

# Groton Daily Independent

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## 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.

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

## Tuesday, Dec. 31

Senior Menu: Roast pork, mashed potatoes and gravy, three bean salad, fruit, whole wheat bread.

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

## Wednesday, Jan. 1, 2025

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
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- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
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- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
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\*\* See owner's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply.  
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EXCEPTIONAL FINANCING OFFERS AVAILABLE<sup>†</sup>



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# 1440

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

## **Azerbaijan Airlines Crash**

Azerbaijan opened a criminal investigation yesterday after a passenger jet crashed in Kazakhstan, killing 38 people on board. At least 29 people survived, though all sustained injuries. Analysts suggest a missile from Russia's air defense system—which recently downed Ukrainian drones in the region—likely struck the aircraft, though Azerbaijan's president has urged against speculation.

Azerbaijan Airlines' Embraer 190 was traveling from the country's capital of Baku to Grozny in Russia on Wednesday when it reversed course. The aircraft then traveled over the Caspian Sea, attempting to land in Aktau, Kazakhstan. In its final moments, the plane made a steep descent before crashing upside down in a fireball. Surviving passengers reportedly heard an explosion and witnessed shrapnel hitting the fuselage.

Separately, Finland seized an oil tanker suspected of using its anchor to cut an undersea cable to Estonia. Finland has further accused the ship of carrying oil to Russia in violation of EU sanctions.

## **Mozambique Prison Break**

At least 6,000 prisoners escaped from a high-security facility this week, Mozambique's police chief said yesterday. Thirty-three inmates were killed and 15 others injured in confrontations with security guards.

The facility—roughly 9 miles from the center of the country's capital—was one of four prisons breached Wednesday as Mozambique experiences widespread civil unrest. Earlier this week, the Constitutional Council certified the long-ruling Frelimo Party won the country's disputed Oct. 9 presidential elections. The announcement came after weeks of violent protests over voting irregularities reported by international observers; more than 250 people are believed to have been killed since the election.

Among those who escaped from prison are over two dozen terrorists, the police chief said. Mozambique is fighting an ISIS-affiliated insurgency in the country's north that has killed thousands of people and resulted in the kidnapping or displacement of more than 100,000 others.

## **Bald Eagle Recognized**

The bald eagle has been formally recognized as the official national bird after President Joe Biden signed legislation on Christmas Eve. The recognition came as Biden signed roughly 50 bills, including an anti-hazing law, weeks before his term ends.

The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) has been featured on the US Great Seal since 1782, a mark used by the State Department and printed on the dollar bill. The bird is the only eagle indigenous to North America and is considered sacred by many Native American tribes. The bird of prey became endangered in the 1900s amid hunting and pesticide use, with nesting pairs dropping from an estimated hundreds of thousands in the 1800s to fewer than 500 in 1963. Hunting bans and conservation efforts returned their numbers to 19th-century levels.

While hunting or selling the birds is illegal, members of federally recognized Native tribes can apply to receive eagle feathers for religious use from the National Eagle Repository, where dead eagles are brought to reduce illegal trade.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Wicked" set to be released for rent or purchase on streaming platforms Dec. 31.

"Mufasa" (\$15M) tops "Nosferatu" (\$11.6M) and "Sonic 3" (\$10.7M) to lead Christmas Day box office.

Baltimore Ravens' Lamar Jackson breaks NFL record for most career rushing yards (6,110) by a quarterback, topping the record previously held by Michael Vick.

Richard Parsons, former CEO of Time Warner and Citigroup chairman, dies of bone cancer at 76.

Bill Bergey, five-time NFL Pro Bowl linebacker, dies of cancer at 79.

Hudson Meek, child actor known for role in "Baby Driver," dies at 16 after falling from moving vehicle.

## Science & Technology

UK patient successfully receives country's first double lung transplant using "lung in a box" device; technology reconditions organs from donors that may have been damaged.

Archaeologists uncover 535-million-year-old fossilized embryos of roundworm-like creatures; discovery sheds light on the evolution of ancient organisms during the Cambrian period.

Chimpanzee study shows individuals vary in their ability to crack open nuts using stones, suggesting a wide degree of cognitive ability within the same group.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.0%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq -0.1%) in thin holiday trading.

Apple stock notches all-time high in intraday trading as it nears \$4T market cap.

US holiday retail sales from Nov. 1 through Dec. 24 rose 3.8% year-over-year, up from 3.1% last year, per preliminary data from Mastercard.

Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba and South Korean retailer E-mart to form online shopping joint venture in 2025, with entity valued at roughly \$4B.

## Politics & World Affairs

Israel strikes multiple targets in Yemen, including the country's international airport, where the World Health Organization director was present, reportedly killing six people and wounding 11 more; attacks come after Houthi militants struck a Tel Aviv playground last week.

India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh dies at age 92; the first Sikh to hold the country's highest office, Singh was known for liberalizing India's economy during his tenure from 2004 to 2014.

World marks 20 years since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami killed an estimated 230,000 people across a dozen countries, the deadliest tsunami in history.



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

5 months to get your through the winter!

Student: \$175.75, Single: \$202.40, Couple: \$298.90,  
Family: \$362.15

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



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## BROWN COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

Lynn Heupel, Auditor

Accounting | Elections | Licensing | Record-Keeping

### NOTICE OF HEARING

#### 2024 BROWN COUNTY BUDGET SUPPLEMENT

A public hearing will be held by the Brown County Commission on the 31<sup>st</sup> day of December 2024 in the Brown County Commission Chambers, Courthouse Annex, Aberdeen, SD to consider supplementing the 2024 Fiscal Year Budget.

The public is invited to attend the hearing and to present comments and testimony regarding the supplements.

ATTEST: Lynn Heupel, Brown County Auditor



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Federal government approves 20-year mining ban in part of SD's Black Hills

**Decision splits clean-water activists and mineral industry**

**BY: SETH TUPPER - DECEMBER 26, 2024 1:31 PM**

The federal government approved a 20-year ban Thursday on new mining-related activity in a portion of South Dakota's Black Hills.

The ban covers 32 square miles of federally owned land located about 20 miles west of Rapid City. The boundaries encompass the Pactola Reservoir and areas upstream that drain into the reservoir via Rapid Creek.

Lilias Jarding, executive director of the Black Hills Clean Water Alliance, hailed the action as "an expression of the will of the people."

"It definitely shows that when people get active in their communities that we can influence what happens," Jarding said.

Advocates for the ban rallied against a proposal from Minneapolis-based F3 Gold to conduct exploratory drilling. The project's location is in the Jenney Gulch area of the Black Hills National Forest, within a mile of Pactola Reservoir. The man-made mountain lake is the largest and deepest reservoir in the Black Hills. It's also a popular recreation destination and a drinking-water source for Rapid City and Ellsworth Air Force Base.

F3 won draft approval of its drilling plan from local Forest Service officials in 2022. Then, last year, the national offices of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management announced they were considering a ban on new mining-related activity in the Pactola area.

Federal officials conducted a meeting about the proposed ban last year in Rapid City, where public sentiment was overwhelmingly against the drilling project and in favor of the ban. The Black Hills Clean Water Alliance said more than 1,900 people filed written comments on the ban, with 98% in support of it.

The ban is formally known as a "mineral withdrawal," because it withdraws the area from eligibility for new mineral exploration and development. A 20-year ban is the maximum allowed by federal law, although the ban could be renewed after that. Only Congress can enact a permanent ban.

Decision comes from Interior Department



**A 2015 view of the Pactola Reservoir in the Black Hills.** (Courtesy

of Black Hills National Forest)



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Interior Secretary Deb Haaland was the decision-maker on the mineral withdrawal, because the department's Bureau of Land Management administers mining claims on federal land.

"I'm proud to take action today to withdraw this area for the next 20 years, to help protect clean drinking water and ensure this special place is protected for future generations," Haaland said in a statement.

She also mentioned the area's clean air, its recreational and ecological benefits, and the Black Hills' sacred status in the traditional spiritual beliefs of many Great Plains Native American tribes. Haaland is a member of the Pueblo and Laguna tribes in New Mexico.

Tom Vilsack, secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which includes the Forest Service, issued a statement praising Haaland's decision.

"The Pactola Reservoir–Rapid Creek Watershed provides so many benefits to the people and communities we serve, from clean water to world-class recreation, from livestock grazing to the spaces our Tribal communities consider sacred," Vilsack said.

F3 Gold did not immediately return a message from South Dakota Searchlight. Jarding said F3's Pactola project is negated by the 20-year ban on new activities.

"The only exception to that is if someone has already proved there is a mineral reserve, and without drilling, there's no proving there's a mineral resource," Jarding said.

The company has another exploratory drilling project near Custer, outside of the Pactola ban area. The Custer project has final approval from the Forest Service.

Interest in Black Hills gold dates to its 1874 discovery by Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's Black Hills Expedition. The discovery set off a gold rush that ultimately led to the development of the Homestake Mine near Lead, which was the largest and deepest gold mine in North America prior to its closure in 2001. Today, the only active, large-scale gold mine in the region is the Wharf Mine, also near Lead. There's a large abandoned gold mine in the Lead area, the Gilt Edge Mine, that is undergoing a massive cleanup and water-treatment project supported by the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund.

## Mining industry responds

Larry Mann, a retired South Dakota lobbyist who formerly represented F3, said the company's project was treated unfairly. He said exploratory drilling would not damage the Pactola watershed, and that if drilling results justified developing a mine, the proposal would go through a rigorous permitting process that would probably take 10 to 15 years.

"F3 was willing to go through a lot of different things to accommodate concerns," Mann said.

Mann wonders if the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump could seek to alter Haaland's decision. Whether or not the new administration could do that, Mann expects Trump's pick for secretary of the Interior Department — Republican former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum — to be more supportive of mining on federal land.

"I think that there's a possibility now with a change of leadership that the pendulum could start swinging the other way," Mann said.

An official working for Burgum's transition team did not immediately return a message from Searchlight. A spokesperson for the Bureau of Land Management responded by email to Searchlight, saying only that "we're not going to speculate about decisions of a next Administration."

F3 Gold is not a member of the South Dakota Mineral Industries Association, but the association issued a statement Thursday in response to Searchlight questions about the Pactola ban. The statement describes the ban as "federal overreach." The association also alleged that the decision conflicts with federal mineral laws and policies and fails to recognize the significance of critical minerals — such as antimony, used in batteries — that the association said are present in the area covered by the ban.

"The secretary's rushed decision on the withdrawal of over 20,000 acres proves this administration is desperate to complete executive actions before the new administration takes over on January 20th," the association's statement said, in part.

*Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.*



## Junk food and drug use cut into life expectancy gains for states

State policies on gun safety, pregnancy care, health screenings matter, too

BY: TIM HENDERSON, STATELINE - DECEMBER 26, 2024 10:09 AM

After large drops during the pandemic, life expectancy in the United States should recover to 2019 levels this year nationally and in 26 states — but not as fast as it should compared with similar countries, according to a new study.

Bad habits such as junk food, smoking and illicit drug use are preventing longer lifespans even as technology brings major progress in diseases such as cancer and heart disease, according to a new study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

By 2050, U.S. life expectancy is projected

to increase from 79.1 years to 80.4 years for babies born in that year, a modest improvement that would drop the United States behind nearly all other high-income countries, according to the study.

Poverty and inadequate health insurance are slowing progress in some states. Wealthier, more urban and better-educated states are doing better and are more likely to adopt policies that save lives, from curbing gun access to offering income supports for young mothers. Nine of the 10 states (all but North Dakota) with the longest life expectancies for babies born this year are dominated by Democrats, and all 10 have expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. All 10 states with the shortest life expectancies are controlled by Republicans (though Kentucky has a Democratic governor), and they include five of the 10 states that have not expanded Medicaid.

A Stateline analysis of data from the study shows how some states have risen, and some have tumbled, in terms of life expectancy.

In 1990, for example, New York and West Virginia were nearly tied at Nos. 39 and 41 among states' life expectancy rankings. But the two have since taken sharply different paths — New York rose to No. 3 in 2024 and is projected to have the longest life expectancy of any state by 2050, passing Hawaii and Massachusetts.

West Virginia outranks only Mississippi in 2024 and is projected to be last among states in 2050.

New York has benefited from good health care availability in New York City hospitals as well as state policies such as strict gun laws that have curbed suicides, and harm reduction policies to curb overdose deaths with supervised use sites and other controversial programs, said Brett Harris, president of the New



**People line up for free food, groceries and clothing at the weekly Saturday River City Street Ministry food distribution on June 10, 2023, in Huntington, West Virginia.** (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

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York State Public Health Association and an associate professor in the University of Albany's Department of Health Policy.

Harris said she's not surprised that New York state, despite its ascent in life expectancy among states, would still drop from No. 33 to No. 41 by 2050 if ranked as a nation, according to the analysis.

"I think part of that is how individualistic we are in this country, the idea of always trying to get ahead, versus more of a community-based environment in other countries," Harris said. "Their social policies tend to be better for health outcomes. If you live in more of a family environment versus an individualistic environment, that builds in more support."

West Virginia's sparse population and rural poverty make it harder to get health care. It's also hard to get past community and political skepticism about health measures, said Brian Huggins, health officer for Monongalia County, West Virginia. Huggins has worked with other county health officials to advocate for stricter anti-smoking laws and to maintain school vaccination mandates in the face of opposition.

"It hurts to see West Virginia ranked at the bottom. We're a proud state," said Huggins, adding that life expectancy there also is hampered by lack of economic opportunity that drives young, healthy residents to move away. A plethora of concerns include a lack of sidewalks that make healthy walking more hazardous, and a dietary culture that does not include vegetables; both promote obesity.

Huggins also has seen conditions abroad. While stationed in Germany for the U.S. Army, he saw generous health provisions for Germans, such as two-week retreats with massages and sauna baths for those feeling stressed or burned out at work.

"Their goal in Germany is they want you back at work. Prevention and keeping a healthy workforce are their priority because that contributes to the economy," said Huggins. "On the other hand, they have built a tax system to support this. You pay like an 18% tax on everything you buy there — that would not be something Americans would necessarily accept." Germany's valued-added tax, now 19%, applies to most goods and services.

Life expectancy dropped two years in a row during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a national drop of more than 1.8 years between 2019 and 2020, from 79.1 to 77.3 years. Recovery will not be complete until this year, according to the projections, with slow progress predicted until 2050 — when the national life expectancy will be about 80.4 years.

Some of the states that recovered fastest from the pandemic were North Dakota, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, where life expectancy gained about a year between 2019 and 2024. Twenty-four states still haven't regained their 2019 life expectancy.

The District of Columbia, which is not a state, had a lower life expectancy than all 50 states in 1990, but this year it ranks 23. Ali Mokdad, an author of the study and the chief strategy officer for population health at the University of Washington, said D.C.'s improvement is at least partly due to an influx of more affluent and well-educated people since 1990.

Most states that were in the top 10 in 1990 have fallen out: Colorado (from No. 7 to 11), Iowa (from No. 4 to 17), Kansas (from No. 8 to 36), Nebraska (from No. 9 to 19), South Dakota (from No. 10 to 21) and Utah (falling from No. 2 to 12).

Those new to the top 10 in 2024 compared with 1990 are: Massachusetts (from No. 13 to 2), New York (as mentioned from No. 39 to 3), California (from No. 24 to 4), New Jersey (from No. 26 to 6), Rhode Island (from No. 19 to 8), and Washington state (from No. 14 to 10).

Urban concentrations of people are important to long life because of the availability of top-flight care, said Mokdad.

"I'm very close to the hospital [in Seattle] and I have health insurance. But is that true for everyone in Washington state? You might live two or three hours from Seattle, so even for people of my income and education level it's not the same," Mokdad said.

Quality care and insurance also are important, Mokdad said, to ensure that problems such as obesity and high blood pressure are noted and controlled.

"You see obesity in many areas, especially the Southern states, has increased tremendously and while

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smoking has dropped in rich areas, it has stuck around in other communities. This is explaining many of these [state differences] — what we call preventable risk factors,” Mokdad said.

“There’s an increase in life expectancy but a lot of people are still left behind,” Mokdad said.

Even in urban areas, racial minority groups and women can find themselves in impoverished circumstances that can cut short both their lives and their children’s lives. One report in the same Lancet issue this month focused on a program in majority-Black Flint, Michigan, where doctors prescribe money for women from late pregnancy through the first year of a child’s life.

The program, launched this year, is the first nationally to mimic some in 140 other nations that offer cash subsidies for child health, according to the article. The success of similar, temporary child tax credits early in the pandemic has prompted other states to adopt or expand their own tax credits for young mothers.

“We increasingly know that what happens in early childhood can impact life expectancy,” said Dr. Mona Hanna, a Flint pediatrician who founded the program, called Rx Kids. It relies on state help, in the form of permission to use federal funds, as well as private donations.

Michigan included \$20 million in its state budget for next year to expand the program to other cities as well as to mostly white, rural counties in the state’s Upper Peninsula. The program grants \$1,500 to expectant mothers plus \$500 a month for the first year of the baby’s life.

“This is a concrete solution to conquer these place-based disparities and inequities,” Hanna said. “The stress of being born into poverty can lead to things like prematurity and low birth weight. Moms are more likely to have stress and maybe smoke. I see it every day. Families can’t make it to the doctor because they don’t have transportation. They have trouble eating healthy food because it’s too expensive.”

Rural areas in West Virginia could benefit from similar programs to address the state’s issues with poverty, aging and reliance on declining industries like coal, said Darren Liu, a health policy professor at the School of Public Health at West Virginia University.

To get more access to care for rural residents, the state should expand telemedicine, deploy more mobile clinics and offer student loan forgiveness for health care workers in rural areas, Liu told Stateline in an email.

Huggins, the county health officer in West Virginia, said money is a problem despite new federal guidelines that mandate many health screenings at no cost for insured patients. Often low-income patients get screenings but can’t afford to treat disabling conditions such as the knee and back pain they get from manual labor jobs.

