

Groton Daily Independent

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Wednesday, Jan. 8

Senior Menu: Baked turkey crunch, Italian blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Cheese stuffed breadsticks, marinara sauce.

Groton Chamber Board Meeting, 6 p.m., at City Hall

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

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

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

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.

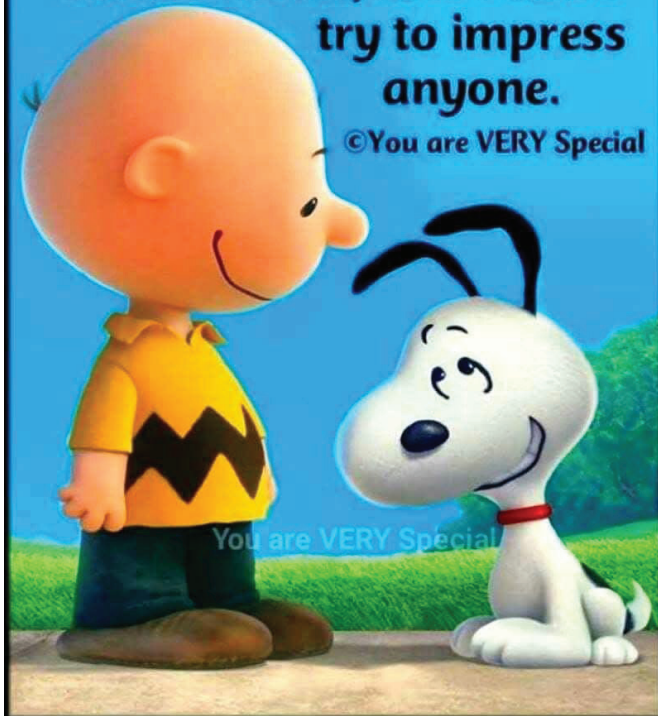
Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

I am happy to be me. I may not be perfect, but I'm honest, loving, caring, and happy. I don't try to be what I'm not, and I don't try to impress anyone.

©You are VERY Special



Thursday, Jan. 9

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, peaches, garlic toast.

School Breakfast: Pancake on a stick.

School Lunch: Sweet and sassy chicken, rice.

Girls Basketball hosts Clark/Willow Lake (JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow)

Groton Lions Club meeting, 6 p.m., 104 N Main

Friday, Jan. 10

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

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Soup and sandwich.

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

Girls Wrestling at Miller, 4 p.m.

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

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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.

Quake Strikes Tibet

A 7.1-magnitude earthquake struck the Shigatse region of Tibet yesterday at 9:05 am local time, causing widespread damage and claiming at least 126 lives. The epicenter was located in the high-altitude Chinese county of Dingri, about 47 miles northeast of Mount Everest, at a depth of 6.2 miles. The tremors were felt across Nepal, India, and Bhutan.

More than 1,000 homes were damaged, and rescue teams have been deployed to search for survivors; however, efforts are being hampered by freezing conditions, with temperatures dropping as low as minus 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

Shigatse is the second-largest city in Tibet and the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, the second-most significant figure after the Dalai Lama in Tibetan Buddhism. The region's location along the Indian-Eurasian tectonic plate boundary makes it prone to seismic activity—a 2015 earthquake near Kathmandu, Nepal, resulted in nearly 9,000 deaths.

US Claims Genocide in Sudan

The US government yesterday officially accused a Sudanese paramilitary group and its proxies of committing genocide in a 20-month-long brutal civil war against the North African country's military.

The declaration marks the most decisive stance the US has taken in the war between the forces of two formerly allied generals—Rapid Support Forces leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo and Sudanese army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. The conflict has killed an estimated 150,000 people and displaced more than 11 million people—about one-fifth of the country's population. The US has declared genocide only six other times since the end of the Cold War in 1989.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday the RSF—a group with roots in the infamous Janjaweed militias—committed systematic executions of men and boys and sexual violence against women and girls based on ethnicity. In response, the US Treasury Department has imposed sanctions on Dagalo and seven United Arab Emirates companies supporting the militia.

Meta Nixes Fact-Checking

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced broad changes to the social media company's content moderation policies yesterday, including ending its US fact-checking program and removing restrictions on sensitive political content on its platforms, including Facebook and Instagram.

The CEO claimed Meta's adoption of more stringent content moderation after the 2016 election led to the mistaken censorship of millions of users. In place of fact-checkers, the company will deploy Community Notes in the US—similar to those on X—where users provide context to posts. It will still use its violation scanner to address high-severity issues like terrorism and child exploitation. The company will also move its safety and trust teams from California to Texas.

Zuckerberg also signaled he would support the incoming Trump administration's efforts to combat foreign censorship. The changes follow Meta's appointment last week of Republican Joel Kaplan as its foreign policy chief and its \$1M donation to Trump's inaugural fund in December.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Peter Yarrow of iconic folk music trio Peter, Paul and Mary, dies of cancer at age 86.
Richard Cohen, Emmy-winning journalist and husband to Meredith Vieira, dies at age 76.
North Dakota State tops Montana State 35-32 to win a record 10th FCS football national championship.
Las Vegas Raiders fire head coach Antonio Pierce after 4-13 season.
Former MoviePass CEO Ted Farnsworth pleads guilty to defrauding investors over the company's revenue sources and sustainability.

Science & Technology

Nvidia unveils \$3K AI-powered desktop for researchers and students; system allows users to run many AI models locally instead of relying on cloud computing.
Google to build AI model capable of simulating real-world environments.
Spider study solves longstanding mystery of how the arachnids smell; researchers find olfactory hairs along male spiders' legs act as a nose to detect pheromones from females.
Arizona receives approval to build 600-megawatt utility-scale solar power plant; one of the biggest solar projects in the US, the facility will power an estimated 180,000 homes.

Business & Markets

US stock markets fall (S&P 500 -1.1%, Dow -0.4%, Nasdaq -1.9%), driven by declines in tech stocks, including Nvidia (-6.2%), and better-than-expected economic data raising concerns over interest rate cuts.
Getty Images to acquire rival Shutterstock in deal valuing combined enterprise at \$3.7B, likely to face regulatory scrutiny; following the news, Getty shares closed up 24% and Shutterstock shares closed up nearly 15%.
Anthropic in talks to raise as much as \$2B in funding round, valuing the AI startup at \$60B.
President-elect Donald Trump announces \$20B investment from Dubai billionaire Hussain Sajwani to build new data centers in the US.

Politics & World Affairs

Judge temporarily blocks release of special counsel Jack Smith's report on President-elect Donald Trump's classified documents case while an appellate court reviews the issue.
Trump declines to rule out military force in potential US expansion into Greenland, Panama Canal.
Two fast-moving brush fires erupt in Los Angeles, including a fire in the affluent Pacific Palisades neighborhood that has grown to nearly 3,000 acres as of this writing, prompting thousands of people to evacuate.
US House passes border measure requiring Homeland Security to take into custody undocumented immigrants who have been charged with theft and other crimes; Senate expected to take up the bill this Friday.

GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area
Tigers
GT

Text Paul at
605-397-7460

Any interest in any of
these basketball games on
GDILIVE.COM?
They are \$25 each.

Girls Clark/Willow Lake JV
Boys Clark/Willow Lake JV
Boys Lennox C
Boys Lennox JV
Girls Lennox JV
Girls Lennox C
Boys Tiospa Zina JV
Girls Tiospa Zina JV
Boys Dakota Valley JV
Girls Northwestern JV
Girls Milbank C
Girls Milbank JV
Boys Milbank C
Boys Milbank JV

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Groton Girls Basketball Secures Dominant Win Over Warner

The Groton Tigers continued their strong start to the season with an impressive 51-34 victory over the Warner Monarchs in a hard-fought girls' basketball matchup. The Tigers controlled the game from start to finish, showcasing balanced scoring, disciplined defense, and efficient free-throw shooting.

Groton came out strong in the first quarter, hitting 50% of their shots (6-for-12) to take an early 15-9 lead. Rylee Dunker got the Tigers rolling, scoring key baskets to set the tone. Meanwhile, Warner struggled to keep up, shooting 43% (3-for-7) but committing several turnovers that allowed Groton to dictate the pace.

The second quarter saw more of the same as Groton extended their lead to 26-15 at halftime. The Tigers cooled slightly, shooting 36% (4-for-11), but their defense forced Warner into mistakes. Despite Jordan Jensen's efforts, who led the Monarchs with 11 points on the night, Warner couldn't close the gap.

After halftime, Groton's offense hit a rough patch, shooting just 25% (4-for-16) in the third quarter. However, their defense and relentless energy on the boards kept them ahead. Warner matched their consistent 43% shooting (3-for-7), but the Monarchs couldn't capitalize on the Tigers' shooting slump. Groton entered the fourth quarter with a 37-26 advantage.

The final quarter sealed the deal for the Tigers. Groton found its rhythm again, shooting a red-hot 55% (6-for-11). Taryn Traphagan added a pair of three-pointers, and Riley Dunker finished with a team-high 15 points, while Jaden Penning added 10.

Groton's efficiency from the free-throw line (9-for-11, 82%) proved decisive, while Warner struggled at 58% (7-for-12). Additionally, Groton's aggressive defense forced 25 Warner turnovers and recorded 18 steals, stifling the Monarchs' offensive flow.

The Tigers also dominated in assists (12) and rebounds (24), showing their team-oriented approach. Despite committing 15 turnovers of their own, Groton's balanced attack and disciplined play helped them improve to 5-1 on the season. Warner, now 3-4, will look to regroup after the loss.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

Rylee Dunker: 15 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists, 6 steals, 2 foul.

Jaedyn Penning: 10 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists, 3 fouls.

Jerica Locke: 9 points, 3 rebounds, 4 assists, 3 steals, 2 fouls.

Taryn Traphagen: 7 points, 2 rebounds, 1 steal, 2 fouls.

Kennedy Hansen: 2 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 3 steals, 2 fouls.

Brooklyn Hansen: 2 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 1 foul.

Faith Traphagen: 2 points, 3 rebounds, 3 steals, 1 foul.

Laila Roberts: 2 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 foul.

Totals: Field Goals: 18-36 50%, 3-Pointers: 2-15 13%, Free Throws: 9-11 82%, 24 rebounds, 15 turnovers, 12 assists, 18 steals, 13 fouls.

Warner:

Jordyn Jensen 11, Stacia Carda 8, Jaycee Jung 7, Courtney Leidholt 4, MaKenna Leidholt 4.

Field Goals: 12-27 44%, Free Throws: 7-12, 58%, Turnovers: 25, Fouls: 9.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms and The Meathouse in Andover,

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Groton Dominates in Blowout Victory Over Warner

The Groton boys' basketball team showcased a dominant performance in a decisive 63-24 victory over Warner. The game, marked by Groton's efficiency on both ends of the court, featured standout contributions from multiple players and a relentless defensive effort that left Warner struggling to find their rhythm.

Groton set the tone early, jumping out to a 12-5 lead by the end of the first quarter. Despite a sluggish start from the field (6-of-15 for 40%), their defense held Warner to just 29% shooting in the opening frame, setting the stage for what would become a lopsided contest.

The second quarter saw Groton shift into high gear offensively, shooting 54% (7-of-13) while holding Warner to a mere 25% (2-of-8). By halftime, Groton had built a commanding 30-10 lead, leaving little doubt about the outcome.

The third quarter was all Groton, as they erupted for 18 unanswered points, extending their lead to 50-14. The onslaught triggered the 30-point mercy rule with 3:02 left in the quarter, as Groton's unyielding defense and efficient offense overwhelmed Warner. Groton shot 50% in the third quarter (6-of-12), while Warner managed just 22% (2-of-9).

By the fourth quarter, Groton continued their efficient play, shooting a scorching 75% (6-of-8) from the field, while Warner managed a slight improvement, going 3-of-10 for 30%. The final buzzer sounded with Groton securing a 63-24 victory.

Three Groton players reached double figures, led by Keegen Tracy's 15 points on an impressive 5-of-6 shooting. Becker Bosma added 12 points on a perfect 4-of-4 from the field, while Ryder Johnson contributed 11 points. Bosma also dominated the boards, grabbing seven of Groton's 26 rebounds.

The team shared the ball well, with Keegen Tracy and Karson Zak dishing out three assists each. Zak also spearheaded the defensive effort with four of the team's 10 steals, as Warner committed 16 turnovers in the face of Groton's relentless pressure. Gage Sippel added a highlight with a key block.

Warner struggled to find any offensive consistency, shooting just 26% (9-of-34) for the game. Though they hit 67% from the free-throw line (4-of-6), it was not enough to counter Groton's balanced attack.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

Keegen Tracy: 15 points, 1 rebound, 3 assists, 2 steals, 1 foul.

Becker Bosma: 12 points, 7 rebounds, 1 steal.

Ryder Johnson: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal, 1 foul.

Karson Zak: 6 points, 1 rebound, 3 assists, 4 steals, 1 foul.

Blake Pauli: 4 points, 1 rebound, 2 assists, 2 steals, 3 fouls.

Gage Sippel: 4 points, 5 rebounds, 2 fouls, 1 block.

Jayden Schwan: 3 points, 3 rebounds, 1 assist, 3 fouls.

Jace Johnson: 3 points.

Ryder Schelle: 3 points.

Ethan Kroll: 2 points, 1 assist.

Logan Warrington: 1 assist.

Turner Thompson: 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 foul.

Totals: Field Goals: 20-29 69%, 3-Pointers: 5-18 28%, Free Throws: 8-11 73%, 26 rebounds, 7 turnovers, 13 assists, 10 steals, 12 fouls, 1 block.

Warner: Drew Bakeberg 8, Jesiah Baum 7, Brennan Wolf-Donat 4, Braydon Kroll 3, Alec Mikkelsen 2.

Field Goals: 9-34 26%, Free Throws: 4-6 67%, Fouls: 11, Turnovers: 16.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms and The Meathouse in Andover,

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Junior Varsity Hoop Teams Beat Warner

The Groton Area girls basketball team posted a 34-18 win over Warner. The Tigers led at the quarterstops at 6-3, 14-5 and 30-13.

Groton Area Scoring: Chesney Weber 15, Kella Tracy 6, Emerlee Jones 4, Ashlynn Warrington 3, Makenna Krause 2, Talli Wright 2, Mia Crank 2.

Warner Scoring: Kaydee Mackner 6, Miah Leidholt 6, Tatum Hanson 2, Delaney Johnson 2, Addisyn Heinrich 1, Olivia Marcuson 1.

Groton Area made 13 of 38 field goals for 34 percent while Warner was 7 of 27 for 26 percent. Groton Area had nine turnovers compared to 16 for Warner. Groton Area had more fouls, 9-7, as the Tigers made five of seven free throws and Warner made four of six.

The boys junior varsity team posted a 38-7 win, lead at the quarterstops at 10-0, 17-3 and 33-3. Groton Area scored 25 unanswered points in the game.

Groton Area Scoring: Anthony Tracy 14, Jayden Schwan 6, Asher Johnson 5, Ethan Kroll 4, Logan Warrington 4, Ryder Schelle 3, Jace Johnson 2.

Warner Scoring: Lincoln Buisker 3, Gage Knupppe 2, Braydon Kroll 2.

Field Goals: Groton Area was 14 of 30 for 47 percent, Warner was 2 of 22 for 9 percent.

Free Throws: Groton Area was 7 of 12 for 58 percent, Warner was 3 of 8 for 38 percent.

Turnovers: Groton Area 8, Warner 20.

Fouls: Groton Area 12, Warner 10.

Both games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The boys game had an anonymous sponsor. The girls was sponsored by Adam and Nicole Wright.



The combined middle school and high school drum lines performed at halftime of the boys Warner basketball game Tuesday night in Groton. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Blake Pauli
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Jerica Locke
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Jaedyn Penning
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Keegen Tracy
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Junior Talent Winners

South Dakota Snow Queen Festival

Junior Division from left to right
2nd place Ayla Bloom- Webster
3rd place Annie Harry- Groton

(Photo courtesy The Official South Dakota Snow Queen Festival Facebook Page)



Senior Talent Winners

South Dakota Snow Queen Festival

Senior Division from left to right 1st place
Gracyn Kadlec-Ipswich
3rd place Natalia Warrington & Abby Yeadon-
Groton
2nd place Kaylyn Hofer- Clark

(Photo courtesy The Official South Dakota Snow Queen Festival Facebook Page)

Conde National League

Jan. 6 Team Standings: Braves 16, Giants 12, Mets 12, Cubs 9, Pirates 7, Stooges 4

Men's High Games: Aaron Severson 186, Butch Farmen 182, Chad Furney 179

Men's High Series: Butch Farmen 502, Chad Furney 491, Aaron Severson 488

Women's High Gaems: Michelle Johnson 214, Sam Bahr 185, Nancy Radke 164

Women's High Series: Sam Bahr 507, Michelle Johnson 481, Nancy Radke 462

Council discusses utility rates, skating rink closure policy

By Elizabeth Varin

The Groton City Council tackled a wide range of topics, including increasing some summer recreation fees, increasing bulk water charges and changing skating rink cold policies.

At Tuesday's meeting, the council discussed sewer and water rates before approving the first reading of two ordinances. Changes that will go into effect February 1 include increasing bulk water rate from \$10 per 1,000 gallons to \$25 per 1,000 gallons.

The second ordinance change impacts sewer rates. Sewer fees will now be based on the average water usage from October to April. Before, the fee was based on water usage from November to April.

More utility rate increases are coming down the line, said Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich. There may be another water rate increase, though more research needs to happen.

The rate that will definitely increase is the sewer rate. Heinrich said an additional increase is coming.

Councilman Brian Bahr asked if the sewer rate increase will be this year, to which Heinrich replied, "yes."

The council also approved increasing some summer recreation costs for the upcoming year.

Fees to play baseball are increasing. The council approved raising Legion, Junior Legion and Junior Teener fees from \$100 to \$150. U8, U10 and U12 baseball fees are increasing from \$50 to \$75. And T-Ball fees are increasing from \$15 to \$20.

Councilwoman Karyn Babcock said she wants to make sure the city isn't going too high with the fees.

"I don't want to keep kids from playing because the fees are too high," she said. "I just don't want people to feel like they can't play."

Councilman Jason Wambach said there is assistance available should families need help paying those fees.

The council also revisited the city's skating rink closure policy. Previously, the rink would close if the wind chill reached zero degrees Fahrenheit or if two inches of snow accumulated on the ice.

Councilman Brian Bahr told the council he thinks the rink should remain open even if the temperatures drop.

"I think it's the parent's decision to let their kids go to the skating rink and the warming house," he said.

Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich proposed matching Aberdeen's policy where outdoor rinks are closed if the windchill reaches -15 degrees. However, council members asked to drop it to -20 degrees wind chill.

"Everybody has to use a bit of their good judgement," said Mayor Scott Hanlon.

Councilman Kevin Nehls questioned closing the rink if more than two inches of snow is on the ice.

The council approved changing the skating rink closure policy. The rink will be closed when temperatures or wind chill is below -20 degrees.

- The city is accepting bids for roof repair on nearly a dozen city structures. The roofs were damaged by hail last year. Repairs are needed at the Main Pump House, Cemetery Repair Shop, Police Department, City Shop, Community Center, Park Restrooms, Picnic Shelter at the park, Swimming Pool Bathhouse, Gazebo at the swimming pool, Storage Shelter at the swimming pool and City Hall/Wage Memorial Library. Sealed bids will be opened at 7 p.m. February 4.

- Three council member positions and the mayorship is coming up for election this spring. Shirley Wells and Karyn Babcock's two-year terms are up for election, as well as Kevin Nehls' one-year appointment. The mayor position is also up for election. Those wanted to throw their name into the hat can sign declarations of candidacy and begin circulating their nomination petition on January 31. The municipal election is scheduled for April 8.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

SD attorney general unveils legislation to address state employee crimes

Package of bills also focuses on human trafficking, prison contraband, probation

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 7, 2025 6:03 PM

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley hopes to prevent and catch future criminal conduct by state employees with new reporting requirements, protections for whistleblowers and a bigger role for the state auditor, according to a package of legislation he released Tuesday.

Jackley unveiled seven bills for lawmakers to consider during the annual legislative session that kicks off next Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre.

Jackley's bills focus on government accountability, human trafficking, prison contraband and probation.

Government accountability

Jackley's government accountability measures come in response to several prosecutions he began last year against former state employees.

Those cases include allegations of former Department of Revenue employees creating fake vehicle titles to secure loans and avoid excise taxes, a former Department of Social Services employee allegedly embezzling \$1.8 million, and a former Department of Public Safety employee allegedly filing fake food-service health inspection records for inspections that were never conducted.

"Protecting taxpayer dollars and restoring the public's trust in government should be given high priority," Jackley said Tuesday in a press release.



South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley talks about charges filed against 11 prison inmates on April 23, 2024, at the Law Enforcement Center in Sioux Falls. (John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)

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One of his proposed measures would require state employees in supervisory roles to report suspected unlawful conduct to the attorney general and state auditor. Failure to report suspected violations would be classified as a felony.

Additionally, the attorney general would be required to submit an annual report to lawmakers on the state budget committee outlining the number and outcomes of misconduct reports received.

Another bill seeks to shield state employees from retaliation for reporting misconduct or participating in audits and investigations. The bill would:

Prohibit state supervisors from discharging, discriminating against or taking any other retaliatory action against whistleblowers.

Establish a process allowing state employees to file complaints with the attorney general within two years after experiencing retaliation.

Authorize courts to reinstate employees and award back pay if they suffered illegal retaliation.

A third measure would authorize the state auditor to access all financial records of every state agency to conduct audits, investigate improper conduct and ensure internal controls are in place and maintained.

The fourth bill proposes state agencies conduct mandatory annual risk reviews, with results submitted to the Board of Internal Control. The reviews would assess agencies' risk management practices and identify vulnerabilities.

Human trafficking

Another proposal would revise human trafficking laws and prohibit the obstruction of their enforcement. "Human trafficking remains a national concern that we are not immune from, and this legislation strengthens victim protections and enhances our ability to hold offenders accountable," Jackley said.

The bill would update the definitions of human trafficking in the first degree and second degree and would: Establish mandatory minimum prison sentences of 15 years for a first offense and 20 years for a second or subsequent offense of human trafficking in the first degree.

Establish mandatory minimum prison sentences of five years for a first offense and 10 years for a second or subsequent offense of human trafficking in the second degree.

Create the new felony crime of obstructing the enforcement of human trafficking laws.

Prison contraband

Jackley's legislative package also includes measures dealing with contraband in state correctional facilities. Officials with the state Department of Corrections reported finding contraband during a lockdown last year at the penitentiary in Sioux Falls.

Existing laws prohibit inmates from possessing drugs, unapproved prescription drugs, alcohol and weapons. Among other provisions, the proposed legislation would add unapproved cell phones and electronic communication devices to the list of banned items, clarify that employees and other people are prohibited from giving a similar list of items to inmates, and adjust the severity of various penalties for the different types of contraband.

Presumptive probation

Another proposal addresses South Dakota's presumptive probation system, which mandates that some non-violent offenders receive probation instead of prison time. Jackley's bill would make re-offenders who were already on probation or parole supervision ineligible for presumptive probation.

The bill also adds those convicted of threatening public officials or fleeing law enforcement to the list of ineligible offenders, as well as sex offenders who violate safety zones.

"Sentencing courts need more flexibility to impose appropriate sentences for certain violent offenders, and those choosing to reoffend while on probation or parole," Jackley said.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

COMMENTARY

South Dakota has a fraud problem that needs new approaches

String of investigations into former state employees reveals systemic failures

by Joe Kirby

South Dakota's state government has a troubling history of fraud incidents. However, 2024 marked a new low. Investigations last year implicated state employees in schemes that mismanaged or outright stole millions in public funds. The officials entrusted with safeguarding these assets — through robust systems, oversight and enforcement — seem to have failed the public.

Voters elect representatives to run state government responsibly and professionally. However, mounting evidence suggests systemic failures by leaders and legislators, raising critical questions about accountability.



The sun sets behind the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre on Dec. 5, 2023.

(Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

Who's minding the store?

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley has been busy recently, announcing fraud investigation after fraud investigation involving state employees. Three people are currently being prosecuted, one has pleaded guilty, and another two died before their behavior fully came to light. It appears there has been a complete breakdown of oversight and internal controls.

While the fraudsters are directly to blame and should be prosecuted for violating public trust, the failures don't stop there. Those responsible for implementing internal controls and oversight systems have also let us down.

So, who has been steering state government over the past decade or two? The finger points to a string of elected Republican leaders along with a Legislature that has seemingly been asleep at the wheel.

2024: A big year for fraud

Among the investigations announced last year, one case in the Department of Revenue involves the alleged forging of motor vehicle titles to get hundreds of thousands of dollars of bank loans. Meanwhile,

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\$1.78 million was allegedly stolen over more than a decade from the state's child protection program.

These incidents are just the latest in a sordid history of fraud that underscores deep flaws in the state's oversight mechanisms.

A troubling legacy of fraud

South Dakota's recent scandals are not isolated events but part of a troubling long-term pattern. Here are some others:

Gear Up scandal (2015): This scandal involved the mismanagement and embezzlement of millions in federal education funds through shell companies and falsified financial documents. The case ended in tragedy when one key figure murdered his family before taking his own life.

EB-5 scandal (2013-14): This one involved the misappropriation of investments and state funds in a federal program for economic development. The controversy culminated in the apparent suicide of a former state official.

Northern Beef Packers scandal (2013): A planned beef packing plant that received millions in state and federal funds failed, mired in allegations of fraud and insider deals.

Each scandal highlights significant lapses in oversight, transparency and accountability. South Dakota has a fraud problem.

Too little, too late

The 2024 scandals have prompted recent legislative and administrative proposals aimed at strengthening oversight. Attorney General Marty Jackley plans to propose new fraud protections this winter. Gov. Kristi Noem has added an internal control officer and mandated annual training for state employees. The state auditor has pledged to revise procedures, and the Legislature is seeking answers, though it faces resistance from state agencies when it starts questioning operations.

