of tariff threats by Trump that the Congressional Budget Office said Wednesday would raise prices and hurt growth without raising enough revenues to cover the rest of his planned tax cuts.

As Trump prepares for a second term in the White House, his actions to undo a deal and replace it in under 24 hours test the proposition that markets — a favored Trump barometer of success — will accept his mix of uncertainty and reality TV drama.

But from the vantage of Trump world, the economy was already a mess. That's because of inflation, which is currently 2.7%, and public dissatisfaction with Biden.

"On day one, President Trump will get to work to launch the largest deregulatory agenda in history, cut taxes, and expedite permitting for drilling and fracking to lower energy costs and inflation for all Americans," said Karoline Leavitt, the transition spokeswoman and incoming press secretary.

Turbulence already starting

The past few days are a reminder that the economic growth in the Republican's first term was often accompanied by turmoil. It remains to be seen if voters already exhausted by inflation are ready for another round of blame games and uncertainty that the past few days have foreshadowed.

Trump vowed on social media Wednesday to "fight 'till the end" unless Democrats agreed to lift the debt ceiling as a condition for the short-term funding to keep the federal government open. He and his billionaire friend and adviser Elon Musk also promised to fund challengers in the 2026 primary elections to any Republican lawmaker who opposed the president-elect.

His social media postings came after Musk blasted the bipartisan package reached by House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., to fund the government through March 14. When the government last had a partial shutdown for five weeks starting at the end of 2018, the CBO estimated it cut economic growth by \$3

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billion, a small but symbolic sum.

By Thursday, Trump was claiming on social media that a new deal reached among Republicans was a "SUCCESS" because it would push the debt ceiling out until January 30, 2027. He insisted that Democrats "do what is best for Country," but the White House and leading Democratic lawmakers came out against the proposal.

Democrats were also quick to seize on the seeming Republican dysfunction, with Rep. Suzan DelBene, D-Wash., saying, "Trump's made a lot of promises, but he's also going to be accountable for the impact he's having on families."

"I guess Elon Musk is making the decisions now, because Republicans in Congress are incapable of making decisions on their own," DelBene said in an interview. "They just wait for someone to tell them what to do."

Trump won the election, but public still wary

Trump's ability to project strength and assure voters that he would reduce inflation helped him win November's election. Stocks initially climbed on the prospect of tax and regulatory cuts, but Trump still faces a skeptical public and appears to be starting his presidency from a more delicate position than Biden did four years ago.

Most U.S. adults — 54% — have an unfavorable view of Trump, according to the latest survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The survey found that small majorities have slight to no confidence in his ability to manage the White House or government spending. By contrast, Biden began his presidency with an approval rating above 60% only to see it steadily decline as inflation worsened.

In a sense, Trump has to preserve the momentum of an economy still recovering from pandemic-era distortions while going through a series of tough policy choices. First, there is the need to increase the government's legal borrowing authority that he insists be part of any short-term funding bill in order to avoid a shutdown. He will also push to renew his 2017 tax cuts that are set to expire after next year. On top of that, there is a budget deficit that has become less sustainable with higher interest rates.

"The U.S. economy is in very good shape — it has a strong underlying growth trend," said Douglas Holtz-Eakin, an economist and president of the American Action Forum, a center-right think tank. "All of the risks are policy risks. They're risks that the Fed didn't get it right, risks that come with the clock — we've got to do the debt ceiling, we've got to fund the government."

In a speech this month at the Brookings Institution, Biden took stock of the roughly 3% economic growth and the inflation rate easing since its 2022 spike, saying Trump would come into office with a solid economy. But he also warned that the policies of Trump allies in the form of tariffs and deportations could unleash an "economic disaster."

The president never translated his investments in infrastructure, renewable energy and new factories into political momentum. But he said "it's going to be politically costly and economically unsound for the next president to disrupt or cut" those programs.

Trump is also inheriting a higher national debt from Biden that could limit the benefits and scope of his planned tax cuts. When he was last president in 2020, the government was spending \$345 billion annually to service the debt. That cost now exceeds \$1 trillion. On Thursday, the president-elect said on social media that the federal government "will cut Hundreds of Billions of Dollars in spending next year" in an effort to fund his tax cuts and limit deficits.

The Fed sees uncertainty ahead

Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell told reporters at a Wednesday news conference that some members of the central bank's rate-setting committee started to incorporate the possible effects of Trump's policies into their economic forecasts.

But Powell stressed that there is a lack of clarity about what Trump would do. It's unknown whether he would deliver on tariff threats against Canada, Mexico, China and Europe. Nor is there much official guidance on how Trump would fund tax cuts that could add \$4.6 trillion to deficits over a decade.

"Some did identify policy uncertainty as one of the reasons for their writing down more uncertainty around

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inflation," Powell said. "The point about uncertainty is it's kind of common sense thinking that when the path is uncertain you go a little bit slower."

Powell added for emphasis about what happens with uncertainty: "It's not unlike driving on a foggy night or walking into a dark room full of furniture. You just slow down."

Today in History: December 21

Pan Am Flight 103 bombing over Lockerbie

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Dec. 21, the 356th day of 2024. There are 10 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 21, 1988, 270 people were killed when a terrorist bomb exploded aboard a Pan Am Boeing 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland, sending wreckage crashing to the ground.

Also on this date:

In 1620, Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower went ashore at present-day Plymouth, Massachusetts, for the first time.

In 1864, during the Civil War, Union forces led by Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman concluded their "March to the Sea" when they captured Savannah, Georgia.

In 1891, the first basketball game, devised by James Naismith, is believed to have been played at the International YMCA Training School (now Springfield College) in Springfield, Massachusetts.

In 1913, the first newspaper crossword puzzle, billed as a "Word-Cross Puzzle," was published in the New York World.

In 1976, the oil tanker Argo Merchant broke apart near Nantucket Island off Massachusetts almost a week after running aground, spilling 7.7 million gallons of oil into the North Atlantic.

In 1991, eleven of the 12 former Soviet republics formally proclaimed the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

In 2020, President-elect Joe Biden received his first dose of the coronavirus vaccine on live television as part of a growing effort to convince the American public the inoculations were safe.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Jane Fonda is 87. Singer Carla Thomas is 82. Conductor Michael Tilson Thomas is 80. Actor Samuel L. Jackson is 76. Film producer Jeffrey Katzenberg is 74. Tennis Hall of Famer Chris Evert is 70. Actor Jane Kaczmarek is 69. Country musician Lee Roy Parnell is 68. Actor-comedian Ray Romano is 67. Actor Kiefer Sutherland is 58. Actor-filmmaker Julie Delpy is 55. Golf Hall of Famer Karrie Webb is 50. French President Emmanuel Macron is 47. Actor Rutina Wesley is 46. Actor Steven Yeun is 41. Actor-producer-writer Quinta Brunson is 35. Actor Kaitlyn Dever is 28. Actor Madelyn Cline is 27.