

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Thursday, Jan. 16

Senior Menu: Lasagna rotini bake, salad with dressing, baked apples, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Biscuits.  
School Lunch: BBQ Chicken sandwich, puzzle tots.  
Basketball Double Header at Tiospa Zina (Girls JV 5 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)  
Triangular Wrestling at Groton Area with Redfield and Webster, 6 p.m.



## Friday, Jan. 17

Senior Menu: Oven baked chicken, sweet potato, carpri blend, pineapple, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Breakfast cookie.  
School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.  
Girls Varsity Wrestling at Harrisburg, 2 p.m.  
Boys JH Basketball hosts Milbank, 7th at 5 p.m., 8th at 6 p.m.

## Saturday, Jan. 18

Girls Basketball at the Hanson Classic at the Corn Palace, Mitchell  
Boys Basketball at Dakota Valley (C game at 2 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity)  
Girls and Boys Varsity Wrestling and JV./JH Wrestling at Gettysburg, 10 a.m.  
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

**Groton Daily Independent**  
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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.**

## Ceasefire Deal Struck

Israel and Hamas agreed yesterday to a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, opening a path to potentially ending the 15-month war.

The deal—facilitated by the US, Egypt, and Qatar—goes into effect Sunday, beginning in phases. An estimated 94 hostages remain in Gaza, though Israeli officials believe roughly one-third are now deceased. The first phase of the deal would see 33 women and children returned to Israel in exchange for hundreds of jailed Palestinians, while Israeli forces would begin withdrawing from Gaza and aid deliveries would quickly ramp up. Subsequent stages would involve swapping male captives and soldiers and eventual plans for long-term reconstruction of the territory.

The war began Oct. 7, 2023, when a Hamas raid in southern Israel killed roughly 1,200 people and resulted in around 250 hostages. Since then, more than 46,000 people have been killed in Gaza, according to the Hamas-run Health Ministry (though it is unclear how many were Hamas fighters). More than 90% of the area's 2.3 million residents have been displaced.

Estimates to rebuild Gaza range as high as \$80B.

## Gold Mine Disaster

At least 78 bodies of unauthorized mine workers and more than 200 living miners were retrieved from a deep gold mine in South Africa amid rescue operations this week, with rights advocates estimating potentially dozens more are deceased in the mine. Officials claimed the deaths resulted from starvation and dehydration.

Hundreds of workers—mostly from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho—have been inside the mine since at least July, searching for trace amounts of gold to be sold illicitly by unofficial groups. In November, officials blockaded the mine and cut off food, water, and other supplies to force the miners out to face arrest, part of a broader anti-illegal mining operation.

The Buffelsfontein gold mine—roughly 100 miles southwest of Johannesburg—is an 8,000-foot-deep shaft that has been officially closed since 2013. The region's goldfield is one of the most productive historically, with deposits deep underground requiring extensive mining works. Officials estimate South Africa contains more than 6,000 abandoned gold mines left over from its longtime dominance in the industry.

## Rap Beef Suits Up

Hip-hop superstar Drake has filed a federal lawsuit against Universal Music Group over fellow rapper Kendrick Lamar's hit 2024 diss track, "Not Like Us," which accuses Drake of being a pedophile, among other claims.

The legal battle is part of an ongoing feud between Drake and Lamar, which escalated through a series of diss tracks (w/timeline) exchanged between the two artists. The lawsuit does not target Lamar directly but instead alleges that UMG—the record label representing the pair—defamed Drake by distributing, promoting, and profiting from Lamar's track. Drake claims UMG's actions have led to increased online harassment, a shooting incident at his Toronto residence, and damage to his reputation and brand value.

"Not Like Us" broke several records last year, including spending a record 20 weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot Rap Songs. Drake and Lamar are considered part of the Big 3 rappers of their generation, along with J. Cole, each of whom rose to prominence over a decade ago.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Conclave" leads all films with 12 nominations at the 2025 British Academy Film Awards, or BAFTA Awards; "Emilia Pérez" is just behind with 11 nods.

"Challengers" and "A Complete Unknown" lead 2025 Writers Guild Awards nominations.

Nine NBA games rescheduled due to Los Angeles fires and Atlanta winter storm.

Nick Saban, Urban Meyer, and Michael Vick headline 2025 College Football Hall of Fame class.

NCAA approves payment for women's basketball teams who compete in March Madness; \$15M will be distributed among tourney teams and will expand to \$25M by 2028.

## Science & Technology

Firefly Aerospace's Blue Ghost moon lander successfully launches, with a lunar touchdown date of March 2; NASA-led mission is part of a series of flights to deliver payloads to the moon's surface.

Meta unveils AI-powered speech-to-speech platform that can perform real-time translation across 101 languages.

DNA analysis of a first-century gravesite in southern England reveals occupants shared a maternal family tree tracing back to a single woman; study suggests women were at the center of Iron Age Celtic communities.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets rise (S&P 500 +1.8%, Dow +1.7%, Nasdaq +2.5%), with all three major indexes notching best day since November after tame inflation data.

Core consumer price index rises 3.2% year-over-year in December, less than expected.

JPMorgan posts record quarterly and annual earnings and revenue, with Q4 profits jumping 50% to over \$14B and annual profit reaching \$58B.

Goldman Sachs beats revenue and earnings estimates; records Q4 profit of \$4B, highest in more than three years.

Meta Platforms plans to lay off 5% of workforce, or about 3,600 people, based on performance evaluations.

Short-seller Hindenburg Research to shut down.

## Politics & World Affairs

US Food and Drug Administration bans use of Red Dye No. 3 from nation's food supply, drinks, and ingested drugs due to potential cancer risks; move comes 35 years after the FDA banned the artificial coloring from cosmetics.

Six Trump Cabinet nominees face Senate confirmation hearings, including Pam Bondi for attorney general, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) for secretary of state, and former Rep. John Ratcliffe (R-TX) for CIA director; see recap.

President Joe Biden delivers farewell address to nation.

US Supreme Court weighs First Amendment constitutionality of Texas' age-verification requirement for pornography sites.



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**The sunrise Wednesday morning.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

## **Brown County has been awarded another 4 years of being a National Weather Service "Storm Ready County"**

Brown County has continually received this certification since 2002.

For those if you that don't know what storm ready is:

Storm Ready is a nationwide program which began in the summer of 2000. It is a voluntary program designed to help counties and communities take a proactive approach to the kinds of severe weather that affect their areas by improving local hazardous weather operations and heightening public awareness.

Some of the things the Storm Ready program is intended to do are:

- Improve the timeliness and effectiveness of hazardous weather warnings for the public.
- Provide detailed and clear recommendations by which local emergency managers may establish and improve effective hazardous weather operations.
- Help local emergency managers justify costs and purchases related to supporting their hazardous weather related program.
- Reward local hazardous weather mitigation programs that have achieved a desired performance level.
- Provide a means of acquiring additional Community Rating System points assigned by the Insurance Services Organization.

## **Pereboom's Café of Webster Receives Community Service Award**

PIERRE, SD – The South Dakota Retailers Association has recognized Pereboom's Café and Boomer's Outback Lodging in Webster with its annual Community Service Award.

The award recognizes a business that goes above and beyond to give back to the residents of the community it serves.

Since 1976, four generations of Perebooms have worked in the family business. A solid work ethic and commitment to the community are traits passed down from one generation to the next. Any time there is a committee, fundraiser, or special event that benefits the community of Webster or a local family facing a crisis, you'll find Jay and Janice Pereboom in the mix, quietly organizing, boosting, contributing.

"It takes a village to make a community grow and succeed," Janice says. "And everyone does their part."

The Perebooms engage in countless ways in their community: helping lead pledge drives and fundraising efforts to support the building of the Middle School, an aquatic center, athletic fields and playground enhancements. They've been involved in launching youth tournaments and camps, coaching youth basketball, and helping to bring the state amateur basketball tournament and state swim meet to the community. The Perebooms also organize fundraisers for families in need.

Making time for family and community service can be a challenge when operating a seven-day-a-week business. But, Jay concludes, "When you go to bed you know you did your best, and you know it's worth it."

South Dakota Retailers Association executive director Nathan Sanderson says the family is modest about their place in the community.

"Jay and Janice Pereboom just want to tell you about what a great community they live in. They don't want to talk about the key role they play in helping to make it a great community. But others will tell you that when something good is happening in Webster, you'll find the Pereboom family involved in it."

## Oswald is new high school para

by Dorene Nelson

Kelly Oswald has recently been hired as a paraprofessional at Groton Area High School. She works in the special education department, helping students in middle and high school.

"I started working here as a substitute in November," Oswald explained, "then when an opening occurred, I applied and was hired in January."

"I enjoy working with a team of others in the school, so this is the perfect job for me," she smiled. "I help the students with reading and various one-on-one projects. Sometimes I also have to do some disciplining to get the students back on task!"

"One of the hardest parts of this job is helping the students work through their emotions as they struggle with their school work and self-esteem," Oswald explained. "The best part of this job is watching their victories when they work hard and finally succeed."

"I have both a cosmetology license and an associate degree in early childhood," she listed. "I checked both areas before applying for and being hired here in the school system."

Oswald and her husband moved to Groton from Wisconsin to be near his son who is a freshman in Groton High School. Her husband is currently employed at Groton Ford.



**Kelly Oswald**



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## Names Released in Gregory County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: 350th Avenue and 286th Street, nine miles north of Herrick, SD

When: 2:09 p.m., Saturday, January 11, 2025

Driver 1: Jon C. Smikle, 40-year-old male from Herrick, SD, no injuries

Vehicle 1: 2001 Ford F-250

Seat belt Used: No

Driver 2: Lori Ann Koenig, 59-year-old female from Fairfax, SD, fatal injuries

Vehicle 2: 2007 Honda CR-V

Seat belt Used: No

Gregory County, S.D.- A Fairfax, SD woman died in a two-car crash, nine miles north of Herrick, SD Saturday afternoon.

