

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Wednesday, Dec. 25

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

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.

## 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.

WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT



And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them... And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.



LUKE 2:9-11

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

## Monday, Dec. 30

Senior Menu: Chicken alredo, broccoli, pineapple, breadstick.

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

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Sioux Falls Lincoln.

Boys Basketball at Westber: C at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity.

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

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
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## God Pause



Wednesday, December 25, 2024

### Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (Evangelical Lutheran Worship 631)

1 Love divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heav'n, to earth come down!  
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
all thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesus, thou art all compassion,  
pure, unbounded love thou art;  
visit us with thy salvation,  
enter ev'ry trembling heart.

2 Breathe, oh, breathe thy loving Spirit  
Into every troubled breast;  
let us all in thee inherit;  
Let us find thy promised rest.  
Take away the love of sinning;  
Alpha and Omega be;  
end of faith, as its beginning,  
set our hearts at liberty.

3 Come, Almighty, to deliver;  
let us all thy life receive;  
suddenly return, and never,  
never more thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
serve thee as thy hosts above,  
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,  
glory in thy perfect love.

4 Finish then thy new creation,  
pure and spotless let us be;  
let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee!  
Changed from glory into glory,  
till in heav'n we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love and praise!

### Devotion

This Christmas morning we are greeted with love: a "love divine, all loves excelling." The love of Christ surpasses any kind of love we can give, receive, or imagine ourselves. As the Word made flesh, Jesus takes on human life and experiences all that it means to be human: to rejoice, to weep, to suffer, to delight, to die. Yet Jesus is not limited by his humanity. As the one who is fully human and fully God, Jesus offers us unending grace beyond all human capacity.

The hymn reminds us that as we celebrate the birth of Jesus each year, we also proclaim our sure and certain hope that Jesus will receive us into God's kingdom, where we may praise God forever. We think of those who have gone before us, who have already cast their crowns at Jesus' feet and serve him with joy. Thanks be to God that each Christmas we can experience a taste of heaven's joy come down to earth, until "in heav'n we take our place." Merry Christmas!

### Prayer

"Come, Almighty, to deliver, let us all thy life receive!" Enter our hearts this Christmas. Give us the courage and joy to serve our neighbors with justice and compassion—and keep us ever mindful of your unlimited love. Amen.

Cameron B. R. Howard  
Associate Professor of Old Testament

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## January 2025 Groton Community Events

### Thursday, Jan. 2

Senior Menu: Chicke strips, tri-tators, peas and carrots, fruit, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Breakfast Pizza.  
School Lunch: Lasagna bake, garlic toast.  
School resumes  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

### Friday, Jan. 3

Senior Menu: Chili, corn bread, winter blend, oranges.  
School. Breakfast: Egg wraps.  
School Lunch: Popcorn chicken, tri taters.  
Girls Wrestling at McCook Central/Montrose (Salem), 2 p.m.

### Saturday, Jan. 4

Boys Wrestling Tournament at Webster, 10 a.m.  
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main  
Basketball Double Header hosts Redfield ((Boys Girls JV at 1 p.m.; Boys JV/ at 2 p.m.; Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

### Sunday, Jan. 5

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.  
United Methodist: Communion Sunday: Conde worship, 8:15 a.m.; Groton worship, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Time, 10:30 a.m.; Britton worship, 11:15 a.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.  
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.  
Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.;  
Pancake Sunday: 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., Groton Community Center (proceeds benefit the Historical Society's jail restoration.

### Monday, Jan. 6

Senior Menu: Beef tips on rice, mixed vegetables, fruit cocktail, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.  
School Lunch: Turkey gravy over mashed potatoes.

Boys JV/JH Wrestling at McCook Central/Montrose (Salem), 5 p.m.  
Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Groton Community Center  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

### Tuesday, Jan. 7

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, masehd potato with gravy, oriental blend, cinnamon apple sauce, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Egg omelets.  
School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce, bread sticks.  
Basketball Double Header hosts Warner ((Girls JV at 4 p.m.; Boys JV at 5:15 p.m.; Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)  
Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.  
Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center  
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

### Wednesday, Jan. 8

Senior Menu: Baked turkey crunch, Italian blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Cereal.  
School Lunch: Cheese stuffed breadsticks, marinara sauce.  
Groton Chamber Board Meeting, 6 p.m., at City Hall  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.  
Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.  
Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

### Thursday, Jan. 9

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, peaches, garlic toast.  
School Breakfast: Pancake on a stick.  
School Lunch: Sweet and sassy chicken, rice.  
Girls Basketball hosts Clark/Willow Lake (JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow)  
Groton Lions Club meeting, 6 p.m., 104 N Main

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## Friday, Jan. 10

Senior Menu: Breaded chicken on bun, oven roasted potatoes, peas and carrots, honey fruit salad.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: SOup and sandwich.

Boys Basketball at Clark (JH in Field House - 8th at 4 p.m., 7th at 5 p.m.; C at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15 p.m., varsity to follow)

Girls Wrestling at Miller, 4 p.m.

Silver Skates costumer handout, 4-7 p.m., Emmanuel Lutheran

## Saturday, Jan. 11

Boys JV Wrestling at Madison, 9 p.m.

Boys Varsity at Garretson, 9:30 a.m.

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Lyman, 10 a.m.

Basketball Double Header hosts Lennox ((Boys C/ Girls JV at 1 p.m.; Boys JV/Girls C at 2:15 p.m.; Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

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

## Sunday, Jan. 12

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m. (Milestones 6th graders and sophomores), Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:15 a.m.; Groton worship, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Time, 10:30 a.m.; Britton worship, 11:15 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.;

## Monday, Jan. 13

Senior Menu: Chicken and rice casserole, mixed vegetables, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Corn dog, baked beans.

Boys JH/JV hosting Invitational Tournament, 5 p.m.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

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

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

United Methodist: PEOPLE Meeting (outside group), 7 p.m.

## Tuesday, Jan. 14

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, carrots, mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Breakfast: Chicken strips, fries.

JH Basketball hosts Roncalli (7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.)

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

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Council meeting, 6 p.m.

## Wednesday, Jan. 15

Senior Menu: Vegetable soup, ham salad sandwich, peaches, cookie.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Cheese quesadilla, corn.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.

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

Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

## Thursday, Jan. 16

Senior Menu: Lasagna rotini bake, salad with dressing, baked apples, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: BBQ Chicken sandwich, puzzle tots.

Basketball Double Header at Tiospa Zina (Girls JV 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

Triangular Wrestling at Groton Area with Redfield and Webster, 6 p.m.

## Friday, Jan. 17

Senior Menu: Oven baked chicken, sweet potato, carpri blend, pineapple, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast cookie.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Harrisburg, 2 p.m.

Boys JH Basketball hosts Milbank, 7th at 5 p.m., 8th at 6 p.m.

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## Saturday, Jan. 18

Girls Basketball at the Hanson Classic at the Corn Palace, Mitchell

Boys Basketball at Dakota Valley

Girls and Boys Varsity Wrestling and JV./JH Wrestling at Gettysburg, 10 a.m.

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

## Sunday, Jan. 19

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:15 a.m.; Groton worship, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Time, 10:30 a.m.; Britton worship, 11:15 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.;

## Monday, Jan. 20

MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.

Boys JV/JH Wrestling at Redfield, 5:30 p.m.

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

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

## Tuesday, Jan. 21

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

School Breakfast: Waffles.

School Lunch: Hot dots, tater tots.

Boys JH Basketball hosts Northwestern, 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.

GIrls Basketball hosts Northwestern (JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow)

Boys Wrestling Tri-angular at Clark with Clark/Willow Lake and Hamlin, 6 p.m.

Boys JH Invitational Wrestling at Simmons Middle School, 4 p.m.

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

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

## Wednesday, Jan. 22

Senior Menu: Roast beef, masehed potatoes with gravy, corn, fruit cocktail, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Chicken Lo Mein, mixed vegetables.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

## Thursday, Jan. 23

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, creamy noodles, normandy blend, pinapple, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Beef sticks, baby bakers.

Basketball Double Header at Milbank (Boys C/ Girls JV at 4 p.m.; Boys JV/Girls C at 5:15 p.m.; Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

## Friday, Jan. 24

Senior Menu: Beef stew, Waldorf salad, peas, whole wheat bread.

HOSA Winter Formal, GHS Gym

No School (Staff Development Day)

Boys JH Basketball hosts Redfield, 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.

Girls Wrestling at Pierre, 4 p.m.

Boys Varsity Wrestling hosts Deuel, 6 p.m.

## Saturday, Jan. 25

HOSA Winter Formal, GHS Gym

Girls and Boys Varsity Wrestling at Arlington, 10 a.m.

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

United Methodist: PEO (outside group), 1:30 p.m.

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## Sunday, Jan. 26

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; annual meeting; no Sunday School; Choir, 6 p.m.

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Groton Community Center

Carnival of Silver Skates, 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:15 a.m.; Groton worship, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Time, 10:30 a.m.; Britton worship, 11:15 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.;

## Monday, Jan. 27

Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, mixed vegetables, vanilla pudding with oranges, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.

School Lunch: Chicken patty, tiny whole potatoes.

Boys JH Wrestling at Ipswich, 6 p.m.

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

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

## Tuesday, Jan. 28

Senior Menu: Parmesean chicken, baked potato, peaches, California blend, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Tacos.

Girls Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli (JV at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity)

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

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center  
United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

## Wednesday, Jan. 29

Senior Menu: Breaded cod, rice pilaf, tomato spoon salad, blushing pears, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Chicken pasta, cooked broccoli.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

## Thursday, Jan. 30

Senior Menu: Goulash, corn, pineapple, breadstick.

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.

Boys JH Basketball hosts Webster in the GHS Gym, 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.

Girls Basektabl hosts Webster (C-5 p.m., JV-6:15, varsity to follow)

## Friday, Jan. 31

Senior Menu: Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, creamed peas, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

Groton Quad Wrestling, boys and girls, 6 p.m.

## Conde National League

**Dec. 23 Team Standings:** Giants 11, Braves 8, Cubs 5, Pirates 5, Mets 5, Stooges 2

**Men's High Games:** Dalton Locke 192, Chad Furney 176, Keith Baker 155

**Men's High Series:** Chad Furney 469, Dalton Locke 462, Skip Kettering 401

**Women's High Games:** Joyce Walter 189, Vickie Kramp 175, Nancy Radke 158

**Women's High Series:** Joyce Walter 475, Vickie Kramp 437, Nancy Radke 437, Suzi Easthouse 402

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

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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **Pipeline owner joins lawsuit over Dakota Access Pipeline**

**BY: MARY STEURER - DECEMBER 24, 2024 2:48 PM**

The owner of the Dakota Access Pipeline last week became the latest party to join the defense in the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's new lawsuit against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The lawsuit, filed in October, accuses the Army Corps of illegally allowing the Dakota Access Pipeline to operate without an easement, an environmental impact study or robust emergency spill response plans. The tribe wants a federal court to order that the pipeline be shut down.

Dakota Access LLC asked to join the lawsuit to protect its private business interests in the pipeline's operation. Dakota Access spent billions developing the pipeline and has standing contracts requiring DAPL to continue transporting oil, the company wrote in a brief filed in court.

Since 2017, the more than 1,000-mile pipeline — also known as DAPL — has safely transported more than 1.4 billion barrels of oil, the company wrote.

"Dakota Access remains willing to consider other mitigation measures that the Corps or this Court believe would be appropriate," the company said.

U.S. District Court Judge James Boasberg approved Dakota Access' request to join the suit.

In the brief, the company also accuses the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's legal challenge of "rehashing old ground." The tribe previously sued the Army Corps over the pipeline in 2016, seeking to stop DAPL before it finished construction.

That case was also assigned to Boasberg. Boasberg in a 2020 concluded that the Army Corps had erred in granting the pipeline an easement to pass underneath Lake Oahe without a full environmental impact study, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. He revoked the easement and instructed the Army Corps of Engineers to conduct the study, which is still in the works.

Boasberg ordered the pipeline to be drained of oil until the environmental review was completed, though that demand was ultimately overturned by an appellate court.

The higher court found that shutting down the pipeline was not warranted because the tribe at the time did not have enough evidence that DAPL posed an immediate threat of irreparable harm.

In its latest suit, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe seeks to present new evidence raising questions about the pipeline's construction under Lake Oahe.

Standing Rock has long opposed the pipeline, saying it violates the tribe's sovereignty, has damaged sacred cultural sites and poses a pollution threat to the tribe's water supply.

The Army Corps of Engineers regulates a section of the pipeline that passes underneath Lake Oahe, a reservoir on the Missouri River, less than a half-mile upstream from the Standing Rock Reservation.

"The Corps has failed to act and failed to protect the tribe," Standing Rock Chairwoman Janet Alkire said in an October press conference announcing the lawsuit.

The pipeline carries oil from northwest North Dakota to southwest Illinois. Its path includes unceded land recognized as belonging to the Sioux Nation under an 1851 treaty with the U.S. government.

North Dakota and 13 other states have also intervened in the case on the side of the Army Corps of Engineers.

The 13 states that joined the lawsuit are Iowa, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and West Virginia.

The states have argued shutting down DAPL would disrupt the regional economy, violate state sovereignty, and make road and rail transit more dangerous.

The pipeline has provided tens of millions of dollars in tax revenue to North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa

and Illinois.

*Mary Steurer is a reporter based in Bismarck for the North Dakota Monitor. A native of St. Louis, Steurer previously worked as the local government reporter for the Casper Star-Tribune newspaper in Wyoming.*

## Lincoln County commissioners push back decision on carbon pipeline rules

**Opponents dislike all four options, ask officials to start from scratch**

**BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 24, 2024 3:28 PM**

CANTON — Commissioners in South Dakota's fastest-growing county punted on four carbon dioxide pipeline ordinances on Christmas Eve, opting to let their planning staff and two new commissioners start from scratch in the new year.

The Lincoln County Commission has wrestled with its approach to carbon pipelines for about two years. Several counties in South Dakota have passed ordinances restricting underground carbon pipelines so strictly that the company proposing a carbon capture pipeline through South Dakota, Summit Carbon Solutions, says it would be impossible to fully comply with all the local requirements and still build the project. The company has also applied for a state permit, which is under review.

The project is a \$9 billion pipeline to carry pressurized carbon dioxide from ethanol plants in Iowa, South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska to an underground sequestration site in North Dakota. The company hopes to cash in on federal tax credits available for activities meant to mitigate the impact of climate change, in this case by keeping some of the heat-trapping gases produced in the ethanol production process from reaching the atmosphere.

Lincoln County is not one of the counties with stricter rules for carbon pipelines than Summit would prefer, though the controversial project has animated discussions about the issue and likely impacted the results of the most recent county commission elections.

Two commissioners, Jim Jibben and Mike Poppens, lost their primary elections to anti-pipeline candidates, one of whom appeared in the commission chambers Tuesday to voice her concerns about the four ordinances up for possible passage.

"I'm opposed to all of them," said incoming commissioner Betty Otten, who also accused the current commission of being too cozy with Summit to be trusted to make decisions on the matter.

### Back to the drawing board

Lincoln County commissioners opted last year to study the options for regulation. An ad-hoc study committee offered suggestions to the planning commission, which held public hearings on the options following the November election.

A state law dubbed the "landowner bill of rights" by its sponsors was on the November general election ballot thanks to a petition drive by pipeline opponents who felt it didn't do enough for landowners to deserve that branding. The referred law failed to earn support from voters, with nearly 60% saying no.

The four ordinances up for possible passage on Tuesday were the result of the planning work and public hearings, Planning Director Toby Brown told the commission. Commissioners were meant to pick one, as each would set a different set of guidelines and conflict with one another if passed together.

The first and second options would have put planners in charge of deciding if a carbon pipeline project would qualify as a permitted land use. The planning commission did not recommend commissioners pass those.

The third would have required carbon pipeline companies to seek conditional use permits, which would open up a public hearing and the chance for opponents to challenge the county commission in court if its members voted to give Summit a permit.

The fourth would have barred pipelines in agricultural areas, but allowed them in areas zoned as industrial.

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With that option, the company could ask the commission to rezone the entire narrow strip of land under which the pipeline would run as industrial land. Voters would be able to refer the commission's decision on the rezone to a public vote.

## Vote faces pushback

Every Lincoln County resident to offer public comment on the ordinances Tuesday asked the commission to send the ordinances back to the planning commission, but not before telling them they'd rather not talk about them until next year.

"This is too important, it's been too long, and I just think it's prudent that we have the new commission in there," said Scott Montgomery of Fairview, echoing the words of half a dozen others in the commission chambers.

Lincoln County's failure to pass an ordinance is at least partially the result of actions one commissioner took before debate started. Poppens took a deal with Summit for access to his own property, and he's recused himself from every debate and vote on pipeline regulations.

On Tuesday, though, Poppens did cast a vote, and it was to keep the pipeline discussion on the agenda. Commissioner Tiffani Landeen had asked for a vote to table the discussion until January, when Poppens and Jibben will be replaced by the candidates who ousted them in the June primary. Landeen said the timing of the discussion and the weight of the issue for citizens combined to convince her that debate should happen after the new commission is seated.

Poppens, in his last vote before leaving the body, said no.

"Residents of the county, my family personally, we are impacted. So I'm not going to discuss the ordinance, but I am against tabling it. It's an important issue," Poppens said.

Also opposed to tabling were Jibben and Joel Arends, who pushed his fellow commissioners to pass an ordinance, ideally one with a 500-foot setback required between the pipeline and homes, schools and businesses. Members of the public had taken time out of their holiday week to offer their opinions, he said, so they ought to be able to do that.

He also said that the county has already delayed making a decision, and that leaving it up to the next commission would be a dereliction of duty.

"We're in some kind of circular doom loop here," Arends said. "We just have to put our feet down and say 'we're elected to office, we're accountable, this is what it's going to be.'"