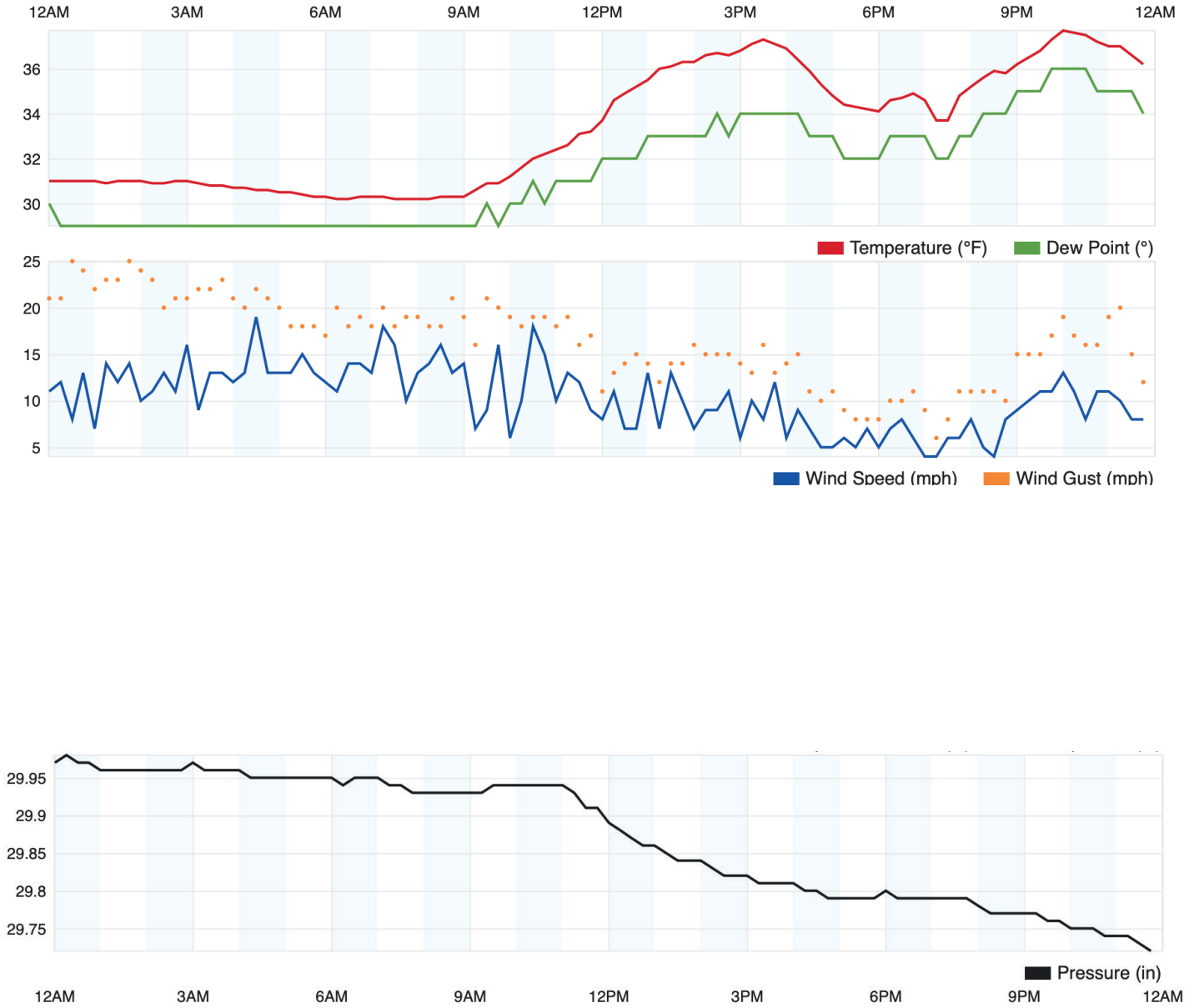
“Because of the barriers that insurance companies put up, because they have to be profitable, I think that’s another reason why West Virginia is ranking low,” Huggins said. “That’s a barrier that we have to try to figure out. Almost any insurance now has well over a \$1,000 deductible.”

*Tim Henderson covers demographics for Stateline. He has been a reporter at the Miami Herald, the Cincinnati Enquirer and The Journal News in suburban New York. Henderson became fascinated with census data in the early 1990s, when AOL offered the first computerized reports. Since then he has broken stories about population trends in South Florida, including a housing affordability analysis included in the 2007 Pulitzer-winning series “House of Lies” for the Miami Herald, and a prize-winning analysis of public pension irregularities for The Journal News. He has been a member and trainer for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting since its inception 20 years ago, specializing in online data access and visualization along with demographics.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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Today



High: 41 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Tonight



Low: 22 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Saturday



High: 38 °F

Mostly Sunny

Saturday Night



Low: 22 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Sunday



High: 39 °F

Mostly Sunny

December 27, 2024

3:23 AM



## INTO NEXT WEEK

TODAY



HIGHS: 36-53°F  
LOWS: 22-28°F

AM FOG OVER  
NORTHEASTERN SD

SATURDAY



HIGHS: 36-48°F  
LOWS: 22-27°F

SUNDAY



HIGHS: 35-48°F  
LOWS: 21-30°F

MONDAY



HIGHS: 27-36°F  
LOWS: 15-18°F

PRECIP STARTING  
EARLY AM

Temperatures today will be much above average. Most areas of central SD are expected to reach 50 degrees and much of northeastern SD is expected to pass 40! These above average temps are expected to continue through the weekend before we cool back down to start the work week. Webcams are also showing some fog around northeastern SD so make sure to plan ahead if you're heading into work this morning! Our next chance for precipitation will be Monday with rain/rain & snow/freezing rain/snow possible early Monday morning becoming mainly snow after sunrise.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 38 °F at 10:00 PM

Low Temp: 30 °F at 7:28 AM

Wind: 26 mph at 12:49 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 54 in 1928

Record Low: -29 in 1914

Average High: 25

Average Low: 5

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.52

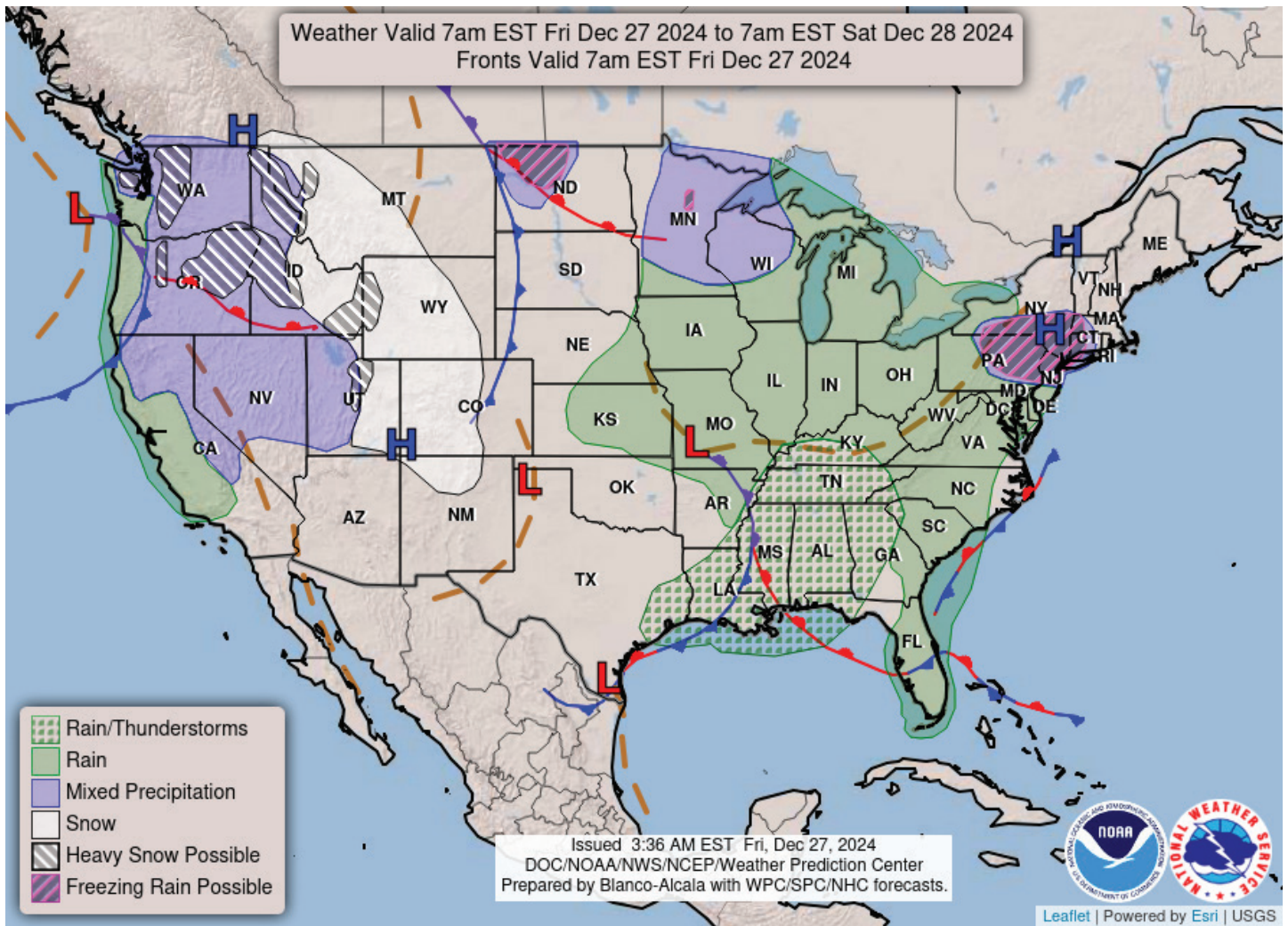
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.73

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:57:44 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 88:10:05 am





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## Today in Weather History

December 27, 1959: Precipitation began as freezing rain on the morning of the 27th throughout the eastern half of South Dakota, changing to snow mixed with occasional sleet late on the 27th, then continued as mostly snow through the late afternoon of the 28th. Glaze caused extensive breakage of tree limbs and power and telephone lines in southeast sections of the state and in scattered communities in the northeast counties. More than 40 communities were without telephone service for more than 24 hours. Highway travel was very dangerous; one man was killed when a tractor skidded on an icy highway and overturned on him in Kingsbury County. Strong winds averaging 20 to 25 mph both dates increased breakage of ice-laded utility wires and caused drifting and blocking of highways by the 3 to 6 inch snowfall. Damage and repair costs to utility lines were estimated at \$400,000.

December 27, 1987: A winter storm gave some freezing rain and snow to southern and eastern South Dakota and southwest and west central Minnesota on the 27th and 28th. In Minnesota, freezing rain began Sunday morning the 27th before changing to heavy snow, which extended into the 28th. The heaviest snowfall was across the high terrain of southwest Minnesota. In southern and eastern South Dakota, six to twelve inches of snow fell. Strong northwest winds of 20-40 mph hampered travel and snow removal. Snow drifts up to 6 feet deep were common. Across many areas of southern Minnesota, visibilities were reduced to zero due to blowing snow. Snowfall amounts in South Dakota included 12 inches in DeSmet; 10 inches in Wessington Springs and Madison; 9 inches in Huron; 8 inches in Pierre, Brookings, Mission and McCook County; 7 inches in Sioux Falls, Kadoka, Pine Ridge, and Martin. 8 inches also fell in Watertown and Highmore, with 7 inches at Bryant and 6 inches in Clear Lake.

1776 - George Washington crossed the ice clogged Delaware River. He marched on Trenton in the midst of snow and sleet thus surprising and capturing many of the British garrison. (David Ludlum)

1947 - New York City received a record 26.4 inches of snow in 24 hours, with as much as 32 inches reported in the suburbs. The heavy snow brought traffic to a standstill, and snow removal cost eight million dollars. Thirty thousand persons were called upon to remove the 100 million tons of snow. The storm claimed 27 lives. (26th-27th) (David Ludlum)

1983 - Miami, FL, established a December record with a morning low of 33 degrees. Just three days earlier, and again three days later, record warm temperatures were reported in Florida, with daytime highs in the 80s. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - Freezing rain plagued parts of the south central U.S., from northwest Texas to southwestern Missouri. Southwestern Missouri was turned into a huge skating rink as roads became sheets of ice. Damage to tree limbs and power lines compared to a hundred tornadoes, and half of the city of Springfield was left without electricity for 24 hours. Snow, sleet and ice covered the northwest two thirds of Oklahoma. 75,000 homes were left without electricity as ice accumulated one to two inches in a 40-mile band from Duncan to Norman to Tulsa to Miami. 25,000 of those homes were still without power a week later. The storm claimed the lives of seven persons. (24th-27th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Low pressure produced heavy snow from North Dakota to western sections of the Great Lakes Region, with up to fourteen inches reported in the Chicago area. Cold arctic air hovered over the Plateau Region. Temperatures in the Big Smokey Valley of Nevada plunged to 31 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong northerly winds behind an arctic cold front produced snow squalls in the Great Lakes Region and dangerous wind chill temperatures in the northeastern U.S. Wind chill readings as cold as 40 degrees below zero were reported in New York State. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2001: Typhoon Vamei forms in the South China Sea, about 100 miles north of the Equator. Vamei is the first recorded tropical cyclone to develop within 1.5 degrees of latitude about 104 miles of the equator.

2003 - A major snow storm in Utah caused several fatalities due to avalanches. As much as 2 ft of snow fell in parts of the state, particularly south of Salt Lake City. Three people that were seen snowboarding in the Aspen Grove recreational area have been presumed dead, all others managed to escape or be rescued (Reuters).



## Why Mothers Matter

One of the most beautiful passages in Scripture is found in Luke's Gospel. It is called "The Magnificat." We have Mary proclaiming, "My soul magnifies the Lord." The word "soul" is a special word and in Hebrew is used to reveal or describe a person's entire identity. It is the very essence – or being or character or the "sum total" – of a person. In this one word,

Mary reveals that all of her is committed to the Lord. The sum and substance of her life was to worship God in all of His Majesty!

If we want to study the smallest particle of God's creation we put it under a microscope to magnify it. This enlarges, or expands, every detail of the particle so we can discover its intricacies, its subtleties, and its structure. Mary was determined to put God under her "microscope" so she could understand Him personally, intimately, and completely.

In her "song" she magnified her Lord – not her Son. Often we become overly concerned about the way our children look rather than what they look at. Not so with Mary. She recognized her responsibility as a mother and knew that if God were first in her life, He would be first in her child's life. She had her priorities right.

God entrusted Mary with the Messiah because He was at the center of her life and knew that her Son would be nurtured in what matters most in the life of a child: knowing, understanding and following His will.

Prayer: We ask, Lord, that all mothers everywhere will recognize the importance of being a mother and the trust You place in them to raise children to know You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 1:46-55 "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.

*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 17 Hrs 8 Mins  
DRAW: 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.25.24

4 5 40 42 52 10

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$19,010,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 23  
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.26.24

9 10 12 30 47 9

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 38 Mins  
DRAW: 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.25.24

14 24 26 32 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$180,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 38  
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.25.24

8 29 30 47 57 1

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 7  
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.25.24

15 26 27 30 35 3

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$145,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 7  
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## Upcoming Groton Events

- 01/05/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/26/2025 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at the Community Center 10am-1pm
- 01/26/2025 87th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 02/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 02/05/2025 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing City Hall 12pm
- 03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
- 04/05/2025 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 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
- 06/07/2025 Day of Play
- 07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
- 08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm

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

### **What is the Native American Church and why is peyote sacred to members?**

By DEEPA BHARATH and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

The Native American Church is considered the most widespread religious movement among the Indigenous people of North America. It holds sacred the peyote cactus, which grows naturally only in some parts of southern Texas and northern Mexico. Peyote has been used spiritually in ceremonies, and as a medicine by Native American people for millennia.

It contains several psychoactive compounds, primarily mescaline, which is a hallucinogen. Different tribes of peyote people have their own name for the cactus. While it is still a controlled substance, U.S. laws passed in 1978 and 1994 allow Native Americans to use, harvest and transport peyote. However, these laws only allow federally recognized Native American tribes to use the substance and don't apply to the broader group of Indigenous people in the US.

The Native American Church developed into a distinct way of life around 1885 among the Kiowa and Comanche of Oklahoma. After 1891, it began to spread as far north as Canada. Now, more than 50 tribes and 400,000 people practice it. In general, the peyotist doctrine espouses belief in one supreme God who deals with humans through various spirits that then carry prayers to God. In many tribes, the peyote plant itself is a deity, personified as Peyote Spirit.

Why was the Native American Church incorporated?

The Native American Church is not one unified entity like, say, the Catholic Church. It contains a diversity of tribes, beliefs and practices. Peyote is what unifies them. After peyote was banned by U.S. government agents in 1888 and later by 15 states, Native American tribes began incorporating as individual Native American Churches in 1918. In order to preserve the peyote ceremony, the federal and state governments encouraged Native American people to organize as a church, said Darrell Red Cloud, the great-great grandson of Chief Red Cloud of the Lakota Nation and vice president of the Native American Church of North America.

In the following decades, the religion grew significantly, with several churches bringing Jesus Christ's name and image into the church so their congregations and worship would be accepted, said Steve Moore, who is non-Native and was formerly a staff attorney at the Native American Rights Fund.

"Local religious leaders in communities would see the image of Jesus, a Bible or cross on the wall of the meeting house or tipi and they would hear references to Jesus in the prayers or songs," he said. "That probably helped persuade the authorities that the Native people were in the process of transformation to Christianity."

This persecution of peyote people continued even after the formation of the Native American Church, said Frank Dayish Jr. a former Navajo Nation vice president and chairperson for the Council of the Peyote Way of Life Coalition.

In the 1960s, there were laws prohibiting peyote in the Navajo Nation, he said. Dayish remembers a time during that period when police confiscated peyote from his church, poured gasoline on the plants and set them on fire.

"I remember my dad and other relatives went over and saved the green peyote that didn't burn," he said, adding that it took decades of lobbying until an amendment to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1994 permitted members of federally recognized Native American tribes to use peyote for religious purposes.

How is peyote used in the Native American Church?

