

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 1 of 78

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [4- God Pause for Tuesday, December 24, 2024](#)
- [5- Weekly Round\[s\] Up](#)
- [7- GDI Fit Ad](#)
- [8- SD News Watch: Trouble in 'prepper' paradise: Bunker residents raise financial, safety concerns](#)
- [21- SD SearchLight: Mercury research raises more questions about lax approach to zebra mussels](#)
- [23- Weather Pages](#)
- [29- Daily Devotional](#)
- [30- Subscription Form](#)
- [31- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [32- Upcoming Groton Events](#)
- [33- News from the Associated Press](#)

## Tuesday, Dec. 24

Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, mixed vegetables, biscuit, fruit.

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Eve Service, 4 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Christmas Eve Service, 7 p.m.

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

Pantry is closed.

United Methodist: Groton Service at 5 p.m. Conde Service at 7 p.m.

## Wednesday, Dec. 25

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Day Service at Zion, 9 a.m.

## Thursday, Dec. 26

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle hot dish with peas, California blend, peaches, whole wheat bread.

## Friday, Dec. 27

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, rice, Normandy blend, apple crisp, whole wheat bread.

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



## Saturday, Dec. 28

The Doubleheader with Dakota Valley will now just be a Boys Basketball game at Dakota Valley on Saturday, January 18th

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

## Sunday, Dec. 29

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m. and at Zion, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School.

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.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 2 of 78

# 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.**

## Gaetz Report Released

The House Ethics Committee released the report on its yearslong investigation into former Rep. Matt Gaetz (R, FL-1) yesterday.

The committee found Gaetz obstructed Congress and violated other ethics rules while in office, paying over \$90K to 12 women for sex or drugs—including marijuana, ecstasy, and cocaine. One of the girls allegedly paid for sex was 17 years old at the time; multiple women were transported over state lines for the purpose of sex.

The committee cited text messages, travel receipts, financial records, and testimonies from over two dozen witnesses. They found Gaetz violated state laws but not federal ones; the Justice Department dropped a related investigation in 2023.

Gaetz denies all wrongdoing and resigned from Congress last month in a since-dropped US attorney general bid. Committee member Rep. Michael Guest (R, MS-3) included a dissenting statement in the report, finding it a violation of precedent to release a report on a former congressman.

## World's No. 3 Automaker

Two of Japan's leading automakers, Honda and Nissan, have formally announced they are exploring plans to merge. The move would create the world's third-largest car manufacturer by revenue (\$191B) after Toyota and Volkswagen.

Honda and Nissan signed a memorandum of understanding yesterday, with the goal of establishing a joint holding company by August 2026 and bringing in Nissan partner Mitsubishi. Analysts view the deal as a lifeline for Nissan, which announced plans to slash 9,000 jobs last month and whose profits have tumbled partly due to an outdated model lineup in the US and lagging sales in China.

However, Honda and Nissan executives said the merger would aid in developing new technologies amid a transition from fossil fuels, including managing the costs of building intelligent cars and electric vehicles. Discussions are set to conclude in June 2025. Honda shares closed up nearly 13% on the news.

## Touching the Sun

NASA is set to make history just before 7 am ET today with its Parker Solar Probe scheduled to make the closest-ever flyby of the sun to date. At its nearest, the spacecraft will reach 3.8 million miles of the solar surface—about 4.5 times the diameter of the sun. For comparison, the moon sits at a distance from Earth roughly 30 times our planet's diameter.

In addition to studying the sun's atmosphere, the probe is expected to shed light on our understanding of solar wind—streams of fast-moving particles that sweep throughout the solar system, creating auroras and interfering with electronics on Earth. The spacecraft, which launched in 2018, now travels at approximately 430,000 miles per hour and is designed to withstand temperatures around 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit.

The probe honors physicist Eugene Parker, who first proposed the existence of the solar wind.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 3 of 78

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Netflix to broadcast two NFL Christmas Day games tomorrow with the Kansas City Chiefs taking on the Pittsburgh Steelers (1 pm ET) and the Baltimore Ravens against the Houston Texans (4:30 pm ET); Beyoncé will perform at halftime of the Ravens-Texans game.

Animation Guild approves contract with film and TV producers and streamers.

"Squid Game" season 2 premieres on Netflix on Thursday, Dec. 26.

Woody Fraser, Emmy-winning producer and director best known for creating "Good Morning America" and "The Mike Douglas Show," dies at 90.

Burt, beloved crocodile from "Crocodile Dundee" film, dies at an estimated 90 years old.

## Science & Technology

Meta to incorporate in-lens displays into the next generation of its Ray-Ban smart glasses, according to reports

Russian scientists discover an "exceptionally" well-preserved baby woolly mammoth; 50,000-year-old remains are the seventh complete specimen of its kind ever found.

Gene-editing tool shown to reduce the formation of molecules that form amyloid-beta plaques, a key culprit in the development of Alzheimer's.

Take a deeper dive into what we know about Alzheimer's and its potential causes.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.7%, Dow +0.2%, Nasdaq +1.0%), with technology stocks, including Tesla, Meta, and Nvidia, leading the rally.

Nordstrom to go private in all-cash deal valued at over \$6B, including debt; deal—backed by its founding family and Mexican retailer El Puerto de Liverpool—will close in 2025.

Xerox to buy printer maker Lexmark from Chinese owners in \$1.5B deal; Xerox shares close up nearly 13% on the news.

The Container Store files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy amid competition from retailers like Target and Walmart; company's 102 nationwide locations will remain open.

US regulator sues Walmart and a fintech company over illegally forcing delivery drivers to open costly deposit accounts.

## Politics & World Affairs

President Joe Biden commutes sentences of 37 out of 40 federal death row inmates to life imprisonment; crimes of three people whose death sentences were not commuted were involved in mass shootings or acts of terrorism.

Suspect in fatal shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson pleads not guilty to state murder and terrorism charges.

Man faces murder charges in death of woman lit on fire in New York City subway.

Kilauea volcano erupts on Hawaii's Big Island following elevated earthquake activity beneath the volcano's summit; volcanic smog expected to spread over parts of the island.

## God Pause for Tuesday, December 24, 2024

Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20 (NRSV)

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

### Devotion

Today, Christmas Eve, Christians all around the world will read these familiar words from Luke's Gospel—the heart of the Christmas narrative. Good news of great joy will ring out across the globe in hundreds upon hundreds of different languages. From the grandest cathedrals to the simplest sanctuaries, in cozy homes or under the open sky, in hospital chapels and on military bases and in the breakrooms of 24-hour grocery stores, people will stop for just a moment to voice the good news of great joy. Listen! Can you hear it? The words of this gospel story connect us to siblings in Christ all around the world. As we read the familiar phrases from Luke, none of us is alone. On this day, in this remarkable moment, we remember that we share in the singular hope that comes with the birth of Jesus, Immanuel, God With Us. Thanks be to God!

### Prayer

God, bring your light, hope, peace, and healing to every corner of the world today. Let your Holy Scripture be a beacon to us, so that we might remember that we are all connected to one another through Christ. Amen.

Cameron B. R. Howard  
Associate Professor of Old Testament



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 5 of 78

Welcome back to another edition of the Weekly Round[s] Up after a busy couple of weeks in Washington. As I'm sure you've seen, we spent most of this past week discussing government funding. Last Friday evening, the Senate and House voted to pass a continuing resolution to avert a government shutdown. This bill was far from perfect, but it delivered several key wins for America: keeping government open (meaning our troops and other essential personnel get paid through the holiday season), delivering relief for our farmers and bringing disaster relief to communities devastated by hurricanes this fall.

While the government spending discussions stole the show, this past week we also sent the Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to the President's desk to be signed into law. This bill contains several provisions to support our national security, which you can read more about below. In between all of our important votes this past week, I took time to meet with South Dakota groups, as well as several of President-elect Trump's nominees. I also received my committee assignments for next Congress, which you can read about below. It's been a busy month out here in DC and it's about to get a whole lot busier as we prepare to hit the ground running in January. With a Republican trifecta in the Senate, House and Presidency, we're ready to get America back on track. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakotans I met with: Jim Dover, CEO of Avera and his son Patrick; members of the Great Plains Tribal Chairmen's Association, including Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate (SWO) Chairman J. Garret Renville, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chairwoman Janet Alkire, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe Chairman Peter Lengkeek and Oglala Sioux Tribe President Frank Star Comes Out; members of the South Dakota Science and Technology Authority; and Nikki Gronli, State Director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's South Dakota Rural Development team.

Met with South Dakotans from: Dell Rapids, Ft. Thompson, Pine Ridge, Rapid City, Sioux Falls and Sisseton. Cabinet nominee meetings: I met with Tulsi Gabbard, President-elect Trump's nominee for Director of National Intelligence (DNI). We had an excellent first meeting. As a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, the committee her nomination will go through before heading to the full Senate, I am looking forward to working with her as she continues to move through the confirmation process.

I also met with John Ratcliffe, nominee for Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). John formerly served as DNI under President-elect Trump which has prepared him well for this role. His nomination will also pass through the Intelligence committee. I'm happy to work with him through the nomination process.

I met with Scott Turner, nominee to lead the Department of Housing and Urban Development. His nomination will go through the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs. I look forward to working with him to reduce the regulatory burden for individuals trying to achieve the American dream of homeownership.

Kash Patel, nominee to lead the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was also in my office for a meeting this week. We had a very good conversation about his vision for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I believe Mr. Patel will restore the confidence of the rank-and-file team members within the FBI who work day-to-day to solve crimes in this country. I am confident in President-elect Trump's choice of Mr. Patel to help the FBI move forward in keeping Americans safe.

I also met with Russell Vought, nominee to lead the Office of Management and Budget, and Paul Atkins, nominee to chair the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

Other meetings: Michael Tackett, a journalist who covers national politics; Senator-elect Lisa Blunt Rochester from Delaware; Bruce Byrd, Executive Vice President and General Counsel at Palo Alto Networks; Harold Hamm, Executive Chairman of Continental Resources; Tim Teter, General Counsel at Nvidia; Roselyn



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 6 of 78

Tso, Director of the Indian Health Service; Lt. Gen. Burt Field, CEO of the Air and Space Forces Association; a group of veterans and active duty military who were on Capitol Hill to talk about the issues they're facing; General B. Chance Saltzman, Chief of Space Operations within the U.S. Space Force; and Anne Neuberger, Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technology. I was also a keynote speaker at the Wharton Future of Finance Forum.

I hosted Senate Bible Study in my office for the past two weeks. Our verses of the week were Philippians 2:16 and Luke 2:10-11. I also attended Senate Prayer Breakfast both weeks.

National Defense Authorization Act: This past week, the Senate and House passed the final version of the FY25 NDAA and sent it to President Biden's desk. This piece of legislation, which I helped craft as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, contains several wins for our national defense. These provisions are designed to support our men and women in uniform by doing everything we can to make certain they never enter a fair fight and always have the upper hand over our adversaries.

The list of these provisions is long, so I won't put them all here, but two of our major wins for South Dakota are \$282 million authorized for construction projects at Ellsworth Air Force Base and \$2.6 billion authorized for procurement of B-21s. You can read more about the bill and view a full list of my provisions here.

Continuing Resolution: As I mentioned, the Senate passed a Continuing Resolution late on Friday night to avert a government shutdown. The final bill set the next funding deadline at March 14, 2025 and included disaster relief funding, particularly for states affected by the devastating hurricanes this fall, and relief for farmers. Our budget and appropriations process in Congress has been dysfunctional for far too long. It's my hope that come next year, we can return to doing appropriations the way we should: working through the committee process and bringing these bills to the floor before the end of the fiscal year, instead of continually kicking the can down the road with a series of CRs and shutdown threats.

Committee assignments: Speaking of appropriations, last week we received our committee assignments for the new Congress beginning in January. I will remain on the Armed Services, Banking, Intelligence and Indian Affairs Committees. I've also added one new committee: the Senate Committee on Appropriations. It's been almost 30 years since Congress passed all of its required appropriations measures on time. I look forward to working with my colleagues on Appropriations to promote returning to regular order for our budgeting process and return to commonsense fiscal conservatism under a Republican trifecta in the 119th Congress. With this new assignment, I will no longer be serving on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, but I will continue to work on Veterans issues. You can read more about my committee assignments here.

Votes taken: 23 – we once again had several controversial Biden administration nominees. These nominees were for judge positions in Georgia, Pennsylvania and California, as well as positions on the National Labor Relations Board and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

We also voted on the CR and NDAA, which I've mentioned above. In addition, we voted on the Social Security Fairness Act. I voted no along with 22 of my colleagues. This bill costs \$196 billion and impacts only 4% of Social Security beneficiaries. It directly increases our mandatory spending and accelerates Social Security's looming shortfall by about six months. We must act to make Social Security solvent long term without harming the current beneficiaries.

Hearings: I attended five hearings over the past couple of weeks. Four of them were closed hearings with the Select Committee on Intelligence. The other was a Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee hearing where we heard from Rohit Chopra, Director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. You can watch a clip of my questioning here.

Classified briefings: I attended three briefings, two of which were classified: one classified briefing on Anomalous Health Incidents and one classified briefing on the Next-Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) program. A third briefing on Dataminr was a briefing only – not classified.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen, Custer, Deadwood, Dupree, Hot Springs, Huron, McIntosh, Philip, Pierre, Timber Lake, Wall and Watertown.

Steps taken this past week: Week 1: 47,799 steps or 23.92 miles, Week 2: 49,041 steps or 24.37 miles

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 7 of 78

## You have to start some time! Why not **now!**

5 months to get your through the winter!

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

Family: \$362.15

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



Gift  
Certificates  
Available!

Daily Pass Available for \$5

Age 65 or older  
Physical Therapy  
\$20 per month

Annual Memberships:

Student: \$255.60

Single: \$319.50

Couple: \$575.10

Family: \$702.26



15 N Main St. - Ste. 101

Downtown Groton

Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460

Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



**Living Heart Fitness Center**

Open 24/7





## Trouble in 'prepper' paradise: Bunker residents raise financial, safety concerns

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

IGLOO, S.D. – A former military munitions site with concrete bunkers now used as residences has become the source of numerous lawsuits, several complaints to the South Dakota Attorney General's Office, a near-fatal shooting and now an FBI inquiry, a News Watch investigation has found.

The former Black Hills Army Depot munitions storage facility was developed in 2016 into the Vivos xPoint bunker complex that is now a residential community marketed largely to so-called preppers.

More than 500 above-ground concrete bunkers are marketed for lease to those who are worried about a potential national or global disaster or who want to live mostly off-the-grid in a remote area 8 miles south of Edgemont in southwestern South Dakota.

The concrete bunkers, which look like earthen igloos, are covered with sod to maintain a constant temperature for the military's conventional and chemical munitions stored on site from 1942 to 1967. The town of Igloo was often home to more than 5,000 people during that span, including a young Tom Brokaw, a South Dakota native and former NBC anchor. The base and town are now abandoned.

The owner and operator of Vivos xPoint, California businessman Robert K. Vicino, told News Watch that he has had great success in leasing more than 200 of the bunkers so far and that the project is highly successful and profitable.

Vicino also said the bunker complex has evolved into a thriving community of like-minded people, most of whom are happy to live there and support one another while realizing their dream of a self-sustainable lifestyle in an area relatively safe from disasters or potential ills that could endanger society and the world.

But a different version of life at Vivos xPoint has emerged in recent months, especially for some of the few dozen individuals and families who make or have made the bunker complex their permanent home.

Over the past four months, News Watch has interviewed more than a dozen people, reviewed hundreds of pages of court records, examined emails and internal Vivos communications, filed three open-records



**This photo, taken on Oct. 4, 2024 at the Vivos xPoint bunker complex near Igloo, S.D., shows an empty bunker before any improvements are made.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 9 of 78

requests and visited the Vivos site to understand the unrest that exists within the community.

At least 16 lawsuits or legal actions have been filed either by residents or former residents against Vivos management or by Vicino, Vivos or its subcontractors against former residents and property neighbors. Five formal complaints against Vivos have been filed with the Consumer Protection Division of the South Dakota Attorney General's Office. At least two former residents have been interviewed by FBI agents.

Some legal filings relate to evictions, claims of illegal eviction, a demand for return of monies paid to Vivos or requests for legal protection orders. In one complaint to the state, a resident says Vivos has broken promises to build numerous amenities and has not fulfilled contractual obligations to provide adequate security and basic services, for which they pay a separate monthly fee. All four residents interviewed by News Watch during an October visit to the site carried handguns for protection.

Vicino attributed the lawsuits and complaints about himself and Vivos to "bad apples" who reside at Vivos xPoint and who may have "their own agenda."

"There are a group of disgruntled (people), they call themselves the pioneers, and you know, they seem to have nothing better to do but to complain," Vicino said.

He added that if residents follow the terms of the lease and the property rules and regulations, no legal action will result.

"I know all the gripes. ... But you cannot respond to unreasonable gripes," he said. "I can point to hundreds of others that will say, 'Yeah, we love it. We love what you're doing and how you're doing it.'"

According to records in the South Dakota Secretary of State's Office, Vicino is the owner or director of two businesses, Vivos Construction and Vivos xPoint Investment Group. A third business, Vivos xPoint, is owned by a company called Fractional Villas that lists Vicino's home address in Del Mar, California, as its physical address.

News Watch conducted a nearly two-hour interview with Vicino in November, and follow-up questions posed by News Watch were answered by Vicino in writing in December through the offices of his Spearfish attorney, Eric Schlimgen.

## **Resident are tenants, not property owners**

Vivos uses a 99-year lease agreement, so residents do not legally own their bunkers.

People who take possession of a bunker pay Vivos an up-front lease fee of up to \$55,000 and \$3,000 for water service. They also pay monthly "common area fees" of \$111 and an annual \$1,124 "ground rent fee" to live in a bunker or have it ready for them when needed, according to a January 2024 Vivos memo.

Lessees sign a 14-page lease and eight-page list of community rules, and those who don't pay or violate



**Vivos xPoint bunker complex resident Rich Roehm, shown on Oct. 4, 2024 in his bunker near Igloo, S.D., filed a complaint with the South Dakota Attorney General's Office over improvements he said he paid for that were not completed or were completed improperly.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 10 of 78

the rules can be evicted. One rule states that Vivos residents are forbidden from talking to the media about the bunker complex or the company under the threat of fines or possible eviction.

Custer attorney J. Scott James, who is litigating several lawsuits related to Vivos, said evicted residents can lose the lease monies paid as well as any financial equity or the value of improvements made to their bunkers, which can then be leased again by Vivos.

A lawsuit filed by James on behalf of former resident Daniel Sindorf alleges that Vivos misrepresented facts to illegally evict Sindorf. In an eviction notice, Vivos claims that Sindorf pointed a gun at a person, thereby violating his lease. Sindorf's lawsuit claims that Sindorf actually pulled his gun only to prepare for a possible attack by "dangerous dogs" owned by Vivos subcontractor Shear "J.R." Rodriguez and did not point it at a person.

The lawsuit demands that Sindorf and his wife be refunded the majority of the \$35,000 they paid up front to lease a bunker for 99 years and for the monthly fees that were supposed to go toward amenities and services the lawsuit alleges were never provided.

"Plaintiff (Vivos) accepted the common area fees, but failed to complete its obligations ... specifically there was no evidence of potable water, and no trash removal was ever done as described, and no security was provided as described," Sindorf's lawsuit states.

Vicino said in an email that there is no provision in the lease signed by Sindorf and others that allows for a return of prorated lease funds. Vivos is fighting the Sindorf counter-lawsuit in state court. James said a trial on the case in January will challenge the legality of some elements of the Vivos xPoint lease.

Former bunker resident Brandon Elliott said he was illegally evicted by Vivos, which then leased his bunker to a new resident after he made \$15,000 in improvements.

"There have been many people in my situation," Elliott said. "As soon as there's a problem and they complain, they get pushed out illegally and their bunkers are resold."

Vicino said that bunker residents who leave Vivos xPoint are allowed to re-lease their bunkers to someone else, and they are free to remove any improvements made prior to leaving.

James is representing at least three former residents of Vivos xPoint in civil actions related to the bunker complex and actions by Vicino and his company.

"A lot of these people paid between \$35,000 to \$50,000 for what Vivos calls a 99-year lease on these bunkers. And if it's truly a 99-year lease, and you're evicting my client in year three or four, and they've prepaid 95 years of lease money, then you should have to give it back, at least a prorated amount," James said. "They (Vivos) get to say, 'OK, we just get to keep reselling these things over and over to people,' and



**A bunker being used as a residence, in foreground, is part of the Vivos xPoint bunker complex, shown Oct. 4, 2024 near Igloo, S.D.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)



that seems like it's an inequitable relationship."

## Former residents: FBI investigation underway

News Watch recently learned that FBI agents from the San Diego office have interviewed at least two former residents of Vivos xPoint. One former resident, Elliott, said he was interviewed by FBI agents in November related to Vicino "dealing with problems in an illegal way."

Former Vivos xPoint resident David Streeter said he has been interviewed by FBI agents twice since November. Streeter said they inquired about the leases and financial dealings at the Vivos xPoint complex and were also investigating other allegations related to Vicino.

Streeter, who shot a Vivos subcontractor in the chest during a confrontation at the

complex in August but was not charged in the shooting, is involved in a number of lawsuits related to Vivos xPoint. He has two pending small claims lawsuits against Vivos and is fighting his eviction. Vivos has filed eviction and defamation lawsuits against Streeter, who has become a leading critic of Vivos and Vicino.

A spokesperson at the San Diego FBI office said the agency would not comment on ongoing investigations nor confirm if an active investigation was underway.

Bunker resident Wayne Corriea, one of the first people to lease a Vivos xPoint bunker and who formerly worked security for Vivos, said Vicino is an unethical businessman who takes questionable and possibly illegal actions against anyone who disagrees with or challenges him.

"When I was head of security, there were several things I wouldn't do," Corriea said. "I won't torment, harass or intimidate people, and I won't do anything that I feel is wrong. If it's right by the law, it's good to go and if you're doing it for the right reasons. So several times I disagreed with him, and I wouldn't do stuff, and I think that caused a lot of issues with him and me because he wanted me to lie for him, but not to him."

In an email response to Corriea's claims, Vicino said he "enforces the agreements that he enters and wants all parties to follow those agreements." He called Corriea "a former employee hostile to Vivos" and said he disagrees with any allegations that he acts in an unethical or retaliatory manner.

Vicino said he wasn't aware of any FBI inquiry but said he welcomes any investigation by authorities.

"I welcome it, good, come talk to me," Vicino said. "We love being vetted because as far as we know, we're all by the book."

"We do exactly what the lease says. ... There's nothing criminal here, there's nothing under cloak, it's all right out there and it's all justified."



**Bunkers that are occupied by residents, such as this one leased by Edith Horn and shown on Oct. 4, 2024 at the Vivos xPoint bunker complex near Igloo, S.D., often have many belongings stored out front.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)

## Residents worry about on-site subcontractors

At least three current and former Vivos residents told News Watch they are concerned about the actions of two on-site subcontract workers for Vivos who have criminal records.

One worker, Kelly Anderson, lives in a Vivos bunker and does construction work on the property, Vicino said.

Anderson, according to information received from a News Watch public records request, served time in prison in Colorado in 2006 after a felony armed robbery conviction. Despite the felony conviction, several residents and former residents told News Watch that Anderson routinely carries a gun while on the premises at Vivos xPoint.

Anderson, 47, pleaded guilty to marijuana possession in Fall River County in May 2024 and was ticketed for driving without a license in Edgemont in January 2023, according to court records.

Anderson was shot in the chest during an August confrontation with Streeter, a former Vivos xPoint resident who is fighting his eviction. Streeter said he shot Anderson in self-defense after Anderson threatened Streeter and his family. Anderson, who was unarmed at the time of the confrontation, sent threatening messages about harming Streeter to an acquaintance just prior to the shooting, according to text messages records obtained by News Watch.

According to that text log, Anderson wrote: "I'm about to f— his ass up," and "What he did isn't right and I'm gonna educate this mother f——."

Streeter provided aid to Anderson after the shooting, and Anderson was life-flighted to Rapid City for care. After a grand jury review in Fall River County, no one was charged in the shooting, which was videotaped by Streeter's daughter, then 12. Streeter was charged with simple assault in a separate confrontation prior to the shooting.

Anderson, who is now suing Streeter for damages and sought a protection order against him in civil court, did not return a News Watch call seeking comment.

Records obtained from Jefferson County, Colorado, indicate that Anderson was arrested on Sept. 27, 2005, and charged with six felony counts related to the burglary of a home in which a female resident's hands and feet were bound with a telephone cord.

According to an Arvada Police Department report, Anderson broke into the home with a sawed-off, 12-gauge shotgun and was in the home when the woman arrived. He bound the woman and made her lie face down with a towel over her head. Anderson stole items and fled.



**David Streeter stands on Oct. 4, 2024 in front of his former bunker in the Vivos xPoint complex at the site where he shot a Vivos subcontractor who he says threatened him and his family. Streeter was not criminally charged in the shooting.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch

/ South Dakota News Watch)



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 13 of 78

After an investigation, Anderson pleaded guilty to aggravated robbery while menacing a victim with a deadly weapon and committing a violent crime with a deadly weapon, according to records.

Vicino said Anderson is a good person and worker who, despite prior criminal convictions, deserves a chance to make a living just like anyone else.

"If we were to say that in South Dakota, 'You've been arrested and been in jail, then you can't be employed by any company,' you're going to have the scarlet letter on your forehead," Vicino said. "That might wipe out, what 20%, 25% of South Dakota (from employment)."

Vicino acknowledged that Anderson might be a convicted felon, but said "that doesn't mean he doesn't serve society and that he's upstanding at this time."

Vicino also downplayed Anderson's arrest on marijuana charges.

"That wouldn't have an effect on us," he said. "As far as possession and use (of marijuana), tell me somebody up there (in South Dakota) who isn't."