But Commissioner Jim Schmidt said voting on the ordinances during a day many might be unable to attend the meeting wouldn't sit well with him.

"Is it an encumbrance for you to come back? Maybe. I'm sorry for that, but I think there's a lot more that we would hear from when it's not Christmas Eve," Schmidt said.

After deciding to take testimony and hearing every citizen who spoke say they disliked all four ordinances, commissioners took their final vote of 2024.

Landeen made the motion to send the ordinances back to the planning commission, on which she serves as the commission's representative.

No one in the room liked the ideas on offer, said Landeen, a Sioux Falls attorney and former Turner County state's attorney, whose own take on the ordinances was that they were vague and unworkable. The last option might seem the most palatable to opponents, as it offers the chance to vote down the commission's choice. But even there, she said, she doesn't like the idea of having "this weird strip" of light industrial land running through the county for no reason but to make a pipeline possible.

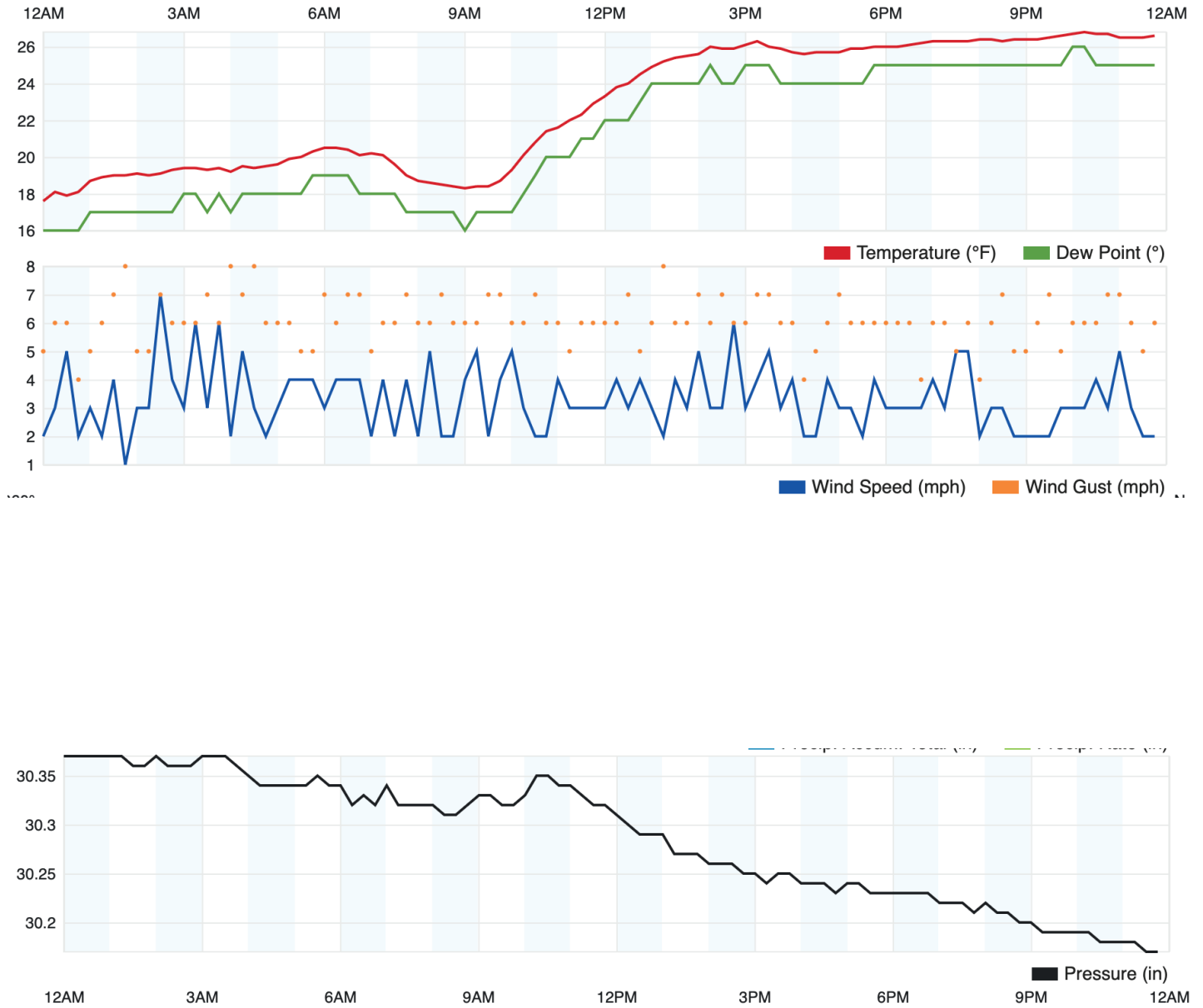
"The language of these ordinances doesn't do what anybody needs them to do," Landeen said.

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

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

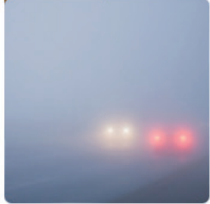


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Dense...

**Christmas Day**



**High: 34 °F**

Dense  
Freezing Fog

**Tonight**



**Low: 26 °F**

Mostly Cloudy

**Thursday**



**High: 34 °F**

Mostly Cloudy

**Thursday  
Night**



**Low: 29 °F**

Mostly Cloudy

**Friday**



**High: 38 °F**

Patchy Fog  
then Slight  
Chance Rain

**NOAA** **NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE**

*NWS Aberdeen, South Dakota  
Wednesday, December 25th, 2024  
2:32 PM*

Day	Highs	Lows	Winds
<b>Wednesday</b>	30-46°		South at 15 mph Gusts to 25 mph
<b>Wednesday Night</b>		23-28°	<u>Foggy conditions</u> returning
<b>Thursday</b>	33-45°		Southeast at 5-10 mph Gusts to 15 mph

If you look under the tree, you'll see our Christmas gift to you this year - a forecast! Foggy conditions will remain this morning, and a Dense Fog Advisory is in effect until noon today. Fog may dissipate this afternoon, but will likely return tonight. Temperatures will be in the 30s to 40s today and Thursday.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 27 °F at 10:11 PM

Low Temp: 18 °F at 12:00 AM

Wind: 9 mph at 4:18 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 1907

Record Low: -25 in 1996

Average High: 26

Average Low: 5

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.48

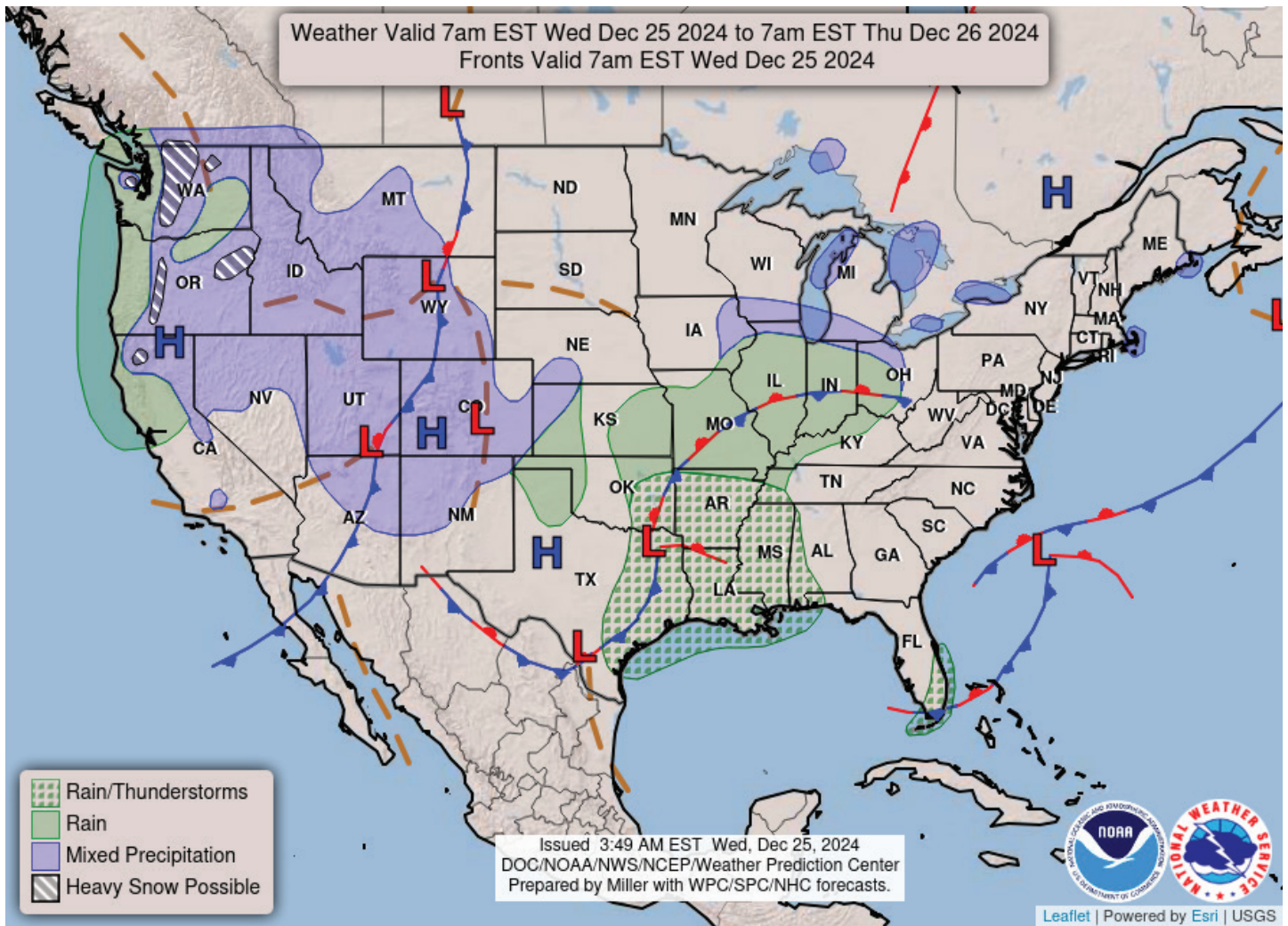
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.69

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:56:18 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:38 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 25, 1983: Winds of 20 to 30 mph, with occasional higher gusts, combined with very light falling snow and loose surface snow to cause near-blizzard conditions and dangerously low wind chills in most of South Dakota, as well as in southwest and west-central Minnesota, from the early evening of the 23rd into Christmas morning. Visibilities were frequently near zero, and four- to five-foot drifts closed the vast majority of roads, making travel impossible. Hundreds of motorists became stranded during the evenings of December 23rd and 24th. In Minnesota, many holiday travelers heading west from Minneapolis and St. Paul drove to central Minnesota before conditions became too severe to continue. Winds and severe cold in the western part of Minnesota caused several power outages as well as the loss of livestock.

In South Dakota, at least 70 vehicles were stalled at one point over a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 90 between Kennebec and Reliance in Lyman County. The Pierre Airport in Hughes County was closed twice on the 23rd as visibility was reduced to zero. Most flights were canceled at Sioux Falls Airport in Minnehaha County, stranding numerous holiday travelers. Sub-zero temperatures, combined with gusts of over 60 mph, produced wind chill indices in the 60 to 100 below zero range. Several cases of frostbite were reported, propane gas solidified, fuel jelled, and water pipes and tanks froze as a result of the extreme cold. In Minnehaha County at Wall Lake, electrical outages of 12 hours were experienced from power lines snapping as a result of the cold and winds.

1776: Thomas Jefferson noted that the first winter snow fell on December 20th, but did not last on the ground one day. Temperatures dropped to 30 degrees or colder on Christmas Day. That night, 22 inches of snow fell. From the 25th of December until March 6, 10 snow covered the ground, and some of them were deep. The first rain came on the 9th of March. In Frederick County, two feet of snow was recorded.

1872: Since records began back in 1887, Columbia, South Carolina, only a trace of snow has been reported on Christmas Day. Before records, 13-hour sleet, and snowstorm occurred in Columbia and surrounding areas. Credit goes to Cary Mock, a USC geography professor who specializes in historical weather research. Here is a link to the newspaper article.

1966 - A white Christmas was enjoyed by residents from North Carolina to New England in the wake of a major snowstorm. Even coastal Virginia was white. (David Ludlum)

1974: Cyclone Tracy was a small but powerful tropical storm that devastated the city of Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, from December 24-26th, 1974. The storm was the second smallest tropical cyclone on record, in terms of gale-force wind diameter, behind Tropical Storm Marco in 2008.

1980 - It was the coldest Christmas Day of modern record in the northeastern U.S. Temperatures as cold as 36 degrees below zero were reported in New York State, and as the sharp cold front swept south-eastward the temperature at Boston MA plunged from 34 degrees to seven degrees below zero during the day. (David Ludlum)

1983 - It was the coldest Christmas Day of modern record for the central and eastern U.S. More than 125 cities reported record low temperatures for the date, and thirty-four of those cities reported all-time records for the month of December. The temperature plunged to one degree below zero at Huntsville AL, and dipped to 14 degrees at Galveston TX. Snow covered the ground from the Pacific Northwest through much of the Great Plains Region to the Northern Appalachians. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - Residents of Tucson, AZ, awoke to a white Christmas for the first time in forty-seven years of records, as a winter storm blanketed the area with up to four inches of snow. While heavy rain inundated Arkansas, freezing rain was reported from northwest Texas to southwestern Missouri, with an inch of ice reported at Harrison AR. Unseasonably mild weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Seven cities reported record high temperatures for the date. For the second day in a row McAllen TX was the hot spot in the nation with an afternoon high of 91 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A massive winter storm made for a very white Christmas in the western U.S. Las Vegas, NV, reported snow on the ground for the first time of record. Periods of snow over a five day period left several feet of new snow on the ground of ski areas in Colorado, with 68 inches reported at Wolf Creek Pass. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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1989 - It was a record cold Christmas Day for parts of the southeastern U.S. Morning lows of zero degrees at Wilmington, NC, and five degrees below zero at Jacksonville NC established all-time records for those two locations. Miami Beach FL equalled a December record established the previous morning with a low of 33 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2002: A major snowstorm moved up the east coast on Christmas Day, 2002. Widespread snowfalls of a foot or more occurred across much of central New York and northeast Pennsylvania, with amounts as high as 30 inches reported over the northwest slopes of the Catskills.

2003 - Heavy rains affected areas of southern California that were just recently ravaged by wildfires in October. The downpour produced flash flooding that resulted in mudslides, taking the lives of 15 people at area campgrounds in San Bernardino (AFP).

2004 - Snow fell on Christmas Day in Deep South Texas. Snow totaled 4.4 inches in Corpus Christi, making it the second White Christmas ever. Farther north, Victoria had their first white Christmas on record when 12.5 inches of snow fell.

2006 - Severe thunderstorms produced four tornadoes in Florida. Columbia, Pasco, Lake and Volusia counties were hardest-hit, including the Daytona Beach area. A tornado generated considerable damage on the campus of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, delaying the start of the spring semester (Orlando Business Journal).

2010 - Up to 32 inches of snow and blizzard conditions affected parts of the eastern U.S. on December 25th-27th. A state of emergency was declared in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine. In New York City, up to 24.5 inches of snow fell, effectively shutting down rail lines, major airports, and bus services. Thousands of flights were cancelled and stranded subway riders were forced to spend a night in unheated train cars. One person was reported killed in Maine due to the weather conditions. (NCDC)





## Joseph's Dream

"...Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. 'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

'Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means "God is with us."'

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife."

When the Lord calls us to do His work, and we are faithful and obedient to Him, great things happen!

Prayer: Father, when You call us to do Your work in Your world, may we accept the challenge, knowing that great things will happen that will bless us and others, and Your Name glorified. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 1:18-24 For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

*We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him*

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.24.24

11 14 38 45 46 3

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$1,150,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 2

DRAW: Mins 27 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 15 Hrs 17 Mins

DRAW: 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.24.24

16 22 24 43 47 11

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 15 Hrs 32 Mins

DRAW: 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.21.24

9 22 28 30 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$172,000**

NEXT 15 Hrs 32 Mins

DRAW: 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.23.24

16 49 62 63 68 10

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 1 Mins 26

DRAW: 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 16 Hrs 1 Mins 26

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## Upcoming Groton Events

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

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

### **Becoming a resident of South Dakota is easy. Some say too easy**

By JACK DURA Associated Press

All you have to do to become a South Dakota resident is spend one night.

Stay in a campground or hotel and then stop by one of the businesses that specialize in helping people become South Dakotans, and they'll help you do the paperwork to gain residency in a state with no income tax and relatively cheap vehicle registration.

The system brings in extra government revenue through vehicle fees and offers refuge to full-time travelers who wouldn't otherwise have a permanent address or a place to vote.

And that's the problem. State leaders are at a stalemate between those who say people who don't really live in South Dakota shouldn't be allowed to vote in local elections and those who say efforts to impose a longer residency requirement for voting violate the principle that everyone gets to vote.

And at least one state has gotten wind that its residents might be avoiding high income taxes with easy South Dakota residency and is investigating.

Catering to the nomadic lifestyle

Easy South Dakota residency for nomads has become an enterprising opportunity for businesses such as RV parks and mail forwarders.

"That's the primary concept here, is the people that have given up their sticks and bricks and now are on wheel estate, we call it, and they're full-time traveling," said Dane Goetz, owner of the Spearfish-based South Dakota Residency Center, which caters to full-time travelers. "They need a place to call home, and we provide that address for them to do that, and they are just perpetually on the move."

Goetz estimated more than 30,000 people are full-time traveler residents of South Dakota, but the actual number is unclear. The state Department of Public Safety, which handles driver licensing, says it doesn't track the number of full-time traveler applications.