Preliminary crash information indicates Jon C. Smikle, the driver of a 2001 Ford F-250, was traveling northbound on 350th Avenue near 286th Street. At the same time, Lori Ann Koenig, the driver of a 2007 Honda CR-V, was traveling southbound on 350th Avenue. The vehicles met at the crest of a hill where they collided.

Smikle was uninjured. Koenig sustained fatal injuries.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

**Coming up on GDILIVE.COM**

**GT**

Groton Area  
Tigers



**Thursday, Jan. 16**

**Double Header at**

**Tiospa Zina**

**5:00 Girls JV**

Sponsored by Rich & Tami Zimney

**Followed by Girls Varsity  
and Boys Varsity**

**Note: There is no  
boys JV game**

**\$5 ticket or  
GDI Subscription  
required to watch the games.**



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Hundreds crowd public hearing on second attempt at a carbon pipeline permit

Comments focus on economic development vs. safety, property rights

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 15, 2025 9:38 PM



SIOUX FALLS — Hundreds of people, many of them opponents of a carbon dioxide pipeline, filled the Southeast Technical College auditorium Wednesday evening for state Public Utilities Commission hearing regarding a second attempt by Summit Carbon Solutions to gain a permit for the project.

“We know this is an incredibly important issue to you,” said Commissioner Gary Hanson at the start of the three-hour meeting. “We are here today to learn and listen, and we appreciate each of you being with us today to give us your input.”

The Iowa-based company plans 2,500-mile, \$9 billion pipeline to capture carbon dioxide from 57 ethanol plants across five states, including eastern South Dakota, and transport it to North Dakota for underground storage. The project would capitalize on federal tax credits incentivizing the prevention

**Hundreds of people fill the Southeast Technical College auditorium in Sioux Falls for a Public Utilities Commission hearing about a carbon dioxide pipeline proposal on Jan. 15, 2025.** (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

of heat-trapping carbon emissions.

The commission rejected Summit’s first permit application in 2023, in part due to the pipeline route’s conflicts with local ordinances mandating minimum distances between pipelines and existing features.

The project has a storage permit in North Dakota and route permits in North Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota, while Nebraska has no state permitting process for carbon pipelines. The project also faces litigation from opponents in multiple states.

The Sioux Falls meeting focused on residents in Minnehaha, Lincoln, Turner and Union counties. The commission held another meeting in Mitchell earlier in the day.

Most of Wednesday’s attendees opposed the pipeline — evident by applause often filling the room after opponents spoke. The opponents who spoke primarily reiterated concerns about safety and impacts to farmland affected by the pipeline’s planned route, which were raised during the company’s initial attempt at a permit.



Opponents also spoke against efforts to designate the pipeline as a common carrier, which would allow the use of eminent domain to push the project through. The South Dakota Supreme Court ruled last year that the pipeline has not yet proven it should be allowed to take private land for public use. The high court sent the case back to a lower court, where the company is trying to prove its case.

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In a handout, Summit said the project would include \$1.9 billion in capital expenditures in South Dakota, add 3,000 construction jobs while the pipeline is being built and support 260 jobs annually.

Project supporters said it would provide economic opportunities to South Dakota if implemented.

Al Giese, an Iowa farmer, board member for the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association and owner of a feed and trucking company doing business in South Dakota, told the commission that the "carbon sequestration train, locally and nationally, has left the station."

"Yes, it is a South Dakota issue. It is a Midwestern issue. But we must move forward with sequestering carbon not only for the vitality of the ag sector but for all the economies in the Midwestern states," Giese said. "There's no other way to go about it."

The next public hearings will be in De Smet and Watertown on Thursday, and in Aberdeen and Redfield on Friday.

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.*

## **Tribes hope to 'reset' state relations after Noem leaves office** **Sisseton Wahpeton leader's speech also addresses policy impacting Indigenous South Dakotans**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 15, 2025 4:16 PM**

Tribal leaders are ready for a new South Dakota governor.

Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Chairman J. Garrett Renville delivered the annual State of the Tribes address Wednesday to lawmakers at the Capitol in Pierre. He encouraged state leaders to mend tribal relationships through collaboration and communication.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has a strained relationship with South Dakota tribes. Leaders from all nine tribal nations voted to ban her from their land last year after she suggested some of them are benefiting from the presence of drug cartels in the state, and said Native American children "don't have any hope" or "parents who show up," and pushed for tax cut legislation without seeking tribal input on its potential

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consequences.

Those statements and actions within the last few years “eroded the bonds leaders worked so hard to build,” Renville said.

“Today, let’s reset. Today, let’s rebuild. Today, let’s start to listen and actually hear,” Renville told lawmakers.

Noem is expected to resign sometime after President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration on Monday, if the U.S. Senate confirms her as Trump’s secretary of Homeland Security. Her confirmation hearing is set for 9 a.m. Eastern time on Friday in Washington, D.C.

If she’s confirmed, Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden will serve the remaining two years of her gubernatorial term. Standing Rock Chairwoman Janet Alkire said she agreed with Renville after his speech. She gave a similar speech to the North Dakota Legislature last week, stressing unity and collaboration. Standing Rock’s reservation includes land in South Dakota and North Dakota.

Alkire has worked with Rhoden during the Noem administration, saying he seems open-minded and “wanting to work” with the tribes.

“It gives you faith that maybe Rhoden will take a different approach,” Alkire said.

Rhoden introduced Renville ahead of Wednesday’s speech, calling him a “sound-minded leader” who cares for the people, health and safety of tribal nations. The two spoke earlier this week about mending state-tribal relations.

“I look forward to hearing how we, as state officials, can work together to govern our state,” Rhoden said.

Renville encouraged lawmakers to talk with tribal leaders as they draft and debate bills, and he promoted a series of ways South Dakota officials can work to improve quality of life for tribal members, including:

Supporting a permanent Bureau of Indian Affairs tribal law enforcement academy in South Dakota, to address what Renville described as a law enforcement “coverage gap.”

Passing a bill requiring the state Department of Revenue to report online sales tax collections from tribal areas in the state.

Passing a resolution urging Congress to exempt land sold to tribes from capital gains taxes, which Renville said could enhance tribal economic development and self sufficiency through land acquisition and agricultural investments.

Moving the Office of Indian Education back under the state Department of Education, instead of under the State Department of Tribal Relations, where Noem placed it in 2019.

Supporting the development of an Indian Managed Care Entity to negotiate costs for health care services covered by the federal-state Medicaid program.

Passing a resolution asking Congress to update and reauthorize the Native American Housing and Self Determination Act of 1996, which critics have said is outdated, leading to overcrowded, unsafe housing in tribal communities.

Renville also called for a resolution urging Congress to eliminate language from the Dakota Removal Act of 1863 that exiled Dakota people from Minnesota. Though the law is no longer enforced, critics consider its language to be racist. South Dakota lawmakers rejected resolutions supporting its repeal twice in 2019 and 2020.

Renville said tribal leaders in South Dakota are opposed to carbon dioxide pipeline projects, citing property rights and concerns about environmental effects. He added that although he is not opposed to Noem’s education savings account proposal, he wants the state to work with tribes “to ensure all students are considered” if the program is implemented. The proposal would use \$4 million in state funding to provide families up to \$3,000 per student to help cover the costs of private school tuition, homeschooling or other forms of alternative instruction.

“We cannot afford to wait for someone else to lead,” Renville said. “The challenges we face, whether in health care, law enforcement, agriculture or education, are urgent. And the opportunities before us are great.”

## Flandreau tribe lifts Noem banishment

The Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe lifted its banishment of Gov. Kristi Noem on Tuesday, according to a letter from Tribal President Anthony Reider.

Noem's office released the letter Wednesday to the media. The tribe had banished Noem from its reservation in May after she said tribal leaders in South Dakota benefited from drug cartels and that tribal children "don't have any hope."

Reider's letter said one of the stipulations for lifting the ban was an apology from Noem. He wrote that Noem had "apologized if the comments offended the tribe."

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.*

## Chief justice says SD would benefit from expanding its new criminal public defense office

BY: SETH TUPPER - JANUARY 15, 2025 12:31 PM

After creating a state office last year to handle criminal appeals by people who can't afford an attorney, the next step is extending that help to the trial court level, South Dakota's top judge told legislators Wednesday.

Steven Jensen, chief justice of the state Supreme Court, delivered his annual State of the Judiciary address to lawmakers at the Capitol in Pierre.

One of Jensen's major topics was "indigent defense" — the use of court-appointed attorneys or public defenders for criminal defendants who lack the financial wherewithal to hire their own representation. The right to court-appointed counsel is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

South Dakota's counties have traditionally borne the responsibility and cost of indigent defense. Last year, with the Legislature's approval and funding, the state created its own office to handle some cases and a commission to oversee the effort.

"The creation of the commission and the Office of Indigent Legal Services is a monumental first step to create a more efficient and effective system of indigent defense in South Dakota," Jensen said.

He did not specifically ask legislators to expand the office, and he did not provide a cost estimate. But he did say an expansion "will require statutory authorization from the Legislature."

The office's creation and the ongoing overhaul of South Dakota's "antiquated and inefficient" system of indigent defense has been 50 years in the making, Jensen said.

He was referencing a 1977 study that identified deficiencies in the system. The study's recommendations went largely unheeded, which meant that by last year, South Dakota was the only state to saddle its counties with all of the costs of indigent defense.

Last winter, the Legislature and Gov. Kristi Noem provided \$1.4 million in annual funding to create the new state office. It includes a chief public defender who leads a team of four attorneys, a paralegal and a legal secretary.

The office handles a limited set of indigent defense cases: criminal appeals; "habeas corpus" appeals, which are filed to challenge a suspect's detention; and child abuse and neglect appeals. Counties remain responsible for other types of indigent defense cases, including everything at the trial level prior to any appeals.