Vicino said he also wasn't overly concerned that Shear "J.R." Rodriguez, another on-site subcontractor for Vivos, pleaded guilty in September to a misdemeanor charge of having a dog that killed domestic animals on the Vivos xPoint site. Court records from Maryland show that Rodriguez has an active bench warrant for his arrest on a misdemeanor theft charge.

Rodriguez could not be reached for comment.

Several residents of Vivos xPoint said that tensions in the complex have been especially high since the August shooting. When News Watch visited the site in October, the entrance gate was open and there was no security system or personnel in place. Vicino said he recently hired a private security service to protect residents and workers within the complex.

According to a Vivos memo obtained by News Watch, Vivos announced in November 2023 that it had hired a new chief of security, Mike Archer, who has a background in military and real estate. Archer's term of employment lasted only a short time, however, and Archer said he could not comment on his former employment due to signing a non-disclosure agreement.

Vicino said residents, many who use satellite services for cell phone and internet connections, can call the Fall River County Sheriff's Office for assistance if needed or dial 9-1-1 in an emergency.

Bunker resident Rich Roehm said he always carries a .357 handgun but that after the August shooting, he removed the "snake shot" cartridges and replaced them with hollow-point bullets with far more stopping power. Roehm called Anderson, the subcontractor who lives and works at Vivos xPoint, "dangerous."

"Now I have to worry about the two-legged snakes," Roehm said.



**An open gate welcomes visitors to the Vivos XPoint bunker complex, shown on Oct. 4, 2024 near Igloo, S.D.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch

/ South Dakota News Watch)

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 14 of 78

## Amenities offered but not provided

Numerous amenities offered to current and potential residents, listed on a large sign at the complex entrance and marketed in a video with computer-generated images on the Vivos website, have not been completed several years after the complex opened.

Some current and former residents – in interviews, court filings and complaints to state and local authorities – said Vivos takes payment for bunker leases or bunker improvements up front and that those projects can take years to be completed, if ever. Even though amenities are not being built, residents must continue to pay the monthly common area fees.

Vicino pointed out that while community amenities such as a workout bunker, gym, general store, community theater, medi-

cal clinic, woodworking shop and restaurant are planned for Vivos, contractual language states they are not guaranteed and that a leasing decision should not be made based on expected completion of the amenities.

And yet, some residents say they are frustrated at the slow pace of building common area amenities or finishing projects they have already paid for.

In an interview with News Watch, Vicino blamed the slow pace of construction of common area amenities and bunkers build-outs on the worker shortage in South Dakota.

"We have a backlog, and why do we have a backlog? A lack of laborers, not a lack of money, so we can only do it so fast," he said.

But later in the interview, Vicino did point to the costs of hiring contractors as a reason for long project delays at Vivos xPoint. "You could go to Rapid (City) and bring a contractor down and do it all, but for twice the money," he said. "Our job and offer is to offer and maintain it at the lowest price possible."

Also, he said, "All our contracts with these people and the work agreements say, 'Subject to available labor,' so there can be delays."

Roehm, who has leased a Vivos bunker for three years, said in a three-page complaint to the South Dakota Attorney General's Office that his septic system was not installed correctly, that he paid for roof repairs that have not been completed, and that Vivos has not provided security systems or personnel as promised.

"Due to all the maintenance that is not being done, and the positions that are not being filled, I have to question where our fees are going," Roehm wrote in his complaint.

In an interview with News Watch, Roehm said he is disappointed that Vivos xPoint has not lived up to the claims made when he inquired about leasing, and that the company has not met his expectations



**Wayne Corriea, shown outside his bunker on Oct. 4, 2024, has lived in a bunker at Vivos xPoint for five years and once worked for complex owner Robert Vicino. But Corriea says he now believes Vicino to be unethical.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 15 of 78

that it would be a safe, well-run community for him, his wife and their son.

"It's a shame because I think he (Vicino) could have done this right and still made money," Roehm said. "I mean, just treat people right."

## **Vicino: We're doing things 'by the book'**

Vicino said his son, Dante Vicino, who manages on-site operations at Vivos xPoint, has been in "constant contact" with the state attorney general's office. Vicino said his son was told by AG officials, "You guys are doing it by the book. We're pleased with what we see, and congratulations."

Tony Mangan, a spokesman for the attorney general's office, confirmed the office has received five consumer complaints about Vivos xPoint. He said the agency is not conducting any criminal investigations related to the complex at this time.

Some residents also question the level of response and protection provided by the Fall River County Sheriff's Office, which has received complaints about Vivos xPoint and the behavior of its subcontractors. Fall River Sheriff Lyle Norton did not return two phone messages seeking comment.

As far as the rule restricting media communication by bunker residents, Vicino said it is a common practice that is akin to how a major corporation limits what its employees can say to the media about the business and its operations.

"We want to have control of that," he said. "We don't want hundreds of different stories because, you know, they're coming at us left and right, the media. It's really for coordination or control."

James, the Custer attorney, said it is unusual to see a landlord place a restriction and possible penalties on tenants who speak to the media.

"You wonder about the rationale that went into drafting that, and what's the purpose?" James said. "It's because they have things that they prefer not to be scrutinized is the only rationale that you could think of."

Corriea, the bunker resident who used to work for Vicino, said he expects that he will likely face consequences for speaking to News Watch. But he said the truth about Vicino and Vivos xPoint needs to be told by those who really know it.

"I know that whatever happens, there's gonna be retaliation to me because there always is," Corriea said. "He (Vicino) retaliates for whatever you do against him, whether you don't go along with what he does or what he wants (you) to do."

## **Work not done, or not done right**

Edith Horn, who retired to the Vivos xPoint complex in 2021 after a 32-year military career, said she tried for months to get Vivos workers to groom the top of her bunker as paid for. She said she also paid up-front for concrete work to be done in 2021 and that it was done improperly by Vivos contractors, forcing her to fix it herself with a grinder.



**Attorney J. Scott James, shown on Nov. 25, 2024 in his office in Custer, S.D., is representing a handful of clients who are involved in lawsuits related to the Vivos xPoint bunker complex.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 16 of 78

"I said, 'I think I'm due a refund because your contractor poured hot concrete and it looks crappy and I need a level floor,'" Horn said. "And never once did I get any response."

Horn said that Vivos raised questions about how she was paying monthly and annual fees, noting that Vivos prefers payment in a lump sum, and was threatened with eviction before reaching an agreement with management.

Later, she was questioned about a fence she installed, and afterward, she began to see Vivos subcontractors drive slowly by her bunker, taking pictures of the site.

Former bunker resident Susan Bass, who now lives in North Carolina, told News Watch that Vicino and his team use false advertising to attract people who are seeking a unique and specific lifestyle. Among other construction concerns, Bass said the floor of her bunker was not installed properly and was never fixed despite her complaints.

"Stuff just doesn't get done. And when you complain to Robert about it, he isn't going to help you, you're on your own," said Bass, 70. "So people feel betrayed."

Bass said she and her husband leased a bunker in 2020 and lived in a motel in Edgemont while it was being prepared. She said they wanted to be free from government intrusion in their lives and find a place where they could live safely if anything disastrous happened in the U.S.

Shortly after moving into the bunker, Bass' husband died of COVID and she later sold the bunker.

"We thought we would be safer there, which now seems ridiculous," she said. "These people, including myself, they're very vulnerable, and he (Robert) is preying on their fears."

In an email, Vicino said Bass violated the lease agreement in how she built a structure next to her bunker but that she was allowed to sell the lease to her bunker to a new resident.

## Lawsuits make claims of possible fraud

In late November, Michelle Collins, a resident of Virginia, filed a civil lawsuit against Vivos xPoint Investment Group alleging that the company has broken numerous contractual agreements made with her.

The lawsuit states that in September 2020, Collins signed both a contract to lease a Vivos bunker and to have improvements done in advance of occupancy. The lawsuit states that Collins paid Vivos \$35,000 to lease the bunker, another \$3,000 for a water hookup and about \$94,000 for the construction work. Collins was also paying the annual land lease fee of \$1,000 and about \$100 a month for Vivos to provide for "common area" amenities, maintenance and security.



**More than 500 above-ground concrete bunkers and 100 miles of unpaved roads are part of the Vivos xPoint residential complex, shown on Oct. 4, 2024 near Igloo, S.D.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)



But more than four years later, the lawsuit states, the construction work not been completed, water service is not being provided and much of the work that was done has been rendered useless. Further, the lawsuit states, Vivos locked Collins out of the bunker, used her bunker for storage and has not provided security services, road maintenance or trash removal services as contractually obligated.

Vivos originally agreed not to charge Collins the monthly common area fees but later reneged on that agreement, the lawsuit claims. After Collins hired an attorney to represent her, Vivos emailed her saying: "Had you not decided to have an attorney contact us out of the blue, this may have gone very differently," according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit, filed on Collins' behalf by James, the Custer attorney, seeks a refund of the initial lease payment, the costs of unfinished construction work and attorney fees as well as any punitive damages for "Vivos' willful and malicious conduct."

When asked about the Collins complaint, Vicino stated: "We've given full refund to those who ask for it. Michelle Collins is not paying any rent because she wanted a deferral until her bunker is done, and then she will pay up the amount of deferral."

In a 2014 federal civil lawsuit filed by an Illinois family against Vicino, his wife, Barbara, and business partner Steven Wallner, the family alleged that they were defrauded of \$140,000 paid to secure spots first in a bunker in Kansas and later in a "secret fortified bunker" called Vivos Indiana.

In the lawsuit, plaintiffs Taiya Shevelev, Yakov Ryabov and their two children said the defendants operated a company called Fractional Villas, which the complaint said also did business as The Vivos Group. The lawsuit alleged that "defendants engaged in an elaborate fraudulent scheme to sell plaintiffs membership interests in the secret bunker while at the same time misrepresenting various facts and circumstances surrounding plaintiffs' purchase, use and the operational status of the bunker."

According to court documents, the lawsuit was settled and dismissed in 2015 after "the disputes between the parties having been resolved by agreement," details of which were not reported.

Vicino said in an email to News Watch that the lawsuit was thrown out. "She was in the Indiana shelter, she attempted to do a mutiny," Vicino wrote.

## North Dakotans 'frustrated' at pace of work

Mike Pugh, a resident of Bismarck, North Dakota, said he and his wife have grown frustrated with the slow pace of construction on a bunker they leased at Vivos xPoint three years ago.

The Pughs paid about \$140,000 in advance to Vivos to lease a bunker and have it built out by Vivos



**This sign just inside the entrance to the Vivos xPoint bunker complex, shown Oct. 4, 2024 near Igloo, S.D., indicates that most promised amenities have not been built and are still "coming soon," several years after the project launched.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch

/ South Dakota News Watch)

contractors, Pugh told News Watch. Pugh said the couple sees the bunker as an inexpensive home in which to retire.

"We were required to pay in advance because at the time I didn't have the time or expertise to do the construction part of it," he said. "After three years of waiting, we're still not down there."

Pugh said he has visited the Vivos bunker and has seen some progress in construction. He also traveled to South Dakota to do his own installation of a solar system at a cost of \$20,000.

Pugh said he has inquired about the delays and is aware that the contract for construction states that completion time is dependent on market factors. "Robert (Vicino) is real savvy that way," Pugh said. "But after three years, we're not talking about building a palace, it's a basic build-out, so it seems to me it should have been done by now."

In the meantime, Pugh said he received an email from Vivos earlier this year informing him that the monthly amenity fee and annual land use fees had increased at the bunker complex.

Pugh said he and his wife have considered taking legal action over the delays but that he doesn't see that as a good option. However, he added, "I'm starting to get concerned that it's never going to get done, and that I may not get my full value out of it."



**This photo, taken on Oct.. 4, 2024 at the Vivos xPoint bunker complex near Igloo, S.D., shows the outside of an uninhabited bunker.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)

### **Bunker idea came in 1982 from a voice**

Vicino said that in the late 1970s he invented and patented the large inflatables that are now ubiquitous in advertising, creating a company that allowed him to buy a Rolls-Royce and a beachfront home in California in his mid-20s.

Vicino said he first became interested in developing or selling survival bunkers in 1982. Vicino said he heard a female voice in his head clearly tell him that, "Robert, you need to build underground bunkers or shelters for thousands of people to survive what is coming," he said. "I attributed it to the Holy Spirit."

Vicino said after he learned of the South Dakota former munitions site, he soon signed an agreement with a local rancher who owned the land to lease the bunkers, enabling him to launch Vivos xPoint in the spring of 2017. Later, he said the rancher approached him about buying the land and the bunkers, and Vicino did so.

Fall River county property records show that Vivos xPoint Investment Group bought three parcels of land at the site for \$2.5 million in May 2020.

Vicino said he paid cash during that transaction. "We've never borrowed any money, and we've done pretty well for ourselves, you know, millions in the bank," he said.



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 19 of 78

Vivos xPoint is promoted on the company website as "the largest survival community on earth." A video indicates that amenity bunkers will eventually include a restaurant, general store, community center, medical clinic, security station, workout facility, pool house, workshop, hydroponic and aquaponics bunker and a horse stable. Language under the video indicates that "each of these amenity bunkers will be developed as the community develops and time permits."

Vicino said his hope is that Vivos xPoint will grow into a place where up to 5,000 people can work together to survive the worst possible catastrophes, such as a nuclear war, a global flood or an asteroid strike. "We want people to harmonize with respect and tolerance for one another," he said.

Current lease holders at Vivos xPoint, Vicino said, include three Los Angeles Police Department officers, a high-powered attorney and retired sheriffs and military personnel.

According to the Vivos website, the company also owns a large survival bunker called Vivos Indiana and another known as Vivos Europa One in an undisclosed location. Vicino said he is developing a new survival project in Switzerland. He said Vivos operates other survival sites in locations he cannot disclose.

The website also promotes the opportunity to buy into the underground Vivos Trine complex, whose location is also not revealed. That large bunker complex, the website says, can house people, a staff, munitions, supplies for a year and vaults that can "store the DNA and gamete cells for millions of people for potential restoration."

Bunker leases at Vivos xPoint in South Dakota are in high demand, he said, and as a result, initial bunker lease prices have risen from \$25,000 to about \$55,000. Vicino said he runs background checks on prospective tenants and turns away about 20% to 25% of lease applicants.

Vicino said plans are underway by a major network to film an unscripted reality TV show in 2025 centered around the Vivos xPoint community in South Dakota, but he declined to share details.

An unusual, surreal setting

The Vivos website says the South Dakota bunker site will be safe from "the marauders during the aftermath of a large-scale cataclysm or catastrophic event." The site has a U.S. map showing that southwestern South Dakota is outside the range of submersion areas along the coasts, known nuclear targets, the Yellowstone blast zone and "high-crime anarchy zones."

The website promotes Vivos xPoint as an 18 square-mile site with 575 steel and concrete bunkers that in total could accommodate 5,000 people. Each bunker has nearly 2,200 square-feet of internal space, a 12-foot ceiling at the apex, with a berm of protective soil on top and 400 feet of separation between each bunker.



**This photo, taken on October. 4, 2024, shows the TV room in a finished bunker within the Vivos xPoint survivalist community south of Edgemont, S.D.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 20 of 78

Once leased, bunkers are cleared of cattle droppings, given a specialized coat of paint inside, and according to residents, remain cool in summer and provide protection from the elements in winter. Residents are provided fresh water and often install solar systems or use diesel generators for power, Vicino said.

Driving on the one gravel road in and out of Vivos xPoint is a surreal, somewhat haunting experience, as visitors pass by the remnants of the former Army base before entering the bunker areas. A few abandoned, dilapidated structures still stand among numerous tall chimneys that used to be attached to buildings.

Once on site, the rolling, wind-swept prairie lands are part of a treeless landscape where only the bunkers, resident campers and outbuildings and scores of cattle break the skyline.



**A bunker in the Vivos xPoint complex, shown on Oct. 4, 2024 near Igloo, S.D., has a solar panel and ventilation pipe in place.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)

## Cases 'about the little guy'

James, the Custer attorney, said he understands the frustration and anger some of his clients feel about how they have been treated by the management at Vivos xPoint.

"In essence, these cases are all about, you know, the rights of the little guy and a company or corporation that is trying to stifle any dissent," James said.

James said his clients are disappointed that they have ended up in court when all they wanted was to live a peaceful life in a setting where they could find serenity and stability.

"I do think these people are making a fundamental commitment to this way of life. They are uprooting themselves from wherever they were, and they're putting all their eggs in this basket. And what's being sold to them is essentially that they have this great, sustainable community of like-minded people that they'll be able to thrive in. And I think that's what a lot of people came here for," James said. "And I think some of them still hope it can be that. But I think that they all, over time, have lost confidence in that vision of what this was supposed to be."

James said is hopeful that the state attorney general's office or some other enforcement agency will take interest in what is happening at Vivos xPoint.

"I believe that this is an operation that needs to see a bright light shined upon it," James told News Watch. "If a light is shone upon it, I think there will be a lot more to be seen."

*This story was produced by South Dakota News Watch, an independent, nonprofit news organization. Read more in-depth stories at [sdnewswatch.org](http://sdnewswatch.org) and sign up for an email every few days to get stories as soon as they're published. Contact Bart Pfankuch at [bart.pfankuch@sdnewswatch.org](mailto:bart.pfankuch@sdnewswatch.org).*





### **COMMENTARY**

## **Mercury research raises more questions about lax approach to zebra mussels**

by Brad Johnson

Anglers catching fish in zebra mussel-infested lakes may be reeling in adult walleyes with mercury content 72% higher and perch with 157% higher levels than those being caught on non-infested lakes.

In a just-released report, researchers studied 21 Minnesota lakes, 12 containing zebra mussels and nine without. The study reports that zebra mussels alter a lake's makeup in several ways. The razor-sharp mussels filter the water, eating algae, zoo plankton and phytoplankton, resources used by small fish.

They can make lakes crystal-clear, enhancing native and invasive plant growth and reducing the number of small bait fish near shore. The excrement from zebra mussels contains concentrated amounts of mercury, and that excrement forms mats on the soil near shore.

Walleye and perch, the study said, lacking normal food sources, begin foraging for scarce food in the lake bottom, ingesting the mercury-laden material.

A 2020 Minnesota study also shows that zebra mussels stunt the growth of walleye and perch.

Given the threats, one wonders why South Dakota is so lackadaisical in its approach to containing the spread of not just zebra mussels, but all invasive aquatic species.

Fishing alone is extremely important to South Dakota's economy, with approximately 225,000 anglers spending nearly \$531 million annually, according to a state Department of Game, Fish & Parks 2022 economic impact study.

A 2019 study, "The Economic and Social Values Associated with Small South Dakota Lakes," reports "that for every dollar spent in South Dakota by anglers fishing a lake in this study there was an economic return of \$1.70."

The study, by South Dakota State University Ph.D. student Aaron Sundmark, focused on the impact of the state's approximately 400 small lakes.

South Dakota has 577 lakes and reservoirs under state management, and lakes are prominently featured



**Zebra mussels at Lewis and Clark Lake near Yankton.** (Sam Stukel/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 22 of 78

in state tourism campaigns. Yet the state invests little in protecting these vital resources.

The South Dakota Lakes and Streams Association (SDLSA) has implored South Dakota political leaders and Game, Fish & Parks to take the zebra mussel spread more seriously. The group is frustrated by the state's limited effort.

The invasive mussels entered South Dakota in 2014 in Lewis and Clark Lake in the Missouri River. They have steadily marched across the state. They now infest 22 lakes as well as the Missouri River, James River and Big Sioux River systems including Sand Lake Refuge, according to GF&P's aquatic invasive species website, SD Least Wanted.

The high mercury concentrations especially can have serious health effects, particularly on unborn children.

"Mercury contamination of aquatic ecosystems is a substantial public health issue," the study said, "and mercury is responsible for about 80% of all fish consumption advisories globally."

Because South Dakota's government has had a limited response to the spread of zebra mussels, organizations like SDLSA have been forced to take the lead.

SDLSA has sponsored a \$100,000-plus study of the economic impact of zebra mussels on South Dakota.

The study is being conducted at the University of South Dakota in partnership with South Dakota State University. Assisting in the study is Nanette Nelson, a research economist with the University of Montana. Her 2019 Montana study predicted that if zebra mussels were to colonize all the water bodies in that state, they would cause up to \$122 million in mitigation expenses, up to \$112 million in lost revenue and up to \$497 million in lost property value.

Results of SDLSA's study are about a year away. In addition to higher mercury levels in fish, zebra mussels attach themselves to structures such as power systems at the hydroelectric dams on the Missouri River.

Back in Minnesota, researchers found that mercury concentrations increased as the fish grew larger.

The study said, "Median mercury concentration in adult walleye of average size (about 16.5 inches) from lakes with zebra mussels was 0.30" parts per million (ppm) or 1.4 times greater than the 0.22 ppm level that is the level where people should begin limiting fish consumption.

"Mercury is in every lake anyway because of atmospheric conditions," SDLSA President Steve Charron noted, "and is most often found laying around in the shallow parts. When fish start scavenging around in things they don't usually eat, mercury increases in fish.

"It is just another warning shot to pay attention as zebra mussels spread. The water may be clear but the weeds and the mercury that come with it show that it is not a good thing to have zebra mussels in your lake."

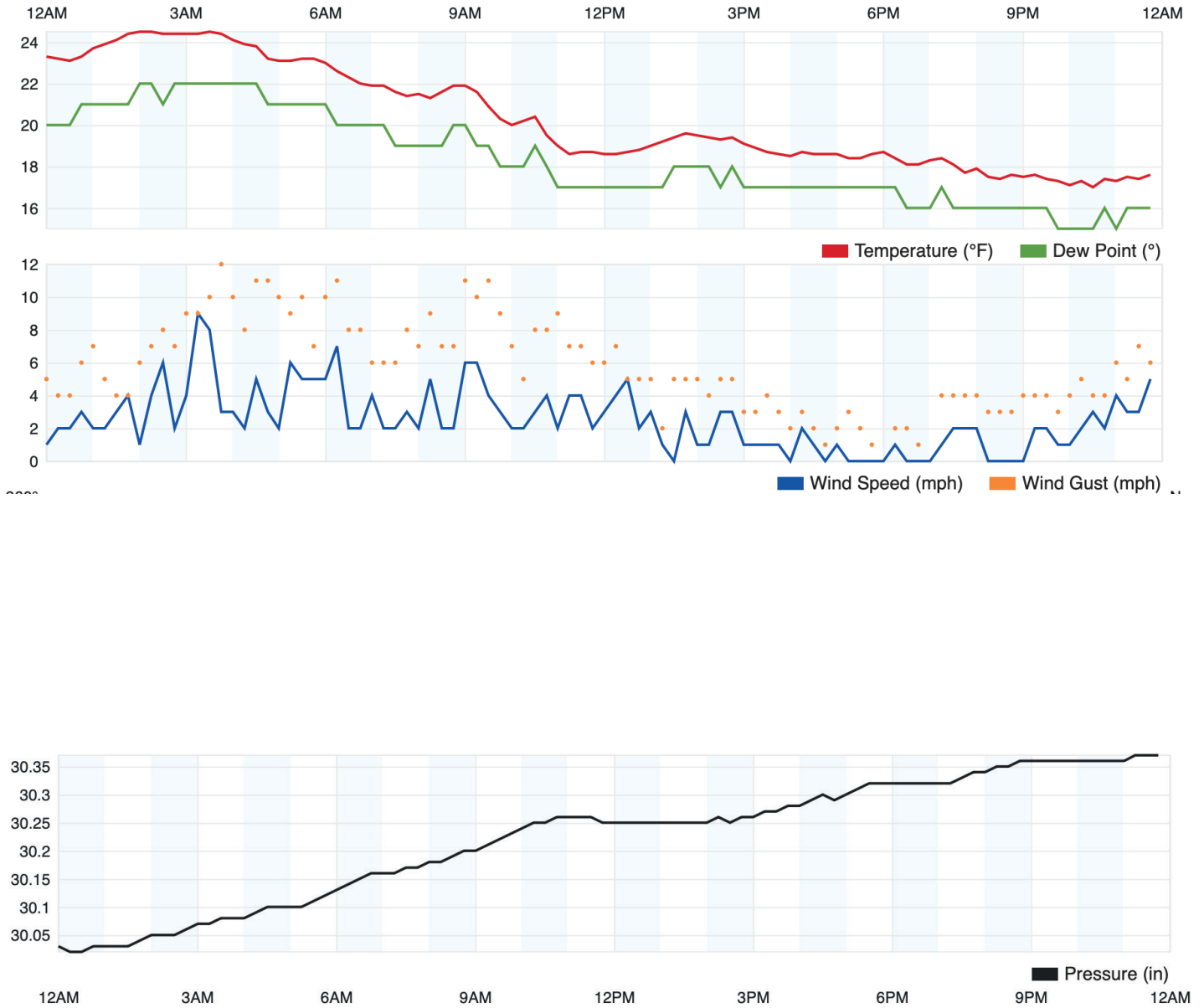
The Minnesota study was conducted by researchers from the University of Minnesota College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences, Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

*Brad Johnson is a Watertown businessman and longtime journalist. He is past president of South Dakota Lakes and Streams Association, president of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation and served 16 years on the South Dakota Board of Water and Natural Resources.*

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 23 of 78

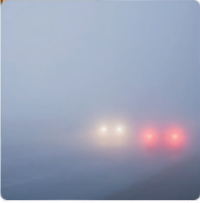
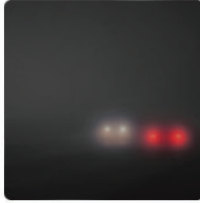


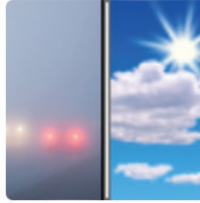
## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





# Broton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 24 of 78

Today	Tonight	Christmas Day	Wednesday Night	Thursday
				
<b>High: 27 °F</b>	<b>Low: 26 °F</b>	<b>High: 34 °F</b>	<b>Low: 25 °F</b>	<b>High: 37 °F</b>
Dense Freezing Fog	Dense Freezing Fog	Patchy Fog then Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Areas Freezing Fog and Patchy Fog then Mostly Sunny


Tuesday, December 24th, 2024  
2:56 AM

## Christmas Forecast

### Dense Fog Advisory

- Visibilities down to a quarter mile or less are possible.
- Low visibility could make driving conditions hazardous.
- Advisory is in effect until 12PM Tuesday.