Officials of the South Dakota Secretary of State's Office did not respond to emailed questions or a phone message seeking the state's tally of full-time travelers registered to vote. The office is not responsible for enforcing residency requirements, Division of Elections Director Rachel Soulek said.

Victor Robledo, his wife and their five kids hit the road a decade ago in a 28-foot (8.5-meter) motorhome to seek adventure and ease their high cost of living in Southern California. They found South Dakota to be an opportunity to save money, receive mail and "take a residency in a state that really nurtures us," he said. They filed for residency in 2020.

"It was as simple as coming into the state, staying one night in one of the campgrounds, and once we do that, we bring in a receipt to the office, fill out some paperwork, change our licenses. I mean, really, you can blow through there — gosh, 48 hours," Robledo said.

Residency rules spark election concerns

Residency becomes thorny around voting. Some opponents don't want people who don't physically live in South Dakota to vote in its elections.

"I don't want to deny somebody their right to vote, but to think that they can vote in a school board election or a legislative election or a county election when they're not part of the community, I'm troubled by that," said Democratic Rep. Linda Duba, who cited 10,000 people or roughly 40% of her Sioux Falls constituents being essentially mailbox residents. She likes to knock on doors and meet people but said she is unable to do "relationship politics" with travelers.

The law the Republican-controlled Legislature passed in 2023 added requirements for voter registration, including 30 days of residency — which don't have to be consecutive — and having "an actual fixed permanent dwelling, establishment, or any other abode to which the person returns after a period of absence."

The bill's prime sponsor, Republican Sen. Randy Deibert, told a Senate panel that citizens expressed concerns about "people coming to the state, being a resident overnight and voting (by) absentee ballot

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or another way the next day and then leaving the state.”

Those registered to vote before the new law took effect remain registered, but some who tried to register since its passage had trouble. Dozens of people recently denied voter registration contacted the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, according to the chapter’s advocacy manager, Samantha Chapman.

Durational residency requirements for voting are, in general, unconstitutional because such restrictions interfere with the interstate right to travel, said David Schultz, a Hamline University professor of political science and a professor of law at the University of St. Thomas.

“It’s kind of this parochialism, this idea of saying that only people who are really in our neighborhood, who really live in our city have a sufficient stake in it, and the courts have generally been unsympathetic to those types of arguments because, more often than not, they’re used for discriminatory purposes,” he said.

State lawmakers at odds over residency law

Earlier this year, the Legislature considered a bill to roll back the 2023 law. It passed the Senate but stalled in the House.

During a House hearing on that bill, Republican Rep. Jon Hansen asked one full-time traveler when he was last in South Dakota and when he intends to return. The man said he was in the state a year earlier but planned to return in coming months. Another man who moved from Iowa to work overseas said he had not lived “for any period of time, physically” in South Dakota.

“I don’t think we should allow people who have never lived in this state to vote in our state,” Hansen said.

Republican Sen. David Wheeler, an attorney in Huron, said he expects litigation would be what forces a change. It’s unlikely a change to the 30-day requirement would pass the Legislature now, he said.

“It is a complicated topic that involves federal and state law and federal and state voting rights, and it is difficult to bring everybody together on how to appropriately address that,” Wheeler said.

Out-of-state residents may see tax benefits

More than 1,600 miles (2,500 kilometers) east, Connecticut State Comptroller Sean Scanlon has asked prosecutors to look into whether some state employees who live in Connecticut may have skirted their tax obligations by claiming to be residents of South Dakota.

Connecticut has a graduated income tax rate of 3.0% to 6.99%. Connecticut cities and towns also impose a property tax on vehicles. South Dakota has none.

Scanlon and his office, which administers state employee retiree benefits, learned from a Hartford Courant columnist in September that some state retirees might be using South Dakota’s mail-forwarding services for nefarious reasons.

Asked if there are concerns about other Connecticut taxpayers who are not state retirees possibly misusing South Dakota’s lenient residency laws, the Department of Revenue Services would only say the agency is “aware of the situation and we’re working with our partners to resolve it.”

A South Dakota legislative panel broached the residency issue as recently as August, a meeting in which one lawmaker called the topic “the Gordian knot of politics.”

“It seems like it’s almost impossible to come to some clear and definitive statement as to what constitutes a residency with such a mobile population with people with multiple homes and addresses and political boundaries that are easy to see on a map but there’s so much cross-transportation across them,” Republican Sen. Jim Bolin said.

## Heat lose guard Dru Smith for remainder of season with torn Achilles

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

Miami Heat guard Dru Smith has suffered another season-ending injury, this one a torn Achilles in his left leg.

Smith got hurt Monday night in Miami’s 110-95 win over Brooklyn. The Achilles tear was the preliminary diagnosis once he left the court for evaluation, and an MRI exam on Tuesday confirmed the severity of the injury.

It’s his third season-ending issue since February 2022. This injury comes 13 months after he was lost

for most of the 2023-24 season with a right knee injury. Surgery to repair the Achilles will be scheduled, followed by months of rehab. Smith also saw his 2021-22 season with Miami's Sioux Falls affiliate in the G League cut short by a knee injury.

"You don't want to see anybody get hurt, but we all have such incredible, deep respect for his journey and what he's had to overcome," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said Monday night, before the full extent of the injury was confirmed. "I've been in the building all those times last year when nobody else was here and he was doing all the extensive treatment and rehab, around the clock. He just has incredible fortitude. You end up absolutely rooting for guys like Dru."

Smith was enjoying the best season of his brief NBA career. He was averaging 6.3 points, 2.6 rebounds and 1.5 steals in 19.1 minutes per game, all of those career-bests. He was on a two-way contract, which was likely going to be upgraded to a standard NBA deal — one that could have raised his salary from \$578,577 to just under \$1.2 million.

Smith's 2023-24 season ended when he hurt the ACL in his right knee after slipping off a raised portion of the floor in front of the Cleveland Cavaliers bench on Nov. 22, 2023, that mishap also requiring season-ending surgery and several months of recovery. He had been part of Miami's rotation to that point, appearing in nine of the team's first 15 games.

Smith has averaged 4.5 points in 38 NBA games with Miami and Brooklyn. He's been in training camp with the Heat in each of the last four seasons.

## King Charles III is set to focus on healthcare workers in his traditional Christmas message

By PAN PYLAS and DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III and close members of the royal family attended Christmas Day services Wednesday at a church on Sandringham, the estate on the windswept North Sea coast that has served as a retreat for the royals for generations.

The monarch, who is suffering from cancer, waved to a large crowd of onlookers who traditionally gather outside the church in hopes of catching a glimpse of the royal parade before and after the service. Also in attendance was the Princess of Wales, the king's daughter-in-law, who has been slowly returned to public duties after completing a course of chemotherapy.

In a reflection of the medical treatments they have received, Charles is expected to use his annual Christmas message broadcast later in the day to highlight health workers.

One familiar face was absent from the traditional scene outside St. Mary Magdalene Church: Prince Andrew. The king's 64-year-old brother has retreated further into the shadows amid news that a Chinese businessman had been barred from the U.K. because of concerns he cultivated links with Andrew on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party.

Andrew, once second in line to the British throne, has become a constant source of tabloid fodder because of his money woes and links to questionable characters, including the late American financier and convicted pedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

Even though Andrew had stepped back from public duties, he has continued to appear at family events and his absence from Sandringham suggests a further retreat from the public eye. The king has been under pressure to put more distance between Andrew and the royal family to avoid further embarrassment to the monarchy.

While Andrew has said he never discussed anything sensitive with the suspected Chinese spy and that he ceased contact with the man as soon as concerns were raised, the scandal raises further questions about his judgment and distracts from the work of the royal family, said Ed Owens, author of "After Elizabeth: Can the Monarchy Save Itself?"

"The reason why this is a problem for the king is simply that the king is trying to rebrand the monarchy at the moment, centering its focus around him, but also around William, Catherine, what they are trying to do," Owens said.

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"It's been a very difficult year for the monarchy, not least because of the two cancer diagnoses. And all the positive headlines that the king has been trying to generate of late, unfortunately, are overshadowed by the behavior, the reckless behavior, of his younger brother, who once again finds himself in the headlines."

Charles' speech was recorded at Fitzrovia Chapel in London, which was part of the now-demolished Middlesex Hospital where his first wife, Diana, opened London's first dedicated ward for those with AIDS. The building is richly decorated in a Gothic Revival style featuring more than 500 stars in a gold leaf ceiling.

"I assume that this space, being one of calm reflection, but also thinking about health, about care, about the medical profession, would make it a pretty apt choice," said Carla Whalen, chair of the Fitzrovia Chapel Foundation's board of trustees.

The broadcast is watched by millions of people in the United Kingdom and across the Commonwealth.

In keeping with the King's desire to go into the community, he tasked the team organizing the broadcast with finding a site away from the royal estate. It's a rare occasion when the monarch's Christmas message is not recorded from one of the royal residences, notably Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle. The last time his late mother, Queen Elizabeth II, recorded her message outside the royal estate was in 2006.

The criteria were clear: the building had to have health connections, a strong community presence and a place of solace and reflection for those with faith or none.

This is the king's third Christmas speech since he ascended the throne after the queen died in September 2022. It is the first since he was diagnosed with an undisclosed form of cancer in February.

His treatment forced him to step away from public appearances for two months. The 76-year-old monarch has slowly returned to public life in recent months and was in good spirits on a tour of Australia with his wife, Queen Camilla, in October.

It's been a difficult year for the royal family. A few weeks after Charles began treatment, the Princess of Wales announced her own cancer diagnosis, which sidelined her for much of the year as she underwent chemotherapy.

In a voiceover for the broadcast of her annual Christmas carol service at Westminster Abbey, which was recorded this month but broadcast on Tuesday evening, Kate reflected on the love and support that she has received.

"The Christmas story encourages us to consider the experiences and feelings of others," she said. "It also reflects our own vulnerabilities and reminds us of the importance of giving and receiving empathy, as well as just how much we need each other in spite of our differences."

Meanwhile, Camilla has had a lingering chest infection in recent weeks and hasn't been able to attend certain events, including last month's remembrance service for fallen service personnel.

Camilla walked alongside the king to the church with Prince William, Kate and their three children following. Charles' other siblings, Anne, the Princess Royal, and Edward, the Prince of Edinburgh, were also in the procession.

Charles has long taken refuge at Sandringham, one of the most famous stately homes in Britain. It sits on an 8,000-hectare (20,000-acre) estate in Norfolk on the eastern coast of England.

The private home of the last six British monarchs, Sandringham sits amid parkland, gardens and working farms about 110 miles (180 kilometers) north of London. It has been owned by the royal family since 1862, passing directly from one monarch to the next for more than 160 years.

## **Azerbaijani airliner with 67 people onboard crashes in Kazakhstan leaving 32 survivors**

By KATIE MARIE DAVIES and DASHA LITVINOVA undefined

An Azerbaijani airliner with 67 people onboard crashed Wednesday near the Kazakhstani city of Aktau, leaving at least 32 survivors, according to officials. More than 30 people may be dead.

The plane was en route from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku to the Russian city of Grozny in the North Caucasus.

Kazakhstan's Emergency Ministry said in a Telegram statement that those on board included five crew. A



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total of 29 survivors, including two children, have been hospitalized, the ministry told Russia's state news agency, RIA Novosti.

Another Russian news agency, Interfax quoted medical workers as saying that four bodies have been recovered and emergency workers at the scene as saying that both pilots, according to a preliminary assessment, died in the crash.

The Embraer 190 aircraft made an emergency landing 3 km from the city, Azerbaijan Airlines said earlier. Kazakhstan's Emergency Ministry initially said 25 people survived the crash, later revising that number to 27, 28, and then 29 as the search and rescue operation continued at the site of the crash, bringing the supposed death toll down.

The Prosecutor General's Office in Azerbaijan later reported that at least 32 people survived the crash, adding that the number wasn't final. Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that some of them were in critical condition.

The number of survivors could mean that over 30 people may be dead.

According to Kazakhstani officials, those aboard the plane included 42 Azerbaijani citizens, 16 Russian nationals, six Kazakhstani and three Kyrgyzstani citizens, it said.

RIA Novosti quoted Russia's civil aviation authority, Rosaviatsia, as saying that preliminary information showed that the pilot had chosen to divert to Kazakhstan's Aktau after a bird strike on the aircraft led to "an emergency situation on board".

Mobile phone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before smashing into the ground in a fireball. Other footage showed part of its fuselage ripped away from the wings and the rest of the aircraft, lying upside in the grass. The footage corresponded to the plane's colors and its registration number.

Some of the videos posted on social media showed survivors dragging fellow passengers away from the wreckage of the plane.

Flight-tracking data from FlightRadar24.com showed the aircraft making what appeared to be a figure-eight once nearing the airport in Aktau, its altitude moving up and down substantially over the last minutes of the flight before impacting the ground.

FlightRadar24 separately said in an online post that the aircraft had faced "strong GPS jamming" which "made the aircraft transmit bad ADS-B data", referring to the information that allows flight-tracking websites to follow planes in flight. Russia has been blamed in the past for jamming GPS transmissions in the wider region.

In a statement, Azerbaijan Airlines said it would keep members of the public updated and changed its social media banners to solid black.

Azerbaijan's state news agency, Azertac, said that an official delegation consisting of Azerbaijan's emergency situations minister, the country's deputy general prosecutor, and the vice president of Azerbaijan Airlines had been dispatched to Aktau to conduct an "on-site investigation".

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who had been traveling to Russia, returned to Azerbaijan on hearing news of the crash, the president's press service said. Aliyev was due to attend an informal meeting of leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States, a bloc of former Soviet countries founded after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in St. Petersburg.

Aliyev expressed his condolences to the families of the victims in a statement on social media. "It is with deep sadness that I express my condolences to the families of the victims and wish a speedy recovery to those injured," he wrote.

Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke to Aliyev on the phone and expressed his condolences, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Speaking at the CIS meeting in St. Petersburg, Putin also said that Russia's Emergency Ministry sent a plane with equipment and medical workers to Kazakhstan to assist with the aftermath of the crash.

Kazakhstani, Azerbaijani and Russian authorities said they were investigating the crash. Embraer told The Associated Press in a statement that the company is "ready to assist all relevant authorities."

## Taliban say Pakistani airstrikes killed 46 people in eastern Afghanistan, mostly women and children

By RIAZ KHAN Associated Press

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) — Pakistan's airstrikes on eastern Afghanistan killed 46 people, mostly women and children, a Taliban government official said Wednesday.

Hamdullah Fitrat, the deputy spokesman for the Afghan government, said that six people were also wounded in the Paktika province bordering Pakistan.

This comes a day after Pakistani security officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity in line with regulations, told The Associated Press that Tuesday's operation was to dismantle a training facility and kill insurgents in the province of Paktika in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, in a statement, Mohammad Khurasani, the spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, claimed that 50 people, including 27 women and children, have died in the strikes.

Residents in the area told an AP reporter over the phone that at least 13 people were left dead, adding that the death toll could be higher. They also said the wounded were transported to a local hospital.

Pakistan has not commented on the strikes. However, on Wednesday, the Pakistani military said security forces killed 13 insurgents in an intelligence-based operation in South Waziristan, a district located along eastern Afghanistan's Paktika province.

The strikes are likely to further spike tensions between the two countries. Afghanistan's ruling Taliban government denounced the attack, saying on Tuesday that most of the victims were refugees from the Waziristan region and promising retaliation.

The TTP is a separate group but also a close ally of the Afghan Taliban, who seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021.

In March, Pakistan said intelligence-based strikes took place in the border regions inside Afghanistan.

Pakistan has seen innumerable militant attacks in the past two decades but there has been an uptick in recent months. The latest was this weekend when at least 16 Pakistani soldiers were killed when TTP attacked a checkpoint in the country's northwest.

Pakistani officials have accused the Taliban of not doing enough to combat militant activity across the shared border, a charge the Afghan Taliban government denies, saying it does not allow anyone to carry out attacks against any country.

## An Israeli soldier who died 417 days after his Oct. 7 wounds has become a symbol of sacrifice

By SAM MCNEIL Associated Press

MODIIN, Israel (AP) — For more than 400 days after being critically wounded during Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel, Yona Brief tried to recover. But after losing both legs and enduring medically induced comas, the combat medic died in late November.

The dual Israeli-American citizen has come to symbolize the sacrifice by hundreds of fallen soldiers in what many in Israel see as a war for the country's survival.

"He became a symbol of 'Don't quit,'" said his mother, Hazel. His father, David, compared him to the oil that lit the candelabra in the Hannukah story, miraculously burning longer than expected, according to Jewish tradition.

More than 800 Israeli soldiers have been killed since Hamas' attack, about 300 of them on the initial day and the rest in Gaza or in the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Thousands of others have been wounded, many of them seriously. The war in Gaza has killed nearly 45,000 Palestinians, while over 3,500 people have been killed in Lebanon, according to local health officials.

Serving in Israel's military is compulsory for most Jews. Soldiers' service is revered, and Israelis see their sacrifice as deeply moving. Public opinion in previous wars has often been swayed by high soldier casualties.

Months before Brief was called into action on Oct. 7, he had been seriously wounded, also in his legs,

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by a pipe bomb during a commando raid while serving in the occupied West Bank.

The weekend of Oct. 7 was his first on duty after his recovery.

As militants attacked from Gaza, he and his seven-soldier commando unit raced to join the Israeli army's house-by-house war in the communal farming villages, military bases and towns along the border.

His father said Brief's unit was ordered to clear the Kibbutz Kfar Aza, where Hamas fighters ambushed them, killing two soldiers.

When Brief rushed to help one of them, he was shot 13 times.

Suddenly, his training as a medic was used to save himself.

His father said he cinched tourniquets around his mutilated legs and dragged himself and a fellow soldier into a nearby bullet-ravaged home. There, the family of Hadas Eilon-Carmi hid in a reinforced room and later described Brief as the soldier "full of blood."