While these measures sound promising, voters have little reason to believe they will effectively address the problem. Perhaps the state would benefit from involving fraud prevention experts. It also raises the question: Why weren't these measures implemented sooner? South Dakota's history of fraud should have served as a clear warning.

Fraud may be inevitable

Maybe South Dakota's chronic fraud problems are inevitable. The state takes pride in its lean approach to government, cutting spending wherever possible. However, this minimalist approach may fail to provide the resources necessary for effective oversight and auditing. Alternatively, these problems might simply be the natural consequence of a fiscally conservative, one-party political environment.

South Dakota voters deserve both answers and action. If leaders continue to prioritize reactive measures over systemic reform, the cycle of mismanagement and scandal will undoubtedly persist. It's time for elected officials to deliver the accountability they have long promised.

Joe Kirby, of Sioux Falls, formerly led Western Surety Company and worked as an accountant and lawyer. He helped lead a successful effort to modernize Sioux Falls city government in the 1990s and continues to advocate for government reform. He blogs at SiouxFallsJoe.com.

Standing Rock chair stresses building unity and infrastructure

BY: MARY STEURER - JANUARY 7, 2025 5:36 PM

BISMARCK, N.D. — Tribes, the state and federal government must continue to work together for the benefit of their people, Janet Alkire, chair of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, said in a Tuesday address to North Dakota state lawmakers.

"Our common citizens are our bridge, and without the valuable support they need, that infrastructure will collapse," Alkire said.

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Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chair Janet Alkire delivers the Tribal-State Relationship address during a joint session of the North Dakota Legislature on Jan. 7, 2024. (Michael Achterling/North Dakota Monitor)

The tribe's reservation straddles the North Dakota-South Dakota border.

In her speech, Alkire provided the Legislature with updates on the five Native nations that share geography with North Dakota: Standing Rock, the Spirit Lake Nation, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa and the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate.

The need for more infrastructure on reservations was a common refrain in Alkire's speech.

In recent years, North Dakota tribes have benefited from federal legislation like the American Rescue Plan Act and other funding to support developments as wide ranging as new housing, medical facilities and energy projects, she said.

For instance, the U.S. Department of Transportation has

awarded a \$14.5 million planning grant for a proposed bridge over the Missouri River connecting the reservation to Emmons County.

But it's not enough, Alkire said. She called on lawmakers, tribal chairs and federal leaders to continue investing in infrastructure in the interest of future generations.

"A bridge to the future needs infrastructure," she said.

Alkire also highlighted health care, education and economic development as key priorities for the tribes.

She urged the Legislature to pass a bill this session to fund research into how much the tribes contribute to North Dakota's gross domestic product.

Mark Fox, chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, said he brought that proposal to Alkire. He said the state had previously commissioned a similar study in the early 2000s.

Fox added that the state and tribes shouldn't see each other as economic competitors, but as collaborators.

"We need to be partnering in all the things that we do," he said in an interview after the address.

Rep. Lisa Finley-DeVillie, D-Mandaree, and Rep. Collette Brown, D-Warwick, agreed that improving the working relationship between the state and tribes should be a priority for the upcoming biennium.

Keeping an open line of communication is an important part of that, Brown said. She said she plans to introduce a bill that would require the state to notify tribal chairs about any proposed legislation that would affect their communities.

Also Tuesday, Gov. Kelly Armstrong called for collaboration with tribal partners during his State of the State address.

"Their challenges are our challenges," Armstrong said. "Their successes are our successes."

Alkire in her speech also voiced support for a measure to create an alert system for missing and murdered indigenous people in North Dakota. She said the bill would be brought this session by Rep. Jayme Davis, D-Rolette.

Brown said she has also pushed for an alert for Missing and Murdered Indigenous People.

Expanding funding and staffing for Bureau of Indian Affairs law enforcement is also key to addressing

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crime on reservations, Alkire said.

"The federal government has been woefully underfunding our law enforcement budgets," she said.

President-elect Donald Trump has named former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum as his pick for secretary of the Interior.

Alkire said while she's unsure how Trump's administration will impact tribes overall, she's hopeful a more conservative administration could result in greater sovereignty for Native nations.

Alkire said if Burgum is confirmed as secretary of the Interior, he would be an asset to tribes. She said the former governor has stayed in touch with tribal chairs since leaving office.

"The tribes agree that a reduction in bureaucratic overhead could be extremely beneficial," Alkire said.

She expressed frustration over needing to get federal approval for many uses of their own land. Historically, Sioux territory stretched from present-day Minnesota to Montana, up through part of Canada and down to Kansas and Nebraska, she said.

Under an 1851 treaty with the federal government, that was reduced to part of modern-day North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Nebraska and Wyoming. The federal government subsequently violated that agreement and annexed additional parts of the Sioux Nation, further reducing Native territory. Today, the Standing Rock Reservation encompasses about 2.3 million acres.

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

Decent, humble and gifted: Jimmy Carter remembered at U.S. Capitol

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 7, 2025 7:47 PM

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers, military officials and other dignitaries celebrated the late President Jimmy Carter's life and achievements before, during and after his White House term at a service in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda Tuesday where he will lie in state until Thursday.

James Earl Carter Jr., who served as the nation's 39th president from 1977 to 1981, died at the age of 100 on Dec. 29 at his home in Plains, Georgia.

The cavernous rotunda filled with dozens of Carter's relatives and former members of his Cabinet who sat not too far from the current U.S. Supreme Court justices, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Biden administration officials and congressional leaders.

The voices of the U.S. Naval Academy Glee Club filled the dome with the Navy hymn and "My Country 'Tis of Thee." In a nod to Carter's love for his home state, the U.S. Army Band Brass Quintet performed a rendition of "Georgia On My Mind" as senators, including that state's Democratic Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, filed past the late president's casket.

The flag-draped casket laid on the same pine catafalque that supported President Abraham Lincoln's casket in 1865.

Camp David and Habitat for Humanity

Vice President Kamala Harris delivered a eulogy remarking on Carter's career in office and humanitarian work in the decades that followed.

"Jimmy Carter established a new model for what it means to be a former president," Harris said, highlighting his work with Habitat for Humanity and leadership in eradicating Guinea worm disease.

Harris, a California Democrat, praised the former president's environmental work during his time in the White House, including signing a 1978 bill that significantly expanded the protection of redwood trees.

She also highlighted Carter as a "forward-looking president with a vision for the future" for his establishment of the Department of Energy, Department of Education and Federal Emergency Management Agency, as well as his legacy of appointing a record number of women and Black judges to the federal

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bench.

Harris said Carter deserves to be remembered on the international stage for his role in leading the Camp David Accords, a peace treaty signed in September 1978 by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

"Jimmy Carter was that all-too-rare example of a gifted man who also walks with humility, modesty and grace," she said.

Harris continued, "Throughout his life and career, Jimmy Carter retained a fundamental decency and humility. James Earl Carter Jr. loved our country. He lived his faith, he served the people, and he left the world better than he found it."

Senate Majority Leader John Thune and House Speaker Mike Johnson also delivered eulogies.

Johnson recalled that he was just 4 years old when Carter was inaugurated.

"He's the first president that I remember. Looking back it's obvious now to me as an adult why he captured everyone's attention," the Louisiana Republican said. "Jimmy Carter was a member of the greatest generation."

Johnson recounted Carter's upbringing in rural Georgia during the Great Depression and his decision to join the Naval Academy during World War II. Shortly after the war, Carter served on one of the first nuclear submarines.

"It's telling that today the USS Jimmy Carter, a top-secret attack submarine, now roams the oceans bearing the name of the only president who served in such close quarters," Johnson said.

Carter will be honored Thursday at a memorial service at the Washington National Cathedral. President Joe Biden has declared Thursday a national day of mourning, closing all federal offices in the nation's capital.



Members of the U.S. House of Representatives file past the flag-draped casket of the late President Jimmy Carter in the Capitol Rotunda on Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2025. (Ashley Murray/States Newsroom)

Ceremonial arrival

U.S. service members carried Carter's flag-draped casket Tuesday morning from The Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta where the late 39th president had been lying in repose. The 282nd Army Band from Fort Jackson, South Carolina, played "Amazing Grace" as Carter's four surviving children and their families followed the procession.

Carter's remains traveled from Dobbins Air Reserve Base in Marietta, Georgia, and arrived at Joint Base Andrews in Prince George's County, Maryland, just after 2 p.m. Eastern Tuesday.

The funeral procession stopped for a brief ceremony at the U.S. Navy Memorial where Midshipmen stood in formation and the U.S. Navy band performed "Four Ruffles and Flourishes" and "Hail to the Chief." Carter, a Navy veteran, attended the U.S. Naval Academy from 1943 to 1946.

Carter's casket was placed on a horse-drawn caisson, or carriage, and a military procession mirroring Carter's inauguration parade in 1977 led the late president's remains to the east side of the Capitol.

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Honorary pallbearers included Carter's 11 surviving grandchildren.

Carter's late wife Rosalynn died in November 2023.

Carter will lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda until Thursday morning. The public can pay their respects on Jan. 7 from 8:30 p.m. to midnight Eastern, and from 7 a.m. on Jan. 8 through 7 a.m. on Jan 9.

Thune honors Carter

FROM SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota, the new Senate majority leader, honored the late former President Jimmy Carter with remarks during a ceremony Tuesday at the U.S. Capitol and earlier on the Senate floor.

Thune's remarks in the Senate, as delivered:

"Madam President, later today President Jimmy Carter will arrive here at the Capitol for the last time.

"He will lie in state until Thursday in the Capitol rotunda, so that Americans can pay final respects to our nation's 39th president.

"Madam President, it's the great American story – how a man or woman can rise from humble origins to the highest levels of government or business or academia.

"And it was Jimmy Carter's story.

"Born in 1924 in Plains, Georgia, he grew up on a peanut farm in a house that had no running water or electricity.

"President was probably not the first thing people would have thought of when considering his future career.

"Most might have thought that he'd end up running the family farm – as indeed he did for a while.

"But he decided to also dip his toe into politics.

"And within 14 years he had gone from taking up office in the Georgia state Senate to taking up office as president of the United States.

"His presidency was notable for a number of things, including his successful brokering of a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel – an agreement that stands to this day.

"But it was perhaps his post-presidency that came to define his legacy the most.

"Jimmy Carter left office in 1981.

"And during the four decades that followed, he dedicated himself to making a difference to the causes of peace and human rights, and to improving the wellbeing of his fellow man.

"Together with his wife Rosalynn, he founded the Carter Center, which, among other things, works for the eradication of disease in some of the poorest areas of the globe.

"Among the center's successes is the almost total eradication of Guinea worm disease – a painful and devastating tropical disease whose cases numbered in the millions at the time the Carter Center was beginning its work.

"Through the first 10 months of 2024, there were just seven reported cases.

"An incredible legacy for anyone.

"But just part of President Carter's.

"President Carter is also known for his work with Habitat for Humanity to provide affordable housing for those in need.

"And I do mean his work.

"President Carter didn't just lend his name or image to Habitat.

"He built houses.

"He nailed it; drilled it; he installed toilets.

"Well into his 90s, you could find him in a hard hat on work sites participating like any other volunteer.

"In one early Habitat project he and Rosalynn worked on in New York City, the former first lady and the former president spent the week sleeping in the basement of a church with other volunteers.

"A characteristic example of unpretentiousness from a couple who lived all their lives in the modest house in Plains, Georgia, that they built long before the presidency.

"All told, the Carter Work Project at Habitat for Humanity has worked on 4,447 homes in 14 countries –

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including homes in Eagle Butte, in my state of South Dakota, which the Carters worked on during a 1994 trip to our state.

"It is unknown how many more homes have been built by volunteers who came to know about Habitat for Humanity through President Jimmy Carter.

"Madam President, it would be wrong to mention Jimmy Carter's years of service without mentioning what animated them.

"Jimmy Carter saw his service as the natural outgrowth of his faith in Jesus Christ.

"... one of the best ways to practice my faith as a Christian,' he would say, 'is to participate in Habitat projects every year.'

"His life was about putting his religious principles into practice – whether that was through Habitat for Humanity, or through his other work.

"And of course anyone attracted by his example who wanted to learn more about the Christian faith could head down to Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, to his Sunday School class, which he taught into his 90s.

"Madam President, I cannot close without mentioning Jimmy Carter's 77-year-long marriage to his beloved wife, Rosalynn, who preceded him in death a year ago.

"And while I join all Americans in mourning the death of President Carter, I rejoice at the thought that he and Rosalynn are again together before the face of their Father.

"My thoughts and prayers are with the Carters' children – with Jack, Chip, Jeff, and Amy – and with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

"And I look forward to paying my respects to this public servant later today.

"Madam President, I yield the floor."

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Trump calls for avoiding default, possibly using military force for expansion

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - JANUARY 7, 2025 4:24 PM

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump said during a wide-ranging press conference at Mar-a-Lago on Tuesday he wanted to see the country's debt limit addressed while cutting spending and would not rule out military force to expand U.S. territory.

Trump, who will take office Jan. 20 after lawmakers breezily certified the election results Monday, continued to place blame on outgoing Democratic President Joe Biden for what he will be left with in his second term as he dives into an ambitious GOP agenda.

"We are inheriting a difficult situation from the outgoing administration, and they're trying everything they can to make it more difficult," Trump said. "Inflation is continuing to rage and interest rates are far too high, and I've been disappointed to see the Biden administration's attempt to block the reforms of the American people and that they voted for."

Reconciliation

As Republicans look to use a complicated legislative process known as budget reconciliation to pass significant immigration, border security and tax policy changes, as well as address the country's debt limit, Trump said Tuesday that he wanted to avoid defaulting on the nation's debt.

"I just don't want to see a default. That's all I want," he said. "Nobody knows what would happen if there was a default — it could be 1929, and it could be nothing."

He added that raising or suspending the debt limit had no effect on his goal to lower federal spending. Though Trump said he is OK if Republicans pass their policy goals through one reconciliation package,

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President-elect Donald Trump speaks to members of the media during a press conference at the Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Florida, on Jan. 7, 2025. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Olson/Getty Images)

he noted that "if two is more certain, it does go a little bit quicker because you can do the immigration stuff early."

Jan. 6 pardons

Meanwhile, the day after the fourth anniversary of the Jan. 6 insurrection on the U.S. Capitol, Trump echoed his campaign pledge that he would pardon those charged in connection with the Jan. 6 riot.

However, he did not specify whether he would pardon those who were charged with violent offenses, saying: "We'll be looking at the whole thing, but I'll be making major pardons."

Foreign affairs

Trump also did not rule out using military force to take control of the Panama Canal and Greenland — two locations with critical implications for the transport of global commerce.

The Panamanian government was given full control of the canal in 1999. Denmark has sovereignty over Greenland, an autonomous territory. Greenland's access to natural resources and implications to national security are increasingly important for the long-term interests of the United States.

"No, I can't assure you on either of those two," Trump said when asked if he could assure the world that he would not use military or economic coercion to take over both locations.

"But I can say this: We need them for economic security," Trump said. "I'm not going to commit to that — it might be that you'll have to do something."

He also said "all hell will break out in the Middle East" if the hostages taken by Hamas are not released by the time he is back in the Oval Office.

Trump also announced that a Dubai-based company, DAMAC Properties, would be investing at least \$20 billion in the United States to support "massive new data centers across the Midwest, the Sun Belt area and also to keep America on the cutting edge of technology and artificial intelligence."

The president-elect said the first phase of the investment would be in Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Ohio, Oklahoma and Texas.

He added that the Gulf of Mexico should be renamed the Gulf of America.

Offshore drilling

Trump slammed Biden's decision earlier this week to prohibit future oil and gas drilling off the entire East and West coasts, the eastern Gulf of Mexico and the remaining portions of Alaska's Northern Bering Sea, saying he would "reverse it immediately."

It appears unlikely Trump can unilaterally reverse the protections. In the early months of his first term, he tried to undo protections placed by then-President Barack Obama, but a federal judge ruled that was beyond his authority.

"We will drill, baby, drill," Trump said. "We're going to be drilling in a lot of other locations, and the energy costs are going to come way down — they'll be brought down to a very low level, and that's going to bring everything else down."

Trump also said he would end a "mandate" for electric vehicles. There is no federal electric vehicle

mandate, but Trump has said he wants to end the \$7,500 consumer tax incentive, and Republicans have sometimes characterized the Biden administration's regulations tightening automotive emissions as an EV mandate.

Trump added that he wanted to move away from wind energy.

"We're going to try and have a policy where no windmills are being built," he said.

Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom's Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.

U.S. House GOP kicks off new session with border security push

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 7, 2025 3:01 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House passed its first bill of the 119th Congress Tuesday, a measure that increases migrant detention and is named after a Georgia nursing student whose murder President-elect Donald Trump repeatedly tied to the Biden administration's immigration policies.

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson said during a Tuesday press conference that "as promised, we're starting today with border security."

"If you polled the populace and the voters, they would tell you that that was the top of the list, and we have a lot to do there to fix it," the Louisiana Republican said. "It's an absolute disaster

because of what has happened over the last four years, and the Laken Riley Act is a big part of that."

Riley, 22, was out on a run when her roommates became concerned after she did not return home. Jose Antonio Ibarra, a 26-year-old migrant from Venezuela, was convicted of her murder last month. According to U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, Ibarra allegedly entered the country illegally in 2022.

The bill, H.R. 29, passed 264-159, with 48 Democrats joining Republicans. The measure also passed the House on a bipartisan basis last Congress, with 37 Democrats voting with the GOP.

It stalled in the Senate when then-Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York, did not bring it to the floor for a vote.

That will likely change now. Republicans who now control the Senate are expected to possibly bring up the bill this week. Alabama's Sen. Katie Britt is the lead sponsor in that chamber of the companion to the House bill, S. 5.

The Senate version has already gained bipartisan support, with the backing of Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman.



Migrants wait throughout the night May 10, 2023, in a dust storm at Gate 42, on land between the Rio Grande and the border wall. (Photo

by Corrie Boudreaux for Source New Mexico)

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Additionally, Michigan's Democratic Sen. Gary Peters said he would support the bill if it's brought to a vote in the Senate.

"We gotta make sure that we're doing everything we can to secure the border, and keep people safe in our country," he said in an interview with States Newsroom.

If the bill advances past the 60-vote threshold in the Senate, it's likely to be signed into law sometime after Trump is inaugurated on Jan. 20. But it's not yet clear how many Democrats will join Republicans in backing it.

DHS detention, AG lawsuits

Ibarra, the man convicted of Riley's murder, was previously arrested for driving a scooter without a license and for shoplifting. The bill would require the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to detain any immigrants — even those with legal status — charged with local theft, burglary or shoplifting.

It would also allow the attorney general of a state to bring civil lawsuits against the federal government for violating a detention or removal proceeding "that harms such State or its residents."

Rep. Mike Collins, who sponsored the bill, represents the district where Riley's family lives.

"This legislation could have prevented her death," the Georgia Republican said Tuesday. "We gotta make sure that this doesn't ever happen again."

During the debate, Collins read a statement from the Riley family in which they said they support the legislation.

"Laken would have been 23 on January the 10th," Collins read from the statement. "There is no greater gift that could be given to her or our country than to continue her legacy by saving lives through this bill."

'Empty and opportunistic'

Maryland Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin criticized the measure and argued that if it were to become law, it would raise questions about due process because the measure would require immigration detention on the basis of a charge or arrest.

"Their bill today is an empty and opportunistic measure," Raskin said during Tuesday's debate.

"This bill would upend 28 years of mandatory immigration detention policy by requiring that any undocumented immigrant arrested for theft, larceny or shoplifting be detained, even if they are never convicted or even charged with a crime."

Washington Democratic Rep. Pramila Jayapal, the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said the bill does not fix the U.S. immigration system.

"In the process it unfairly sweeps up many more innocent lives with no due process," she said.

Jennifer Shutt contributed to this report.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Librarians gain protections in some states as book bans soar New Jersey just joined at least five other states that have taken steps against school library censorship

BY: MATT VASILOGAMBROS, STATELINE - JANUARY 7, 2025 9:36 AM

Karen Grant and fellow school librarians throughout New Jersey have heard an increasingly loud chorus of parents and conservative activists demanding that certain books — often about race, gender and sexuality — be removed from the shelves.

In the past year, Grant and her colleagues in the Ewing Public Schools just north of Trenton updated a 3-decade-old policy on reviewing parents' challenges to books they see as pornographic or inappropriate. Grant's team feared that without a new policy, the district would immediately bend to someone who wanted certain

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books banned.

Around the same time, state lawmakers in Trenton were readying legislation to set a book challenge policy for the entire state, preventing book bans based solely on the subject of a book or the author's background or views, while also protecting public and school librarians from legal or civil liabilities from people upset by the reading materials they offer.

When Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy signed that measure into law last month, Grant breathed a little easier.

"We just hear so many stories of our librarians feeling threatened and targeted," said Grant, who works at Parkway Elementary School and serves as president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians. "This has been a wrong, an injustice that needs to be made right."

Amid a national rise in book bans in school libraries and new laws in some red states that threaten criminal penalties against librarians, a growing number of blue states are taking the opposite approach.

New Jersey joined at least five other states — California, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington — that have passed legislation within the past two years that aims to preserve access to reading materials that deal with racial and sexual themes, including those about the LGBTQ+ community.

Conservative groups have led the effort to ban materials to shield children from what they deem as harmful content. In the 2023-24 school year, there were 10,000 instances of book bans across the U.S. — nearly three times as many as the year before, according to a recent report by PEN America, a nonprofit that advocates for literary freedom.

"Certain books are harmful to children — just like drugs, alcohol, Rated R movies and tattoos are harmful to them," Kit Hart, chair of the Carroll County, Maryland, chapter of Moms for Liberty, a national organization leading the book banning effort, wrote in an email.

But some states are now safeguarding librarians and the books they offer.

"State leaders are demonstrating that censorship has no place in their state and that the freedom to read is a principle that is supported and protected," said Kasey Meehan, director of the Freedom to Read program at PEN America, which has been tracking book bans since 2021.

The drive to ban certain books is not waning, however. While a handful of states fight censorship in school libraries, some communities within those states are attempting to retake local control and continuing to remove materials that conservative local officials regard as lurid and harmful to children.



Newly donated LGBTQ+ books are displayed in the library at Nystrom Elementary School in Richmond, Calif. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

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'Lives are in the balance'

The New Jersey measure not only sets minimum standards for localities when they adopt a policy on how books are curated or can be challenged but also prevents school districts from removing material based on "the origin, background, or views of the library material or those contributing to its creation."

The law also gives librarians immunity from civil and criminal liability for "good faith actions."

New Jersey state Sen. Andrew Zwicker, a Democrat who introduced the legislation, said until recently he thought that book bans were a disturbing trend, but one limited to other states. But early last year, he went to a brunch event and met a school librarian who told him she faced a torrent of verbal and online abuse for refusing to remove a handful of books with LGBTQ+ themes from her library's shelves.

"That's when I realized that I was so horribly mistaken, that these attacks on librarians and on the freedom to read were happening everywhere," Zwicker told Stateline. "I went up to her and asked, 'What can I do?'"

He said he's already heard from lawmakers in Rhode Island who are considering introducing a similar measure this year.

A child who identifies with the LGBTQ+ community can read a memoir like "Gender Queer" by Maia Kobabe and feel seen for the first time in their lives, he said.

"I do not think it's an overstatement to say that lives are in the balance here, that these books are that important to people, and that librarians are trusted gatekeepers to ensure that what's on the shelf of a library has been curated and is appropriate," Zwicker said.

These new state laws, several of which are titled the "Freedom to Read Act," passed almost entirely along party lines, with unanimous Democratic support.

In New Jersey, Republican state Assemblywoman Dawn Fantasia, who has worked in schools for the past 18 years, including as an English teacher, vehemently opposed the measure. She did not respond to an interview request.

"This isn't puritanical parents saying, 'Oh, I don't want my child to learn how babies are made,'" she said during a September committee hearing. "That's ridiculous, and we all know it."

She added, "What I do want is for us to be able to have an honest conversation about some of what is in these texts that is extraordinarily inappropriate for that grade level."

Enforcement and penalties

Legislation differs by state, including in enforcement and how to penalize noncompliant localities.

In Illinois, for example, school districts risk losing thousands of dollars in state grant funding if they violate the state's new law discouraging book bans. But as the Chicago Tribune reported last month, that financial penalty was not enough to persuade many school districts throughout the state to comply, with administrators saying they are concerned about giving up local control on school decisions.

Several school districts in other states have similarly rebelled.

North of Minneapolis, St. Francis Area Schools' board last month decided it would consult with conservative group BookLooks to determine which books it will buy for its school libraries. BookLooks uses a 0-through-5 rating system that flags books for violent and sexual content.

Under its rating system, books that have long had a place in school libraries — such as the Holocaust memoir "Night" by Elie Wiesel or "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou — would require parental consent to read.

Asked about the school district potentially violating state law, school board member Amy Kelly, who led the drive to use BookLooks, declined to be interviewed. Karsten Anderson, superintendent of St. Francis Area Schools, also declined an interview request.

In Maryland, Carroll County schools led the state in banning books in recent years, removing in the 2023-2024 school year at least 59 titles that were "sexually explicit," according to a tally by PEN America.

Schools should not allow children to see "kink and porn," wrote Hart, of Moms for Liberty. She got involved in the effort more than three years ago, saying she wanted to protect her five children and parents'

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rights to make educational decisions.

She pointed to one book to make her point: "Let's Talk About It: The Teen's Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human," a nonfiction book in graphic novel form by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan that seeks to educate teenagers about anatomy and consensual and safe sex. The book explores other issues of gender and sexuality, as well. Hart likened the book's illustrations showing different ways of having sex to "erotica."