Peyote is the central part of a ceremony that takes place in a tipi around a crescent-shaped earthen altar mound and a sacred fire. The ceremony typically lasts all night and includes prayer, singing, the sacramental eating of peyote, water rites and spiritual contemplation.



Morgan Tosee, a member of the Comanche Nation who leads ceremonies within the Comanche Native American Church, said peyote is utilized in the context of prayer — not smoked — as many tend to imagine.

"When we use it, we either eat it dry or grind it up," he said. "Sometimes, we make tea out of it. But, we don't drink it like regular tea. You pray with it and take little sips, like you would take medicine."

Tosee echoes the belief that pervades the church: "If you take care of the peyote, it will take care of you."

"And if you believe in it, it will heal you," he said, adding that he has seen the medicine work, healing people with various ailments.

People treat the trip to harvest peyote as a pilgrimage, said Red Cloud. Typically, prayers and ceremonies take place before the pilgrimage to seek blessings for a good journey. Once they get to the peyote gardens, they would touch the ground and thank the Creator before harvesting the medicine. The partaking of peyote is also accompanied by prayer and ceremony. The mescaline in the peyote plant is viewed as God's spirit, Red Cloud said.

"Once we eat it, the sacredness of the medicine is inside of us and it opens the spiritual eye," he said. "From there, we start to see where the medicine is growing. It shows itself to us. Once we complete the harvest, we bring it back home and have another ceremony to the medicine and give thanks to the Creator."

## **Peyote sacred to Native Americans threatened by psychedelic renaissance and development**

By DEEPA BHARATH and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

HEBBRONVILLE, Texas (AP) — In this corner of southern Texas, the plump cacti seem to pop out of arid dust and cracked earth, like magic dumplings.

It's only here and in northern Mexico that the bluish-green peyote plant can be found growing naturally, nestled under thorny mesquite, acacia and blackbrush.

For many Native American Church members who call this region the "peyote gardens," the plant is sacrosanct and an inextricable part of their prayer and ceremony. It's believed to be a natural healer that Indigenous communities have counted on for their physical and mental health as they've dealt with the trauma of colonization, displacement, and erosion of culture, religion and language.

Lack of access for religious use

The cactus contains a spectrum of psychoactive alkaloids, the primary one being the hallucinogen mescaline, and is coveted for those psychedelic properties. Even though it is a controlled substance under federal law, an exemption afforded by a 1994 amendment to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act made it legal for Native Americans to use, possess and transport peyote for traditional religious purposes.

For over two decades, Native American practitioners of peyotism, whose numbers in the U.S. are estimated at 400,000, have raised the alarm about lack of access to peyote, which they reverently call "the medicine." They say poaching and excessive harvesting of the slow-growing cactus, which flowers and matures over 10 to 30 years, are endangering the species and ruining its delicate habitat.

Native American Church members say the situation has worsened with demands from advocates of the psychedelic renaissance seeking to decriminalize peyote and make it more widely available for medical research and treatment of various ailments. Agriculture, housing developments, wind farms in the region and the border wall, are also damaging the habitat, experts say.

A vast majority of peyote people agree the plant must be protected and should be out of reach for medical researchers, Silicon Valley investors and other groups advocating peyote decriminalization. But there are diverse opinions within the Native American Church on how to accomplish that goal.

While at least one group spearheaded by Native American Church leaders has begun efforts to conserve and propagate peyote naturally in its habitat using philanthropic dollars, others in the church are more suspicious of investors' intentions, saying they fear exploitation and would rather get funding from the U.S. government to protect peyote.

Peyote embodies the Creator's spirit

Darrell Red Cloud, who is Oglala Lakota, remembers at age 4 using peyote and singing ceremonial songs

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at all-night peyote ceremonies with his family. Peyote has always been about forging a connection with the Creator, said Red Cloud. He's the vice president of the Native American Church of North America.

"Our people were not religious people, we were prayerful people."

Frank Dayish, former vice president of the Navajo Nation and chairperson of the Council of the Peyote Way of Life Coalition, compared peyote to the Eucharist in Catholicism.

"Peyote is my religion," he said. "Everything in my life has been based on prayers through that sacrament."

Adrian Primeaux, who is Yankton Sioux and Apache, says he grew up hearing the story of a malnourished and dehydrated Apache woman who fell behind her group during a forced relocation by the U.S. government in the 1830s.

"She was about to give up on life as she lay close to the Earth when she heard a plant speaking to her," Primeaux said. "The peyote was telling her: Eat me and you will be well."

She carried this plant back to Apache medicine men and elders who meditated and prayed with it, said Primeaux. He believes the Native American Church and what would become the Peyote Way of Life was unveiled during that spiritual quest.

Peyote is not just a medicinal herb — it is "a spiritual guide and a north star," said Primeaux, who comes from five generations of peyote people. The plant has been a guiding light amid their traumatic history.

"It gave us hope and helped us process our thoughts, emotions and life purpose," he said.

An initiative to conserve and protect peyote

In October 2017, the National Council of Native American Churches purchased 605 acres in Hebronville, Texas, to establish a peyote preserve and a "spiritual homesite" that is now run by the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative or IPCI.

Steven Benally, a Navajo elder from Sweetwater, Arizona, and an IPCI board member, remembers his annual pilgrimages to the peyote gardens with his family. He recalls losing access to the gardens after the "peyotero" system took over, where government-licensed peyoteros harvested the button-like tops of the plant by the thousands and sold them to Native American Church members.

This meant that Native American people could not freely go onto privately owned ranches and prayerfully harvest peyote as they had done for generations. They lost their sacred connection with the land, Benally said.

It wasn't until he threw open the gate to their sprawling ranch, affectionately called "the 605," that Benally felt connected once again. He was so overcome by emotion that he placed a sign at the entrance with the words: "This is real."

"It felt like we were finally living what we just dreamed, prayed and talked about," he said.

One of Benally's favorite spots on the property is a hilltop bench — a tranquil corner where visitors have placed prayer notes, painted rocks and other offerings to a nearby cluster of naturally sprouted peyote. Benally sits on the bench inhaling the gentle breeze and taking in the stillness.

"Our belief is that these plants, these animals, these birds are just like us," he said. "They can hear, they can understand. They have their powers, they have their place, a purpose and a reason — just like us."

The peyote preserve is a conservation site where the plant is not harvested but propagated and replanted naturally in its habitat without chemicals, said Miriam Volat, executive director for the nonprofit that oversees it. Native Americans who can produce their tribal identification cards can camp at the preserve and prayerfully harvest from amiable surrounding ranches, she said.

The goal is to restore peyote and its habitat, making it abundant in the region within the next 50 years.

Peyote grown in their nursery is under the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency's watchful eye, she said. Licensed to operate, the nonprofit tries to balance being welcoming with satisfying the agency's requirement to secure the plant behind locked gates and camera monitoring.

The debate over peyote conservation

Those trying to protect peyote disagree on whether it should be grown outside its natural habitat. While scientists and conservationists say it is essential for the protection of the species, many Native American Church members say doing so would dilute its sacred nature.

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Keeper Trout, a research scientist and co-founder of Texas-based Cactus Conservation Institute, remembers how abundantly peyote grew in the region during the 1970s. It's all but disappeared.

"It was like walking on mattresses," he said.

Trout empathizes with those who object on religious grounds, but he believes people should be able to cultivate and harvest anywhere. With a little help, Trout is confident the resilient plant can survive.

But many Native American Church members say where the plant grows matters. The ceremonial protocols were bestowed by the Creator's grace and preserved through storytelling, said Hershel Clark, secretary for the Teesto chapter of the Azee Bee Nahagha of Diné Nation in Arizona.

"This is why we don't support greenhouses, growing it outside its natural habitat or synthesizing it to make pills," Clark said.

Red Cloud fears those changes would harm its sacredness.

"Then, it just becomes a drug that people depend on rather than a spiritual medicine," he said.

Funding peyote preservation and conservation efforts has been a challenge as well.

The Native American Church of North America is calling on the U.S. government to uphold its obligation to protect and preserve peyote in its natural habitat in southern Texas, which includes financial incentives for landowners, said Red Cloud. His organization is asking for a \$5 million federal grant to jumpstart such a program.

IPCI started with seed money from Riverstyx Foundation, which is run by Cody Swift, a psychotherapist and prominent supporter of psychedelic therapy research. The organization continues to seek philanthropic dollars to carry the conservation effort forward and is not opposed to receiving funding from the U.S. government, Volat said.

"But, we're not waiting for it," she said.

There is suspicion and skepticism about Swift and other investors' intentions in some corners of the Native American Church, Clark said. Swift has said in interviews that IPCI's goal is to preserve peyote in its natural habitat under the leadership and guidance of Native American peyote people, a stance Volat, his co-director at the foundation, also affirms.

Demand for peyote exceeds supply

There is no question that opening peyote up to a broader market will create a supply crisis and increase access to those who have the financial resources, said Kevin Feeney, senior social sciences lecturer at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington, who has studied the commodification of peyote.

Indigenous people would struggle to access their sacred plant while seeing others use it in a way they deem profane, he said.

Peyote supply remains limited for the Native American Church. Today, in southern Texas, only three licensed peyoteros are legally allowed to harvest the plant for sale to church members. Zulema "Julie" Morales, based in Rio Grande City, is one of them. She inherited the business from her father, Mauro Morales, who died two years ago.

She has been out in the fields since she was 10. Now 60, she says the peyote habitat is dwindling not because of peyoteros who harvest legally and ethically, but because of illegal poaching. She remembers her father gathering enough peyote to fill a dozen large trays while she can barely fill one.

Even though she is Mexican American and a Catholic, Morales, who charges 55 cents a button, considers it a privilege to provide peyote for ceremonial purposes. Her father, who customers called "grandpa," hosted ceremonies for Native people every year and she has been a keen observer.

"As Mexican Americans, we value our traditions," she said. "This is their tradition and it's beautiful for us to be a part of that in our own way."

Teaching future generations

At IPCI, one of the main goals is to teach future generations the value of getting back to their ancestors' spiritual and healing ways, said Sandor Iron Rope, an Oglala Lakota spiritual leader and president of the Native American Church of South Dakota. At least 200 people gathered on IPCI's grounds over Thanksgiving week, learning about peyote through panels, discussions, ceremony and prayer.

"We've put our moccasins and our footprints in this place," Iron Rope said. "The hope is that these children, the next generation, will see the therapeutic value in getting rid of their phones and learning about what is right in front of them."

Iron Rope says this is how he is fulfilling his responsibility to future generations.

"You can pray all you want, but you're going to have to meet the Creator halfway somewhere," he said. "You're going to have to implement that prayer into action. And I see this as prayer in action."

## **Why this Mexican American woman played a vital role in the US sacramental peyote trade**

By DEEPA BHARATH and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

MIRANDO CITY, Texas (AP) — The late Amada Cardenas was called many things — the "angel of peyote," the "peyote rose" or simply "Grandma Amada."

The beloved Mexican American peyotera — who was the first authorized dealer of peyote in the United States — not only played a vital role in the history of the peyote trade, but was also revered as an elder and healer by Native American peyote people.

Her home still stands in the heart of Mirando City, a tiny South Texas border town 30 miles east of Laredo with a population under 200, as a shrine and museum that holds her legacy. It's in an area Native Americans call the peyote gardens because the spineless cactus containing the hallucinogen mescaline, a plant they hold sacred, only grows naturally in this region and in northern Mexico.

Cardenas, a native of this land who grew up in a community where Catholicism was the way of life, learned the peyote trade at an early age from her father. She and her husband, Claudio Cardenas Sr., were the first federally licensed peyote dealers who harvested and sold the sacramental plant to Native American Church members in the 1930s. After her husband's death in 1967, she continued to welcome generations of church members to her home until her death in 2005, just before her 101st birthday.

Her biographer and peyote researcher, anthropologist Stacy B. Schaefer, wrote that the Cardenases got into legal hot water with state and federal government officials over how peyote laws were interpreted and implemented for most of the 20th century. Schaefer says they stood strong in their support of Native Americans' rights to acquire and use peyote in religious ceremonies, risking prosecution and incarceration for doing so.

In 1957, Claudio and Amada Cardenas were appointed Texas delegates-at-large for the Native American Church of North America. In 1987, Amada Cardenas was appointed as an officer of the Native American Church of the United States.

Her home's living room, which has welcomed thousands of guests over decades, is now filled with framed family photos and gifts from the peyote people she hosted. The dressers in the bedroom hold hundreds of handwritten letters from Native people asking for her prayers, blessings or thanking her for having them over for a harvest or ceremony.

Cristala Allen, who is Caddo and visited Cardenas often in the 1990s, said Cardenas had a holy presence. "The love was palpable every time I visited," she said. "She lived in a humble little house. But she welcomed everyone. Tibetan monks have been out to visit her. It's a vibration. When you go to that land, you can feel it."

Allen said Cardenas is "the matriarch of the Native American Church."

"Amada was living where the medicine grows and thrives," she said. "She's cutting medicine, squeezing the peyote juice and it goes into your body and bloodstream. It's like she became the embodiment of it."

Sandor Iron Rope, an Oglala Lakota spiritual leader and president of the Native American Church of South Dakota, said Cardenas was a living representation of the words "love, faith, hope and charity," written like mantras in her home. They are some of the core values of the church.

"She wanted everybody to get along and for Native people to have access to peyote," he said. "She wanted to bring peyote back to our people, for healing."



Sky Groove, who takes care of the property, said he became familiar with the area in the 1990s and met Cardenas from whom he learned some of the Spanish peyote songs she sang during ceremonies. He remembers and sings this one: "Manana, manana, venga la manana," which means "the morning comes."

"She was a very deep person," said Groove, who is not Native American, but has been associated with the Native American Church for decades. "She lived around the medicine all her life. There is a certain amount of magic in the medicine that is impossible to describe. They say it's the peyote spirit. Amada knew it was there."

## Germany's president dissolves parliament, sets national election for Feb. 23

By DAVID McHUGH Associated Press

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Friday ordered parliament dissolved and set new elections for Feb. 23 in the wake of the collapse of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's governing coalition.

Scholz lost a confidence vote on Dec. 16 and leads a minority government after his unpopular and notoriously rancorous three-party coalition collapsed on Nov. 6 when he fired his finance minister in a dispute over how to revitalize Germany's stagnant economy.

Steinmeier said he made the decision because it was clear after consultation with party leaders that there was no agreement among Germany's political parties on a majority for a new, stable government in the current parliament.

"It is precisely in difficult times like these that stability requires a government capable of taking action and a reliable majority in parliament," he said as he made the announcement in Berlin.

"Therefore I am convinced that for the good of our country new elections are the right way."

Since the post-World War II constitution doesn't allow the Bundestag to dissolve itself, it was up to Steinmeier to decide whether to dissolve parliament and call an election. He had 21 days to make that decision. Once parliament is dissolved, the election must be held within 60 days. Leaders of several major parties agreed earlier on the election date of Feb. 23, seven months earlier than originally planned.

The campaign is already well underway. Polls show Scholz's party trailing the conservative opposition Union bloc led by Friedrich Merz. Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck of the environmentalist Greens, the remaining partner in Scholz's government, is also bidding for the top job — though his party is further back. If recent polls hold up, the likely next government would be led by Merz as chancellor in coalition with at least one other party.

Key issues include immigration, how to get the sluggish economy going, and how best to aid Ukraine in its struggle against Russia.

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

Germany's electoral system traditionally produces coalitions, and polls show no party anywhere near an absolute majority on its own. The election is expected to be followed by weeks of negotiations to form a new government.

It's only the fourth time that the Bundestag has been dissolved ahead of schedule under Germany's post-World War II constitution. It happened under Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1972, Helmut Kohl in 1982 and Gerhard Schroeder in 2005. Schroeder used the confidence vote to engineer an early election narrowly won by center-right challenger Angela Merkel.

## Leaders and politicians pay homage to India's former prime minister, Manmohan Singh

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Authorities in India have declared a seven-day mourning period to honor Manmohan Singh, officials said Friday, as politicians and public paid tributes to the country's former prime minister widely regarded as the architect of India's economic reform program.

Officials canceled all cultural and entertainment events for the week, with government buildings flying the national flag at half staff across India. Singh, who died late Thursday at age 92, is scheduled to be cremated on Saturday.

Singh's body was put in a glass casket, adorned with flowers and wrapped in the Indian flag, as leaders and mourners paid their respects. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited his home and offered condolences to his family.

Later, Modi in a video message said Singh's life "was a reflection of his honesty and simplicity."

"He saved the country from an economic crisis by providing a road towards a new economy. As a prime minister, his contribution towards the development and progress of the country will always be remembered," Modi said.

A mild-mannered technocrat, Singh was prime minister for 10 years and leader of the Congress Party in the Parliament's upper house, earning a reputation as a man of great personal integrity. He was chosen to fill the role in 2004 by Sonia Gandhi, the widow of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Singh was reelected in 2009, but his second term as prime minister was clouded by financial scandals and corruption charges over the organization of the 2010 Commonwealth Games. This led to the Congress Party's crushing defeat in the 2014 national election by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

Singh adopted a low profile after relinquishing the post of prime minister.

## Powerful thunderstorms threaten Texas and Louisiana, delaying holiday travel

DALLAS (AP) — Parts of Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas were under severe weather watches early Friday as the National Weather Service predicted a storm system in the Gulf of Mexico could bring high winds, hail and possible tornadoes to the region.

"Heavy showers and thunderstorms continue to race across Louisiana and the Gulf waters at this time, with SETX in the clear for the rest of tonight. Please stay safe all," the weather service's office in Lake Charles, Louisiana, posted on the social platform X shortly after 11 p.m. Thursday.

The weather service issued a tornado warning late that afternoon for parts of Texas northeast of Houston, meaning weather radar indicated there was a tornado in the area. There were no immediate reports of damage.

After a line of thunderstorms started moving across parts of Texas, more than 100 flights were delayed and dozens more canceled at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport. Delays and thunderstorm-related cancellations also were reported at Dallas' Love Field and George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, according to FlightAware, an aviation company that tracks flights across the world.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott activated state emergency response resources because of the increased severe weather threat.

"As Texans and out-of-state visitors begin traveling after the Christmas holiday, it's crucial that everyone regularly monitor road conditions, make an emergency plan and heed the guidance of state and local officials," Abbott said in a statement.