Brief was evacuated to a hospital hours later. The other soldier, his commanding officer, died at the scene.

The hospital stay was grueling, too. Brief was the most critically wounded patient from the Oct. 7 attack to be treated at Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv, the country's largest hospital.

After his legs were amputated, he teetered between life and death.

He had more than 20 surgeries. His doctors told Israeli media he received more than 200 units of blood. The hospital brought specialists and surgeons from around the world in a bid to save him.

Eilon-Carmi's family became close with his family, visiting Brief in the hospital and praying for his recovery.

"Yona represents everything I want an Israeli to be," she said.

Brief's determination to live became a source of inspiration for the doctors and medical staff, who had been overwhelmed by work and heartbreak in the early days of the war, said Steve Walz, the international spokesperson for Sheba Medical Center.

Though there were periods when Brief was in a medically induced coma, he was often awake and lucid, even lively.

He was grateful for what remained, his mother said.

He worked out in his hospital bed, raising a barbell above his head. He sang and danced with visitors. Once, he even left the hospital to spend the night in his family home but his medical issues brought him back.

Brief's parents said there were sparks of joy in the nearly 14 months after he was wounded. Chefs cooked him special meals like sushi. Politicians and influencers visited, and Israel's top musicians played by his bedside. He turned 23.

But while his parents said his spirit never wavered, his liver finally failed after months of heavy medication.

Hundreds attended his funeral, and tributes poured in from all walks of Israeli life.

"With Yona, every day he had to fight for this victory and that's why his heroism is extraordinary," said Chili Tropper, an Israeli opposition lawmaker who became close with Brief and his family. "For him, during 417 days, every single day was a war."

## Russia targets Ukrainian energy infrastructure on Christmas Day

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia launched a massive missile and drone barrage targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure on Wednesday, striking a thermal power plant and prompting Ukrainians to take shelter in metro stations on Christmas morning.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said over 70 missiles, including ballistic missiles, and over 100 attack drones were used to strike Ukraine's power sources, in a statement on X.

At least one person was killed in the Dnipro region in the attack, Ukrainian Vice Prime Minister Oleksii Kuleba said on Telegram, adding that heating was disrupted for 155 residential buildings in Ivano-Frankivsk 81. He also said 500,000 recipients or 2677 buildings in Kharkiv region were without heat.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said one Russian missile passed Moldovan and Romanian airspace.

"Putin deliberately chose Christmas for an attack. What could be more inhumane?" Zelenskyy said. "They

continue to fight for a blackout in Ukraine.”

He said Ukraine has managed to shoot down at least 50 missiles and a significant number of drones.

Ukrainian energy minister, Herman Halushchenko, said Russia again “massively attacks energy infrastructure,” in a Facebook statement. Ukraine’s Air Force alerted multiple missiles fired at Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Poltava regions east of the country.

“The (electricity) distribution system operator takes the necessary measures to limit consumption to minimize negative consequences for the power system,” he said. “As soon as the security situation allows, energy workers will establish the damage caused.”

Ukraine’s biggest private energy company, DTEK, said Russia struck one of their thermal power plants Wednesday morning, making it the 13th attack on Ukraine’s power grid this year.

“Denying light and warmth to millions of peace-loving people as they celebrate Christmas is a depraved and evil act that must be answered,” Maxim Timchenko, CEO of DTEK wrote on his X account.

Ukrainian state energy operator, Ukrenergo, applied preemptive power outages across the country, due to a “massive missile attack,” leading to electricity going out in several districts of the capital, Kyiv.

At least seven strikes targeted Kharkiv sparking fires across the city, regional head Oleh Syniehubov wrote on Telegram. At least three people were injured, local authorities said.

“Kharkiv is under massive missile fire. A series of explosions rang out in the city and there are still ballistic missiles flying in the direction of the city. Stay in safe places,” Kharkiv mayor Ihor Terekhov said.

## Why Palestinian forces are cracking down on Palestinian militants in the occupied West Bank

By MAJDI MOHAMMED and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JENIN REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank (AP) — Gunfire has rung out for days from the West Bank’s Jenin refugee camp. But this time, it’s not Israeli forces that are facing off against armed groups. It is the forces of the Palestinian Authority clashing with Palestinian gunmen.

The Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied territory, launched a rare crackdown earlier this month that has sparked one of the worst armed confrontations between Palestinians in years. The authority says it wants to bring law and order to what’s long been a hotbed of militancy and a place where it has little control.

Its ability to contain armed groups there will reverberate far beyond the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority wants to position itself to take over governance in Gaza once the war there ends. But confronting Palestinians at a time when many view the authority as a subcontractor for Israel could deepen divisions in Palestinian society.

Here is a look at the days of fighting between Palestinians in the West Bank:

Fighting rages on the streets and at least 5 are dead

Earlier this month, security forces for the Western-backed Palestinian Authority stormed into Jenin refugee camp, a restive militant stronghold, and began a crackdown against armed groups.

Fighting has raged in the streets of the camp, and armored cars are seen patrolling. Palestinian security forces have taken over part of a hospital, using it as a base and shooting from inside, according to the United Nations.

At least one militant from the Islamic Jihad group and three security force members have been killed, including a captain in the intelligence services whose death was announced Wednesday, according to the Palestinian forces. About 50 people have been arrested.

At least two uninvolved civilians have been killed and some wounded. The fighting prompted the main U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, to suspend its services, including schooling. The violence has disrupted safe access for Palestinians to other services, including water and health. It also has complicated the restoration of services destroyed in previous Israeli raids of the camp.

The Jenin refugee camp explained

The urban, built-up refugee camp in the northern West Bank houses Palestinians whose families were

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displaced in the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation. It has long been a center for Palestinian militancy and a bastion of armed struggle against Israel. The militant groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas operate freely there, and its streets are regularly lined with posters depicting slain fighters as martyrs for the Palestinian cause.

The Palestinian Authority, which administers the main Palestinian population centers of the West Bank as part of interim peace agreements with Israel from the 1990s, has little presence in Jenin. Many people view the Palestinian Authority forces with suspicion and see them as serving Israel's interests because of security coordination that has facilitated Israel's own crackdowns on Palestinians.

The refugee camp and the adjacent city of Jenin have long been targets of Israel in its stated bid to stamp out militancy. Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, which has sparked a wave of violence in the West Bank, Israel has raided or carried out airstrikes in Jenin multiple times, killing dozens and leaving heavy destruction.

Palestinian health officials say Israeli raids throughout the West Bank since Oct. 7, 2023, have killed more than 800 Palestinians. Israel says most of these are militants, but youth throwing stones and people not involved in confrontations have also been killed.

The PA raid is meant to restore order but it's also linked to postwar Gaza

According to Brig. Gen. Anwar Rajab, the spokesperson for the Palestinian security forces, the raid is meant to impose law and order and restore peace and security. The troops were focused on "eradicating" Iran-backed groups that were trying to incite "chaos and anarchy," he added. The raid will end when those goals are reached, according to the security forces.

But the raid is also shining a spotlight on the Palestinian Authority's ability to impose order and security in a restive area. With no clear vision for who will administer postwar Gaza, the raid could convince skeptics that the authority has what it takes to rule the Palestinian enclave. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is considering an agreement with Hamas that would create a committee of politically independent technocrats to administer the Gaza Strip after the war. The committee would report to him.

The Biden administration sees a rehabilitated Palestinian Authority as the best option to govern and secure postwar Gaza. The U.S. has for years invested heavily in training the Palestinian security forces, and the administration has seen its re-entry into Gaza, after being routed by Hamas in 2007, as a feasible replacement for Hamas, whose rule Israel has sought to end with the war.

Israel rejects this idea, seeing the Palestinian Authority as too weak to be able to contain Hamas. It says it will maintain open-ended security control over Gaza.

The incoming Trump administration has not yet laid out its vision for postwar Gaza, but Trump's first term was overwhelmingly supportive of Israel's positions.

For Palestinians, the raid highlights and deepens their internal divisions

Palestinians are not strangers to divisions within their society, with the most prominent the rift between Hamas and Abbas' Fatah party. The parties fought bloody street wars in Gaza before Hamas forced Fatah out of the territory, and the sides have failed to reconcile since.

Since then, the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority has tried to diminish Hamas' influence in the West Bank, often with Israel's help.

Reeling from the yearslong internal rift, Palestinians have staged general strikes and protests calling for unity. But the raid could deepen the perception of the Palestinian Authority as a facilitator of Israel's whims and potentially undermine any popular support for it to return to effectively rule Gaza.

## Japan's foreign minister seeks "positive" direction in bilateral ties during his visit to China

BEIJING (AP) — Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya met with top Chinese leaders Wednesday during his visit to Beijing, the first since the heads of the two countries met at a summit in Peru last month, in an effort to make positive inroads in the bilateral relationship.

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The two neighbors have had a tense relationship in recent years. At the top of Iwaya's agenda is China's ban on Japanese seafood in response to the release of treated radioactive wastewater into the sea from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, as well as China's increasingly assertive military activity in the East and South China Seas.

Iwaya met with China's premier, Li Qiang Wednesday as well as Wang Yi, his Chinese counterpart.

"Currently the China-Japan relations are at a critical period of improvement and development," said Li, in his remarks. "China is willing to work together with Japan to move towards the important direction proposed by the leaders of the two countries."

"I want to build a relationship where the people of both countries feel that Japan-China relations have developed and progressed in a positive direction," said Iwaya, ahead of his meeting with Wang.

His trip comes just before U.S. President-elect Donald Trump is to take office in January.

Tokyo considers the Japan-U.S. alliance the lynchpin of its diplomatic and security policies, a tone emphasized in the past four years under U.S. President Joe Biden's direction, but it's unclear how Trump will impact the alliance.

Japan has revamped its approach to defense in response to Chinese actions in recent years, boosting military spending and shifting away from a principle of self-defense. Earlier this year, Japan protested when a Chinese military plane flew into Japan's airspace, while in the summer, a Chinese survey ship sailed into Japanese territorial waters.

While how U.S.-China relations come out under the Trump administration is unclear, Japan is seeking stability in its relationship with its neighbor and hopes to develop ties in areas of mutual interest, including the economy and the elderly care industry.

Iwaya told reporters before his departure Tuesday that he will also hold bilateral high-level people and cultural exchange talks, joined by the education ministers from the two sides.

"The relationship with China, our neighboring country, is one of Japan's most important," Iwaya told reporters Tuesday. Though there are many issues and concerns, Japan and China share a variety of possibilities, he said. "The two countries share important responsibilities for the peace and prosperity of the region and the international society."

Iwaya, a security expert, is also expected to reiterate his concern about Japanese nationals detained in alleged spying allegations.

Japan maintains that the water discharged from the Fukushima plant is treated and diluted to levels much safer than international standards and adequately monitored, but China calls the water contaminated.

Japan and China agreed in September to work toward easing the seafood ban by allowing China in multinational sampling missions under the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Chinese experts joined an IAEA monitoring mission to Fukushima in October, when China took water samples from the sea just off the coast of the Fukushima plant, as well as the water discharge system on the plant, for analysis.

However, no breakthrough is expected during Iwaya's visit.

## Turkey's soaring costs are creating a 'lost generation' of kids forced to help their families get by

By ROBERT BADENDIECK Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — In a dim one-room apartment in one of Istanbul's poorest neighborhoods, 11-year-old Atakan Sahin curls up on a threadbare sofa with his siblings to watch TV while their mother stirs a pot of pasta.

The simple meal is all the family of six can look forward to most evenings. Atakan, his two younger brothers and 5-year-old sister are among the one-third of Turkish children living in poverty.

"Look at the state of my children," said Rukiye Sahin, 28. "I have four children. They don't get to eat chicken, they don't get to eat meat. I send them to school with torn shoes."

Persistently high inflation, triggered by currency depreciation and unconventional economic policies that

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pursued but later abandoned, has left many families struggling to pay for food and housing. Experts say it's creating a lost generation of children who have been forced to grow up too quickly to help their families eke out an existence.

According to a 2023 joint report by UNICEF and the Turkish Statistical Institute, about 7 million of Turkey's roughly 22.2 million children live in poverty.

That deprivation is brought into stark focus in neighborhoods such as Istanbul's Tarlabasi, where the Sahin family lives just a few minutes' walk from Istiklal Avenue, a tourism hot spot bristling with brightly lit shops and expensive restaurants.

Meanwhile, the Sahins eat sitting on the floor of their room — the same floor Rukiye and her husband sleep on while their children occupy the room's sofas. In the chilly early December night, a stove burns scraps of wood to keep them warm. They sometimes fall asleep to the sound of rats scuttling through the building.

Atakan spends his days helping his father scour dumpsters in search of recyclable material to earn the family a meager income.

Poor children in Istanbul also earn money for their families by selling small items such as pens, tissues or bracelets at the bars and cafes in the city's entertainment districts, often working late into the night.

"I can't go to school because I have no money," he said. "We have nothing. Can you tell me how I can go? On sunny days, when I don't go to school, I collect plastic and other things with my father. We sell whatever we find."

The cash helps buy basic foodstuffs and pay for his siblings to attend school. On the days Atakan can attend, he is ill-equipped to succeed, lacking proper shoes, a coat and textbooks for the English class he loves.

The Sahins struggle to scrape together the money to cover the rent, utilities and other basic expenses as Turkey's cost-of-living crisis continues to rage. Inflation stood at 47% in November, having peaked at 85% in late 2022. Prices of food and nonalcoholic drinks were 5.1% higher in November than in the previous month.

Under these circumstances, a generation of children is growing up rarely enjoying a full meal of fresh meat or vegetables.

Rukiye and her husband receive 6,000 lira (\$173) per month in government welfare to help towards school costs, but they pay the same amount in rent for their home.

"My son says, 'Mom, it's raining, my shoes are soaking wet.' But what can I do?" Rukiye said. "The state doesn't help me. I'm in this room alone with my children. Who do I have except them?"

The picture of children rummaging through garbage to help support their families is far from the image Turkey presents to the world: that of an influential world power with a vibrant economy favorable to foreign investment.

Erdogan is proud of the social programs his party has introduced since he came to power more than 20 years ago, boasting that the "old days of prohibitions, oppression, deprivation and poverty are completely behind us."

Speaking at the G20 summit in November, Erdogan described Turkey's social security system as "one of the most comprehensive and inclusive" in the world. "Our goal is to ensure that not a single poor person remains. We will continue our work until we achieve this," he said.

Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek, tasked with implementing austerity and taming inflation, said the 17,000 lira (\$488) monthly minimum wage isn't low. But he has pledged to raise it as soon as possible.

Although the government allocates billions of lira to struggling households, inflation, which most people agree is far above the official figure, eats into any aid the state can give.

In districts such as Tarlabasi, rents have risen five-fold in recent years due to gentrification in central Istanbul that puts pressure on the housing market for low-income families.

Experts say welfare payments aren't enough for the millions who rely on them, forcing many parents to make impossible choices: Should they pay the rent or buy clothing for the children? Should they send

them to school or keep them home to earn a few extra lira?

Volunteers are trying to ease the cycle of deprivation.

Mehmet Yeralan, a 53-year-old former restaurant owner, brings essentials to Tarlabasi's poor people that they can't afford, including coats, notebooks and the occasional bag of rice.

"Our children do not deserve this," he said, warming himself by a barrel of burning scrap wood on the street. "Families are in very difficult situations. They cannot buy food for their children and send them to school. Children are on the streets, selling tissues to support their families. We are seeing deep poverty here."

Hacer Foggo, a poverty researcher and activist, said Turkey is raising a lost generation who are forced to drop out of school to work or are channeled into vocational programs where they work four days and study one day per week, receiving a small fraction of the minimum wage.

"Look at the situation of children," she said. "Two million of them are in deep poverty. Child labor has become very common. Families choose these education-work programs because children bring in some income. It's not a real education, just cheaper labor."

Foggo points to research showing how early childhood education can help break cycles of poverty. Without it, children remain trapped — stunted physically and educationally, and condemned to lifelong disadvantages.

UNICEF placed Turkey 38th out of 39 European Union or Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries in terms of child poverty between 2019 and 2021, with a child poverty rate of 34%.

The tragic consequences of this destitution occasionally burst into the public arena.

The deaths of five children in a fire in the western city of Izmir in November happened while their mother was out collecting scrap to sell. The image of their sobbing father, who was escorted from prison in handcuffs to attend his children's funeral, caused widespread outrage at the desperation and helplessness facing poor families.

It is a situation Rukiye fully understands.

"Sometimes I go to bed hungry, sometimes I go to bed full," she said. "We can't move forward, we always fall behind. ... When you don't have money in your hands, you always fall behind."

Her eldest son, meanwhile, clings to his childhood dreams. "I want my own room," Atakan said. "I want to go to school regularly. I want everything to be in order. ... I'd like to be a football player one day, to support my family."

## Cities worldwide hold subdued Christmas Eve celebrations amid conflicts

By JALAL BWAITEL Associated Press

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

The cheer that typically descends on the West Bank during Christmas week were nowhere to be found. The festive lights and giant tree that normally decorate Manger Square were missing, as were the throngs of foreign tourists.

Palestinian scouts marched silently through the streets, a departure from their usual raucous brass marching band. Security forces arranged barriers near the Church of the Nativity, built atop the spot where Jesus is believed to have been born. A young boy stood holding a pile of balloons for sale, but gave up because there were no customers to buy them.

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

A surge of violence in the West Bank, where more than 800 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire and dozens of Israelis have been killed in militant attacks, has greatly stalled tourism. Palestinian officials



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do not provide a breakdown of how many of the deceased are civilians and how many are fighters.

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

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 Israeli hostages. Israeli officials believe that around 100 hostages remain in captivity in the Gaza Strip.

Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Roman Catholic cleric in the Holy Land, noted the shuttered shops and empty streets and expressed hope that next year would be better.