### Dec. 24th




**Highs:**  
26-30° NE SD/W MN  
35-46° Central SD

**Overnight Lows:**  
19-26°

**Wind:**  
S 5-10 mph

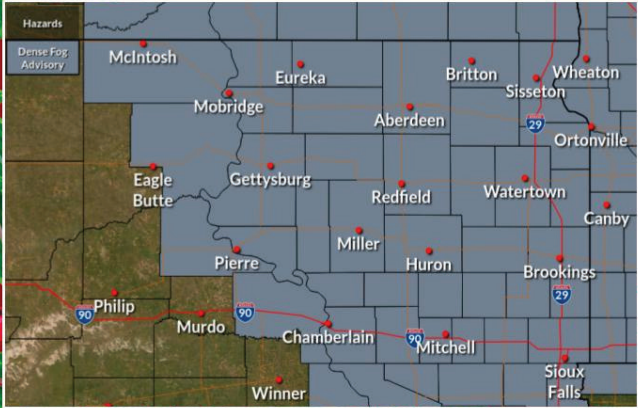
### Dec. 25th



**Highs:**  
31-35° NE SD/W MN  
38-48° Central SD

**Overnight Lows:**  
22-28°

**Wind:**  
S 10-15 mph  
Gusts to 25 mph



A Dense Fog Advisory is in effect through 12 PM this afternoon for central & northeastern South Dakota as well as western Minnesota. Visibilities down to a quarter mile are possible, which could create hazardous driving conditions. Foggy conditions will hang around today into tomorrow. Temperatures will run slightly to well above average both today and Wednesday.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 25 of 78



## Roving Dense Fog

December 23, 2024  
2:45 PM

Areas of fog as of 2:30 PM - fog is expected to last into the overnight hours and expand in coverage



Dense fog has been in place across central and far northeastern SD most of the day so far and is expected to continue through the evening and overnight hours. Areas currently clear of fog are expected to become foggy overnight. This could leave a glaze of ice on roadways for the evening commute and any Christmas traveling. Please slow down and be careful if you are driving.

**Winter Travel**  
Road Trip Safety Tips

- SHARE YOUR TRAVEL PLANS WITH FRIENDS OR FAMILY
- WINTERIZE YOUR VEHICLE
- PACK AN EMERGENCY SUPPLY KIT
- CHECK ROAD CONDITIONS
- GET THE WEATHER FORECAST

Stay prepared & have a safe & happy holiday season!

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 26 of 78

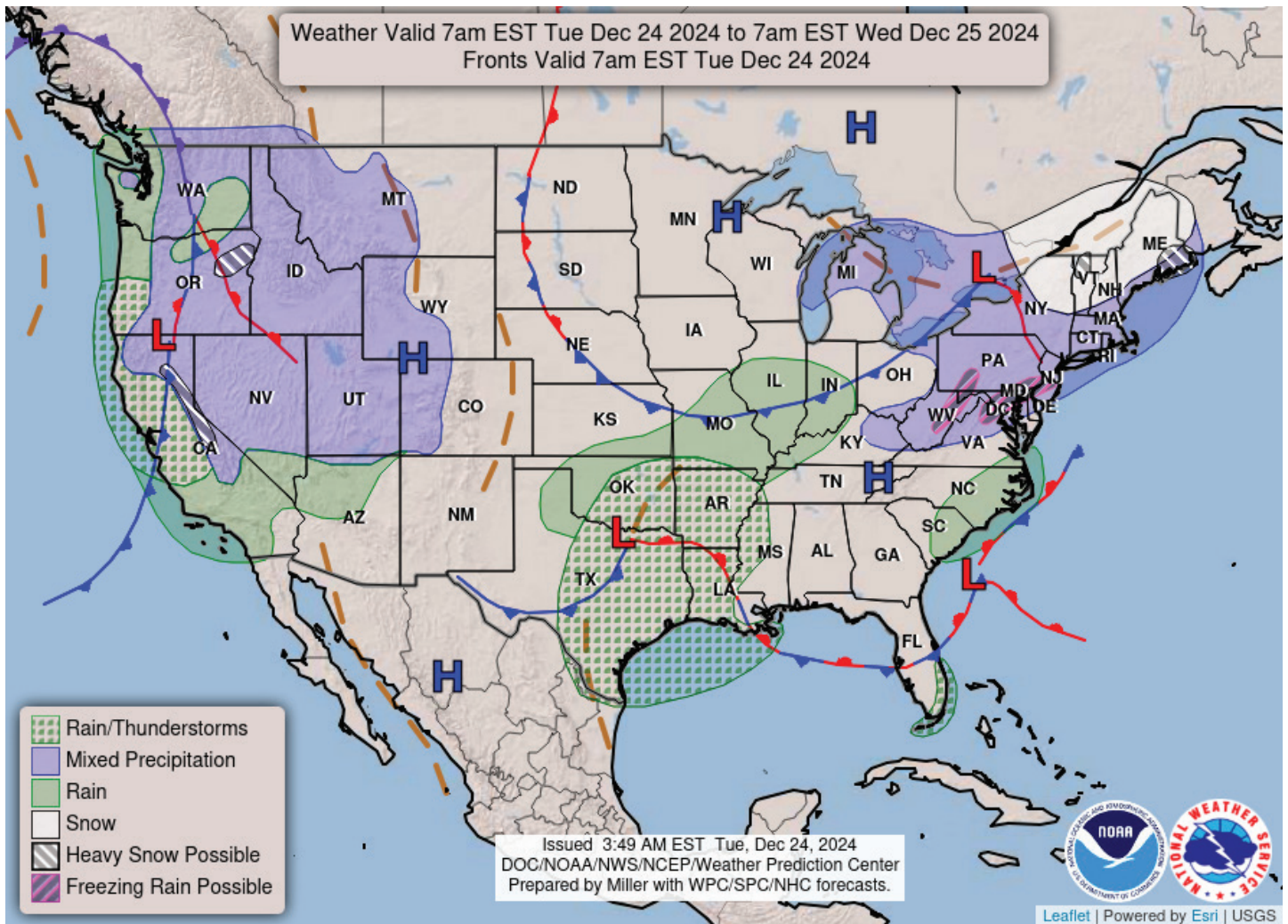
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 25 °F at 2:09 AM**  
**Low Temp: 17 °F at 10:26 PM**  
**Wind: 13 mph at 4:38 AM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 50 in 1943  
Record Low: -24 in 1996  
Average High: 26  
Average Low: 5  
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.46  
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 21.67  
Precip Year to Date: 21.71  
Sunset Tonight: 4:55:39 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:20 am



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 27 of 78

## Today in Weather History

December 24, 1985: Snow fell over western South Dakota on December 23, with the greatest amounts in the northern Black Hills. Strong winds gusting to 50-60 mph developed over the western part of the state on the evening of December 23rd and continued into the morning of the 24th, with gusts to above 40 mph in the east. The winds caused ground blizzard conditions in the northern and central sections of South Dakota, and many vehicles were reported in ditches. Many people were stranded for a time in Martin in Bennett County. Several roads were blocked entirely during this time, such as Highway 248 near Murdo in Jones County.

December 24, 1992: A deep area of low pressure traveled across the United States/Canada border, dragging a cold front southward across South Dakota and Minnesota by Christmas Day. Southerly winds gusted up to 50 mph over western Minnesota on the 23rd in advance of the storm, causing ground blizzard conditions. As the arctic cold front swept across the area, temperatures tumbled from the 20s and 30s to well below zero by Christmas morning. Wind gusts were up to 50 mph behind the front, causing ground blizzard conditions and wind chill readings from 40 to 60 degrees below zero. A church that was under construction in Litchfield in Meeker County, Minnesota, was destroyed by strong winds. Many motorists were stranded on Christmas Eve and spent the night at area homes and motels. Interstate 94 from Alexandria to Moorhead, MN, was closed for nearly eight hours. High winds gusted up to 55 mph in the Watertown, SD area, causing a steel frame building under construction to collapse sometime between 9 and 10 pm CST.

December 24, 2009: A broad upper-level low-pressure area over the Upper Midwest associated with an intense surface low-pressure area brought widespread heavy snow along with blizzard conditions to central and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. The storm was a slow mover and produced several rounds of snow over three days. Total snowfall amounts were from 7 to as much as 25 inches. The heavy snow combined with winds of 25 to 40 mph with gusts to 50 mph brought widespread blowing and drifting snow with visibilities frequently less than a quarter of a mile. This blizzard ranked in the top three for South Dakota snowfall with a state average of 15.4 inches. Most of the state received 10 inches of snow or more with many locations with 20 inches or more. Pollock in north-central South Dakota set an all-time high three-day snowfall total with 17 inches. Before the onset of the storm, the Governor declared a state of emergency for South Dakota. Large portions of both Interstates 29 and 90 across South Dakota were closed late on Thursday, December 24th. Both Interstates were closed through Christmas Day and into Saturday, December 26th. There were some stranded holiday travelers due to the road closings, along with a few rescues. Most roads were reopened by Sunday morning, December 27th. There were also several vehicle accidents with nothing serious. Several airports were also closed throughout the storm, along with a few spotty power outages occurring in Lyman County in central South Dakota. Total snowfall amounts over the three days predominantly ranged from 1 to 2 feet. Snowfall amounts with a foot or more included; 12 inches at Mobridge, Eureka, Waubay, and Eagle Butte; 13 inches at Highmore and Miller; 14 inches at

Castlewood, Summit, Watertown, Pierre, and Ree Heights; 15 inches at Groton, Gettysburg, Webster, Wilmot, Hayti, and McLaughlin; 16 inches at McIntosh, east of Hayes and east of Hosmer; 17 inches at Timber Lake, Britton, and Pollock; 18 inches near Victor; 20 inches near Keldron; 22 inches at Murdo; 23 inches at Sisseton and 25 inches at Kennebec. In west-central Minnesota Wheaton received 11 inches, Browns Valley received 15 inches with 16 inches at Ortonville and Artichoke Lake.

1851: The Library of Congress caught fire. About 35,000 of the Library's 55,000 volumes were destroyed.

1872 - Extreme cold gripped the Upper Midwest on Christmas Eve. Downtown Chicago reported an all-time record low of 23 degrees below zero, which stood until January 1982, and Minneapolis MN reached 38 below. The afternoon high at Minneapolis was 17 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1963: At 0326 CDT on December 24th, 1963, a new all-time low for Memphis occurred with a reading of -13°F. The record still stands today.

1968: The crew of Apollo 8 took this photo, later dubbed "Earthrise," on December 24th, 1968. During a



# Groton Daily Independent

**Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 28 of 78**

broadcast that night, pilot Jim Lovell said: "The vast loneliness is awe-inspiring, and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth."

1971: A commercial airliner encountered severe turbulence from a thunderstorm and broke up in mid-air over Peru. Juliane Koepcke, who was 17 years old, fell roughly 2 miles to earth, still strapped into her seat, survived with a broken collarbone, a gash to her right arm, and her right eye swollen shut. She traveled 11 days through the Peruvian rainforest before being rescued.

1983 - The barometric pressure reached 31.42 inches at Miles City, MT, to establish a record for the U.S. It was the coldest Christmas Eve of modern record. More than 125 cities reported record low temperatures for the date, and all-time record lows for December were reported at seventeen cities, including Chicago with a low of 25 degrees below zero, and Havre MT with a reading of 50 below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1987 - A four day seige of heavy rain began in the south central U.S. Flooding claimed four lives and caused millions of dollars property damage. Western Tennessee was drenched with up to fourteen inches of rain in two days. Total rainfall exceeded twelve inches around Memphis TN, and the heavy rain and subsequent flooding added insult to injury to victims of the West Memphis tornado on the 14th of the month. Little Rock AR experienced their wettest December day of record with 5.01 inches of rain. West Little Rock reported 10.20 inches of rain in 24 hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Early morning thunderstorms developing along a cold front spawned a powerful tornado at Franklin, TN, which killed one person, injured seven others, and caused eight million dollars damage. Another in a series of winter storms in the western U.S. produced 20 inches of snow at Blue Canyon CA in 24 hours. Bishop CA received 14 inches of snow in just six hours, and Redding CA, which averages three inches of snow per year, was blanketed with ten inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Fifty-seven cities in the south central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Elkins, WV, with a reading of 22 degrees below zero. Key West FL equalled their record for December with a morning low of 44 degrees. The high of just 45 degrees at Miami FL was an all-time record for that location. It smashed their previous record for the date by twenty degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004: An extremely rare snowstorm impacts southeastern Texas on this day. Corpus Christi International Airport officially measured 4.4 inches from this event. This was their second white Christmas ever recorded in Corpus Christi. The other white Christmas occurred in 1918 when 0.1 inches was reported.



## The Angel's Visit To Mary

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think of what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And though the angel left her, she was not alone.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your presence and the peace and protection that is ours when we are obedient to Your voice. Give us Your courage to be faithful to Your plan to fulfill Your purpose for our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 1:26-38 Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus.

*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*



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 30 of 78

## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White.....\$48.99/year
- Colored.....\$79.88/year
- Colored.....\$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly\*.....\$31.95/year

\* The E-Weekly is a PDF file emailed to you each week. It does not grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Mail Completed Form to:

Groton Independent

P.O. Box 34

Groton, SD 57445-0034

or scan and email to [paperpaul@grotonsd.net](mailto:paperpaul@grotonsd.net)

## Groton Daily Independent [www.397news.com](http://www.397news.com) Subscription Form

This option will grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

- 1 Month.....\$15.98
- 3 Months.....\$26.63
- 6 Months.....\$31.95
- 9 Months.....\$42.60
- 12 Months.....\$53.25

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

The following will be used for your log-in information.

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Password \_\_\_\_\_

Pay with Paypal. Type the following into your browser window:

[paypal.me/paperpaul](https://paypal.me/paperpaul)

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

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 31 of 78



## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.20.24

2 20 51 56 67 19

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$970,000,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 27 Mins  
DRAW: 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.23.24

4 21 28 42 52 1

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$18,710,000**

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 42  
DRAW: Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.23.24

10 20 22 23 43 1

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 15 Hrs 57 Mins  
DRAW: 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.21.24

9 22 28 30 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$172,000**

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 57  
DRAW: Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.23.24

16 49 62 63 68 10

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 26  
DRAW: Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.23.24

22 42 44 57 64 18

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$117,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 26  
DRAW: Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 32 of 78

## Upcoming Groton Events

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

## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### **Bethlehem is set to mark a second subdued Christmas during the war in Gaza**

By JALAL BWAITEL Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Bethlehem prepared Tuesday to mark another somber Christmas in the traditional birthplace of Jesus under the shadow of war in Gaza.

The excitement and cheer that typically descends on the Palestinian town in the occupied West Bank on Christmas were nowhere to be found: The festive lights and giant tree that normally decorate Manger Square were missing. Throngs of foreign tourists that usually fill the square weren't expected and youth marching bands that gather each year to mark the holiday were absent.

Palestinian security forces arranged barriers near the Nativity Church, built atop the spot where Jesus is believed to have been born, and a worker cleared garbage bins.

"Always the message of Bethlehem is a message of peace and hope," said Mayor Anton Salman. "And these days, we are also sending our message to the world: peace and hope, but insisting that the world must work to end our suffering as Palestinian people."

The cancellation of Christmas festivities is a severe blow to the town's economy. Tourism accounts for an estimated 70% of Bethlehem's income — almost all of it from the Christmas season. Salman said unemployment is hovering around 50% — higher than the 30% unemployment across the rest of the West Bank, according to the Palestinian Finance Ministry.

The number of visitors to the town plunged from a pre-COVID high of around 2 million visitors per year in 2019 to fewer than 100,000 visitors in 2024, said Jiries Qumsiyeh, the spokesperson for the Palestinian Tourism Ministry.

Bethlehem is an important center in the history of Christianity, but Christians make up only a small percentage of the roughly 14 million people spread across the Holy Land. There are about 182,000 in Israel, 50,000 in the West Bank and Jerusalem and 1,300 in Gaza, according to the U.S. State Department.

While the war in Gaza has deterred tourists and pilgrims alike, it has also prompted a surge of violence in the West Bank, with more than 800 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire and dozens of Israelis killed in militant attacks.

Since the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that sparked the war, access to and from Bethlehem and other Palestinian towns in the West Bank has been difficult, with long lines of motorists waiting to pass Israeli military checkpoints. Restrictions have also prevented some 150,000 Palestinians from leaving the territory to work in Israel, causing the economy there to contract by 25%.

More than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, according to health officials there, while some 90% of the territory's 2.3 million residents have been displaced. Officials say more than half of the dead are women and children, though they don't give a breakdown of how many are civilians and how many fighters.

In the Oct. 7 assault on southern Israel, Hamas-led militants killed about 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and took more than 250 hostages.

### **Middle East latest: Israel intercepts projectile from Yemen. Former Israeli hostage dies**

By The Associated Press undefined

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — A septuagenarian Israeli woman who was taken hostage during Hamas's attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023 has died.

She was among the 250 hostages the Palestinian militant group took back into Gaza following the surprise attack that left about 1,200 people dead. Israel's subsequent bombardment and ground invasion have



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 34 of 78

killed over 45,000 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its count.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military said on Tuesday it intercepted a projectile launched from Yemen.

Here's the latest:

A former Israeli hostage dies

TEL AVIV, Israel — Hannah Katzir, an Israeli woman who was taken hostage on Oct. 7, 2023, and freed in a brief ceasefire last year, has died. She was 78.

The Hostages Families Forum, a group representing the families of people taken captive, confirmed the death Tuesday but did not disclose the cause.

Her daughter, Carmit Palty Katzi,r said in a statement that her mother's "heart could not withstand the terrible suffering since Oct. 7."

Katzir's husband, Rami, was killed during the attack by militants who raided their home in Kibbutz Nir Oz. Her son Elad was also kidnapped and his body was recovered in April by the Israeli military, who said he had been killed in captivity.

She spent 49 days in captivity and was freed in late November 2023. Shortly after Katzir was freed, her daughter told Israeli media that she had been hospitalized with heart issues attributed to "difficult conditions and starvation" while she was held captive.

Israeli air defense system intercepts projectile launched from Yemen

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israel's military said the projectile was intercepted before crossing into Israeli territory, but it set off air raid sirens overnight in the country's populous central area, sending residents looking for cover.

Israel's rescue service Magen David Adom said a 60-year-old woman was seriously wounded after being hurt on her way to a protected space.

There was no immediate comment from Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

It was the third time in a week that fire from Yemen set off sirens in Israel. On Saturday, a missile slammed into a playground in Tel Aviv, injuring 16, after Israel's air defense system failed to intercept it.

Earlier last week, Israeli jets struck Yemen's rebel-held capital and a port city, killing nine. Israel said the strikes were in response to previous Houthi attacks.

## Man faces murder charges in the death of a woman who was lit on fire in New York City subway

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE and SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

A man is facing murder and arson charges in New York City for allegedly setting a woman on fire inside a subway train and then watching her die after she was engulfed in flames, police said Monday.

The suspect, identified by police as Sebastian Zapeta, was taken into custody hours after the woman died on Sunday morning.

Zapeta, 33, is a Guatemalan citizen who entered the U.S. illegally after he had been previously removed in 2018, said Jeff Carter, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Surveillance video showed the suspect approach the woman, who was sitting motionless and may have been sleeping, on a stationary F train at the Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue subway station in Brooklyn and set her clothing on fire, police said.

The woman's clothing "became fully engulfed in a matter of seconds," said Jessica Tisch, the New York City police commissioner, while the suspect remained at the scene, watching her burn from a bench on the subway platform as police and a transit worker extinguished the flames.

The woman was pronounced dead at the scene. Police have not yet released her identity.

Tisch called the incident "one of the most depraved crimes one person could possibly commit against another human being."

Police arrested Zapeta later Sunday, riding the same subway line, after getting a tip from a group of high school students who recognized images of the suspect that were circulated by police.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 35 of 78

It is unclear when and where Zapeta reentered the U.S. after being removed about six years ago.

In a statement, Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez said, "The depravity of this horrific crime is beyond comprehension, and my office is committed to bringing the perpetrator to justice."

"This gruesome and senseless act of violence against a vulnerable woman will be met with the most serious consequences," he said.

It was unclear if Zapeta has an attorney or when he would be arraigned.

A Brooklyn address for Zapeta released by police matches a service center for Samaritan Daytop Village, which provides housing and substance abuse support. The organization did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul this year has sent New York National Guard members to the city's subway system to help police conduct random searches of riders' bags for weapons following a series of high-profile crimes on city trains. Hochul recently deployed additional members to help patrol during the holiday season.

About a year ago, Hochul supported funding to install video cameras on every train car in the New York subway system, said Michael Kemper, chief security officer for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. He and other officials on Sunday credited the cameras with helping to track down the suspect so quickly.

## South Korea's opposition party vows to impeach acting president

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's main liberal opposition party said Tuesday it will seek to impeach acting leader Han Duck-soo, as Seoul grapples with the turmoil set off when impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol made a short-lived declaration of martial law.

The country's political parties are now tussling over how to run investigations into that decision, as well as separate allegations against Yoon's wife.

The opposition Democratic Party, which has a majority in parliament, wants independent investigators, and gave Han until Tuesday to approve bills appointing them.

Impeaching Han would further deepen political chaos and worries by neighboring countries. Han, the country's No. 2 official, has taken over the president's powers since Yoon's impeachment. If he's impeached too, the finance minister is next in line.

The Democratic Party has slammed Han for vetoing several opposition-sponsored bills, including a controversial agriculture bill. It also urged Han to quickly appoint justices to vacant seats on the Constitutional Court, which is reviewing Yoon's impeachment and will determine whether to dismiss or reinstate him.

Filling the Constitutional Court's three empty posts could make conviction more likely, as it requires the support of six of the court's possible full nine members.

The Democratic Party demanded that Han approve bills calling for special prosecutors to investigate Yoon for rebellion over his martial law decree, and his wife for corruption and other allegations, by Tuesday.

Han didn't put the bills on the agendas for Tuesday's Cabinet Council meeting, calling for the ruling and opposition parties to negotiate more.

Democratic Party floor leader Park Chan-dae responded that there's no room for negotiations about a Yoon investigation, and that his party would begin steps toward an impeachment at once.

"We've clearly warned that it's totally up to Prime Minister Han Duck-soo whether he would go down in history as a disgraceful figure as a puppet of rebellion plot leader Yoon Suk Yeol or a public servant that has faithfully carried out the orders by the public," Park told a televised party meeting.

South Korean prosecutors and other officials are separately probing whether Yoon committed rebellion and abuse of power, but he's ignored requests by investigative agencies to appear for questioning and allow searches of his office.

Yoon's defense minister, police chief and several other senior military commanders have already been arrested over the deployment of troops and police officers to the National Assembly, which prompted a dramatic standoff that ended when lawmakers managed to enter the chamber and voted unanimously to overrule Yoon's decree.



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 36 of 78

The governing People Power Party said that the opposition's impeachment threats are interfering with Han's "legitimate exercise of authority." Floor leader Kweon Seong-dong, a Yoon loyalist, said the Democratic Party's "politics of intimidation have reached their peak."

An impeachment vote would face legal ambiguities. Most South Korean officials can be impeached with a simple majority of parliament, but impeaching the presidents takes two-thirds. The rival parties differ on which standard would apply to an acting president.

The Democratic Party controls 170 of the National Assembly's 300 seats, so it would need support from members of other parties including Yoon's own to get a two-thirds majority.

The Constitutional Court has up to six months to determine Yoon's fate. If he's thrown of office, a national election to find his successor must take place within two months.

## Southern Africa elections brought big changes in 2024

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — In Southern Africa, where democracy remains relatively stable, elections held in 2024 saw long-governing liberation parties struggling to survive.

Across Africa, power struggles involving military governments, coup attempts and armed conflict are common, but the southern region has largely been more stable and elections in some countries brought joy and hopes of a better future.

Not so much though for some long-governing parties. The decades-old goodwill of liberating their countries from colonial rule appears to be giving way to frustration over economic problems and limited opportunities for young people in the region.

As voters become younger, and without personal memories of colonialism, which ended before they were born, liberation struggle-era parties in Southern Africa lost power or were given a wake-up call in 2024.

For many young voters, performance of the government matters more than historic liberation struggle era credentials that these parties have relied on to stay in power for decades, resulting in "the shifting political tectonic plates we are seeing," said Nic Cheeseman, a political scientist and professor at the University of Birmingham in England.

"Generational change is an important factor in the shifting political tectonic plates we are seeing. People want jobs and dignity — you can't eat memories," said Cheeseman, who researches African politics.

Botswana, a tiny nation of about 2.5 million people with a history of democratic stability, provided the biggest shock as the economy suffered from a global downturn in demand for mined diamonds, and levels of youth unemployment rose.

Opposition supporters dressed in blue and white took to the streets to celebrate, while then President Mokgweetsi Masisi conceded defeat even before the vote count was over following an election held in late October. The opposition landslide marked the end of the 58 years in power of the Botswana Democratic Party, which had governed the country since independence from the United Kingdom in 1966.

Months earlier, South African voters turned against the African National Congress, the party led by anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela in the 1990s. In May, the ANC lost its majority, forcing it to share power with the opposition.

The result put South Africa on an uncharted political path for the first time since the end of apartheid three decades ago. The ANC has been gradually losing support since the 2009 national election, also ceding political control of major cities because of widespread discontent over corruption, service delivery failures and economic struggles. However, its drop from 57.5% of support to 40% in May was its biggest loss yet.