"Parents who provide their children with alcohol or drugs, or to give them a tattoo would rightly be charged with crimes," she wrote Stateline in an email. "Schools that provide children with sexually explicit content are negligent at best."

The future of book bans

Around 8,000 of the more than 10,000 instances of banned books during the 2023-24 school year were in Florida and Iowa schools, according to PEN America. Lawmakers in those states enacted legislation in 2023 that created processes for school districts to remove books that have sexual content.

Iowa now requires that reading materials offered in schools be "age-appropriate," while the Florida lawensures that books challenged for depicting or describing "sexual conduct" be removed from shelves while the challenge is processed by the district.

Some of those banned books included classics, such as "Roots" by Alex Haley and "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" by Betty Smith.

Over the past year, lawmakers in Idaho, Tennessee and Utah passed measures that ban certain reading materials that deal with sex or are otherwise deemed inappropriate, according to a December report from EveryLibrary, an Illinois-based organization that advocates against book bans. Arizona Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs vetoed similar legislation in June.

Laws that allow for book bans have been the subject of several lawsuits in recent years, as plaintiffs argue those measures violate constitutional protections of free expression.

Late last month, a federal judge struck down parts of a 2023 Arkansas law that threatened prison time for librarians who distribute "harmful" material to minors. Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin, a Republican, announced the state would appeal the decision.

EveryLibrary is tracking 26 bills in five states that lawmakers will consider this year that would target books with sexual and racial themes.

The organized effort to remove books because of LGBTQ+ or racial themes will continue, said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

The association, which tracks book bans as part of its mission to support libraries and information science, found that most of the top banned books around the country had LGBTQ+ protagonists.

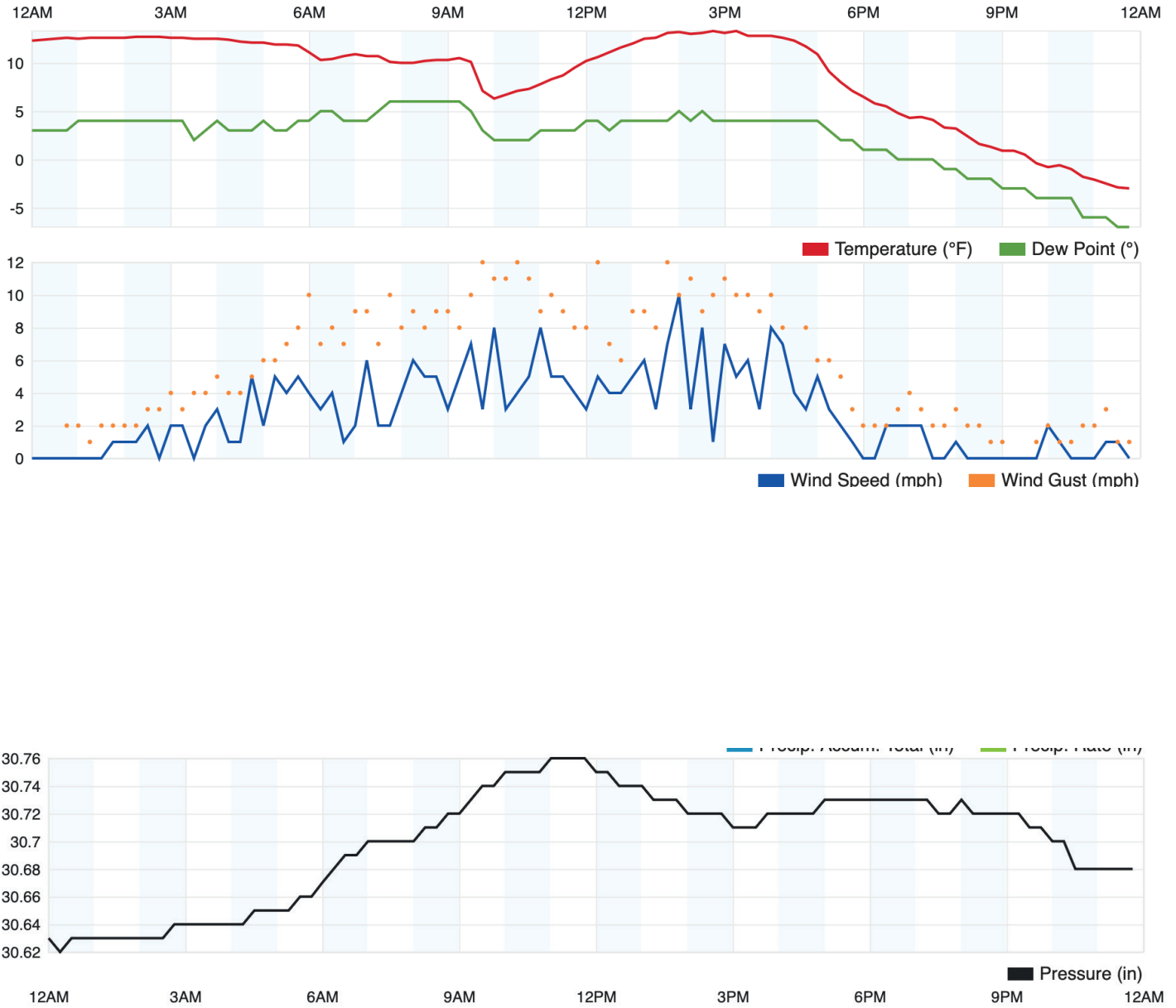
"Librarians have always been all about providing individuals with access to the information they need, whether it's for education, for enrichment, for understanding," she said in an interview. "Censorship is diametrically opposed to that mission."

Matt Vasilogambros covers voting rights, gun laws and Western climate policy for Stateline. He lives in San Diego, California.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 26 °F

Partly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 19 °F↑↑

Chance Freezing Rain then Wintry Mix Likely

Thursday



High: 34 °F

Snow Likely and Patchy Blowing Snow

Thursday Night



Low: 16 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Friday



High: 24 °F

Partly Sunny

“Warmer” Days Ahead & Light Snow Thursday

Tonight



Lows: -2 to +1°

Wednesday





Highs: 22 to 34°

Thursday



Highs: 29 to 34°

Warmest across central SD

-  - Temperatures will run about 5-10° above average Wednesday and 10-15° above average Thursday
-  - Light snow Wednesday night through Thursday
 - Probability of an inch in snow accumulation ranges from 40 to 50% over the northern Sisseton Hills and a 15-20% chance of two inches of snow for this area
 - Everywhere else is expected to receive less than an inch of snow



High temperatures will run between 5 to 15 degrees above average for the next couple of days as milder air moves in. Our next system will pass over the area Wednesday night through Thursday bringing light snow along with it. Generally an inch in snow accumulation or less is forecasted. Winds will be on the increase out of the northwest Thursday morning through the afternoon behind the cold front. Gusts could range between 30 to 40+ mph, highest over central SD. This may lead to drifting and blowing snow in some areas while the snow is falling.

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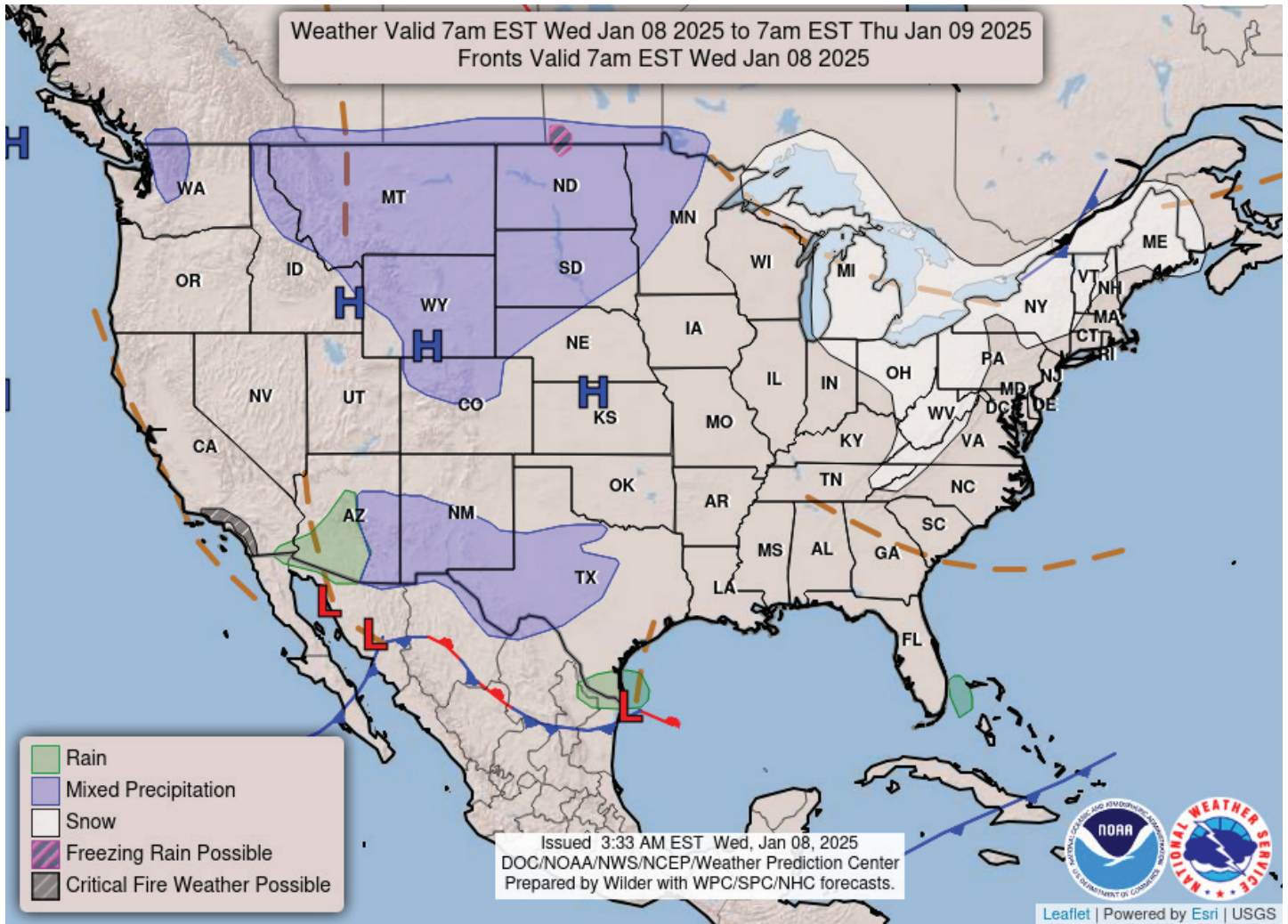
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 14 °F at 3:10 PM
Low Temp: -3 °F at 11:28 PM
Wind: 14 mph at 9:32 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 59 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 1963
Record Low: -33 in 1912
Average High: 23
Average Low: 2
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.17
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.17
Precip Year to Date: 21.71
Sunset Tonight: 5:09:09 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:09 am



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Today in Weather History

January 8, 2010: Arctic high pressure combined with strong northwest winds resulted in extreme wind chills from -35 to nearly 50 degrees below zero across central and northeast South Dakota. Some of the lowest wind chills included -40 in Aberdeen; -41 in Watertown; -42 in Highmore; -43 in Leola and Faulkton; -44 in Eagle Butte, Herreid, and Gettysburg; and -47 in Bowdle. Several record lows were also tied or broken during the morning hours of the 8th, including -22 degrees NW of Gann Valley and Victor; -23 degrees at Pierre and Sisseton; -24 degrees at Roscoe; and -34 degrees at Pollock.

1953 - A severe icestorm in the northeastern U.S. produced up to four inches of ice in Pennsylvania, and two to three inches in southeastern New York State. In southern New England the ice coated a layer of snow up to 20 inches deep. The storm resulted in 31 deaths and 2.5 million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1973: Georgia's worst ice storm since 1935 occurred from the 7th through the 8th. Freezing rain and sleet began during the early morning hours on Sunday the 7th and ended in most areas on Monday. Total damage was estimated at well over \$25 million. The electric power companies suffered losses estimated at \$5 million, and telephone companies had another \$2 million in damages. Some schools were closed for more than a week.

1987 - A winter storm moving out of the Southern Rockies into the Central Plains Region produced 14 inches of snow at Red River NM, and 17 inches in the Wolf Creek ski area of Colorado. Wichita KS was blanketed with seven inches of snow. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter storm spread heavy snow across the northeastern U.S., with up to ten inches reported in southern New Jersey. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northwesterly winds and bitterly cold temperatures prevailed in the north central U.S. Winds in the Great Lakes Region gusted to 58 mph at Chicago IL, and reached 63 mph at Niagara Falls NY. Squalls in western New York State produced 20 inches of snow at Barnes Corners and Lowville. Snow squalls in Upper Michigan produced 26 inches around Keweenaw. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - High winds plagued the northwestern U.S., with the state of Oregon hardest hit. Two persons were killed in Oregon, and nine others were injured, and the high winds downed fifty-five million board feet of timber, valued at more than twenty million dollars. Winds gusted to 90 mph near Pinehurst ID, and wind gusts reached 96 mph at Stevenson WA. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2019: An unusual January tornado impacted Cortland, Ohio, during the mid-morning hours. The EF-1 tornado developed northeast of Champion Township in Trumbull County and moved east. The tornado brought down numerous trees and wires along the 4.5-mile path.



DOING WHAT FOR WHOM?

One of the world's greatest composers and musicians was Johann Sebastian Bach. He is recognized as the most celebrated German composer of all times. He was also known as a deeply religious man. Over every one of his compositions, he wrote the words, "To the glory of God." He never lost sight of Who got credit for what he did.

This sets a great example for us: Whatever we do we must do, as Paul said, for the glory of God. But how is this possible and what does it mean? Am I to receive no recognition for what I do? Must God get all the credit for all of my accomplishments?

Perhaps the first truth we need to understand is the impact of our behavior on others. Many things that we can do may not bring harm to ourselves. But we must not ever, under any conditions, do anything that may or will bring harm to other Christians or non-Christians. There is nothing more wonderful than the Christian's freedom. But that freedom must be used to help – not hurt others.

We also need to consider the important fact that we as disciples are responsible to disciple others. It is not enough to live right, we must be involved in sharing the insights, knowledge and wisdom God has given us with those who want to grow into the likeness of Christ. We need to strengthen the weak and lift up the fallen.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may we be conscious and considerate of everything we do and say. May we also work with You to equip those who are struggling. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today : So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31

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:

01.07.25

20 24 33 39 48 18

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$77,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 41

DRAW: Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.06.25

15 34 45 50 51 8

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,610,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 56 Mins

DRAW: 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.07.25

16 24 30 32 44 2

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 11 Mins 13

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.04.25

20 26 29 31 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 11 Mins 13

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.06.25

41 44 54 57 64 13

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 40 Mins

DRAW: 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.06.25

17 34 46 66 67 14

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$240,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 40 Mins

DRAW: 13 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

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 65, Gregory 20
Arlington 51, Madison 19
Avon 58, Alcester-Hudson 24
Belfield, N.D. 63, McIntosh High School 35
Bon Homme 49, Parker 34
Chadron, Neb. 42, Hot Springs 25
Clark-Willow Lake 45, DeSmet 35
Dakota Valley 64, Sergeant Bluff-Luton, Iowa 52
Dell Rapids 55, McCook Central-Montrose 38
Dell Rapids St Mary 44, Garretson 27
Ethan 47, Wagner 43
Flandreau 39, Castlewood 32
Freeman 49, Irene-Wakonda 23
Groton 51, Warner 34
Harding County 57, Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 44
Highmore-Harold 49, Stanley County 26
Hitchcock-Tulare 42, Iroquois-Lake Preston 27
Kimball-White Lake 33, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 25
Lemmon High School 69, Philip 46
Lyman 71, Lower Brule 10
Milbank 61, Britton-Hecla 23
Miller 53, Wolsey-Wessington 26
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 55, Corsica/Stickney 44
Newell 63, Oelrichs 27
O'Gorman High School 70, Brookings 31
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 53, Freeman Academy-Marion 47
Parkston 53, Hanson 27
Potter County 40, North Central 35
Rapid City Christian 45, Hill City 30
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 70, Bridgewater-Emery 44
Sioux Valley 52, Deubrook 48
St Thomas More 45, Belle Fourche 38
Timber Lake 42, Faith 40
Tiospaye Topa 58, Sully Buttes 43
Tri-Valley 50, Elkton-Lake Benton 14
Vermillion 59, Yankton 23
Wall 47, New Underwood 18
Webster 51, Tiospa Zina 43
Wilmot 37, Leola-Frederick High School 22
Winner 59, Chamberlain 25

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

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BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 72, Aberdeen Roncalli 60, OT
Alcester-Hudson 65, Avon 34
Bridgewater-Emery 57, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 45
Castlewood 56, Flandreau 28
Chadron, Neb. 66, Hot Springs 39
Corsica/Stickney 60, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 48
Crazy Horse 65, Edgemont 29
Dakota Valley 76, Sergeant Bluff-Luton, Iowa 48
Dell Rapids St Mary 81, Garretson 66
Dupree 60, Jones County 42
Elk Point-Jefferson 63, Canistota 39
Estelline-Hendricks 79, Chester 66
Freeman 66, Irene-Wakonda 63
Freeman Academy-Marion 68, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 50
Gregory 74, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 45
Groton 63, Warner 24
Harrisburg 57, Mitchell 46
Ipswich 52, Northwestern 45
Iroquois-Lake Preston 71, Hitchcock-Tulare 56
Kadoka 65, White River 56
Langford 67, Redfield 46
Lemmon High School 56, Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 52
Lennox 72, Platte-Geddes 42
Leola-Frederick High School 80, Wilmot 47
Lyman 92, Colome 19
Marty 66, Crow Creek Tribal School 63
Milbank 56, Britton-Hecla 43
Mobridge-Pollock 72, Potter County 56
Parker 53, Bon Homme 41
Parkston 45, Hanson 39
Rapid City Christian 77, Hill City 54
Rapid City Stevens 70, Douglas 46
Sioux Falls Christian 65, West Central 48
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 66, Brookings 56
St Thomas More 69, Belle Fourche 21
Standing Rock, N.D. 66, McLaughlin 39
Stanley County 66, Highmore-Harrold 46
Tea 60, Sioux City, North, Iowa 55
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 64, Kimball-White Lake 39
Vermillion 49, Yankton 47
Viborg-Hurley 71, Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. 60
Wagner 60, Ethan 47
Waverly-South Shore 66, Tri-State, N.D. 47
Webster 78, Tiospa Zina 38
Winner 46, Chamberlain 28
Wolsey-Wessington 63, Miller 45

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

Thousands flee as wildfires burn out of control in and around Los Angeles and homes are destroyed

By JAIMIE DING, CHRISTOPHER WEBER and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — California firefighters battled wind-whipped wildfires that tore across the Los Angeles area, destroying homes, clogging roadways as tens of thousands fled and straining resources as officials prepared for the situation to worsen early Wednesday.

The flames from a fire that broke out Tuesday evening near a nature preserve in the inland foothills northeast of LA spread so rapidly that staff at a senior living center had to push dozens of residents in wheelchairs and hospital beds down the street to a parking lot. The residents waited there in their bedclothes as embers fell around them until ambulances, buses and even construction vans arrived to take them to safety.

Another blaze that started hours earlier ripped through the city's Pacific Palisades neighborhood, a hillside area along the coast dotted with celebrity residences and memorialized by the Beach Boys in their 1960s hit "Surfin' USA." In the frantic haste to get to safety, roadways became impassable when scores of people abandoned their vehicles and fled on foot, some toting suitcases.

The traffic jam on Palisades Drive prevented emergency vehicles from getting through and a bulldozer was brought in to push the abandoned cars to the side and create a path. Video along the Pacific Coast Highway showed widespread destruction of homes and businesses along the famed roadway.

Pacific Palisades resident Kelsey Trainor said the only road in and out of her neighborhood was blocked. Ash fell all around them while fires burned on both sides of the road.

"We looked across and the fire had jumped from one side of the road to the other side of the road," Trainor said. "People were getting out of the cars with their dogs and babies and bags, they were crying and screaming."

A third wildfire started around 10:30 p.m. and quickly prompted evacuations in Sylmar, a San Fernando Valley community that is the northernmost neighborhood in Los Angeles. The causes of all three fires were under investigation.

Flames were being pushed by Santa Ana winds topping 60 mph (97 kph) in some places. The winds were expected to increase overnight, producing isolated gusts that could top 100 mph (160 kph) in mountains and foothills — including in areas that haven't seen substantial rain in months.

The situation prompted the Los Angeles Fire Department to take the rare step of putting out a plea for off-duty firefighters to help. It was too windy for firefighting aircraft to fly, further hampering the fight.

Gov. Newsom posted on X early Wednesday that California had deployed more than 1,400 firefighting personnel to combat the blazes. "Emergency officials, firefighters, and first responders are all hands on deck through the night to do everything possible to protect lives, Newsom said.

The erratic weather caused President Joe Biden to cancel plans to travel to inland Riverside County, where he was to announce the establishment of two new national monuments in the state. He remained in Los Angeles, where smoke was visible from his hotel, and was briefed on the wildfires. The Federal Emergency Management Agency approved a grant to help reimburse California for the firefighting cost.

Officials didn't give an estimate of structures damaged or destroyed in the Pacific Palisades wildfire, but they said about 30,000 residents were under evacuation orders and more than 13,000 structures were under threat. Gov. Gavin Newsom visited the scene and said many homes had burned.

By evening the flames had spread into neighboring Malibu and several people there were being treated for burn injuries and a firefighter had a serious head injury and was taken to a hospital, according to Los Angeles Fire Department Capt. Erik Scott.

Things were expected to worsen overnight.

Just after midnight Wednesday, the Eaton fire, which started around 6:30 p.m. the day before, had quickly burned 1.6 square mile (4 square kilometers), according to fire officials. The Hurst fire jumped to 500 acres (202. hectares) and the Palisades fire had destroyed 4.5 square miles (11.6 square kilometers) according to Angeles National Forest. The fires were at 0% containment as of early Wednesday.

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"By no stretch of the imagination are we out of the woods," Newsom warned residents, saying the worst of the winds were expected between 10 p.m. Tuesday and 5 a.m. Wednesday. He declared a state of emergency.

As of Tuesday evening, nearly 167,000 people were without power in Los Angeles county, according to the tracking website PowerOutage.us, due to the strong winds.

Recent dry winds, including the notorious Santa Anas, have contributed to warmer-than-average temperatures in Southern California, where there's been very little rain so far this season. Southern California hasn't seen more than 0.1 inches (0.25 centimeters) of rain since early May.

The Pacific Palisades fire started around 10:30 a.m. and quickly consumed about 4.6 square miles (11.6 square kilometers) and sent up a dramatic plume of smoke visible across Los Angeles.

The neighborhood, which borders Malibu about 20 miles (32 kilometers) west of downtown LA, includes hillside streets of tightly packed homes along winding roads nestled against the Santa Monica Mountains and stretches down to beaches along the Pacific Ocean.

Long-time Palisades resident Will Adams said he immediately went to pick his two kids up from St. Matthews Parish School when he heard the fire was nearby. Meanwhile, he said embers flew into his wife's car as she tried to evacuate.

"She vacated her car and left it running," Adams said. She and many other residents walked down toward the ocean until it was safe.

Adams said he had never witnessed anything like this in the 56 years he's lived there. He watched as the sky turned brown and then black as homes started burning. He could hear loud popping and bangs "like small explosions," which he said he believes were the transformers exploding.

"It is crazy, it's everywhere, in all the nooks and crannies of the Palisades. One home's safe, the other one's up in flames," Adams said.

Actor James Woods posted footage of flames burning through bushes and past palm trees on a hill near his home. The towering orange flames billowed among the landscaped yards between the homes.

"Standing in my driveway, getting ready to evacuate," Woods said in the short video on X.

Some trees and vegetation on the grounds of the Getty Villa were burned by late Tuesday, but staff and the museum collection remain safe, Getty President Katherine Fleming said in a statement. The museum located on the eastern end of the Pacific Palisades is a separate campus of the world-famous Getty Museum that focuses on the art and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. The fire also burned Palisades Charter High School.

Film studios canceled two movie premieres due to the fire and windy weather, and the Los Angeles Unified School District said it temporarily relocated students from three campuses in the Pacific Palisades area.

Tents arrive for survivors of a quake that killed 126 in freezing, high-altitude Tibet

By KEN MORITSUGU and CHRISTOPHER BODEEN Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Rescuers in the freezing, high-altitude Tibet region in western China searched a second day for any remaining victims of a deadly earthquake that struck near a holy city for Tibetan Buddhists, before shifting their focus to resettling the survivors.

More tents, quilts, stoves and other relief items were being delivered Wednesday to people whose homes were uninhabitable or unsafe. Temperatures fall well below freezing overnight in an area with an average altitude of about 4,200 meters (13,800 feet).

In video aired by state broadcaster CCTV, workers could be seen erecting rows of tents with metal frames and stakes after nightfall Tuesday. Meant as temporary shelter, they were lined with quilted padding to keep out the cold. The workers distributed packaged food items to the shelter occupants, donning blue winter jackets over their orange uniforms.

The confirmed death toll stood at 126 with another 188 injured as of Tuesday evening, and no further updates were issued during the day on Wednesday. Hong Li, the director of Tibet's Emergency Management

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Department, told a late afternoon news conference that the work had shifted from search and rescue to resettlement and reconstruction.

The earthquake struck an outlying county in the city of Shigatse, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, the second-highest figure in Tibetan Buddhism. It was not immediately known whether he was in his Tashi Lhunpo Monastery at the time or how much damage Tibet's second largest city sustained. The epicenter was about 25 kilometers (15 miles) from the main part of the city, which is called Xigaze in Chinese and sprawls across a high altitude plain.

More than 500 aftershocks were recorded after the earthquake, which the U.S. Geological Survey said measured magnitude 7.1. China's earthquake center recorded a magnitude of 6.8. The quake was also about 75 kilometers (50 miles) from Mount Everest and the border with Nepal, where the shaking sent people running out of their homes in the capital.