"This has to be the last Christmas that is so sad," he told hundreds of people gathered in Manger Square, where normally tens of thousands would congregate.

Pizzaballa held a special pre-Christmas Mass in the Church of the Holy Family in Gaza City. Several Palestinian Christians told the Associated Press that they had been displaced in the church since the war began in October of last year with barely enough food and water.

"We hope by next year at the same day we'd be able to celebrate Christmas at our homes and go to Bethlehem," said Najla Tarazi, a displaced woman who prayed for the war to end. "We don't feel happy."

Bethlehem is an important center in the history of Christianity, but Christians make up only a small percentage of the roughly 14 million residents 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.

Elsewhere, worshippers found connection despite difficult times.

Tourists flock to reopened Notre Dame Cathedral

Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris celebrated its first Christmas Eve Masses since a devastating fire ravaged the medieval landmark in 2019.

About 2,000 people joined an afternoon Mass — one of four held on Tuesday — including worshippers and other visitors marveling at the restoration of the recently reopened cathedral. Some American tourists in Paris crafted their trip to ensure they could attend Christmas Eve services at Notre Dame.

"They did such an amazing job," said visitor Aly Beinert. "It looks beautiful. It blew us away."

The Paris Archbishop symbolically reopened Notre Dame's grand wooden doors on Dec. 7 with three resounding knocks, with guests including President-elect Donald Trump, U.S. first lady Jill Biden, Britain's Prince William and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Syrians come together for rare moment of joy

In Saydnaya, Syria, a large crowd gathered near a historic monastery on Christmas Eve to witness the lighting of a towering tree adorned with glowing green lights.

The celebration offered a rare moment of joy in a city scarred by over a decade of war and its infamous prison, where tens of thousands were held. Families and friends stood by the illuminated tree — some wearing Santa hats, others watching from rooftops — while a band played festive music and fireworks lit up the sky.

"This year is different — there's happiness, victory and a new birth for Syria and a new birth for Christ," said Houssam Saadeh, one attendee. Another, Joseph Khabbaz, expressed hope for unity across all sects and religions in Syria, dismissing recent Christmas tree vandalism as "isolated incidents."

U.S. families honor victims of church school shooting

At City Church in Madison, Wisconsin, lead pastor Tom Flaherty urged congregants at a candlelight Christmas Eve service to open their hearts to God's grace.

"Happiness comes from what happens. Joy comes from a much deeper place, and it doesn't matter what's going on around you," Flaherty said. "So number one, joy comes from God's love, and forgiveness."

Eight days earlier, there was a deadly shooting in the school on the church's campus.

Over the weekend, the congregation hosted a funeral for Rubi Patricia Vergara, the 14-year-old freshman killed when another student opened fire. A teacher was also killed and several others injured before the

shooter shot herself and later died at a hospital, police said.

Travel woes and family reunions in other U.S. cities

American Airlines briefly grounded flights across the U.S. on Tuesday due to a technical problem just as the Christmas travel season kicked into overdrive. Winter weather threatened more potential problems for those planning to fly or drive.

In Virginia, hundreds of sailors and their loved ones got an early Christmas present when the USS Cole docked at its home port in Norfolk after seven months at sea. Families bundled in coats and blankets, shed tears of gratitude and held signs bearing the sailors' names and photos.

Volunteers in Colorado Springs, Colorado, answered calls Tuesday from curious children inquiring about Santa's location. At least 100,000 kids call into the North American Aerospace Defense Command each year to track Santa's whereabouts. NORAD's beloved Santa tracking tradition has endured since the Cold War, when a Colorado newspaper mistakenly printed a phone number for Santa that connected kids to the joint U.S. and Canadian defense command.

Spanish ministries bring seafarers holiday cheer

In the port of Barcelona, Spain, volunteers from the faith-based ministry Stella Maris visited seven ships docked there on Christmas Eve to deliver Nativity scenes and the local specialty of turrón (nougat candy) to seafarers.

The volunteers met seafarers from India, the Philippines, Turkey and elsewhere, said Ricard Rodríguez-Martos, a Catholic deacon and former merchant marine captain who leads Stella Maris in this major Mediterranean harbor.

Heavy snow hits the Balkans

A snowstorm in the Balkans stranded drivers and downed power lines Tuesday, but some saw the beauty in it.

"I'm actually glad it's falling," said driver Mirsad Jasarevic in Zenica, Bosnia. "We did not have snow for Christmas for 17 years here, and now is the time for wonderful white Christmas."

## **A Haiti gang attack on the reopening of a main hospital kills 2 reporters and a police officer**

By EVENS SANON Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Two reporters were killed and several were wounded Tuesday in a gang attack in Haiti on the reopening of Port-au-Prince's biggest public hospital, the country's online media association said. A police officer was also killed in the attack.

Street gangs forced the closure of the General Hospital early this year and authorities had pledged to reopen the facility in Haiti's capital on Christmas Eve. But as journalists gathered to cover the event, suspected gang members opened fire.

It was the latest violence in Haiti, crippled by an unprecedented crisis that has seen coordinated gang attacks on prisons, police stations and the main international airport.

Robest Dimanche, a spokesman for the Online Media Collective, identified the killed journalists as Markenzy Nathoux and Jimmy Jean. Dimanche said an unspecified number of reporters were also been in the attack, which he blamed on the Viv Ansanm coalition of gangs.

The Haitian Association of Journalists confirmed two reporters and a police officer were killed, and seven reporters were wounded in what it called "a macabre scene comparable to terrorism, pure and simple."

Haiti's interim president, Leslie Voltaire, said in an address to the nation that journalists and police were among the victims of the attack. He did not specify the casualty numbers or provide a breakdown.

"I send my sympathies to the people who were victims, the national police and the journalists," Voltaire said.

Later, the government put out a statement saying it is "responding firmly to the attack."

"This heinous act, which targets an institution dedicated to health and life, constitutes an unacceptable

attack on the very foundations of our society," it said.

Earlier, a video posted online by the reporters trapped inside the hospital shows what appeared to be two lifeless bodies of men on stretchers, their clothes bloodied. One of the men had a lanyard with a press credential around his neck.

Radio Télé Métronome initially reported that seven journalists and two police officers were wounded. Police and officials did not immediately respond to calls for information on the attack.

Another video posted online, which also could not be immediately verified, showed reporters inside the building and at least three lying on the floor, apparently wounded.

Street gangs have taken over an estimated 85% of Port-au-Prince and have also targeted the main international airport and Haiti's two largest prisons.

Johnson "Izo" André, considered Haiti's most powerful gang leader and part of the Viv Ansanm group of gangs, which that has taken control of much of Port-au-Prince, posted a video on social media claiming responsibility for the attack.

The video said the gang coalition had not authorized the hospital's reopening.

Haiti has seen journalists targeted before. In 2023, two local journalists were killed in the space of a couple of weeks — radio reporter Dumesky Kersaint was fatally shot in mid-April that year, while journalist Ricot Jean was found dead later that month.

In July, former Prime Minister Garry Conille visited the Hospital of the State University of Haiti, more widely known as the General Hospital, after authorities regained control of it from gangs.

The hospital had been left ravaged and strewn with debris. Walls and nearby buildings were riddled with bullet holes, signaling fights between police and gangs. The hospital is across the street from the national palace, the scene of several battles in recent months.

Gang attacks have pushed Haiti's health system to the brink of collapse with looting, setting fires, and destroying medical institutions and pharmacies in the capital. The violence has created a surge in patients and a shortage of resources to treat them.

Haiti's health care system faces additional challenges during the rainy season, which is likely to increase the risk of water-borne diseases. Poor conditions in camps and makeshift settlements have heightened the risk of diseases like cholera, with over 84,000 suspected cases in the country, according to UNICEF.

## After 20 years, the post-tsunami generation stays vigilant for future disasters

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

LHOKNGA, Indonesia (AP) — Qurrata Ayuni, a 28-year-old survivor of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated her hometown two decades ago, has transformed her resilience into purpose. Defying Aceh's male-dominated coffee culture, she runs a café that serves as a welcoming space for everyone, especially women, by employing and empowering them in the region worst hit by the tragedy.

On Dec. 26, 2004, a powerful 9.1-magnitude earthquake, off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, triggered a tsunami that killed around 230,000 people across a dozen countries, reaching as far as East Africa. Some 160,000 of those were in Aceh, at the northwestern tip of Indonesia.

Ayuni survived the tsunami by chance, staying at her aunt's house in Banda Aceh instead of her family home in Lampuuk, Aceh Besar district. However, the disaster shattered her childhood, claiming the lives of her parents and younger sister, who was only 6 when their home was hit by the giant waves.

Infrastructure in Aceh has been rebuilt and is now stronger than before the tsunami. Early warning systems have been set up in areas closer to shores, to warn residents of a potential tsunami.

About 14 kilometers (9 miles) from Ayuni's coffee shop, in a public high school in Lhoknga, students regularly take part in disaster simulations, especially when there is a warning of an earthquake, and get ready to evacuate ahead of a possible tsunami.

They hide under the table and chant dhikr (the Islamic prayer) "la ilaha illallah," which means "there's no God but Allah," while waiting for the next direction to move from their classroom to the designated

assembly point which is on the field at the front of the school.

The school has a devastating history. Situated about one kilometer (half a mile) from the shore, it was totally destroyed and flattened to the ground like other buildings. This school was one of over 1,400 that were wrecked by the tsunami, according to a report by the Disaster Mitigation Research Center at Syiah Kuala University in Aceh, published in 2019.

Some of the teachers are survivors of that disaster. They were only teenagers when they saw the giant waves, some as high as coconut trees.

They are the only ones left at the school who experienced the disaster, as all the students now were born after 2004. They have only heard the story about the quake followed by three giant waves and the impact from their parents.

"We also want to educate them about the history of the tsunami. We don't want them to remain ignorant about that history, that there was a tragedy that may be dark for some people," said Eka Sari Dewi, the school principal.

"However, today as the younger generation, they must know what they should do after the tsunami."

That is why Dewi has followed the government policy of educating her students about tsunamis, teaching them to remain alert and be ready to evacuate to safer places when required.

After about a year of disaster simulations at school on the 26th of every month, students have become very alert and are ready to act when the disaster alarm rings.

"This simulation is very useful because if a disaster happens, we will know how to do self-rescue. Then we also won't be confused like people in the past," Rihadatul Aisy, one of the students, said.

Fazli, the head of Preparedness in Aceh Disaster Management Agency, who like many Indonesians uses a single name, said that the simulation aims to build school community capacity, raise awareness and prepare students for earthquakes by equipping them with vital earthquake and tsunami information and ensuring readiness anytime, anywhere.

"The biggest hope is that there will be minimal casualties when the (next) disaster occurs," Fazli said.

Survivors who faced disasters at a very young age like Ayuni cannot directly digest what they faced in the past. However, there is hope that younger generations can be better prepared to face such challenges in the future.

"I hope the younger generation doesn't forget that we were once hit by a very powerful tsunami. So for now, even though our infrastructure may have turned around and is very good, our economy has come back again, don't forget the old incident," Ayuni said.

## **Ecuadorian police probe if bodies found are of missing children allegedly taken by soldiers**

By ALLEN PANCHANA Associated Press

GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador (AP) — Ecuadorian police on Tuesday found an undisclosed number of bodies in an area close to a military base, officials said, and were investigating whether the bodies could be of some of the four children who were last seen taken by men in military uniform earlier this month.

The case of the children, aged 11 to 15, who went missing on Dec. 8, has profoundly shaken Ecuador, with rights groups and the public demanding information about their whereabouts and asking that the case be investigated as a forced disappearance.

Under pressure for answers, authorities said 16 soldiers had been placed in custody and were being investigated for the disappearance of the minors.

Also Tuesday, prosecutors said they are looking to charge some members of the military with forced disappearance in the case. They did not provide further details and no charges have yet been raised.

According to a police official who spoke with The Associated Press, the bodies discovered Tuesday were found in a mangrove area near the western city of Taura, where the military base is located.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the case, did not say how many bodies were found but added that they are now being analyzed to determine whether they were the kids.

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Two other officials following the case, who also asked not to be identified because they were not authorized to speak with the media, told the AP that the bodies were charred and showed signs of violence.

President Daniel Noboa, whose government has used the military to fight soaring crime as part of a security strategy with which he seeks to be reelected in February, has promised that his administration would not cover up for anyone in the disappearance.

The children went missing in the coastal city of Guayaquil, where dozens of people demonstrated Monday demanding accountability and answers.

Defense Minister Gian Carlo Loffredo on Tuesday ordered the army to keep 16 soldiers in custody pending investigation, according to a statement posted on X.

The bodies were found near the Taura Military Base, on the outskirts of Guayaquil, where the Ecuadorian Air Force is headquartered, according to the police official. The 16 troops in custody were assigned to that base.

Surveillance videos emerged this week showing men in military uniform grabbing two boys and driving off with them. The two are believed to be among four children who disappeared that night.

Loffredo on Monday confirmed the four were detained in the area where the footage was taken.

The videos, seen by the AP, show a group of children running, men in uniform, two children being placed in the back of a pick-up truck and the vehicle moving through the streets of Guayaquil. The footage appears to back up the account of Luis Arroyo, the father of two of the missing children.

Arroyo earlier told local media that his children were on their way home after playing soccer when two vehicles carrying people in military uniforms arrived in the area. The children, he said, were chased and four were caught and driven away.

It wasn't clear how he knew this.

Loffredo, the defense minister, told reporters on Monday that, according to a military report, the children were detained by a patrol with 16 agents who "observed eight people who were allegedly robbing a woman."

He said the military later released the minors and did not hand them over to the police. The footage reviewed by the AP does not show the alleged robbery.

## Heavy travel day starts with brief grounding of all American Airlines flights

By MATT OTT and HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — American Airlines briefly grounded flights nationwide Tuesday because of a technical problem just as the Christmas travel season kicked into overdrive and winter weather threatened more potential problems for those planning to fly or drive.

Government regulators cleared American flights to get airborne about an hour after the Federal Aviation Administration ordered a national ground stop for the airline. The order, which prevented planes from taking off, was issued at the airline's request after it experienced trouble with its flight operating system, or FOS. The airline blamed technology from one of its vendors.

As a result, flights were delayed across American's major hubs, with only 36% of the airline's 3,901 domestic and international flights leaving on time, according to Cirium, an aviation analytics company. Fifty-one flights were canceled.

Dennis Tajer, a spokesperson for the Allied Pilots Association, a union representing American Airlines pilots, said the airline told pilots at 7 a.m. Eastern that there was an outage affecting the FOS system. It handles different types of airline operations, including dispatch, flight planning, passenger boarding, as well as an airplane's weight and balance data, he said.

Some components of FOS have gone down in the past, but a systemwide outage is rare, Tajer said.

Hours after the ground stop was lifted, Tajer said the union had not heard about any "chaos out there beyond just the normal heavy travel day." He said officials were watching for any cascading effects, such as staffing problems.

On social media, however, customers expressed frustration with delays that caused them or their family

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members to miss connecting flights. One person asked if American planned to hold flights for passengers to make connections, while others complained about the lack of assistance they said they received from the airline or gate agents.

Bobby Tighe, a real estate agent from Florida, said he will miss a family Christmas Eve party in New York because his American flight was repeatedly delayed. The delays made him miss a connecting flight, leaving him the choice of going to his destination — Westchester, New York — on Christmas Day or taking another flight to Newark, New Jersey, that was scheduled to land Tuesday evening. He chose the latter.

"I'm just going to take an Uber or Lyft to the airport I was originally supposed to go to, pick up my rental car and kind of restart everything tomorrow," Tighe said. He said his girlfriend was "going through the same exact situation" on her way from Dallas to New York.

Cirium noted that the vast majority of flights were departing within two hours of their scheduled departure time. A similar percentage — 39% — were arriving at their destinations as scheduled.

Dallas-Fort Worth, New York's Kennedy Airport and Charlotte, North Carolina, saw the greatest number of delays, Cirium said. Washington, Chicago and Miami experienced considerably fewer delays.

Meanwhile, the flight-tracking site FlightAware reported that 4,058 flights entering or leaving the U.S., or serving domestic destinations, were delayed, with 76 flights canceled. The site did not post any American Airlines flights on Tuesday morning, but it showed in the afternoon that 961 American flights were delayed.

Amid the travel problems, significant rain and snow were expected in the Pacific Northwest at least into Christmas Day. Showers and thunderstorms were developing in the South. Freezing rain was reported in the Mid-Atlantic region near Baltimore and Washington, and snow fell in New York.

Because the holiday travel period lasts weeks, airports and airlines typically have smaller peak days than they do during the rush around Thanksgiving, but the grind of one hectic day followed by another takes a toll on flight crews. And any hiccups — a winter storm or a computer outage — can snowball into massive disruptions.

That is how Southwest Airlines stranded 2 million travelers in December 2022, and Delta Air Lines suffered a smaller but significant meltdown after a worldwide technology outage in July caused by a faulty software update from cybersecurity company CrowdStrike.

Many flights during the holidays are sold out, which makes cancellations even more disruptive than during slower periods. That is especially true for smaller budget airlines that have fewer flights and fewer options for rebooking passengers. Only the largest airlines, including American, Delta and United, have "interline agreements" that let them put stranded customers on another carrier's flights.

This will be the first holiday season since a Transportation Department rule took effect that requires airlines to give customers automatic cash refunds for canceled or significantly delayed flights. Most air travelers were already eligible for refunds, but they often had to request them.

Passengers still can ask to get rebooked, which is often a better option than a refund during peak travel periods. That's because finding a last-minute flight on another airline tends to be expensive.

An American spokesperson said Tuesday was not a peak travel day for the airline — with about 2,000 fewer flights than the busiest days — so the airline had somewhat of a buffer to manage the delays.