The greatest weather risk was forecast for a stretch of Texas east of Dallas, between Houston and portions of southern Arkansas and western and northern Louisiana, said Brian Hurley, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center.

"There does look like the possibility of one or a few tornadoes with this risk, but the main risk will be with high winds and hail," Hurley said, adding that he expected wind gusts generally between 60 and 80 mph (96 to 128 kph), and hail 1 inch (2.5 centimeters) in diameter or greater.

The storms were likely to push into southern Arkansas and western and northern Louisiana after nightfall, posing a potentially dangerous situation for holiday travelers, Hurley said.

"People can't see a whole lot and may not be as weather aware," he said.

## **Israel strikes Houthi rebels in Yemen's capital while the WHO chief says he was meters away**

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A new round of Israeli airstrikes in Yemen on Thursday targeted the Houthi rebel-held capital and multiple ports, while the World Health Organization's director-general said the bombardment occurred nearby as he prepared to board a flight in Sanaa, with a crew member injured.

"The air traffic control tower, the departure lounge — just a few meters from where we were — and the runway were damaged," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on the social media platform X.

He added that he and U.N. colleagues were safe. "We will need to wait for the damage to the airport to be repaired before we can leave," he said, without mentioning the source of the bombardment. U.N. spokesperson Stephanie Tremblay later said the injured person was with the U.N. Humanitarian Air Service.

At least three people were later reported killed and dozens injured in the airport strike. The U.N. team members left the airport and were "safe and sound" in Sanaa while the injured crew member was being treated at a hospital, she said.

Tremblay said the damage assessment would be made on Friday morning to see whether WHO chief and the U.N. team can leave Yemen.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the escalation in attacks between Yemen and Israel and described Thursday's attacks as "especially alarming," Tremblay said.

Israel's army later told The Associated Press it wasn't aware that the WHO chief or delegation was at the location in Yemen.

The Israeli strikes followed several days of Houthi launches setting off sirens in Israel. Overnight, the Israel said the Houthis fired yet another missile, triggering air raid sirens in central Israel, jolting thousands of people awake and forcing them to scramble to shelters. The army said it intercepted the missile before it reached Israeli airspace and there were no reports of injuries.

The Israeli military in a statement said it attacked infrastructure used by the Iran-backed Houthis at the international airport in Sanaa and ports in Hodeida, Al-Salif and Ras Qantib, along with power stations, asserting they were used to smuggle in Iranian weapons and for the entry of senior Iranian officials.

Israel's military added it had "capabilities to strike very far from Israel's territory — precisely, powerfully, and repetitively."

The strikes, carried out over 1,000 miles from Jerusalem, came a day after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said "the Houthis, too, will learn what Hamas and Hezbollah and Assad's regime and others learned" as his military has battled those more powerful proxies of Iran.

The Houthi-controlled satellite channel al-Masirah reported multiple deaths and showed broken windows, collapsed ceilings and a bloodstained floor and vehicle. Iran's foreign ministry condemned the strikes. The U.S. military also has targeted the Houthis in recent days.

The U.N. has said the targeted ports are important entryways for humanitarian aid for Yemen, the poorest Arab nation that plunged into a civil war in 2014.

Over the weekend, 16 people were wounded when a Houthi missile hit a playground in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv, while other missiles and drones have been shot down. Last week, Israeli jets struck Sanaa and Hodeida, killing nine people, calling it a response to previous Houthi attacks. The Houthis also have been targeting shipping on the Red Sea corridor, calling it solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.

The U.N. Security Council has an emergency meeting Monday in response to an Israeli request that it

condemn the Houthi attacks and Iran for supplying them weapons.

5 journalists killed in Gaza

Meanwhile, an Israeli strike killed five Palestinian journalists outside a hospital in Gaza overnight, the territory's Health Ministry said. The Israeli military said all were militants posing as reporters.

The strike hit a car outside Al-Awda Hospital in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza. The journalists were working for local news outlet Al-Quds Today, a television channel affiliated with the Islamic Jihad militant group.

Islamic Jihad is a smaller and more extreme ally of Hamas and took part in the Oct. 7, 2023 attack in southern Israel that ignited the war. Israel's military identified four of the men as combat propagandists and said that intelligence, including a list of Islamic Jihad operatives found by soldiers in Gaza, had confirmed that all five were affiliated with the group.

Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian militant groups operate political, media and charitable operations in addition to their armed wings.

Associated Press footage showed the incinerated shell of a van, with press markings visible on the back doors. Sobbing young men attended the funeral. The bodies were wrapped in shrouds, with blue press vests draped over them.

The Committee to Protect Journalists says more than 130 Palestinian reporters have been killed since the start of the war. Israel hasn't allowed foreign reporters to enter Gaza except on military embeds.

Israel has banned the pan-Arab Al Jazeera network and accused six of its Gaza reporters of being militants. The Qatar-based broadcaster denies the allegations and accuses Israel of trying to silence its war coverage, which has focused heavily on civilian casualties from Israeli military operations.

Another Israeli soldier killed

Separately, Israel's military said a 35-year-old reserve soldier was killed during fighting in central Gaza. A total of 389 soldiers have been killed in Gaza since the start of the ground operation.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed across the border, killing around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. About 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third believed to be dead.

Israel's air and ground offensive has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry. It says more than half the fatalities have been women and children, but doesn't say how many of the dead were fighters. Israel says it has killed more than 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The offensive has caused widespread destruction and hunger and driven around 90% of the population of 2.3 million from their homes. Hundreds of thousands are packed into squalid camps along the coast, with little protection from the cold, wet winter.

Also Thursday, people mourned eight Palestinians killed by Israeli military operations in and around Tulkarem in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. The Israeli military said it opened fire after militants attacked soldiers, and it was aware of uninvolved civilians who were harmed in the raid.

## **'We fall and we rise': Some amputees in Sierra Leone turn to farming to combat discrimination**

By JACK THOMPSON Associated Press

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone (AP) — Lahai Makieku struck the bamboo with a machete until it cracked and fell. Balancing on his crutch, he reached to pick it up. But colleagues pulled the bamboo's other end, and he tumbled into the dense grass.

"They forgot I had one leg," the 45-year-old said, laughing. The trainer at a center for amputee farmers picked himself up and added: "We fall and we rise."

The phrase encapsulates his journey since the civil war in Sierra Leone. From 1991 to 2002, conflict in the West African country created some 28,000 amputees like him. Amputation by machete was one ter-



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ror tactic by rebels.

But even now, amputation rates remain high in Sierra Leone due to motorbike accidents, poor medical care and delayed treatment by traditional healers, according to medical researchers. The government doesn't collect data on amputees, but the United Nations estimates there are about 500,000 disabled people in the country.

Makieu's left leg was amputated as a child after rebels shot him and he received no medical attention for a week.

More than 20 years later, in a nation ranked near the bottom of the U.N. development index, amputees still face discrimination, often regarded as a shameful reminder of the civil war. Many resort to begging and live in the streets.

"No one cares about you as an amputee in Sierra Leone," Makieu said.

The Farming on Crutches initiative where Makieu works near the capital, Freetown, offers a rare refuge. It aims to restore amputees' confidence and independence by teaching them skills to start a farm business. They've trained 100 amputees and want to expand their work.

The training has transformed Makieu's life. After his amputation in 2002, he lived in a small room with a friend in Freetown, dependent on him for food, money and shelter.

At a displacement camp for 270 amputees in Freetown, he met Mambud Samai, the founder of Farming on Crutches and a pastor.

"Many (amputees) are being rejected by their families and communities. They don't believe they have love," the 51-year-old Samai said. He felt moved to help after being a refugee himself in Guinea during the civil war.

First, Samai organized beach football matches for amputees in Freetown, boosting their confidence. During a visit to Sierra Leone, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon saw the project and funded a site for an amputee football club outside the capital.

But Samai decided football was not enough. As a farmer, he saw agriculture as a path to self-sufficiency. In 2020, he set up a demonstration farm to teach amputees how to farm and become rural leaders.

His project's name reflects amputees' widespread use of crutches instead of prosthetic legs in Sierra Leone. Foreign donors distributed them after the civil war but many people say they don't fit well and cause sores. And the country's only prosthetic clinic is too expensive for many.

Makieu was one of the first Farming on Crutches trainees in 2022. He learned how to use farm waste for organic fertilizer and bamboo sticks for fences. He set up a small farm operation this year with his wife, Zanib, also an amputee. They met during the training and now have a child.

Makieu wants to inspire future farmers.

"It's my dream to teach people about life. It's about changing your mindset," he said.

Morning mist rolled over the nearby mountains as the camp rose for exercises ahead of a strenuous day. They gathered in a circle, harmonizing on local songs before Samai spoke.

"We are created for fellowship, not isolation," he said. "When we return, we are not as we came. We go home to serve our community as rural leaders."

Makieu interjected: "I sustain my life through farming, I met my wife here. This training can be a big package for you."

But the vast majority of amputees in Sierra Leone have no such support.

Alimany Kani, 30, lives in a camp built by the Norwegian Refugee Council for amputees on the outskirts of Freetown. He lost his leg when he was a baby, to the same bullet that killed his father in the civil war. Despite holding a master's degree in social work, he cannot find a job.

"Even if you have qualifications, an able-bodied with less education will always get the job," Kani said.

Sierra Leone's National Commission for Persons with Disability told AP that discrimination towards amputees has improved in the last decade since the Disability Act in 2011 aimed to provide equal opportunities and punish discrimination.

Kani firmly disagreed and called on the government to deliver reparations to victims of the civil war. Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2009 recommended that amputees receive pensions,

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access to healthcare, accommodation and education.

But many of those pledges remain unfulfilled, including for Kani. Only 1,300 out of 32,000 have received a full reparations package due to lack of resources, according to the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration.

"The government don't keep their promises. It's inhumane," Kani said.

There currently is no specific support for amputees from the government, the National Commission for Persons with Disability said.

Sierra Leone's health ministry, the president's office and the National Commission for Social Action office that manages the reparations program did not respond to questions.

A farming charity in Britain, Pasture for Life, is financing Farming on Crutches in full, but Samai said they need support from Sierra Leone's government to expand.

Meanwhile, the government is investing over \$600 million in agriculture but some believe this will largely benefit large-scale agriculture over small-scale farmers, such as Farming on Crutches' trainees, who form 70% of the population.

Two such smallholders are cousins and Farming on Crutches trainees, Amara and Moustapha Jalloh, aged 19 and 21, in central Sierra Leone.

Both recently harvested rice and cassava. Moustapha, who was born without a leg, said his harvest surplus allowed him to pay for computer science training. He dreams of being an agricultural engineer.

"Any successful story, there must be painful experiences," he said.

## **New 2025 laws hit hot topics from AI in movies to rapid-fire guns**

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

Artificial intelligence. Abortion. Guns. Marijuana. Minimum wages.

Name a hot topic, and chances are good there's a new law about it taking effect in 2025 in one state or another.

Many of the laws launching in January are a result of legislation passed this year. Others stem from ballot measures approved by voters. Some face legal challenges.

Here's a look at some of the most notable state laws taking effect:

Hollywood stars and child influencers

California, home to Hollywood and some of the largest technology companies, is seeking to rein in the artificial intelligence industry and put some parameters around social media stars. New laws seek to prevent the use of digital replicas of Hollywood actors and performers without permission and allow the estates of dead performers to sue over unauthorized AI use.

Parents who profit from social media posts featuring their children will be required to set aside some earnings for their young influencers. A new law also allows children to sue their parents for failing to do so.

Social media limits

New social media restrictions in several states face court challenges.

A Florida law bans children under 14 from having social media accounts and requires parental consent for ages 14 and 15. But enforcement is being delayed because of a lawsuit filed by two associations for online companies, with a hearing scheduled for late February.

A new Tennessee law also requires parental consent for minors to open accounts on social media. NetChoice, an industry group for online businesses, is challenging the law. Another new state law requires porn websites to verify that visitors are at least 18 years old. But the Free Speech Coalition, a trade association for the adult entertainment industry, has filed a challenge.

Several new California measures aimed at combating political deepfakes are also being challenged, including one requiring large social media platforms to remove deceptive content related to elections and another allowing any individual to sue for damages over the use of AI to create fabricated images or videos in political ads.

School rules on gender

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In a first nationally, California will start enforcing a law prohibiting school districts from adopting policies that require staff to notify parents if their children change their gender identification. The law was a priority for Democratic lawmakers who wanted to halt such policies passed by several districts.

## Abortion coverage

Many states have passed laws limiting or protecting abortion rights since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a nationwide right to the procedure in 2022. One of the latest is the Democratic-led state of Delaware. A law there will require the state employee health plan and Medicaid plans for lower-income residents to cover abortions with no deductible, copayments or other cost-sharing requirements.

## Gun control

A new Minnesota law prohibits guns with "binary triggers" that allow for more rapid fire, causing a weapon to fire one round when the trigger is pulled and another when it is released.

In Delaware, a law adds colleges and universities to a list of school zones where guns are prohibited, with exceptions for those working in their official capacity such as law officers and commissioned security guards.

## Medical marijuana

Kentucky is becoming the latest state to let people use marijuana for medical purposes. To apply for a state medical cannabis card, people must get written certification from a medical provider of a qualifying condition, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, chronic pain, epilepsy, chronic nausea or post-traumatic stress disorder. Nearly four-fifths of U.S. states have now legalized medical marijuana.

## Minimum wages

Minimum wage workers in more than 20 states are due to receive raises in January. The highest minimum wages will be in Washington, California and Connecticut, all of which will top \$16 an hour after modest increases.

The largest increases are scheduled in Delaware, where the minimum wage will rise by \$1.75 to \$15 an hour, and in Nebraska, where a ballot measure approved by voters in 2022 will add \$1.50 to the current minimum of \$12 an hour.

Twenty other states still follow the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour.

## Safer traveling

In Oregon, using drugs on public transit will be considered a misdemeanor crime of interfering with public transportation. While the measure worked its way through the legislature, multiple transportation officials said drug use on buses and trains, and at transit stops and stations, was making passengers and drivers feel less safe.

In Missouri, law enforcement officers have spent the past 16 months issuing warnings to motorists that handheld cellphone use is illegal. Starting with the new year, penalties will kick in: a \$150 fine for the first violation, progressing to \$500 for third and subsequent offenses and up to 15 years imprisonment if a driver using a cellphone cause an injury or death. But police must notice a primary violation, such as speeding or weaving across lanes, to cite motorists for violating the cellphone law.

Montana is the only state that hasn't banned texting while driving, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

## Tax breaks

Tenants in Arizona will no longer have to pay tax on their monthly rent, thanks to the repeal of a law that had allowed cities and towns to impose such taxes. While a victory for renters, the new law is a financial loss for governments. An analysis by Arizona's nonpartisan Joint Legislative Budget Committee estimated that \$230 million would be lost in municipal tax revenue during the first full fiscal year of implementation.

Meanwhile Alabama will offer tax credits to businesses that help employees with child care costs.

Kansas is eliminating its 2% sales tax on groceries. It also is cutting individual income taxes by dropping the top tax rate, increasing a credit for child care expenses and exempting all Social Security income from taxes, among other things. Taxpayers are expected to save about \$320 million a year going forward.

## Voting rights

An Oklahoma law expands voting privileges to people who have been convicted of felonies but had their

sentences discharged or commuted, including commutations for crimes that have been reclassified from felonies to misdemeanors. Former state Sen. George Young, an Oklahoma City Democrat, carried the bill in the Senate.

"I think it's very important that people who have gone through trials and tribulations in their life, that we have a system that brings them back and allows them to participate as contributing citizens," Young said.

## **Croatia's outspoken president is seeking reelection. He faces several contenders in Sunday's vote**

By SAŠA KAVIĆ Associated Press

ZAGREB, Croatia (AP) — Croatia's left-leaning president, an outspoken critic of Western military support for Ukraine in its war against Russia, is running for reelection this weekend against an array of contenders, including the candidate backed by the conservative government.

President Zoran Milanović is seen as a favorite ahead of the presidential election on Sunday, though he is unlikely to score an outright victory. If none of the eight contenders gain more than half of the ballots cast in the first round, a runoff between the top two will be held on Jan. 12.

The most popular politician in Croatia, 58-year-old Milanović had served as prime minister in the past. Populist in style, Milanovic has been a fierce critic of current Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and a continuous sparring of the two has lately marked Croatia's political scene.

Ahead of Sunday's vote, Plenković's Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica party, or Croatian Democratic Union party has backed pediatrician and university professor Dragan Primorac for the presidency. Primorac has sought to portray himself as a unifier and Milanovic as divisive.

Though the presidency is largely ceremonial in Croatia, an elected president holds political authority and acts as the supreme commander of the military.

Milanović has criticized the European Union's support for Ukraine and has often insisted that Croatia should not take sides. He has said Croatia should stay away from global disputes, thought it is a member of both NATO and the EU.

Milanovic has also blocked Croatia's participation in a NATO-led training mission for Ukraine, declaring that "No Croatian soldier will take part in somebody else's war."

His main rival in the election, Primorac, has stated that "Croatia's place is in the West, not the East." His presidency bid, however, has been marred by a high-level corruption case that landed Croatia's health minister in jail last month and which featured prominently in pre-election debates.

Political expert Andjelko Milardović said Milanović's reelection would be good for democracy in Croatia because the ruling party holds a tight grip over all other government institutions.

"We are interested to see a balance and control of power," said Milardović.

Milanović is backed by center-left Social Democrats, the biggest opposition party.

Some analysts believe that Marija Selak Raspudić, a conservative independent candidate polling third in pre-election surveys, could stand a better chance against Milanovic if she somehow makes it to the runoff.

Selak Raspudić was close to a right-wing party in the past but now runs as non-partisan. She has focused on economic troubles of ordinary citizens and issues such as population decline in the country of some 3.8 million and corruption.

Trailing fourth in the polls is the only left-green contender in the race, Ivana Kekin, from Možemo, or We Can, party which governs Zagreb, Croatia's capital.