In Namibia, the candidate of the long-governing South West Africa People's Organization, or SWAPO — 72-year-old Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah — made history by becoming the country's first female president.

However, SWAPO won 51 seats in the parliamentary vote, only just passing the 49 it needed to keep its majority and narrowly avoiding becoming another liberation struggle party to be rejected in Southern Africa this year. This marked SWAPO's worst parliamentary result since Namibia gained independence from South Africa's apartheid government in 1990, signaling a potential shift in the country's political landscape.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 37 of 78

Many liberation governments have reason to be worried even though the consistency of democratic processes could be lauded, said Nicole Beardsworth, politics researcher and lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

"What we see in Southern Africa is a relative stability in terms of democratic standards, where citizens seem to believe that their votes matter and that they count. So this does present a concern for ruling parties," Beardsworth said.

In Mozambique, results that extended the governing Frelimo party's nearly half-century in power following an election in October ignited protests that resulted in the death of at least 100 people, according to Amnesty International.

Exiled opposition leader Venancio Mondlane, capitalizing on growing youth discontent in the country of 34 million people, has challenged the election outcome in court. Also, he has continued calling for protests that range from street marches to road and border blockades and the banging of pots.

A similar situation occurred in January in the Indian Ocean island nation of Comoros, where news of incumbent President Azali Assoumani winning a fourth term triggered violent unrest that left one person dead and scores others injured.

Cheeseman, the political researcher, said that protests, including in countries where democracy is thwarted, reflect "growing signs — from protests to online dissent — that public opinion is already turning."

"Even citizens who have lost faith in democracy want responsive and accountable government, and to have their voices heard," he said.

Elections swept away ruling parties in several countries elsewhere in the region and across the economically troubled continent of more than 1.4 billion people and home to the world's youngest population.

The Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, one of Africa's most stable democracies, saw an opposition coalition grab all contested parliamentary seats, driving out the government led by Pravind Jugnauth, who was replaced by former Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam.

In West Africa, Senegal in March elected previously little-known 44-year-old Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who became the continent's youngest leader.

Faye defeated rivals who included a former prime minister who was backed by then incumbent Macky Sall, just a few weeks after being released from prison to run in the polls. And hopes for change continue running high in a country where more than 60% of the population is under age 25 and 90% work in informal jobs, after Faye's PASTEF party won 130 of 165 seats.

Former President John Dramani Mahama returned to power in Ghana, as voters vented their anger over the policies of outgoing President Nana Akufo-Addo in early December. The 65-year-old Mahama's National Democratic Congress also won the majority in parliament.

## **UN investigative team says Syria's new authorities 'very receptive' to probe of Assad war crimes**

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. organization assisting in investigating the most serious crimes in Syria said Monday the country's new authorities were "very receptive" to its request for cooperation during a just-concluded visit to Damascus, and it is preparing to deploy.

The visit led by Robert Petit, head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria, was the first since the organization was established by the U.N. General Assembly in 2016. It was created to assist in evidence-gathering and prosecution of individuals responsible for possible war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide since Syria's civil war began in 2011.

Petit highlighted the urgency of preserving documents and other evidence before it is lost.

Since the rebel overthrow of Syria's President Bashar Assad and the rebel opening of prisons and detention facilities there have been rising demands from Syrians for the prosecution of those responsible for atrocities and killings while he was in power.



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 38 of 78

"The fall of the Assad rule is a significant opportunity for us to fulfill our mandate on the ground," Petit said. "Time is running out. There is a small window of opportunity to secure these sites and the material they hold."

U.N. associate spokesperson Stephane Tremblay said Monday the investigative team "is preparing for an operational deployment as early as possible and as soon as it is authorized to conduct activities on Syrian soil."

The spokesperson for the organization, known as the IIIM, who was on the trip with Petit, went further, telling The Associated Press: "We are preparing to deploy on the expectation that we will get authorization."

"The representatives from the caretaker authorities were very receptive to our request for cooperation and are aware of the scale of the task ahead," the spokesperson said, speaking on condition of not being named. "They emphasized that they will need expertise to help safeguard the newly accessible documentation."

The IIIM did not disclose which officials in the new government it met with or the site that Petit visited afterward.

"Even at one facility," Petit said, "the mountains of government documentation reveal the chilling efficiency of systemizing the regime's atrocity crimes."

He said that a collective effort by Syrians, civil society organizations and international partners will be needed, as a priority, "to preserve evidence of the crimes committed, avoid duplication, and ensure that all victims are inclusively represented in the pursuit of justice."

In June 2023, the 193-member General Assembly also established an Independent Institution of Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic to clarify the fate and whereabouts of more than 130,000 people missing as a result of the conflict.

## Major storm pounds California's central coast, blamed for man's death and partially collapsing pier

By MARTHA MENDOZA and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

SANTA CRUZ, Calif. (AP) — A major storm pounded California's central coast on Monday, bringing flooding and high surf that was blamed for fatally trapping a man beneath debris on a beach and later partially collapsing a pier, tossing three people into the Pacific Ocean.

The storm was expected to bring hurricane-force winds and waves up to 60 feet (18 meters) as it gained strength from California to the Pacific Northwest. Some California cities ordered beachfront homes and hotels to evacuate early Monday afternoon as forecasters warned that storm swells would continue to increase throughout the day.

"We are anticipating that what is coming toward us is more serious than what was there this morning," said Fred Keeley, mayor of the city of Santa Cruz, where the pier collapsed.

In Watsonville along the Monterey Bay, first responders were called to Sunset State Beach, a state park, around 11:30 a.m. Monday for a report of a man trapped under debris. The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office believes a large wave pinned him there. The man was pronounced dead at a hospital. Other details were not immediately available, and his name has not been released.

The storm's high surf also likely pulled another man into the Pacific Ocean around noon Monday at Marina State Beach, nearly 13 miles (21 kilometers) south of Watsonville, authorities said. Strong currents and high waves forced searchers to abandon their efforts roughly two hours later as conditions worsened. The man remained missing Monday evening.

In Santa Cruz, the municipal wharf under construction partially collapsed and fell into the ocean around 12:45 p.m., taking three people with it. Two people were rescued by lifeguards and a third swam to safety. No one was seriously injured.

Keeley, the mayor, said that section of the wharf had been damaged over time. The structure was in the middle of a \$4 million renovation following destructive storms last winter about 70 miles (112 kilometers) south of San Francisco.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 39 of 78

"It's a catastrophe for those down at the end of the wharf," said David Johnston, owner of Venture Quest Kayaking, who was allowed onto the pier to check on his business.

Tony Elliot, the head of the Santa Cruz Parks & Recreation Department, estimated that about 150 feet (45 meters) of the end of the wharf fell into the water. It was immediately evacuated and will remain closed indefinitely.

Some of the wharf's pilings are still in the ocean and remain "serious, serious hazards" to boats, the mayor said. Each piling weighs hundreds of pounds and is being pushed by powerful waves.

"You are risking your life, and those of the people that would need to try and save you by getting in or too close to the water," the National Weather Service's Bay Area office said on the social platform X.

The end of the Santa Cruz Wharf that broke off had been shut down during renovations. The portion, which included public restrooms and the closed Dolphin restaurant, floated about half a mile (0.8 kilometers) down the coast and wedged itself at the bottom of the San Lorenzo River.

Those who fell into the water were two engineers and a project manager who were inspecting the end of the wharf, officials said. No members of the public were in the area.

Building inspectors were looking at the rest of the pier's structural integrity.

Further up the West Coast, dangerous surf conditions and waves up to 30 feet (9.1 meters) were expected from the central Oregon coast up through southwestern Washington. Winds could peak near 80 mph (130 kph) and a high surf warning in effect until 10 p.m. Monday night, forecasters said.

In a post on X, the National Weather Service office in Portland, Oregon, said "it will likely go down as some of the highest surf this winter."

## 20 years after the Indian Ocean tsunami, a boy found in the mud embraces being known as 'Baby 81'

By KRISHAN FRANCIS Associated Press

KURUKKAL MADAM, Sri Lanka (AP) — Pulled from the mud as an infant after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, and reunited with his parents following an emotional court battle, the boy once known as "Baby 81" is now a 20-year-old dreaming of higher education.

Jayarasa Abilash's story symbolized that of the families torn apart by one of the worst natural calamities in modern history, but it also offered hope. More than 35,000 people in Sri Lanka were killed, with others missing.

The 2-month-old baby was washed away by the tsunami in eastern Sri Lanka and found some distance from home by rescuers. At the hospital, he was No. 81 on the admissions registry.

His father, Murugupillai Jayarasa, spent three days searching for his scattered family, with little left to his name in those early hours but a pair of shorts.

First he found his mother, then his wife. But their infant son was missing.

A nurse had taken the baby from the hospital, but returned him after hearing that his family was alive.

The ordeal, however, was far from over. Nine other families had submitted their names to the hospital, claiming "Baby 81" as their own, so the hospital administration refused to hand over the child to Jayarasa and his wife without proof.

The family went to the police. The matter went to court. The judge ordered a DNA test, a process that was still in its early stages in Sri Lanka.

But none of the nine other families claimed the baby legally, and no DNA testing was done on them, Jayarasa said.

"The hospital named the child 'Baby 81' and listed the names of nine people who claimed the child, omitting us," he said.

"There was a public call to all those who said the child was theirs to subject themselves for DNA testing, but none of them came forward," he recalled. Jayarasa said his family gave DNA samples and it was proven the child was theirs.

Soon, the family was reunited. Their story drew international media attention, and they even visited the



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 40 of 78

United States for an interview.

Today, Abilash is sitting for his final high school exam. Solid and good-natured, he hopes to attend a university to study information technology.

He said he grew up hearing about his story from his parents, while classmates teased him by calling him "Baby 81" or "tsunami baby." He was embarrassed, and it worsened every time the anniversary of the tsunami arrived.

"I used to think 'Here they have come' and run inside and hide myself," he said as journalists returned to hear his story again.

His father said the boy was so upset he wouldn't eat at times.

"I consoled him saying, 'Son, you are unique in being the only one to have such a name in this world,'" he said.

Later, as a teenager, Abilash read more about the events that tore him from his family and brought him back, and he lost his fear.

He knows the nickname will follow him for life. But that's all right.

"Now I only take it as my code word," he said, joking. "If you want to find me out, access that code word."

He continues to search online to read about himself.

His father said memories of those frantic, searching days 20 years ago remain fresh, even as others fade.

Over the years, the extensive publicity his family received has also affected them negatively, Jayarasa said.

His family was excluded from many of the tsunami relief and reconstruction programs because government officials assumed they had received money during their visit to the U.S.

The experience also led to jealousy, gossiping and ostracizing of the family in their neighborhood, forcing them to relocate.

The father wants his son and other family members to remain grateful for their survival, and he wants Abilash to become someone who can help others in need.

From time the boy was a toddler, his father collected small amounts of money from his work at a hair-dressing shop. When Abilash turned 12, the family erected a small memorial to victims of the tsunami in their front yard. It shows four cupped hands.

The father explained: "A thought arose in my mind that since all those who have died have gone, leaving Abilash behind for us, why not a memorial site of our own to remember them every day."

## Middle East latest: Israeli's defense minister acknowledges it killed Hamas leader

By The Associated Press undefined

Israel's defense minister has confirmed that Israel assassinated Hamas' top leader last summer and is threatening to take similar action against the leadership of the Houthi rebel group in Yemen.

The comments by Israel Katz appeared to mark the first time that Israel has acknowledged killing Ismail Haniyeh, who died in an explosion in Iran in July. Israel was widely believed to be behind the blast and leaders have previously hinted at its involvement.

In a speech Monday, Katz said the Houthis would meet a similar fate as the other members of an Iranian-led alliance in the region, including Haniyeh. He also noted that Israel has killed other leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, helped topple Syria's Bashar Assad and destroyed Iran's anti-aircraft systems.

"We will strike (the Houthis') strategic infrastructure and cut off the head of the leadership," he said.

"Just like we did to Haniyeh, Sinwar and Nasrallah in Tehran, Gaza and Lebanon, we will do in Hodeida and Sanaa," he said, referring to Hamas and Hezbollah leaders killed in previous Israeli attacks.

The Iranian-backed Houthis have launched scores of missiles and drones at Israel throughout the war, including a missile that landed in Tel Aviv on Saturday and wounded at least 16 people.

Israel has carried out three sets of airstrikes in Yemen during the war and vowed to step up the pressure on the rebel group until the missile attacks stop.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 41 of 78

Here's the latest:

US says it struck Islamic State group in Syria

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon says U.S. Central Command forces have killed two operatives for the Islamic State militant group in a airstrike in Syria.

The U.S. military said the airstrike Monday in Deir Ezzour Province was aimed at IS militants who were moving a truckload of weapons, which was destroyed. Another IS operative was wounded.

Central Command said the area was formerly controlled by former President Bashar Assad's regime and its Russian supporters. Assad fled to Moscow after rebel forces seized control of Damascus earlier this month and ended his family's 50 years of iron rule.

UN group helping investigate crimes in Syria says new authorities are receptive to cooperation

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. organization assisting in investigating and prosecuting the most serious crimes in Syria says the country's new authorities were "very receptive" to its request for cooperation during a just-concluded visit to Damascus.

The visit led by Robert Petit, head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria, was the first since the organization was established by the U.N. General Assembly in 2016 to assist in evidence-gathering and prosecution of individuals responsible for possible war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide since Syria's civil war began in 2011.

Since the recent rebel overthrow of Syria's President Bashar Assad and the opening of prisons and detention facilities there have been rising demands from Syrians for the prosecution of those responsible for atrocities and killings while he was in power.

U.N. associate spokesperson Stephane Tremblay said Monday the investigative team "is preparing for an operational deployment as early as possible and as soon as it is authorized to conduct activities on Syrian soil."

The spokesperson for the organization, who was on the trip, went further, telling The Associated Press, "We are preparing to deploy, on the expectation that we will get authorization."

"The representatives from the caretaker authorities were very receptive to our request for cooperation and are aware of the scale of the task ahead," the spokesperson said, commenting on condition of not being named.

By Edith M. Lederer

UN says 23 aid trucks were plundered in central Gaza

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. food agency reports that 23 trucks in a 66-truck convoy carrying food and other humanitarian supplies to central Gaza were plundered and lost.

U.N. associate spokesperson Stephanie Tremblay said Monday that the World Food Program convoy departed from the Kerem Shalom crossing via the recently approved Philadelphi Corridor on Sunday.

Despite Israeli assurances that safety conditions would be in place, she said an airstrike took place.

Tremblay said the first 35 trucks made it to a WFP warehouse without losses. She said Israeli Defense Forces delayed the rest of the convoy.

News of the convoy's movement spread, Tremblay said, leading to plundering along the way, with a total of 43 trucks making it to the warehouse while 23 others were lost.

She called it "another example of why we continue to stress the need for the safe, unimpeded passage of assistance to reach populations that need it the most."

Aid truck in central Gaza looted after Israeli airstrike kills 4 police protecting the vehicle

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Palestinian witnesses and hospital officials say an aid truck carrying flour has been looted in central Gaza after an Israeli airstrike killed four policemen inside a car securing the delivery.

An Associated Press journalist saw people walking away with flour bags, some stained with blood, after the blast. AP footage showed dozens of people gathered at the scene as emergency workers checked the burnt vehicle, which had spilled flour next to it.

U.N. officials and international aid organizations have said they are struggling to deliver aid, including

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 42 of 78

much-needed winter supplies, into Gaza, in part because of looting and a lack of security protecting the convoys.

Israel often strikes armed men guarding the deliveries, saying they are Hamas militants. The Israeli military had no immediate comment on Monday's strike.

Earlier this month, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees said it would halt aid deliveries through the main cargo crossing into the Gaza Strip because of the threat of armed gangs who have looted convoys. It blamed the breakdown of law and order in large part on Israeli policies.

Pentagon acknowledges there are more than 2,500 US troops in Iraq

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon acknowledged Monday that there are more than 2,500 U.S. troops in Iraq, the total routinely touted publicly. It also said the number of forces in Syria has grown over the past "several years" due to increasing threats, but was not openly disclosed.

Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, said in a statement that there are "at least 2,500" U.S. military personnel in Iraq "plus some additional, temporary enablers" that are on rotational deployments. He said that due to diplomatic considerations, the department will not provide more specifics.

The U.S. concluded sensitive negotiations with the government of Iraq in September that called for troops to begin leaving after the November election. The presence of U.S. troops there has long been a political liability for Iraqi leaders who are under increased pressure and influence from Iran.

U.S. officials have not provided details about the withdrawal agreement, but it calls for the mission against the Islamic State group to end by September 2025, and that some U.S. troops will remain through 2026 to support the anti-IS mission in Syria. Some troops may stay in the Kurdistan region after that because the regional government would like them to stay.

Ryder announced last week that there are about 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria – more than double the 900 that the U.S. had acknowledged publicly until now. On Monday he said the extra 1,100 deploy for shorter times to do force protection, transportation, maintenance and other missions. He said the number has fluctuated for the past several years and increased "over time."

Defense minister acknowledges Israel killed Hamas leader

JERUSALEM — Israel's defense minister has confirmed that Israel assassinated Hamas' top leader last summer and is threatening to take similar action against the leadership of the Houthi rebel group in Yemen.

The comments by Israel Katz appeared to mark the first time that Israel has acknowledged killing Ismail Haniyeh, who died in an explosion in Iran in July. Israel was widely believed to be behind the blast and leaders have previously hinted at its involvement.

In a speech Monday, Katz said the Houthis would meet a similar fate as the other members of an Iranian-led alliance in the region, including Haniyeh. He also noted that Israel has killed other leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, helped topple Syria's Bashar Assad and destroyed Iran's anti-aircraft systems.

UN peacekeepers in Lebanon say they observed Israeli army destroying residential areas

BEIRUT — The United Nations peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon on Monday said it has observed recent "concerning actions" by the Israeli army in southern Lebanon, including the destruction of residential areas and road blockages.

A spokesperson for the peacekeeping mission, Kandice Ardiel, told The Associated Press that peacekeepers also observed on Monday an Israeli flag flying in Lebanese territory near Naqoura. The town hosts the headquarters of the peacekeeping mission, known as UNIFIL.

Under the terms of the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement that ended the 14-month war between Israel and Hezbollah, the Israeli army is required to complete its withdrawal from Lebanon within 60 days of the agreement's signing on Nov. 27.

Since the ceasefire went into effect, the Israeli army has conducted near-daily military operations in southern villages, including firing gunshots, house demolitions, excavations, tank shelling and strikes. These actions have killed at least 27 people, wounded more than 30, destroyed residential buildings and, in one case, a mosque.

"Peacekeepers continue to monitor the situation on the ground and report violations of Resolution 1701," Ardiel said. "We reiterate our call for all actors to cease and refrain from violations of Resolution 1701 and



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 43 of 78

any actions that may upset the current delicate balance.”

On Monday, Lebanon’s caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati visited the site of an Israeli airstrike in the southern town of Khiam as part of a tour of front-line areas alongside army chief Joseph Aoun and UNIFIL Head of Mission Aroldo Lazaro. Mikati and Lazaro urged the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanese territory to allow the army to fully assume its duties.

Israeli military says 3 soldiers killed in combat in Gaza

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says three soldiers were killed Monday in combat in northern Gaza.

The military did not provide details of the circumstances. According to a statement released Sunday, the brigade in which the three were serving completed its operational activities in the northern town of Beit Lahiya on Sunday. It then began operating in the nearby town of Beit Hanoun following intelligence suggesting the presence of militants there.

Since the start of the ground offensive in the Gaza Strip, 389 Israeli soldiers have been killed.

Israeli PM Netanyahu says there is ‘some progress’ in ceasefire and hostage deal efforts

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday there is “some progress” in efforts to reach a hostage and ceasefire deal in Gaza, although he added he could not give a time frame for a possible agreement.

Of the roughly 250 people who were taken hostage in the Hamas-led raid on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023 that sparked the war, around 100 are still inside the Gaza Strip, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Speaking in the Knesset, Netanyahu said “we are taking significant actions through all channels to return our loved ones. I would like to tell you cautiously that there is some progress.”

Netanyahu said he could not reveal details of what was being done to secure the return of hostages. He said the main reasons for the progress were the death of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and Israel’s military actions against Iran-backed Hezbollah militants who had been firing rockets into Israel from neighboring Lebanon in support of Hamas.

“Hamas hoped that Iran and Hezbollah would come to its aid but they are busy licking the wounds from the blows we inflicted on them,” he said, adding that Israel was also putting “relentless military pressure” on Hamas in Gaza.

“There is progress. I don’t know how long it will take,” Netanyahu said.

Israel shoots down a drone from Yemen, military says

JERUSALEM — Israel’s military said Monday it intercepted a drone launched from Yemen before it entered Israeli territory, days after a long-range rocket attack by Yemen’s Houthi rebels hit Tel Aviv, injuring 16 people from shattered glass.

The military said no air raid warning sirens were sounded Monday. Israel says the Iran-backed Houthis have fired more than 200 missiles and UAVs, or unmanned aerial vehicles, during the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

The Houthis have also been attacking shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden — attacks they say won’t stop until there is a ceasefire in Gaza.

The attacks on shipping and Israel are taking place despite U.S. and European warships patrolling the area. On Saturday night and early Sunday, the U.S. conducted airstrikes on Yemen. Last week, Israel launched its own airstrikes on Yemen, killing at least nine people, and a Houthi missile damaged a school in Israel.

Qatari delegation meets with top Syrian rebel leader in Damascus

DAMASCUS, Syria — A Qatari delegation visited the Syrian capital on Monday for the first time in more than a decade and met with the country’s top insurgent commander, who said strategic cooperation between Damascus and Doha will begin soon.

Qatar, along with Turkey, has long backed the rebels who now control Damascus, and the two countries are looking to protect their interests in Syria now that former President Bashar Assad has been overthrown.

The Qatari delegation was headed by the minister of state for foreign affairs, Mohammed al-Khulaifi, who met with Ahmad al-Sharaa, leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, the insurgent group that overthrew Assad on Dec. 8.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 44 of 78

Al-Sharaa was quoted as saying by Syrian media that they have invited the emir of Qatar to visit Damascus adding that relations will return to normal soon. Al-Sharaa said Qatar will back Syria during the transitional period and the two countries will soon start "wide strategic cooperation."

Al-Sharaa also met Monday with Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi as well as a Saudi official.

Unlike Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan had relations with Assad's government until he was removed from power.

Palestinian Authority says another member of its security forces is killed in Jenin

JENIN, West Bank — The Palestinian Authority says a second member of its security forces has been killed in the West Bank town of Jenin during clashes with Palestinian militants.

Brig. Gen. Anwar Rajab, the spokesman for PA security forces, said 1st Sgt. Mehran Qadoos was killed on Monday by "outlaws" in the volatile northern town, where the security forces launched a rare crackdown earlier this month. A member of security forces also was killed on Sunday.

An Associated Press reporter in Jenin heard heavy gunfire and explosions, apparently from a battle between the security forces and Palestinian militants. There was no sign of Israeli forces in the area.

Militant groups had earlier called for a general strike across the territory, accusing the security forces of trying to disarm them in support of Israel's half-century occupation of the territory.

The Western-backed Palestinian Authority is internationally recognized but deeply unpopular among Palestinians, in part because it cooperates with Israel on security matters. Israel accuses the authority of incitement and of failing to act against armed groups.

The Palestinian Authority exercises limited authority in population centers in the West Bank. Israel captured the territory in the 1967 Mideast War, and the Palestinians want it to form the main part of their future state.

Israel's current government is opposed to Palestinian statehood and says it will maintain open-ended security control over the territory. Violence has soared in the West Bank following Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack out of Gaza, which ignited the war there.

Palestinians in Jenin observe a general strike

JENIN, West Bank — Palestinians in the volatile northern West Bank town of Jenin are observing a general strike called by militant groups to protest a rare crackdown by Palestinian security forces.

An Associated Press reporter in Jenin heard gunfire and explosions, apparently from clashes between militants and Palestinian security forces. It was not immediately clear if anyone was killed or wounded. There was no sign of Israeli troops in the area.

Shops were closed in the city on Monday, the day after militants killed a member of the Palestinian security forces and wounded two others.

Militant groups called for a general strike across the territory, accusing the security forces of trying to disarm them in support of Israel's half-century occupation of the territory.

The Western-backed Palestinian Authority is internationally recognized but deeply unpopular among Palestinians, in part because it cooperates with Israel on security matters. Israel accuses the authority of incitement and of failing to act against armed groups.

The Palestinian Authority blamed Sunday's attack on "outlaws." It says it is committed to maintaining law and order but will not police the occupation.

The Palestinian Authority exercises limited authority in population centers in the West Bank. Israel captured the territory in the 1967 Mideast War, and the Palestinians want it to form the main part of their future state.

Israel's current government is opposed to Palestinian statehood and says it will maintain open-ended security control over the territory. Violence has soared in the West Bank following Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack out of Gaza, which ignited the war there.

Lebanon's caretaker prime minister visits military positions in the country's south

BEIRUT — Lebanon's caretaker prime minister has begun a tour of military positions in the country's south, almost a month after a ceasefire deal that ended the war between Israel and the Hezbollah group that battered the country.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 45 of 78

Najib Mikati on Monday was on his first visit to the southern frontlines, where Lebanese soldiers under the U.S.-brokered deal are expected to gradually deploy, with Hezbollah militants and Israeli troops both expected to withdraw by the end of next month.

Mikati's tour comes after the Lebanese government expressed its frustration over ongoing Israeli strikes and overflights in the country.

"We have many tasks ahead of us, the most important being the enemy's (Israel's) withdrawal from all the lands it encroached on during its recent aggression," he said after meeting with army chief Joseph Aoun in a Lebanese military barracks in the southeastern town of Marjayoun. "Then the army can carry out its tasks in full."