The groundings happened as millions of travelers were expected to fly over the next 10 days. The Transportation Security Administration expects to screen 40 million passengers through Jan. 2.

Airlines expect to have their busiest days on Thursday, Friday and Sunday.

About 90% of Americans traveling far from home over the holidays will be in cars, according to AAA.

"Airline travel is just really high right now, but most people do drive to their destinations, and that is true for every holiday," AAA spokesperson Aixa Diaz said.

Gasoline prices are similar to last year. The nationwide average Thursday was \$3.04 a gallon, down from \$3.13 a year ago, according to AAA. Charging an electric vehicle averages just under 35 cents per kilowatt hour, but varies by state.

Transportation-data firm INRIX says travel times on the nation's highways could be up to 30% longer than normal over the holidays, with Sunday expected to see the heaviest traffic. Boston, New York City, Seattle and Washington are the metropolitan areas primed for the greatest delays, according to the company.

## Prosecutors find workers in 'slavery like' conditions at Chinese car company site in Brazil

By LUCAS DUMPHREYS Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil (AP) — A task force led by Brazilian prosecutors said it rescued 163 Chinese nationals working in "slavery-like" conditions at a construction site in northeastern Brazil, where Chinese electric vehicle company BYD is building a factory.

On Tuesday, the Labor Prosecutor's Office released videos of the dorms where the construction workers were staying, which showed beds with no mattresses and rooms without any places for the workers to store their personal belongings.

In a statement issued Monday, the prosecutor's office said the workers had been hired in China by Jinjiang Construction Brazil, one of the contractors on the site, which is located in Camaçari, a city in the Salvador metropolitan region.

Officials said Jinjiang Construction Brazil had confiscated the workers' passports and held 60% of their wages. Those who quit would be forced to pay the company for their airfare from China, and for their return ticket, the statement said.

Efforts to reach Jinjiang Construction in Brazil were unsuccessful as a contact phone number and email address were not immediately available.

BYD, which stands for Build Your Dreams, is one of the world's largest producers of electric cars. The company said on Monday night that it will "immediately terminate the contract" with the Jinjian group and is "studying other appropriate measures."

BYD said that the Jinjiang workers will be housed in nearby hotels for the time being, and that they will not suffer from the decision to stop work at the site. The company said that over the past few weeks it had been revising working conditions at the construction site and had told its contractors that "adjustments" had to be made.

Prosecutors said the sanitary situation at BYD's site in Camaçari was especially critical, with only one toilet for every 31 workers, forcing them to wake up at 4 a.m. to line up and get ready to leave for work at 5:30 a.m.

Under Brazilian law, slavery-like conditions are characterized by submission to forced labor or exhausting working hours, subjection to degrading working conditions and restriction of the worker's freedom of movement.

## Trump vows to pursue executions after Biden commutes most of federal death row

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump promised on Tuesday to "vigorously pursue" capital punishment after President Joe Biden commuted the sentences of most people on federal death row partly to stop Trump from pushing forward their executions.

Trump criticized Biden's decision on Monday to change the sentences of 37 of the 40 condemned people to life in prison without parole, arguing that it was senseless and insulted the families of their victims. Biden said converting their punishments to life imprisonment was consistent with the moratorium imposed on federal executions in cases other than terrorism and hate-motivated mass murder.

"Joe Biden just commuted the Death Sentence on 37 of the worst killers in our Country," he wrote on his social media site. "When you hear the acts of each, you won't believe that he did this. Makes no sense. Relatives and friends are further devastated. They can't believe this is happening!"

Presidents historically have no involvement in dictating or recommending the punishments that federal prosecutors seek for defendants in criminal cases, though Trump has long sought more direct control over the Justice Department's operations. The president-elect wrote that he would direct the department to pursue the death penalty "as soon as I am inaugurated," but was vague on what specific actions he may

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take and said they would be in cases of “violent rapists, murderers, and monsters.”

He highlighted the cases of two men who were on federal death row for slaying a woman and a girl, had admitted to killing more and had their sentences commuted by Biden.

Is it a plan in motion or more rhetoric?

On the campaign trail, Trump often called for expanding the federal death penalty — including for those who kill police officers, those convicted of drug and human trafficking, and migrants who kill U.S. citizens.

“Trump has been fairly consistent in wanting to sort of say that he thinks the death penalty is an important tool and he wants to use it,” said Douglas Berman, an expert on sentencing at Ohio State University’s law school. “But whether practically any of that can happen, either under existing law or other laws, is a heavy lift.”

Berman said Trump’s statement at this point seems to be just a response to Biden’s commutation.

“I’m inclined to think it’s still in sort of more the rhetoric phase. Just, ‘don’t worry. The new sheriff is coming. I like the death penalty,’” he said.

Most Americans have historically supported the death penalty for people convicted of murder, according to decades of annual polling by Gallup, but support has declined over the past few decades. About half of Americans were in favor in an October poll, while roughly 7 in 10 Americans backed capital punishment for murderers in 2007.

Death row inmates are mostly sentenced by states

Before Biden’s commutation, there were 40 federal death row inmates compared with more than 2,000 who have been sentenced to death by states.

“The reality is all of these crimes are typically handled by the states,” Berman said.

A question is whether the Trump administration would try to take over some state murder cases, such as those related to drug trafficking or smuggling. He could also attempt to take cases from states that have abolished the death penalty.

Could rape now be punishable by death?

Berman said Trump’s statement, along with some recent actions by states, may present an effort to get the Supreme Court to reconsider a precedent that considers the death penalty disproportionate punishment for rape.

“That would literally take decades to unfold. It’s not something that is going to happen overnight,” Berman said.

Before one of Trump’s rallies on Aug. 20, his prepared remarks released to the media said he would announce he would ask for the death penalty for child rapists and child traffickers. But Trump never delivered the line.

What were the cases highlighted by Trump?

One of the men Trump highlighted on Tuesday was ex-Marine Jorge Avila Torrez, who was sentenced to death for killing a sailor in Virginia and later pleaded guilty to the fatal stabbing of an 8-year-old and a 9-year-old girl in a suburban Chicago park several years before.

The other man, Thomas Steven Sanders, was sentenced to death for the kidnapping and slaying of a 12-year-old girl in Louisiana, days after shooting the girl’s mother in a wildlife park in Arizona. Court records show he admitted to both killings.

Some families of victims expressed anger with Biden’s decision, but the president had faced pressure from advocacy groups urging him to make it more difficult for Trump to increase the use of capital punishment for federal inmates. The ACLU and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops were some of the groups that applauded the decision.

Biden left 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. \_\_\_\_\_

Associated Press writers Jill Colvin, Michelle L. Price and Eric Tucker contributed to this report.



## **Biden signs a bill officially making the bald eagle the national bird of the US**

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The bald eagle, a symbol of the power and strength of the United States for more than 240 years, earned an overdue honor on Tuesday: It officially became the country's national bird.

President Joe Biden signed into law legislation sent to him by Congress that amends the United States Code to correct what had long gone unnoticed and designate the bald eagle — familiar to many because of its white head, yellow beak and brown body — as the national bird.

The bald eagle has appeared on the Great Seal of the United States, which is used in official documents, since 1782, when the design was finalized. The seal is made up of the eagle, an olive branch, arrows, a flag-like shield, the motto "E Pluribus Unum" and a constellation of stars.

Congress that same year designated the bald eagle as the the national emblem, and its image appears in a host of places, ranging from documents and the presidential flag to military insignia and U.S. currency, according to USA.gov.

But it had never been officially designated to be what many had just assumed it was — the national bird. The bald eagle is indigenous to North America.

## **21 dead as Mozambique erupts in violence after election court ruling**

MAPUTO, Mozambique (AP) — Violence that engulfed Mozambique after the country's highest court confirmed ruling Frelimo party presidential candidate Daniel Chapo as the winner of disputed Oct. 9 elections killed at least 21 people, including two police officers, authorities said Tuesday.

Mozambique Interior Minister Pascoal Ronda told a news conference in Maputo late Tuesday that a wave of violence and looting was sparked by the court's announcement a day earlier. He said it was led by mostly youthful supporters of losing candidate Venancio Mondlane, who received 24% of the vote, second to Chapo, who got 65%.

"From the preliminary survey, in the last 24 hours, 236 acts of violence were recorded throughout the national territory that resulted in 21 deaths, of which two members of the Police of the Republic of Mozambique also died," Ronda said. He said 13 civilians and 12 police were injured.

Ronda said 25 vehicles were set on fire, including two police vehicles. He added that 11 police subunits and a penitentiary were attacked and vandalized and 86 inmates were freed.

Tensions were high in the country ahead of the The Constitutional Council ruling on Monday and violent protests started immediately after the announcement was made.

Footage circulating on various social media platforms showed protesters burning and looting shops in the capital Maputo and the city of Beira, where some city officials were reported to have fled the city.

Mondlane has called for a "shutdown" starting Friday but violence in the country has already escalated and the situation remained tense in the capital on Tuesday night following a day of violence and looting by protesters.

The country of 34 million people has been on edge since the Oct. 9 general elections. Mondlane's supporters, mostly hundreds of thousands of young people, have since taken to the streets, and have been met by gunfire from security forces.

This brings to more than 150 the number of people who have died from post-election violence since the initial results were announced by the country's electoral body.

## Middle East latest: Israeli raid and airstrikes in West Bank kill at least 8 Palestinians

By The Associated Press undefined

At least eight people were killed by Israeli military operations in the northern West Bank around the city of Tulkarem on Tuesday, the Palestinian Health Ministry said, including three people it said were killed by Israeli airstrikes.

The Israeli military said it opened fire after militants attacked soldiers, and it was aware of some uninvolved civilians who were harmed in the raid.

Elsewhere in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian city of Bethlehem was marking a second somber Christmas Eve under the shadow of the war in Gaza, with most festivities cancelled and crowds of tourists absent.

Israel's bombardment and ground invasion in Gaza has killed over 45,000 Palestinians, 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.

Winter is hitting the Gaza Strip and many of the nearly 2 million Palestinians displaced by the devastating 15-month war with Israel are struggling to protect themselves from the wind, cold and rain.

The war in Gaza was sparked by Hamas's attack on southern Israel in October 2023, during which about 1,200 people were killed and 250 taken hostage by Palestinian militants. Around 100 hostages are still being held in Gaza, although only two thirds are believed to still be alive.

Here's the latest:

Israeli raid and airstrikes kill at least 8 Palestinians in West Bank, health officials say

NUR SHAMS REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank — The Palestinian Health Ministry said at least eight people were killed by Israeli military operations in and around the city of Tulkarem in the northern West Bank on Tuesday. The ministry reported three of the dead were killed by airstrikes.

The Israeli military said it opened fire after militants attacked soldiers, and it was aware of some uninvolved civilians who were harmed in the raid.

An Associated Press photojournalist captured images of Israeli forces detonating an explosive device planted by Palestinian militants during a raid in the Nur Shams refugee camp.

Israel has carried out several large-scale raids in the West Bank since the start of the war in Gaza, ignited by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. While airstrikes were once rare in the West Bank, they have grown more common since the outbreak of war as Israeli forces clamp down, saying they aim to prevent attacks on their citizens.

Israeli fire has killed at least 800 Palestinians in the occupied West Bank since October 2023, Palestinian health officials say. In that time, Palestinian militants have launched a number of attacks on soldiers at checkpoints and within Israel.

Syrians celebrate Christmas and dream of 'a new birth for Syria'

SAYDNAYA, Syria — A large crowd of Syrians gathered near a historic monastery in Saydnaya on Christmas Eve to witness the lighting of a towering tree adorned with glowing green lights.

Tuesday's celebration offered a rare moment of joy in a city scarred by over a decade of war and an infamous prison, where tens of thousands were held. Families and friends stood beneath the illuminated tree — some wearing Santa hats, others watching from rooftops — while a band played festive music and fireworks lit up the sky

"This year is different, there's happiness, victory and a new birth for Syria and a new birth for Christ," said Houssam Saadeh, one attendee.

Another, Joseph Khabbaz, expressed hope for unity across all sects and religions in Syria, dismissing recent Christmas tree vandalism as "isolated incidents."

Earlier in the afternoon, pilgrims visited the historic Our Lady of Saydnaya Monastery, one of the world's oldest Christian monasteries, believed to be built in the sixth century.

In Homs, a similarly grand Christmas tree was illuminated as security officers patrolled the area to ensure

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a safe and peaceful gathering, according to Syria's state media.

UN says Israeli attacks on North Gaza have a devastating impact on Palestinian civilians

UNITED NATIONS -- Recent attacks on hospitals in North Gaza, where Israel is carrying out an offensive, are having a devastating impact on Palestinian civilians still in the area, the U.N. humanitarian office says.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs expressed deep concern at reports that the Israeli military entered the Indonesian Hospital on Tuesday, forcing its evacuation.

The humanitarian office, known as OCHA, also expressed deep concern at attacks reported in recent days in and around the two other hospitals in North Gaza that are minimally functioning -- Al Awda and Kamal Adwan.

OCHA said the Israeli siege on Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahia and parts of Jaballiya in North Gaza continued for a 79th day on Tuesday, and while the U.N. and its partners have made 52 attempts to coordinate humanitarian access to besieged areas in December 48 were rejected by Israel.

While four missions were approved, OCHA said the U.N. and its partners faced impediments as a result of Israeli military operations and "none of the U.N.-coordinated attempts to access the area have been fully facilitated."

Throughout the Gaza Strip, OCHA said that Israeli authorities facilitated just 40% of requests for humanitarian movements requiring their approval in December.

Global monitor says famine is weeks away in north Gaza. A US diplomat calls the warning 'irresponsible'

WASHINGTON — A leading global food crisis monitor says deaths from starvation will likely pass famine levels in north Gaza as soon as next month.

The U.S.-created Famine Early Warning System Network says that's because of a near-total Israeli blockade of food and other aid in that part of Gaza.

The finding, however, appears to have exposed a rift within the Biden administration over the extent of starvation in northern Gaza.

The U.S. ambassador to Israel, Jacob Lew, disputes part of the data used in reaching the conclusion and calls the intensified famine warning "irresponsible."

Northern Gaza has been one of the areas hardest-hit by fighting and Israel's restrictions on aid throughout its 14-month war with Hamas militants.

Israel wants UN Security Council to condemn recent attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels

UNITED NATIONS — Israel's foreign minister has requested an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council to condemn recent missile and drone attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels, and to condemn the group's Iranian allies for allegedly providing the group with weapons.

Gideon Saar said in a letter Tuesday to Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield of the United States, which holds the council presidency this month, that the Houthis are violating international law and council resolutions.

"This Iranian-backed terrorist group continues to endanger Israel's and other nations' security, as well as the freedom of maritime navigation, in flagrant violation of international law," Saar said. "All of this malign activity is done as part of a broader strategy to destabilize the region."

The U.S. Mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to an email asking when the council meeting will be held.

The Houthis have said they launched attacks on shipping in the Red Sea -- and on Israel -- with the aim of ending Israel's devastating air and ground offensive in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli war in Gaza followed Hamas' deadly October 2023 attacks in southern Israel.

Israeli military says troops' presence inadvertently contributed to Hamas killing 6 hostages in August

TEL AVIV, Israel — An Israeli military investigation has concluded that the presence of troops inadvertently contributed to the deaths of six hostages killed by their Hamas captors in Gaza.

The hostages' bodies were discovered in a tunnel in late August, an event that shook Israel and sparked some of the largest anti-war protests since the war began.

The investigation found that the six hostages were killed by multiple gunshots from their captors after surviving for nearly 330 days. The Israeli military's "ground activities in the area, although gradual and

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cautious, had a circumstantial influence on the terrorists' decision to murder the six hostages," the report found.

According to the investigation, the Israeli military began operating in the area where the hostages were being held in southern Gaza about two weeks before their discovery, under the assumption that the chances of hostages in the area was medium to low.

On August 27, hostage Qaid Farhan Alkadi was found alone in a tunnel, causing the Israeli military to halt operations for 24 hours to determine if there could be other hostages in the area. The military discovered the opening leading to the tunnel where the bodies of the six hostages were located on August 30. A pathological report estimated the six hostages were killed on August 29.

The six hostages killed were Carmel Gat, Eden Yerushalmi, Alexander Lobanov, Almog Sarusi, Ori Danino, and Hersh Goldberg-Polin, whose American-Israeli parents became some of the most recognized spokespeople pleading for the hostages' release, including addressing the Democratic National Convention days before their son's killing.

"The investigation published tonight proves once again that the return of all hostages will only be possible through a deal," the Hostages Families Forum said in response to the investigation. "Every passing moment puts the hostages' lives in immediate danger."

Israeli ceasefire negotiators are returning from Qatar after 'a significant week,' prime minister's office says  
JERUSALEM — The Israeli negotiating team working on a ceasefire returned from Qatar to Israel on Tuesday, the prime minister's office said, after what it called "a significant week" of talks.

After months of deadlock, the U.S., Qatar and Egypt resumed their mediation efforts in recent weeks and reported greater willingness by the warring sides to reach a deal.

According to Egyptian and Hamas officials, the proposed agreement would take place in phases and include a halt in fighting, an exchange of captive Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, and a surge in aid to the besieged Gaza Strip.

Israel says Hamas is holding 100 hostages, over one-third of whom are believed to be dead.

On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said there was "some progress" in efforts to reach a deal, but added he did not know how long it would take.

Israeli soldiers force patients to evacuate a hospital in northern Gaza, some on foot, Palestinian health officials say

CAIRO — Israeli soldiers took control of a hospital in isolated northern Gaza after forcing all the patients and most of the doctors to leave, the Palestinian Health Ministry said Tuesday.

Some of the patients had to walk to another hospital while others were driven by paramedics, according to Health Ministry spokesperson Zaher al-Wahidi. He did not specify how many patients had evacuated.