A candlelight vigil was planned on Wednesday night in Dharamsala, India, home to the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's highest figure, and a large Tibetan population. An announcement on the Dalai Lama's website said he would lead a prayer ceremony in memory of the victims on Thursday.

The Dalai Lama is viewed by the Chinese government as bent on making Tibet independent of China.

Asked about the prayer ceremony, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said, "We are very clear about the separatist nature and political schemes of the Dalai Lama and remain highly vigilant."

Guo expressed confidence that the people in the earthquake zone will be able to rebuild under "the strong leadership" of China's ruling Communist Party.

The Chinese government and followers of the Dalai Lama have feuded over who should hold the position of Panchen Lama since a boy appointed by the Dalai Lama disappeared in the mid-1990s and a Chinese-backed candidate was approved for the position. The Dalai Lama denounced the move and has refused to recognize the current Panchen Lama.

China's government says Tibet has been part of its territory for centuries, but many Tibetans say they were functionally independent for most of that time. China's People's Liberation Army invaded the territory in 1950 and the Dalai Lama fled to India nine years later during an uprising against Chinese rule, seen as eroding Tibet's unique Buddhist culture.

The death toll from the quake included at least 22 of the 222 residents of Gurum, the official Xinhua News Agency cited the village's Communist Party chief, Tsering Phuntsog, as saying. The victims included his 74-year-old mother, and several other of his relatives remained buried in the debris.

"Even young people couldn't run out of the houses when the earthquake hit, let alone old people and children," Tsering Phuntsog said.

State broadcaster CCTV showed orange-suited rescue workers with sniffing search dogs clambering over huge chunks of debris in the wreckage of homes. In the hardest-hit areas, rows of houses had been reduced to rubble. Blue disaster emergency tents with bright red Chinese flags flapping in the wind had been set up nearby.

More than 3,600 houses collapsed, according to a preliminary survey, and 46,000 residents had been relocated, state media said.

Tibet is generally closed to foreign journalists over reports about the ill treatment of the population by Chinese authorities.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping ordered "all-out rescue efforts to save lives and minimize casualties," Xinhua reported. Power and communications in the area have been restored, allowing smoother delivery of emergency goods, it said.

Jimmy Carter continues to lie in state at Capitol Rotunda ahead of his state funeral

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Jimmy Carter will continue to lie in state Wednesday after his remains

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arrived in Washington a day earlier as part of state funeral rites.

The Georgia Democrat and 39th president died Dec. 29 at the age of 100.

Carter served as president from 1977-81, winning office as an outsider in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate. He endured a rocky four years of economic unrest and international crises that ended with his defeat to Republican Ronald Reagan. But he also lived long enough to see historians reassess his presidency more charitably than voters did in 1980.

He was remembered Tuesday at the Capitol for his deep religious faith, long public service and decades of humanitarian work beyond what he accomplished in politics.

Vice President Kamala Harris and Speaker Mike Johnson were among those who offered bipartisan tributes to Carter in the Capitol Rotunda, where his flag-draped casket remains atop the Lincoln catafalque for members of the public to pay their respects.

Carter will remain at the Capitol until Thursday morning, when he is transported to Washington National Cathedral for a state funeral. President Joe Biden, a longtime Carter ally, will deliver a eulogy. Other living former presidents, including President-elect Donald Trump, are expected to attend.

After the funeral, the Boeing 747 that is Air Force One when a sitting president is aboard will carry Carter and his family back to Georgia. An invitation-only funeral will be held at Maranatha Baptist Church in tiny Plains, where Carter taught Sunday School for decades after leaving office.

Carter will be buried next to his wife, former first lady Rosalynn Carter, in a plot near the home they built before his first state Senate campaign in 1962 and where they lived out their lives with the exception of four years in the Georgia Governor's Mansion and four years in the White House.

CNN defamation trial comes at a rough time for legacy media — and for the struggling network

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — At a particularly inopportune time for legacy media and CNN, the news outlet is on trial in Florida this week, accused of defaming a Navy veteran involved in rescuing endangered Afghans from that country when the U.S. ended its involvement there in 2021.

The veteran, Zachary Young, blames CNN for destroying his business when it displayed his face onscreen during a story that discussed a "black market" in smuggling out Afghans for high fees at the time of the Taliban takeover.

In a broader sense, the case puts the news media on the stand in journalism critic Donald Trump's home state weeks before he's due to begin his second term as president, and on the same day Facebook's parent introduced a Trump-friendly policy of backing off fact checks. Young's attorney, Kyle Roche, leaned into the press' unpopularity in his opening arguments on Tuesday.

"You're going to have an opportunity to do something significant in this trial," Roche told jurors in Florida's 14th Judicial Circuit Courts in Panama City on Tuesday. "You're going to have an opportunity to send a message to mainstream media. You're going to have an opportunity to change an industry."

That's the fear. Said Jane Kirtley, director of the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and the Law at the University of Minnesota: "Everybody in the news media is on trial in this case."

Actual defamation trials are rare in this country

Defamation trials are actually rare in the United States, in part because strong constitutional protections for the press make proving libel difficult. From the media's standpoint, taking a case to a judge or jury is a risk many executives don't want to take.

Rather than defend statements that George Stephanopoulos made about Trump last spring, ABC News last month agreed to make the former president's libel lawsuit go away by paying him \$15 million toward his presidential library. In the end, ABC parent Walt Disney Co. concluded an ongoing fight against Trump wasn't worth it, win or lose.

In the most high-profile libel case in recent years, Fox News agreed to pay Dominion Voting Systems \$787 million on the day the trial was due to start in 2023 to settle the company's claims of inaccurate

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reporting in the wake of the 2020 presidential election.

The Young case concerns a segment that first aired on Jake Tapper's program on Nov. 11, 2021, about extraction efforts in Afghanistan. Young had built a business helping such efforts, and advertised his services on LinkedIn to sponsors with funding who could pay for such evacuation.

He subsequently helped four separate organizations — Audible, Bloomberg, a charity called H.E.R.O. Inc. and a Berlin-based NGO called CivilFleet Support eV — get more than a dozen people out of Afghanistan, according to court papers. He said he did not market to — or take money from — individual Afghans.

Yet Young's picture was shown as part of CNN story that talked about a "black market" where Afghans were charged \$10,000 or more to get family members out of danger.

The plaintiff says the story's reference to 'black market' damaged him

To Young, the "black market" label implied some sort of criminality, and he did nothing illegal. "It's devastating if you're labeled a criminal all over the world," Young testified on Tuesday.

CNN said in court papers that Young's case amounts to "defamation by implication," and that he hadn't actually been accused of nefarious acts. The initial story he complained about didn't even mention Young until three minutes in, CNN lawyer David Axelrod argued on Tuesday.

Five months after the story aired, Young complained about it, and CNN issued an on-air statement that its use of the phrase "black market" was wrong. "We did not intend to suggest that Mr. Young participated in a black market. We regret the error. And to Mr. Young, we apologize."

That didn't prevent a defamation lawsuit, and the presiding judge, William S. Henry, denied CNN's request that it be dismissed. CNN, in a statement, said that "when all the facts come to light, we are confident we will have a verdict in our favor."

Axelrod argued on Tuesday that CNN's reporting was tough, fair and accurate. He told the jury that they will hear no witnesses who will say they thought less of Young or wouldn't hire him because of the story — in other words, no one to back up his contention that it was so damaging to his business and life.

Yet much like Fox was publicly hurt in the Dominion case by internal communications about Trump and the network's coverage, some unflattering revelations about CNN's operations will likely become part of the trial. They include internal messages where CNN's reporter, Alex Marquardt, says unflattering and profane things about Young. A CNN editor was also revealed on messages to suggest that a Marquardt story on the topic was "full of holes," Roche said.

"At the end of the day, there was no one at CNN who was willing to stand up for the truth," Roche said. "Theater prevailed."

Axelrod, who shares a name with a longtime Democratic political operative and CNN commentator, contended that the give and take was part of a rigorous journalistic process putting the video segment and subsequent printed stories together. "Many experienced journalists put eyes on these stories," he said.

It's still going to be difficult for CNN to go through. The network, with television ratings at historic lows, doesn't need the trouble.

"At a moment of wider vilification and disparagement of the press, there is every reason to believe this will be weaponized, even if CNN prevails," said Ronnell Andersen Jones, a professor at the University of Utah law school and expert on libel law.

The case is putting a media organization and its key players on the stand in a very public way, which is something people don't usually see.

"I always dread any kind of libel cases because the likelihood that something bad will come out of it is very high," Minnesota's Kirtley said. "This is not a great time to be a libel defendant if you're in the news media. If we ever did have the support of the public, it has seriously eroded over the past few years."

Southern US shivers as new winter storm threatens snow for Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas

By HANNAH FINGERHUT and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — A developing winter storm threatens to drop snow, sleet and freezing rain on parts

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of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas as frigid air that escaped the Arctic plunges temperatures to subfreezing levels in some of the southernmost points of the U.S.

National Weather Service meteorologists predicted wintry precipitation across the southern Plains region starting Wednesday night, with snow likely in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. Farther south, snow could transition to sleet and freezing rain, which meteorologists warn could result in hazardous driving conditions.

An arctic blast descended on much of the U.S. east of the Rockies over the weekend, causing hundreds of car accidents and thousands of flight cancellations and delays. Several communities set up warming shelters this week, including one at a roller rink in Cincinnati and another in the Providence, Rhode Island, City Council chambers.

As the cold front moved south, a cold weather advisory was issued for the Gulf Coast and pushed the low temperature in El Paso, along the Texas border with Mexico, to 31 degrees (minus 0.5 Celsius). The National Weather Service predicted a wind chill factor ranging from 0 to 15 degrees (minus 18 to minus 9 Celsius) early Wednesday.

The polar vortex of ultra-cold air usually spins around the North Pole, but it sometimes ventures south into the U.S., Europe and Asia. Some experts say such cold air outbreaks are happening more frequently, paradoxically, because of a warming world.

As points north and east dug out of snow and ice Tuesday, communities in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas were preparing. In Texas, crews treated the roads in the Dallas area amid forecasts of 1 to 3 inches (about 3 to 8 centimeters) of snow on Thursday, along with sleet and rain. National Weather Service meteorologist Sam Shamburger said up to 5 inches (13 centimeters) of snow was expected farther north near the Oklahoma line.

Kevin Oden, Dallas' director of emergency management and crisis response, said Tuesday, "Our city is in a preparedness phase."

The storm could make roads slick Friday as 75,000 fans head to AT&T Stadium in Arlington to see Texas play Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl. Arlington spokesperson Susan Shrock said crews are ready to address any hazardous road conditions around the stadium.

"They're going to have the salt brine, they'll have sand and they'll have equipment on standby," she said.

A Tuesday night statement from AT&T Stadium and the Cotton Bowl said officials have been meeting with city and transportation officials and that "plans are in place to assure a safe environment for everyone in and around AT&T Stadium on game day."

Parts of southeastern Georgia and northern Florida endured unusually frigid temperatures overnight into Tuesday and were under freeze warnings into Wednesday.

In northern Florida, with Valentine's Day just a month away, the main concern for growers fearful of cold weather is the fern crop used for floral arrangements.

Major damage to citrus trees, which typically occurs when temperatures drop to 28 degrees (minus 2 degrees Celsius) or below for several hours, was less likely. Florida's commercial citrus groves are primarily south of the central part of the peninsula.

An area stretching from the central Plains through the Ohio Valley into the mid-Atlantic region is likely to receive more snow and ice for a few days, which could cause the ground covering to melt and refreeze to form treacherous black ice on roadways, forecasters said.

Hundreds of car accidents were reported in Virginia, Indiana, Kansas and Kentucky earlier this week, and a state trooper was treated for injuries after his patrol car was hit.

Three people died in vehicle crashes in Virginia, according to state police. Other weather-related fatal accidents occurred Sunday near Charleston, West Virginia, and Monday in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Kansas, where over a foot (30 centimeters) of snow fell in places, had two deadly weekend crashes.

Nearly 100,000 customers remained without power Tuesday night in states to the east of Kansas including Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia, according to the tracking website PowerOutage.us. That was down from more than 200,000 earlier in the day.

More than 5,000 flights into or out of the U.S. were delayed Tuesday, according to tracking platform FlightAware. On Monday, more than 2,300 flights were canceled and at least 9,100 more were delayed.

Virginia's state Capitol and General Assembly buildings will stay closed Wednesday after a weather-related power outage caused a malfunction in the water system, officials said Monday. The closure postponed lawmakers' first working day of the legislative session. A boil-water notice that was issued for Richmond's 200,000 residents could be lifted Wednesday, Mayor Danny Avula said.

Jimmy Carter's woodworking, painting and poetry reveal an introspective Renaissance Man

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

PLAINS, Ga. (AP) — The world knew Jimmy Carter as a president and humanitarian, but he also was a woodworker, painter and poet, creating a body of artistic work that reflects deeply personal views of the global community — and himself.

His portfolio illuminates his closest relationships, his spartan sensibilities and his place in the evolution of American race relations. And it continues to improve the finances of The Carter Center, his enduring legacy.

Creating art provided "the rare opportunity for privacy" in his otherwise public life, Carter said. "These times of solitude are like being in another very pleasant world."

'One of the best gifts of my life'

Mourners at Carter's hometown funeral will see the altar cross he carved in maple and collection plates he turned on his lathe. Great-grandchildren in the front pews at Maranatha Baptist Church slept as infants in cradles he fashioned.

The former president measured himself a "fairly proficient" craftsman. Chris Bagby, an Atlanta woodworker whose shop Carter frequented, elevated that assessment to "rather accomplished."

Carter gleaned the basics on his father's farm, where the Great Depression meant being a jack-of-all-trades. He learned more in shop class and with Future Farmers of America. "I made a miniature of the White House," he recalled, insisting it was not about his ambitions.

During his Navy years, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter chose unfurnished military housing to stretch his \$300 monthly wage, and he built their furniture himself in a shop on base.

As president, Carter nurtured woodworking rather than his golf game, spending hours in a wood shop at Camp David to make small presents for family and friends. And when he left the White House, West Wing aides and Cabinet members pooled money for a shopping spree at Sears, Roebuck & Co. so he could finally assemble a full-scale home woodshop.

"One of the best gifts of my life," Carter said.

Working in their converted garage, he previewed decades of Habitat for Humanity work by refurbishing their one-story house in Plains. He also improved his fine woodworking skills, joining wood without nails or screws. He also bought Japanese carving tools, and fashioned a chess set later owned by a Saudi prince.

Not just any customer

Carter frequented Atlanta's Highland Woodworking, a shop replete with a library of how-to books and hard-to-find tools, and recruited the world's preeminent handmade furniture maker, Tage Frid, as an instructor, Bagby said.

Still hanging near the store entrance is a picture of Frid, who died in 2004, teaching students including a smiling former president at the front of the class.

"He was like a regular customer," Bagby said, other than the "Secret Service agents who came with him."

Carter built four ladder-back chairs out of hickory in 1983, and Sotheby's auctioned them for \$21,000 each at the time, the first of many sales of Carter paintings and furniture that raised millions to benefit The Carter Center.

It was rarely about the money, though. Jill Stuckey, a longtime friend who would have the Carters over to her home in Plains, recalled seeing the former president carrying out one of her chairs.

"I said, 'What are you doing?'" she recalled. "He said, 'It's broken. I'm going to take it home and fix it.'"

He was at her back door at 7:30 the next morning, holding her repaired chair.

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Carter compared woodworking to the results of his labor as a Navy engineer, or as a boy on the farm: "I like to see what I have done, what I have made."

'No special talent,' but his paintings drive auctions

Carter employed a folk-art style as a late-in-life amateur painter and claimed "no special talent," but a 2020 Carter Center auction drew \$340,000 for his painting titled "Cardinals," and his oil-on-canvas of an eagle sold for \$225,000 in 2023, months after he entered hospice care.

Carter's work hangs throughout the center's campus. A room where he met with dignitaries is encircled with birds he painted after he and Rosalynn took on bird watching as a hobby.

Near the executive offices are a self-portrait and a painting of Rosalynn in their early post-presidential years, hanging across from a trio of Andy Warhol prints showing Carter in office.

Carter's earliest years predominate, with boyhood farm scenes and portraits of influential figures like his father James Earl Carter Sr., whose death in 1953 led him to abandon a Navy career and eventually enter politics in Georgia.

Some of his subjects, including both of his parents, are looking away. Carter's likeness of his mother shows "Miss Lillian" as a 70-year-old Peace Corps volunteer in India. Jason Carter said the piece was particularly meaningful to his grandfather, who lost reelection at a relatively youthful 56.

"When he got out of the White House, she was standing there saying, 'Well, I turned 70 in the Peace Corps. What are you going to do?'" Jason Carter said.

One Carter subject who meets his gaze is a young Rosalynn — they married when she was 18 and he was 21. He described her as "remarkably beautiful, almost painfully shy, obviously intelligent, and yet unrestrained in our discussions."

Another who doesn't look away is Rachel Clark, a Black sharecropper who had hosted the future president after they worked in the fields. "Except for my parents, Rachel Clark was the person closest to me," Carter wrote of his childhood.

'Just a word of praise'

Carter wrote more than 30 books — even a novel — but was most introspective in poetry.

On his first real recognition of Jim Crow segregation: "A silent line was drawn between friend and friend, race and race."

On his Cold War submarine's delicate dance with enemies: "We wanted them to understand ... to share our love of solitude ... the peace we yearned to keep."

Rosalynn's smile, he gushed, silenced the birds, "or may be I failed to hear their song."

Perhaps Carter's most revealing poem, "I Wanted to Share My Father's World," concerns the man who never got to see his namesake son's achievements. He wrote that he despised Earl's discipline, and swallowed hunger for "just a word of praise."

Only when he brought his own sons to visit his dying father did he "put aside the past resentments of the boy" and see "the father who will never cease to be alive in me."

Hostages in Gaza endure another winter as their families plead for a ceasefire

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — When Luis Har was kidnapped by Hamas-led militants on the warm morning of Oct. 7, 2023, he was forced into Gaza wearing shorts and a T-shirt. As his captivity stretched into weeks and then months, the cold, wet winter set in, bringing along with it a dread he had never endured before.

"I felt a penetrating cold in my bones," said Har, 71, who was rescued in mid-February in an Israeli military raid. With no heating in the apartment where he was held, the cold from the floor permeated his thin mattress at night. Fighting outside shattered the apartment windows, sending in rain and wind.

While Har is spending this winter warm and free, dozens of hostages still in captivity are not. Their families and supporters are desperate for a ceasefire deal to bring an end to their 15-month-long nightmare.

"Winter makes it much harder, much more complicated," said Har. "They must return as quickly as pos-

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sible.”

The hostages often experience the same dire circumstances as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza, whether it be food scarcity, the dangers from Israeli bombardments or the winter. The war in Gaza, sparked by Hamas’ attack, has displaced most of Gaza’s 2.3 million population, many of whom are weathering a second winter in tents that are barely holding up against the wind, rain and temperatures that can drop below 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit) at night.

Israel and Hamas are considering a deal that would free some hostages in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel and a halt to the fighting in Gaza. But despite reports of progress, the families of hostages have been shattered by previous rounds of promising talks that have suddenly collapsed. They fear the same could happen now.

“It is a dagger in our hearts,” said Ofri Bibas Levy, about the rollercoaster of hope and despair the families have lived throughout the war. Bibas Levy’s brother, Yarden Bibas, along with his wife Shiri and sons Ariel, 5, and Kfir, 1, are being held in Gaza. “Either it happens now or it doesn’t happen at all,” she told Israeli Army Radio.

During its attack on southern Israel, Hamas killed 1,200 people and kidnapped about 250, more than 100 of whom were freed in a brief ceasefire in the early weeks of the war. Since then, Israel has killed more than 45,000 people in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry, which doesn’t distinguish between fighters and noncombatants in its count.

Of the roughly 100 hostages who remain in Gaza, one third are said to be dead, some killed during Hamas’ initial attack and others killed or having died in captivity. Israel has rescued eight hostages and has recovered the bodies of dozens.

The hostages range in age from 1 to 86, and are believed to be scattered throughout the Gaza Strip. They have been held in apartments or in Hamas’ web of underground tunnels, which are cramped, damp and stifling, according to testimony from freed hostages.

Many families have no idea what conditions their loved ones face, uncertainty that heightens their concern. “You see a rainy day, or a cold day or whatever is going on outside, a storm, and it kills you,” said Michael Levy, whose brother Or, 34, was captured from an outdoor music festival after his wife was killed by militants, leaving their now 3-year-old son, Almog, without his parents.

Yehonatan Sabban, a spokesperson for the Hostages Families Forum, said the hostages are undernourished, with low fat reserves and weakened immune systems, making them more vulnerable to complications from illness in winter.

“Everyone is in a life-threatening situation that demands their immediate release,” Sabban said.

Har said the conditions of his captivity worsened during winter. For weeks, he had been held with four members of his family who had also been kidnapped — along with a Shih Tzu smuggled in by one of them. Three of them and the dog were freed in the first and only ceasefire agreement in late November. That left Har and his relative Fernando Marman alone with their captors in a second-floor apartment in the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

Har pled with his captors, who wore heavy coats, to bring them warmer clothes. They did — although they were ridden with holes. Every 10 days or so, they washed themselves with water from a bucket. A shattered window was sealed with a tarp.

In the first few weeks of captivity, there was food. Ingredients were delivered and Har took on the role of chef. When there were tomatoes, he made tomato soup with some rice. With canned peas, he made pea soup. But as the war dragged on and the temperature dropped, food became scarce. They were delighted when a captor brought one egg for them to share. For weeks, he and Marman split a single pita a day.

When he was rescued in a nighttime operation in mid-February, he ran shoeless out of the apartment and into a nearby greenhouse. Soldiers gave him a pair of shoes and a coat and spirited him home. The raid killed about 70 Palestinians, according to local authorities.

The families of the remaining hostages are pinning their hopes on the latest round of ceasefire talks.

“All I have is to pray that he’s somehow OK,” Levy said of his brother’s fate, “and know that the human

spirit is stronger than anything.”

See photos of fire, smoke and flight as wildfires race across Southern California

By DOUG GLASS Associated Press

Strong winds that sent wildfires ripping through the mountains and foothills around Los Angeles on Tuesday fed a spectacle of smoke, flames and flight.

Large flames

Vivid orange flames lit the sky in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood, where firefighters dragged hoses to meet blazes flaring up in brush dried out by persistent drought. Others fought to protect structures from the fires.

Protecting Homes

Firefighters raced to try to beat the flames back from homes. A helicopter dropped water in one area, while a firefighter jumped a fence near a home with flames approaching. Meanwhile, a woman stood outside of her garage, hand on her head, as a firetruck sprayed water on a neighboring house.

Evacuations

The fast-moving fires forced residents to evacuate. One woman wept as she stood next to her car as bright flames burned in the background. Another person ran alongside a line of cars as smoke filled the skyline.

Beach and smoke

As the Pacific Palisades fire scorched more than 200 acres, billowing smoke was visible for miles. One surfer rode a wave, with smoke in the background. Two other people laid on the sand, a white plume nearly filling the sky behind them. And a pair of bicyclists pedaled along the beach against an afternoon sky made twilight by the looming smoke.

California governor says Pacific Palisades wildfire has destroyed many structures as winds kick up

By JAIMIE DING, JANIE HAR and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A wildfire whipped up by extreme winds swept through a Los Angeles hillside dotted with celebrity residences Tuesday, burning homes in Pacific Palisades and prompting evacuation orders for tens of thousands. In the frantic haste to get to safety, roadways were clogged and scores of people abandoned their vehicles and fled on foot, some toting suitcases.

The traffic jam on Palisades Drive prevented emergency vehicles from getting through and a bulldozer was brought in to push the abandoned cars to the side and create a path, according to the LA Fire Department.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who was in Southern California to attend the naming of a national monument by President Joe Biden, made a detour to the canyon to see “firsthand the impact of these swirling winds and the embers,” and he said he found “not a few — many structures already destroyed.”

Officials did not give an exact number of structures damaged or destroyed in the Pacific Palisades wildfire, but they said about 30,000 residents were under evacuation orders and more than 13,000 structures were under threat.

And the worst could be yet to come. The blaze began around 10:30 a.m., shortly after the start of a Santa Ana windstorm that the National Weather service warned could be “life threatening” and the strongest to hit Southern California in more than a decade. The exact cause of the fire was unknown and no injuries had been reported, officials said.

Only about 25 miles (about 40 kilometers) northeast in Altadena, another fire spread to more than 200 acres (81 hectares) by Tuesday evening, prompting evacuation orders, the Angeles National Forest posted on the social platform X.

The winds were expected to increase overnight and continue for days, producing isolated gusts that

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could top 100 mph (160 kph) in mountains and foothills — including in areas that haven't seen substantial rain in months.

"By no stretch of the imagination are we out of the woods," Newsom warned residents, saying the worst of the winds are expected between 10 p.m. Tuesday and 5 a.m. Wednesday. He declared a state of emergency on Tuesday.

As of Tuesday evening, 28,300 households were without power due to the strong winds, according to the mayor's office. About 15,000 utility customers in Southern California had their power shut off to reduce the risk of equipment sparking a blaze. A half a million customers total were at risk of losing power preemptively.

The Pacific Palisades fire quickly consumed about 4.6 square miles (11.6 square kilometers) of land in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood in western Los Angeles, sending up a dramatic plume of smoke visible across the city. Residents in Venice Beach, some 6 miles (10 kilometers) away, reported seeing the flames. It was one of several blazes across the area.

Sections of Interstate 10 and the scenic Pacific Coast Highway were closed to all non-essential traffic to aid in evacuation efforts. But other roads were blocked. Some residents jumped out of their vehicles to get out of danger and waited to be picked up.