The Lebanese military for years has relied on financial aid to stay functional, primarily from the United States and other Western countries. Lebanon's cash-strapped government is hoping that the war's end and ceasefire deal will bring about more funding to increase the military's capacity to deploy in the south, where Hezbollah's armed units were notably present.

Though they were not active combatants, the Lebanese military said that dozens of its soldiers were killed in Israeli strikes on their premises or patrolling convoys in the south. The Israeli army acknowledged some of these attacks.

## **Biden vetoes once-bipartisan effort to add 66 federal judgeships, citing 'hurried' House action**

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Monday vetoed a once-bipartisan effort to add 66 federal district judgeships, saying "hurried action" by the House left important questions unanswered about the life-tenured positions.

The legislation would have spread the establishment of the new trial court judgeships over more than a decade to give three presidential administrations and six Congresses the chance to appoint the new judges. The bipartisan effort was carefully designed so that lawmakers would not knowingly give an advantage to either political party in shaping the federal judiciary.

The Democratic-controlled Senate passed the measure unanimously in August. But the Republican-led House brought it to the floor only after Republican Donald Trump was reelected to a second term in November, adding the veneer of political gamesmanship to the process.

The White House had said at the time that Biden would veto the bill.

"The House of Representative's hurried action fails to resolve key questions in the legislation, especially regarding how the new judgeships are allocated, and neither the House of Representatives nor the Senate explored fully how the work of senior status judges and magistrate judges affects the need for new judgeships," the president said in a statement.

"The efficient and effective administration of justice requires that these questions about need and allocation be further studied and answered before we create permanent judgeships for life-tenured judges," Biden said.

He said the bill would also have created new judgeships in states where senators have not filled existing judicial vacancies and that those efforts "suggest that concerns about judicial economy and caseload are not the true motivating force behind passage of this bill now.

"Therefore, I am vetoing this bill," Biden said, essentially dooming the legislation for the current Congress. Overturning Biden's veto would require a two-thirds majority in both the House and Senate, and the House vote fell well short of that margin.

Organizations representing judges and attorneys had urged Congress to vote for the bill. They argued that the lack of new federal judgeships had contributed to profound delays in the resolution of cases and serious concerns about access to justice.

Sen. Todd Young, R-Ind., reacted swiftly, calling the veto a "misguided decision" and "another example



of why Americans are counting down the days until President Biden leaves the White House." He alluded to a full pardon that Biden recently granted his son Hunter on federal gun and tax charges.

"The President is more enthusiastic about using his office to provide relief to his family members who received due process than he is about giving relief to the millions of regular Americans who are waiting years for their due process," Young said. "Biden's legacy will be 'pardons for me, no justice for thee.'"

## **Prosecutors withdraw appeal of dismissed case against Alec Baldwin in fatal movie set shooting**

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — New Mexico prosecutors won't pursue an appeal of a court's decision to dismiss an involuntary manslaughter charge against Alec Baldwin in the fatal shooting on a cinematographer on the set of a Western movie, the Santa Fe district attorney's office announced Monday.

Special Prosecutor Kari Morrissey withdrew the appeal of a July decision at trial to dismiss the charge against Baldwin in the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins during a rehearsal on set for the movie "Rust" outside Santa Fe in October 2021.

"Today's decision to dismiss the appeal is the final vindication of what Alec Baldwin and his attorneys have said from the beginning — this was an unspeakable tragedy but Alec Baldwin committed no crime," said defense attorneys Luke Nikas and Alex Spiro. "The rule of law remains intact in New Mexico."

Representatives for the state attorney general could not be reached immediately.

The decision to drop the appeal solidifies the decision by Judge Mary Marlowe Sommer halfway through trial to dismiss the case on allegations that police and prosecutors withheld evidence from the defense.

Baldwin's trial was upended by revelations that ammunition was brought into the Santa Fe County sheriff's office in March by a man who said it could be related to Hutchins' killing. Prosecutors said they deemed the ammo unrelated and unimportant, while Baldwin's lawyers say investigators "buried" the evidence in a separate case file and filed a successful motion to dismiss.

The district attorney's office said that under state law the New Mexico attorney general would have carried forward the appeal but "did not intend to exhaustively pursue the appeal on behalf of the prosecution."

"As a result, the State's efforts to continue to litigate the case in a fair and comprehensive manner have been met with multiple barriers that have compromised its ability to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law," local prosecutors said.

Baldwin, the lead actor and co-producer for "Rust," was pointing a gun at Hutchins during a rehearsal on set when the revolver went off, killing Hutchins and wounding director Joel Souza. Baldwin has said he pulled back the hammer — but not the trigger — and the revolver fired.

In April, a judge sentenced movie weapons supervisor Hannah Gutierrez-Reed to the maximum of one and a half years at a state penitentiary on an involuntary manslaughter conviction in Hutchins' death.

Prosecutors blamed Gutierrez-Reed for unwittingly bringing live ammunition onto the set of "Rust," where it was expressly prohibited, and for failing to follow basic gun safety protocols.

Assistant director and safety coordinator David Halls pleaded no contest to the negligent use of a deadly weapon and was sentenced to six months of unsupervised probation. A no contest plea isn't an admission of guilt but is treated as such for sentencing purposes.

Several civil lawsuits have been brought against Baldwin and "Rust" producers, including a complaint by Hutchins' parents and sister.

Prosecutors said Hutchins' death has prompted industry-wide scrutiny of safety protocols, especially the use of firearms and live ammunition on set.

## Inside the Gaetz ethics report, a trove of new details alleging payments for sex and drug use

By LISA MASCARO and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Ethics Committee's long-awaited report on Matt Gaetz documents a trove of salacious allegations, including sex with an underage girl, that tanked the Florida Republican's bid to lead the Justice Department.

Citing text messages, travel receipts, online payments and testimony, the bipartisan committee paints a picture of a lifestyle in which Gaetz and others connected with younger women for drug-fueled parties, events or trips, with the expectation the women would be paid for their participation.

The former congressman, who filed a last-minute lawsuit to try to block the report's release Monday, slammed the committee's findings. Gaetz has denied any wrongdoing and has insisted he never had sex with a minor. And a Justice Department investigation into the allegations ended without any criminal charges filed against him.

"Giving funds to someone you are dating — that they didn't ask for — and that isn't 'charged' for sex is now prostitution?!?" Gaetz wrote in one post Monday. "There is a reason they did this to me in a Christmas Eve-Eve report and not in a courtroom of any kind where I could present evidence and challenge witnesses."

Here's a look at some of the committee's key findings:

'Sex-for-money arrangements,' drug-fueled parties and trips

The committee found that between 2017 and 2020, Gaetz paid tens of thousands of dollars to women "likely in connection with sexual activity and/or drug use." He paid the women using through online services such as PayPal, Venmo and CashApp and with cash or check, the committee said.

The committee said it found evidence that Gaetz understood the "transactional nature" of his relationships with the women. The report points to one text exchange in which Gaetz balked at a woman's request that he send her money, "claiming she only gave him a 'drive by.'"

Women interviewed by the committee said there was a "general expectation of sex," the report said. One woman who received more than \$5,000 from Gaetz between 2018 and 2019 said that "99 percent of the time" that when she hung out with Gaetz "there was sex involved."

However, Gaetz was in a long-term relationship with one of the women he paid, so "some of the payments may have been of a legitimate nature," the committee said.

Text messages obtained by the committee also show that Gaetz would ask the women to bring drugs to their "rendezvous," the report said.

While most of his encounters with the women were in Florida, the committee said Gaetz also traveled "on several occasions" with women whom he paid for sex. The report includes text message exchanges in which Gaetz appears to be inviting various women to events, getaways or parties, and arranging airplane travel and lodging.

Gaetz associate Joel Greenberg, who pleaded guilty to sex trafficking charges in 2021, initially connected with women through an online service.

In one text with a 20-year-old woman, Greenberg suggested if she had a friend, the four of them could meet up. The woman responded that she usually does "\$400 per meet." Greenberg replied: "He understands the deal," along with a smiley face emoji. Greenberg asked if they were old enough to drink alcohol, and sent the woman a picture of Gaetz. The woman responded that her friend found him "really cute."

"Well, he's down here for only for the day, we work hard and play hard," Greenberg replied.

'Substantial evidence' indicates that Gaetz had sex with an underage girl, the committee said

The report details a party in July 2017 in which Gaetz is accused of having sex with "multiple women, including the 17-year-old, for which they were paid." The committee pointed to "credible testimony" from the now-woman herself as well as "multiple individuals" who corroborated the allegation.

The then-17-year-old — who had just completed her junior year in high school — told the committee that Gaetz paid her \$400 in cash that night, "which she understood to be payment for sex," according to the report. The woman acknowledged that she had taken ecstasy the night of the party, but told the

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 48 of 78

committee that she was "certain" of her sexual encounters with the then-congressman.

There's no evidence that Gaetz knew she was a minor when he had sex with her, the committee said. The woman told the committee she didn't tell Gaetz she was under 18 at the time and he didn't ask how old she was. Rather, the committee said Gaetz learned she was a minor more than a month after the party.

But he stayed in touch with her after that and met up with her for "commercial sex" again less than six months after she turned 18, according to the committee.

Gaetz said evidence would 'exonerate' him but provided none of it

In sum, the committee said it authorized 29 subpoenas for documents and testimony, reviewed nearly 14,000 documents and contacted more than two dozen witnesses.

But when the committee subpoenaed Gaetz for his testimony, he failed to comply.

"Gaetz pointed to evidence that would 'exonerate' him yet failed to produce any such materials," the committee said. Gaetz "continuously sought to deflect, deter, or mislead the Committee in order to prevent his actions from being exposed."

The report details a months-long process that dragged into a year as it sought information from Gaetz that he decried as "nosey" and a "weaponization" of government against him.

In one notable exchange, investigators were seeking information about the expenses for a 2018 getaway with multiple women to the Bahamas. Gaetz ultimately offered up his plane ticket receipt "to" the destination, but declined to share his return "from" the Bahamas.

The report said his return on a private plane and other expenses paid by an associate were in violation of House gift rules.

In another Gaetz told the committee he would "welcome" the opportunity to respond to written questions. Yet, after it sent a list of 16 questions, Gaetz said publicly he would "no longer" voluntarily cooperate.

He called the investigation "frivolous," adding, "Every investigation into me ends the same way: my exoneration."

The report said that while Gaetz's obstruction of the investigation does not rise to a criminal violation it is inconsistent with the requirement that all members of Congress "act in a manner that reflects creditably upon the House."

Justice Department didn't cooperate with the committee

The committee began its review of Gaetz in April 2021 and deferred its work in response to a Justice Department request. It renewed its work shortly after Gaetz announced that the Justice Department had ended a sex trafficking investigation without filing any charges against him.

The committee sought records from the Justice Department about the probe, but the agency refused, saying it doesn't disclose information about investigations that don't result in charges.

The committee then subpoenaed the Justice Department, and after a back-and-forth between officials and the committee, the department handed over "publicly reported information about the testimony of a deceased individual," according to the report.

"To date, DOJ has provided no meaningful evidence or information to the Committee or cited any lawful basis for its responses," the committee said.

Many of the women who the committee spoke to had already given statements to the Justice Department and didn't want to "relive their experience," the committee said. "They were particularly concerned with providing additional testimony about a sitting congressman in light of DOJ's lack of action on their prior testimony," the report said.

The Justice Department, however, never handed over the women's statements. The agency's lack of cooperation — along with its request that the committee pause its investigation — significantly delayed the committee's probe, lawmakers said.



## Bill Clinton is hospitalized with a fever but in good spirits, spokesperson says

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Bill Clinton was admitted Monday to MedStar Georgetown University Hospital in Washington after developing a fever.

The 78-year-old was hospitalized in the “afternoon for testing and observation,” Angel Urena, Clinton’s deputy chief of staff, said in a statement.

“He remains in good spirits and deeply appreciates the excellent care he is receiving,” Urena said.

Clinton, a Democrat who served two terms as president from January 1993 until January 2001, addressed the Democratic National Convention in Chicago this summer, and campaigned ahead of November’s election for the unsuccessful White House bid of Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris.

In the years since Clinton left the White House, he’s faced some health scares.

In 2004, he underwent quadruple bypass surgery after experiencing prolonged chest pains and shortness of breath. Clinton returned to the hospital for surgery for a partially collapsed lung in 2005, and in 2010 he had a pair of stents implanted in a coronary artery.

Clinton responded by embracing a largely vegan diet that saw him lose weight and report improved health.

In 2021, the former president was hospitalized for six days in California while being treated for an infection that was unrelated to COVID-19, when the pandemic was still near its height.

An aide to the former president said then that Clinton had a urological infection that spread to his bloodstream, but was on the mend and never went into septic shock, a potentially life-threatening condition. The aide said Clinton was in an intensive care section of the hospital that time, but wasn’t receiving ICU care.

## Luigi Mangione pleads not guilty to murder and weapons charges in UnitedHealthcare CEO’s death

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The man accused of fatally shooting the CEO of UnitedHealthcare pleaded not guilty on Monday to state murder and terror charges while his attorney complained that comments coming from New York’s mayor would make it tough to receive a fair trial.

Luigi Mangione, 26, was shackled and seated in a Manhattan court when he leaned over to a microphone to enter his plea. The Manhattan district attorney charged him last week with multiple counts of murder, including murder as an act of terrorism.

Mangione’s initial appearance in New York’s state trial court was preempted by federal prosecutors bringing their own charges over the shooting. The federal charges could carry the possibility of the death penalty, while the maximum sentence for the state charges is life in prison without parole.

Prosecutors have said the two cases will proceed on parallel tracks, with the state charges expected to go to trial first.

One of Mangione’s attorneys told a judge that the “warring jurisdictions” had turned Mangione into a “human ping-pong ball” and that New York City Mayor Eric Adams and other government officials had made him a political pawn, robbing him of his rights as a defendant and tainting the jury pool.

“I am very concerned about my client’s right to a fair trial,” lawyer Karen Friedman Agnifilo said.

Adams and Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch stood among a throng of heavily armed officers last Thursday when Mangione was flown to a Manhattan heliport and escorted up a pier after being extradited from Pennsylvania.

Friedman Agnifilo said police turned Mangione’s return to New York into a choreographed spectacle. She called out Adams’ comment to a local TV station that he wanted to be there to look “him in the eye and say, ‘you carried out this terroristic act in my city.’”

“He was on display for everyone to see in the biggest stage perp walk I’ve ever seen in my career. It was absolutely unnecessary,” she said.

She also accused federal and state prosecutors of advancing conflicting legal theories, calling their ap-

proach confusing and highly unusual.

In a statement, Adams spokesperson Kayla Mamelak Altus wrote: "Critics can say all they want, but showing up to support our law enforcement and sending the message to New Yorkers that violence and vitriol have no place in our city is who Mayor Eric Adams is to his core."

"The cold-blooded assassination of Brian Thompson — a father of two — and the terror it infused on the streets of New York City for days has since been sickeningly glorified, shining a spotlight on the darkest corners of the internet," Mamelak Altus said.

State trial court Judge Gregory Carro said he has little control over what happens outside the courtroom, but can guarantee Mangione will receive a fair trial.

Authorities say Mangione gunned down Thompson as he was walking to an investor conference in midtown Manhattan on the morning of Dec 4.

Mangione was arrested in a Pennsylvania McDonald's after a five-day search, carrying a gun that matched the one used in the shooting and a fake ID, police said. He also was carrying a notebook expressing hostility toward the health insurance industry and especially wealthy executives, according to federal prosecutors.

At a news conference last week, Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said the application of the terrorism law reflected the severity of a "frightening, well-planned, targeted murder that was intended to cause shock and attention and intimidation."

"In its most basic terms, this was a killing that was intended to evoke terror," he added.

Mangione is being held in a Brooklyn federal jail alongside several other high-profile defendants, including Sean "Diddy" Combs and Sam Bankman-Fried.

During his court appearance Monday, he smiled at times when talking with his attorneys and stretched his right hand after an officer removed his cuffs.

Outside the courthouse, a few dozen supporters chanted, "Free Luigi," over the blare of a trumpet.

Natalie Monarrez, a 55-year-old Staten Island resident, said she joined the demonstration because she lost both her mother and her life savings as a result of denied insurance claims.

"As extreme as it was, it jolted the conversation that we need to deal with this issue," she said of the shooting. "Enough is enough, people are fed up."

An Ivy-league graduate from a prominent Maryland family, Mangione appeared to have cut himself off from family and friends in recent months. He posted frequently in online forums about his struggles with back pain. He was never a UnitedHealthcare client, according to the insurer.

Thompson, a married father of two high-schoolers, had worked at the giant UnitedHealth Group for 20 years and became CEO of its insurance arm in 2021.

The killing has prompted some to voice their resentment at U.S. health insurers, with Mangione serving as a stand-in for frustrations over coverage denials and hefty medical bills. It also has sent shockwaves through the corporate world, rattling executives who say they have received a spike in threats.

## Relief, defiance, anger: Families and advocates react to Biden's death row commutations

By JEFFREY COLLINS and ALI SWENSON Associated Press

COLUMBIA, South Carolina (AP) — Victims' families and others affected by crimes that resulted in federal death row convictions shared a range of emotions on Monday, from relief to anger, after President Joe Biden commuted dozens of the sentences.

Biden converted the sentences of 37 federal death row inmates to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. The inmates include people convicted in the slayings of police and military officers, as well as federal prisoners and guards. Others were involved in deadly robberies and drug deals.

Three inmates will remain on federal death row: Dylann Roof, convicted of the 2015 racist slayings of nine Black members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina; the 2013 Boston Marathon Bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and Robert Bowers, who fatally shot 11 congregants at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018, the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 51 of 78

Opponents of the death penalty lauded Biden for a decision they'd long sought. Supporters of Donald Trump, a vocal advocate of expanding capital punishment, criticized the move weeks before the president-elect takes office.

Victims' families and former colleagues share relief and anger

Donnie Oliverio, a retired Ohio police officer whose partner, Bryan Hurst, was killed by an inmate whose death sentence was commuted, said the killer's execution "would have brought me no peace."

"The president has done what is right here," Oliverio said in a statement also issued by the White House.

But Hurst's widow, Marissa Gibson, called Biden's move distressing and a "complete dismissal and undermining of the federal justice system," in a statement to The Columbus Dispatch.

Tim Timmerman, whose daughter, Rachel, was thrown into a Michigan lake in 1997 to keep her from testifying in a rape trial, said Biden's decision to commute the killer's sentence offered families "only pain."

"Where's the justice in just giving him a prison bed to die comfortably in?" Timmerman said on WOOD-TV.

Heather Turner, whose mother, Donna Major, was killed in a 2017 South Carolina bank robbery, called the commutation of the killer's sentence a "clear gross abuse of power" in a Facebook post.

"At no point did the president consider the victims," Turner wrote. "He, and his supporters, have blood on their hands."

Corey Groves, whose mother, Kim Groves, was murdered in a 1994 plot by a New Orleans police officer after she filed a complaint against him, said the family has been living with the "nightmare" of her killer for three decades.

"I have always wanted him to spend the rest of his life in prison and have to wake up every morning and think about what he did when he took our mother from us," Groves said in a statement through his attorney.

Decision to leave Roof on death row met with conflicting emotions

Families of the nine people killed and the survivors of the massacre at the Mother Emanuel AME Church have long had a broad range of opinions on Roof's punishment.

Many forgave him, but some say they can't forget and their forgiveness doesn't mean they don't want to see him put to death for what he did.

Felicia Sanders survived the shooting shielding her granddaughter while watching Roof kill her son, Tywanza, and her aunt, Susie Jackson. Sanders brought her bullet-torn bloodstained Bible to his sentencing.

In a text message to her lawyer, Andy Savage, Sanders called Biden's decision to not spare Roof's life a wonderful Christmas gift.

Michael Graham, whose sister, Cynthia Hurd, was killed, told The Associated Press that Roof's lack of remorse and simmering white nationalism in the country means he is the kind of dangerous and evil person the death penalty is intended for.

"This was a crime against a race of people," Graham said. "It didn't matter who was there, only that they were Black."

But the Rev. Sharon Risher, who was Tywanza Sanders' cousin and whose mother, Ethel Lance, was killed, criticized Biden for not sparing Roof and clearing out federal death row.

"I need the President to understand that when you put a killer on death row, you also put their victims' families in limbo with the false promise that we must wait until there is an execution before we can begin to heal," Risher said in a statement.

Risher, a board member of Death Penalty Action, which seeks to abolish capital punishment, said during a Zoom news conference that families "are left to be hostages for the years and years of appeals that are to come."

Abraham Bonowitz, Death Penalty Action's executive director, said Biden was giving more attention to the three inmates he chose not to spare, something they all wanted as a part of their political motivations to kill.

"When Donald Trump gets to execute them what will really be happening is they will be given a global platform for their agenda of hatred," Bonowitz said.

Politicians and advocacy groups speak up



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 52 of 78

Biden had faced pressure from advocacy organizations to commute federal death sentences, and several praised him for taking action in his final month in office.

Anthony D. Romero, executive director of the ACLU, said in a statement that Biden has shown "the brutal and inhumane policies of our past do not belong in our future."

Republicans, including Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, criticized the move — and argued its moral ground was shaky given the three exceptions.

"Once again, Democrats side with depraved criminals over their victims, public order, and common decency," Cotton wrote on X. "Democrats can't even defend Biden's outrageous decision as some kind of principled, across-the-board opposition to the death penalty since he didn't commute the three most politically toxic cases."

One inmate's attorney expresses thanks — and his remorse

Two men whose sentences were commuted were Norris Holder and Billie Jerome Allen, on death row for opening fire during a 1997 bank robbery in St. Louis, killing a guard, 46-year-old Richard Heflin.

Holder's attorney, Madeline Cohen, said in an email that Holder, who is Black, was sentenced to death by an all-white jury.

"Norris' case exemplifies the racial bias and arbitrariness that led the President to commute federal death sentences," Cohen said. "Norris has always been deeply remorseful for the pain his actions caused, and we hope this decision brings some measure of closure to Richard Heflin's family."

But Ed Dowd Jr., the U.S. attorney in St. Louis at the time of the robbery and now a private attorney, criticized Biden's move.

"This case was a message to people who wanted to go out and shoot people for the hell of it, that you're going to get the death penalty," Dowd said. Now, "Biden is sending a message that you can do whatever you want and you won't get the death penalty."

## **Biden gives life in prison to 37 of 40 federal death row inmates before Trump can resume executions**

By WILL WEISSERT and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Monday announced that he is commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 people on federal death row, converting their punishments to life imprisonment just weeks before President-elect Donald Trump, an outspoken proponent of expanding capital punishment, takes office.

The move spares the lives of people convicted in killings, including the slayings of police and military officers, people on federal land and those involved in deadly bank robberies or drug deals, as well as the killings of guards or prisoners in federal facilities.

The decision leaves three federal inmates to face execution. They are Dylann Roof, who carried out the 2015 racist slayings of nine Black members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina; 2013 Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev; and Robert Bowers, who fatally shot 11 congregants at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018, the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history.

"I've dedicated my career to reducing violent crime and ensuring a fair and effective justice system," Biden said in a statement. "Today, I am commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 individuals on federal death row to life sentences without the possibility of parole. These commutations are consistent with the moratorium my administration has imposed on federal executions, in cases other than terrorism and hate-motivated mass murder."

Reaction was strong, both for and against. A Trump spokesperson called the decision "abhorrent."

"These are among the worst killers in the world and this abhorrent decision by Joe Biden is a slap in the face to the victims, their families, and their loved ones," said Trump spokesman Steven Cheung. "President Trump stands for the rule of law, which will return when he is back in the White House after he was elected with a massive mandate from the American people."

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 53 of 78

Heather Turner, whose mother was killed during the 2017 robbery of a Conway, South Carolina, bank, blasted the decision in a social media post, saying Biden didn't consider the victims of these crimes.

"The pain and trauma we have endured over the last 7 years has been indescribable," Turner wrote on Facebook, describing weeks spent in court in search of justice as "now just a waste of time."

"Our judicial system is broken. Our government is a joke," she said. "Joe Biden's decision is a clear gross abuse of power. He, and his supporters, have blood on their hands."

Some of Roof's victims supported Biden's decision to leave him on death row.

Michael Graham, whose sister Cynthia Hurd was killed by Roof, said Roof's lack of remorse and simmering white nationalism in the U.S. means Roof is the kind of dangerous and evil person the death penalty is intended for.

"This was a crime against a race of people who were doing something all Americans do on a Wednesday night — go to Bible study," Graham said. "It didn't matter who was there, only that they were Black."

The Biden administration in 2021 announced a moratorium on federal capital punishment to study the protocols used, which suspended executions during Biden's term. But Biden actually had promised to go further on the issue in the past, pledging to end federal executions without the caveats for terrorism and hate-motivated, mass killings.

While running for president in 2020, Biden's campaign website said he would "work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government's example."

Similar language didn't appear on Biden's reelection website before he left the presidential race in July.

"Make no mistake: I condemn these murderers, grieve for the victims of their despicable acts, and ache for all the families who have suffered unimaginable and irreparable loss," Biden's statement said. "But guided by my conscience and my experience as a public defender, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, vice president, and now president, I am more convinced than ever that we must stop the use of the death penalty at the federal level."

He took a political jab at Trump, saying, "In good conscience, I cannot stand back and let a new administration resume executions that I halted."

Trump, who takes office on Jan. 20, has spoken frequently of expanding executions. In a speech announcing his 2024 campaign, Trump called for those "caught selling drugs to receive the death penalty for their heinous acts." He later promised to execute drug and human smugglers and even praised China's harsher treatment of drug peddlers. During his first term as president, Trump also advocated for the death penalty for drug dealers.

There were 13 federal executions during Trump's first term, more than under any president in modern history, and some may have happened fast enough to have contributed to the spread of the coronavirus at the federal death row facility in Indiana.