The Israeli military confirmed its troops had entered the Indonesian Hospital in the town of Jabaliya as part of an operation searching for Hamas fighters. The army later said its soldiers had left the hospital.

The military said it had assisted with evacuating the patients and had not ordered the hospital closed. However, al-Wahidi said only one doctor and maintenance person were left behind.

The Indonesian Hospital is one of three hospitals left largely inaccessible in the northernmost part of Gaza because Israel has imposed a tight siege there since launching an offensive in early October.

The Israeli army said Tuesday's operation at the Indonesian Hospital came after militants carried out attacks from the hospital for the past month, including launching anti-tank missiles and planting explosive devices in the surrounding area. The Health Ministry accused Israel of "besieging and directly targeting" the three hospitals in northern Gaza.

Hussam Abu Safiya, the director of Kamal Adwan Hospital, said Israeli drones detonated explosives near the hospital and that 20 people were wounded, including five medical staff. The Israeli military declined to comment on the operation around the hospital.

Syrian Christians protest to demand greater protections after a Christmas tree is burned

DAMASCUS — Scores of Syrian Christians protested in the capital Damascus on Tuesday, demanding greater protections for their religious minority after a Christmas tree was set on fire in the city of Hama

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a day earlier.

Many of the insurgents who now rule Syria are jihadis, although Ahmad al-Sharaa, the leader of the main rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, has renounced longtime ties to al-Qaida and spent years depicting himself as a champion of pluralism and tolerance.

It remains unclear who set the Christmas tree on fire Monday, which was condemned by a representative of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham who visited the town and addressed the community.

"This act was committed by people who are not Syrian, and they will be punished beyond your expectations," the HTS representative said in a video widely shared on social media. "The Christmas tree will be fully restored by this evening."

On Tuesday, protesters marched through the streets of Bab Touma in Damascus, shouting slogans against foreign fighters and carrying large wooden crosses.

"We demand that Syria be for all Syrians. We want a voice in the future of our country," said Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syriac Orthodox Church as he addressed the crowd in a church courtyard, assuring them of Christians' rights in Syria.

Since HTS led a swift offensive that overthrew President Bashar Assad earlier this month, Syria's minority communities have been on edge, uncertain of how they will be treated under the emerging rebel-led government.

"We are here to demand a democratic and free government for one people and one nation," another protester said. "We stand united — Muslims and Christians. No to sectarianism."

Qatar says Gaza ceasefire negotiations are ongoing

DOHA — Qatar's Foreign Ministry said that ceasefire negotiations to end the war in Gaza were ongoing in Doha in cooperation with Egyptian, Qatari, and American mediators.

"We will not leave any door unopened in pursuit of reaching an agreement," said Majid al-Ansari, Qatar's Foreign Ministry spokesperson on Tuesday.

Al Ansari added that rumors the ceasefire would be reached before Christmas are "speculation."

The ceasefire negotiations come at a time when winter is hitting the Gaza Strip and many of the nearly 2 million Palestinians displaced by the devastating 15-month war with Israel are struggling to protect themselves from the wind, cold and rain. Families of the approximately 100 hostages who have been held for 445 days in Gaza are also worried their loved ones will not survive another winter.

In a press conference, al-Ansari also called on the international community to lift sanctions on Syria as quickly as possible on Tuesday.

"The reason was the crimes of the previous regime, and that regime, with all of its authority, is no longer in place, therefore the causes for these sanctions no longer exist today," he said.

US journalist missing in Syria since 2012 is believed to be alive, says aid group

DAMASCUS, Syria — American journalist Austin Tice is believed to be still alive, according to the head of an international aid group.

Nizar Zakka, who runs the Hostage Aid Worldwide organization, said there has never been any proof that Tice, who has been missing since 2012, is dead.

Zakka told reporters in Damascus on Tuesday that Tice was alive in January and being held by the authorities of ousted Syrian President Bashar Assad. He added that U.S. President Joe Biden said in August that Tice was alive.

Zakka said he believes Tice was transferred between security agencies over the past 12 years, including in an area where Iranian-backed fighters were operating.

Asked if it was possible Tice had been taken out of the country, Zakka said Assad most likely kept him in Syria as a potential bargaining chip.

Biden said Dec. 8 that his administration believed Tice was alive and was committed to bringing him home, although he also acknowledged that "we have no direct evidence" of his status.

A former Israeli hostage dies

TEL AVIV, Israel — Hannah Katzir, an Israeli woman who was taken hostage on Oct. 7, 2023, and freed

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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 Katzir, 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.

## Hurricane-force winds bear down on California, latest in stretch of extreme weather

By DORANY PINEDA and MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Record-setting flooding over three days dumped more than a foot of rain on parts of northern California, a fire left thousands under evacuation orders and warnings in Los Angeles County, forecasters issued the first-ever tornado warning in San Francisco and rough seas tore down part of a wharf in Santa Cruz.

All of this extreme weather has hit California in the past several weeks, showcasing the state's particular vulnerability to major weather disasters.

Strong storms Tuesday produced waves that forecasters said could reach 35 feet (10.7 meters) around Santa Cruz. The National Weather Service issued a high surf warning until early evening, cautioning people to stay out of the ocean and away from piers.

For Chandler Price, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in San Diego, these extreme weather events are both typical and unusual for a La Niña winter, a natural climate cycle that can cause extreme weather across the planet. In California, it means a wetter than average northern region and a drier south.

"So far we've seen that pattern play out pretty well," he said, but added, "obviously, you know, the tornado in the Bay Area was atypical. ... We haven't seen that before, at least not for a very long time."

A storm and wind gusts of up to 60 mph (96 kph) prompted the San Francisco tornado warning that extended to neighboring San Mateo County, which went out to about 1 million people earlier this month. The tornado overturned cars and toppled trees and utility poles near a mall in Scotts Valley, about 70 miles (110 kilometers) south of San Francisco, injuring several people. Tornadoes do occur in California, but they rarely hit populated areas.

In San Francisco, local meteorologists said straight-line winds, not a tornado, felled trees onto cars and streets and damaged roofs.

The storm also dumped significant snow across the northern Sierra Nevada.

F. Martin Ralph, director of the Center for Western Weather and Water Extremes at the University of

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California, San Diego, said climate change means that atmospheric rivers, long stretches of wet air that can produce heavy rains, will be responsible for a greater share of California's yearly precipitation and the periods in between those big events will be drier. These storms are essential for the water supply but can also be dangerous.

"When they are too strong and too many in a row, we end up getting floods," he said, adding that they drive California's weather extremes.

During storms this week around Santa Cruz, one man was trapped under debris and died and another person was pulled into the ocean. The surf also splintered off the end of a Santa Cruz municipal wharf that was under construction, plunging three people into the ocean. One swam to shore and the other two were rescued.

A series of atmospheric rivers are expected through the rest of the week. Overall, this pattern is not unusual — these storms regularly produce high winds, heavy snow in the mountains and torrential rain this time of year.

"What's a little unique about this setup is how closely spaced they are, so there's not much of a break between them," said David Lawrence, a meteorologist and emergency response specialist with the National Weather Service.

Bad storms hit the state ahead of Thanksgiving, too, dumping more than a foot of rain (32 centimeters) on Santa Rosa over three record-setting days, according to federal forecasters.

But these storms haven't stretched very far south, creating dry weather in Southern California that increases fire risk.

One of the state's most recent blazes, the Franklin Fire left some 20,000 people under evacuation orders and warnings and forced students at Pepperdine University to shelter in place. The blaze was fueled by the Santa Anas, the notorious seasonal winds that blow dry air from the interior toward the coast, pushing back moist ocean breezes.

Most of the destruction occurred in Malibu, a community on the western corner of Los Angeles known for its beautiful bluffs and the Hollywood-famous Zuma Beach. The fire damaged or destroyed 48 structures and is one of nearly 8,000 wildfires that have scorched more than 1 million acres (more than 404,685 hectares) in the Golden State this year.

The Santa Ana winds, which peak in December, have also contributed to warmer-than-average temperatures in parts of the southern state, said Price with the National Weather Service.

"Eighty-degree (26.7 Celsius) Christmases are not entirely uncommon around here," he added, but "there was a couple of high temperature record breaks in the mountains, which are usually less affected by the Santa Anas, and so those were a little unusual."

## **Pope Francis kicks off a yearlong Jubilee that will test his stamina and Rome's patience**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis kicked off the 2025 Holy Year on Tuesday, inaugurating a celebration of the Catholic Church that is expected to draw some 32 million pilgrims to Rome in a test of the pope's stamina and the ability of the Eternal City to welcome them.

From his wheelchair, Francis knocked a few times and the great Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica swung open. He was wheeled across the threshold as bells tolled across Rome and the choir inside the basilica began Christmas Eve Mass.

In his homily, Francis said the Holy Year is an opportunity to relieve the debt of poor countries and commit to protecting the planet. The aim of the Jubilee, he said, is "to bring hope to the interminable, dreary days of prisoners, to the cold and dismal lodgings of the poor and to all those places desecrated by war and violence."

The ceremony inaugurated the once-every-25-year tradition of a Jubilee, in which the Catholic faithful make pilgrimages to Rome.

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Francis has dedicated the 2025 Jubilee to the theme of hope, and he will underscore that message when he opens a Holy Door on Thursday at Rome's Rebibbia prison in a bid to give inmates hope for a better future. Francis has long incorporated prison ministry into his priestly vocation, and has made several visits to Rebibbia and other prisons during his travels.

Security around the Vatican was at its highest levels following the Christmas market attack last week in Germany, the interior ministry said.

Italian authorities were using extra police patrols and camera surveillance around Rome, while pilgrims faced metal detectors and other security checks to access St. Peter's Square via a reinforced police barricade passage.

Francis, who turned 88 last week, went into the Christmas week and Jubilee launch with a cold that forced him to deliver his weekly Sunday blessing from indoors. But he appeared in fine form Tuesday night. His health and stamina, already compromised because of his tendency to get bronchitis, are a concern given the rigorous calendar of events during the Holy Year.

One of the highlights will be the canonization of the teenage internet whiz Carlo Acutis, considered the first millennial and digital-era saint, during the Jubilee dedicated to adolescents in April.

This week, Francis also delivers his annual "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) speech on Christmas Day from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica. In addition to the outing at Rebibbia, he will celebrate New Year's Eve vespers and a New Year's Day Mass.

The city of Rome entered the Jubilee with some trepidation. It has undergone two years of traffic-clogging public works upgrades of transportation, hospital emergency rooms and other vital services, testing residents' patience.

But only about a third of the 323 projects have been completed, and the city is already groaning under the weight of overtourism. Visitors have returned to Italy in droves following COVID-19, and the explosion of short-term vacation rentals has exacerbated a housing crisis.

Some of Rome's prized monuments have reopened recently, including the Trevi Fountain. And the main Jubilee project was finished just in time: A pedestrian piazza linking Castel St. Angelo to the Via della Conciliazione, the main boulevard leading to St. Peter's Square, was unveiled Monday.

Vatican officials insist that Rome has a tradition of welcoming pilgrims and point to how past Jubilees have left their mark on the Eternal City's urban and spiritual landscape. The Sistine Chapel was commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV for the Jubilee of 1475, and the big Vatican garage was built for the 2000 Jubilee under St. John Paul II.

Pope Boniface VII called the first Holy Year in 1300, and in recent times they are generally celebrated every 25 to 50 years. Pilgrims who participate can obtain "indulgences" — the related to the forgiveness of sins that roughly amounts to a "get out of Purgatory free" card.

Francis declared a special Jubilee in 2015-2016 dedicated to mercy and the next one is planned for 2033 to commemorate the anniversary of the crucifixion of Christ.

The last regular Jubilee was in 2000, when St. John Paul II ushered in the church's third millennium. The one before that, in 1975, was notable because Pope Paul VI was nearly hit by falling plaster when he opened the Holy Door. The door was still behind a fake wall and Paul had used a ceremonial hammer to bang on it three times to open it. The fake wall now is removed well in advance.

## **NFL players who use platform to share their faith say it's their duty to spread their love of Jesus**

By LARRY LAGE AP Sports Writer

ALLEN PARK, Mich. (AP) — Jake Bates was standing on the turf in his hometown of Houston when asked to reflect on an unlikely journey from learning how to sell bricks to making game-winning kicks for the Detroit Lions.

Bates used his platform as an NFL player to spread his love of Jesus in a prime-time interview on NBC after lifting the Lions to a win over the Texans with a 52-yard field goal as time expired.



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A month later, Bates told The Associated Press it is a duty to share his Christian faith.

"This doesn't happen without Jesus and by this, I mean any of this, like, living doesn't happen without Jesus dying on the cross," Bates said recently at the team's practice facility. "He put us on a stage to glorify his name."

The NFL is filled with players and coaches who feel the same way.

Quarterbacks C.J. Stroud of Houston, Kirk Cousins of Atlanta and Lamar Jackson of Baltimore along with Ravens coach John Harbaugh are among the many in the league who speak publicly about their Christian beliefs.

Stroud, in particular, has been a source of inspiration for Bates. He especially admires how the quarterback regularly credits Jesus at press conferences.

"What he's been able to do in the media and spreading Jesus' love has been awesome to see," Bates said.

Harbaugh started his latest postgame news conference, reminding reporters and anyone watching or listening that Christmas was coming up and shared the prayer the Ravens had just heard in the locker room.

"It's a big football week, all right? It's also a big life week," Harbaugh said. "It's a big spiritual week."

Cousins has professed his faith publicly, dating back to his college years at Michigan State and continuing in the NFL with Washington, Minnesota and the Falcons.

"We all have a platform," Cousins said earlier this month. "We all try to steward it the best we can. I just want to be able to give a reason to people who ask for the hope that I have."

Although Christianity is the dominant religion at all levels of the sport, some Jewish and Muslim players have also used their platform to publicly share their faith. Recently, for example, Jake Retzlaff became the first Jewish quarterback to play for Brigham Young University, the Utah private school run by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He has embraced his role as an ambassador of Judaism in football.

In the NFL, Bates' story is perhaps one of the most unique in league history.

He grew up about 30 miles northwest of Houston in Tomball, Texas, and played soccer at Central Arkansas before switching sports and transferring twice.

Bates was a kickoff specialist for two seasons at Texas State and for one year at Arkansas, earning All-SEC honors in 2022.

His hometown Texans signed him on Aug. 1, 2023, and waived him 11 days later to send him searching for a new career in the brick business.

"I was still in training, so I hadn't even sold new bricks yet," he said. "But that's what I was getting ready to do."

Bates, though, wasn't ready to hang up his cleats for good and went to an XFL showcase in fall of 2023.

"My last shot," he said.

Bates did enough to get signed by the Michigan Panthers and made three field goals from at least 60 yards while playing for them in the United Football League, a team that shares the same home field with the Lions.

Bates believes it was divine intervention.

He has made the most of the opportunity, making game-winning kicks against NFC North rivals Minnesota and Green Bay as well as Houston. He earned the NFC special teams player of the month honors in November.

While playing football is his job, it is not Bates' calling.

"I'm not here to make kicks or miss kicks," he said. "I think I'm here to spread the love of Jesus. So, however long he gives me this stage, that's what I plan to do."

## Amsterdam court sentences 5 men over violence linked to Ajax-Maccabi soccer game

By MOLLY QUELL and RAF CASERT Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — An Amsterdam District Court on Tuesday sentenced five men to up to six months in prison for violence that erupted around a UEFA Europa League football match between the

Dutch club Ajax and Israel's Maccabi Tel Aviv in November.

The riots, which caused an international outcry and accusations of deliberate antisemitic attacks, left 5 people in hospital and 20 others with minor injuries. More than 60 people were detained.

The court on Tuesday sentenced one man to 6 months in prison, another to 2 1/2 months and two to 1 month in jail. A fifth defendant received 100 hours of community service.

A series of violent incidents took place between pro-Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli soccer fans around the soccer match.

Some of the violence was condemned as antisemitic, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offering to evacuate Maccabi supporters. The violence, which garnered headlines worldwide, damaged Amsterdam's reputation as a beacon of tolerance and a haven for persecuted religions, including Jews.

"It seems that the violence arose from strong pro-Palestine sentiments and dissatisfaction with the situation in Gaza, and related anger against the Israelis present," the prosecutors' office said in a statement at the conclusion of hearings two weeks ago.

The five defendants, who are all Dutch residents and aged between 19 and 32, were accused of public violence, theft and assault.

The Nov. 8 game was allowed to go ahead after the Netherlands' counterterrorism watchdog found there was no "concrete threat" to Israeli fans, and the match wasn't considered a high risk. Even so, Amsterdam authorities banned a pro-Palestinian demonstration outside the Johan Cruyff Arena.

According to an investigation, the day before the game the authorities reported several incidents, including Israeli fans tearing a Palestinian flag from an Amsterdam building and attacking a taxi.

Six more suspects will have their trials at a later date, including three minors. Under Dutch rules, proceedings for juveniles are held behind closed doors. Police are continuing to investigate the violence and have released images of several suspects they want to identify.

## **Medellin Cartel victims demand truth and justice as cartel boss Fabio Ochoa walks free in Colombia**

By MANUEL RUEDA and ASTRID SUÁREZ Associated Press

BOGOTÁ, Colombia (AP) — The return of former drug trafficker Fabio Ochoa to Colombia following his deportation from the United States has reopened old wounds among victims of the Medellín Cartel, with some expressing dismay at the Colombian authorities' decision to let Ochoa walk free.

Some of the cartel victims said Tuesday they are hoping the former drug lord will at least cooperate with ongoing efforts by human rights groups to investigate one of the most violent periods of Colombia's history and demanded that Colombian prosecutors also take Ochoa in for questioning.

In the late 80s and early 90s the Medellín Cartel killed police officers, politicians, judges, journalists and bystanders as it waged war on the Colombian state, which had stepped up its efforts to interdict drug shipments, arrest drug traffickers and seize their properties. Some historians in Colombia attribute 10,000 killings to cartel leader Pablo Escobar.