Resident Kelsey Trainor said the only road in and out of her neighborhood was completely blocked. Ash fell all around them while fires burned on both sides of the road.

"We looked across and the fire had jumped from one side of the road to the other side of the road," Trainor said. "People were getting out of the cars with their dogs and babies and bags, they were crying and screaming. The road was just blocked, like full-on blocked for an hour."

An Associated Press video journalist saw a roof and chimney of one home in flames and another residence where the walls were burning. The Pacific Palisades neighborhood, which borders Malibu about 20 miles (32 kilometers) west of downtown LA, includes hillside streets of tightly packed homes along winding roads nestled against the Santa Monica Mountains and stretches down to beaches along the Pacific Ocean.

An AP photographer saw multi-million dollar mansions on fire as helicopters overhead dropped water loads. Roads were clogged in both directions as evacuees fled down toward the Pacific Coast Highway while others begged for rides back up to their homes to rescue pets. Two of the homes on fire were inside exclusive gated communities.

Long-time Palisades resident Will Adams said he immediately went to pick his two kids up from St. Matthews Parish School when he heard the fire was nearby. Meanwhile, he said embers flew into his wife's car as she tried to evacuate.

"She vacated her car and left it running," Adams said. She and many other residents walked down toward the ocean until it was safe.

Adams said he had never witnessed anything like this in the 56 years he's lived there. He watched as the sky turned brown and then black as homes started burning. He could hear loud popping and bangs "like small explosions," which he said he believes were the transformers exploding.

"It is crazy, it's everywhere, in all the nooks and crannies of the Palisades. One home's safe, the other one's up in flames," Adams said.

Actor James Woods posted footage of flames burning through bushes and past palm trees on a hill near his home. The towering orange flames billowed among the landscaped yards between the homes.

"Standing in my driveway, getting ready to evacuate," Woods said in the short video on X.

Actor Steve Guttenberg, who lives in the Pacific Palisades, urged people who abandoned their cars to leave their keys behind so they could be moved to make way for fire trucks.

"This is not a parking lot," Guttenberg told KTLA. "I have friends up there and they can't evacuate. ... I'm walking up there as far as I can moving cars."

The erratic weather caused Biden to cancel plans to travel to inland Riverside County, where he was to announce the establishment of two new national monuments in the state. He remained in Los Angeles, where smoke was visible from his hotel, and was briefed on the wildfires. The Federal Emergency Man-

agement Agency approved a grant to help reimburse California for the firefighting cost.

Biden said in a statement that he and his team are communicating with state and local officials and he has offered "any federal assistance that is needed to help suppress the terrible Pacific Palisades fire."

Some trees and vegetation on the grounds of the Getty Villa were burned by late Tuesday, but staff and the museum collection remain safe, Getty President Katherine Fleming said in a statement. The museum located on the eastern end of the Pacific Palisades is a separate campus of the world-famous Getty Museum that focuses on the art and culture of ancient Greece and Rome.

Film studios canceled two movie premieres due to the fire and windy weather, and the Los Angeles Unified School District said it temporarily relocated students from three campuses in the Pacific Palisades area.

Recent dry winds, including the notorious Santa Anas, have contributed to warmer-than-average temperatures in Southern California, where there's been very little rain so far this season. Southern California hasn't seen more than 0.1 inches (0.25 centimeters) of rain since early May.

Jimmy Carter eulogized by Kamala Harris and others as 39th president returns to Washington

By BILL BARROW, JONATHAN J. COOPER and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nearly 44 years after Jimmy Carter left the nation's capital in humbling defeat, the 39th president returned to Washington on Tuesday for state funeral rites that featured the kind of bipartisan praise and ceremonial pomp the Georgia Democrat rarely enjoyed at his political peak.

The military honor guards, a procession down Pennsylvania Avenue and a service in the Capitol Rotunda continued public commemorations for Carter, who died Dec. 29 at age 100. Services will continue through his state funeral Thursday at the National Cathedral, before Carter returns to his hometown of Plains, Georgia, for burial beside his late wife, former first lady Rosalynn Carter, who died in 2023.

As the sun set outside the Capitol, Vice President Kamala Harris, House Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader John Thune — none of whom were old enough to vote in Carter's first national campaign — celebrated his faith, military service and devotion to service more than anything he did in politics.

"To be sure, his presidency was not without its challenges and international crises," said Harris, for whom Carter cast his final presidential ballot this fall. But she described him nonetheless as "that all-too-rare example of a gifted man who also walks with humility, modesty and grace."

As a presidential candidate in 1976, Harris noted, he slept in the homes of his supporters to "share a meal with them at their table and listen to what was on their minds."

Thune, the newly elected majority leader, ticked through Carter's legacy beyond the White House, including his hands-on contributions to rebuilding homes through Habitat For Humanity. "First and foremost a faithful servant of his creator, and his fellow man," said Thune, a South Dakota Republican.

Johnson, a Louisiana Republican who was just four years old when Carter was inaugurated, recalled his fellow Southerner as a man "willing to roll up his own sleeves to get the work done."

The former president was to lie in state Tuesday night and again Wednesday before his remains are moved to National Cathedral. There, President Joe Biden will eulogize Carter, his longtime ally.

Carter's remains, which had been lying in repose at the Carter Presidential Center since Saturday, left the Atlanta campus Tuesday morning, accompanied by his children and extended family. Special Air Mission 39 departed Dobbins Air Reserve Base north of Atlanta and arrived at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland before Carter was brought to Washington.

Carter never traveled as president on the iconic blue and white Boeing 747 variant that is known as Air Force One when the sitting president is on board. It first flew as Air Force One in 1990 with President George H.W. Bush.

Many of the rituals this week are typical of what follows a president's death — the Air Force rides to and from the Beltway, the horse-drawn caisson in the capital, the Lincoln catafalque in the rotunda.

There also is symbolism unique to Carter. As he was carried from his presidential center, a military band

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played the hymns "Amazing Grace" and "Blessed Assurance" for the outspoken Baptist evangelical, who called himself a born-again Christian.

Another hymn, "Just as I am, without one plea," played as Carter was transferred from the hearse at the U.S. Navy Memorial to the horse-drawn caisson for the rest of his trip to the Capitol. The location was a nod to Carter's place as the lone U.S. Naval Academy graduate to become commander in chief.

The path also was meant as a mirror to Carter famously getting out of his secure limousine during the 1977 inaugural parade and walking up Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House with his family.

A bipartisan delegation of members of Congress were led into the Capitol Rotunda by Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, both Democrats who represent Carter's home state. Harris, members of President Joe Biden's cabinet and U.S. Supreme Court justices John Roberts, Brett Kavanaugh and Elena Kagan were present.

The U.S. Army Band Brass Quintet played as people awaited the casket. The room fell silent as three knocks on the rotunda door marked Carter's arrival. The casket was placed in the middle of the room on the catafalque built in 1865 to hold assassinated President Abraham Lincoln's casket in the same place.

The U.S. Naval Academy Glee Club performed "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" before congressional leaders and Harris, accompanied by her husband Doug Emhoff, placed wreaths beside the casket. Members of Carter's family, including some of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, wiped tears.

The pomp carried some irony for a politician who went from his family peanut warehouse to the Governor's Mansion and eventually the White House. Carter won the presidency as the smiling Southerner and technocratic engineer who promised to change the ways of Washington — and eschewed many of its unwritten rules when he got there.

From 1977 to 1981, Carter was Washington's highest-ranking resident. But he never mastered it.

"He could be prickly and a not very appealing personality" in a town that thrives on relationships, said biographer Jonathan Alter, describing a president who struggled with schmoozing lawmakers and reporters.

Carter often flouted the kind of ceremonial trappings that have been on display following his death.

While in office he wanted to keep the Marine Band from playing "Hail to the Chief," thinking it elevated the president too much, but his advisers persuaded him to accept it as part of the job. It has played multiple times since Carter's presidential funeral ceremonies began.

He also never used his full name, James Earl Carter Jr., even when taking the oath of office. His full name was printed on memorial cards given to mourners in Atlanta and was used again in the rotunda.

Carter once addressed the nation from the White House residence wearing a cardigan, now on display at his museum and library. His remains now rest in a wooden casket that was carried and guarded by military pallbearers in impeccable dress uniforms, similar to the attire worn by the Naval Academy midshipmen who saluted him on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Still, Carter was not met entirely with adulation Tuesday. President-elect Donald Trump, who mocked Carter during the 2024 campaign, criticized him again during a news conference in Florida for ceding control of the Panama Canal.

Pressed on whether criticism of Carter was appropriate during the solemn national rites, Trump responded, "I liked him as a man. I disagreed with his policies. He thought giving away the Panama Canal was a good thing."

"I didn't want to bring up the Panama Canal because of Jimmy Carter's death," Trump added, though he had first mentioned it unprompted.

Trump plans to attend Carter's Washington funeral.

The polar vortex brings its bitter cold to the Southern US

By HANNAH FINGERHUT and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — The plunging polar vortex brought subfreezing temperatures Tuesday to some of the southernmost points of the U.S., threatening to dump snow on parts of Texas and Oklahoma in coming days and contributing to a power outage in Virginia's capital that made the water unsafe to drink.

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The arctic blast that descended on much of the U.S. east of the Rockies over the weekend has caused hundreds of car accidents, thousands of flight cancellations and delays, and led communities to set up warming shelters, including one at a roller rink and another in the Providence, Rhode Island City Council chambers.

As the cold front moved southward, it prompted a cold weather advisory for the Gulf Coast and pushed the low temperature in El Paso, along Texas' border with Mexico, to 31 degrees (minus 0.5 Celsius), with an expected wind chill factor ranging from 0 to 15 degrees (minus 18 to minus 9 Celsius) early Wednesday, according to the National Weather Service.

Road crews in the Kansas City area, which received about 11 inches (28 centimeters) of snow in recent days, have struggled to keep up with clearing streets and highways.

"I don't know what super powers some think snow removal teams have but 2 days of straight snow & ice isn't going to disappear overnight," the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, wrote Monday on Facebook.

In frigid northern Virginia, Carol Grayson said Monday that she wished she had a metal shovel — not her plastic one — while trying to carve a path for her beagle, Rudy, and sheltie, Emma.

The great-grandmother, who declined to give her age, said shoveling through nearly frozen snow up to her knees was "like climbing Mount Everest." Her neighborhood in Alexandria was once populated with teenagers who'd offer to help. But they've all grown up and moved away.

"We're not used to it here, and we're just not prepared," Grayson said.

The polar vortex of ultra-cold air usually spins around the North Pole, but it sometimes plunges south into the U.S., Europe and Asia. Some experts say such cold air outbreaks are happening more frequently, paradoxically, because of a warming world.

Southern discomfort

As points north and east dug out of snow and ice Tuesday, communities in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas were preparing for their own helping. A low-pressure system was expected to form as soon as Wednesday near South Texas, and could dump several inches of snow in the Dallas area and lower Mississippi Valley, the weather service said.

In Texas, crews treated the roads in the Dallas area amid forecasts of 1 to 3 inches (about 3 to 8 centimeters) of snow on Thursday, along with sleet and rain, said National Weather Service meteorologist Sam Shamburger. He said up to 5 inches (13 centimeters) of snow was expected farther north near the Oklahoma line.

Kevin Oden, Dallas' director of emergency management and crisis response, said Tuesday that "our city is in a preparedness phase."

The storm is expected to make for slick roads Friday as 75,000 fans head to AT&T Stadium in Arlington to see Texas play Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl. Arlington spokeswoman Susan Shrock said crews are ready Friday to address any hazardous road conditions around the stadium.

"They're going to have the salt brine, they'll have sand and they'll have equipment on standby," she said.

Parts of southeastern Georgia and northern Florida endured unusually frigid temperatures overnight into Tuesday and were under freeze warnings into Wednesday.

In northern Florida, with Valentine's Day just a month away, the main concern for growers fearful of cold weather is the fern crop used for floral arrangements.

Major damage to citrus trees, which typically occurs when temperatures drop to 28 degrees (minus 2 degrees Celsius) or below for several hours, was less likely. Florida's commercial citrus groves are primarily south of the central part of the peninsula.

Transportation has been tricky

An area stretching from the central Plains through the Ohio Valley into the mid-Atlantic region is likely to receive more snow and ice for a few days, which could cause the ground covering to melt and refreeze to form treacherous black ice on roadways, according to forecasters.

A Kentucky truck stop was jammed Monday with big rigs that had been forced off of snow-covered Interstate 75 just outside Cincinnati. Michael Taylor, a long-haul driver from Los Angeles carrying a load

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of rugs to Georgia, said he saw numerous cars and trucks in ditches and was dealing with icy windshield wipers before he pulled off the interstate.

"It was too dangerous. I didn't want to kill myself or anyone else," he said.

Hundreds of car accidents were reported in Virginia, Indiana, Kansas and Kentucky, where a state trooper was treated for non-life-threatening injuries after his patrol car was hit.

Virginia State Police responded to 650 crashes, some likely storm-related, between Sunday afternoon and Monday night, that resulted in three deaths. Police said other weather-related fatal accidents occurred Sunday near Charleston, West Virginia, and Monday in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Kansas had two deadly weekend crashes.

More than 1,000 flights into or out of the U.S. had been delayed as of Tuesday morning, according to tracking platform FlightAware. On Monday, more than 2,300 flights were canceled and at least 9,100 more were delayed.

Tens of thousands are without power

Many were in the dark as temperatures plunged. About 200,000 customers were without power Tuesday across Kentucky, Indiana, Virginia, West Virginia, Illinois and Missouri, according to the tracking website PowerOutage.us.

In Virginia's capital, Richmond, a weather-related power outage caused a temporary malfunction in the water system, officials said Monday. The city issued a boil-water advisory to its more than 200,000 residents and promised to get the system back online as quickly as possible. Mayor Danny Avula said the advisory could be lifted as soon as Wednesday.

The malfunction forced Virginia's Capitol and General Assembly buildings to close Tuesday, a day before the start of the legislative session. G. Paul Nardo, clerk for the House of Delegates, told lawmakers and staff in an email to vacate the buildings or go elsewhere if they were headed to the capital.

"The water pressure has gone kaput," he wrote.

Biden administration asks court to block plea deal for alleged mastermind of 9/11 attacks

By ERIC TUCKER and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration asked a federal appeals court on Tuesday to block a plea agreement for accused 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed that would spare him the risk of the death penalty in one of the deadliest attacks ever on the United States.

The Justice Department argued in a brief filed with a federal appeals court in the District of Columbia that the government would be irreparably harmed if the guilty pleas were accepted for Mohammed and two co-defendants in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

It said the government would be denied a chance for a public trial and the opportunity to "seek capital punishment against three men charged with a heinous act of mass murder that caused the death of thousands of people and shocked the nation and the world."

The Defense Department negotiated and approved the plea deal but later repudiated it. Attorneys for the defendants argue the deal is already legally in effect and that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who began the administration's efforts to throw it out, acted too late.

When the appeal was filed Tuesday, family members of some the nearly 3,000 people killed in the al-Qaida attacks already were gathered at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to hear Mohammed's scheduled guilty plea Friday. The other two men, accused of lesser roles in 9/11, were due to enter them next week.

Family members have been split on the deal, with some calling it the best resolution possible for a prosecution mired for more than a decade in pretrial hearings and legal and logistical difficulties. Others demanded a trial and — they hoped — execution.

Some legal experts have warned that the legal challenges posed by the case, including the men's torture under CIA custody after their capture, could keep the aging detainees from ever facing verdicts and any

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possible sentences.

Military prosecutors this summer notified families of the victims that the senior Pentagon official overseeing Guantanamo had approved a plea deal after more than two years of negotiations. The deal was "the best path to finality and justice," military prosecutors said.

But some family members and Republican lawmakers condemned the deal and the Biden administration for reaching it.

Austin has fought unsuccessfully since August to throw out the agreement, saying that a decision on death penalties in an attack as grave as the Sept. 11 plot should only be made by the defense secretary.

A military judge at Guantanamo and a military appeals panel rejected those efforts, saying he had no power to throw out the agreement after it had been approved by the senior Pentagon official for Guantanamo.

Defense attorneys say the plea agreement was approved by Austin's own officials and military prosecutors and that his intervention was unlawful political interference in the justice system.

The Justice Department brief Tuesday said the defendants would not be harmed by a short delay, given that the prosecution has been ongoing since 2012 and the plea agreements would likely result in them serving long prison sentences, potentially for the rest of their lives.

"A short delay to allow this Court to weigh the merits of the government's request in this momentous case will not materially harm the respondents," the government argued.

The Justice Department criticized the military commission judge for a ruling that it said "improperly curtailed" the defense secretary's authority in a "case of unique national importance." Preserving that authority "is a matter of critical importance warranting the issuance of extraordinary relief," the government's filing said.

Trump refuses to rule out use of military force to take control of Greenland and the Panama Canal

By WILL WEISSERT and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump on Tuesday said he would not rule out the use of military force to seize control of the Panama Canal and Greenland, as he declared U.S. control of both to be vital to American national security.

Speaking to reporters less than two weeks before he takes office on Jan. 20 and as a delegation of aides and advisers that includes Donald Trump Jr. is in Greenland, Trump left open the use of the American military to secure both territories. Trump's intention marks a rejection of decades of U.S. policy that has prioritized self-determination over territorial expansion.

"I'm not going to commit to that," Trump said, when asked if he would rule out the use of the military. "It might be that you'll have to do something. The Panama Canal is vital to our country." He added, "We need Greenland for national security purposes."

Greenland, home to a large U.S. military base, is an autonomous territory of Denmark, a longtime U.S. ally and a founding member of NATO. Trump cast doubts on the legitimacy of Denmark's claim to Greenland.

The Panama Canal has been solely controlled by the eponymous country for more than 25 years. The U.S. returned the Panama Canal Zone to the country in 1979 and ended its joint partnership in controlling the strategic waterway in 1999.

Addressing Trump's comments in an interview with Danish broadcaster TV2, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen called the United States Denmark's "most important and closest ally," and that she did not believe that the United States will use military or economic power to secure control over Greenland.

Frederiksen repeated that she welcomed the United States taking a greater interest in the Arctic region, but that it would "have to be done in a way that is respectful of the Greenlandic people," she said.

"At the same time, it must be done in a way that allows Denmark and the United States to still cooperate in, among other things, NATO," Frederiksen said.

Earlier, Trump posted a video of his private plane landing in Nuuk, the Arctic territory's capital, in a land-

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scape of snow-capped peaks and fjords.

"Don Jr. and my Reps landing in Greenland," Trump wrote. "The reception has been great. They, and the Free World, need safety, security, strength, and PEACE! This is a deal that must happen. MAGA. MAKE GREENLAND GREAT AGAIN!"

In a statement, Greenland's government said Donald Trump Jr.'s visit was taking place "as a private individual" and not as an official visit, and Greenlandic representatives would not meet with him.

Panamanian Foreign Minister Javier Martínez-Acha said his government hasn't had formal contact with Trump or representatives of the incoming administration but reiterated previous comments from the country's president, José Raúl Mulino, who said last month that the canal will remain in Panamanian hands.

"The sovereignty of our canal is not negotiable and is part of our history of struggle and an irreversible conquest," Martínez-Acha said.

Trump, a Republican, has also floated having Canada join the United States as the 51st state. He said Tuesday that he would not use military force to invade the country, which is home to more than 40 million people and is a founding NATO partner.

Instead, he said, he would rely on "economic force" as he cast the U.S. trade deficit with Canada — a natural resource-rich nation that provides the U.S. with commodities like crude oil and petroleum — as a subsidy that would be coming to an end.

Canadian leaders fired back after earlier dismissing Trump's rhetoric as a joke.

"President-elect Trump's comments show a complete lack of understanding of what makes Canada a strong country. Our economy is strong. Our people are strong. We will never back down in the face of threats," Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly said in a post on X.

Justin Trudeau, the country's outgoing prime minister, was even more blunt.

"There isn't a snowball's chance in hell that Canada would become part of the United States," he wrote.

Promising a "Golden age of America," Trump also said he would move to try to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America," saying that has a "beautiful ring to it."

He also said he believes that NATO should dramatically increase its spending targets, with members of the trans-Atlantic alliance committing to spend at least 5% of their GDPs on defense spending, up from the current 2%.

In June, NATO announced a record 23 of its 32 member nations were on track to hit that target as Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has raised the threat of expanding conflict in Europe.

Trump also used his press conference to complain that President Joe Biden was undermining his transition to power a day after the incumbent moved to ban offshore energy drilling in most federal waters.

Biden, whose term expires in two weeks, used his authority under the federal Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act to protect offshore areas along the East and West coasts, the eastern Gulf of Mexico and portions of Alaska's Northern Bering Sea from future oil and natural gas leasing. All told, about 625 million acres of federal waters were withdrawn from energy exploration by Biden in a move that may require an act of Congress to undo.

"I'm going to put it back on day one," Trump told reporters. He pledged to take it to the courts "if we need to."

Trump said Biden's effort — part of a series of final actions in office by the Democrat's administration — was undermining his plans for once he's in office.

"You know, they told me that, we're going to do everything possible to make this transition to the new administration very smooth," Trump said. "It's not smooth."

But Biden's team has extended access and courtesies to the Trump team that the Republican former president initially denied Biden after his 2020 election victory. Trump incoming chief of staff Susie Wiles told Axios in an interview published Monday that Biden chief of staff Jeff Zients "has been very helpful."

In extended remarks, Trump also railed against the work of special counsel Jack Smith, who oversaw now-dropped prosecutions over his role in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol and possession of classified documents after he left office in 2021. The Justice Department is expected to soon release a report from Smith summarizing his investigation after the criminal cases were forced to an end by Trump's vic-

tory in November.

US Justice Department accuses six major landlords of scheming to keep rents high

By JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press/Report for America

DENVER (AP) — The U.S. Justice Department is suing several large landlords for allegedly coordinating to keep Americans' rents high by using both an algorithm to help set rents and privately sharing sensitive information with their competitors to boost profits.

The lawsuit arrives as U.S. renters continue to struggle under a merciless housing market, with incomes failing to keep up with rent increases. The latest figures show that half of American renters spent more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities in 2022, an all-time high.

That means exhausting, day-to-day decisions between medications, groceries, school supplies and rent. It means eviction notices and protracted court cases in which children face the highest eviction rates, with 1.5 million evicted each year, according to Princeton University's Eviction Lab.

While the housing crisis has been assigned several causes, including a slump in homes built over the last decade, the Justice Department's lawsuit claims major landlords are playing a part.

The department, along with 10 states including North Carolina, Tennessee, Colorado and California, is accusing six landlords that collectively operate more than 1.3 million units in 43 states and the District of Columbia of scheming to avoid lowering rents.

The landlord Greystar Real Estate Partners LLC, a defendant in the case, declined a request for comment from The Associated Press, but published an unsigned statement on its website.

"Greystar has and will conduct its business with the utmost integrity. At no time did Greystar engage in any anti-competitive practices," the statement read. "We will vigorously defend ourselves in this lawsuit."

The lawsuit accuses the landlords of sharing sensitive data on rents and occupancy with competing firms via email, phone calls or in groups. The information shared allegedly included renewal rates, how often they accept an algorithm's price recommendation, the use of concessions such as offering one month free, and even their approach to pricing for the next quarter.

The Justice Department said one of the six landlords agreed to cooperate with prosecutors. The proposed settlement would restrict how the company can use their competitors' data and algorithms to set rents.

"Today's action against RealPage and six major landlords seeks to end their practice of putting profits over people and make housing more affordable for millions of people across the country," said Doha Mekki, the acting assistant attorney general for the department's antitrust division in Tuesday's press release.

Those landlords were added to an existing lawsuit against RealPage, which runs an algorithm that recommends rental prices to landlords. Prosecutors say the algorithm uses sensitive competitive information, allowing landlords to align their prices and avoid competition that would otherwise push down rents.

Jennifer Bowcock, RealPage's senior vice president for communications, said in a statement to the AP that their software is used on fewer than 10% of rental units in the U.S., and that their price recommendations are used less than half the time.

"It's past time to stop scapegoating RealPage — and now our customers -- for housing affordability problems when the root cause of high housing costs is the under-supply of housing," Bowcock said.

Elon Musk helped Trump win. Now he's looking at Europe, and many politicians are alarmed

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Fresh from pouring his money and energies into helping Donald Trump win reelection, Elon Musk has trained his sights on Europe, setting off alarm bells among politicians across the continent.

The Tesla and SpaceX chief executive has endorsed the far-right Alternative for Germany, demanded the

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release of jailed U.K. anti-Islam extremist Tommy Robinson and called British Prime Minister Keir Starmer an evil tyrant who should be in prison.

Many European politicians have been left concerned by the attention. Musk's feed on his social network X is dotted with abusive language — labeling politicians "stupid cretin" and "sniveling cowards" — as well as retweets of far-right and anti-immigrant accounts.

Andrew Chadwick, professor of political communication at Loughborough University, said Musk is using X "a bit like an old-style newspaper mogul," to promulgate his political views.

"We've seen Musk start to align himself much more obviously with an international movement of the far right," Chadwick said. "If you look at the kinds of people who Musk himself is boosting on his platform ... he's increasingly started to assemble a group of different right-wing influencers, many of them with large followings, and presenting their evidence as a basis for his interventions into European politics."

Musk has inserted himself into politics in Germany, which is headed for a Feb. 23 election after center-left Chancellor Olaf Scholz's fractious three-party coalition government collapsed.

On Dec. 20, Musk wrote on X: "Only the AfD can save Germany," a reference to the Alternative for Germany party, which is under observation by the domestic intelligence agency for suspected extremism.

He doubled down on support for the AfD in an article for the Welt am Sonntag newspaper, claiming Germany is "teetering on the edge of economic and cultural collapse." Later this week Musk is due to hold a live chat on X with AfD co-leader Alice Weidel.