Those were the first federal executions since 2003. The final three occurred after Election Day in November 2020 but before Trump left office the following January, the first time federal prisoners were put to death by a lame-duck president since Grover Cleveland in 1889.

Biden faced recent pressure from advocacy groups urging him to act to make it more difficult for Trump to increase the use of capital punishment for federal inmates. The president's announcement also comes less than two weeks after he commuted the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, and of 39 others convicted of nonviolent crimes, the largest single-day act of clemency in modern history.

The announcement also followed the post-election pardon that Biden granted his son Hunter on federal gun and tax charges after long saying he would not issue one, sparking an uproar in Washington. The pardon also raised questions about whether he would issue sweeping preemptive pardons for administration officials and other allies who the White House worries could be unjustly targeted by Trump's second administration.

Speculation that Biden could commute federal death sentences intensified last week after the White

House announced he plans to visit Italy on the final foreign trip of his presidency next month. Biden, a practicing Catholic, will meet with Pope Francis, who recently called for prayers for U.S. death row inmates in hopes their sentences will be commuted.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which has long called for an end to the death penalty, said Biden's decision is a "significant step in advancing the cause of human dignity in our nation" and moves the country "a step closer to building a culture of life."

Martin Luther King III, who publicly urged Biden to change the death sentences, said in a statement shared by the White House that the president "has done what no president before him was willing to do: take meaningful and lasting action not just to acknowledge the death penalty's racist roots but also to remedy its persistent unfairness."

Madeline Cohen, an attorney for Norris Holder, who faced death for the 1997 fatal shooting of a guard during a bank robbery in St. Louis, said his case "exemplifies the racial bias and arbitrariness that led the President to commute federal death sentences," Cohen said. Holder, who is Black, was sentenced by an all-white jury.

## **Shohei Ohtani wins 3rd AP Male Athlete of the Year award, tying Michael Jordan for 1 shy of record**

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Shohei Ohtani is keeping elite company.

The Japanese superstar caps 2024 by winning The Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year for the third time, tying him with basketball great Michael Jordan. He trails only four-time winners Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods and LeBron James.

"I'm very honored," Ohtani said through translator Matt Hidaka in an exclusive interview with the AP. "Obviously all the hard work has paid off. Maybe next year, I'll get the award again."

In balloting by 74 sports journalists from the AP and its members, Ohtani received 48 votes. He previously won the award in 2023 and 2021, when he was with the Angels.

"Growing up in Japan, I did follow Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods," he said. "I would see their accolades and how they were successful in the United States."

The AP honor has been given out since 1931. Golfer Babe Didrikson won six times, the most by a man or woman.

Swimmer Léon Marchand of France, who won four gold medals at the Paris Olympics, was second with 10 votes in balloting announced Monday. Golfer Scottie Scheffler, whose victories this year included the Masters and an Olympic gold medal, was third with nine.

The AP Female Athlete of the Year will be announced Tuesday.

Moving from the beleaguered Los Angeles Angels to the powerhouse Los Angeles Dodgers, Ohtani won his third Most Valuable Player award and first in the National League, led his new team to its eighth World Series championship and created Major League Baseball's 50/50 club by hitting 54 home runs and stealing 59 bases.

Ohtani signed a then-record \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Dodgers in December 2023. Already a two-way superstar, he embellished his reputation even further despite not pitching all season while he rehabilitated from a second major right elbow surgery he had in September 2023.

Ohtani went wild on offense, making every at-bat a must-see moment. The 6-foot-4 designated hitter batted a career-high .310 while easily surpassing his previous career highs in home runs and stolen bases.

In September, he reached the previously unheard of 50/50 mark in a performance for the ages. Against the Miami Marlins in Florida, Ohtani went 6 for 6 with three homers, 10 RBIs, two stolen bases and 17 total bases.

"It wouldn't shock me if he went 60/60 and 20 wins a year from now," Brad Ausmus, who managed the Angels in 2019 during Ohtani's second season in Anaheim, said recently. "This guy is the greatest athlete to ever play the sport of baseball and there's not a close second."



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 55 of 78

Ohtani said he knew the Dodgers' franchise record for most homers in a season was 49. His previous best was 46, set in 2021.

"I kind of wanted to get over that bar," he said. "I was pleasantly surprised I was able to pass that record."

Ohtani carried the Dodgers offensively during the regular season, and he stayed healthy until Game 2 of the World Series. He injured his left shoulder trying to steal second base against the New York Yankees and finished the Series playing hurt.

He underwent surgery a few days after the Dodgers celebrated their championship in early November.

"I don't have full range of motion yet, but it feels a lot better," he told the AP. "There's no pain. There's obviously still a little bit of tightness, but slowly but surely it's getting better."

Ohtani recently received an updated rehab schedule, and he's focused on the near-term.

"It's the small steps that I think are very important to get me to the ultimate goal, which is to just get back healthy," he said.

Ohtani is also throwing in the 70 mph range, which is typical for pitchers early in the offseason.

"I'm going to continue to ramp up slowly," he said.

The Dodgers' rotation for next season is in flux, and Ohtani is waiting to see how it shakes out.

"We may go with a five-man rotation with a bullpen (game), which is what we did a lot during this season or we may have a six-man rotation," he said. "But it's all about balancing out when we can get rest and recuperate. We'll see where that takes us along the playoff chase. I've got to obviously pace myself, but again that situation will guide us to how we get there."

The Dodgers open the 2025 season in Japan, where Ohtani is even more closely watched.

"My personal goal is to be fully healthy by the time the opening games do start," he said. "To be able to pitch and hit would be great, but the situation will kind of guide itself."

Each time Ohtani comes to the plate or steps on the mound, there's great pressure and expectation for him to perform spectacular feats.

"I just go out there and try to stay within myself," he said. "I can only control what I can control and that's where you trust your teammates. The guys behind me, you trust they're going to make the plays for you. I don't really try to overthink it."

Ohtani generated big bucks for the Dodgers off the field, too.

Fans traveled from Japan in droves to see him play around the U.S. At Dodger Stadium, they paid extra for tours of baseball's third-oldest venue narrated by Japanese-speaking guides and to be on the field during pre-game batting practice. A majority of the fans bought Ohtani-branded merchandise, especially his No. 17 jersey.

Ohtani's presence also helped the Dodgers land a bevy of new Japanese sponsors.

Because Ohtani prefers to speak Japanese and use an interpreter with the media, he is shrouded in a bit of mystique. Asked before his first postgame series if he was nervous, he dropped a one-word answer in English: "Nope," which drew laughter.

Japanese-born Dodgers manager Dave Roberts observed Ohtani's behind-the-scenes interactions with his teammates, coaches and staff, and came away impressed.

"I really do believe that as good of a ballplayer as he is, he's a much better person. He's very kind, considerate, he cares," Roberts told the AP. "I'm just proud of any fame or glory or award that he receives because he just does it in such a respectful and humble way."

Ohtani relishes his privacy and rarely shares details about himself off the field. That's why his February announcement via Instagram that he had wed Mamiko Tanaka, a former basketball player, stunned his new teammates and the rest of the world.

The following month, after the Dodgers arrived in South Korea to open the season, he was enveloped in scandal when his longtime interpreter and friend, Ipeei Mizuhara, was fired by the Dodgers after being accused of using millions of dollars of Ohtani's money to place bets with an illegal bookmaker.

His new teammates rallied around Ohtani, who was found to have no part in the wrongdoing, and publicly it didn't seem to affect him even if he was privately distressed by it.

By June, the uproar had subsided. Mizuhara pleaded guilty to federal bank and tax fraud charges and

admitted to stealing nearly \$17 million from Ohtani.

The public got a glimpse of Ohtani's softer side in August, when his dog Decoy delivered a first pitch to his owner on their shared bobblehead night. The Nederlandse Kooikerhondje exchanged an endearing high-five with Ohtani at the plate.

As a result, Decoy became a celebrity in his own right, with his breed (pronounced COY-ker-HUND-che) making the list of the most mispronounced words of 2024. He and Ohtani were mentioned during the telecast of last month's National Dog Show, where the small Spaniel-type breed was among the competitors.

"The number of the breed has kind of dwindled, so by him gaining a little bit of popularity hopefully that brings up the number of his breed," Ohtani said. "I do feel like we were able to, in a small way, contribute to the popularity of the dog and I'm sure Decoy himself would be happy about that."

Ohtani will be looking to top himself next year while eyeing a repeat World Series title.

"It's almost like right now you can lock in the Most Valuable Player in the National League award because no one has that ability or talent," Roberts said.

"I'm just excited to see what '25 has for Shohei Ohtani."

## Trump again calls to buy Greenland after eyeing Canada and the Panama Canal

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — First it was Canada, then the Panama Canal. Now, Donald Trump again wants Greenland.

The president-elect is renewing unsuccessful calls he made during his first term for the U.S. to buy Greenland from Denmark, adding to the list of allied countries with which he's picking fights even before taking office on Jan. 20.

In a Sunday announcement naming his ambassador to Denmark, Trump wrote that, "For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the World, the United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity."

Trump again having designs on Greenland comes after the president-elect suggested over the weekend that the U.S. could retake control of the Panama Canal if something isn't done to ease rising shipping costs required for using the waterway linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

He's also been suggesting that Canada become the 51st U.S. state and referred to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as "governor" of the "Great State of Canada."

Stephen Farnsworth, a political science professor at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia, said Trump tweaking friendly countries harkens back to an aggressive style he used during his days in business.

"You ask something unreasonable and it's more likely you can get something less unreasonable," said Farnsworth, who is also author of the book "Presidential Communication and Character."

Greenland, the world's largest island, sits between the Atlantic and Arctic oceans. It is 80% covered by an ice sheet and is home to a large U.S. military base. It gained home rule from Denmark in 1979 and its head of government, Múte Bourup Egede, suggested that Trump's latest calls for U.S. control would be as meaningless as those made in his first term.

"Greenland is ours. We are not for sale and will never be for sale," he said in a statement. "We must not lose our years-long fight for freedom."

The Danish Prime Minister's Office said in its own statement that the government is "looking forward to welcoming the new American ambassador. And the Government is looking forward to working with the new administration."

"In a complex security political situation as the one we currently experience, transatlantic cooperation is crucial," the statement said. It noted that it had no comment on Greenland except for it "not being for sale, but open for cooperation."

Trump canceled a 2019 visit to Denmark after his offer to buy Greenland was rejected by Copenhagen,

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 57 of 78

and ultimately came to nothing.

He also suggested Sunday that the U.S. is getting "ripped off" at the Panama Canal.

"If the principles, both moral and legal, of this magnanimous gesture of giving are not followed, then we will demand that the Panama Canal be returned to the United States of America, in full, quickly and without question," he said.

Panama President José Raúl Mulino responded in a video that "every square meter of the canal belongs to Panama and will continue to," but Trump fired back on his social media site, "We'll see about that!"

The president-elect also posted a picture of a U.S. flag planted in the canal zone under the phrase, "Welcome to the United States Canal!"

The United States built the canal in the early 1900s but relinquished control to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999, under a treaty signed in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter.

The canal depends on reservoirs that were hit by 2023 droughts that forced it to substantially reduce the number of daily slots for crossing ships. With fewer ships, administrators also increased the fees that shippers are charged to reserve slots to use the canal.

The Greenland and Panama flareups followed Trump recently posting that "Canadians want Canada to become the 51st State" and offering an image of himself superimposed on a mountaintop surveying surrounding territory next to a Canadian flag.

Trudeau suggested that Trump was joking about annexing his country, but the pair met recently at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Florida to discuss Trump's threats to impose a 25% tariff on all Canadian goods.

"Canada is not going to become part of the United States, but Trump's comments are more about leveraging what he says to get concessions from Canada by putting Canada off balance, particularly given the precarious current political environment in Canada," Farnsworth said. "Maybe claim a win on trade concessions, a tighter border or other things."

He said the situation is similar with Greenland.

"What Trump wants is a win," Farnsworth said. "And even if the American flag doesn't raise over Greenland, Europeans may be more willing to say yes to something else because of the pressure."

## **A history of the Panama Canal — and why Trump can't take it back on his own**

By WILL WEISSERT, JUAN ZAMORANO and GARY FIELDS Associated Press

PANAMA CITY (AP) — Teddy Roosevelt once declared the Panama Canal "one of the feats to which the people of this republic will look back with the highest pride." More than a century later, Donald Trump is threatening to take back the waterway for the same republic.

The president-elect is decrying increased fees Panama has imposed to use the waterway linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. He says if things don't change after he takes office next month, "We will demand that the Panama Canal be returned to the United States of America, in full, quickly and without question."

Trump has long threatened allies with punitive action in hopes of winning concessions. But experts in both countries are clear: Unless he goes to war with Panama, Trump can't reassert control over a canal the U.S. agreed to cede in the 1970s.

Here's a look at how we got here:

What is the canal?

It is a man-made waterway that uses a series of locks and reservoirs over 51 miles (82 kilometers) to cut through the middle of Panama and connect the Atlantic and Pacific. It spares ships having to go an additional roughly 7,000 miles (more than 11,000 kilometers) to sail around Cape Horn at South America's southern tip.

The U.S. International Trade Administration says the canal saves American business interests "considerable time and fuel costs" and enables faster delivery of goods, which is "particularly significant for time sensitive cargoes, perishable goods, and industries with just-in-time supply chains."

Who built it?



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 58 of 78

An effort to establish a canal through Panama led by Ferdinand de Lesseps, who built Egypt's Suez Canal, began in 1880 but progressed little over nine years before going bankrupt.

Malaria, yellow fever and other tropical diseases devastated a workforce already struggling with especially dangerous terrain and harsh working conditions in the jungle, eventually costing more than 20,000 lives, by some estimates.

Panama was then a province of Colombia, which refused to ratify a subsequent 1901 treaty licensing U.S. interests to build the canal. Roosevelt responded by dispatching U.S. warships to Panama's Atlantic and Pacific coasts. The U.S. also prewrote a constitution that would be ready after Panamanian independence, giving American forces "the right to intervene in any part of Panama, to re-establish public peace and constitutional order."

In part because Colombian troops were unable to traverse harsh jungles, Panama declared an effectively bloodless independence within hours in November 1903. It soon signed a treaty allowing a U.S.-led team to begin construction.

Some 5,600 workers died later during the U.S.-led construction project, according to one study.

Why doesn't the US control the canal anymore?

The waterway opened in 1914, but almost immediately some Panamanians began questioning the validity of U.S. control, leading to what became known in the country as the "generational struggle" to take it over.

The U.S. abrogated its right to intervene in Panama in the 1930s. By the 1970s, with its administrative costs sharply increasing, Washington spent years negotiating with Panama to cede control of the waterway.

The Carter administration worked with the government of Omar Torrijos. The two sides eventually decided that their best chance for ratification was to submit two treaties to the U.S. Senate, the "Permanent Neutrality Treaty" and the "Panama Canal Treaty."

The first, which continues in perpetuity, gives the U.S. the right to act to ensure the canal remains open and secure. The second stated that the U.S. would turn over the canal to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999, and was terminated then.

Both were signed in 1977 and ratified the following year. The agreements held even after 1989, when President George H.W. Bush invaded Panama to remove Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega.

In the late 1970s, as the handover treaties were being discussed and ratified, polls found that about half of Americans opposed the decision to cede canal control to Panama. However, by the time ownership actually changed in 1999, public opinion had shifted, with about half of Americans in favor.

What's happened since then?

Administration of the canal has been more efficient under Panama than during the U.S. era, with traffic increasing 17% between fiscal years 1999 and 2004. Panama's voters approved a 2006 referendum authorizing a major expansion of the canal to accommodate larger modern cargo ships. The expansion took until 2016 and cost more than \$5.2 billion.

Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino said in a video Sunday that "every square meter of the canal belongs to Panama and will continue to." He added that, while his country's people are divided on some key issues, "when it comes to our canal, and our sovereignty, we will all unite under our Panamanian flag."

Shipping prices have increased because of droughts last year affecting the canal locks, forcing Panama to drastically cut shipping traffic through the canal and raise rates to use it. Though the rains have mostly returned, Panama says future fee increases might be necessary as it undertakes improvements to accommodate modern shipping needs.

Mulino said fees to use the canal are "not set on a whim."

Jorge Luis Quijano, who served as the waterway's administrator from 2014 to 2019, said all canal users are subject to the same fees, though they vary by ship size and other factors.

"I can accept that the canal's customers may complain about any price increase," Quijano said. "But that does not give them reason to consider taking it back."

Why has Trump raised this?

The president-elect says the U.S. is getting "ripped off" and "I'm not going to stand for it."

"It was given to Panama and to the people of Panama, but it has provisions — you've got to treat us

fairly. And they haven't treated us fairly," Trump said of the 1977 treaty that he said "foolishly" gave the canal away.

The neutrality treaty does give the U.S. the right to act if the canal's operation is threatened due to military conflict — but not to reassert control.

"There's no clause of any kind in the neutrality agreement that allows for the taking back of the canal," Quijano said. "Legally, there's no way, under normal circumstances, to recover territory that was used previously."

Trump, meanwhile, hasn't said how he might make good on his threat.

"There's very little wiggle room, absent a second U.S. invasion of Panama, to retake control of the Panama Canal in practical terms," said Benjamin Gedan, director of the Latin America Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

Gedan said Trump's stance is especially baffling given that Mulino is a pro-business conservative who has "made lots of other overtures to show that he would prefer a special relationship with the United States." He also noted that Panama in recent years has moved closer to China, meaning the U.S. has strategic reasons to keep its relationship with the Central American nation friendly.

Panama is also a U.S. partner on stopping illegal immigration from South America — perhaps Trump's biggest policy priority.

"If you're going to pick a fight with Panama on an issue," Gedan said, "you could not find a worse one than the canal."

## House Ethics Committee accuses Gaetz of paying for sex, including with 17-year-old girl

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Ethics Committee on Monday accused Matt Gaetz of "regularly" paying for sex, including once with a 17-year-old girl, and purchasing and using illicit drugs as a member of Congress, as lawmakers released the conclusions of a nearly four-year investigation that helped sink his nomination for attorney general.

The 37-page report by the bipartisan panel includes explicit details of sex-filled parties and vacations that Gaetz, now 42, took part in from 2017 to 2020 while the Republican represented Florida's western Panhandle.

Congressional investigators concluded that Gaetz violated multiple state laws related to sexual misconduct while in office, though not federal sex trafficking laws. They also found that Gaetz "knowingly and willfully sought to impede and obstruct" the committee's work.

"The Committee determined there is substantial evidence that Representative Gaetz violated House Rules and other standards of conduct prohibiting prostitution, statutory rape, illicit drug use, impermissible gifts, special favors or privileges, and obstruction of Congress," the report said.

Before the report came out, Gaetz denied any wrongdoing and criticized the committee's process.

"Giving funds to someone you are dating — that they didn't ask for — and that isn't 'charged' for sex is now prostitution?!?" he posted on X, the website formerly known as Twitter. "There is a reason they did this to me in a Christmas Eve-Eve report and not in a courtroom of any kind where I could present evidence and challenge witnesses."

Gaetz, who was first elected in 2017, spent the majority of his time in Washington enmeshed in scandals that ultimately derailed his selection by President-elect Donald Trump to lead the Justice Department. Gaetz abruptly resigned from Congress last month. His political future is uncertain, although Gaetz has indicated interest in running for the open Senate seat in Florida.

The committee painted a damning portrait of Gaetz's conduct, using dozens of pages of exhibits, including text messages, financial records, travel receipts, checks and online payments, to document a party and drug-fueled lifestyle. The committee said it compiled the evidence after issuing 29 subpoenas for documents and testimony and contacting more than two dozen witnesses.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 60 of 78

In addition to soliciting prostitution, the report said Gaetz "accepted gifts, including transportation and lodging in connection with a 2018 trip to the Bahamas, in excess of permissible amounts."

That same year, investigators said, Gaetz arranged for a staffer to obtain a passport for a woman with whom he was sexually involved, falsely telling the State Department that she was his constituent.

In some of the text exchanges made public, he appeared to be inviting various women to events, get-aways or parties, and arranging airplane travel and lodging. At one point he asked one woman if she had a "cute black dress" to wear. There were also discussions of shipping goods.

One of the exhibits was a text exchange that appeared to be between two of the women concerned about their cash flow and payments. In another, a person asked Gaetz for help to pay an educational expense.

Regarding the 17-year-old girl, the report said there was no evidence Gaetz knew she was a minor when he had sex with her. The woman told the committee she did not tell Gaetz she was under 18 at the time and that he learned she was a minor more than a month after the party.

But Gaetz stayed in touch with her after that and met up with her for "commercial sex" again less than six months after she turned 18, according to the committee. Florida law says it is a felony for a person 24 or older to have sex with a minor. The law does not allow a claim of ignorance or misrepresentation of a minor's age as a defense.

Joel Leppard, who represents two women who told the committee that Gaetz paid them for sex, said the findings "vindicate" the accounts of his clients and "demonstrate their credibility."

"We appreciate the Committee's commitment to transparency in releasing this comprehensive report so the truth can be known," Leppard said in a statement.

At least one Republican joined all five Democrats on the committee earlier this month in voting to release the report despite initial opposition from GOP lawmakers, including House Speaker Mike Johnson, to publishing findings about a former member of Congress.

While ethics reports have previously been released after a member's resignation, it is extremely rare.

On behalf of the Republicans who voted against making the report public, the committee chairman, Rep. Michael Guest of Mississippi, wrote that while the members did not challenge the findings, "we take great exception that the majority deviated from the Committee's well-established standards," to drop any investigation when a person is no longer a member of the chamber.

Guest added that releasing this report sets a precedent that "is a dangerous departure with potentially catastrophic consequences."

But Maryland Rep. Glenn Ivey, a Democratic member of the committee, said that for transparency, it was crucial for the public and Congress as an institution to read the findings.

"I think that's important for my colleagues here in the House to know how the committee reviews certain acts," he told The Associated Press. "Some of these were obviously conduct that crossed the line, but some of them weren't."

Mounting a last-ditch effort to halt the publication of the report, Gaetz filed a lawsuit Monday asking a federal court to intervene. He cited what he called "untruthful and defamatory information" that would "significantly damage" his "standing and reputation in the community." Gaetz's complaint argued that he was no longer under the committee's jurisdiction because he had resigned from Congress.

The often secretive, bipartisan committee has investigated claims against Gaetz since 2021. But its work became more urgent last month when Trump picked him shortly after the Nov. 5 election Day to be the nation's top law enforcement officer. Gaetz resigned from Congress that same day, putting him outside the purview of the committee's jurisdiction.

But Democrats had pressed to make the report public even after Gaetz was no longer in the House and had withdrawn from consideration for Trump's Cabinet. A vote on the House floor this month to force the report's release failed; all but one Republican voted against it.

The committee detailed its start-and-stop investigation over the past several years, which was halted for a time as the Justice Department conducted its own inquiry of Gaetz. Federal prosecutors never brought a case against him.

Lawmakers said they asked the Justice Department for information about its investigation, but the agency



refused to hand over information, saying it does not disclose information about investigations that do not result in charges.

The committee then subpoenaed the department for records. After a back-and-forth between department officials and the committee, the department only handed over "publicly reported information about the testimony of a deceased individual," according to the committee's report.

The report said Gaetz was "uncooperative" throughout the committee's investigation. He provided "minimal documentation" in response to the committee's requests, it said. "He also did not agree to a voluntary interview."

## **Nigerian agency 'failed completely' to clean up oil damage despite funding, leaked files say**

By ED DAVEY Associated Press

As it crossed the Niger Delta in 2021, a satellite imaged acres of bare land. The site outside the city of Port Harcourt was on a United Nations Environment Programme cleanup list, supposed to be restored to green farmland as the Delta was before thousands of oil spills turned it into a byword for pollution. Instead it was left a sandy "moonscape" unusable for farming, according to U.N. documents.

It wasn't the only botched cleanup, a cache of previously unreported investigations, emails, letters to Nigerian ministers and meeting minutes show. Senior U.N. officials considered the Nigerian cleanup agency a "total failure."

The agency, the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project, or Hyprep, selected cleanup contractors without relevant experience, a U.N. review found. It sent soil samples to laboratories lacking the equipment for tests they had claimed to perform. Auditors were physically blocked from checking that work had been completed.

Most cleanup companies are owned by politicians, a former Nigerian environment minister told the AP, and correspondence shows similar views were shared by U.N. officials.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

There have been thousands of oil spills since Niger Delta production began in the 1950s. Reports and studies document that people often wash, drink, fish and cook in contaminated water.

Spills still occur frequently. In November, the Ogboinbiri community in Bayelsa state suffered its fourth spill in three months, harming fields, streams and fishing.

"We have not harvested anything," said farmer Timipre Bridget, there is now "no way to survive."

After a major U.N. pollution survey in 2011, oil companies agreed to a \$1 billion cleanup fund for the worst-affected area, Ogoniland. Shell, the largest private oil and gas company in the country, contributed \$300 million. The U.N. was relegated to an advisory role. The Nigerian government would handle the funds.

But a confidential investigation by U.N. scientists last year found the site outside Port Harcourt was left with a "complete absence of topsoil," with almost seven times more petroleum remaining than Nigerian health limits allow.

The company responsible had its contract revoked, Nenibarini Zabbey, the current director of Hyprep, told the AP by email.

The head of operations when the contract was awarded, Philip Shekwolo, called allegations in the U.N. documents "baseless" and "cheap blackmail." Shekwolo, who used to head up oil spill remediation for Shell, insists the cleanup was successful.

But the documents show U.N. officials raising the alarm since 2021, when Shekwolo was acting chief.

A January 2022 U.N. review found 21 of the 41 contractors okayed to clean up spill sites had no relevant experience. These included construction companies and general merchants.