Married to a popular rock musician, Kekin says she is a "president for a new generation." As a psychiatrist, Kekin has accused Primorac and HDZ of syphoning money from Croatia's health system in shady corruption deals.

Four more candidates are running but none are believed to stand a chance to reach the second round.

Zagreb resident Ilka Matić said she expects Milanović to win another five-year mandate but that "there is little difference between them all."



Croatia, the newest member state of the EU after joining the bloc in 2013, has around 1.6 million eligible voters.

## An uneasy calm settles over Syrian city of Homs after outbreak of sectarian violence

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

HOMS, Syria (AP) — Syria's new security forces checked IDs and searched cars in the central city of Homs on Thursday, a day after protests by members of the Alawite minority erupted in gunfire and stirred fears that the country's fragile peace could break down.

A tense calm prevailed after checkpoints were set up throughout the country's third-largest city, which has a mixed population of Sunni and Shia Muslims, Alawites and Christians.

The security forces are controlled by the former insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which led the charge that unseated former President Bashar Assad. On the road from Damascus, security teams at the checkpoints waved cars through perfunctorily, but in Homs they checked IDs and opened the trunk of each car to look for weapons.

Armed men blocked the road leading to the square formerly named for Assad's father, Hafez Assad, where one foot was all that remained of a statue of him that once stood in the center of the traffic roundabout. The square has been renamed Freedom Square, although some call it "the donkey's square," referring to Assad.

Protests erupted there Wednesday among Alawites — the minority sect to which the Assad family belongs — after a video circulated showing an Alawite shrine in Aleppo being vandalized. Government officials later issued a statement saying that the video was old.

Wednesday's protests began peacefully, said Alaa Amran, the newly installed police chief of Homs, but then "some suspicious parties ... related to the former regime opened fire on both security forces and demonstrators, and there were some injuries."

Security forces flooded the area and imposed a curfew to restore order, he said.

Mohammad Ali Hajj Younes, an electrician who has a shop next to the square, said the people who instigated the violence are "the same shabiha who used to come into my shop and rob me, and I couldn't say anything," using a term referring to pro-Assad militia members.

The protests were part of a larger flare-up of violence Wednesday. Pro-Assad militants attacked members of the new security forces near the coastal town of Tartous, killing 14 and wounding 10, according to the Interior Ministry in the transitional government.

In response, security forces launched raids "pursuing the remnants of Assad's militias," state media reported. The state-run SANA news agency reported late Thursday that clashes broke out in the village of Balqasa in a rural part of Homs province.

The unrest left many people fearful that the relatively peaceful conditions that have prevailed since Assad's fall could break down into sectarian fighting as the country begins to recover following nearly 14 years of civil war.

Those who instigated the violence "are supported by parties that may be external that want strife for Syria to return it to square one, the square of sectarianism," Amran said.

Ahmad al-Bayyaa, an Alawite in the al-Zahra neighborhood of Homs, said he and his wife and three daughters fled to the coastal town of Baniyas when insurgent forces first arrived, but came back a day later after hearing from neighbors that the fighters had not harmed civilians.

"We had been given the idea that there would be slaughter and killing based on our identity, and nothing like that happened," he said. "We came back, and nobody asked to see my ID from the coast to Homs."

Before Assad's fall, al-Bayyaa said, he spent 10 years in hiding to avoid a call-up for reserve army service and was afraid to cross a checkpoint in his own neighborhood. After the former Syrian army collapsed in the face of the HTS-led advance, residents of the neighborhood set up a fruit and vegetable stand on an

abandoned tank in a gesture of mockery.

In the predominantly Christian Homs suburb of Fayrouzeh, a group of teenage girls took each other's pictures next to a giant cutout of Santa Claus with a Christmas tree in the town square.

Residents of the area said their initial fears that the country's new rulers would target religious minorities were quickly laid to rest. HTS was once aligned with al-Qaida, but its leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has cut ties with the group and since coming to power has preached religious coexistence.

"We had a very beautiful holiday even though there was some anxiety before it," said Fayrouzeh resident Sarab Kashi. "The guys from HTS volunteered and stood as guards on the door of the churches."

The city's Sunni majority, meanwhile, welcomed the new administration. Many of the young men now guarding its streets were originally from Homs and were evacuated to opposition-held Idlib when Assad's forces solidified control of their areas years ago.

"These guys were young boys when they took them in the green buses, and they were crying," said Wardeh Mohammed, gesturing at a group of young men manning a checkpoint in front of a grocery store on one of the city's main streets. "Thank God, they have come back as young men, as fighters who made us proud."

The country's new rulers have scrambled to impose order after the initial anarchic days after Assad's fall.

The former police and security forces — widely known for corruption — were disbanded, and members of the police force in what was formerly a regional government headed by HTS in the opposition-held northwest were deployed to other areas.

Amran, the police chief, said recruitment efforts are underway to build up the forces, but he acknowledged that the current numbers are "not sufficient to control security 100%." The new security forces have also struggled to stem the proliferation of weapons in the hands of civilians or non-state groups, he said.

Al-Sharaa has said that the country's patchwork of former rebel groups will come together in one unified national army, but it remained unclear exactly how that would happen or whether the groups can avoid infighting.

In Homs, it was clear that several different armed factions patrolled the streets, in a sometimes uneasy coordination. An HTS official hastened to explain that a handful of armed men wearing patches with an insignia sometimes associated with the Islamic State were not members of his group.

Many feared another flare-up of violence.

"From what happened yesterday, it's clear that some people want to take the country backwards" to the worst days of the country's civil war, al-Bayya said, "and no one wants to go back 14 years."

## **Aviation experts say Russia's air defense fire likely caused Azerbaijan plane crash as nation mourns**

By The Associated Press undefined

Aviation experts said Thursday that Russian air defense fire was likely responsible for the Azerbaijani plane crash the day before that killed 38 people and left all 29 survivors injured.

Azerbaijan Airlines' Embraer 190 was en route from Azerbaijan's capital of Baku to the Russian city of Grozny in the North Caucasus on Wednesday when it was diverted for reasons still unclear and crashed while making an attempt to land in Aktau in Kazakhstan after flying east across the Caspian Sea.

The plane went down about 3 kilometers (2 miles) from Aktau. Cellphone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before crashing into the ground and exploding in a fireball.

Other footage showed a part of its fuselage ripped away from the wings and the rest of the aircraft lying upside down on the grass.

Azerbaijan mourned the crash victims with national flags at half-staff across on Thursday. Traffic stopped at noon, and sirens sounded from ships and trains as it observed a nationwide moment of silence.

Speaking at a news conference Wednesday, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said that it was too soon

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to speculate on the reasons behind the crash, but said that the weather had forced the plane to change from its planned course.

"The information provided to me is that the plane changed its course between Baku and Grozny due to worsening weather conditions and headed to Aktau airport, where it crashed upon landing," he said.

Russia's civil aviation authority, Rosaviatsia, said that preliminary information indicated the pilots diverted to Aktau after a bird strike led to an emergency on board.

Authorities in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia were tight-lipped about a possible cause of the crash but a lawmaker in Azerbaijan blamed Moscow. Rasim Musabekov told the Azerbaijani news agency Turan that the plane was fired on while in the skies over Grozny and urged Russia to offer an official apology.

"Those who did this must face criminal charges," Musabekov was quoted by Turan as saying, adding that compensations to the victims should also be paid. "If it doesn't happen, relations will be affected."

As the official crash investigation started, some experts pointed out that holes seen in the plane's tail section could indicate that it could have come under fire from Russian air defense systems fending off a Ukrainian drone attack.

Ukrainian drones had previously attacked Grozny, the capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya, and other regions in the country's North Caucasus. An official in Chechnya said another drone attack on the region was fended off on Wednesday, although federal authorities didn't report it.

Mark Zee of OPSGroup, which monitors the world's airspace and airports for risks, said that the analysis of the images of fragments of the crashed plane indicate that it was almost certainly hit by a surface-to-air missile, or SAM.

"Much more to investigate, but at high level we'd put the probability of it being a SAM attack on the aircraft at being well into the 90-99% bracket," he said.

Osprey Flight Solutions, an aviation security firm based in the United Kingdom, warned its clients that the "Azerbaijan Airlines flight was likely shot down by a Russian military air-defense system." Osprey provides analysis for carriers still flying into Russia after Western airlines halted their flights during the war.

Osprey CEO Andrew Nicholson said that the company had issued more than 200 alerts regarding drone attacks and air defense systems in Russia during the war.

"This incident is a stark reminder of why we do what we do," Nicholson posted online. "It is painful to know that despite our efforts, lives were lost in a way that could have been avoided."

Yan Matveyev, an independent Russian military expert, noted that images of the crashed plane's tail reveal the damage compatible with shrapnel from a small surface-to-air missiles, such as the Pantsyr-S1 air defense system.

"It looks like the tail section of the plane was damaged by some missile fragments," he said.

Matveyev added that it remains unclear why the pilots decided to fly hundreds of miles east across the Caspian Sea instead of trying to land at a closer airport in Russia after the plane was hit.

"Perhaps some of the plane's systems kept working for some time and the crew believed that they could make it and land normally," Matveyev said, adding that the crew could also have faced restrictions on landing at another venue in Russia.

Caliber, an Azerbaijani news website with good government connections, also claimed that the airliner was fired upon by a Russian Pantsyr-S air defense system as it was approaching Grozny. It questioned why Russian authorities failed to close the airport despite the apparent drone raid in the area. Khamzat Kadyrov, head of Chechnya's Security Council, said that air defenses downed drones attacking the region on Wednesday.

Caliber also wondered why Russian authorities didn't allow the plane to make an emergency landing in Grozny or other Russian airports nearby after it was hit.

Asked about the claims that the plane had been fired upon by air defense assets, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that "it would be wrong to make hypotheses before investigators make their verdict."

Kazakhstan's parliamentary speaker, Maulen Ashimbayev, also warned against rushing to conclusions based on pictures of the plane's fragments, describing the allegations of air defense fire as unfounded

and unethical.

According to Kazakh officials, those aboard the plane included 42 Azerbaijani citizens, 16 Russian nationals, six Kazakhs and three Kyrgyzstan nationals. Russia's Emergencies Ministry on Thursday flew nine Russian survivors to Moscow for treatment.

## **The US says it pushed retraction of a famine warning for north Gaza. Aid groups express concern**

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A lead organization monitoring for food crises around the world withdrew a new report this week warning of imminent famine in north Gaza under what it called Israel's "near-total blockade," after the U.S. asked for its retraction, U.S. officials told The Associated Press. The move follows public criticism of the report from the U.S. ambassador to Israel.

The rare public challenge from the Biden administration of the work of the U.S.-funded Famine Early Warning System, which is meant to reflect the data-driven analysis of unbiased experts, drew accusations from aid and human-rights figures of possible U.S. political interference. A finding of famine would be a rebuke of close U.S. ally Israel, which has insisted that its 15-month war in Gaza is aimed against the Hamas militant group and not against its civilian population.

U.S. ambassador to Israel Jacob Lew earlier this week called the warning by the internationally recognized group inaccurate and "irresponsible." Lew and the U.S. Agency for International Development, which funds the monitoring group, both said the findings failed to properly account for rapidly changing circumstances in north Gaza.

The U.S. Embassy in Israel and the State Department declined comment. FEWS confirmed Thursday it had retracted its famine warning, and said it expected to re-release the report in January with updated data and analysis. The group declined further comment.

"We work day and night with the U.N. and our Israeli partners to meet humanitarian needs — which are great — and relying on inaccurate data is irresponsible," Lew said Tuesday.

USAID confirmed to the AP that it had asked the famine-monitoring organization to withdraw its stepped-up warning of imminent famine, issued in a report dated Monday.

The dispute points in part to the difficulty of assessing the extent of starvation in largely isolated northern Gaza, where thousands in recent weeks have fled an intensified Israeli military crackdown that aid groups say has allowed delivery of only a dozen trucks of food and water since roughly October.

FEWS Net said in its withdrawn report that unless Israel changes its policy, it expects the number of people dying of starvation and related ailments in north Gaza to reach between two and 15 per day sometime between January and March.

The internationally recognized mortality threshold for famine is two or more deaths a day per 10,000 people.

FEWS was created by the U.S. development agency in the 1980s and is still funded by it. But it is intended to provide independent, neutral and data-driven assessments of hunger crises, including in war zones. Its findings help guide decisions on aid by the U.S. and other governments and agencies around the world.

A spokesman for Israel's foreign ministry, Oren Marmorstein, welcomed the U.S. ambassador's public challenge of the famine warning. "FEWS NET - Stop spreading these lies!" Marmorstein said on X.

In challenging the findings publicly, the U.S. ambassador "leveraged his political power to undermine the work of this expert agency," said Scott Paul, a senior manager at the Oxfam America humanitarian non-profit. Paul stressed that he was not weighing in on the accuracy of the data or methodology of the report.

"The whole point of creating FEWS is to have a group of experts make assessments about imminent famine that are untainted by political considerations," said Kenneth Roth, former executive director of Human Rights Watch and now a visiting professor in international affairs at Princeton University. "It sure looks like USAID is allowing political considerations -- the Biden administration's worry about funding Israel's starvation strategy -- to interfere."



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Israel says it has been operating in recent months against Hamas militants still active in northern Gaza. It says the vast majority of the area's residents have fled and relocated to Gaza City, where most aid destined for the north is delivered. But some critics, including a former defense minister, have accused Israel of carrying out ethnic cleansing in Gaza's far north, near the Israeli border.

North Gaza has been one of the areas hardest-hit by fighting and Israel's restrictions on aid throughout its war with Hamas militants. Global famine monitors and U.N. and U.S. officials have warned repeatedly of the imminent risk of malnutrition and deaths from starvation hitting famine levels.

International officials say Israel last summer increased the amount of aid it was admitting there, under U.S. pressure. The U.S. and U.N. have said Gaza's people as a whole need between 350 and 500 trucks a day of food and other vital needs.

But the U.N. and aid groups say Israel recently has again blocked almost all aid to that part of Gaza. Cindy McCain, the American head of the U.N. World Food Program, called earlier this month for political pressure to get food flowing to Palestinians there.

Israel says it places no restrictions on aid entering Gaza and that hundreds of truckloads of goods are piled up at Gaza's crossings and accused international aid agencies of failing to deliver the supplies. The U.N. and other aid groups say Israeli restrictions, ongoing combat, looting and insufficient security by Israeli troops make it impossible to deliver aid effectively.

Lew, the U.S. ambassador, said the famine warning was based on "outdated and inaccurate" data. He pointed to uncertainty over how many of the 65,000-75,000 people remaining in northern Gaza had fled in recent weeks, saying that skewed the findings.

FEWS said in its report that its famine assessment holds even if as few as 10,000 people remain.

USAID in its statement to AP said it had reviewed the report before it became public, and noted "discrepancies" in population estimates and some other data. The U.S. agency had asked the famine warning group to address those uncertainties and be clear in its final report to reflect how those uncertainties affected its predictions of famine, it said.

"This was relayed before Ambassador Lew's statement," USAID said in a statement. "FEWS NET did not resolve any of these concerns and published in spite of these technical comments and a request for substantive engagement before publication. As such, USAID asked to retract the report."

Roth criticized the U.S. challenge of the report in light of the gravity of the crisis there.

"This quibbling over the number of people desperate for food seems a politicized diversion from the fact that the Israeli government is blocking virtually all food from getting in," he said, adding that "the Biden administration seems to be closing its eyes to that reality, but putting its head in the sand won't feed anyone."

The U.S., Israel's main backer, provided a record amount of military support in the first year of the war. At the same time, the Biden administration repeatedly urged Israel to allow more access to aid deliveries in Gaza overall, and warned that failing to do so could trigger U.S. restrictions on military support. The administration recently said Israel was making improvements and declined to carry out its threat of restrictions.

Military support for Israel's war in Gaza is politically charged in the U.S., with Republicans and some Democrats staunchly opposed any effort to limit U.S. support over the suffering of Palestinian civilians trapped in the conflict. The Biden administration's reluctance to do more to press Israel for improved treatment of civilians undercut support for Democrats in last month's elections.

## **Ukraine's military intelligence says North Korean troops are suffering heavy battlefield losses**

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — North Korean troops are suffering heavy losses in the fighting in Russia's Kursk region and facing logistical difficulties as a result of Ukrainian attacks, Ukraine's military intelligence said Thursday.

The intelligence agency, known under its acronym GUR, said Ukrainian strikes near Novoivanovka inflicted

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heavy casualties on North Korean units. It said North Korean troops also faced supply issues and even shortages of drinking water.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said earlier this week that 3,000 North Korean troops have been killed and wounded in the fighting in the Kursk region. It marked the first significant estimate by Ukraine of North Korean casualties several weeks after Kyiv announced that North Korea had sent 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia to help it in the almost 3-year war.

The casualty disclosure came as the Biden administration was pressing to send as much military aid as possible to Ukraine before President-elect Donald Trump takes over in January.

Ukrainian forces launched an incursion into the Kursk region in August, dealing a significant blow to Russia's prestige and forcing it to deploy some of its troops from eastern Ukraine, where they were pressing a slow-moving offensive.

The Russian army has been able to reclaim some territory in the Kursk region from Ukrainian forces, but has failed to fully dislodge them.

At the same time, Russia has sought to break Ukraine's resistance with waves of strikes with cruise missiles and drones against Ukraine's power grid and other infrastructure.

The latest attack on Christmas morning involved 78 missiles and 106 drones, striking power facilities, Ukraine's air force said. It claimed to have intercepted 59 missiles and 54 drones and jammed 52 other drones.

On Thursday, Russia attacked Ukraine with 31 exploding drones. Twenty were shot down and another 11 didn't reach their target due to jamming, the Ukrainian air force said.

As part of the daily barrage, Russian forces also struck a central market in Nikopol in the Dnipropetrovsk region with a drone, wounding eight people, according to local authorities.

Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened Thursday that Russia could again hit Ukraine with the new Oreshnik hypersonic ballistic missile that was first used in a Nov. 21 strike on the Ukrainian city of Dnipro.

Speaking to reporters, Putin said Russia has just a few Oreshnik missiles, but added that it wouldn't hesitate to use them on Ukraine.