Scholz's response embodies the dilemma faced by European politicians — should they ignore and let Musk's comments go unchallenged, or engage and risk amplifying them?

Scholz has said it's important to "stay cool" over personal attacks, but called Musk's involvement in German politics worrying. In a new year message, Scholz pointedly noted that Germany's way forward "will not be decided by the owners of social media channels" but by German voters.

French President Emmanuel Macron warned Monday about the risks posed by unchecked power in the hands of tech billionaires and the destabilizing impact they could have on democratic institutions.

"Who could have imagined, 10 years ago, that the owner of one of the world's largest social networks would intervene directly in elections, including in Germany?" Macron said.

Greek Health Minister Adonis Georgiadis said Musk's behavior was "troubling and far from amusing."

"Someone cannot simply use their platform, wealth and connections to try to dictate how governments are formed in each nation," he told Parapolitika Radio. "This is becoming increasingly dangerous."

Musk has increasingly focused on British politics since the center-left Labour Party was elected in July, calling Starmer an "evil" leader presiding over a "tyrannical police state."

Musk's recent focus is on child sexual abuse, particularly a series of cases that rocked northern England towns several years ago, in which groups of men, largely from Pakistani backgrounds, were tried for grooming and abusing dozens of mostly white girls. The cases have been used by far-right activists to link child abuse to immigration and Islam.

Musk has accused Starmer of failing to bring perpetrators to justice when he was England's director of public prosecutions between 2008 and 2013 — a charge Starmer strongly denies.

"Starmer must go and he must face charges for his complicity in the worst mass crime in the history of Britain," Musk tweeted.

Chadwick said "there's been a hesitancy on the part of the political elite in the U.K. to engage" with Musk's "incredibly inflammatory remarks." But Starmer changed tack Monday, condemning "lies and misinformation" and accusing U.K. Conservative politicians who have echoed some of Musk's points of "amplifying what the far right are saying."

"I enjoy the cut and thrust of politics, the robust debate that we must have, but that's got to be based on facts and truth, not on lies," the prime minister said.

Starmer is facing calls to tighten Britain's laws on foreign interference, and governments around the world are under pressure to leave X. Both the U.K. and German governments say they have no plans to quit the platform.

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Musk's X is under investigation by European authorities attempting to curb hatred, disinformation and other toxic content on social media. The European Union has launched infringement proceedings against X under the bloc's Digital Services Act, and EU spokesman Thomas Regnier said it will look at whether Musk's livestream interview Thursday with the AfD's Weidel gives inappropriate "preferential treatment" to the party during a preelection period.

Musk, a self-styled free-speech advocate, is critical of efforts to regulate social media. He has compared British attempts to weed out online misinformation through the Online Safety Act to censorship in the Soviet Union.

Musk clearly enjoys baiting mainstream politicians on social media, but Chadwick said it "remains to be seen" whether his posting changes public attitudes or helps the causes he champions.

And the political interventions carry risk for him. His comments are being watched closely by Tesla investors for signs he could be turning off car buyers who don't agree with his politics.

Tesla is already struggling in Europe, where new registrations for Musk's electronic vehicles fell 13% in the first nine months of 2023, according to auto researcher Jato Dynamics. In Germany, Tesla registrations dropped 44%.

Jato senior analyst Felipe Munoz said that Musk's outspokenness is rare and risky for the owner of a publicly traded company — though it may pay off in the end.

"Europe is going to (the) right," he said, pointing to politicians including France's Marine Le Pen and Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni.

"Look at what happened in the U.S. His bet on Trump worked. He is playing the same game in Europe."

Meta eliminates fact-checking in latest bow to Trump

By KELVIN CHAN, BARBARA ORTUTAY and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

Meta chief executive officer Mark Zuckerberg on Tuesday announced changes to content moderation on Facebook and Instagram long sought by conservatives. Incoming President Donald Trump said the new approach was "probably" due to threats he made against the technology mogul.

The move to replace third-party fact-checking with user-written "community notes" similar to those on Trump backer Elon Musk's social platform X is the latest example of a media company moving to accommodate the incoming administration. It comes on the four-year anniversary of Zuckerberg banning Trump from his platforms after the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Zuckerberg has been a target of Trump and his allies since he donated \$400 million to help local officials run the 2020 election during the coronavirus pandemic. Those donations became part of a false narrative that the 2020 election was rigged against Trump, although there has never been any evidence of widespread fraud or problems that would have changed that result. Nonetheless, Republican-controlled states have banned future donations to local elections offices and Trump himself threatened to imprison Zuckerberg in a book published in September, during the peak of the presidential campaign.

Zuckerberg released a video Tuesday using some of the language that conservatives have long used to criticize his platforms, saying it was time to prioritize "free expression" and that fact-checkers had become "politically biased." Zuckerberg said he is moving Meta's content moderation team from California, a blue state, to red state Texas, and lifting restrictions on some immigration and gender discussions. Meta had no immediate comment on how many people might be relocated.

At a press conference hours later, Trump praised the changes.

"I think they've come a long way, Meta," Trump said. When asked if he believed Zuckerberg made the changes in response to threats the incoming president has made, Trump responded: "Probably."

Meta is among several tech companies apparently working to get in Trump's good graces before he takes office later this month. Meta and Amazon each donated \$1 million to Trump's inauguration fund in December, and Zuckerberg had dinner with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida.

Zuckerberg this week also appointed a key Trump ally, Ultimate Fighting Championship chief executive Dana White, to Meta's board. Amazon announced a documentary on incoming first lady Melania Trump.

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ABC News, which is owned by Disney, last month settled a libel suit filed by Trump with a \$15 million payment to Trump's presidential library foundation.

Brendan Nyhan, a political scientist at Dartmouth College, called the Meta changes part of "a pattern of powerful people and institutions kowtowing to the president in a way that suggests they're fearful of being targeted."

Nyhan said that's a grave risk to the country.

"We have in many ways an economy that's the envy of the world and people come here to start businesses because they don't have to be aligned with the governing regime like they do in the rest of the world," Nyhan said. "That's being called into question."

Except for YouTube, Meta's Facebook is by far the most used social media platform in the U.S. According to the Pew Research Center, about 68% of American adults use Facebook, a number that has largely held steady since 2016. Teenagers, however, have fled Facebook over the past decade, with just 32% reporting they used it in a 2024 survey.

Meta began fact checks in December 2016, after Trump was elected to his first term, in response to criticism that "fake news" was spreading on its platforms. For years, the tech giant boasted it was working with more than 100 organizations in over 60 languages to combat misinformation.

The Associated Press ended its participation in Meta's fact-checking program a year ago.

Media experts and those who study social media were aghast at Meta's policy shift.

"Mark Zuckerberg's decision to end Meta's fact-checking program not only removes a valuable resource for users, but it also provides an air of legitimacy to a popular disinformation narrative: That fact-checking is politically biased. Fact-checkers provide a valuable service by adding important context to the viral claims that mislead and misinform millions of users on Meta," said Dan Evon, lead writer for RumorGuard, the News Literacy Project's digital tool that curates fact checks and teaches people to spot viral misinformation.

Business analysts saw it as an openly political gambit.

"Meta is repositioning the company for the incoming Trump administration," said Emarketer analyst Jasmine Enberg. "The move will elate conservatives, who've often criticized Meta for censoring speech, but it will spook many liberals and advertisers, showing just how far Zuckerberg is willing to go to win Trump's approval."

X's approach to content moderation has led to the loss of some advertisers, but Enberg said Meta's "massive size and powerhouse ad platform insulate it somewhat from an X-like user and advertiser exodus." Even so, she said, any major drop in user engagement could hurt Meta's ad business.

Meta's quasi-independent Oversight Board, which acts as a referee of controversial content decisions, said it welcomes the changes and looks forward to working with the company "to understand the changes in greater detail, ensuring its new approach can be as effective and speech-friendly as possible."

On X, Rep. Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican, called Meta's move a "huge step in the right direction."

Others in the GOP were skeptical.

"Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me," Rep. Mike Lee, a Utah Republican, wrote on X. "Can any of us assume Zuckerberg won't return to his old tricks?"

Zuckerberg is not registered with any political party but was once seen as a champion of liberal causes. He invested heavily in supporting an immigration overhaul and defending the rights of those brought to the U.S. illegally as children to remain in the country. His efforts to fact-check content on Facebook made him a longtime target of conservative suspicions. When he made his election donation in 2020 he framed it as a nonpartisan, civic act, but quickly ran afoul of widespread distrust on the right.

Alexios Mantzarlis, director of the Security, Trust, and Safety Initiative at Cornell Tech and a former director of the International Fact-Checking Network, said the change is "a choice of politics, not policy," and warned: "Depending on how this is applied, the consequences of this decision will be an increase in harassment, hate speech and other harmful behavior across billion-user platforms."

Man who exploded Tesla Cybertruck outside Trump hotel in Las

Vegas used generative AI, police say

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

The highly decorated soldier who exploded a Tesla Cybertruck outside the Trump hotel in Las Vegas used generative AI including ChatGPT to help plan the attack, Las Vegas police said Tuesday.

Nearly a week after 37-year-old Matthew Livelsberger fatally shot himself, officials said according to writings, he didn't intend to kill anyone else.

An investigation of Livelsberger's searches through ChatGPT indicate he was looking for information on explosive targets, the speed at which certain rounds of ammunition would travel and whether fireworks were legal in Arizona.

Kevin McMahill, sheriff of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, called the use of generative AI a "game-changer" and said the department was sharing information with other law enforcement agencies.

"This is the first incident that I'm aware of on U.S. soil where ChatGPT is utilized to help an individual build a particular device," he said. "It's a concerning moment."

In an emailed statement, OpenAI said it was committed to seeing its tools used "responsibly" and that they're designed to refuse harmful instructions.

"In this case, ChatGPT responded with information already publicly available on the internet and provided warnings against harmful or illegal activities. We're working with law enforcement to support their investigation," the emailed statement said.

Launched in 2022, ChatGPT is part of a broader set of technologies developed by the San Francisco-based startup OpenAI. Unlike previous iterations of so-called "large language models," the ChatGPT tool is available for free to anyone with an internet connection and designed to be more user-friendly.

During a roughly half-hour-long news conference, Las Vegas police and federal law enforcement officials unveiled new details about the New Year's Day explosion.

Among the specifics law enforcement disclosed: Livelsberger stopped during the drive to Las Vegas to pour racing-grade fuel into the Cybertruck, which then dripped the substance. The vehicle was loaded with 60 pounds (27 kilograms) of pyrotechnic material as well as 70 pounds (32 kilograms) of birdshot but officials are still uncertain exactly what detonated the explosion. They said Tuesday it could have been the flash from the firearm that Livelsberger used to fatally shoot himself.

Authorities also said they uncovered a six-page document that they have not yet released because they're working with Defense Department officials since some of the material could be classified. They added that they still have to review contents on a laptop, mobile phone and smartwatch.

Among the items released was a journal Livelsberger kept titled "surveillance" or "surveil" log. It showed that he believed he was being tracked by law enforcement, but he had no criminal record and was not on the police department's or FBI's "radar," the sheriff said Tuesday.

The log showed that he considered carrying out his plans in Arizona at the Grand Canyon's glass skywalk, a tourist attraction on tribal land that towers high above the canyon floor. Assistant Sheriff Dori Koren said police don't know why he changed his plans. The writings also showed he worried he would be labeled a terrorist and that people would think he intended to kill others besides himself, officials said.

Once stopped outside the hotel, video showed a flash in the vehicle that they said they believed was from the muzzle of the firearm Livelsberger used to shoot himself. Soon after that flash, video showed fire engulfing the truck's cabin and even escaping the seam of the door, the result of considerable fuel vapor, officials said. An explosion followed.

Livelsberger, an Army Green Beret who deployed twice to Afghanistan and lived in Colorado Springs, Colorado, left notes saying the explosion was a stunt meant to be a "wake up call" for the nation's troubles, officials said last week.

He left cellphone notes saying he needed to "cleanse" his mind "of the brothers I've lost and relieve myself of the burden of the lives I took."

The explosion caused minor injuries to seven people but virtually no damage to the Trump International Hotel. Authorities said that Livelsberger acted alone.

Livelsberger's letters touched on political grievances, societal problems and domestic and international issues, including the war in Ukraine. He wrote that the U.S. was "terminally ill and headed toward collapse."

Investigators had been trying to determine if Livelsberger wanted to make a political point, given the Tesla and the hotel bearing the president-elect's name.

Livelsberger harbored no ill will toward President-elect Donald Trump, law enforcement officials said. In one of the notes he left, he said the country needed to "rally around" him and Tesla CEO Elon Musk.

Judge temporarily blocks release of special counsel report on Trump cases as court fight simmers

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Tuesday temporarily blocked the public release of special counsel Jack Smith's report on investigations into Donald Trump as an appeals court weighs a challenge to the disclosure of a much-anticipated document just days before the president-elect reclaims office.

The ruling from U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon may represent a short-lived victory for Trump, but it's nonetheless the latest instance of the Trump-appointed jurist taking action in the Republican's favor. The halt followed an emergency request Monday by defense lawyers to block the release of a report that they said would be one-sided and prejudicial.

Trump responded to Cannon's order by complaining anew at a news conference about Smith's investigation and saying, "It'll be a fake report just like it was a fake investigation."

It was unclear what the Justice Department, which has its own regulations governing special counsels and the reports they are expected to produce when they conclude their own, intended to do following Cannon's order.

The two-volume report is expected to describe charging decisions made in separate investigations by Smith into Trump's hoarding of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, and his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election in the run-up to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Cannon's order did not make a distinction between the two volumes, instead barring the release of any information from any report for three days after the dispute is resolved by the Atlanta-based 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, unless the court orders otherwise. Smith's team said it would file a response to the appeals court.

Trump was charged alongside two co-defendants in the classified documents case, which was dismissed in July by Cannon, who concluded that Smith's appointment was illegal. Trump was also charged in an election interference case that was significantly narrowed by a Supreme Court ruling on presidential immunity. Smith's team abandoned both cases in November after Trump's presidential victory, citing Justice Department policy that prohibits the federal prosecutions of sitting presidents.

Lawyers for Trump, including Todd Blanche, who was picked by Trump to serve as his deputy attorney general, urged Attorney General Merrick Garland a letter that was made public late Monday to block the release of the report and to remove Smith from his position "promptly" — or defer the release of the report to the incoming attorney general.

Using language mimicking Trump's own attacks on Smith and his work, Blanche told Garland that the "release of any confidential report prepared by this out-of-control private citizen unconstitutionally posing as a prosecutor would be nothing more than a lawless political stunt, designed to politically harm President Trump and justify the huge sums of taxpayer money Smith unconstitutionally spent on his failed and dismissed cases."

The letter was included as part of an emergency request filed late Monday with Cannon by lawyers for Trump's codefendants in the documents case, Trump valet Walt Nauta and Mar-a-Lago property manager Carlos De Oliveira.

They asked Cannon to block the report's release, noting that Smith's appeal of her dismissal of charges against the men is pending and that the disclosure of pejorative information about them would be prejudicial.

In response to that request, Smith's team said in a two-page filing earlier Tuesday that it intended to submit its report to Garland by that afternoon and that the volume pertaining to the classified documents investigation would not be made public before 10 a.m. Friday.

Justice Department regulations call for special counsels appointed by the attorney general to submit a confidential report at the conclusion of their investigations. It's then up to the attorney general to decide what to make public.

Garland has made public in their entirety the reports produced by special counsels who operated under his watch, including Robert Hur's report on President Joe Biden's handling of classified information and John Durham's report on the FBI's Russian election interference investigation.

Middle East latest: Israeli strikes kill 17 people in Gaza, nearly all of them women or kids

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli airstrikes in southern Gaza killed at least 17 people late Tuesday, nearly all of them women or children, the territory's Health Ministry and hospital officials said.

Five kids were killed as they sheltered together in the same tent, said Ahmed al-Farra, director of the children's ward at nearby Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis. Their bodies were among the eight children and five women brought to the hospital after strikes on tents, homes and a vehicle. Two bodies were unidentifiable.

The Israeli military said it targeted militants who had taken part in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that sparked the war, without providing evidence. Israel said it took steps to lessen the risk of hurting civilians and blamed Hamas for the civilian casualties.

The Israel-Hamas war in Gaza is raging with no end in sight, although there has reportedly been recent progress in long-running talks aimed at a ceasefire and the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

Some Palestinians in the Gaza Strip still have hope the war will end soon. Issam Saqr, a displaced man from Khan Younis, told The Associated Press he hopes the ceasefire "will happen today — before tomorrow!"

Here's the latest:

Israel says only a 'limited' number of its soldiers faced possible arrest overseas

JERUSALEM — The Israeli Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday that the number of Israeli soldiers subjected to possible arrest overseas for accusations of war crimes in Gaza is "very limited," despite intense media coverage of a case of a soldier forced to leave Brazil this week due to possible legal action.

On Sunday, Israel said it had helped the former soldier leave Brazil on a commercial flight, after Brazilian authorities launched an investigation into the soldier based on his social media posts showing him taking part in the demolition of civilian homes in Gaza. The investigation was based on a complaint filed by a pro-Palestinian activist group.

The Foreign Ministry said it is aware of fewer than a dozen similar complaints around the world. Eden Bar-Tal, the ministry's director general, accused "terrorist organizations" of spearheading the efforts to investigate Israeli soldiers. He dismissed the complaints as a public relations stunt with little chance of succeeding.

Palestinians in Gaza hope for a ceasefire as they endure war's harsh conditions

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip still have hope that Israel's 15-month war with Hamas will end soon, as both sides appear to be inching toward a ceasefire deal.

"What we are living is not a life. Nobody could bear the situation we're experiencing for a single day," said Munawar al-Bik, a displaced woman from Gaza City.

"We wake up at night to the sounds of men crying, because of the bad situation," al-Bik said. "The situation is unbearable, we have no energy left, we want it to end today."

She spoke to The Associated Press on a dusty road in the southern city of Khan Younis beside the rubble of a destroyed building. Behind her, a sea of makeshift tents filled with displaced families stretched into the distance.

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Muhammad Zaqout, a displaced man from Gaza City, said he's sick of children being killed daily, of the destruction and displacement.

In recent months, families who fled their homes in Gaza have had little access to clean water or enough food to eat, and they struggle to cope with harsh winter conditions that have killed several babies from hypothermia in recent weeks.

Issam Saqr, displaced from Khan Younis, said he hopes the ceasefire "will happen today — before tomorrow!"

Israeli strike kills at least 17 people in southern Gaza, nearly all of them women or children

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Israeli airstrikes in southern Gaza killed at least 17 people late Tuesday, nearly all of them women or children, the territory's Health Ministry said.

Five kids were killed in the same tent as they sheltered together in a camp for displaced Palestinians in Muwasi, said Ahmed al-Farra, director of the child ward at Nasser Hospital in nearby Khan Younis. Their bodies were among the eight children and five women brought to the hospital.

The strikes tore into tents for displaced Palestinians, a car and two houses in the the Khan Younis area, the hospital said. Two of the dead were men, and the two in the vehicle were unidentifiable.

In the morgue, bodies lay on stretchers or stacked on metal shelves. A young girl in a fuzzy pink sweat-shirt rested with her head in the lap of another girl. Other corpses, some disfigured by the explosions, were covered in blankets.

The Israeli military said it targeted militants who had taken part in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel that sparked the war, without providing evidence. Israel said it took steps to lessen the risk of harming civilians and blamed Hamas for the civilian casualties.

It was not immediately clear if that strike that killed the five children was inside the area in Muwasi Israel's military designated a humanitarian safe zone but has repeatedly targeted. Israel blames Hamas for civilian casualties.

Muwasi is a desolate coastal area where hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians are sheltering in makeshift tents during the cold and rainy winter.

This post has been updated to reflect that hospital officials lowered the death toll to 17, not 18 as initially reported.

Turkey says it is ready to launch a new cross-border operation against Syrian Kurdish militias

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's foreign minister says Turkey is ready to launch a new cross-border operation against Syrian Kurdish militias if they do not comply with a Turkish "ultimatum" demanding that their leaders leave Syria and that other fighters disarm.

In an interview with CNN-Turk television on Tuesday, Hakan Fidan said his country was prepared to intervene even if the United States opposes the offensive, saying Turkey had conducted past incursions "despite" objections from Washington.

Fidan also said Syria's new administration has the strength to battle the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led fighters.

Turkey considers the Syrian Kurdish force an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party and a threat to its security. For the U.S., the militia group has been a key ally in the fight against the Islamic State group.

Turkey has conducted several cross-border operations against the group since 2016.

Israeli foreign minister travels to UAE for talks with his Emirati counterpart

JERUSALEM — Israel's foreign minister was in the United Arab Emirates for talks with his Emirati counterpart.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry said that Gideon Saar discussed "regional developments and the bilateral relations between the two countries" in his talks with Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

The statement did not elaborate, but Israeli officials have expressed hope that the United Arab Emirates and other Arab countries could play a role in rebuilding and helping run postwar Gaza.

Israel and the UAE established diplomatic relations as part of the 2020 Abraham Accords.

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Trump says he will send his Middle East envoy to Qatar

PALM BEACH, Fla. — President-elect Donald Trump is dispatching his incoming special envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, to Qatar this week for talks aimed at a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of some 100 Israeli hostages.

Trump speaking at a news conference at his Mar-a-Lago resort on Tuesday reiterated his threat that there will be “hell to pay” in the Middle East if the hostages are not released prior to his Jan. 20 inauguration.

Witkoff, who also spoke briefly at the press conference, said he expected to depart for Qatar later Tuesday or Wednesday but did not detail who he’d be meeting with during his latest visit to the region.

Witkoff added that progress is being made on landing a deal, something he said is happening because of the pressure Trump is creating.

“The red lines he’s put out there — that’s driving this negotiation,” Witkoff said.

Ireland formally intervenes in ICJ genocide case against Israel

LONDON — Ireland has formally asked to intervene in South Africa’s case accusing Israel of committing genocide in Gaza, the International Court of Justice said Tuesday.

The request submitted in the Hague on Monday has roiled Irish relations with Israel.

Israel, which denies the allegations, announced last month that it would close its embassy in Ireland after the Irish government decided to intervene in South Africa’s case.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said the “antisemitic rhetoric of the Irish government against Israel are rooted in efforts to delegitimize and demonize the Jewish state.”

In May, Israel recalled its ambassador to Dublin after Ireland announced along with Norway, Spain and Slovenia it would recognize a Palestinian state.

Several other countries have also intervened in the case: Nicaragua, Colombia, Libya, Mexico, Palestine, Spain, Chile, Bolivia, the Maldives and Turkey.

A French diplomat is in Lebanon to help unlock a yearslong political stalemate

BEIRUT — France’s special envoy to Lebanon, Jean-Yves Le Drian, arrived in Beirut on Tuesday to help mediate the parliament’s latest attempt to elect the country’s president — a position that has been empty for more than two years amid sharp political and sectarian divides.

Lebanon’s parliament is scheduled to meet on Thursday to elect a president. Le Drian will attend the session at the invitation of Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri.

His visit comes as part of ongoing efforts to “enable the Lebanese to elect a president, in accordance with the principles agreed upon in Doha in July 2023,” according to a statement from his office. He is working alongside members of the Quintet — France, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt — to push for a resolution to the prolonged stalemate.

Le Drian urged lawmakers to reach a consensus, emphasizing that electing a president is “the first step toward the urgent reactivation of Lebanon’s institutions and the restoration of the country’s sovereignty,” according to the statement.

It remains to be seen how much Lebanon’s political landscape has shifted in recent months after Hezbollah, a powerful political actor in the country, was severely hobbled after the war with Israel, which killed top officials including longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah, as well as the overthrow of President Bashar Assad in neighboring Syria.

Former President Michel Aoun, an ally of Iran-backed Hezbollah, finished his term in October 2022.

First international commercial flight since Assad’s ouster lands in Damascus

DAMASCUS, Syria — The first international commercial flight since the fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad last month landed Tuesday at the Damascus airport from Qatar.

Jordanian state-run Petra news agency also reported that a Royal Jordanian Airlines plane was heading to Damascus on a test flight.

The head of Syria’s Civil Aviation Regulatory Commission, Capt. Haitham Misto, who was on board the flight with a team of specialists, said the aim was to evaluate the condition of the Damascus airport before resuming regular flights.

Israel launches raids in West Bank after attack kills 3 Israelis

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JERUSALEM — The Israeli military launched a wave of raids across the occupied West Bank overnight and into Tuesday, killing at least three Palestinians it said were militants a day after a deadly shooting attack.

The army said it killed two militants in an airstrike after they fired at troops in the area of Tamun in the northern West Bank. It said another militant was killed in "close-quarters combat" in the nearby village of Taluza and an Israeli soldier was severely wounded. The military said it arrested more than 20 suspected militants.

Hamas said in a statement that one of its veteran commanders, Jaafar Dababsah, was killed by Israeli forces in the area of the two deadly raids.

The Israeli army said the overnight operations were not related to Monday's shooting in which gunmen opened fire on a bus carrying Israelis in the West Bank, killing two women in their 70s and a 35-year-old policeman before fleeing.

The Palestinian Health Ministry says at least 840 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in the West Bank since the start of the war in Gaza. At least 46 Israelis, including 19 soldiers, have been killed in violent attacks by Palestinian militants, according to the U.N.

The war in Gaza began when Hamas-led militants stormed across the border in a massive surprise attack nearly 15 months ago, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Some 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel's air and ground offensive has killed over 45,800 Palestinians in Gaza, according to local health authorities, who say women and children make up more than half of those killed. They do not say how many of the dead were militants. The Israeli military says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

Flying taxis are on the horizon as aviation soars into a new frontier

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — When he was still a boy making long, tedious trips between his school and his woodsy home in the mountains during the 1980s, JoeBen Bevirt began fantasizing about flying cars that could whisk him to his destination in a matter of minutes.