They were effectively handed a "blank check," U.N. Senior Project Advisor Iyenemi Kakulu is recorded saying in the minutes of a meeting with Hyprep and Shell. Incompetent companies were to blame for bad cleanups, Hyprep's own communications chief, Joseph Kpobari is in the minutes as having said. Despite this, they were rewarded contracts for more polluted sites, the U.N. delegation warned.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 62 of 78

Zabbey denied Kpobari's admission. He said 16 out of 20 sites in the project's first stage are certified as clean by Nigerian regulators and many have been returned to communities. Hyprep always issued contracts correctly, he said.

Two sources close to the cleanup efforts, speaking anonymously for fear of loss of business or employment, said when officials visited laboratories used by Hyprep, they lacked equipment needed to perform the tests they reported.

In a letter to customers, one U.K. laboratory frequently used by Hyprep acknowledged its tests for most of 2022 were flawed and unreliable and the U.K. laboratory accreditation service confirmed the lab was twice suspended.

Zabbey says now Hyprep monitors contractors more closely, labs adhere to Nigerian and U.N. recommendations and are frequently checked.

The U.N. also warned the Nigerian government in a 2021 assessment that Hyprep's spending was not being tracked. Internal auditors were considered "the enemy" and "demonized for doing their job." Shekwolo's predecessor as Hyprep chief blocked financial controls and "physically prevented" auditors from checking that work had been completed, it found.

Zabbey responded that the audit team is valued now, and accounts are audited annually, although he provided only one audit cover letter. In it, the accountants "identified weaknesses."

One Nigerian politician tried to change things: Sharon Ikeazor spent decades as a lawyer before becoming environment minister in 2019.

"The companies had no competence whatsoever," she said in a phone interview.

In February 2022, she received a letter from senior U.N. official Muralee Thummarukudy, warning of "significant opportunities for malpractice" over contract awards, unusually strong language in U.N. diplomacy. She removed Shekwolo as acting Hyprep chief the next month, explaining that she believed he was too close to the politicians.

Most cleanup companies were owned by politicians, she said. The few competent companies "wouldn't get the big jobs."

Shekwolo assessed who was competent for contract awards, Ikeazor said. Shekwolo's former employer Shell and the U.N. both warned her about him, she said, something Shekwolo says he was unaware of.

Ikeazor asked Shekwolo's successor to review every suspect contract and investigate the cleanup companies.

"That sent shockwaves around the political class," she said.

She was quickly replaced as environment minister, with Shekwolo rehired, after just two months out of office.

Shekwolo denied being too close to politicians. He insists no reason was given for his removal and suggested Ikeazor simply didn't like him.

Last year, the U.N. Environment Programme ended its official involvement in the Nigerian oil spill cleanup, explaining its five-year consultancy was over. Ikeazor said the real reason was U.N. frustration over corruption, and the two sources close to the project concurred.

Zabbey said he believes the U.N. merely changed its goals and moved on.

## Tennessee and Auburn remain 1-2 in AP Top 25 poll featuring 10 SEC teams

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Tennessee and Auburn remained Nos. 1-2 atop The Associated Press men's college basketball poll. It's a fitting spot for a pair of Southeastern Conference teams considering the league put 10 teams into Monday's AP Top 25.

The Volunteers (11-0) and Tigers (11-1) spent a third straight week in the same position, and it marked a fourth consecutive week for Auburn sitting at No. 2. They were part of a top 10 that featured the same top-10 programs, though slightly reshuffled with Kentucky tumbling six spots to No. 10 after a loss to

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 63 of 78

Ohio State.

The poll also featured four additions that previously had been ranked this season, including No. 19 Mississippi State and No. 23 Arkansas to add to the SEC's season-long hauls.

The SEC thrice had as many as nine ranked teams this season, including in the preseason poll. This is the first time since at least the start of the 2012-13 season that one league had 10 ranked teams.

Iowa State was third, followed by Duke and Alabama to round out the top five. Florida, Kansas, Marquette and Oregon followed, with those teams all moving up one spot given the Wildcats' fall to 10th.

Rising

San Diego State had the biggest jump among last week's ranked teams, rising three spots to No. 20, while No. 12 Oklahoma, No. 17 Cincinnati and No. 18 Michigan State all climbed two spots. In all, 11 teams rose at least one spot this week.

Sliding

While Kentucky took the week's biggest tumble, No. 21 Purdue and No. 22 UCLA also slid multiple spots. The Boilermakers fell five places after a lopsided loss to Auburn, while the Bruins fell four spots after blowing a 16-point lead and falling by two against an unranked North Carolina team that opened the year at No. 9.

No. 13 Texas A&M and No. 14 Gonzaga also slid one spot to round out the downward movers.

Status quo

Five teams held their positions from last week, starting with the Volunteers, Tigers and Cyclones at the top. Two-time reigning national champion UConn (No. 11) and Houston (No. 15) also stayed in place.

Welcome

No. 24 Illinois and No. 25 Baylor joined Mississippi State and Arkansas as the week's new arrivals and poll returnees.

The Bears were the highest ranked of that group this year, opening the year at No. 8 and spending five weeks in the poll. The Razorbacks started at No. 16 and spent four weeks in the poll, while the Bulldogs and Illini have each had a pair of one-week stints in November and December.

Farewell (for now)

Memphis (No. 21), Dayton (No. 22), Michigan (No. 24) and Clemson (No. 25) fell out of the poll to make room for the new teams.

Conference watch

While the SEC gobbled up spots, the AP Top 25 featured teams from a total of only seven leagues.

The Big Ten — headlined by ninth-ranked new league member Oregon — had five teams to join the Big 12 for second behind the SEC, while the Big East was the only other league with at least two ranked teams.

The Atlantic Coast, West Coast and Mountain West conferences each had one ranked team.

## Magdeburg mourns Christmas market attack victims as fears swirl of deeper German social divisions

MAGDEBURG, Germany (AP) — Mourners laid flowers near the scene of the deadly Christmas market attack on Monday as investigators puzzled over the motive of the suspect and his previous encounters with authorities were scrutinized, while fears swirled that the rampage could deepen divisions in German society.

The Johanniskirche, a church a short walk from the scene of the attack, has become a central place of mourning since the suspect drove a car into the busy market on Friday evening, killing five people. A carpet of flowers now covers the broad sidewalk in front of the church.

Prosecutors said the number of injured has risen to as many as 235 as more people have reported to hospitals and doctors, but it's possible there was some double-counting.

Authorities have identified the suspect as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency. They say he doesn't fit the usual profile of perpetrators of extremist attacks. The man described himself as an ex-Muslim who was highly critical of Islam, and on social media expressed support for the far-right.



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 64 of 78

A picture has emerged of someone who had come to authorities' attention for threatening behavior and been the subject of tipoffs, but wasn't known to have committed any violence. The interior minister of Saxony-Anhalt state, Tamara Zieschang, told lawmakers Monday that police had contacted him in September 2023 and again in October this year, but didn't comment publicly on why, German news agency dpa reported.

"The Magdeburg perpetrator had repeatedly attracted attention by threatening crimes. There were also warnings about him but, according to what is known so far, his political statements were so confused that none of the security authorities' patterns fitted him," German Justice Minister Volker Wissing was quoted as telling the Funke newspaper group.

He said that Germany may have to "draw consequences for our security architecture" and that a serious debate about that will be needed, "but it's still too early for that" as facts and questions remain open.

Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck voiced fears that the attack will fuel online misinformation before a national election expected in late February. He urged people not to "be infected by hatred."

"There is still a lot we don't know and a lot is unexplained, including the exact motive," Habeck said in a video posted Sunday. "All the same, I fear that the distrust that was immediately propagated on the net against Muslims, foreigners and people with a history of immigration will entrench itself deeper in society."

At a gathering organized by the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, party outside Magdeburg's cathedral Monday, co-leader Alice Weidel described the attack as "an act of an Islamist full of hatred for what constitutes human cohesion ... for us Germans, for us Christians."

## Trump wants mass deportations. A ride-along with immigration officers shows the challenges

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The immigration officers sat in their vehicles before dawn near a two-story building. A New York subway line rumbled overhead, then an officer's voice crackled over the radio.

After watching for about two hours, he said, "I think that's Tango," using a term for target. "Gray hoodie. Backpack. Walking quickly."

The immigration officers surrounded and handcuffed a 23-year-old man from Ecuador who had been convicted of sexually assaulting a minor.

Kenneth Genalo, head of Enforcement and Removal Operations for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in New York, said a popular misconception is that officers can sweep into a community and pick up a wide swath of people who are in the United States illegally and send them to their home countries.

"It's called targeted enforcement," Genalo said. "We don't grab people and then take them to JFK and put them on a plane."

With Donald Trump returning to the White House, there is intense interest in how the Republican will carry out his immigration agenda, including a campaign pledge of mass deportations. His priorities could run into the realities faced by agents focused on enforcement and removals, including the unit in New York that offered The Associated Press a glimpse into its operations: The number of people already on its lists to target eclipses the number of officers available to do the work.

The Biden administration had narrowed deportation priorities to public safety threats and recent border crossers. Trump's incoming "border czar," Tom Homan, says officials in the new administration also will prioritize those who pose a risk, such as criminals, before moving on to immigrants whom courts have ordered removed from the U.S.

But Homan also has signaled that enforcement could be wider: "If you're in the country illegally you got a problem," he said recently on Dr. Phil's Merit TV.

It's a tall order.

Deportation orders far outnumber staff

About 1.4 million people have final orders of removal, while about 660,000 under immigration supervision

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 65 of 78

either have been convicted of crimes or are facing charges. But only 6,000 officers within ICE are tasked with monitoring noncitizens in the country and then finding and removing those not eligible to stay.

Those staffing numbers have largely remained static as their caseload has roughly quadrupled over the past decade to 7.6 million. About 10% of that workforce was pulled from their regular duties last year to go to the U.S.-Mexico border at times when immigration spiked.

Jason Houser, ICE chief of staff earlier in the Biden administration, said the number of officers needed to pursue those deemed a public safety threat are at direct odds with the goal of deporting people in large numbers.

"You're not going to be able to do both of those with the resources you have, with the deportation of officers you have," Houser said. "Just the arithmetic, the time-intensive nature of those sort of arrests will overwhelm any ability to get to those large scale numbers."

Genalo said the officers in charge of individual cases have to get a lead, ensure they have the legal authority to arrest someone and then track the person down. They generally aren't allowed to enter a residence, so they want to catch people outside.

#### How immigration removals work in the field

On this recent operation, about a dozen officers gathered before 5 a.m. at a White Castle parking lot in the Bronx. After putting on their body armor and checking their equipment, they circled around for a briefing.

Besides the 23-year-old Ecuadorian man, they were going after a 36-year-old Mexican man convicted of forcibly touching a young girl and another Ecuadorian also convicted of sexual abuse of a minor.

The first target, the 23-year-old man, who pleaded guilty to raping a 14-year-old girl, was believed to usually leave the apartment building around 7 a.m. or 7:30 a.m. Sometimes he was with a woman and child.

"Light came on in the first floor of the apartment," an officer waiting outside said over the radio. Then later: "Someone came out of the basement, but it's not our target."

They finally spotted him, swept him into the back of a vehicle and quickly left the neighborhood.

Inside, the man's 22-year-old wife didn't know what had happened until he called later from detention.

In an interview, she said they met in Ecuador and had a child — a bubbly 3-year-old girl with braids — and she was pregnant with their second. He worked construction while she was a manicurist.

She said she knew why her husband had been arrested but felt there were important mitigating factors. She said they knew it was possible her husband could be sent back to Ecuador after his criminal case wrapped up but that it was still a shock.

ICE deported more than 270,000 people over a recent 12-month period, the highest annual tally in a decade, the agency said in a recent report. But it also said it made fewer arrests of noncitizens, in part because of the demand of sending staff to the border. Of those arrested, a greater proportion had serious criminal histories.

#### Working with local law enforcement

Some cities and states work with ICE to turn over people in their custody who aren't U.S. citizens.

But many left-leaning states and cities have so-called sanctuary policies that limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities. In New York City, for example, ICE used to have an office at the jail to easily take custody of noncitizens. In 2014, then-Mayor Bill de Blasio signed legislation kicking out ICE and restricting police cooperation.

His successor, Eric Adams, has shown willingness to revisit some of those policies. He recently met with Homan and told reporters they agreed on pursuing people who commit violent crimes.

Genalo said agents spend time and resources picking up immigrants few would argue should have the right to stay in America.

"How can you state that sanctuary policies help the community when you're releasing all these criminals right back into the community?" he said. "We're safer when we collaborate."

Staffing is also an issue. He said he's supposed to have about 325 officers, but in recent years, the number has been about 30% lower.

Many immigration advocates have long-standing concerns about ICE's tactics, and those concerns are deepening with Trump's return to office in January.

Advocates say the incoming administration's position of going after public safety threats is already longtime policy. They object to rhetoric they say paints immigrants as people to be feared. They say there can be nuances in some cases: Maybe someone committed a crime a long time ago and has been rehabilitated, or someone facing a final order of removal moved and never got the notice.

During Trump's first term, there were a lot of "collateral arrests" where immigration officers would detain others besides those being targeted, said Jehan Laner, a senior staff attorney for the Immigrant Legal Resource Center. That destabilizes communities, she said, adding, "We saw them go after everyone."

Genalo said he couldn't comment on the incoming administration's plans but stressed that officers are going after specific targets with criminal histories. He said he has a docket of about 58,000 people who either have criminal convictions or pending charges.

"I'm pretty sure we're going to be tied up for a while dealing with the criminal population," Genalo said.

## How faith communities can be welcoming of believers with disabilities this holiday season and beyond

By MARIAM FAM and LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

The Rev. Shannon Blosser sees how his son loves church — the music, the singing, the communion. But the United Methodist pastor said his family hasn't always felt like 11-year-old Noah, who is autistic, has been welcome.

At one point, Blosser's wife and the couple's two sons stopped attending in-person services at a church where he served. "If we felt more supported, we probably would have pushed through."

Many people with disabilities, advocates and families want more religious congregations to know that there are ways to be accommodating and inclusive of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities this holiday season — and year round — and to fully embrace them and their families.

"They just have to have the willingness to be the church that sees the image of God in every child and every adult," said Blosser, who now serves two small West Virginia congregations that have been supportive of his family's needs.

Mount Olivet United Methodist Church, one of the congregations, is hosting a "Calm Christmas," a sensory-friendly celebration and worship, where music will come from a guitar, rather than a piano, and candles will be swapped for glow sticks to avoid any dangers. There are fidget toys and a "visual schedule" to help those needing images and graphics to better process the sequence of events.

Blosser's message to attendees? Be you.

"Families like mine who feel overwhelmed with just the lights and the cameras and the pomp and circumstance of Christmas Eve, they can come in and be themselves," he said. "If you need to run around and do laps, ... do it. This is a place for you to be you so you can experience God's love."

He hopes it could be the start of something more regular, like a quarterly or monthly service.

Linda Bunk, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a former name for one form of autism, said it's important to work on not just facilitating accessibility at churches but also fostering belonging.

For instance, ask someone with Down syndrome if they'd like to be on the welcome team or if they sing or play the guitar, suggested Bunk who's a photographer and has served on Christian mission trips, including to Ukraine.

"Let them serve at their ability," she said. "God blessed them with all kinds of talents and if we don't ask them or welcome them, we'll never know what they can do."

Bunk, who has bipolar disorder and lives in Virginia, said she especially likes seeing people with disabilities worshipping with the full congregation, rather than separately.

"Why can't we have that all together ... and having fun, dancing, singing, eating food," she said. "It breaks down those barriers of 'disabilities are scary.'"

Blosser said people with disabilities must be part of planning about inclusion to offer guidance and flag



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 67 of 78

mistakes.

He also encourages congregations to follow the Golden Rule. "What would you want done?" he said. "For most of us, we would want understanding; we would want compassion."

Joining an inclusive Hanukkah service

In Teaneck, New Jersey, Congregation Rinat Yisrael is hosting an inclusive Hanukkah service later this month. The synagogue's Hanukkah minyan, the quorum of at least 10 men needed for public worship, will include Dov Marcus, a congregant who has autism, and who will recite blessings over the Torah.

"The idea isn't to give him his one opportunity a year to be called up to the Torah for the blessings," said Stephen Glicksman, a synagogue member and director of innovation at Makor Care & Services Network which supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families and is co-sponsoring the service. "It's for people to see that he's capable of being called out ... and then be put on the roster like everybody else who will periodically get called up to receive that honor."

Organizers said the service aims to give all people an opportunity to pray in a welcoming, accessible and sensory-aware atmosphere that transcends the holidays.

Marcus attends synagogue weekly and Glicksman said he's often smiling, clapping and humming along during the service. Most congregation members, though, have never heard him because he rarely talks outside his home, Glicksman said.

"The people who are there, I think are going to be very surprised that he has that capability."

Inclusion, Glicksman said, shouldn't be viewed as an event or activity, but rather a mindset.

Marcus, who was diagnosed with autism at 2, said receiving the honor of reciting the blessings "makes me happy because I feel closer to Hashem," using a Hebrew word for God.

His parents became aware of his sensitivity to sounds the first time they took him to synagogue. During the Jewish holiday of Purim, he became overwhelmed by the loud congregation. It would also happen when he heard the shofar — a ceremonial ram's horn, sounded on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year.

Growing up, though, he always felt connected to Judaism and would wrap the leather straps of tefillin and pray with his grandfather, a Holocaust survivor.

"He likes the Jewish music, the Jewish service. This is where he shines," his mother, Debbie Marcus, said, adding that his favorite time is attending synagogue.

During his Bar Mitzvah, she recalls how he recited the blessings over the Torah, making many in the congregation cry with joy.

"To see Dovie light up the room, to be included and respected the way he is and honored — that's the highlight of the Hanukkah holiday."

Making houses of worship more hospitable

David Mandell, psychiatry professor and director of the Penn Center for Mental Health at the University of Pennsylvania, urged leaders to make their houses of worship hospitable from the moment members enter the door, considering such things as how greeters are trained. The message that all are welcome, he said, should also come from the pulpit.

Other things to consider, he said: Is there a quiet, sensory-friendly room that families can go to when needed and still follow the service remotely? Who in the congregation can volunteer to support families' needs?

Many families "are not going to come back for the High Holy Days or for Christmas and Easter or for Eid if they feel like their child is not welcome" on a regular basis, he said.

Challenges are not uncommon in religious schools, said Mandell, who worked with his synagogue to train teachers there.

In Wisconsin, Kathleen Krueger said attending church with her daughter, who has cognitive disabilities and autism, was at times very challenging, especially when she was younger. When her daughter had an outburst, people would stare, she said.

That would leave Krueger feeling "very, very sad" for her daughter and "also bad for us because nobody wants to stand out in a negative way."

The family kept attending services, but she realized that other families dealing with disabilities weren't doing so.

Krueger led an effort to start a special needs ministry at Mt. Zion Lutheran Church, now part of New Life Lutheran Church in Kenosha. It started with holidays and other special events; monthly Bible classes were later added.

Recently, the ministry held a Christmas celebration featuring such things as cookie decorating, crafts, music, a puppet show and a short service. Krueger wanted attendees to enjoy and "really feel the love of Jesus." Participants celebrated the ministry's 20th anniversary.

Krueger recommends faith leaders ask people with disabilities and their families how they can better serve them.

As a mother, she said, she appreciated when members would ask her about her daughter's challenges rather than being afraid to engage in conversation.

"Everybody appreciates a friendly, loving face to welcome them."

## **Nissan and Honda to attempt a merger that would create the world's No. 3 automaker**

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and ELAINE KURTENBACH Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese automakers Honda and Nissan have announced plans to work toward a merger that would form the world's third-largest automaker by sales, as the industry undergoes dramatic changes in its transition away from fossil fuels.

The two companies said they had signed a memorandum of understanding on Monday and that smaller Nissan alliance member Mitsubishi Motors Corp. also had agreed to join the talks on integrating their businesses.

Automakers in Japan have lagged behind their big rivals in electric vehicles and are trying to cut costs and make up for lost time as newcomers like China's BYD and EV market leader Tesla devour market share.

Honda's president, Toshihiro Mibe, said Honda and Nissan will attempt to unify their operations under a joint holding company. Honda will lead the new management, retaining the principles and brands of each company. They aim to have a formal merger agreement by June and to complete the deal and list the holding company on the Tokyo Stock Exchange by August 2026, he said.

No dollar value was given and the formal talks are just starting, Mibe said.

There are "points that need to be studied and discussed," he said. "Frankly speaking, the possibility of this not being implemented is not zero."

A merger could result in a behemoth worth more than \$50 billion based on the market capitalization of all three automakers. Together, Honda, Nissan and Mitsubishi would gain scale to compete with Toyota Motor Corp. and with Germany's Volkswagen AG. Toyota has technology partnerships with Japan's Mazda Motor Corp. and Subaru Corp.

News of a possible merger surfaced earlier this month, with unconfirmed reports saying Taiwan iPhone maker Foxconn was seeking to tie up with Nissan by buying shares from the Japan's company's other alliance partner, Renault SA of France.

Nissan's CEO Makoto Uchida said Foxconn had not directly approach his company. He also acknowledged that Nissan's situation was "severe."

Even after a merger Toyota, which rolled out 11.5 million vehicles in 2023, would remain the leading Japanese automaker. If they join, the three smaller companies would make about 8 million vehicles. In 2023, Honda made 4 million and Nissan produced 3.4 million. Mitsubishi Motors made just over 1 million.

"We have come to the realization that in order for both parties to be leaders in this mobility transformation, it is necessary to make a more bold change than a collaboration in specific areas," Mibe said.

Nissan, Honda and Mitsubishi earlier agreed to share components for electric vehicles like batteries and to jointly research software for autonomous driving to adapt better to electrification.

Nissan has struggled following a scandal that began with the arrest of its former chairman Carlos Ghosn

in late 2018 on charges of fraud and misuse of company assets, allegations that he denies. He eventually was released on bail and fled to Lebanon.

Speaking Monday to reporters in Tokyo via a video link, Ghosn derided the planned merger as a “desperate move.”

From Nissan, Honda could get truck-based body-on-frame large SUVs such as the Armada and Infiniti QX80 that Honda doesn’t have, with large towing capacities and good off-road performance, Sam Fiorani, vice president of AutoForecast Solutions, told The Associated Press.

Nissan also has years of experience building batteries and electric vehicles, and gas-electric hybrid powertrains that could help Honda in developing its own EVs and next generation of hybrids, he said.

But the company said in November that it was slashing 9,000 jobs, or about 6% of its global work force, and reducing its global production capacity by 20% after reporting a quarterly loss of 9.3 billion yen (\$61 million).

It recently reshuffled its management and Uchida, its chief executive, took a 50% pay cut while acknowledging responsibility for the financial woes, saying Nissan needed to become more efficient and respond better to market tastes, rising costs and other global changes.

“We anticipate that if this integration comes to fruition, we will be able to deliver even greater value to a wider customer base,” Uchida said.

Fitch Ratings recently downgraded Nissan’s credit outlook to “negative,” citing worsening profitability, partly due to price cuts in the North American market. But it noted that it has a strong financial structure and solid cash reserves that amounted to 1.44 trillion yen (\$9.4 billion).

Nissan’s share price also had fallen to the point where it is considered something of a bargain. On Monday, its Tokyo-traded shares gained 1.6%. They jumped more than 20% after news of the possible merger broke last week.

Honda’s shares surged 3.8%. Honda’s net profit slipped nearly 20% in the first half of the April-March fiscal year from a year earlier, as its sales suffered in China.

The merger reflects an industry-wide trend toward consolidation.

At a routine briefing Monday, Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi said he would not comment on details of the automakers’ plans, but said Japanese companies need to stay competitive in the fast changing market.

“As the business environment surrounding the automobile industry largely changes, with competitiveness in storage batteries and software is increasingly important, we expect measures needed to survive international competition will be taken,” Hayashi said.

## **AI will eavesdrop on world’s wildest places to track and help protect endangered wildlife**

By MATT O’BRIEN AP Technology Writer

PUERTO JIMÉNEZ, Costa Rica (AP) — The endangered Geoffrey’s spider monkeys that dangle high in the rainforest canopy are elusive and hard for scientists to track.

So biologist Jenna Lawson hid 350 audio monitors in trees across Costa Rica’s lush Osa Peninsula to spy on them.

The devices recorded the sounds of the forest and surrounding countryside for a week, collecting so much data that Lawson could have spent years listening to it all.

Instead, she fed it into artificial intelligence systems trained to instantly recognize spider monkey calls and detect where the animals traveled. One of the world’s largest acoustic wildlife studies when Lawson began the project in 2021, it revealed troubling findings about the health of a treasured wildlife refuge.

More of this AI-assisted wildlife surveillance is “urgently needed” as some 28% of all plant and animal species are now at risk of extinction, according to a paper published in the academic journal *Science* this summer. Researchers from Dutch and Danish universities showed that machine-learning techniques can “handle huge amounts of data and uncover sound patterns, allowing for faster, cheaper, and better eco-



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 70 of 78

logical studies” that can aid in biodiversity conservation. But many technical challenges remain.

Tech giant Microsoft’s philanthropic AI for Good Lab announced this month it is hoping to answer some of those technical challenges with a new kind of hardware and computing system for eavesdropping on the planet’s wildest places.

“Those remote places are also the most important places on the Earth from a biodiversity perspective,” said Microsoft’s chief data scientist, Juan Lavista Ferres, in an interview last week by video call from Colombia, where a research team was preparing to test the new approach.

Powered by the sun and energy-efficient AI computer chips, the devices can run for years rather than weeks without human intervention. And they can regularly transmit their data online via low-Earth orbit satellites. It’s called Sparrow, short for Solar-Powered Acoustic and Remote Recording Observation Watch.

Pablo Arbelaez, director of an AI-focused research center at the University of the Andes, said a first Sparrow test will happen in a jungle preserve along Colombia’s largest river, the Magdalena. Eventually, the researchers hope to get a better idea of how deforestation — and efforts to reverse it — is affecting the population behavior of jaguars, blue-beaked paujil birds, spider monkeys and other endangered species.