Jensen said counties and judges struggle to find attorneys for indigent criminal defendants in rural areas. Attorneys appointed to take the cases often have to drive several hours to meet with a defendant or participate in court proceedings, and Jensen said the travel time is not compensated.

"The creation of regional, full-time public defenders through the Office of Indigent Legal Services could



alleviate many of these concerns," Jensen said.

A proposal to fund an expansion of the office could face opposition this year, due to the state's declining sales tax revenues. Noem has proposed numerous cuts in the state budget, which legislators will consider during their annual lawmaking session that began Tuesday and continues through March 13.

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

## In farewell speech to nation, Biden warns of threat from 'extreme wealth, power and influence'

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - JANUARY 15, 2025 10:04 PM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden issued a series of warnings Wednesday night during his farewell address to the nation, while emphasizing the work still left to be done as the octogenarian soon caps off 50 years in public service.

Biden, in remarks from the Oval Office, highlighted what's at stake regarding the threat of climate change, artificial intelligence and "a dangerous concentration of power in the hands of a very few ultra-wealthy people."

"Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead," Biden said.

He echoed concerns about a "tech industrial complex," noting that "Americans are being buried under an avalanche of misinformation and disinformation, enabling the abuse of power."

"The free press is crumbling," Biden said.

Without ever mentioning his successor, President-elect Donald Trump, Biden called for amending the Constitution "to make clear that no president — no president — is immune from crimes that he or she commits while in office."

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in July that a president could enjoy full immunity from criminal charges for their official "core constitutional" acts but no immunity for unofficial acts.

The decision stemmed from a federal election interference case against Trump. Those charges were dropped following his election victory.

### Challenges during term

Biden, who faced a slew of global and domestic challenges during his one term in the White House, is departing the Oval Office with low approval ratings as Trump soon regains power.

Biden withdrew his reelection bid in July after a disastrous debate performance in June against Trump. The 82-year-old faced repeated scrutiny regarding his age and mental agility. He also drew criticism for



**President Joe Biden delivers his farewell address to the nation from the Oval Office of the White House on Jan. 15, 2025, in Washington, D.C.** (Photo by Mandel Ngan/Pool/Getty Images)

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not dropping out of the race sooner.

He passed the torch to Vice President Kamala Harris for the Democratic ticket. She lost against Trump in both the popular vote and Electoral College.

"I wish the incoming administration success because I want America to succeed," Biden said.

"That's why I upheld my duty to ensure a peaceful, orderly transition of power, to ensure we lead by the power of our example," he said.

Biden also faced criticism in December for choosing to issue an unconditional pardon to his son, Hunter Biden, over federal gun and tax crimes — a sharp reversal of his previous position on the matter.

Hunter Biden and his wife, Melissa Cohen Biden, sat in the Oval Office during the farewell address, along with Harris, second gentleman Doug Emhoff and first lady Jill Biden.

## Taxes, hostage deal

Biden also called for revising the tax code, "not by giving the biggest tax cuts to billionaires, but by making them begin to pay their fair share." Republicans who have taken control of Congress as well as the White House are planning to renew tax cuts enacted in Trump's first term.

Biden called for an 18-year term limit and the strongest ethics reforms for the U.S. Supreme Court.

He pushed for a ban on lawmakers trading stock while in Congress.

The outgoing president shed light on some of his major accomplishments while in office, including the ceasefire and hostage deal reached between Israel and Hamas earlier Wednesday, which brings an end to the 15-month brutal war in Gaza.

Biden said the plan was developed and negotiated by his team and will largely be implemented by the next administration.

He also pointed to his massive infrastructure, climate and clean energy initiatives, which have defined much of his presidency.

"Together, we've launched a new era of American possibilities, one of the greatest modernizations of infrastructure in our entire history, from new roads, bridges, clean water, affordable, high-speed internet for every American," Biden said.

He also highlighted the nearly 17 million new jobs created during his administration and signing into law the most comprehensive federal gun safety legislation in nearly 30 years.

The White House published a fact sheet Wednesday, along with a letter from Biden, that outlines his administration's record in detail.

*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.*

## Federal regulators announce proposed rule for CO2 pipeline safety

**BY: CAMI KOONS, IOWA CAPITAL DISPATCH - JANUARY 15, 2025 7:35 PM**

The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, or PHMSA, announced Wednesday a notice of proposed rule making to strengthen guidelines for carbon dioxide pipelines.

The proposed rule would apply to carbon dioxide transported in a supercritical liquid state through pipelines and establishes, for the first time, guidelines for pipelines transporting gaseous CO2.

PHMSA, which is part of the U.S. Department of Transportation, said in a press release the proposed rules are the result of "PHMSA's largest public outreach campaign on record."

The proposed rule, if adopted as is, would require CO2 pipeline operators to train emergency responders and ensure local first responders have the necessary detection equipment in the event of an emergency.

It also would require operators produce more detailed vapor dispersion analyses and implement "more robust requirements" for communicating with the public in the event of an emergency, like a pipeline rupture or leak.

According to the press release, these proposed rules address "lessons learned" from the administration's

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multi-year investigation of a CO2 pipeline rupture in Satartia, Mississippi.

"I have learned first-hand from affected communities in Mississippi and across America why we need stronger CO2 pipeline safety standards," PHMSA Deputy Administrator Tristan Brown said in the release. "These new requirements will be the strongest, most comprehensive standards for carbon dioxide transportation in the world and will set our nation on a safer path as we continue to address climate challenges."

The proposal would also create new rules for transitioning an existing pipeline into a CO2 pipeline and would establish requirements for CO2 gas pipelines.

The department said the proposed rules respond to a "significant anticipated" need of what it estimates could be a 10-fold increase in carbon capture and storage infrastructure by 2050. According to the press release, currently the U.S. has more than 5,000 miles of carbon dioxide pipelines in operation.

The Summit Carbon Solutions proposed pipeline would have approximately 2,500-miles of pipe through Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota, transporting sequestered carbon dioxide from ethanol plants to underground storage in North Dakota.

A statement from Summit Carbon Solutions said the company was "pleased" with the proposed rules for providing clear standards for project developers.

"As a company currently permitting a CO2 pipeline in the Midwest, Summit Carbon Solutions is committed to following these enhanced safety requirements and designing infrastructure that meets the highest standards of reliability and public safety," the statement read.

Jimmy Powell, the chief operating officer for the company, said the updates underscore the importance of safety standards as the infrastructure for CO2 pipelines grows nationwide.

"Summit Carbon Solutions will ensure these standards are met as we move forward," Powell said. "CO2 pipelines are essential for opening new opportunities for Midwest agriculture and supporting the success of American energy and economic goals."

Jess Mazour, with the Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club, an organization opposed to the Summit project, said the group was working to evaluate the rule as it would apply to the project in Iowa and surrounding states.

"We are very happy to see that PHMSA listened to the voices of everyday people threatened by proposed carbon pipelines," Mazour said in a statement. "We hope the incoming administration continues to prioritize this rule and prioritize the needs of people, not pipeline companies and their investors."

Tom Buis, the CEO of American Carbon Alliance, an Iowa-based advocate of carbon capture pipelines and ethanol production, reiterated the safety and efficiency of CO2 pipelines, in a statement about the proposed rules.

"Pipelines have a proven track record of safety and reliability, minimizing the risks associated with other forms of CO2 transportation," Buis said. "These new rules will help us lead the world in safety and building infrastructure to meet global demand for American energy."

A notice of proposed rule making is an announcement and explanation of an agency's "plan to address a problem or accomplish a goal," according to the Federal Register.

The proposed rules are open to public comment for 60 days, after which, the agency will use the comments it received and the proposed rules to issue its final rules.

Those interested in submitting comments can do so on the Regulations.gov website once the proposed rule making is published on the Federal Register.

*Cami Koons is an Iowa Capital Dispatch reporter covering agriculture and the environment. She previously worked at publications in Kansas and Missouri, covering rural affairs.*



## USDA finalizes packers and stockyards reform to help chicken farmers

**BY: CAMI KOONS, IOWA CAPITAL DISPATCH - JANUARY 15, 2025 11:05 AM**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture finalized a third regulatory reform under the Packers and Stockyards Act, with the latest regulation giving greater stability and fairness to chicken farmers working for major meat companies, according to an announcement Tuesday.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a press conference Monday the regulation came from “the ground up” and reflects changes that poultry farmers across the country have said they needed.

“This rule basically addresses many of the concerns that we’ve heard from rank and file producers who just simply want a fair shake,” Vilsack said. “They don’t want the field necessarily tilted in their direction, they just don’t want to have to work uphill.”

The regulation limits some of the variability within the poultry tournament system, a system where growers are ranked against one another to determine pay. The new rule stops companies from deducting from a grower’s baseline pay because of their placement in the tournament system.

The rule sets that no more than 25% of a grower’s total compensation can be based on the tournament system and requires greater stability, and information, on the inputs producers receive.

The rule, according to Vilsack, will also provide producers with “key information” on the nature and extent of capital investments that a company would require a contract grower to make in order to extend a contract.

“This is a strong rule and a good rule, and it’s a rule that bubbled up from the ground up, not the top down, and I think those kinds of rules, ultimately, are successful and the ones that are preserved,” Vilsack said.

USDA has made two other rules to strengthen fairness and transparency under of the Packers and Stockyards Act during the Biden administration, including another poultry-oriented rule finalized in 2023 that mandated large processing companies give “critical information” to their poultry growers related to earnings, flock placement and protocol for sickness or natural disaster.

The other rule prohibited discrimination and banned companies from retaliating against farmers who communicate with government agencies or join grower associations.

Vilsack said USDA has also strengthened partnerships with state attorneys general and the U.S. Department of Justice to better enforce the Packers and Stockyards Act.

“We try to be responsive to the field, to the ordinary folks out there working hard every day, trying to make a living and trying to take care of their family, trying to make sure their their operation remains profitable in a tough time, and that they’re in a position to be able to turn it on to the next generation in better shape than they found it,” Vilsack said, reflecting on the work of USDA during the Biden administration.