"We aren't in a rush to use them, because those are powerful weapons intended for certain tasks," he said. "But we wouldn't exclude their use today or tomorrow if necessary."

Putin said Russia has launched serial production of the new weapon and reaffirmed a plan to deploy some of Oreshnik missiles to Russia's neighbor and ally Belarus. Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko told reporters Thursday that his country could host 10 or more.

Ukraine struck back with drone strikes of its own. Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications said the military struck a plant in Kamensk-Shakhtynsky in Russia's southern Rostov region that produces propellant for ballistic missiles.

"This strike is part of a comprehensive campaign to weaken the capabilities of the Russian armed forces to carry out terrorist attacks against Ukrainian civilians," it said in a statement.

## India's former prime minister Manmohan Singh, architect of economic reforms, dies at 92

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN and ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, widely regarded as the architect of India's economic reform program and a landmark nuclear deal with the United States, has died. He was 92.

Singh was admitted to New Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences late Thursday after his health deteriorated due to a "sudden loss of consciousness at home," the hospital said in a statement.

"Resuscitative measures were started immediately at home. He was brought to the Medical Emergency" at 8:06 p.m., the hospital said, but "despite all efforts, he could not be revived and was declared dead at 9:51 p.m."

Singh was being treated for "age-related medical conditions," the statement said.

A mild-mannered technocrat, Singh became one of India's longest-serving prime ministers for 10 years

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and leader of the Congress Party in the Parliament's Upper House, earning a reputation as a man of great personal integrity. He was chosen to fill the role in 2004 by Sonia Gandhi, the widow of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

But his sterling image was tainted by allegations of corruption against his ministers.

Singh was reelected in 2009, but his second term as prime minister was clouded by financial scandals and corruption charges over the organization of the 2010 Commonwealth Games. This led to the Congress Party's crushing defeat in the 2014 national election by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

Singh adopted a low profile after relinquishing the post of prime minister.

Prime Minister Modi, who succeeded Singh in 2014, called him one of India's "most distinguished leaders" who rose from humble origins and left "a strong imprint on our economic policy over the years."

"As our Prime Minister, he made extensive efforts to improve people's lives," Modi said in a post on the social platform X. He called Singh's interventions in Parliament as a lawmaker "insightful" and said "his wisdom and humility were always visible."

Rahul Gandhi, from the same party as Singh and the opposition leader in the lower house of the Indian Parliament, said Singh's "deep understanding of economics inspired the nation" and that he "led India with immense wisdom and integrity."

"I have lost a mentor and guide. Millions of us who admired him will remember him with the utmost pride," Gandhi wrote on X.

The United States offered its condolences, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken saying that Singh was "one of the greatest champions of the U.S.-India strategic partnership."

"We mourn Dr. Singh's passing and will always remember his dedication to bringing the United States and India closer together," Blinken said.

Born on Sept. 26, 1932, in a village in the Punjab province of undivided India, Singh's brilliant academic career took him to Cambridge University in Britain, where he earned a degree in economics in 1957. He then got his doctorate in economics from Nuffield College at Oxford University in 1962.

Singh taught at Panjab University and the prestigious Delhi School of Economics before joining the Indian government in 1971 as economic advisor in the Commerce Ministry. In 1982, he became chief economic adviser to the Finance Ministry. He also served as deputy chair of the Planning Commission and governor of the Reserve Bank of India.

As finance minister, Singh in 1991 instituted reforms that opened up the economy and moved India away from a socialist-patterned economy and toward a capitalist model in the face of a huge balance of payments deficit, skirting a potential economic crisis.

His accolades include the 1987 Padma Vibhushan Award, India's second-highest civilian honor; the Jawaharlal Nehru Birth Centenary Award of the Indian Science Congress in 1995; and the Asia Money Award for Finance Minister of the Year in 1993 and 1994.

Singh was a member of India's Upper House of Parliament and was leader of the opposition from 1998 to 2004 before he was named prime minister. He was the first Sikh to hold the country's top post and made a public apology in Parliament for the 1984 Sikh Massacre in which some 3,000 Sikhs were killed after then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by Sikh bodyguards.

Under Singh, India adopted a Right to Information Act in 2005 to promote accountability and transparency from government officials and bureaucrats. He was also instrumental in implementing a welfare scheme that guaranteed at least 100 paid workdays for Indian rural citizens.

The coalition government he headed for a decade brought together politicians and parties with differing ideologies that were rivals in the country's various states.

In a move hailed as one of his biggest achievements apart from economic reforms, Singh ended India's nuclear isolation by signing a deal with the U.S. that gave India access to American nuclear technology.

But the deal hit his government adversely, with Communist allies withdrawing support and criticism of the agreement growing within India in 2008 when it was finalized.

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Singh adopted a pragmatic foreign policy approach, pursuing a peace process with nuclear rival and neighbor Pakistan. But his efforts suffered a major setback after Pakistani militants carried out a massive gun and bomb attack in Mumbai in November 2008.

He also tried to end the border dispute with China, brokering a deal to reopen the Nathu La pass into Tibet, which had been closed for more than 40 years.

His 1965 book, "India's Export Trends and Prospects for Self-Sustained Growth," dealt with India's inward-oriented trade policy.

Singh is survived by his wife Gursharan Kaur and three daughters.

## **Powerful thunderstorms rumble across Texas, delaying holiday travel**

DALLAS (AP) — Some flights were delayed or canceled in Texas on Thursday after a line of thunderstorms started moving across parts of the state in a system the National Weather Service predicted could bring high winds, hail and possible tornadoes.

More than 100 flights were delayed and dozens more canceled at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport on Thursday. Delays and thunderstorm-related cancellations also were reported at Dallas' Love Field and George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, according to FlightAware, an aviation company that tracks flights across the world.

The National Weather Service issued a tornado warning late Thursday afternoon for parts of Texas northeast of Houston, meaning weather radar indicated there was a tornado in the area. There were no immediate reports of damage.

A tornado watch remained in effect through Thursday night for several counties in southeast Texas, including the Houston area.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott activated state emergency response resources because of the increased severe weather threat.

"As Texans and out-of-state visitors begin traveling after the Christmas holiday, it's crucial that everyone regularly monitor road conditions, make an emergency plan and heed the guidance of state and local officials," Abbott said in a statement.

The greatest weather risk was forecast for a stretch of Texas east of Dallas, between Houston and portions of southern Arkansas and western and northern Louisiana, said Brian Hurley, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center.

"There does look like the possibility of one or a few tornadoes with this risk, but the main risk will be with high winds and hail," Hurley said, adding that he expected wind gusts generally between 60 and 80 mph (96 to 128 kph), and hail one inch (2.5 centimeters) in diameter or greater.

Hurley said the storms will likely push into southern Arkansas and western and northern Louisiana after nightfall, posing a potentially dangerous situation for holiday travelers.

"People can't see a whole lot and may not be as weather aware," he said.

## **Holiday shoppers increased spending by 3.8% despite higher prices**

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO and HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writers

Sales rose this year during the holiday shopping season even as Americans wrestled with elevated prices for many groceries and other necessities, according to new data.

Holiday sales from the beginning of November through Christmas Eve climbed 3.8%, outpacing the 3.1% increase from a year earlier, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks all kinds of payments including cash and debit cards. The last five days of the season accounted for 10% of the spending.

This year, retailers were even more under the gun to get shoppers in to buy early and in bulk since there were five fewer days between Thanksgiving and Christmas.



Michelle Meyer, chief economist at Mastercard Economics Institute, said the holiday shopping season “revealed a consumer who is willing and able to spend but driven by a search for value” as seen by concentrated online spending during the biggest promotional periods.

Sales growth was higher than the 3.2% increase Mastercard SpendingPulse had projected this fall. The data released Thursday excludes the automotive industry and is not adjusted for inflation.

Clothing sales rose 3.6%, with most of the growth being fueled by online shopping. Spending on restaurants, and sales of electronics and jewelry also grew. Online sales jumped 6.7% from a year ago and in-person spending rose 2.9%.

Consumer spending accounts for nearly 70% of U.S. economic activity and economists carefully monitor how Americans use their money, particularly during the holidays, to gauge how they’re feeling financially.

The most recent government data on consumer spending, released on Dec. 17, showed shoppers stepped up activity at retail stores last month. But auto dealer sales drove most of those gains as huge storms created a need for new cars in parts of the southeast slammed by Hurricane Helene in October. Big discounts at many retail chains also attracted shoppers.

But the report also hinted at some consumer caution as sales at grocery stores, clothing shops, and restaurants fell. Outside of car dealers and online retailers, sales gains were modest.

Retailers felt more pressure this year due to the shorter holiday shopping period, and also from a presidential election that captured the attention of many consumers. Sales of general merchandise slid 9% in the two weeks ended Nov. 9, according to Circana, a market research group. Sales have been rebounding but stores will have to make up for those losses.

A broader picture of how Americans are spending their money arrives next month when the National Retail Federation, the nation’s largest retail trade group, releases its combined two-month statistics based on November-December sales figures from the Commerce Department.

The group expects that shoppers will have made \$979.5 billion to \$989 billion worth of purchases in November and December, which would represent a 2.5%-3.5% increase over the same two-month period a year ago. That would be a slower rate than the 3.9% increase from holiday 2023 over holiday 2022 season.

Overall, retailers had a decent start to the unofficial kickoff to the holiday shopping period despite lots of discounts that started as early as October.

## **Ex-Sen. Bob Menendez, citing ‘emotional toll,’ seeks sentencing delay in wake of wife’s trial**

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez asked a federal judge on Thursday to delay his end-of-January sentencing on bribery charges and acting as an agent of the Egyptian government, saying his family would suffer a “tremendous emotional toll” if the New Jersey Democrat were sentenced during his wife’s trial.

His lawyers told Judge Sidney H. Stein in a letter that Nadine Menendez would face a jury that might find it impossible not to hear about her husband’s sentencing if it occurred on its scheduled date, eight days into her trial.

“Put simply, the current timeline poses an unnecessary and overwhelming risk of poisoning the proceedings against Nadine,” the lawyers wrote.

They recommended moving the sentencing to a date immediately after his wife’s trial, which might not conclude until March.

The 70-year-old Menendez resigned in the weeks after his July conviction on 16 charges, including bribery, extortion, honest services fraud and obstruction of justice. He has challenged the conviction after prosecutors recently revealed that jurors were permitted to see some evidence during deliberations that was supposed to be excluded from the trial.

His wife, whose trial was postponed after it was learned she would need surgery for treatment of breast cancer, faces much of the same evidence as her husband in Manhattan federal court. Her trial is set to

begin Jan. 21 while her husband is scheduled to be sentenced on Jan. 29.

Bob Menendez's lawyers wrote that the former senator "often tends to his wife's physical and emotional needs."

"Sentencing him during his wife's trial will of course take a tremendous emotional toll on both Senator Menendez and his family," they said. "To ask him to face sentencing during the criminal trial of his wife, who is also in the midst of an ongoing battle against a life-threatening disease, is too much to ask of any man."

In a separate letter to the judge, a lawyer for Nadine Menendez urged the judge to reject a suggestion by prosecutors that the sentencing occur immediately before the trial.

"If Mr. Menendez were sentenced shortly before our client proceeds to trial, that likely would have a devastating impact on our client, which, I believe, would make it difficult if not impossible for her to concentrate on, and participate meaningfully in, her trial," attorney Barry Coburn wrote.

A spokesperson for prosecutors declined to comment.

Prosecutors say nearly \$150,000 in gold bars, along with \$480,000 in cash and a Mercedes-Benz convertible found during a 2022 FBI raid at the Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, home that Nadine Menendez shared with her husband were given to the couple over a four-year span so that the senator would do favors for three New Jersey businessmen.

Two of the three businessmen were convicted along with Menendez while a third businessman pleaded guilty to charges and testified at his trial.

At the time he was charged in fall 2023, Menendez held a powerful position as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a post he was forced to give up.

## What is known about a plane crash in Kazakhstan as experts suspect Russian air defense fire

By The Associated Press undefined

Aviation experts said Thursday an Azerbaijani airliner that crashed in Kazakhstan most likely went down after being hit by Russian air defense systems.

Here are some things to know about the crash that killed 38 out of the 67 people on board:

How did the plane crash?

Azerbaijan Airlines' Embraer 190 was en route from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku to the Russian city of Grozny in the North Caucasus on Wednesday when it was diverted for reasons that aren't yet fully clear. It crashed while trying to land in Aktau, Kazakhstan, after flying east across the Caspian Sea.

The plane went down near the coast about 3 kilometers (2 miles) from Aktau. Cellphone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before hitting the ground and exploding in a fireball.

Rescuers rushed 29 survivors to hospitals.

How did Azerbaijan react?

Azerbaijan observed a nationwide day of mourning on Thursday. National flags were at half-staff, traffic across the country stopped at noon, and sirens were sounded from ships and trains.

Speaking at a news conference on Wednesday, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said that the weather had forced the plane to change from its planned course.

What do officials and experts say about a possible cause?

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

Russia's civil aviation authority, Rosaviatsia, said that preliminary information indicated the pilots diverted to Aktau after a bird strike led to an emergency on board.

While officials remained tight-lipped, an Azerbaijani lawmaker directly pointed the finger at Russia. Rasim Musabekov told the Azerbaijani news agency Turan that the plane was fired upon in the skies over Grozny and urged Russia to offer an official apology.

Some aviation experts say the holes seen in the plane's tail section after the crash indicate that it could

have come under fire from Russian air defense systems fending off a Ukrainian drone attack.

Mark Zee of OPSGroup, which monitors the world's airspace and airports for risks, said that the analysis of the fragments of the crashed plane indicate with a 90-99% probability that it was hit by a surface-to-air missile.

Osprey Flight Solutions, an aviation security firm based in the United Kingdom, warned its clients that the "Azerbaijan Airlines flight was likely shot down by a Russian military air-defense system."

Osprey CEO Andrew Nicholson said that the company had issued more than 200 alerts regarding drone attacks and air defense systems in Russia since the full-scale war in Ukraine began in February 2022.

FlightRadar24 said in an online post that the aircraft had faced "strong GPS jamming" that interfered with flight tracking data allowing to monitor planes' flight path. Russia has extensively used sophisticated jamming equipment to fend off drone attacks.

A day later, no definitive word

Yan Matveyev, an independent Russian military expert, noted that the images of the crashed plane's tail show damage compatible with shrapnel from the Russian Pantsyr-S1 air defense system.

It's unclear why the pilots decided to fly hundreds of miles east across the Caspian Sea instead of trying to land in Russia after the plane was hit, he said, adding that they probably faced restrictions on landing at a closer venue and may have thought that the damage was not critical.

In Azerbaijan, Caliber online newspaper also claimed that the airliner was fired upon by a Russian Pantsyr-S air defense system and also had its systems affected by jamming equipment as it was approaching Grozny.

The paper questioned why Russian authorities failed to close the airport despite the drone attack in the area on Wednesday, and why they didn't allow the plane to land in Grozny or other Russian airports nearby after it was hit.

Asked about the claims that the plane had been fired upon by air defense assets, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Thursday that "it would be wrong to make hypotheses before investigators make their verdict."

Officials in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have similarly avoided comment on a possible cause of the crash, saying it will be up to investigators to determine it.

## **New York to charge fossil fuel companies for damage from climate change**

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Large fossil fuel companies would have to pay fees to help New York fight the effects of climate change under a bill signed Thursday by Gov. Kathy Hochul.

The new law requires companies responsible for substantial greenhouse gas emissions to pay into a state fund for infrastructure projects meant to repair or avoid future damage from climate change.

Lawmakers approved the bill earlier this year to force big oil and gas companies to contribute to the cost of repairs after extreme weather events and resiliency projects such as coastal wetland restoration and upgrades to roads, bridges and water drainage systems.

"The Climate Change Superfund Act is now law, and New York has fired a shot that will be heard round the world: the companies most responsible for the climate crisis will be held accountable," said state Sen. Liz Krueger, a Democrat who sponsored the bill.

"The planet's largest climate polluters bear a unique responsibility for creating the climate crisis, and they must pay their fair share to help regular New Yorkers deal with the consequences," Krueger said.

The biggest emitters of greenhouse gases between 2000 and 2018 would be subjected to the fines.

The law won't start penalizing companies immediately. Instead, the state must come up with rules on how to identify responsible parties, notify companies of the fines and create a system to determine which infrastructure projects will be paid for by the fund. Legal challenges are expected.

"This type of legislation represents nothing more than a punitive new fee on American energy, and we are evaluating our options moving forward," the American Petroleum Institute, the oil industry's top lobbying group, said in a statement.

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New York's governor signed the measure months after Vermont put a similar law in place.

## How the stock market defied expectations again this year, by the numbers

The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — What a wonderful year 2024 has been for investors.

U.S. stocks ripped higher and carried the S&P 500 to records as the economy kept growing and the Federal Reserve began cutting interest rates.

The year featured many familiar winners, such as Big Tech, which got even bigger as their stock prices kept growing. But it wasn't just Apple, Nvidia and the like. Bitcoin, gold and other investments also drove higher.

Here's a look at some of the numbers that defined the year. All are as of Dec. 20.

1998

Remember when President Bill Clinton got impeached or when baseball's Mark McGwire hit his 70th home run against the Montreal Expos? That was the last time the U.S. stock market closed out a second straight year with a leap of at least 20%, something the S&P 500 is on track to do again this year. The index has climbed 24.3% so far this year, not including dividends, following last year's spurt of 24.2%.

57

The number of all-time highs the S&P 500 has set so far this year. The first came early, on Jan. 19, when the index capped a two-year comeback from the swoon caused by high inflation and worries that high interest rates instituted by the Federal Reserve to combat it would create a recession. But the index was methodical through the rest of the year, setting a record in every month outside of April and August, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices. The latest came on Dec. 6.

3

The number of times the Federal Reserve has cut its main interest rate this year from a two-decade high, offering some relief to the economy. Expectations for those cuts, along with hopes for more in 2025, were a big reason the U.S. stock market has been so successful this year. The 1 percentage point of cuts, though, is still short of the 1.5 percentage points that many traders were forecasting for 2024 at the start of the year. The Fed disappointed investors in December when it said it may cut rates just two more times in 2025, fewer than it had earlier expected.