Another project closer to Microsoft headquarters will monitor forests in Washington state’s Cascade Mountains. By late 2025, Lavista Ferres plans to have devices on all continents, from remote corners of the Amazon rainforest to gorilla habitats of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. That will then be “open-sourced” to make it accessible to a wide body of researchers in real time, but with measures to obscure sensitive location data.

“What we don’t want is these devices to ever be used for poachers to understand where the animals are,” Lavista Ferres said.

It was a concern about encroachments on Costa Rican spider monkey habitat that led Lawson, then at Imperial College London, to undertake her ambitious bio-acoustic study three years ago. She persuaded landowners to let her place recording devices on their properties outside Corcovado National Park, a jewel of Costa Rica’s decades-long efforts to preserve biodiversity by encouraging wildlife tourism.

“She basically realized the spider monkey is in a really critical situation,” said local environmentalist and bug scientist Jim Córdoba-Alfaro. On a follow-up visit last year, he and Lawson trekked across a private reserve with an Associated Press reporter to observe the monkeys and check on the audio monitors.

Compared to the charismatic capuchin monkey and the notoriously loud howler monkey -- both commonly seen or heard throughout Costa Rica — spider monkeys are far more wary of humans and the changes they bring.

“They’re the most sensitive of the primates that we have here,” said Lawson. “The spider monkey would be the first animal to leave when there’s signs of trouble. They would be the last animal to come back once forests are restored because they need mature secondary and primary forest to be able to survive.”

The Royal Society of London in March 2023 published Lawson’s findings of what the audio monitors revealed: the spider monkeys weren’t going anywhere near paved roads or the plantations harvesting palm oil and teak wood that bisect the region’s protected national parks. That meant government-designated wildlife corridors meant to extend their range through and beyond the Osa Peninsula were not working as well as designed. She came back to present those conclusions to local officials.

After hours of searching, a troop of spider monkeys appeared — peering down at the humans who found them. Within moments, they were on their way again — extending their lanky arms and prehensile tails to grasp at trees and propel themselves across the canopy with spidery acrobatics.

Unattended acoustic detection of animal sounds is valuable not just in rainforests but in a wide variety of ecosystems, according to the Science paper published earlier this year. For example, it could help sailors avoid colliding their ships with large baleen whales heard to be passing through a shipping channel.

Lavista Ferres said there are still numerous challenges to overcome, from humidity that can fray jungle monitors to elephants in African savannas unintentionally knocking them off a tree.

Lawson said using the audio monitors to capture the spider monkey’s distinctive whinny enables biologists to study a larger area at lower cost, but also provides a truer account of how the monkeys behave without scientists following them around.

"We're reducing our influence on their behavior," she said. "And also — they don't want us here."

## France observes a day of mourning for victims of Cyclone Chido in its Mayotte territory off Africa

By TOM NOUVIAN and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France marked a day of mourning Monday for victims of Cyclone Chido, which devastated its poorest territory, Mayotte, over a week ago.

The cyclone was the most destructive to hit Mayotte in 90 years and caused extensive damage to the island off Africa's east coast. At least 35 deaths have been reported, with around 2,500 injured.

The actual toll is likely much higher due to the widespread destruction, precarious living conditions for a large migrant population and others and the Muslim practice of burying the dead within 24 hours.

Locals said many victims had stayed home, not believing the storm would be so severe.

In an informal neighborhood near Mayotte's capital, Zaharia Youssouf sat in her damaged home, remembering her last conversation with her husband, Baco Houmadi. She had sought refuge in a shelter while Houmadi, who had heart problems, stayed behind with their son.

"I called him three times," she said. "The first time I asked if he was OK. The second time he told me that he and our son had eaten. The third call, I said, 'Sweetie, can you cook for me, because there are bananas and fish at home?' He said, 'I'm not cooking for you.' After that, I couldn't reach him."

Houmadi's brother-in-law, Saandi Mbae, was with him when he died.

"We were under the table, and the tin was blowing, and we couldn't go out," Mbae said. "At the start, we were talking, but then we couldn't continue because he had a problem breathing. I looked at him again, and he really couldn't breathe. Then I realized it was over — that God would do what he would do."

Cyclone Chido struck Mayotte on Dec. 14, disrupting water and electricity supplies and severing communications. It also left thousands displaced. Many are struggling to rebuild.

"At least I had a man in the house. Even if he didn't work, he brought something home," Youssouf said. "The house is broken, and if he was here, he could repair it."

Chido also hit southeastern Africa. In Mozambique, the National Institute of Risk and Disaster Management said Sunday that 94 people had been killed.

In Paris, French President Emmanuel Macron stood for a minute of silence at the Elysee Palace. He visited Mayotte days after the cyclone.

"The people of Mayotte are in the hearts of all French people," Macron wrote on X.

Mayotte lawmaker Estelle Youssouffa accused the French government of neglecting the island, noting that newly appointed Prime Minister François Bayrou was under pressure to announce his cabinet.

"The prime minister seems to be considering the announcement of a reshuffling of his cabinet on a national day of mourning," Youssouffa said on France Inter radio. "It's disgraceful, contemptuous, and deeply mediocre. Nobody cares about Mayotte — it's appalling!"

This is the first national day of mourning in response to a climate-related disaster since the Fifth Republic of France was established in the 1950s. Previous ones have been mainly to mourn former French presidents or victims of terrorist attacks.

## A Holy Year is about to start in Rome. Here's what you need to know

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis on Tuesday formally inaugurates the 2025 Holy Year, reviving an ancient church tradition encouraging the faithful to make pilgrimages to Rome, amid new security fears following a Christmas market attack in Germany.

At the start of Christmas Eve Mass, Francis will push open the Holy Door on St. Peter's Basilica, which will stay open throughout the year to allow the estimated 32 million pilgrims projected to visit Rome to pass through.

The first Holy Year was called in 1300, and in recent times they are generally celebrated every 25 to 50

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 72 of 78

years. Pilgrims who participate can obtain “indulgences” — the centuries-old feature of the Catholic Church related to the forgiveness of sins that roughly amounts to a “get out of Purgatory free” card.

The last regular Jubilee was in 2000, when St. John Paul II ushered in the church’s third millennium. Francis declared a special Jubilee in 2015-2016 dedicated to mercy and the next one planned is in 2033, to commemorate the anniversary of the crucifixion of Christ.

What are indulgences?

According to church teaching, Catholics who confess their sins are forgiven and therefore released from the eternal or spiritual punishment of damnation. An indulgence is designed to remove the “temporal” punishment of sin that may remain — the consequence of the wrongdoing that might disrupt the sinner’s relationships with others.

Martin Luther’s opposition to the church’s practice of selling indulgences inspired him to launch the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. He was excommunicated, and the practice of buying and selling indulgences has been illegal since the 1562 Council of Trent. But the granting of them has continued and is an important element in Holy Year pilgrimages.

According to the norms issued for the 2025 Jubilee, Catholics can obtain an indulgence if they:

— Undertake a pious pilgrimage, participating in Masses and other sacraments, at any of the four papal basilicas in Rome or the Holy Land, or other sacred Jubilee sites “so as to manifest the great need for conversion and reconciliation.”

— Participate in works of charity, mercy or penance, such as visiting prisoners, sick people or elderly people or undertaking corporal works of mercy “to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned and bury the dead.”

— Abstain, in a spirit of penance, for at least one day of the week from “futile distractions,” such as social media, or from “superfluous consumption,” such as fasting; or donating the proportionate sum to the poor or to help migrants.

Why the focus on prisoners?

Francis has long made ministry to prisoners a hallmark of his priestly vocation, and a Holy Year dedicated to a message of hope is no exception.

In fact, the only other Holy Door that Francis will personally open this year is located at the chapel of Rome’s Rebibbia prison, to draw attention to the need to give prisoners in particular hope of a better future.

The final big event of the Holy Year before it closes on Jan. 6, 2026, is the Jubilee of Prisoners on Dec. 14, 2025.

What’s on the calendar?

The Jubilee calendar is a compilation of official and unofficial Holy Year events that will test the stamina of Francis, who just turned 88 and went into the Christmas season with a cold that made it hard for him to catch his breath.

Every month has two, three or four official Jubilee events that Francis is expected to attend which are designated for particular categories of people: the armed forces, artists, priests, poor people, volunteers and teachers. Then there are the unofficial Jubilee events, in which individual dioceses and other groups have organized their own pilgrimages to Rome.

One item on the Jubilee’s unofficial calendar, Sept. 6, has made news because it has been organized by an Italian association, “La Tenda di Gionata” or “Jonathan’s Tent,” which is dedicated to making LGBTQ+ Catholics feel more welcome in the Catholic Church.

What about security for so many people?

Rome Mayor Roberto Gualtieri has said the security plans call for a mix of traditional policing — a reported 700 extra officers — plus high-tech surveillance using drones and closed-circuit cameras that, thanks to algorithms informed by artificial intelligence, can keep track in real time of crowd sizes and congestion points.

“There will be more vehicles, more men, and very, very, shall we say, robust and important security devices,” Gualtieri told reporters last week.

The Vatican has tried to reduce congestion for pilgrims by allowing them to reserve their visits to St.



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 73 of 78

Peter's Basilica online in advance.

After a driver plowed into a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, killing five people, Italian authorities last week sent a circular to police stations around the country recommending "maximum" investigative efforts and to immediately boost surveillance and police patrols around Christmas markets and displays and tourist attractions.

The Vatican, with its life-sized creche and giant Christmas tree in St. Peter's Square and outdoor exhibit of nativity scenes in the Bernini colonnade ringing it, qualifies as an at-risk target.

How else is Rome preparing?

Rome has had two years of intense preparations for the Holy Year that involved major public works projects and artistic renovations that have coincided with separate initiatives paid for by the European Union's COVID-19 recovery funds.

Fewer than a third of the 323 Jubilee projects have been finished or will wrap up by next month, meaning the traffic headaches and eyesores will continue well into 2025 and even 2026. But Romans and visitors are beginning to see some of the finished products.

Bernini's fountains in Piazza Navona are glistening white again after a monthslong cleaning. A spiffed-up Trevi Fountain reopened over the weekend, and on Monday the main Jubilee project was unveiled: A pedestrian piazza linking Castel St. Angelo to the Via della Conciliazione, the main boulevard leading to St. Peter's Square.

## **Congress is looking to ban Chinese drones that are widely used in US. What to know about the debate**

By DIDI TANG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The economic and technological rivalry between the United States and China has come to the drone market, where Chinese-made flying devices are a dominant player.

Lawmakers in Washington are seeking to ban new sales of drones from two dominant Chinese manufacturers, arguing they could be used to spy on Americans and that the low-cost models are hurting the U.S. drone industry.

A defense bill that passed Congress last week would bar new Chinese drones from DJI Technology and Autel Robotics should a review find them to pose an "unacceptable" risk to U.S. national security.

But American users, from police officers to farmers, mappers and filmmakers, have come to rely on Chinese-made drones, especially those by DJI.

Here are things to know about the debate.

Lawmakers say the drones pose a national security threat

Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., who is President-elect Donald Trump's pick to be U.N. ambassador, has led House efforts to ban new Chinese drones, saying Americans have become too dependent on them.

"It is strategically irresponsible to allow Communist China to be our drone factory," she argued.

It was the role of drones in everyday life that drove Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., to get Congress to restrict the purchase of Chinese drones by federal agencies. Those restrictions were included in a bill that Democratic President Joe Biden signed last year.

Scott has compared Chinese drones to spy balloons that could "gather data or carry harmful payloads" across America, posing risks to military bases, critical infrastructure and natural resources.

Drones made by DJI dominate the US market

DJI, named in the bill, is the best-known Chinese drone brand. The company has the lion's share of the global drone market and is a dominant player in the U.S. market. Its drones have been used by first responders to locate disaster victims, mappers to survey roads and utility lines, mosquito control officers to reach swarms of larvae, and filmmakers to capture aerial footage.

Founded in 2006 and based in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, DJI makes devices that are known for their affordability and high performance. They are even used on the battlefield in Ukraine by both sides, even though DJI does not make military drones.

As U.S.-China relations soured, DJI drones have come under scrutiny. The U.S. government has put the company on several blacklists citing human rights concerns as well as alleged links to the Chinese military. DJI has denied any wrongdoing, and is suing the Pentagon over the designation that it is a Chinese military company.

U.S. customs officials have also blocked some DJI shipments over concerns that the products might have been made with forced labor. DJI has called it "a customs-related misunderstanding."

DJI has also expressed concern about the review of Chinese drones included in the defense bill., saying it doesn't allow the company to defend itself. It called for "a fair right of reply to any findings."

Users say Chinese drones can't be easily replaced

Russell Hedrick, a North Carolina farmer, flies drones to spray fertilizers on his corn, bean and wheat fields at a fraction of what it would cost him to use a conventional ground spreader. A drone spreader costs \$35,000, while a ground sprayer would cost \$250,000, he said.

As a volunteer rescuer, Hedrick uses thermal drones to search for people trapped by mudslides and cargo drones to send water and baby formula to those who are stranded — something he did after Hurricane Helene.

"I am not going to say I won't love to have U.S. drones, but I don't see the American drones as anywhere close to the DJI drones in terms of reliability, ease of use, and just the user-friendly software," Hedrick said. "The U.S. drones are not as good as DJI ones but cost twice as much."

At the Interior Department, the ban on foreign-made drones has resulted in a "loss of opportunities to collect data on landscape, natural and cultural resources, wildlife and infrastructure," according to a September report by the Government Accountability Office.

Michael Robbins, president and chief executive officer of AUVSI, an advocacy group for unmanned vehicles such as drones, argues against an immediate ban. Instead, the group has urged the government to support the domestic drone-making industry through investment so it can catch up with its Chinese competitors in both capability and cost.

## **New York City police apprehend suspect in the death of a woman found on fire in a subway car**

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

New York City police announced Sunday they have in custody a "person of interest" in the early morning death of a woman who they believe may have fallen asleep on a stationary subway train before being intentionally lit on fire by a man she didn't know.

Transit police apprehended the suspect after receiving a report from three high school students who had recognized the man. They had seen images of the suspect taken from surveillance and police body cam video and widely distributed by police.

"New Yorkers came through again," said New York City Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch, who described the case as "one of the most depraved crimes one person could possibly commit against another human being."

Tisch said the suspect and the woman, both of whom have not been identified, were riding a subway train without any interaction between them to the end of the line in Brooklyn at around 7:30 a.m.

After the train came to a stop, surveillance video from the subway car showed the man "calmly" walk up to the victim, who was seated motionless, possibly sleeping, and set her clothing on fire with what appeared to be a lighter. The woman's clothing then "became fully engulfed in a matter of seconds," Tisch said.

Police do not believe the two knew one another.

Officers on a routine patrol at the Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue subway station smelled and saw smoke and discovered the woman on fire, standing in the middle of the subway car. After the fire was extinguished, emergency medical personnel declared the woman dead at the scene.

Unbeknownst to the officers, the suspect had remained at the scene and was seated on a bench on the subway platform, just outside the train car, Tisch said. Body cameras worn by the officers caught a "very

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 75 of 78

clear, detailed look" at the suspect and those images were publicly disseminated.

After later receiving a 911 call from the teenagers, other transit officers identified the man on another subway train and radioed ahead to the next station, where more officers kept the train doors closed, searched each car and ultimately apprehended him without incident, said Chief of Transit Joseph Gulotta. The man had a lighter in his pocket when he was taken into custody, Tisch said.

Gulotta said the investigation was continuing, including whether the woman was homeless and the background of the suspect.

The case marked the second fatality on a New York subway Sunday.

At 12:35 a.m., police responded to an emergency call for an assault in progress at the 61st Street-Woodside Station in Queens and found a 37-year-old man with a stab wound to his torso and a 26-year-old man with multiple slashes throughout his body. The older man was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital while the younger man was in stable condition, police said.

An investigation was continuing.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul this year has sent New York National Guard members to the city's subway system to help police conduct random searches of riders' bags for weapons following a series of high-profile crimes on city trains. Hochul recently deployed additional members to help patrol during the holiday season.

About a year ago, Hochul supported funding to install video cameras on every train car in the New York subway system, said Michael Kemper, chief security officer for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. He and other officials on Sunday credited the cameras with helping to track down the suspect so quickly.

## **Many Americans have come to rely on Chinese-made drones. Now lawmakers want to ban them**

By DIDI TANG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russell Hedrick, a North Carolina farmer, flies drones to spray fertilizers on his corn, soybean and wheat fields at a fraction of what it would cost him to use a conventional ground spreader.

As a volunteer rescuer, Hedrick uses thermal drones to search for people trapped by mudslides and cargo drones to send water and baby formula to those who are stranded — something he did after Hurricane Helene.

Now he is fretting that one day he will have to ground his drone fleet. Most commercial drones sold in the United States, including those used by Hedrick, are made in China. They have become a target of U.S. lawmakers, who see the dominance of Chinese drones not only as an espionage threat but as a commercial threat because they make it nearly impossible for American manufacturers to compete.

It's another front in the U.S.-China economic and technological competition that's likely to intensify with the return to the White House in January of Republican Donald Trump, who has promised to get tough on China.

Washington has already placed restrictions on Chinese telecommunications companies and imposed high tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles as the U.S. competes with China in semiconductors, artificial intelligence and other areas.

A defense bill that Congress passed on Dec. 18 includes a clause to stop two Chinese companies from selling new drones in the U.S. if a review finds they pose "an unacceptable risk" to American national security. Congress has banned federal agencies from acquiring Chinese drones, with some exceptions, and several states have barred publicly funded programs from using or procuring Chinese drones.

A broader ban is worrisome for Americans for whom drones have become a part of their lives and work. It could disrupt wide-ranging operations, from law enforcement to mapping and filmmaking that drone operators say are viable because of the low cost and high performance of the Chinese drones. American-made drones just aren't comparable, they say.

American reliance on Chinese-made drones

In Hickory, North Carolina, Hedrick began flying Chinese-made drones in 2019 to fertilize crops and monitor crop health. A drone spreader costs \$35,000, while a conventional ground sprayer would set him



# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 76 of 78

back \$250,000, he said.

"With the drone efficiency, we are able to do things we were never able to do before: to apply fertilizer but use less, which is good for American consumers," Hedrick said.

But it's precisely that reliance on Chinese drones that worries U.S. lawmakers.

"It is strategically irresponsible to allow Communist China to be our drone factory," argued Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., who has been tapped by Trump to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. She led earlier House efforts to ban new Chinese drones.

It was the role of drones in everyday life that drove Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., to get Congress to restrict the purchase of Chinese drones by federal agencies. Those restrictions were included in a defense bill that Democratic President Joe Biden signed last year.

Scott has compared Chinese drones to spy balloons that could "gather data or carry harmful payloads" across America, posing risks to military bases, critical infrastructure and natural resources.

Michael Robbins, president and chief executive officer of AUVSI, an advocacy group for unmanned vehicles such as drones, opposes an immediate ban. Instead, his group has urged the government to support the U.S. drone-making industry through investment so it can catch up with its Chinese competitors in both capability and cost.

He applauds Congress for addressing some of the issues in the 2025 defense budget, including promoting investment in autonomous technology and working to develop a secure supply chain for U.S. drone manufacturing.

That vulnerability was clear earlier this year when Beijing sanctioned the U.S. drone maker Skydio, forcing it to ration its batteries sourced from China.

"This is an attempt to eliminate the leading American drone company and deepen the world's dependence on Chinese drone suppliers," wrote Adam Bry, chief executive officer of Skydio.

Citing security interests, China has restricted exports to the U.S. of drone parts, including motors, flight controllers and imaging equipment.

John Goodson, CEO of Darkhive, a San Antonio-based drone maker, said a ban would not stop Chinese drone makers from selling their products elsewhere in the world but could hurt U.S. drone companies that rely on China for parts.

For now, it remains unrealistic to ban Chinese drones when there are few comparable products, said Faine Greenwood, a drone enthusiast who writes extensively about drones. "If we ban the Chinese drones, we knock out many amazing things we do."

The dominant Chinese player

The best-known Chinese drones are those by DJI Technology Co., a company founded in 2006 and based in the southern city of Shenzhen. It's named in the defense spending bill, along with another Chinese company, Autel Robotics.

DJI has the lion's share of the global drone market and is the dominant player in the U.S. market. Its devices are known for their affordability and high performance. They are even used on the battlefield in Ukraine by both sides, even though DJI does not make military drones.

DJI's drones have been used by first responders to locate disaster victims, mappers to survey roads and utility lines, mosquito control officers to reach swarms of larvae, and filmmakers to capture aerial footage. Police use them to help prevent crime and find missing people.

Hedrick, the North Carolina farmer, mobilized drone search efforts as a volunteer after Helene hit. On the first night, he and his teammates located 150 stranded people. When they could not be immediately rescued, Hedrick said his team used DJI cargo drones to send in supplies.

"I am not going to say I won't love to have U.S. drones, but I don't see the American drones as anywhere close to the DJI drones in terms of reliability, ease of use, and just the user-friendly software," Hedrick said. "The U.S. drones are not as good as the DJI ones but cost twice as much."

But as U.S.-China relations have soured, DJI drones have come under scrutiny. The U.S. government has put the company on several blacklists, saying it violates human rights by supplying drones to Chinese police to surveil members of the ethnic Uyghur minority, and alleging links to the Chinese military.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 77 of 78

DJI has denied wrongdoing and is suing the Pentagon over the designation that it is a Chinese military company. U.S. customs officials also have blocked some DJI shipments over concerns that the products might have been made with forced labor. DJI has called it "a customs-related misunderstanding."

As for the defense bill, DIJ said it contains no provision that would allow the company to defend itself. "We call on a relevant technical intelligence agency to undertake an audit of our products, and we ask for a fair right of reply to any findings," DJI said.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said China opposes what it calls the politicization of trade.

"The Chinese government firmly supports Chinese companies in carrying out international trade and cooperation in drones for civilian use, and opposes certain countries' frequent illegal sanctions on Chinese companies and individuals on the grounds of so-called national security," Liu Pengyu, the embassy spokesman, said in a statement.

A lack of alternatives

Several states have already restricted the use of Chinese drones. In Tennessee, public agencies, including police and fire departments, are no longer allowed to purchase DJI drones.

That caused a headache for Capt. Chris Lowe of the Kingsport Fire Department. After his department lost a DJI Mavic Pro drone, he was quoted \$5,000 for a replacement from an approved list of drones, when another DJI Mavic Pro would cost \$1,000 to \$1,500.

"Basically it would be a DJI clone but doesn't have all the capabilities," Lowe said of the alternative. Without any state assistance, he said he would either forgo a new drone or tighten the belt in equipment maintenance elsewhere. He said the department has used drones to scope out wildfires, chemical leaks and disaster scenes and to search for missing people. "It's about life and death," he said.

In Wimberley, Texas, Gene Robinson has used high-resolution drone images to analyze differences in vegetation to discover buried bodies. He said he helped police find a victim's buried arm, making prosecution possible. Robinson doesn't think there's a viable alternative to the DJI drone he uses.

He said his project at Texas State University's Forensic Anthropology Center would be "deader than a doornail" if there's a national ban on Chinese-made drones.

At the Interior Department, the policy against foreign-made drones has hamstrung its drone operations, resulting in the "loss of opportunities to collect data on landscape, natural and cultural resources, wildlife and infrastructure," according to a September report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Florida's state ban

In Florida, law enforcement officers last year complained to the state senate that a ban on state-funded agencies operating Chinese-made drones left them with costlier aircraft that didn't perform as well. That prompted state lawmakers to appropriate \$25 million to help government-run drone programs acquire compliant models.

Christopher Todd, executive director of the not-for-profit group Airborne International Response Team, described the ban and the subsequent switch as "an absolute mess."

"Lawmakers failed to understand that this issue is far more complicated than simply changing from one drone to another," he said. "You need to learn a new user interface with new shortcuts and new protocols, and then you need to change all of the software and accessories and re-examine all of your network configurations to accommodate the technology change."

But the financial assistance as well as training programs, such as the one provided by his group, made the transition possible, he said.

More than 90% of law enforcement agencies in Florida used DJI drones in 2022, and the share plummeted to about 14% after the ban, according to Todd's group.

In Orange County, where Orlando is located, the sheriff's office said it spent nearly \$580,000 to replace 18 noncompliant drones last year and received nearly \$400,000 in reimbursements from the state.

"The transition has gone well and has simultaneously increased our drone fleet with better capabilities and technology," the sheriff's office said.

# Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 182 ~ 78 of 78

## Today in History: December 24 World War I 'Christmas truce' begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 24, the 359th day of 2024. There are seven days left in the year. This is Christmas Eve.

Today in history:

On Dec. 24, 1914, during World War I, impromptu Christmas truces began to take hold along parts of the Western Front between British and German soldiers.

Also on this date:

In 1814, the United States and Britain signed the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812 following ratification by both the British Parliament and the U.S. Senate.

In 1851, fire devastated the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., destroying about 35,000 volumes (about two-thirds of the library's collection).

In 1865, several veterans of the Confederate Army formed a private social club in Pulaski, Tennessee, that was the original version of the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1913, 73 people, most of them children, died in a crush of panic after a false cry of "Fire!" during a Christmas party for striking miners and their families at the Italian Hall in Calumet, Michigan.

In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush pardoned former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and five others in the Iran-Contra scandal.

In 2013, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II granted a posthumous pardon to code-breaker Alan Turing, who was criminally convicted of homosexual behavior in the 1950s.

Today's Birthdays: Immunologist Dr. Anthony Fauci is 84. Filmmaker Lee Daniels is 65. Basketball Hall of Fame coach Jay Wright is 63. Singer Ricky Martin is 53. Author Stephenie Meyer is 51. TV host Ryan Seacrest is 50. Rock singer Louis Tomlinson (One Direction) is 33. NFL wide receiver Davante Adams is 32.