USDA additionally announced Tuesday the withdrawal of a fourth rule, the Fair and Competitive Livestock and Poultry Markets, which it had proposed in June 2024 and would have defined general practices that were either unfair or in violation of the Packers and Stockyards Act.

Vilsack said the department chose to withdraw the rule, rather than leave it to be finalized by the incoming administration, because it was a very complex rule that could have been “fundamentally” changed by a couple of tweaks.

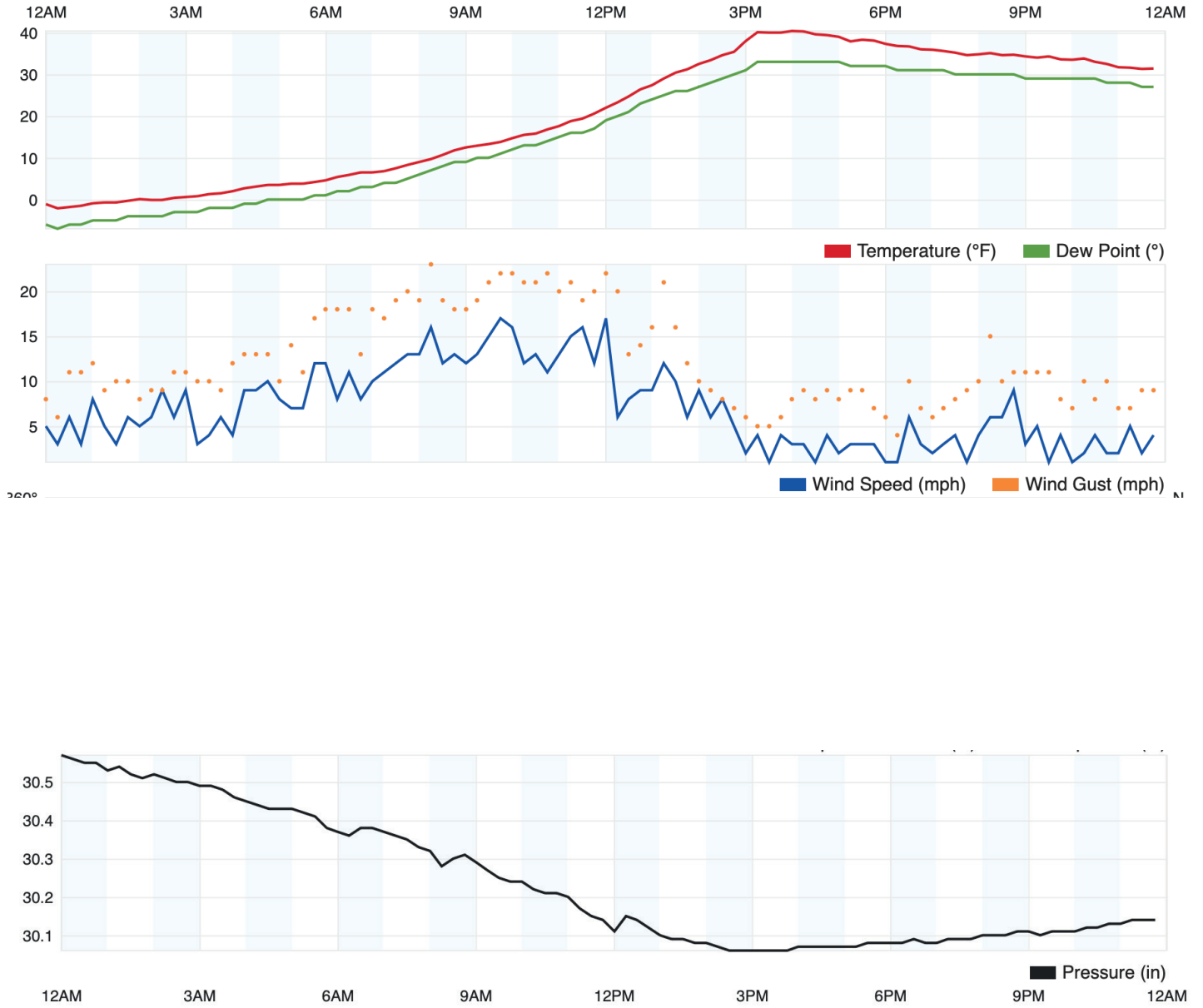
“If there is an intent to do that, then it seems like it ought to start from the beginning of the process, not at the end of the process,” Vilsack said.

*Cami Koons is an Iowa Capital Dispatch reporter covering agriculture and the environment. She previously worked at publications in Kansas and Missouri, covering rural affairs.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Broton Daily Independent

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**Today**

**Tonight**

**Friday**

**Friday Night**

**Saturday**



**High: 38 °F**

**Low: 25 °F**

**High: 33 °F** ↓↓

**Low: 1 °F**

**High: 9 °F**

Mostly Sunny

Mostly Cloudy

Breezy.  
Mostly Sunny  
then Slight  
Chance Snow  
Showers

Mostly Cloudy  
and Blustery

Partly Sunny  
then Partly  
Sunny and  
Blustery



## Key Messages & Minimum Wind Chills

January 16, 2025  
3:12 AM

### Key Messages

#### Concerning Upcoming Cold Snap

- **Strong Winds (40 to 50 mph Gusts) Follow Cold Front Friday**
- **Breezy/Windy Conditions Persist Well Into Saturday**
- **Core of Coldest Air Saturday Night Through Tuesday Morning**
- **Dangerous Wind Chills and Cold - Be Well Prepared if Headed Outside This Weekend/Next Week**

### Minimum Wind Chill Forecast (°F)

	1/17 Fri		1/18 Sat				1/19 Sun				1/20 Mon				1/21 Tue			1/22 Wed			
	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6am	12pm		
<b>Aberdeen</b>	8	-8	-15	-16	-15	-26	-29	-31	-26	-28	-33	-35	-30	-27	-30	-30	-14	-9	-8	-6	5
<b>Britton</b>	2	-12	-16	-19	-20	-28	-32	-33	-30	-31	-35	-37	-35	-32	-35	-35	-21	-14	-10	-7	1
<b>Chamberlain</b>	14	1	-10	-11	-5	-13	-24	-27	-20	-20	-27	-29	-26	-19	-23	-21	-3	-1	-2	-1	11
<b>Clark</b>	6	-11	-17	-19	-17	-27	-31	-34	-30	-29	-34	-36	-33	-30	-32	-31	-20	-12	-10	-6	1
<b>Eagle Butte</b>	3	-9	-16	-16	-13	-26	-32	-36	-29	-30	-37	-39	-35	-29	-30	-30	-14	-6	-6	-3	6
<b>Eureka</b>	-1	-15	-19	-21	-20	-33	-36	-38	-32	-34	-39	-43	-36	-33	-34	-34	-17	-11	-10	-10	0
<b>Gettysburg</b>	4	-9	-16	-17	-14	-24	-32	-33	-28	-27	-35	-37	-34	-29	-31	-31	-16	-7	-7	-7	3
<b>McIntosh</b>	-2	-15	-17	-18	-19	-31	-35	-37	-29	-34	-41	-43	-35	-33	-34	-33	-13	-8	-7	-6	5
<b>Milbank</b>	9	-10	-17	-18	-15	-26	-32	-33	-29	-30	-32	-34	-31	-28	-30	-30	-16	-11	-8	-6	3
<b>Miller</b>	10	-5	-13	-13	-10	-21	-26	-29	-23	-23	-29	-33	-28	-26	-28	-28	-12	-6	-5	-3	8
<b>Mobridge</b>	5	-5	-11	-12	-12	-23	-28	-29	-23	-25	-32	-33	-27	-24	-26	-26	-7	-1	-1	0	11
<b>Murdo</b>	9	-1	-11	-13	-8	-16	-25	-29	-25	-25	-30	-35	-30	-24	-27	-26	-8	-1	-3	-2	9
<b>Pierre</b>	14	0	-8	-8	-5	-15	-23	-25	-21	-20	-27	-30	-26	-17	-20	-20	-6	1	0	1	11
<b>Redfield</b>	11	-7	-13	-14	-10	-23	-29	-29	-23	-24	-30	-32	-27	-25	-28	-28	-14	-7	-8	-5	6
<b>Sisseton</b>	3	-10	-18	-20	-18	-29	-33	-35	-31	-32	-36	-38	-35	-32	-33	-33	-17	-14	-10	-5	2
<b>Watertown</b>	8	-9	-17	-18	-16	-26	-31	-33	-30	-30	-34	-36	-33	-30	-32	-31	-17	-12	-11	-7	2
<b>Webster</b>	4	-13	-18	-19	-19	-29	-33	-36	-32	-32	-35	-38	-36	-32	-35	-34	-20	-14	-12	-8	-1
<b>Wheaton</b>	3	-12	-18	-21	-20	-30	-32	-35	-34	-32	-35	-38	-35	-29	-31	-31	-18	-14	-11	-7	1



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Arctic air will blast into the region Friday and persist well into next week. While this comes with mainly dry conditions (outside a few light snow showers) there is the real threat of hypothermia and frostbite. Make sure you are well prepared if you plan any roadtrips or being outside for any period of time.