1,508

That's how many points the Dow Jones Industrial Average rose by the day after Election Day, as investors made bets on what Donald Trump's return to the White House will mean for the economy and the world. The more widely followed S&P 500 soared 2.5% for its best day in nearly two years. Aside from bitcoin, stocks of banks and smaller winners were also perceived to be big winners. The bump has since diminished amid worries that Trump's policies could also send inflation higher.

\$100,000

The level that bitcoin topped to set a record above \$108,000 this past month. It's been climbing as interest rates come down, and it got a particularly big boost following Trump's election. He's turned around and become a fan of crypto, and he's named a former regulator who's seen as friendly to digital currencies as the next chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission, replacing someone who critics said was overly aggressive in his oversight. Bitcoin was below \$17,000 just two years ago following the collapse of crypto exchange FTX.

26.7%

Gold's rise for the year, as it also hit records and had as strong a run as U.S. stocks. Wars around the world have helped drive demand for investments seen as safe, such as gold. It's also benefited from the Fed's cut to interest rates. When bonds are paying less in interest, they pull away fewer potential buyers from gold, which pays investors nothing.

\$420



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It's a favorite number of Elon Musk, and it's also a threshold that Tesla's stock price passed in December as it set a record. The number has a long history among marijuana devotees, and Musk famously said in 2018 that he had secured funding to take Tesla private at \$420 per share. Tesla soared this year, up from less than \$250 at the start, in part because of expectations that Musk's close relationship with Trump could benefit the company.

\$91.2 billion

That's how much revenue Nvidia made in the nine months through Oct. 27, showing how the artificial-intelligence frenzy is creating mountains of cash. Nvidia's chips are driving much of the move into AI, and its revenue through the last nine months catapulted from less than \$39 billion the year before. Such growth has boosted Nvidia's worth to more than \$3 trillion in total.

74%

GameStop's gain on May 13 after Keith Gill, better known as "Roaring Kitty," appeared online for the first time in three years to support the video game retailer's stock, which he helped rocket to unimaginable heights during the "meme stock craze" in 2021. Several other meme stocks also jumped following his post in May on the social platform X, including AMC Entertainment. Gill later disclosed a sizeable stake in the online pet products retailer Chewy, but he sold all of his holdings by late October.

1.6%, 3.0% and 3.1%

That's how much the U.S. economy grew, at annualized seasonally adjusted rates, in each of the three first quarters of this year. Such growth blew past what many pessimists were expecting when inflation was topping 9% in the summer of 2022. The fear was that the medicine prescribed by the Fed to beat high inflation — high interest rates — would create a recession. Households at the lower end of the income spectrum in particular are feeling pain now, as they contend with still-high prices. But the overall economy has remained remarkably resilient.

20.1%

This is the vacancy rate for U.S. office buildings — an all-time high — through the first three quarters of 2024, according to data from Moody's. The fact the rate held steady for most of the year was something of a win for office building owners, given that it had marched up steadily from 16.8% in the fourth quarter of 2019. Demand for office space weakened as the pandemic led to the popularization of remote work.

3.73 million

That's the total number of previously occupied homes sold nationally through the first 11 months of 2024. Sales would have to surge 20% year-over-year in December for 2024's home sales to match the 4.09 million existing homes sold in 2023, a nearly 30-year low. The U.S. housing market has been in a sales slump dating back to 2022, when mortgage rates began to climb from pandemic-era lows. A shortage of homes for sale and elevated mortgage rates have discouraged many would-be homebuyers.

## AI is a game changer for students with disabilities. Schools are still learning to harness it

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

For Makenzie Gilkison, spelling is such a struggle that a word like rhinoceros might come out as "ri-neanswsaurs" or sarcastic as "srkastik."

The 14-year-old from suburban Indianapolis can sound out words, but her dyslexia makes the process so draining that she often struggles with comprehension. "I just assumed I was stupid," she recalled of her early grade school years.

But assistive technology powered by artificial intelligence has helped her keep up with classmates. Last year, Makenzie was named to the National Junior Honor Society. She credits a customized AI-powered chatbot, a word prediction program and other tools that can read for her.

"I would have just probably given up if I didn't have them," she said.

Artificial intelligence holds the promise of helping countless other students with a range of visual, speech, language and hearing impairments to execute tasks that come easily to others. Schools everywhere have

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been wrestling with how and where to incorporate AI, but many are fast-tracking applications for students with disabilities.

Getting the latest technology into the hands of students with disabilities is a priority for the U.S. Education Department, which has told schools they must consider whether students need tools like text-to-speech and alternative communication devices. New rules from the Department of Justice also will require schools and other government entities to make apps and online content accessible to those with disabilities.

There is concern about how to ensure students using it — including those with disabilities — are still learning.

Students can use artificial intelligence to summarize jumbled thoughts into an outline, summarize complicated passages, or even translate Shakespeare into common English. And computer-generated voices that can read passages for visually impaired and dyslexic students are becoming less robotic and more natural.

"I'm seeing that a lot of students are kind of exploring on their own, almost feeling like they've found a cheat code in a video game," said Alexis Reid, an educational therapist in the Boston area who works with students with learning disabilities. But in her view, it is far from cheating: "We're meeting students where they are."

Ben Snyder, a 14-year-old freshman from Larchmont, New York, who was recently diagnosed with a learning disability, has been increasingly using AI to help with homework.

"Sometimes in math, my teachers will explain a problem to me, but it just makes absolutely no sense," he said. "So if I plug that problem into AI, it'll give me multiple different ways of explaining how to do that."

He likes a program called Question AI. Earlier in the day, he asked the program to help him write an outline for a book report — a task he completed in 15 minutes that otherwise would have taken him an hour and a half because of his struggles with writing and organization. But he does think using AI to write the whole report crosses a line.

"That's just cheating," Ben said.

Schools have been trying to balance the technology's benefits against the risk that it will do too much. If a special education plan sets reading growth as a goal, the student needs to improve that skill. AI can't do it for them, said Mary Lawson, general counsel at the Council of the Great City Schools.

But the technology can help level the playing field for students with disabilities, said Paul Sanft, director of a Minnesota-based center where families can try out different assistive technology tools and borrow devices.

"There are definitely going to be people who use some of these tools in nefarious ways. That's always going to happen," Sanft said. "But I don't think that's the biggest concern with people with disabilities, who are just trying to do something that they couldn't do before."

Another risk is that AI will track students into less rigorous courses of study. And, because it is so good at identifying patterns, AI might be able to figure out a student has a disability. Having that disclosed by AI and not the student or their family could create ethical dilemmas, said Luis Pérez, the disability and digital inclusion lead at CAST, formerly the Center for Applied Specialized Technology.

Schools are using the technology to help students who struggle academically, even if they do not qualify for special education services. In Iowa, a new law requires students deemed not proficient — about a quarter of them — to get an individualized reading plan. As part of that effort, the state's education department spent \$3 million on an AI-driven personalized tutoring program. When students struggle, a digital avatar intervenes.

More AI tools are coming soon.

The U.S. National Science Foundation is funding AI research and development. One firm is developing tools to help children with speech and language difficulties. Called the National AI Institute for Exceptional Education, it is headquartered at the University of Buffalo, which did pioneering work on handwriting recognition that helped the U.S. Postal Service save hundreds of millions of dollars by automating processing.

"We are able to solve the postal application with very high accuracy. When it comes to children's handwriting, we fail very badly," said Venu Govindaraju, the director of the institute. He sees it as an area that

needs more work, along with speech-to-text technology, which isn't as good at understanding children's voices, particularly if there is a speech impediment.

Sorting through the sheer number of programs developed by education technology companies can be a time-consuming challenge for schools. Richard Culatta, CEO of the International Society for Technology in Education, said the nonprofit launched an effort this fall to make it easier for districts to vet what they are buying and ensure it is accessible.

Makenzie wishes some of the tools were easier to use. Sometimes a feature will inexplicably be turned off, and she will be without it for a week while the tech team investigates. The challenges can be so cumbersome that some students resist the technology entirely.

But Makenzie's mother, Nadine Gilkison, who works as a technology integration supervisor at Franklin Township Community School Corporation in Indiana, said she sees more promise than downside.

In September, her district rolled out chatbots to help special education students in high school. She said teachers, who sometimes struggled to provide students the help they needed, became emotional when they heard about the program. Until now, students were reliant on someone to help them, unable to move ahead on their own.

"Now we don't need to wait anymore," she said.

## 'Baby Driver' actor Hudson Meek, 16, dies in a fall from a moving vehicle

VESTAVIA HILLS, Ala. (AP) — Teenage actor Hudson Meek has died after he fell out of a moving vehicle in Alabama, authorities said.

Meek, 16, was hurt on Dec. 19 while on a street in Vestavia Hills, a suburb of Birmingham. He died two days later, according to the Jefferson County Coroner's Office.

The Vestavia Hills Police Department, which is investigating Meek's death, has not issued any public statements.

Meek made his on-screen debut in 2014's "The Santa Con," and had roles in various TV series, including "MacGyver." He was perhaps best known for his role in the 2017 film "Baby Driver," in which he played a younger version of Ansel Elgort's titular character.

"His 16 years on this earth were far too short, but he accomplished so much and significantly impacted everyone he met," a post on Meek's Instagram page read.

Meek played football at Vestavia Hills High School, enjoyed Bible study with his teammates and had traveled to all 50 states. He loved snow skiing, making music playlists for his friends and singing in the school choir, according to his obituary.

His family plans a funeral and memorial service on Saturday that will be livestreamed on Meek's Instagram account.

## Flooding took away the love of his life after 35 years without a day spent apart

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

ERWIN, Tenn. (AP) — Jerry and Sibrina Barrett never spent a day apart over 35 years. They worked long hours, never took vacations, and liked to relax with their son at home. They had no idea that a hurricane could reach them in the mountains of East Tennessee.

Living in Johnson City, they were barely aware that Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida on September 26. The next day it was raining heavily, so Sibrina went in late to her once-a-week cleaning job at the Impact Plastics factory.

It was the last time they saw each other.

Today, Sibrina Barnett's clothes are just where she left them, on her side of the bed. Her nail polish and shampoo are still in the bathroom. Her sweater still hangs from the back of a kitchen chair. Jerry knows

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he will have to move them one day, but not yet.

Helene caused catastrophic damage, the deadliest storm to hit the U.S. mainland since Katrina in 2005. At least 221 people were killed. Many were like Sibrina, drowning in floods hundreds of miles inland. Behind every number was a person whose absence is sorely felt.

'Just trying to enjoy life'

She was 17 and he was 20 when they met, and "35 years later, we never left each other's side," Jerry said.

At first they would cruise in Jerry's Camaro and blast the stereo, which "you could hear from a little way," he jokes. They would "catch a group of friends or something, maybe park and sit around and talk" between her night shifts as a waitress.

"We wasn't really wild people or anything. We was just a couple young people trying to enjoy life a little bit," he said.

A few years later, she was pregnant. They got married and made their future, in a mobile home in the same community Jerry has known all his life.

"Me and her, both, growing up as kids, didn't really have a lot," Jerry says. "We wasn't poor, but we wasn't wearing Levi's and Nikes and stuff either."

They were both workaholics. He does HVAC repair, but she was proud to be the main breadwinner. Six days a week, she'd handle a morning cleaning job, then clean a private school in the evening. Clients loved her for being meticulous — she'd sometimes go back over areas already cleaned by a different crew until they met her standards.

"Work making money, that's how you're going to have anything," Jerry says. "She spoiled me and my son. That's exactly what she did."

Caimen is 21 now, but the first thing visitors see in the home he shares with his dad is a coffee-table-sized resin model of characters from the Dragonball Z anime show. Dozens of smaller models fill a living room display case. Still more line the hallway. Sibrina ordered the figures and they would assemble them together. Some came all the way from Japan and cost thousands of dollars.

"We decided to kind of just enjoy it as we went, instead of trying to have a bunch for retirement or our older age," Jerry said. Given what happened, "I'm kind of glad we did."

One of the display cases now holds Sibrina's urn.

The Flood

Sibrina hated driving in bad weather, so she went in late to Impact Plastics on Sept. 27. Rainwater would often pool on the factory parking lot, but she called Jerry on her break to report it was higher than usual. Then she called again — the water had risen to the bottom of her car door. Jerry put his tools away and drove to get her, but the exit off the interstate was blocked.

"Don't worry about even trying to get down in here," she told him. "She said, 'Just go home. It looks like I'm going to be here for a few hours.'"

What happened next, Jerry learned second-hand. As the water kept rising, Sibrina and nine other workers retreated to the highest point — the flatbed of a tractor-trailer loaded with giant coils of plastic tubing. It wasn't high enough. They called 911, but first responders were focused on a different emergency: Dozens of people were trapped on the roof of a nearby hospital.

Then the truck flipped over, sending the workers into the raging water. Some managed to float on the tubing and were washed onto a pile of debris. Sibrina was one of six who died.

Many Americans haven't thought of inland areas as being particularly vulnerable to severe weather, but places like Erwin, in a valley alongside the Nolichucky River, are increasingly prone to disasters.

Jerry hung up with Sibrina and went back to work. He had no idea how bad the flooding was, and didn't learn she was missing until hours later. He tried searching for clues in YouTube videos. Eight days passed before her body was recovered.

The litigation

Jerry's lawyer, Luke Widener, said the workers relied on management to warn them of dangers outside because the factory had few windows. Some said they weren't allowed to stop work until the power went



out. By then the access road was under water.

Widener also represents Zinnia Adkins, who earned \$11.50 an hour as a temporary employee at Impact Plastics. She's alive, she said, because a co-worker gripped her tightly in the chest-deep water. She can't swim and is deathly afraid of spiders, which were all over the water's surface. Months later, she still sleeps on the couch because the bed feels too open and unsafe.

"A lot of good people lost their lives that day," Adkins said. "It's just it's a hard memory for me to relive."

The family of another employee, Johnny Peterson, filed a wrongful-death lawsuit against the company and its owner, Gerald O'Connor, who said the workers were dismissed with enough time to escape.

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation and the state's workplace safety office have opened investigations.

## Hwang Dong-hyuk on killing off his 'Squid Game' characters and wanting to work with Jake Gyllenhaal

By ALICIA RANCILIO Associated Press

Viewers may gasp, cringe or cry out watching characters die on Netflix's "Squid Game," but those simulated deaths have a different effect on its creator, writer and director. Instead, Hwang Dong-hyuk feels happiness seeing them go.

The show has a huge cast and Hwang says it was "really difficult" to manage everyone on set.

As characters would die, Hwang recalls saying to the actors on their last day, "Oh no! How sad! I won't see you tomorrow," but I was always smiling inside."

"Squid Game" season two premieres Thursday. It once again stars Lee Jung-jae and centers around a secret competition in South Korea that targets people in debt and the winner gets a big cash prize. What they don't know is that losing the game is deadly.

Hwang originally conceived of the show 15 years ago as a two-hour film but it failed to gain traction with financiers or even interested actors. He put it aside and worked on other films instead. He then had the idea to make it a TV series instead and took the project to Netflix. There, it could reach a wide audience.

"I never in my wildest dream thought it was going to be this huge," said Hwang, who spoke with the AP about the show and what comes next. Answers have been edited for clarity and length.

AP: What have you learned from "Squid Game"?

HWANG: I learned that I shouldn't give up. If you love something and if you want to create something, it might not work now, but the time might come later. Or that idea could be the source of inspiration for something else.

AP: You've already finished filming season three of "Squid Game." Have you thought about what your next project will be?

HWANG: I'm afraid to talk about it but it's a feature film taking place 10-20 years in the future. It's darker than "Squid Game." It's going to be quite cruel, quite sad, but at the same time quite quirky and humorous.

AP: What films and TV shows do you enjoy?

HWANG: I used to think you had to have a specific taste to be cool, but I actually think I'm very omnivorous. I like to watch anything. When I'm on the couch watching TV, sometimes I watch CNN or Fox News. And then National Geographic and nature documentaries, I also watch some very soapy Korean shows or reality TV as well. I hop around and watch everything that's kind of happening in the world. With a series, I often don't stick with it the whole way through. There's only about like five shows that I watched until the very end, like "Breaking Bad" and "Why Women Kill."

AP: Would you ever want to direct a U.S. production or Hollywood actors?

HWANG: Of course. I studied film school at the University of Southern California and there are so many people I'd love to work with. I have had those offers since "Squid Game," but because I'm a writer-director I think I'm best when I'm working with Korean actors, giving direction in Korean with my Korean script. But, if I come across an amazing script, why not? I'd love to work with Jake Gyllenhaal.

AP: There are more characters in season two of "Squid Game." Why is that?

HWANG: With seasons two and three, I had more screen time for more characters. This time around we have a lot of younger characters. When I was creating season one, I thought it was very hard for you to be up to your neck in debt when you're only in your 20s or 30s. I thought you had to be at least middle-aged to need money and want to join the Squid Game. But the world has changed. Now I feel like there are less decent jobs for young people and they feel like working hard doesn't even get them to middle class. They want to hit the jackpot, so that's why they invest in cryptocurrency. In Korea, there are a lot of young people in their early 20s or 30s turning to online gambling. I wanted to show what society really is like today.

AP: Season two of "Squid Game" has already been nominated for a Golden Globe which is a good sign. Can you say anything about season three of "Squid Game"?

HWANG: It's better than season two.

## **Pope brings Holy Year and prayers for better future to Rome prison, a 'cathedral of pain and hope'**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis inaugurated his Holy Year at Rome's main prison on Thursday, bringing a message of hope to inmates and involving them in the Catholic Church's once every quarter-century celebration that is expected to bring about 32 million pilgrims to Rome.

Francis stood up from his wheelchair, knocked on the door to the chapel at Rebibbia prison and walked across the threshold, reenacting the gesture he performed at the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica two nights earlier on Christmas Eve.

The opening of the Holy Door at the basilica officially kicked off the Jubilee year, a church tradition dating to 1300 that nowadays occurs every 25 years and involves the faithful coming to Rome on pilgrimages.