Ochoa was one of the cartel's key operators at the time and lived for several years in Miami where he ran a distribution center for the cocaine cartel. He has denied being involved in the cartel killings. But many victims of the cartel and their relatives are highly skeptical of that claim.

Bogotá Mayor Carlos Fernando Galán was 12 when his father, presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán was killed by cartel hitmen in 1989.

On Monday night Galán wrote in a message on X that it was "unacceptable" for Ochoa not to be facing any charges in Colombia.

Galán's older brother, Juan Manuel Galán, went further.

"The majority of the (Medellín Cartel's) crimes are in impunity" he wrote on X. "Along with thousands of victims we hope to know the truth about Ochoa's responsibility and that of his allies in kidnappings, murders and indiscriminate acts of terrorism."

Ochoa was deported to Colombia on Monday after serving more than 20 years in prison in the U.S. for

a drug trafficking conviction, which was not related to any killings in Colombia.

The 67-year-old had his fingerprints taken at the airport and was let go by immigration officials who ran his name through a database and confirmed he is not wanted by Colombian authorities.

Speaking to journalists, who frantically swarmed around him in Bogotá's airport, Ochoa claimed he had been "framed" by U.S. prosecutors. He added that he had paid for his drug trafficking crimes in Colombia in the early 1990s, when he spent several years in a Colombian prison.

Ochoa was released in 1996 but was once again arrested in 1999 and was extradited to the U.S. in 2001 in response to an indictment in Miami naming him and more than 40 others as part of a drug smuggling conspiracy.

Gonzalo Enrique Rojas was a young boy in 1989 when his father died on a commercial plane that was blown up by the Medellín Cartel, killing all 107 people on board.

Rojas, who now leads a foundation for victims of Colombia's conflict said that Ochoa's return to Colombia presents an opportunity for more details to be known about that incident, such as what motivated the cartel to attack a plane full of civilians, and what were its relations with members of the Colombian government.

He said that Colombian prosecutors should interrogate Ochoa about this event and other crimes committed by the cartel. He added that his foundation, Colombia with Memory, will also try to seek a meeting with the former cartel boss.

"The years in prison (for cartel leaders) are not that relevant for those of us who are victims of the Medellín cartel," Rojas said. "What really repairs the pain is justice and truth."

## 1 dead after a Russian missile hits a Ukrainian apartment block

ILLIA NOVIKOV undefined

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian ballistic missile struck a residential building Tuesday in the Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih and at least one person was killed, local authorities said.

Gov. Serhii Lysak said at least 11 other people were injured and more people could be trapped beneath the rubble of the four-story apartment block.

Social media footage showed one side of the building had almost completely collapsed.

"Unfortunately, we are preparing for difficult news," Mayor Oleksandr Vilkul wrote on his Telegram channel.

Minutes before his post, Ukraine's air force alerted a "ballistic missile strike threat" for southern and central regions of Ukraine, later signaling a "high-speed" target flying in the direction of Kryvyi Rih.

The strike came as Ukraine prepared to officially celebrate Christmas for the second time on Dec. 25. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed legislation in July 2023 to bring Ukraine's public Christmas holiday in line with the majority of other European countries, rather than the later date followed in Russia.

The shift sought to assert Ukraine's national identity amid Russia's full-scale invasion.

"While the rest of the world celebrates Christmas, Ukrainians continue to suffer from endless Russian attacks," Ukraine's human rights ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, wrote on social media.

## Sudan's war is 'deepening and widening' a famine crisis, hunger monitoring report says

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Famine is spreading in Sudan due to a war between the military and a notorious paramilitary group that has devastated the country and created the world's largest displacement crisis, a global hunger monitoring group said Tuesday.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, said it detected famine in five areas, including in Sudan's largest displacement camp, Zamzam, in North Darfur province, where famine was found for the first time in August.

The report said the war has triggered unprecedented mass displacement and a collapsing economy. It said hostilities can result in farmers abandoning their crops, looting and stock destruction.

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Along with the Zamzam camp, which has more than 400,000 people, famine was also detected in two other camps for displaced people, Abu Shouk and al-Salam in North Darfur, and the Western Nuba Mountains, the IPC report said.

Five other areas in North Darfur are projected "with reasonable evidence" to experience famine in the next six months, including el-Fasher, the provincial capital of North Darfur, it said. Seventeen areas in the Nuba Mountains and the northern and southern areas of Darfur are at risk of famine, it added.

The report also said some areas in the capital, Khartoum, and the east-central province of Gezira "may be experiencing" famine-like conditions. It said experts were unable to confirm whether famine threshold has been surpassed due to lack of data.

"It is not merely a lack of food but a profound breakdown of health, livelihoods and social structures, leaving entire communities in a state of desperation," it said.

There is widespread hunger, with food in markets scarce and prices high. Aid groups say they struggle to reach the most vulnerable as warring parties limit access, especially in North Darfur province.

Ahead of the IPC's report, Sudan's government said it had suspended its participation in the global monitoring system, according to a senior United Nations official with knowledge of the move.

In a letter dated Dec. 23, Agriculture Minister Abu Baker al-Beshri accused the IPC of "issuing unreliable reports that undermine Sudan's sovereignty and dignity," said the U.N. official, who spoke in condition of anonymity to discuss the letter.

Sudan's 20-month war has killed more than 24,000 people and driven over 14 million people — about 30% of the population — from their homes, according to the United Nations. An estimated 3.2 million Sudanese have crossed into neighboring countries including Chad, Egypt and South Sudan.

The war began in April 2023 when tensions between its military and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces exploded into fighting in Khartoum before spreading to other areas. The conflict has been marked by atrocities including ethnically motivated killing and rape, according to the U.N. and rights groups. The International Criminal Court is investigating alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Dervla Cleary, a senior emergency and rehabilitation officer at the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization, said 638,000 people are experiencing famine.

"The situation in Sudan is just awful. It is unacceptable in a world like today," she said.

The IPC report called for a ceasefire, calling it the only way to reduce the risk of famine spreading further."

Sudan is the third country where famine was declared in the past 15 years, along with South Sudan and Somalia.

The IPC comprises more than a dozen U.N. agencies, aid groups and governments that use its monitoring as a global reference for analysis of food and nutrition crises. The organization has also warned that large parts of Gaza's Palestinian population face the threat of famine.

## Bill Clinton is out of the hospital after being treated for the flu

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Bill Clinton was discharged from a Washington hospital on Tuesday and will be home for Christmas after he was admitted the day before with a fever.

Clinton is being treated for the flu, Angel Urena, Clinton's deputy chief of staff, said in a statement about his release.

"He and his family are deeply grateful for the exceptional care provided by the team at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and are touched by the kind messages and well wishes he received," Urena said.

"He sends his warmest wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season to all," Urena said.

The 78-year-old Democrat was hospitalized on Monday afternoon for testing and observation.

Clinton served two terms as president from January 1993 until January 2001. He addressed the Democratic National Convention in Chicago this summer, and campaigned in the fall for Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris, who lost the election to Republican Donald Trump in November.

Clinton recently published his newest book, "Citizen," a memoir about his life after the White House and the role of philanthropy in it.

## France has a new government, again. Politics and crushing debt complicate next steps

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France's president and prime minister managed to form a new government just in time for the holidays. Now comes the hard part.

Crushing debt, intensifying pressure from the nationalist far right, wars in Europe and the Mideast: Challenges abound for President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Francois Bayrou after an already tumultuous 2024.

What's wrong with French finances?

The most urgent order of business is passing a 2025 budget. Financial markets, ratings agencies and the European Commission are pushing France to bring down its deficit, to comply with EU rules limiting debt and keep France's borrowing costs from spiraling. That would threaten the stability and prosperity of all countries that share the euro currency.

France's debt is currently estimated at a staggering 112% of gross domestic product. It grew further after the government gave aid payments to businesses and workers during COVID-19 lockdowns even as the pandemic depressed growth, and capped household energy prices after Russia invaded Ukraine. The bill is now coming due.

But France's previous government collapsed this month because Marine Le Pen's far-right party and left-wing lawmakers opposed 60 billion euros in spending cuts and tax hikes in the original 2025 budget plan. Bayrou and new Finance Minister Eric Lombard are expected to scale back some of those promises, but the calculations are tough.

"The political situation is difficult. The international situation is dangerous, and the economic context is fragile," Lombard, a low-profile banker who advised a Socialist government in the 1990s, said upon taking office.

"The environmental emergency, the social emergency, developing our businesses — these innumerable challenges require us to treat our endemic illness: the deficit," he said. "The more we are indebted, the more the debt costs, and the more it suffocates the country."

How long will this government last?

This is France's fourth government in the past year. No party has a parliamentary majority and the new Cabinet can only survive with the support of lawmakers on the center-right and center-left.

Le Pen — Macron's fiercest rival — was instrumental in ousting the previous government by joining left-wing forces in a no-confidence vote. Bayrou consulted her when forming the new government and Le Pen remains a powerful force.

That angers left-wing groups, who had expected more influence in the new Cabinet, and who say promised spending cuts will hurt working-class families and small businesses hardest. Left-wing voters, meanwhile, feel betrayed ever since a coalition from the left won the most seats in the summer's snap legislative elections but failed to secure a government.

The possibility of a new no-confidence vote looms, though it's not clear how many parties would support it.

What about Macron?

Macron has repeatedly said he will remain president until his term expires in 2027.

But France's constitution and current structure, dating from 1958 and called the Fifth Republic, were designed to ensure stability after a period of turmoil. If this new government collapses within months and the country remains in political paralysis, pressure will mount for Macron to step down and call early elections.

Le Pen's ascendant National Rally is intent on bringing Macron down. But Le Pen faces her own headaches: A March court ruling over alleged illegal party financing could see her barred from running for office.

What else is on the agenda?

The National Rally and hard-right Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau want tougher immigration rules. But Bayrou wants to focus on making existing rules work. "There are plenty of (immigration) laws that exist. None is being applied," he said Monday on broadcaster BFM-TV, to criticism from conservatives.

Military spending is a key issue amid fears about European security and pressure from U.S. President-elect Donald Trump for Europe to spend more on its own defense. French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu, who champions military aid for Ukraine and ramping up weapons production, kept his job and stressed in a statement Tuesday the need to face down "accumulating threats" against France.

More immediately, Macron wants an emergency law in early January to allow sped-up reconstruction of the cyclone-ravaged French territory of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean off Africa. Thousands of people are in emergency shelters and authorities are still counting the dead more than a week after the devastation.

Meanwhile the government in the restive French South Pacific territory of New Caledonia collapsed Tuesday in a wave of resignations by pro-independence figures — another challenge for the new overseas affairs minister, Manuel Valls, and the incoming Cabinet.

## **Caitlin Clark honored as AP Female Athlete of the Year following her impact on women's sports**

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

Caitlin Clark raised the profile of women's basketball to unprecedented levels in both the college ranks and the WNBA, and Tuesday she was named the AP Female Athlete of the Year for her impact on and off the court.

After leading Iowa to the national championship game, Clark was the top pick in the WNBA draft as expected and went on to win rookie of the year honors in the league. Fans packed sold-out arenas and millions of television viewers tuned in to follow her journey. Clark's exploits were far reaching, casting a light on other women's sports leagues along the way.

A group of 74 sports journalists from The Associated Press and its members voted on the award. Clark received 35 votes, Olympic gymnast Simone Biles was second with 25 and boxer Imane Khelif was third, getting four votes.

Clark is only the fourth women's basketball player to be honored as the female athlete of the year since it was first presented in 1931, joining Sheryl Swoopes (1993), Rebecca Lobo (1995) and Candace Parker (2008, 2021).

"I grew up a fan of Candace Parker and the people who came before me and to be honored in this way, is super special and I'm thankful," Clark said in a phone interview. "It was a great year for women's basketball and women's sports."

Shohei Ohtani won the AP Male Athlete of the Year on Monday for the third time.

Clark broke the NCAA Division I career scoring record for both men and women finishing her career with 3,951 points while guiding Iowa to its second consecutive national championship game. After her Hawkeyes lost to South Carolina for the title, Gamecocks coach Dawn Staley took the mic during her team's celebration and said, "I want to personally thank Caitlin Clark for lifting up our sport."

For all the success Clark has had and the attention she has brought to women's basketball, she is often the centerpiece of debates and online toxicity towards her and other players in the league.

For her part, Clark has disavowed the toxic discourse.

Lobo also has been impressed with the way the 22-year-old Clark has handled the pressure and attention that has come her way.

"I would say she's navigated it almost flawlessly. she hasn't had an big missteps or misspeaks at a time you're under constant scrutiny," Lobo said. "She's seemed to say and do all the right things. That's just incredible at a time when it's constant attention and scrutiny. She has not done anything to tarnish this sort of mild persona she has."

As Clark handled the praise — and the backlash — during the heat of competition, it was hard for her to appreciate just what she was able accomplish over the past year. But after having time to reflect on the whirlwind tour, she appreciates those who were there alongside her for the ride.

"I'm thankful for the people I got to do it with," Clark said. "A year ago I was still in the early part of my senior year in college. ... How fast things change, and now I can see how great a college season it was."

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Iowa sold out all of its games at home and on the road with Clark as the main attraction. That momentum continued into the pros. Her No. 22 jersey was prevalent wherever she played during her rookie season and will be retired at Iowa.

"You'd be remiss not to acknowledge how crazy her fan base is and the eyes she gets with everything she does," said Indiana Pacers guard Tyrese Haliburton, who was often spotted courtside at Clark's Indiana Fever games. "It's a different type of popularity, she's one of the most popular athletes in the world. It's not just women's sports anymore.

"It's really cool to see and she just handles it with such grace."

Clark said she enjoys spending time with fans at games, usually taking a few minutes before and after games to sign autographs.

"For me it's still really fun," she said. "Whether it's 15 seconds or 10 seconds or 5 seconds can be very impactful in a young girl and young boys life. Seeing the fans going crazy an hour before tipoff, I never take that for granted. That's super cool and I never want that to go away."

After a slow start to her WNBA career, Clark eventually found her stride there too. She set the single-game assist record with 19 and also had 337 assists on the season to break that mark as well. Clark, known for her logo-distance 3-pointers, was the fastest player to reach 100 3's when she did it in 34 games which helped Indiana reach the playoffs for the first time since 2016.

Lobo, who won the AP female athlete of the year award after lifting UConn to its first national championship, was on the court for launch of the WNBA two years later. The ESPN analyst sees Clark's ascension as something different.

"She's brought unprecedented attention both in the building, but also viewership to the sport that was worthy of it but didn't have it yet," Lobo said. "There's never been anything like this.

"That timeframe from 1995-97 was a baby step in the progression of it all. This is a giant leap forward. I've never seen anything like this. There's more attention then the sports ever had."

The numbers have been record breaking when Clark is part of a broadcast:

— TV viewership in the WNBA was up 300% thanks in large part to Clark with ABC, CBS, ION, ESPN, and ESPN2 all having record viewers when Fever games were on.

— The NCAA women's championship game outdrew the men on TV for the first time in the sport's 42-year history with 18.9 million viewers tuning it to watch the event. It was the second most watched women's sporting event outside of the Olympics in the history of U.S. television.

— The 2024 WNBA draft was the most-watched in league history with 2.4 million viewers.

Clark credits the community of women athletes for the popularity increase of women's sports, saying "we" did this or "we" did that when asked about it.

"It's fascinating, you don't always appreciate how many people 18 million is," Clark said. "You see that number against a college football game or the Masters or whatever it is as far as the biggest sporting events in our country and it puts it in perspective. We outdrew the men's Final Four."

## A blast at a Turkish ammunition factory kills 11 people

ISTANBUL (AP) — An explosion at an ammunition factory in northwest Turkey left 11 dead and five injured Tuesday morning.

The blast occurred in Balikesir province, according to the state-run Anadolu Agency. The factory is in a rural area away from population centers.

Balikesir Governor Ismail Ustaoglu said the explosion collapsed the capsule production building and the surrounding buildings had minor damage. "The explosion was due to a technical issue. There is no possibility of sabotage," he added.

Justice Minister Yilmaz Tunc wrote on social media platform X that public prosecutors have been assigned to investigate the cause.

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## Today in History: December 25

### George Washington crosses the Delaware

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 25, the 360th day of 2024. There are six days left in the year. This is Christmas Day.

Today in history:

On Dec. 25, 1776, Gen. George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack against Hessian forces at Trenton, New Jersey, during the American Revolutionary War.

Also on this date:

In 1066, William the Conqueror was crowned King of England.

In 1818, "Silent Night (Stille Nacht)" was publicly performed for the first time during the Christmas Midnight Mass at the Church of St. Nikolaus in Oberndorf, Austria.

In 1868, President Andrew Johnson granted unconditional pardons to "every person who directly or indirectly" supported the Confederacy in the Civil War.

In 1926, Hirohito became emperor of Japan, succeeding his father, Emperor Yoshihito.

In 1989, ousted Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo) and his wife, Elena, were executed following a populist uprising.

In 2009, passengers aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 foiled an attempt to blow up the plane as it was landing in Detroit by seizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (OO'-mahr fah-ROOK' ahb-DOOL'-moo-TAH'-lahb), who tried to set off explosives in his underwear. (Abdulmutallab later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2021, NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, the world's largest and most powerful space telescope, rocketed away from French Guiana in South America on a quest to see light from the first stars and galaxies and search the universe for signs of life.

Today's Birthdays: Football Hall of Famer Larry Csonka is 78. Country singer Barbara Mandrell is 76. Actor Sissy Spacek is 75. Former White House adviser Karl Rove is 74. Actor CCH Pounder is 72. Singer Annie Lennox is 70. Country singer Steve Wariner is 70. Baseball Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson is 66. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is 53. Actor Jeremy Strong is 46.