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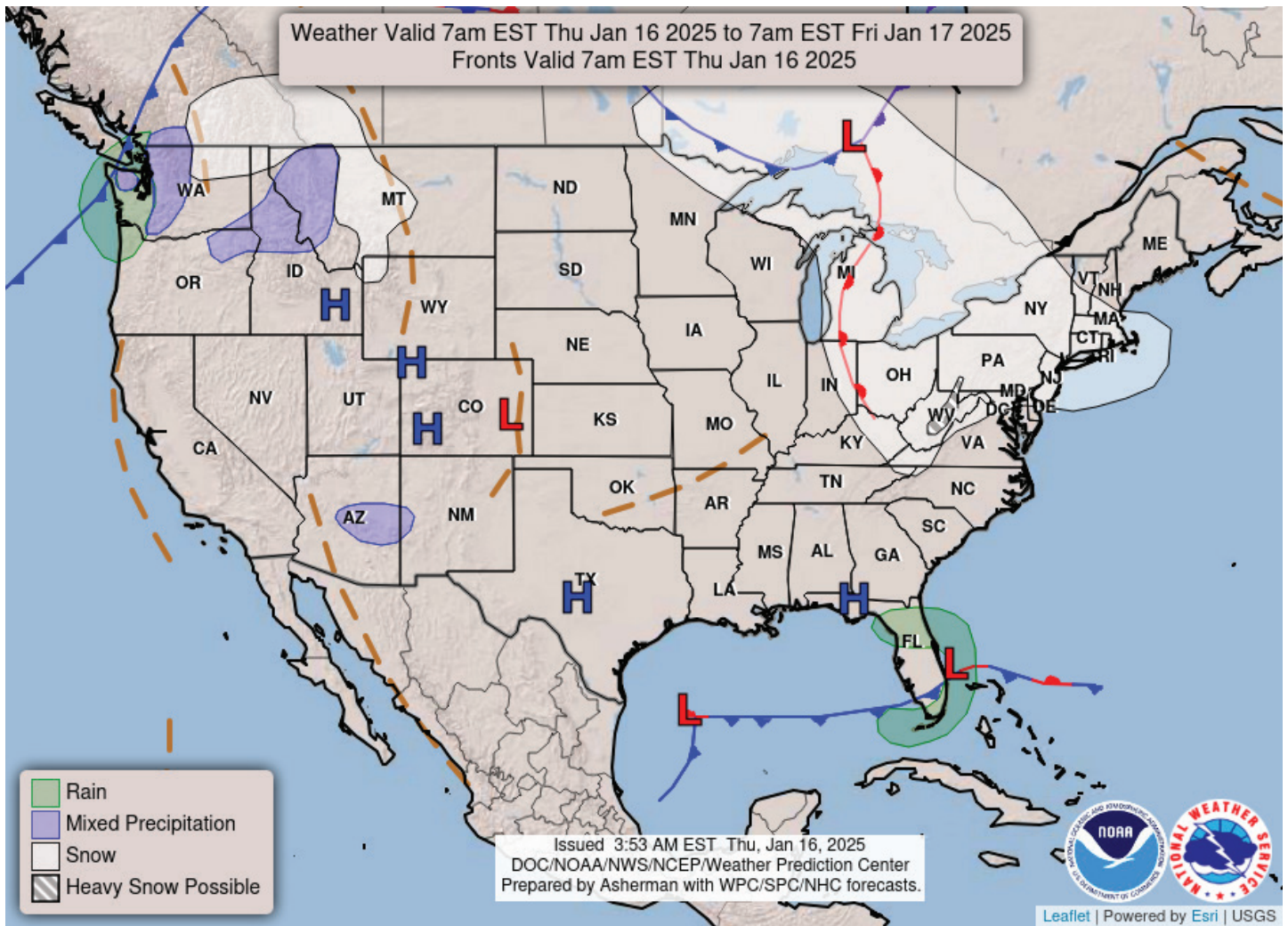
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 40 °F at 4:02 PM**  
**Low Temp: -2 °F at 12:20 AM**  
**Wind: 26 mph at 9:35 AM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 49 in 1942  
Record Low: -30 in 2005  
Average High: 23  
Average Low: 1  
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.31  
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 0.31  
Precip Year to Date: 21.71  
Sunset Tonight: 5:18:54 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:05:04 am

Day length: 9 hours, 13 minutes



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## Today in Weather History

January 16, 1967: In Minnesota, a fast-moving blizzard brought winds over 75 mph. The snowfall was light to moderate, with extensive blowing and drifting snow. Visibility was near zero for an extended time. Temperatures fell rapidly during the storm, and by the morning of the 18th, many record lows temperatures were set. Many vehicles went into the ditch. Thousands of motorists and schoolchildren found shelter wherever they could as travel was halted. A Wheaton man froze to death. In South Dakota, rain followed by a sudden drop in temperatures of nearly 30 degrees in 2 hours resulted in widespread freezing rain and significant icing on roads and trees. Strong winds of 35 to 45 mph with gusts to 75 mph along with the ice halted most travel. The wind and icing also caused the toppling of a 270-foot radio tower near Aberdeen.

January 16, 1997: An intense Arctic High brought widespread blizzard conditions and dangerous wind chills of 40 to 70 below to central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. One to 3 inches of snow fell on top of the already deep snowpack of 2 to 5 feet. The blizzard winds brought another round of widespread heavy drifting, blocking area roads and highways. Many area schools were closed once again to add to their large number of days missed for the winter season. Fortunately, this blizzard was short-lived compared to previous blizzards, and the people were better prepared.

January 16, 2014: A strong area of high-pressure building into the region behind an Arctic cold front brought high winds to central and north-central South Dakota during the early morning hours of the 16th. Some of the strongest wind gusts include; 69 mph near Whitlocks Bay; 68 mph near Bullhead; 67 mph near Trail City; 66 mph in Foster Bay; 65 mph near Mellette and in Presho; 64 mph near Harrold and in Murdo; and 63 mph in Pierre, Reliance, and Miranda. The strong winds diminished during the late afternoon hours of the 16th. A clipper system passing across the region brought light snowfall and powerful northwest winds gusting more than 70 mph at times resulting in blizzard conditions. The highest wind gusts include; 76 mph at the Brown County Landfill, 69 mph in Aberdeen and Cravens Corner, 52 mph near Webster, and 52 mph in Sisseton. Blizzard conditions ended during the late afternoon hours. A no travel advisory was issued in Grant, Codington, Hamlin, and Spink Counties due to low visibilities. The blizzard led to the cancellation of several area activities and schools and nearly impossible travel conditions.

1831 - A great snowstorm raged from Georgia to Maine. Snowfall totals greater than 30 inches were reported from Pennsylvania across southern New England. (David Ludlum)

1964 - Fort Worth, TX, received 7.5 inches of snow, and Dallas reported a foot of snow. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A winter storm produced a total of 61 inches of snow at Rye CO, and wind gusts to 100 mph in Utah. The storm then spread heavy snow from the Texas panhandle to Indiana. Tulia TX received 16 inches of snow, and up to 14 inches was reported in western Oklahoma. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A small storm in the western U.S. produced a foot of snow and wind gusts to 70 mph in the Lake Tahoe Basin of Nevada. Showers and thunderstorms produced 2.28 inches of rain at Brownsville TX, their third highest total for any day in January. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong chinook winds plagued much of the state of Wyoming. Winds gusted to 80 mph at Cody, and wind gusts to 100 mph were reported in eastern and northwestern Wyoming. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Heavy snow fell across the Prince Williams Sound area and the Susitna Valley of southern Alaska. Valdez was buried under 64.9 inches of snow in less than two days, including a record 47.5 inches in 24 hours. Up to 44 inches of snow was reported in the Susitna Valley. The heavy snow blocked roads, closed schools, and sank half a dozen vessels in the harbor. (Storm Data)

2008: An area of low pressure brought snow, sleet, and freezing rain across northern Georgia. Three to four inches was a typical amount reported from many of the northeast Georgia counties.



## BE ALL YOU CAN BE

Years ago, after being introduced to the students in a small college in South Carolina, the guest speaker stood quietly for a moment.

She then began her remarks by saying, "I was born to a mother who was deaf and could not speak. I do not know who my father is or where he may be. The first job I ever had was in a cotton field."

Smiling, she continued and said, "I stand before you today as the Treasurer of the United States. My name is Azie Taylor Morton. Nothing has to remain the way it is if that's not the way you want it to be."

Paul said that "I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength that I need." Does that mean we can become the Treasurer of the United States? The chief executive officer of a large corporation? The driver of an eighteen-wheeler? The crossing guard for an elementary school? Perhaps.

The power that is ours through Christ is available to meet every challenge in life as long as we are doing His will. His strength will prevail in us, for us, and through us whenever we do what He has called us to do. But we must be willing and committed to fulfilling the purpose He has for our lives. It is inappropriate for us to expect God to empower us to be or do anything that is not in keeping with His will. What we do must be in keeping with what His character is!

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to be faithful to You in everything we do, and to always seek Your will for our lives. May what we do and think follow the example of Your Son. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength that I need. Philippians 4:13

*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: 01.14.25

4 14 35 49 62 6

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$113,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 1 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

2 11 28 40 47 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$22,020,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 16 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

19 31 33 36 46 7

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 31 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

13 18 20 27 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$20,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 31 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

11 15 25 51 54 15

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

8 41 52 53 58 7

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$331,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 0 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

Middle East latest: Netanyahu says Cabinet won't meet over ceasefire until Hamas drops new demands  
By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said Thursday his Cabinet won't meet to approve the agreement for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the release of dozens of hostages until Hamas backs down from what it called a "last minute crisis."

Netanyahu's office accused Hamas of renegeing on parts of the agreement in an attempt "to extort last minute concessions." It did not elaborate.

The Israeli Cabinet was set to ratify the deal Thursday.

Meanwhile, Israeli strikes across the Gaza Strip have killed at least 48 people over the past day. In previous conflicts, both sides have stepped up military operations in the final hours before ceasefires go into effect as a way to project strength.

Gaza's Health Ministry said the 48 bodies of people killed since midday Wednesday were brought to several hospitals. Around half of the dead were women and children, Zaher al-Wahedi, head of the ministry's registration department, told The Associated Press.

Thirty-three hostages are set to be released over the next six weeks in the ceasefire deal reached on Wednesday. The remainder, including male soldiers, are to be released in a second phase that will be negotiated during the first. Hamas has said it will not release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal.