"The first Holy Door I opened at Christmas in St. Peter's. I wanted the second one to be here, in a prison," Francis told the Rebibbia inmates before he entered. "I wanted each of us here, inside and out, to have the possibility of throwing open the door of our hearts and understanding that hope doesn't disappoint."

Francis dedicated the 2025 Jubilee to hope and made clear that prisoners would be an important part of it: The final grand event of the Jubilee is a special Mass for inmates at St. Peter's on Dec. 14, 2025. Francis has long made prison ministry an important part of his priestly vocation and has made several visits to Rebibbia since becoming pope in 2013 while also including prison visits in many of his foreign trips.

His message is always one of hope, believing that people who are serving prison sentences need something to look forward to more than most. That is especially true in Italy, where prison overcrowding and inmate suicides are at record highs, according to the Antigone Association, which tracks prison conditions.

According to Antigone's 2024 report, 88 prisoners killed themselves in Italian lockups this year — more than any other year — and Italy's inmate population was 132% over the system's capacity.

In a statement Thursday, Antigone called on Italian authorities to hear Francis' appeal to give prisoners hope. It called for structural reforms that put into practice the constitutional principles of "a punishment that is dignified, humane and looks to the social reintegration of those who are in prison."

In his homily, Francis suggested the prisoners think of hope as an anchor that is fixed on the ground and that they try to hold tight to the rope that is attached to it, even if it sometimes hurts their hands.

"Hold onto the rope of hope, hold onto the anchor," Francis said. "Never let it go."

Speaking to reporters outside, Francis recalled that whenever he speaks to prisoners, the first thing he always asks himself is "why them and not me."

"Because we all can fall, the important thing is to not lose hope, to hold onto that anchor of hope," he said.

Back at the Vatican for his noon blessing, Francis called prison "a cathedral of pain and hope" as he repeated his message. He also doubled down on his 2025 wish for peace in the world and for wealthy countries to reduce or eliminate the debt owed by poorer countries.

"One of the things that characterizes Jubilees is the remission of debts," Francis said, calling the debts

owed by many poor countries simply "unsustainable."

Francis' outing to Rebibbia on a frigid morning was his final big event of the week after he celebrated Christmas Eve Mass on Tuesday evening at St. Peter's Basilica and delivered his Christmas Day blessing from the loggia overlooking the square.

The 88-year-old pope, who often suffers from respiratory infections in winter, has a few days to rest before gearing up for the New Year's Eve vigil and Mass the following day.

With the St. Peter's Holy Door now open to the public, a steady stream of pilgrims was filing into the basilica, a pace that is expected to continue through next year until the door closes on Jan. 6, 2026.

Francis' 2025 involves a dizzying calendar of Jubilee events that will sorely test his stamina, with special Jubilee Masses for all the main groups of pilgrims who are being celebrated during the year: Adolescents, migrants, teachers and law enforcement, among others.

So far, he has only one foreign trip under study: A May visit to Turkey to commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, Christianity's first ecumenical council.

## **Prayers and tears mark 20 years since the Indian Ocean tsunami that killed some 230,000 people**

By REZA SAIFULLAH and EDNA TARIGAN Associated Press

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia (AP) — People gathered in prayer and visited mass graves in Indonesia's Aceh province on Thursday to mark 20 years since the massive Indian Ocean tsunami hit the region in one of modern history's worst natural disasters.

Many wept as they placed flowers at a mass grave in Ulee Lheue village, where more than 14,000 unidentified tsunami victims are buried. It is one of several mass graves in Banda Aceh, the capital of Indonesia's northernmost province, which was one of the areas worst hit by a magnitude 9.1 earthquake and the massive tsunami it triggered.

"We miss them and we still don't know where they are. All we know is that every year we visit the mass grave in Ulee Lhue and Siron," said Muhamad Amirudin, who lost two of his children 20 years ago and has never found their bodies.

"This life is only temporary, so we do our best to be useful to others," Amirudin, visiting the grave with his wife, said.

The powerful earthquake off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra on Dec. 26, 2004, triggered a tsunami that killed around 230,000 people across a dozen countries, reaching as far as East Africa. Some 1.7 million people were displaced, mostly in the four worst-affected countries: Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

More than 170,000 people died in Indonesia alone.

Even though 20 years have passed, survivors in Indonesia are still grieving the loved ones they lost to the giant wave that flattened buildings all the way to the provincial capital of Banda Aceh.

Hundreds of people gathered to pray at the Baiturrahman Mosque in downtown Banda Aceh. Sirens sounded across the city for three minutes to mark the time of the earthquake.

Infrastructure in Aceh has been rebuilt and is now more resilient than before the tsunami struck. Early warning systems have been installed in coastal areas to alert residents of incoming tsunamis, providing crucial time to seek safety.

The rebuilding efforts were made possible by the support of international donors and organizations, which contributed significant funds to help the region recover. Schools, hospitals, and essential infrastructure destroyed by the disaster have been reconstructed.

In Thailand, people gathered at a memorial ceremony in Ban Nam Khem, a small fishing village in Phang Nga province that bore the brunt of the devastating wave in the country.

The tsunami claimed the lives of over 8,000 people in Thailand, including many who remain missing, leaving a deep scar in the nation's history. Nearly 400 bodies remain unclaimed.

Mourners shed tears and comforted each other as they laid flowers at the village's tsunami memorial. Around 300 people joined a modest ceremony with Muslim, Christian and Buddhist prayers.

Urai Sirisuk said she avoids the seaside memorial park the rest of the year because the loss of her 4-year-old daughter still cuts deep every time she's reminded of it.

"I have this feeling that the sea has taken my child. I'm very angry with it. I can't even put my foot in the water," she said.

But, she said, "I still hear her voice in my ears, that she's calling for me. I can't abandon her. So I have to be here, for my child."

In India, hundreds gathered at Marina beach in the southern city of Chennai in Tamil Nadu state. They poured milk into the sea to propitiate gods and offered flowers and prayers for the dead as drums beat in the background.

According to official data, 10,749 people were killed in India, including nearly 7,000 people in Tamil Nadu alone.

"It has been 20 years since the tsunami," said 69-year-old Sadayammal, who uses one name. "We are here to pay respects to the people who lost their lives."

In Sri Lanka, survivors and relatives of tsunami victims gathered at the coastal village of Pereliya and laid flowers at a memorial that commemorates nearly 2,000 passengers who died when their train, the Queen of the Sea, was hit by the wave. Only a few dozen people are believed to have survived.

Anura Ranjith joined the mourners to pay respects to his younger sister, Anula Ranjani, and her 9-year-old daughter who were passengers on the train. Ranjith never heard from them after that day.

"I looked for them everywhere for years and still, no information about them. Their loss is a great sorrow and pain for me. I am still grieving," he said.

Overall, more than 35,000 people died in Sri Lanka in the tsunami. People across the country observed two minutes of silence on Thursday in memory of those who lost their lives.

## **Americans are exhausted by political news.**

### **TV ratings and a new AP-NORC poll show they're tuning out**

By DAVID BAUDER and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — As a Democrat who immersed himself in political news during the presidential campaign, Ziad Aunallah has much in common with many Americans since the election. He's tuned out.

"People are mentally exhausted," said Aunallah, 45, of San Diego. "Everyone knows what is coming and we are just taking some time off."

Television ratings — and now a new poll — clearly illustrate the phenomenon. About two-thirds of American adults say they have recently felt the need to limit media consumption about politics and government because of overload, according to the survey from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Smaller percentages of Americans are limiting their intake of news about overseas conflicts, the economy or climate change, the poll says. Politics stand out.

Election news on CNN and MSNBC was taking up too much of Sam Gude's time before the election, said the 47-year-old electrician from Lincoln, Nebraska. "The last thing I want to watch right now is the interregnum," said Gude, a Democrat and no fan of President-elect Donald Trump.

Poll finds more Democrats than Republicans stepping away from news

The poll, conducted in early December, found that about 7 in 10 Democrats say they are stepping back from political news. The percentage isn't as high for Republicans, who have reason to celebrate Trump's victory. Still, about 6 in 10 Republicans say they've felt the need to take some time off too, and the share for independents is similar.

The differences are far starker for the TV networks that have been consumed by political news.

After election night through Dec. 13, the prime-time viewership of MSNBC was an average of 620,000,



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down 54% from the pre-election audience this year, the Nielsen company said. For the same time comparison, CNN's average of 405,000 viewers was down 45%.

At Fox News Channel, a favorite news network for Trump fans, the post-election average of 2.68 million viewers is up 13%, Nielsen said. Since the election, 72% of the people watching one of those three cable networks in the evening were watching Fox News, compared to 53% prior to election day.

A post-election slump for fans of the losing candidate is not a new trend for networks that have become heavily identified for a partisan audience. MSNBC had similar issues after Trump was elected in 2016. Same for Fox in 2020, although that was complicated by anger: many of its viewers were outraged then by the network's crucial election night call of Arizona for the Democratic presidential candidate, Joe Biden, and sought alternatives.

MSNBC had its own anger issues after several "Morning Joe" viewers became upset that hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski visited Trump shortly after his victory last month. Yet while the show's ratings are down 35% since Election Day, that's a smaller drop than the network's prime-time ratings.

CNN points out that while it has been suffering in the television ratings, its streaming and digital ratings have been consistent.

Will political interest rebound when Trump takes office?

MSNBC can take some solace in history. In previous years, network ratings bounce back when the depression after an election loss lifts. When a new administration takes office, people who oppose it are frequently looking for a gathering place.

"I'll be tuning back in once the clown show starts," Aunallah said. "You have no choice. Whether or not you want to hear it, it's happening. If you care about your country, you have no choice but to pay attention."

But the ride may not be smooth. MSNBC's slide is steeper than it was in 2016; and there's some question about whether Trump opponents will want to be as engaged as they were during his first term. People are also unplugging from cable television in rates that are only getting more rapid, although MSNBC believes it has bucked this trend eating away at audiences before.

The poll indicates that Americans want less talk about politics from public figures in general. After an election season where endorsements from celebrities like Taylor Swift made headlines, the survey found that Americans are more likely to disapprove than approve of celebrities, large companies and professional athletes speaking out about politics.

Still, Gude is among those discovering other ways to get news to which he does want to pay attention, including on YouTube.

MSNBC is also in the middle of some corporate upheaval that raises questions about potential changes. Parent company Comcast announced last month that the cable network is among some properties that will spin off into a new company, which will give MSNBC new corporate leadership and cut its ties to NBC News.

Advice for networks who want to see the viewers return

Some of the Americans who have turned away from political news lately also had some advice for getting them engaged again.

Gude said, for example, that MSNBC will always have a hard-core audience of Trump haters. But if the network wants to expand its audience, "then you have to talk about issues, and you have to stop talking about Trump."

Kathleen Kendrick, a 36-year-old sales rep from Grand Junction, Colorado, who's a registered independent voter, said she hears plenty of people loudly spouting off about their political opinions on the job. She wants more depth when she watches the news. Much of what she sees is one-sided and shallow, she said.

"You get a story but only part of a story," Kendrick said. "It would be nice if you could get both sides, and more research."

Aunallah, similarly, is looking for more depth and variety. He's not interested "in watching the angry man on the corner yelling at me anymore," he said.

"It's kind of their own fault that I'm not watching," he said. "I felt they spent all this time talking about the election. They made it so much of their focus that when the main event ends, why would people want to keep watching?"

## Trump has pressed for voting changes. GOP majorities in Congress will try to make that happen

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Republicans plan to move quickly in their effort to overhaul the nation's voting procedures, seeing an opportunity with control of the White House and both chambers of Congress to push through long-sought changes that include voter ID and proof-of-citizenship requirements.

They say the measures are needed to restore public confidence in elections, an erosion of trust that Democrats note has been fueled by false claims from President-elect Donald Trump and his allies of widespread fraud in the 2020 election. In the new year, Republicans will be under pressure to address Trump's desires to change how elections are run in the U.S., something he continues to promote despite his win in November.

The main legislation that Republicans expect to push will be versions of the American Confidence in Elections Act and the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, said GOP Rep. Bryan Steil of Wisconsin, chair of the Committee on House Administration, which handles election-related legislation. The proposals are known as the ACE and SAVE acts, respectively.

"As we look to the new year with unified Republican government, we have a real opportunity to move these pieces of legislation not only out of committee, but across the House floor and into law," Steil said in an interview. "We need to improve Americans' confidence in elections."

Republicans are likely to face opposition from Democrats and have little wiggle room with their narrow majorities in both the House and Senate. Steil said he expects there will be "some reforms and tweaks" to the original proposals and hopes Democrats will work with Republicans to refine and ultimately support them.

Democrats want to make it easier, not harder, to vote

New York Rep. Joe Morelle, the ranking Democrat on the committee, said there was an opportunity for bipartisan agreement on some issues but said the two previous GOP bills go too far.

"Our view and the Republicans' view is very different on this point," Morelle said. "They have spent most of the time in the last two years and beyond really restricting the rights of people to get to ballots – and that's at the state level and the federal level. And the SAVE Act and the ACE Act both do that – make it harder for people to vote."

Morelle said he wants to see both parties support dedicated federal funding for election offices. He sees other bipartisan opportunities around limiting foreign money in U.S. elections and possibly imposing a voter ID requirement if certain safeguards are in place to protect voters.

Democrats say some state laws are too restrictive in limiting the types of IDs that are acceptable for voting, making it harder for college students or those who lack a permanent address.

Morelle said he was disappointed by the GOP's claims in this year's campaigns about widespread voting by noncitizens, which is extremely rare, and noted how those claims all but evaporated once Trump won. Voting by noncitizens is already illegal and can result in felony charges and deportation.

"You haven't heard a word about this since Election Day," Morelle said. "It's an Election Day miracle that suddenly the thing that they had spent an inordinate amount of time describing as a rampant problem, epidemic problem, didn't exist at all."

GOP: Current voter registration relies on an 'honor system'

Before the November election, House Republicans pushed the SAVE Act, which passed the House in July but stalled in the Democrat-controlled Senate. It requires proof of citizenship when registering to vote and includes potential penalties for election officials who fail to confirm eligibility.

Republicans say the current process relies on what they call an honor system with loopholes that have allowed noncitizens to register and vote in past elections. While voting by noncitizens has occurred, research and reviews of state cases have shown it to be rare and typically a mistake rather than an intentional effort to sway an election.

Under the current system, those seeking to register are asked to provide either a state driver's license

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number or the last four digits of a Social Security number. A few states require a full Social Security number.

Republicans say the voter registration process is not tight enough because in many states people can be added to voter rolls even if they do not provide this information and that some noncitizens can receive Social Security numbers and driver's licenses. They believe the current requirement that anyone completing a voter registration form sign under oath that they are a U.S. citizen is not enough.

They want to force states to reject any voter registration application for which proof of citizenship is not provided. Republicans say that could include a REAL ID-compliant driver's license, a passport or a birth certificate.

One state flags noncitizens with regular audits

In Georgia, a perennial presidential battleground state, election officials said they have not encountered any hiccups verifying the citizenship status of its nearly 7.3 million registered voters. They conducted an audit in 2022 that identified 1,634 people who had attempted to register but were not able to be verified as U.S. citizens by a federal database.

A second audit this year used local court records to identify people who said they could not serve as a juror because they were not a U.S. citizen. Of the 20 people identified, six were investigated for illegal voting, though one of those cases was closed because the person had since died.

"What we've done by doing those audits is give voters confidence that we do not have noncitizens voting here in Georgia," said Brad Raffensperger, Georgia's secretary of state. "And when society is highly polarized, you have to look at building trust. Trust is the gold standard."

Raffensperger, a Republican who supports both voter ID and proof of citizenship requirements, credits the state's early adoption of REAL ID and use of automatic voter registration for ensuring voter lists are accurate. The latter is something he hopes more Republicans will consider, as he argued it has allowed Georgia election officials to use the motor vehicle agency's process to verify citizenship and track people moving in and around the state.

"You have to get it right because you're talking about people's priceless franchise to vote," Raffensperger said.

Look to states as laboratories for voting reforms

If Congress does pass any changes, it would fall to election officials across the country to implement them.

Raffensperger and Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, a Democrat, said it would be a mistake to move the country to a single day of voting, something Trump has said he would like to see happen, because it would eliminate early voting and limit access to mail ballots. Both methods are extremely popular among voters. In Georgia, 71% of voters in November cast their ballots in person before Election Day.

Both said they hoped lawmakers would look to what is working in their states and build off those successes.

"We've proven time and time again in our states that our elections are secure and are accurate," Benson said.

## Today in History: December 27, Benazir Bhutto assassinated

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Dec. 27, the 362nd day of 2024. There are four days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 27, 2007, former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in a shooting and bomb attack that killed at least 20 people in the city of Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

Also on this date:

In 1831, naturalist Charles Darwin set out on a round-the-world voyage aboard the HMS Beagle.

In 1904, James Barrie's play "Peter Pan: The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up" opened at the Duke of York's Theater in London.

In 1932, New York City's Radio City Music Hall opened to the public.

In 1945, the International Monetary Fund was formally established as its first 29 member countries rati-

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fied its Articles of Agreement.

In 1968, the Apollo 8 capsule splashed down safely in the Pacific, completing the first crewed mission to orbit the moon.

In 1979, Soviet forces seized control of Afghanistan. President Hafizullah Amin (hah-FEE'-zoo-lah ah-MEEN'), who was overthrown and executed, was replaced by Babrak Karmal.

In 1985, American naturalist Dian Fossey, 53, who had studied mountain gorillas in Africa for nearly 20 years, was found murdered in her cabin in Rwanda.

Today's Birthdays: Basketball Hall of Fame coach Nolan Richardson is 83. Rock musician Mick Jones (Foreigner) is 80. Basketball Hall of Fame coach Bill Self is 62. TV journalist Savannah Guthrie is 53. Actor Masi Oka is 50. Actor Aaron Stanford is 48. Actor Jay Ellis is 43. Olympic sprint gold medalist Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce is 38. Rock singer Hayley Williams (Paramore) is 36. Country singer Shay Mooney (Dan + Shay) is 33. Actor Timothée Chalamet is 29. NFL quarterback Brock Purdy is 25.