As CEO of Joby Aviation, Bevirt is getting closer to turning his boyhood flights of fancy into a dream come true as he and latter-day versions of the Wright Brothers launch a new class of electric-powered aircraft vying to become taxis in the sky.

The aircraft — known as "electric vertical take-off and landing vehicle, or eVTOL — lift off the ground like a helicopter before flying at speeds up to 200 miles per hour (322 kilometers per hour) with a range of about 100 miles (161 kilometers). And these craft do it without filling the air with excessive noise caused by fuel-powered helicopters and small airplanes.

"We are just a few steps from the finish line. We want to turn what are now one- and two-hour trips into five-minute trips," Bevirt, 51, told The Associated Press before a Joby air taxi took off on a test flight in Marina, California — located about 40 miles south from where he grew up in the mountains.

Archer Aviation, a Silicon Valley company backed by automaker Stellantis and United Airlines, has been testing its own eVTOLs over farmland in Salinas, California, where a prototype called "Midnight" could be seen gliding above a tractor plowing fields last November.

The tests are part of the journey that Joby Aviation and other ambitious companies that collectively have raised billions of dollars are taking to turn flying cars into more than just pie-in-the-sky concepts popularized in 1960s-era cartoon series, "The Jetsons," and the 1982 science fiction film, "Blade Runner."

Archer Aviation and nearby Wisk Aero, with ties to aerospace giant Boeing Co. and Google co-founder Larry Page, are also at the forefront in the race to bring air taxis to market in the United States. Joby has already formed a partnership to connect its air taxis with Delta Air Lines passengers while Archer Aviation has lined up a deal to sell up to 200 of its aircraft to United Airlines.

Flying taxis have made enough regulatory inroads with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration to result in the recent creation of a new aircraft category called "powered lift," a step that the agency hadn't taken

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since helicopters were introduced for civilian use in the 1940s.

But there are more regulatory hurdles to be cleared before air taxis will be allowed to carry passengers in the U.S., making Dubai the most likely place where eVTOLs will take commercial flight — perhaps by the end of this year.

“It’s a tricky business to develop a whole new class of vehicles,” said Adam Lim, director of Alton Aviation Consultancy, a firm tracking the industry’s evolution. “It is going to be like a crawl, walk, run situation. Right now, I think we are still crawling. We are not going to have the Jetsons-type reality where everyone will be flying around everywhere in the next two to three years.”

China is also vying to make flying cars a reality, a quest that has piqued President-elect Donald Trump’s interest in making the vehicles a priority for his incoming administration during the next four years.

If the ambitions of eVTOL pioneers are realized in the U.S., people will be able to hop in an air taxi to get to and from airports serving New York and Los Angeles within the next few years.

Because its electric taxis can fly unimpeded at high speeds, Joby envisions transporting up to four Delta Air Lines passengers at a time from New York area airports to Manhattan in about 10 minutes or less. To start, air taxi prices almost certainly will be significantly more than the cost of taking a cab or Uber ride from JFK airport to Manhattan, but the difference could narrow over time because eVTOLs should be able to transport a higher volume of passengers than ground vehicles stuck in traffic going each way.

“You will see highways in the sky,” Archer Aviation CEO Adam Goldstein predicted during an interview at the company’s San Jose, California, headquarters. “There will be hundreds, maybe thousands of these aircraft flying in these individual cities and it will truly change the way cities are being built.”

Investors are betting Goldstein is right, helping Archer raise an additional \$430 million late last year from a group that included Stellantis and United Airlines. The infusion came shortly after a Japanese automaker poured another \$500 million into Joby to bring its total investment in that company to nearly \$900 million.

Those investments were part of the \$13 billion that eVTOL companies have raised during the past five years, according to Alton Aviation.

Both Joby Aviation and Archer Aviation went public in 2021 through reverse mergers, opening up another fundraising avenue and making it easier to recruit engineers with the allure of stock options. Both companies have been able to attract workers away from electric automaker Tesla and rocket maker SpaceX and, in Archer’s instance, raiding the ranks of Wisk Aero.

The Wisk defections triggered a lawsuit accusing Archer of intellectual property theft in a dispute that was resolved with a 2023 settlement that included an agreement for the two sides to collaborate on some facets of eVTOL technology.

Before going public, Joby also acquired eVTOL technology developed by ride-hailing service Uber in an \$83 million deal that also brought those two companies together as partners.

But none of the deals or technological advances have stopped the losses from piling up at the companies building flying cars. Joby, whose roots date back to 2009 when Bevirt founded the company, has sustained \$1.6 billion in losses since its inception while Archer has amassed nearly \$1.5 billion in losses since its founding in 2018.

While they moved to commercial air taxi services, both Joby and Archer are trying to bring in revenue by negotiating contracts to use their eVTOLs in the U.S. military for deliveries and other short-range missions. Archer has forged a partnership with Anduril Industries, a military defense technology specialist founded by Oculus headset inventor Palmer Luckey, to help it win deals.

The uncertain prospects have left both companies with relatively low market values by tech industry standards, with Joby’s hovering around \$7 billion and Archer’s \$6 billion.

But Bevirt sees blue skies ahead. “eVTOLs are going to transform the way we move,” he said. “It’s a dramatically better way to get around. Seeing the world from the air is better than being stuck in the traffic on the interstate.”

US says Sudanese rebel force has committed genocide and

imposes sanctions on the group's leaders

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration said Tuesday that a Sudanese paramilitary group and its proxies are committing genocide in a civil war with the country's military that has killed tens of thousands of people, leveling sanctions on the group's leader and affiliated companies.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the conflict, which began nearly two years ago and is considered the world's biggest current humanitarian catastrophe, had escalated beyond a war crimes and ethnic cleansing determination he made in December 2023.

Blinken said that based on more recent reporting, he found that the Rapid Support Forces group is committing genocide.

"The RSF and RSF-aligned militias have continued to direct attacks against civilians," Blinken said. "The RSF and allied militias have systematically murdered men and boys — even infants — on an ethnic basis, and deliberately targeted women and girls from certain ethnic groups for rape and other forms of brutal sexual violence."

"Those same militias have targeted fleeing civilians, murdering innocent people escaping conflict, and prevented remaining civilians from accessing lifesaving supplies," he said in a statement.

The genocide determination has no legal implication by itself, but it was accompanied by a Treasury Department announcement that RSF leader Mohammad Hamdan Daglo Mousa, also known as Hemedti, had been targeted for sanctions as well as seven RSF-owned companies in the United Arab Emirates, including one handling gold likely smuggled out of Sudan.

The UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula and a U.S. ally, has been repeatedly accused of arming the RSF, something it has strenuously denied despite evidence to the contrary.

The RSF and Sudan's military began fighting each other in April 2023. Their conflict has killed more than 28,000 people, has forced millions to flee their homes and has left some families eating grass in a desperate attempt to survive as famine sweeps parts of the country.

Other estimates suggest a far higher death toll in the civil war.

Emirati officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday night. The RSF did not immediately acknowledge the sanctions nor a request for comment from The Associated Press passed through an intermediary.

Blinken said his determination was not intended to support either side in the conflict but rather to promote accountability for war crimes and other atrocities.

However, some experts believe the RSF is directly to blame for the situation.

"The RSF is responsible for some of the most heinous atrocities being committed anywhere in the world today," said John Prendergast, co-founder of The Sentry, a U.S.-based watchdog group. "Today's actions by the Biden administration are an important start to creating that accountability, which hopefully can provide leverage both for deterring future human rights crimes as well as for helping to drag the RSF into treating ceasefire negotiations more seriously."

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum said the decision is "a somber acknowledgment of the horrific crimes endured by people who have been neglected for so long."

LGBTQ+ rights group reports progress at U.S. companies despite conservative backlash

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A national rights group said Tuesday that more U.S. companies are providing strong benefits and protections to LGBTQ+ employees despite an ongoing effort by conservative activists to get high-profile brands to stop participating in the organization's annual workplace report card.

The education arm of the Human Rights Campaign released its latest Corporate Equality Index the day after McDonald's became the latest big company to say it would no longer provide information for the annual evaluation of policies affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees.

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Last year, Walmart, Ford, Harley-Davidson and other consumer brands that came under pressure said they would end their voluntary participation in the grading system. The HRC rated them anyway, giving Harley-Davidson a score of 10 out of 100 and Ford a 75, for example.

The index has emerged as a top target of conservative activists as part of a broader campaign to pressure businesses into abandoning diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives that were designed to reduce discrimination against women, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, and LGBTQ+ people.

A 2023 Supreme Court decision that declared race-based affirmative action programs in college admissions unconstitutional emboldened critics of DEI programs to target universities, government agencies and corporations on social media, in the courts and in state legislatures. Some companies, including McDonald's, cited the high court precedent as their reason for curtailing diversity policies.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation said the 2025 equality index nonetheless included 72 employers that were first-time participants, and that 765 of the 1,449 companies graded received a perfect score, 28% more than last year.

"At times, progress meets backlash, but companies continue to dedicate the time and resources to reinforcing workplace inclusion," HRC President Kelley Robinson said in a statement. "As a result, they are more competitive and more creative while attracting and retaining top talent and widening their consumer base."

The number of companies given official ratings included ones that have said they would pull out of the process. Some completed the organization's survey months before their decisions. The HRC said it would continue to monitor companies that drop out and assign them scores.

McDonald's was among the companies earning the top score of 100. Walmart and Lowe's both received 90 points.

The scores are based on points companies get for a range of workplace metrics, such as having anti-discrimination policies that encompass sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, and offering health benefits that cover same-sex spouses and the needs of transgender individuals.

This is the second index that assigned points for having gender transition guidelines that managers, transitioning employees and their colleagues can consult. More than 1,000 of the companies graded for 2025 reported adopting such guidelines, a 21% increase, the HRC said.

"Obviously, there are plenty of examples of organizations that have made some kind of announcement around retreating from some aspects of how they were doing DEI, including things like participation in this survey," said David Glasgow, executive director of the Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging at NYU School of Law. "But the vast majority of companies that were doing DEI before are still doing it. The only difference is that they're changing some programs mostly for legal risk mitigation purposes and or doing it more quietly so that they don't attract as much attention and scrutiny."

The Corporate Equality Index debuted in 2002 and primarily focused on ensuring that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer employees didn't face discrimination in hiring and on the job. Over the years, the criteria to gain a perfect score grew stricter, and experts say the Index helped improve workplace benefits for LGBTQ+ people.

Biggest Nvidia takeaways from Jensen Huang's CES 2025 keynote

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang unveiled a suite of new products, services and partnerships at CES 2025.

In a packed Las Vegas arena, Huang kicked off the CES this week with his vision for how his companies' products will drive gaming, robotics, personal computing and even self-driving vehicles forward.

Here's a look at the biggest announcements to come out of his appearance.

New graphics cards and AI chips

Going back to its roots in gaming, the chipmaker and AI darling unveiled its GeForce RTX 50 Series desktop and laptop GPUs — its consumer graphics processor units for gamers, creators and developers.

Huang said the GPUs, which use the company's next-generation artificial intelligence chip Blackwell, can deliver breakthroughs in AI-driven rendering.

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"Blackwell, the engine of AI, has arrived for PC gamers, developers and creatives," Huang said, adding that Blackwell "is the most significant computer graphics innovation since we introduced programmable shading 25 years ago." Blackwell technology is now in full production, he said.

The flagship RTX 5090 model will be available in January for \$1,999. The RTX 5070 will launch later in February for \$549

AI models to help with robotics and vehicles

Huang also introduced a series of new AI models — dubbed Cosmos — that can generate cost-efficient photo-realistic video that can then be used to train robots and other automated services.

The open-source model, which works with the Nvidia's Omniverse — a physics simulation tool — to create more realistic video, promises to be much cheaper than traditional forms of gathering training, such as having cars record road experiences or having people teach robots repetitive tasks.

Central to this is Nvidia's new partnership with Japanese automaker Toyota to build its next-generation autonomous vehicles, and its announced partnership with Aurora to power its autonomous shipping trucks.

Nvidia's DriveOS operating system would power the new cars, which Huang said has the highest standard of safety. "I predict that this will likely be the first multi-trillion dollar robotics industry."

Aurora, based in Pittsburgh, plans to launch its driverless trucks — with Nvidia's hardware — commercially in April 2025.

And a supercomputer on your desk

And finally, Huang announced Project DIGITS, a \$3,000 desktop computer targeted at developers or gen AI enthusiasts who want to experiment with AI models at home.

The machine will launch in May and is powered by the new Blackwell chip. In all, Project DIGITS will allow users to run AI models with up to 200 billion parameters. This means models previously requiring expensive cloud infrastructure to operate can run on your desktop.

Biden administration set to announce 'substantial' final weapons package for Ukraine

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is set to announce a massive, final weapons aid package for Ukraine as part of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Germany on Thursday to meet with representatives of about 50 partner nations who have come to Ukraine's defense since Russia invaded nearly three years ago, two senior defense officials said.

The officials did not provide an exact dollar amount but said the package was expected to be "substantial," although it would not include all of the roughly \$4 billion left in the congressionally authorized funding for Ukraine. There likely would be "more than a couple of billion dollars" remaining for the incoming Trump defense team to provide to Ukraine if it chose to do so, the officials said Tuesday in briefing reporters traveling with Austin.

Ukraine is in the midst of launching a second offensive in Russia's Kursk region and is facing a barrage of long-range missiles and ongoing advances from Russia as both sides seek to put themselves in the strongest negotiating point possible before President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Jan. 20.

Biden defense officials working on Ukraine have been in contact with Trump's transition team to discuss "all the issues that we believe are important," one of the officials said.

Austin's trip to Ramstein Air Base will be his final meeting with the group he organized to come to Ukraine's defense after Russia's invasion in February 2022. Together those nations have provided more than \$126 billion in weapons and military training and assistance. Those packages have included millions of rounds of ammunition, advanced fighter jets, air defense systems, counter-UAV systems and even tanks.

The U.S. has provided \$66 billion of that total.

The package to be announced on Thursday will be drawn from existing stockpiles with a goal of getting most of the weapons pledged to Ukraine by the time Trump is sworn in., one of the defense officials said.

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On Dec. 30, the administration announced a separate \$1.25 billion aid package, part of a series of aid announcements as it hurried to get as much military assistance to Ukraine as it can before President Joe Biden leaves office. The officials said roughly 80% to 90% of all stockpile equipment promised has already been provided to Ukraine.

New labels will help people pick devices less at risk of hacking

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal government is rolling out a consumer labeling system designed to help Americans pick smart devices that are less vulnerable to hacking.

Under the voluntary program, called the U.S. Cyber Trust Mark Initiative, manufacturers can affix the label on their products if they meet federal cybersecurity standards. The types of devices that can seek to carry the label include baby monitors, home security cameras, fitness trackers, refrigerators and other internet-connected appliances.

The labels will include a distinctive shield logo as well as QR codes that consumers can scan for more information about the security of the device. Products bearing the label should be available this year, once manufacturers begin submitting their devices for approval, said deputy national security adviser Anne Neuberger, who briefed reporters on the new program Tuesday.

"It gives consumers an easy way to check if a home alarm system or baby monitor is cyber safe," Neuberger said, noting that the average American household now has 21 devices that are connected to the internet — each presenting a possible entry point for cybercriminals.

Amazon, Best Buy, Google, LG Electronics USA, Logitech and Samsung are among industry participants.

Even though it's voluntary, the program will help consumers know which brands to trust — by clicking on the QR code, they'll be able to access even more information about cybersecurity, including whether the manufacturer provides software updates to protect against new cyberthreats, according to Justin Brookman, director of technology policy at Consumer Reports.

First proposed by the Biden administration 18 months ago, the labels were approved last year by the Federal Communications Commission, the agency tasked with leading the program. Last month, the FCC selected 11 companies and organizations to oversee the technical designation of products bearing the labels.

Officials compare the labels to the Energy Star program, which rates appliances' energy efficiency, and say the idea is to give consumers more information about the products they buy while also encouraging manufacturers to enhance their cybersecurity.

The proliferation of so-called smart devices has coincided with growing cybercrime in which one insecure device can often give cyberintruders a dangerous foothold on a home network.

Long silenced by fear, Syrians now speak about rampant torture under Assad

By SARAH EL DEEB and MALAK HARB Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Handcuffed and squatting on the floor, Abdullah Zahra saw smoke rising from his cellmate's flesh as his torturers gave him electric shocks.

Then it was Zahra's turn. They hanged the 20-year-old university student from his wrists until his toes barely touched the floor and electrocuted and beat him for two hours. They made his father watch and taunted him about his son's torment.

That was 2012, and the entire security apparatus of Syria's then-President Bashar Assad was deployed to crush the protests that had arisen against his rule.

With Assad's fall a month ago, the machinery of death that he ran is starting to come out into the open.

It was systematic and well-organized, growing to more than 100 detention facilities where torture, brutality, sexual violence and mass executions were rampant, according to activists, rights group and former prisoners. Security agents spared no one, not even Assad's own soldiers. Young men and women were

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detained for simply living in districts where protests were held.

As tens of thousands disappeared over more than a decade, a blanket of fear kept the Syrian population silent. People rarely told anyone that a loved one had vanished for fear they too could be reported to security agencies.

Now, everyone is talking. The insurgents who swept Assad out of power opened detention facilities, releasing prisoners and allowing the public to bear witness. Crowds swarmed, searching for answers, bodies of their loved ones, and ways to heal.

The Associated Press visited seven of these facilities in Damascus and spoke to nine former detainees, some released on Dec. 8, the day Assad was ousted. Some details of the accounts by those who spoke to the AP could not be independently confirmed, but they matched past reports by former detainees to human rights groups.

Days after Assad's fall, Zahra – now 33 -- came to visit Branch 215, a detention facility run by military intelligence in Damascus where he was held for two months. In an underground dungeon, he stepped into the windowless, 4-by-4-meter (yard) cell where he says he was held with 100 other inmates.

Each man was allowed a floor tile to squat on, Zahra said. When ventilators weren't running -- either intentionally or because of a power failure -- some suffocated. Men went mad; torture wounds festered. When a cellmate died, they stowed his body next to the cell's toilet until jailers came to collect corpses, Zahra said.

"Death was the least bad thing," he said. "We reached a place where death was easier than staying here for one minute."

Assad's system of repression grew as civil war raged

Zahra was arrested along with his father after security agents killed one of his brothers, a well-known anti-Assad graffiti artist. After they were released, Zahra fled to opposition-held areas. Within a few months, security agents returned and dragged off 13 of his male relatives, including a younger brother and, again, his father.

They were brought to Branch 215. All were tortured and killed. Zahra later recognized their bodies among photos leaked by a defector that showed the corpses of thousands killed while in detention. Their bodies were never recovered, and how and when they died is unknown.

Rights groups estimate at least 150,000 people went missing after anti-government protests began in 2011, most vanishing into Assad's prison network. Many of them were killed, either in mass executions or from torture and prison conditions. The exact number remains unknown.

Even before the uprising, Assad had ruled with an iron fist. But as peaceful protests turned into a full-fledged civil war that would last 14 years, Assad rapidly expanded his system of repression.

New detention facilities sprung up in security compounds, military airports and under buildings — all run by military, security and intelligence agencies.

Touring the site of his torture and detention, Zahra hoped to find some sign of his lost relatives. But there was nothing. At home, his aunt, Rajaa Zahra, saw the pictures of her killed children for the first time. She had refused to look at the leaked photos before. She lost three of her six sons in Branch 215 and a fourth was killed at a protest. Her brother, she said, had three sons, now he has only one.

"They were hoping to finish off all the young men of the country."

Syrians were tortured with 'the tire' and 'magic carpet'

The tortures had names.

One was called the "magic carpet," where a detainee was strapped to a hinged wooden plank that bends in half, folding his head to his feet, which are then beaten.

Abdul-Karim Hajeko said he endured this five times. His torturers stomped on his back during interrogations at the Criminal Security branch, and his vertebrae are still broken.

"My screams would go to heaven. Once a doctor came down from the fourth floor (to the ground floor) because of my screams," he said.

He was also put in "the tire." His legs were bent inside a car tire as interrogators beat his back and feet

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with a plastic baton. When they were done, he said, a guard ordered him to kiss the tire and thank it for teaching him "how to behave." Hajeko was later taken to the notorious Saydnaya Prison, where he was held for six years.

Many prisoners said the tire was inflicted for rule violations -- like making noise, raising one's head in front of guards, or praying -- or for no reason at all.

Mahmoud Abdalbaki, a non-commissioned air force officer who defected from service, was put in the tire during detention at a military police facility. They forced him to count the lashes — up to 200 — and if he made a mistake, the torturer would start over.

"People's hearts stopped following a beating," the 37-year-old said.

He was later held at Saydnaya, where he said guards would terrorize inmates by rolling a tire down the corridor lined with cells and beat on the bars with their batons. Wherever it stopped, the entire cell would be subjected to the tire.

Altogether, Abdalbaki spent nearly six years in prison over different periods. He was among those freed on the day Assad fled Syria.

Saleh Turki Yahia said a cellmate died nearly every day during the seven months in 2012 he was held at the Palestine Branch, a detention facility run by the General Intelligence Agency.

He recounted how one man bled in the cell for days after returning from a torture session where interrogators rammed a pipe into him. When the inmates tried to move him, "all his fluids poured out from his backside. The wound opened from the back, and he died," he said.

Yahya said he was given electric shocks, hanged from his wrists, beaten on his feet. He lost half his body weight and nearly tore his own skin scratching from scabies.

"They broke us," he said, breaking into tears. "Look at Syria, it is all old men ... A whole generation is destroyed."

But with Assad gone, he was back visiting the Palestine Branch.

"I came to express myself. I want to tell."

The mounting evidence will be used in trials

Torture continued up to the end of Assad's rule.

Rasha Barakat, 34, said she and her sister were detained in March from their homes in Saqba, a town outside Damascus.

Inside a security branch, she was led past her husband, who had been arrested hours earlier and was being interrogated. He was kneeling on the floor, his face green, she said. It was her last brief glimpse of him: He died in custody.

During her own hours-long interrogation, she said, security agents threatened to bring in her sons, 5- and 7-years-old, if she didn't confess. She was beaten. Female security agents stripped her and poured cold water on her, leaving her shivering naked for two hours. She spent eight days in isolation, hearing beatings nearby.

Eventually she was taken to Adra, Damascus' central prison, tried and sentenced to five years for supporting rebel groups, charges she said were made up.

There she stayed until insurgents broke into Adra in December and told her she was free. An estimated 30,000 prisoners were released as fighters opened up prisons during their march to Damascus.

Barakat said she is happy to see her kids again. But "I am destroyed psychologically ... Something is missing. It is hard to keep going."

Now comes the monumental task of accounting for the missing and compiling evidence that could one day be used to prosecute Assad's officials, whether by Syrian or international courts.

Hundreds of thousands of documents remain scattered through the former detention facilities, many labeled classified, in storage rooms commonly underground. Some seen by the AP included transcripts of phone conversations, even between military officers; intelligence files on activists; and a list of hundreds of prisoners killed in detention.

Shadi Haroun, who spent 10 years imprisoned, has been charting Assad's prison structure and documenting former detainees' experiences from exile in Turkey. After Assad's fall, he rushed back to Syria

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and toured detention sites.

The documents, he said, show the bureaucracy behind the killings. "They know what they are doing, it is organized."

Civil defense workers are tracking down mass graves where tens of thousands are believed to be buried. At least 10 have been identified around Damascus, mostly from residents' reports, and five others elsewhere around the country. Authorities say they are not ready to open them.

A U.N. body known as the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism has offered to help Syria's new interim administration in collecting, organizing and analyzing all the material. Since 2011, it has been compiling evidence and supporting investigations in over 200 criminal cases against figures in Assad's government.

Robert Petit, director of the U.N. body, said the task is so enormous, no one entity can do it alone. The priority would be to identify the architects of the brutality.

Many want answers now.

Officials cannot just declare that the missing are presumed dead, said Wafaa Mustafa, a Syrian journalist, whose father was detained and killed 12 years ago.

"No one gets to tell the families what happened without evidence, without search, without work."

New Orleans attack came at a time of political heat, and transition, for the FBI

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Joining law enforcement officials to update the public in the hours after a man killed 14 people and injured dozens of others in New Orleans, Louisiana's junior Republican senator, John Kennedy, implored the FBI to "catch these people" — and then added one more eyebrow-raising request of the federal government.

"After we get to the bottom of this," he said, "they need to tell the American people the truth."

The comment appeared to allude at least in part to an FBI official's erroneous assertion hours earlier that the Bourbon Street rampage was "not a terrorist event," a misstep the FBI tried to clean up with a follow-up statement that said the bureau was indeed investigating the Islamic State group-inspired attack as "an act of terrorism."

But more broadly, the suggestion that federal officials might obscure the truth of the investigation, and Kennedy's warning that he would "raise fresh hell" if they did, reflected the uneasy position the FBI had already found itself in by the time of last week's attack: buffeted by suspicion and public criticism from lawmakers, especially allies of President-elect Donald Trump, and bracing for a leadership change expected to produce dramatic upheaval at the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency.

"When the rubber meets the road, what really matters is that even in spite of all of this noise — and that's all it is, is noise — the bureau goes about doing its job on a day-to-day basis," said Frank Montoya Jr., a retired FBI senior official and a counterintelligence expert.

The attack by Shamsud-Din Jabbar that killed 14 took place in the waning days of the Biden administration and just over two weeks before FBI Director Christopher Wray plans to resign his position to make way for Trump's pick, Kash Patel. It follows a turbulent stretch in which the bureau has faced an escalating threat of international and domestic terrorism and has also been at the center of politically explosive national security investigations involving both Trump and President Joe Biden that have put the FBI and Justice Department on the defensive and their decision-making under scrutiny.

The attack, the deadliest assault on U.S. soil in years inspired by the Islamic State group, is certain to make counterterrorism and national security core topics of discussion at Patel's yet-to-be-scheduled confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

A former Justice Department national security prosecutor, Patel has appeared repeatedly on podcasts before he was selected as director, where he's spoken of his belief that the FBI needed a major overhaul. But he's been less specific about how as director he would protect the homeland.