Israel's offensive has killed over 46,000 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Health Ministry. It does not say how many of the dead were militants. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

Here's the latest:

Families mourn 4 killed in Israeli strike in southern Gaza

Mourners held a Muslim funeral service on Thursday for a Palestinian journalist who was killed in an Israeli airstrike in southern Gaza the previous day.

The strike hit a food charity known as Tikia in the Muwasi area in the city of Khan Younis Wednesday evening as people were waiting for the announcement of the ceasefire deal, according to the Naser hospital and the journalists' relatives.

The journalist, Ahmed al-Shaiyah, was killed in the strike along with three other people, according to the hospital, which received the bodies.

"Instead of receiving news of the truce, we received news of his martyrdom," the journalist's brother, Ismail al-Shaiyah, told the AP.

"We were waiting to rest and get rid of this nightmare, but my son was martyred in the last hour. He was gone from me," said Nagat Moammar, the mother of one of those killed.

China welcomes Gaza ceasefire, hopes it is 'comprehensive and permanent'

TAIWAN — Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said Thursday that Beijing welcomes the ceasefire deal and hopes it can be "effectively implemented so a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire in Gaza can be achieved."

China will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Gaza and make "positive efforts" for post-war reconstruction, he added.

"We also sincerely hope that the relevant parties will take the Gaza ceasefire as an opportunity to promote the easing of local tensions. China is willing to work with the international community to make unremitting efforts to promote peace and stability in the Middle East," Guo said.

Iran-backed militia will suspend operations against Israel, its leader says

Baghdad — The leader of the Iran-backed Iraqi militia Harkat al-Nujaba, Akram al-Kaabi, announced

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Thursday the suspension of the group's operations against Israel following the declaration of a Gaza ceasefire agreement but warned they could start again if there were violations of the truce.

In a statement, al-Kaabi congratulated the Palestinian people and "freedom-loving" individuals worldwide on "this important development."

"We will suspend our military operations against (Israel) in solidarity with the halt of operations in Palestine and to support the continuation of the ceasefire in Gaza, but let the occupying entity know that any foolishness from them in Palestine or the region will be met with a harsh response," he added.

Al-Kaabi said the group's missiles and drones "remain on permanent standby."

During the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, Iraqi militias launched a series of drone attacks targeting U.S. bases in Syria and Iraq as well as sites in Israel.

Syria's foreign minister calls for lifting of sanctions

ANKARA, Turkey — Syria's new foreign minister has called for a lifting of sanctions that were imposed on his country during former President Bashar Assad's rule.

In an interview with Turkish state broadcaster TRT that aired Thursday, Asaad al-Shibani also said Syria's new leadership wanted to "open a new page" in its diplomatic relations with countries that had cut diplomatic ties with Damascus during the Syrian civil war.

"The economic sanctions are one of the problems that the old regime left us," al-Shibani said in the interview, which aired a day after he met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other Turkish officials in Ankara. "We are saying that there is no longer any need for them. The old regime is gone."

"These sanctions must be lifted in order for people to live in better economic conditions and for security and economic stability to be achieved," he added.

Indonesia calls for the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state as it welcomes the ceasefire

JAKARTA — Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Ministry has welcomed the ceasefire and called for its immediate implementation, along with the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state.

"Peace in Palestine cannot be achieved without the end of Israel's occupation and the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state, in accordance with the two-state solution based on agreed international parameters," it said in a statement on Thursday.

Muslim-majority Indonesia has long been a strong supporter of Palestinians.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard says ceasefire is a 'great victory' for Hamas

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's Revolutionary Guard has applauded the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas and called it a "great victory" for Hamas and the resistance front.

"This great victory, like the 'al-Aqsa storm,' which was a multifaceted and irreparable defeat for the Zionists, did not bring any gains for the Zionist regime, and the resistance remained alive, thriving and strong," the Guard said in a statement on Thursday, referring to the Oct. 7, 2023 surprise attack that sparked the war.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei later said in a post on social platform X that the patience of the resistance front forced Israel to retreat.

"It will be written in books that there was a mob who once killed thousands of children & women in Gaza! Everyone will realize it was the patience of the people & steadfastness of Palestinian Resistance & Resistance Front that forced Zionist regime to retreat," he wrote in a post on the social platform X on Thursday.

Pakistan hails ceasefire but criticizes Israel for 'unprecedented loss of lives'

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs says that Islamabad welcomes the ceasefire deal reached between Israel and Hamas and calls for its immediate and full implementation.

"Indiscriminate use of force by Israeli occupation forces has caused unprecedented loss of lives and property and displacement of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian Palestinians. Israel's expansionist designs have destabilized the entire region," the ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

It added that Pakistan hopes the truce will lead to a permanent ceasefire and help scale up humanitarian assistance.

Japan and South Korea welcome Israel-Hamas ceasefire in Gaza

TOKYO — Japan and South Korea have separately welcomed the Israel-Hamas ceasefire in Gaza as a key step toward improving humanitarian conditions and calming the situation in the territory.

Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi, speaking to reporters in Tokyo on Thursday, urged Israel and Hamas to implement the agreement "sincerely and steadily" and he praised the United States, Egypt and Qatar for their work to achieve the deal.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, called for a "thorough and swift implementation" of the agreement so that "all hostages are released and the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip improves."

## **UK's Starmer in Kyiv for security talks with a pledge for a '100-year partnership' with Ukraine**

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — British Prime Minister Keir Starmer arrived in Ukraine's capital on Thursday with a pledge to help guarantee the country's security for a century, days before Donald Trump is sworn in as U.S. president.

The British government says Starmer and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will sign a "100-Year Partnership" treaty in Kyiv covering areas including defense, science, energy and trade.

Starmer's unannounced visit is his first trip to Ukraine since he took office in July. He visited the country in 2023 when he was opposition leader, and has twice held talks with Zelenskyy in London since becoming prime minister. The war will be three years old next month.

The Italian defense chief was also in Kyiv on Thursday, two days after Germany's defense minister visited and three days after Zelenskyy talked by phone with French President Emmanuel Macron.

The flurry of diplomatic activity came in the run-up to Trump's inauguration next Monday, which is expected to bring a departure from the outgoing U.S. administration's pledge to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes to defeat Russia. Trump has also indicated he wants Europe to shoulder more of the burden for helping Ukraine.

On a gray and frosty morning, Starmer was greeted at Kyiv railway station by Martin Harris, the U.K.'s ambassador to Ukraine, and Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Ukraine's envoy to London.

"We're a long way into this conflict," Starmer said. "We mustn't let up."

The U.K., one of Ukraine's biggest military backers, has pledged 12.8 billion pounds (\$16 billion) in military and civilian aid since Russia's full-scale invasion three years ago, and has trained more than 50,000 Ukrainian troops on British soil. Starmer is to announce another 40 million pounds (\$49 million) for Ukraine's postwar economic recovery.

But the U.K.'s role is dwarfed by that of the United States, and there is deep uncertainty over the fate of American support for Ukraine once Trump takes office on Jan. 20. The president-elect has balked at the cost of U.S. aid to Kyiv, says he wants to bring the war to a swift end and is planning to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, for whom he has long expressed admiration.

Kyiv's allies have rushed to flood Ukraine with as much support as possible before Trump's inauguration, with the aim of putting Ukraine in the strongest position possible for any future negotiations to end the war.

Zelenskyy has said that in any peace negotiation, Ukraine would need assurances about its future protection from its much bigger neighbor.

Britain says its 100-year pledge is part of that assurance and will help ensure Ukraine is "never again vulnerable to the kind of brutality inflicted on it by Russia," which seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and attempted a full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The deal commits the two sides to cooperate on defense — especially maritime security against Russian activity in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Sea of Azov — and on technology projects including drones, which have become vital weapons for both sides in the war. The treaty also includes a system to help track stolen Ukrainian grain exported by Russia from occupied parts of the country.

"Putin's ambition to wrench Ukraine away from its closest partners has been a monumental strategic failure. Instead, we are closer than ever, and this partnership will take that friendship to the next level," Starmer said ahead of the visit.

"This is not just about the here and now, it is also about an investment in our two countries for the



next century, bringing together technology development, scientific advances and cultural exchanges, and harnessing the phenomenal innovation shown by Ukraine in recent years for generations to come.”

Zelenskyy says he and Starmer also will discuss a plan proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron that would see troops from France and other Western countries stationed in Ukraine to oversee a ceasefire agreement.

Zelenskyy has said any such proposal should go alongside a timeline for Ukraine to join NATO. The alliance’s 32 member countries say that Ukraine will join one day, but not until after the war. Trump has appeared to sympathize with Putin’s position that Ukraine should not be part of NATO.

As the grinding war nears the three-year mark, both Russia and Ukraine are pushing for battlefield gains ahead of possible peace talks. Ukraine has started a second offensive in Russia’s Kursk region, where it is struggling to hang onto a chunk of territory it captured last year, and has stepped up drone and missile attacks on weapons sites and fuel depots inside Russia.

Moscow is slowly taking territory at the cost of high casualties along the 600-mile (1,000-kilometer) front line in eastern Ukraine and launching intense barrages at Ukraine’s energy system, seeking to deprive Ukrainians of heat and light in the depths of winter. A major Russian ballistic and cruise missile attack on regions across Ukraine on Wednesday compelled authorities to shut down the power grid in some areas.

## **Netanyahu says ‘last minute crisis’ with Hamas holding up approval of Gaza truce and hostage deal**

By TIA GOLDENBERG, WAFAA SHURAFU and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday that a “last minute crisis” with Hamas was holding up Israeli approval of a long-awaited agreement to pause the fighting in the Gaza Strip and release dozens of hostages. Israeli airstrikes meanwhile killed dozens of people across the war-ravaged territory.

Netanyahu’s office said his Cabinet won’t meet to approve the agreement until Hamas backs down, accusing it of renegeing on parts of the agreement in an attempt to gain further concessions, without elaborating.

Izzat al-Rishq, a senior Hamas official, said the militant group “is committed to the ceasefire agreement, which was announced by the mediators.”

U.S. President Joe Biden and key mediator Qatar announced the deal on Wednesday, which is aimed at releasing scores of hostages held in Gaza and winding down a 15-month war that has destabilized the Middle East and sparked worldwide protests.

Netanyahu’s office had earlier accused Hamas of backtracking on an earlier understanding that he said would give Israel a veto over which prisoners convicted of murder would be released in exchange for hostages.

Netanyahu has faced great domestic pressure to bring home the scores of hostages, but his far-right coalition partners have threatened to bring down his government if he makes too many concessions. He has enough opposition support to approve an agreement, but doing so would weaken his coalition and make early elections more likely.

A night of heavy Israeli strikes

Palestinians in Gaza reported heavy Israeli bombardment overnight as people were celebrating the ceasefire deal. In previous conflicts, both sides have stepped up military operations in the final hours before ceasefires as a way to project strength.

“We were expecting that the occupation would intensify the bombing, like they did every time there were reports on progress in the truce (negotiations),” said Mohammed Mahdi, who fled his home a few months ago and is sheltering in Gaza City.

Ahmed Mattar, who lives near the city’s Al-Ahly hospital, said he heard “massive airstrikes” overnight.

Gaza’s Health Ministry said at least 48 people were killed in Israeli strikes between midday Wednesday and Thursday morning. Around half of the dead were women and children, Zaher al-Wahedi, head of the ministry’s registration department, told The Associated Press.

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He said the toll could rise as hospitals update their records.

An Associated Press reporter on the Israeli side of the border near Gaza heard more airstrikes and artillery fire on Thursday.

A phased withdrawal and hostage release with potential pitfalls

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel in a surprise attack on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Some 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, and the Israeli military believes around a third and up to half of them are dead.

Under the deal reached Wednesday, 33 hostages are set to be released over the next six weeks in exchange for hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. Israeli forces will pull back from many areas, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians would be able to return to what's left of their homes, and there would be a surge of humanitarian assistance.

The remainder of the hostages, including male soldiers, are to be released in a second — and much more difficult — phase that will be negotiated during the first. Hamas has said it will not release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal, while Israel has vowed to keep fighting until it dismantles the group and to maintain open-ended security control over the territory.

Israel's offensive has killed over 46,000 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Health Ministry. It does not say how many of the dead were militants. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The war has destroyed vast areas of Gaza and displaced some 90% of its population of 2.3 million people, according to the United Nations.

Ceasefire leaves questions about Gaza's future unanswered

Mediators from Egypt, Qatar and the U.S. are expected to meet in Cairo on Thursday for talks on implementing the agreement. They have spent the past year holding indirect talks with Israel and Hamas that finally resulted in a deal after repeated setbacks.

President-elect Donald Trump's Mideast envoy joined the talks in the final weeks, and both the outgoing administration and Trump's team are taking credit for the breakthrough.

Many longer-term questions about postwar Gaza remain, including who will rule the territory or oversee the daunting task of reconstruction after a brutal conflict that has destabilized the broader Middle East and sparked worldwide protests.

Israel has come under heavy international criticism, including from its closest ally, the United States, over the civilian toll in Gaza. It also blames Hamas for the civilian casualties, accusing it of using schools, hospitals and residential areas for military purposes.

The International Court of Justice is investigating allegations brought by South Africa that Israel has committed genocide. The International Criminal Court, a separate body also based in The Hague, has issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu, his former defense minister and a Hamas commander for war crimes and crimes against humanity linked to the war.

Israel and the United States have condemned the actions taken by both courts.

Hamas, a militant group that does not accept Israel's existence, has come under overwhelming pressure from Israeli military operations, including the invasion of Gaza's largest cities and towns and the takeover of the border between Gaza and Egypt. Its top leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, who was believed to have helped mastermind the Oct. 7, 2023, attack, have been killed.

But its fighters have regrouped in some of the hardest-hit areas after the withdrawal of Israeli forces, raising the prospect of a prolonged insurgency if the war continues.

## Lawyers for detained South Korean president say he will reject questioning by investigators

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Lawyers representing South Korea's impeached president said Thursday he will refuse further questioning after being detained by anti-corruption officials over his ill-fated declaration of martial law last month, maintaining that the investigation is illegal.

President Yoon Suk Yeol exercised his right to remain silent as he faced more than 10 hours of questioning on Wednesday at the headquarters of the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, following a massive law enforcement operation to detain him at his official residence in Seoul.

Investigators are expected to move to place him under arrest in the coming days.

The anti-corruption agency, which is leading a joint investigation with the police and the military over whether Yoon's martial law declaration amounted to attempted rebellion, has 48 hours either to request a court order for his formal arrest or to release him.

Yoon's lawyers have argued that the detention warrant issued by the Seoul Western District Court is invalid and have asked the Seoul Central District Court to consider his release. The clock for the arrest warrant is on hold while the court reviews his petition, which can take up to 48 hours.

On Thursday, his lawyers formally claimed Wednesday's raid at the presidential residence which led to the detention of a head of state was illegal, in complaints filed with prosecutors.

Yoon didn't attend a hearing at the Central District Court on Thursday, which was part of the review over his detention warrant, due to security concerns, according to Seok Dong-hyeon, one of the president's lawyers.

It was expected that the decision could come sometime during the evening.

Hundreds of Yoon's supporters gathered in the streets near the court amid a heavy police presence, waving banners and chanting slogans calling for his release.

Yoon set off the country's most serious political crisis since its democratization in the late 1980s when he attempted to break through gridlock in legislation by declaring martial law and deploying troops around the National Assembly on Dec. 3. The standoff lasted only hours before lawmakers managed to get through the blockade and voted to lift the measure.

His presidential powers were suspended when the opposition-dominated assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14, accusing him of rebellion. His fate now rests with the Constitutional Court, which has begun deliberating on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reject the charges and reinstate him.

Yoon and his allies have defied efforts to investigate his role in the chaos of Dec. 3. He ignored requests to appear for questioning for weeks, remaining in his official residence to avoid detention as his lawyers turned away police, citing a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge — Yoon himself. They also said that the anti-corruption agency had no legal authority to investigate rebellion allegations.

Yoon also resisted one attempt to detain him as the presidential security service barricaded the residence. He was finally brought into custody after hundreds of anti-corruption investigators and police raided the presidential compound for some five hours in a second attempt.

In a video message recorded shortly before he was escorted to the headquarters of the anti-corruption agency, Yoon lamented that the "rule of law has completely collapsed in this country." He echoed the arguments of his lawyers that the anti-corruption agency does not have the authority to investigate his actions, but said he accepted detention to prevent violence.

The Constitutional Court rejected a request by Yoon's lawyers to postpone a hearing on his case scheduled for Thursday. It remains possible for Yoon to exercise his right to attend, even while under detention.

If a court grants a warrant for Yoon's formal arrest, the anti-corruption investigators can extend his detention to 20 days, during which it will transfer the case to public prosecutors for an indictment.

If prosecutors indict Yoon on the possible charges of rebellion and abuse of power, he could remain under arrest until the first court ruling, which is typically made within six months, said Park Sung-bae, an



attorney specializing in criminal law. Under South Korean law, the leader of a rebellion can face the death penalty or life imprisonment if convicted.

## Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin launches massive New Glenn rocket on first test flight and reaches orbit

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Blue Origin launched its massive new rocket on its first test flight Thursday, sending up a prototype satellite to orbit thousands of miles above Earth.

Named after the first American to orbit Earth, the New Glenn rocket blasted off from Florida, soaring from the same pad used to launch NASA's Mariner and Pioneer spacecraft a half-century ago.

Years in the making with heavy funding by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the 320-foot (98-meter) rocket carried an experimental platform designed to host satellites or release them into their proper orbits.

All seven main engines fired at liftoff as the rocket blazed through the predawn sky to the delight of spectators lining nearby beaches. Company employees erupted in cheers and frenzied applause once the craft successfully reached orbit 13 minutes later, a feat that drew quick praise from none other than SpaceX's Elon Musk.

Bezos took part in the action from Mission Control, standing with crossed arms as he gazed out a bank of windows and watched New Glenn soar.

"We did it! Orbital," Blue Origin's CEO Dave Limp said via X.

For this test, the satellite was meant to remain inside the second stage while circling Earth. The mission was expected to last six hours, with the second stage then placed in a safe condition to stay in a high, out-of-the-way orbit in accordance with NASA's practices for minimizing space junk.

The first-stage booster missed its landing on a barge in the Atlantic minutes after liftoff so it could be recycled, but the company stressed that the more important goal was for the test satellite to reach orbit. Bezos said before the flight it was "a little crazy" to even try to land the booster on the first try.

"Great night for Team Blue. On to spring and trying again on the landing," Limp said.

New Glenn was supposed to fly before dawn Monday, but ice buildup in critical plumbing caused a delay. The rocket is built to haul spacecraft and eventually astronauts to orbit and also the moon.

Founded 25 years ago by Bezos, Blue Origin has been launching paying passengers to the edge of space since 2021, including himself. The short hops from Texas use smaller rockets named after the first American in space, Alan Shepard. New Glenn, which honors John Glenn, is five times taller.

Blue Origin poured more than \$1 billion into New Glenn's launch site, rebuilding historic Complex 36 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. The pad is 9 miles (14 kilometers) from the company's control centers and rocket factory, outside the gates of NASA's Kennedy Space Center.

Blue Origin envisions six to eight New Glenn flights this year, if everything goes well, with the next one coming up this spring.

In a weekend interview, Bezos declined to disclose his personal investment in the program. He said he does not see Blue Origin in a competition with Musk's SpaceX, long the rocket-launching dominator.

"There's room for lots of winners" Bezos said from the rocket factory on Sunday evening, adding that this was the "very, very beginning of this new phase of the space age, where we're all going to work together as an industry ... to lower the cost of access to space."