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One area he has discussed is significant reforms on how agents and analysts make use of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act eavesdropping powers in national security investigations and has spoken also of a desire to break out the FBI's "intel shops" from the rest of its crime-fighting activities.

A person familiar with Patel's positions who has sat in on his meetings with senators and who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations said Patel wants to ensure "there's better intel-sharing across agencies" but is not calling for the elimination of spy powers.

The FBI has long characterized protecting the homeland from terrorist attack as its top priority, and Wray has been proactive in sounding the alarm about a rising threat inspired in part by the turmoil in the Middle East following the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas on Israel. Agents in recent months have successfully disrupted multiple plots, including the October arrest of an Afghan national accused of plotting an Election Day attack and charges weeks later against a Florida man said to be seeking to bomb the New York Stock Exchange.

Despite that run of success, there's also no question that each action by the FBI is magnified at a time when its work and public statements are so intensely under the microscope as a result of politically charged investigations as well as the aftermath of controversial decisions, like a Justice Department memo directing the FBI to address threatening rhetoric at school board meetings and a since-withdrawn field office memo that warned of potential Catholic extremists.

Chris Piehota, a former executive assistant director of the FBI who retired in 2020, said he believed that the FBI had become "distracted" in recent years by "political and social agendas versus addressing the actual emerging threat environment."

"Their priorities have not been properly set in my opinion," said Piehota, author of a book titled: "Wanted: The FBI I Once Knew."

In the case of Jabbar, the FBI was continuing to dig into his background but there was no immediate indication that agents missed any obvious red flags prior to the attack that could have thwarted it. Officials say he acted by himself, without any associates, and his path to radicalization — he has said he joined the Islamic State before last summer — appears to have been short.

Yet some imperfect communication on the first day did color public perception of the response.

Besides initially stating that the attack was not an act of terror, Alethea Duncan, an assistant special agent in charge in the New Orleans field office, said officials did not believe Jabbar had acted alone. A day later, the FBI said that upon further review it had concluded otherwise and that he had been in fact a solo actor.

"As soon as they found out that that wasn't the case, they came out and they said, 'That's not the case,'" Montoya said. "And we can make a lot of inferences about that, but the fact of the matter is that's how investigations go."

Who was Dietrich Bonhoeffer? An AP Explainer about the anti-Nazi pastor

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Who was Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian from Germany executed by the Nazis in 1945 at age 39 for his role in a resistance movement that included attempts to assassinate German leader Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, Germany (present-day Wroclaw, Poland), one of eight children in a prominent, well-educated family.

He early showed a strong piety, studied theology and by age 21 completed a doctoral dissertation.

He did further study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. There, he also worshipped at Harlem's famed Abyssinian Baptist Church, considered the flagship of the Black church tradition, and was deeply shaped by its emphasis on faith-based social justice.

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer opposed Nazi efforts to coopt the Protestant church with its racist ideology.

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In defiance of the compromised church, Bonhoeffer led an unofficial seminary for a while.

Bonhoeffer traveled widely and was involved in efforts to build church unity across denominations and nations – contacts that served him well in his later espionage work.

Bonhoeffer joined other relatives and officers within the German intelligence service who were secretly conspiring to overthrow Hitler and end the war. Bonhoeffer knew of and approved plans to assassinate Hitler, though he wasn't an active participant. The plot failed. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in 1943 for resistance work and executed by hanging on April 9, 1945.

What has been Bonhoeffer's legacy?

His theological and devotional works, as well as his prison letters, have been widely read and published since his death. Biographies and documentaries have further spread his renown, as has a new biopic, "Bonhoeffer: Pastor. Spy. Assassin."

He has been widely honored as a martyr to the cause of anti-Nazi resistance. He's reverently depicted in stained glass windows in churches the world over. He's included among statues of 20th century martyrs in Britain's Westminster Abbey, which also include the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Some have questioned the extent of honors lavished on Bonhoeffer. While recognizing his sacrificial courage, scholars say his role in the resistance has sometimes been exaggerated. Skeptics also note focusing on the heroics of resisters like Bonhoeffer helps deflect attention from larger failures of the German churches to resist the Nazis.

Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance center in Israel, has declined to include Bonhoeffer among its Righteous Among the Nations – non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews, such as Oskar Schindler of "Schindler's List." Bonhoeffer did help make arrangements for a group of Jews to escape to neutral Switzerland. But in a 2003 statement, Yad Vashem said that while it didn't question Bonhoeffer's character, he didn't meet its criteria for having directly protected Jews at his own risk. It also noted Bonhoeffer's longstanding advocacy for Jews to convert to Christianity.

What are some famous Bonhoeffer quotations?

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." – from the 1937 book, "The Cost of Discipleship."

"Both too much law and order and too little law and order compel the church to speak ... not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself." – from the 1933 essay, "The Church and the Jewish Question."

"What is bothering me incessantly is the question of what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. ... We are moving towards a completely religionless time." – from a prison letter.

What is a famous Bonhoeffer misquotation?

"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. ... Not to speak is to speak." According to researcher Warren Throckmorton, this is a popular quote and meme, but there's no evidence Bonhoeffer ever said it.

Why more frequent cold blasts could be coming from global warming

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Frigid air that normally stays trapped in the Arctic has escaped, plunging deep into the United States for an extended visit that is expected to provoke teeth-chattering but not be record-shattering.

It's a cold air outbreak that some experts say is happening more frequently, and paradoxically, because of a warming world. Such cold air blasts have become known as the polar vortex. It's a long-established weather term that's become mainstream as its technical meaning changed a bit on the way.

What it really means to average Americans in areas where the cold air comes: brrrrr.

What's happening is the jet stream — that usually west-to-east river of air way above ground that moves weather systems along — has made a roller-coaster like dip from the Pacific Northwest to the Southeast and is stuck on that wavy track. To the west of that plunge, in California, it's hot and dry. But to the east and just above the dip, it's a taste of the North Pole.

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"We're just getting a lot of cold Canadian and Arctic air that's being just channeled from north to south," said Dan DePodwin, AccuWeather director of forecast operations. "We really expect this to be more of a prolonged stretch of well below historical average temperatures. We're talking 12 to 25 degrees Fahrenheit (7 to 14 degrees Celsius) across a large portion of the eastern half of the country."

The worst will be in areas that just got hit with heavy snow, from Kansas to Washington, said National Weather Service Weather Prediction Center meteorologist Zack Taylor: "That's where we could see actual overnight lows down well into the single digits, perhaps even below zero in some places across the Ohio Valley and the Plains."

Judah Cohen, seasonal forecast director at the private firm Atmospheric and Environmental Research, called this a polar vortex event. He and DePodwin called it a stretching of the polar vortex, which is cold air normally penned in high above the Arctic that's there year round.

"Think of it as like a rubber band at rest, kind of roundish," Cohen said. "If you start pulling on it, it gets elongated like a hot dog or like pulling on a rubber band. It gets stretched out."

When the polar vortex stretches it can either bring that cold air south to the United States or toward Asia, said Cohen, an expert in winter weather.

Other times, when something called sudden stratospheric warming happens, the polar vortex moves away from the Arctic and comes south or even splits. That's not the case this time, Cohen said.

Other meteorologists, including Yale Climate Connections' Jeff Masters, along with National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center meteorologist Laura Ciasto, who co-writes the agency's "polar vortex blog," say the polar vortex term is being misused. Technically, the polar vortex is 20 miles high in the stratosphere. And what's happening right now is down lower.

These type of polar vortex disruptions — stretching or moving entirely out of the North Pole — are happening more frequently, according to a study last month by Cohen, Woodwell Climate Research Center scientist Jennifer Francis and others.

"There's a climate change signal in that," Francis said.

The Arctic is warming four times faster than the rest of the world, which means the difference between temperatures up north and down south are shrinking, Francis said. Arctic sea ice is shrinking, especially near the Barents Sea in Scandinavia, which releases more heat into atmosphere. That means more energy bouncing off and warping or moving the polar vortex, Cohen said.

DePodwin, who was not part of the study, said that makes sense because of these changes in the Arctic "the jet stream seems like in a warming world may be more amplified."

Yet winters globally are on average 1.1 degrees Fahrenheit (0.6 degrees Celsius) warmer than 25 years ago, according to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data. There can be more cold outbreaks and warmer winters at the same time, DePodwin said.

"Keep in mind that this is a small part of the whole climate, a couple of weeks of weather in a small part of the Northern Hemisphere," DePodwin said, noting that climate change is years and decades across the globe. "Climate change does not mean that we will expect to see no more cold weather. It just means that the average temperature overall is going up and we still expect to see colder shots."

Immigration is a higher priority for Americans than it was a year ago, an AP-NORC poll shows

By LINLEY SANDERS, HUMERA LODHI and JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More Americans say immigration should be a top focus for the U.S. government in 2025, as the country heads toward a new Republican administration in which President-elect Donald Trump has promised the mass deportations of migrants and an end to birthright citizenship.

About half of U.S. adults named immigration and border topics in an open-ended question that asked respondents to share up to five issues they want the government to work on this year, according to a December poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That's up from about one-third who mentioned the topic as a government priority in an AP-NORC poll conducted the previous

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year.

The issue of immigration has risen in salience across the board — among Democrats and Republicans, men and women, and adults both young and old. But Republicans, in particular, have converged around this issue in recent years. About 7 in 10 Republicans say immigration or a U.S.-Mexico border wall should be a top focus, up from 45% just two years ago.

This means that Trump will return to the White House with his base, and much of the country, interested in his signature issue. That's a marked contrast to when he left Washington four years ago with his successor, Democrat Joe Biden, offering a more welcoming posture toward migrants.

But even with the widespread uptick in concern about immigration, that issue is still overshadowed by economic worries. About three-quarters of Americans want the government to focus on addressing broad economic concerns, similar to the past few years. There's a range of economic issues Americans want addressed — about 3 in 10 referenced general economic issues, a similar share pointed to inflation, and roughly 1 in 10 mentioned either unemployment or taxes.

About one-third of Americans identify foreign policy as an important issue, with health care issues and politics — both identified broadly — close behind.

Republicans are especially likely to want government action on immigration

Trump won back the White House with immigration playing a key role in his campaign, often disparaging migrants to the U.S. and claiming that they commit violent crimes, though studies have shown no link between immigration and crime.

Some of his immigration reforms are likely to face legal challenges as Trump seeks to sharply limit the number of immigrants welcome in the U.S. But addressing those issues remains paramount for Americans as he prepares to take office.

About 8 in 10 Republicans want the government to prioritize economic issues, while about 7 in 10 Republicans say immigration or the border wall should be a top priority.

Most Democrats, meanwhile, are focused on the economy, but they don't have a clear second priority. Instead, about 4 in 10 name health care and health issues, a small uptick from a year earlier. About one-third of Democrats mention political issues, the environment or climate change, or immigration.

But even Democrats are more likely to want the government to make progress on immigration than they were the year before, when only about 2 in 10 Democrats considered it something that should be a primary focus for the federal government.

That doesn't mean, though, that they align with Trump's hard-line approach. One Democrat said the government should focus on "border control, not mass deportation," while another said "better pathways to citizenship" should be the goal. In their responses to the poll, Republicans tended to mention "illegal immigration" and "a stronger border" as an important focus. One Republican supported "closing the border, deporting illegal immigrants, starting with criminals first."

The focus among Republicans on immigration and the economy dovetails with two of the biggest challenges Biden confronted during his tenure, which saw both high inflation and sharp growth in migration.

Illegal border crossings reached a record level in 2023, adding fuel to Trump's relentless focus on border security and his promise to deport migrants en masse. The numbers fell during 2024 after Biden announced a crackdown on asylum claims, but Trump argued those moves were too little, too late.

Americans under 30 really want the government to prioritize inflation

The youngest adults are particularly likely to want the government to work on economic issues.

Americans under 30 are significantly more likely than older adults to mention economic issues, inflation and personal financial topics as a vital focus for government in 2025. About 4 in 10 young adults name inflation, compared with roughly one-quarter of older adults. And about one-quarter of young adults say they want the government focused on housing costs, whereas only about 1 in 10 adults ages 60 or older say the same.

Trump made gains among young adults in 2024 compared with his performance four years earlier, but his youngest voters were much more motivated by the economy than by immigration, according to AP VoteCast, a sweeping survey of more than 120,000 voters.

The same sentiment prevails as Trump prepares to take office. Compared with 2023, the December poll found, Americans under 30 are more likely to highlight general economic issues and immigration as things they want government to focus on — but they are much less focused on immigration than older adults. Only about one-third of adults under 30 said immigration should be a focus, compared with about 6 in 10 adults 60 or older.

Older Americans are also broadly focused on the economy, but their priorities are a little different — for instance, about 1 in 10 Americans over 60 want the government focused on Social Security in the coming year. Very few Americans under 30 mentioned Social Security as a concern.

South Korean anti-corruption agency receives new court warrant to detain impeached President Yoon

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's anti-corruption agency said it received a new court warrant on Tuesday to detain impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol after its previous attempt was blocked by the presidential security service last week.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which plans to question the embattled president on rebellion allegations over his short-lived martial law decree on Dec. 3, didn't immediately confirm how long the warrant would remain valid.

The agency's chief prosecutor, Oh Dong-woon, refused to answer when asked by lawmakers when the warrant would expire, saying such information is sensitive as the agency and police contemplate ways to execute it.

Detention warrants typically last seven days but can be extended to around 10 days. Oh didn't say when investigators planned to make their next attempt to detain Yoon.

The Seoul Western District Court last week had initially issued a warrant to detain Yoon and a separate warrant to search his residence after he repeatedly defied authorities by refusing to appear for questioning.

About 150 anti-corruption agency investigators and police officers attempted to detain Yoon on Friday but retreated from his residence in Seoul after a tense standoff with the presidential security service that lasted more than five hours. The investigators did not make another attempt to detain Yoon and the previous court warrants expired after a week on Monday.

If investigators manage to detain Yoon, they will likely ask a court for permission to make a formal arrest. Otherwise, he will be released after 48 hours.

The anti-corruption agency and police have pledged to make a more forceful effort to detain Yoon, which could be a complicated process as long as he remains in his official residence.

The anti-corruption agency is leading a joint investigation with the police and military into Yoon's brief power grab, which included declaring martial law and dispatching troops to surround the National Assembly. Lawmakers who managed to get past the blockade voted to lift martial law hours later.

Yoon's presidential powers were suspended after the opposition-dominated Assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14, accusing him of rebellion. The Constitutional Court has started deliberations on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reinstate him.

Members of the presidential security staff were seen installing barbed wire near the gate and along the hills leading up to the presidential compound over the weekend.

Oh confirmed to lawmakers that the agency was debating with police on whether to arrest members of the presidential security staff if they forcefully obstruct efforts to detain Yoon. Police have said they are considering "all available options" to bring Yoon into custody and haven't publicly ruled out the possibility of deploying SWAT teams, although it's unclear whether investigators would risk escalating a confrontation with presidential security forces, who are also armed.

Park Jong-joon, chief of the presidential security service, has hit back against criticism that it has become Yoon's private army, saying it has legal obligations to protect the incumbent president. He and his deputy have so far defied summonses by police, who planned to question them over the suspected obstruction

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of official duty following Friday's events.

In a parliament hearing Tuesday, Oh criticized the country's acting leader, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, for instructing police to oblige with the presidential security service's request to deploy personnel to Yoon's residence to beef up security ahead of Friday's detention attempt. The police did not carry out Choi's instruction, and Oh said the agency was reviewing whether Choi's actions constituted an obstruction of official duty.

The agency has repeatedly called for Choi to instruct the presidential security service to comply with the execution of the detention warrant against Yoon. Choi hasn't commented.

Yoon's lawyers argued the detention and search warrants against the president cannot be enforced at his residence due to a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge — which would be Yoon. They also argue the anti-corruption office lacks the legal authority to investigate rebellion charges and delegate police to detain Yoon.

Yoon's lawyers on Monday filed complaints with public prosecutors against Oh and six other anti-corruption and police officers over Friday's detention attempt, which they claim was illegal. The lawyers also filed complaints against the country's acting national police chief, the acting defense minister and two Seoul police officials for ignoring the presidential security service's request to provide additional forces to block Yoon's detention attempt.

US rejection of Nippon Steel's bid for US Steel rankles Washington's key ally in Asia

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden's decision to reject a bid by Nippon Steel to acquire U.S. Steel on national security grounds isn't the first time friction over trade and investment has irked Washington's closest ally in Asia.

There have been plenty of scraps over trade in the past few decades, and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken sought to smooth ruffled feathers in a visit to Tokyo on Tuesday.

Nippon Steel Chief Executive Eiji Hashimoto said the top Japanese steelmaker was standing firm on its proposed \$15 billion friendly acquisition. Nippon Steel and U.S. Steel filed a federal lawsuit challenging the Biden administration's decision.

But the assertion that the proposed deal could threaten U.S. national security has stung.

Many in Japan see the decision as a betrayal by Washington after decades of U.S. pressure to lift barriers to investment and trade. The timing doesn't help, with Japanese businesses already bracing for potentially damaging tariff hikes once President-elect Donald Trump takes office.

Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba was blunt in warning that spoiling the deal might hurt Japanese investment in the U.S.

Here are some key issues at stake:

Making nice

While in Tokyo in a farewell tour before Biden leaves office, Blinken told reporters he believes that during the past four years the alliance with Japan has "grown stronger than it's ever been before." Japan and the U.S. are mutually the largest investors in each other's economies, he noted, "strengthening the foundation for many years to come." Japan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the U.S. Steel decision came up during Blinken's meeting with Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya. But it said only that the two sides had "reaffirmed the importance of Japan-U.S. economic relations, including investment in the U.S. by Japanese companies."

Harsh words

Before Blinken's visit, Ishiba, who has struggled to build support and momentum since he took office in October, was emphatic.

"As for why national security was cited as an issue, it must be clearly explained. Otherwise, future discussions on the matter will come to naught," he said Monday. "No matter how much we are an ally, I believe

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that the points I have just made are extremely important for our future relations.”

He said, “It is an unfortunate fact that Japanese industry has voiced concerns about future investment between the U.S. and Japan. We have to take this very seriously.”

Japan’s Trade Minister Yoji Muto said the decision was “very regrettable.” Headlines in Japanese newspapers mainly focused on Nippon Steel and U.S. Steel’s plan to fight the ruling in court.

US-Japan alliance

Japan is the biggest and most important U.S. ally in Asia, a relationship forged during the U.S. occupation following Japan’s 1945 defeat in World War II. Nearly 63,000 troops are stationed at dozens of facilities across the country and Washington has urged Japan to build up its own defense capabilities as a counterweight to China’s growing influence and military power.

Japan counts on the U.S. to provide an umbrella of defense against its neighbors China, Russia and North Korea. Some critics have chafed at the decision to reject Nippon Steel’s bid for U.S. Steel, saying Washington was treating Japan like it does China, a potential adversary.

“When is an ally not a partner? Apparently when a Japanese company seeks to purchase an iconic U.S. corporation,” The newspaper The Japan Times said in an editorial. It described the concerns over national security as “incomprehensible,” adding “Trust has been greatly damaged and it is unclear what will be required to undo the harm.”

Track record on trade

Biden and Trump have both supported higher tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum from China, saying they are needed to insulate American producers from unfair trade practices and a flood of cheap imports. In 2018, Trump imposed 25% tariffs on imports of Japanese steel on “national security” grounds. The Biden administration agreed to a deal in 2022 to allow a certain quota of some steel products to be imported tariff-free. Any above that amount is subject to the 25% tariff.

Today’s trade frictions follow decades of negotiations that have led Japan to open its markets much more widely to foreign goods and services, transforming its retailing from mostly old-style department stores and mom-and-pop shops into outlet malls and big discount stores. Such “gai-atsu,” or foreign pressure, led Japanese automakers and other manufacturers chose to invest in U.S. factories, creating hundreds of thousands of jobs. Nippon Steel and U.S. Steel contend their deal would save American jobs, and business groups on both sides have objected to seeing the deal fall through as part of a broad shift in recent years away from greater openness.

North Korea says it tested hypersonic intermediate range missile aimed at remote Pacific targets

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea said Tuesday its latest weapons test was a new hypersonic intermediate-range missile designed to strike remote targets in the Pacific as leader Kim Jong Un vowed to further expand his collection of nuclear-capable weapons to counter rival nations.

The North Korean state media report came a day after South Korea’s military said it detected North Korea launching a missile that flew 1,100 kilometers (685 miles) before landing in waters between the Korean Peninsula and Japan. The launch, conducted weeks before Donald Trump returns as U.S. president, came off a torrid year in weapons testing.

North Korea demonstrated multiple weapons systems last year that can target its neighbors and the United States, including solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles, and there are concerns that its military capabilities could advance further through technology transfers from Russia, as the two countries align over the war in Ukraine.

North Korea in recent years has flight tested various intermediate-range missiles, which if perfected, could reach the U.S. Pacific military hub of Guam. In recent months, North has been testing combining these missiles with purported hypersonic warheads to improve their survivability.

North Korea since 2021 has been testing various hypersonic weapons designed to fly at more than five

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times the speed of sound. The speed and maneuverability of such weapons aim to withstand regional missile defense systems. However, it's unclear whether these missiles are consistently flying at the speeds the North claims.

The North's state media said Kim supervised Monday's launch, and that the weapon traveled 1,500 kilometers (932 miles), during which it reached two different peaks of 99.8 kilometers (62 miles) and 42.5 kilometers (26.4 miles) and achieved a speed amounting to 12 times the speed of sound, before accurately striking a sea target.

Lee Sung Joon, spokesperson of South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the South Korean military believes North Korea was exaggerating capabilities of the system, saying the missile covered less distance and that there was no second peak.

Lee said the test was likely a followup to another hypersonic intermediate-range ballistic missile test last April and said it would be difficult to use such systems in a relatively small territory like the Korean Peninsula. He said the South Korean and U.S. militaries were continuing to analyze the missile.

Kim described the missile as a crucial achievement in his goals to bolster the North's nuclear deterrence by building an arsenal "no one can respond to," according to the official Korean Central News Agency.

"The hypersonic missile system will reliably contain any rivals in the Pacific region that can affect the security of our state," the agency quoted Kim as saying.

Kim reiterated that his nuclear push was aimed at countering "different security threats the hostile forces posed to our state," but KCNA didn't mention any direct criticism toward Washington, Seoul or Tokyo.

The launch took place while U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was visiting Seoul for talks with South Korean allies over the North Korean nuclear threat and other issues.

In a news conference with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul on Monday, Blinken condemned North Korea's launch, which violated U.N. Security Council resolutions against the North's weapons programs. He also reiterated concerns about the growing alignment between North Korea and Russia in Moscow's war on Ukraine. He described the military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow as a "two-way street," saying Russia has been providing military equipment and training to the North and "intends to share space and satellite technology."

According to U.S., Ukrainian and South Korean assessments, North Korea has sent more than 10,000 troops and conventional weapons systems to support Moscow's war campaign. There are concerns that Russia could transfer to North Korea advanced weapons technology in return, which could potentially enhance the threat posed by Kim's nuclear-armed military.

At a year-end political conference, Kim Jong Un vowed to implement the "toughest" anti-U.S. policy and criticized the Biden administration's efforts to strengthen security cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo, which he described as a "nuclear military bloc for aggression."

North Korean state media did not specify Kim's policy plans or mention any specific comments about Trump. During his first term as president, Trump met Kim three times for talks on the North's nuclear program.

Even if Trump returns to the White House, a quick resumption of diplomacy with North Korea could be unlikely. Kim's strengthened position — built on his expanded nuclear arsenal, deepening alliance with Russia and the weakening enforcement of U.S. international sanctions — presents new challenges to resolving the nuclear standoff, experts say.

Today in History: January 8, Lyndon Johnson declares 'war on poverty'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 8, the eighth day of 2025. There are 357 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 8, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in his State of the Union address, declared an "uncondi-

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tional war on poverty in America.”

Also on this date:

In 1790, President George Washington delivered the first State of the Union address in New York City.

In 1815, the last major engagement of the War of 1812 came to an end as U.S. forces defeated the British in the Battle of New Orleans, not having received word of the signing of a peace treaty.

In 1867, the U.S. House of Representatives joined the Senate in overriding President Andrew Johnson’s veto of the District of Columbia Suffrage Act, giving Black men in the nation’s capital the right to vote.

In 1998, Ramzi Yousef (RAHM’-zee YOO’-sef), the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was sentenced in New York to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

In 2011, U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., was shot and critically wounded when a gunman opened fire as the congresswoman met with constituents in Tucson; six people were killed and 12 others were injured. (Gunman Jared Lee Loughner (LAWF’-nur) was sentenced in Nov. 2012 to seven consecutive life sentences, plus 140 years.)

In 2016, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, the world’s most-wanted drug lord, was captured for a third time in a daring raid by Mexican marines, six months after walking through a tunnel to freedom from a maximum security prison.

In 2020, Iran struck back at the United States for killing Iran’s top military commander, firing missiles at two Iraqi military bases housing American troops. More than 100 U.S. service members were diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries after the attack. As Iran braced for a counterattack, the country’s Revolutionary Guard shot down a Ukrainian jetliner after apparently mistaking it for a missile; all 176 people on board were killed.

In 2023, supporters of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro who refused to accept his election defeat, stormed Congress, the Supreme Court and the presidential palace in the capital, a week after the inauguration of his leftist rival, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Today’s birthdays: Singer Shirley Bassey is 88. Fashion designer Carolina Herrera is 86. Country-gospel singer Cristy Lane is 85. Rock musician Robby Krieger (The Doors) is 79. Filmmaker Sarah Polley is 46. Actor Gaby Hoffman is 43. Actor Cynthia Erivo is 38.