New Glenn is the latest in a series of big, new rockets to launch in recent years, including United Launch Alliance's Vulcan, Europe's upgraded Ariane 6 and NASA's Space Launch System or SLS, the space agency's successor to the Saturn V for sending astronauts to the moon.

The biggest rocket of all, at approximately 400 feet (123 meters), is SpaceX's Starship. Musk said the seventh test flight of the full rocket could occur later Thursday from Texas. He hopes to repeat what he pulled off in October, catching the returning booster at the launch pad with giant mechanical arms.

Starship is what NASA plans to use to land astronauts on the moon later this decade. The first two moon landings under the space agency's Artemis program, which follows the Apollo missions of the 1960s and

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1970s, will see crews descending from lunar orbit to the surface in Starships.

Blue Origin's lander, dubbed Blue Moon, will make its debut on the third lunar touchdown by astronauts.

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson pushed for competing moon landers similar to the strategy to hire two companies to ferry astronauts to and from the International Space Station. Nelson will step down when President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Monday.

Trump has tapped tech billionaire Jared Isaacman to run NASA. Isaacman, who has twice rocketed into orbit on his own privately financed SpaceX flights, must be approved by the Senate.

New Glenn's debut was supposed to send twin spacecraft to Mars for NASA. But the space agency pulled them from last October's planned flight when it became clear the rocket wouldn't be ready in time. They will still fly on a New Glenn rocket, but not until spring at the earliest. The two small spacecraft, named Escapade, are meant to study the Martian atmosphere and magnetic environment while orbiting the red planet.

## He left his LA-area home to cover the wildfires. But the flames were barreling toward his front door

By RYAN PEARSON Associated Press

ALTADENA, Calif. (AP) — The warnings began on Saturday, Jan. 4.

Our neighbor, a volunteer at the local sheriff's station, texted that we should "batten down the hatches" for a "big windstorm." From there, things moved fast.

On Sunday, I put on a bowtie and tux to cover the red carpet at the Golden Globes. Tuesday morning, I drove from my home in Altadena toward the massive Pacific Palisades wildfire to shoot video for our coverage. I asked my wife, Meg, to ready the two cat carriers and shoot video of our home for insurance purposes.

Just in case.

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — Ryan Pearson, a Los Angeles-based entertainment video editor for The Associated Press, lost his home to the California wildfires last week.

On my way home, I saw orange glowing smoke. A colleague texted that there was another fire in Altadena. To get a closer look, I parked at a gas station across the street from a place called the Bunny Museum. Our favorite new pizza place, Side Pie, was on the other side of the intersection. A cafe called Fox's, open since 1955, was just down the street.

Less than an hour after the fire had started, flames were ripping strong along the mountain above Eaton Canyon. I wore a KN95 mask and ski goggles. The fire was probably still three miles from our home. But the Santa Anas were blowing at a level I'd never felt before.

I went home and gave Meg the news: We needed to pack and get out.

Our daughter, Reese, was away on a school trip. We took maybe an hour, which felt like both five minutes and an entire day. I picked out an Ozomatli sweatshirt I'd just gotten for Christmas from my closet, some jeans, vitamins, a portable speaker. Meg packed up her stuff and Reese's essential items — school backpack, a few stuffed animals. I started packing wine bottles, thought, "What am I doing?" and put them back. We got passports and birth certificates. A litter box and some wet food for the cats. We loaded both cars.

Did anybody else on the street need our help? I asked our neighbor. Her next-door neighbor did, so we went over and I helped Donna get her husband, Phil, from his wheelchair into their Subaru.

I snapped one last picture from our driveway — our house with a reddish-orange haze behind it. With that, we headed off into the night — into a future of flames and smoke and loss that would change us forever.

It was a backdrop to our family's growing history

This was our home:

We first encountered Altadena when Reese attended the Summerkids camp there. I felt the city's hustle-bustle melt away each morning that I drove her past the towering pines, deodar cedars and maple trees

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that lined the calm streets. When Reese was 5, we found a three-bedroom, two-bath home that had a backyard view of the San Gabriel Mountains and a tree out front with thick branches perfect for hanging a swing.

Built in 1958, it had been owned for years by our new next-door neighbor. Megan and I both loved the clerestory windows, hardwood floors and wood beams that crossed the ceiling; they'd been painted brown, but we stripped the paint to expose the natural wood.

We loved the mixture of people around us, nods and greetings from neighbors when we walked down our sidewalk-less street. Along with a deep-rooted Black community, the hush and space and trees and birds and relatively affordable homes have long drawn musicians, artists and artisans from the LA area's more-blue-collar-than-you-think creative community.

When the weather was right, I walked down the driveway and hiked uphill to the trail leading up to Echo Mountain and eventually to Inspiration Point. It was so accessible, I called it "my mountain." On Echo Mountain you could find the remains of a resort and hotel that burned in fires in the early 1900s. Once, when I hiked up with Reese, she and a friend dug in the dirt and uncovered pieces of a pot that we carried down, cleaned up and tried to piece back together.

Two years ago, a family moved in next door to us with two daughters. They all became like sisters, and the girls would climb atop our garage to watch fireworks on the Fourth of July, play ping-pong in the backyard or sit in Reese's room and play Roblox. We adopted Luke and Archie, our two orange tabby cats. The cats, with us before the pandemic, helped get us through that hard time (including a few weeks of lockdown with nearby fires on the mountain keeping us indoors for days on end). Meg envisioned eventually building a "catio" for them outside.

After Meg's father died, we used her inheritance to remodel. Meg modernized and styled every corner while retaining the house's midcentury character. She curated the artwork, paintings, photographs, wood sculptures and trinkets from places we'd visited in the before times.

One Christmas, Meg surprised me by converting the garage into a man cave/study with a TV, elliptical and spin bike and her dad's old roll-top desk. We put sheds in the back for storage: photo albums from the time before digital photos, holiday ornaments, scrapbooks with my earliest newspaper clippings and Meg's elementary school class photos and report cards. All now gone.

I ended up working from home a lot and walked a three-mile loop through the neighborhood that gave me a regular view of the community's variety: yards filled with cars in various states of disrepair. People in cowboy hats riding horses down the pavement. Ultra-modern new homes with glass walls. Coyotes — and dog walkers who carried thick sticks to fend them off. Rainbow flags and "In this house ..." signs and Black Lives Matter signs and Harris signs and a couple Trump signs. A cul-de-sac on a hillside with a house where a motion-activated robot voice told me I was being recorded every time I walked past.

Works of humans and works of nature. The predictable and the unexpected. The entire tapestry. All of these things, and more, made it our home.

Surveying what was left (not much)

The night we left last week, we went to stay the night with friends in northeast LA's San Rafael Hills. I woke up at about 6 a.m. and headed back to Altadena.

From the freeway, it resembled the scene in "Fury Road" where there's a swirling wall of orange as the vehicles enter the sandstorm. But I drove into an all-black cloud of smoke instead.

Homes were on fire just down from the always busy McDonald's. I stopped to send in live video from my iPhone because I knew I couldn't get a cell signal up by my house.

My house. Our house. What had become of it?

I tried to drive up to check. I turned back when the smoke got too thick to see the street and I was encircled by flames.

After a while, I headed over to the evacuation site at Pasadena Convention Center. It was fascinating to watch the center evolve: at first just people wandering in and sitting against the wall, then Red Cross volunteers arriving, paramedics pushing folks from nursing homes on hospital beds, people giving out free

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food from World Central Kitchen and Chick-fil-A.

We interviewed evacuees for a bit. When enough time had passed, I drove back up Marengo to check on our house.

I swerved to avoid burning trees in the road. Debris and destruction surrounded me. Our street was blocked by a burning downed electrical pole.

I didn't even get out of my car. I just looked long enough to absorb it: Like nearly the entire community, our whole block had burned. Reese's tree swing and the backyard ping-pong table were still there, plus our chimney and fireplace, with brick painted white. Everything else — everything in this place where we had chosen to live our lives and raise our child — was simply gone, as if it had never been there in the first place. But I knew better. I had lived it.

Driving back down the hill, I cried.

## As flames linger, talk turns to rebuilding Los Angeles neighborhoods leveled by wildfires

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD and JAIMIE DING Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Staggered after one of the most destructive natural disasters in Southern California history, thousands of heartbroken families, burned-out business owners and beleaguered leaders across Los Angeles County are beginning to ponder another monumental task: rebuilding what was lost and charting a path forward.

Alex Rosewood and nearly her entire family in Altadena, northeast of Los Angeles, lost their homes — her father, whom she and her husband were living with, and her aunt, uncle and cousin next door.

Lost were the keepsakes of a lifetime of family relationships: Rosewood's grandmother's playing cards and unfinished quilt. Her wedding photos. Heirlooms from her grandfather, who served in the Navy. All things she wished she could have saved in their frantic flight as smoke turned the sky gray and her cousin's house began to catch fire.

But Altadena remains home.

"We all plan to rebuild, for sure," she said.

The traumatized region made it through Wednesday without another major fire breaking out, after forecasters had warned of another round of particularly dangerous winds.

Yet even with flames still leaping in two of the largest fires, which have killed 25 and destroyed more than 12,000 structures, government officials talked Wednesday of the epic job that will unspool over years: clearing Altadena, Pacific Palisades and other ravaged communities of toxic ash and debris, then rebuilding homes, restaurants, schools, boutiques, banks and houses of worship — all while finding financing for it all.

Because of the ongoing firefighting battle and the likelihood of dangerous refuse in burned areas, many anxious residents have yet to return to see what, if anything, is left of their homes. The losses range from multimillion-dollar ocean-view mansions to modest homes that once welcomed returning World War II GIs.

While talking of rebuilding can be a comfort for those eager for a return to normalcy, much remains unknown.

What will the new neighborhoods look like? Will fire-resistant materials and designs be used? Are more and wider roads needed to allow swifter evacuations and easier access for fire engines during future infernos?

In the coveted seaside hills, there always is the impulse to rebuild after fires — it's happened many times. But there are inevitable questions about whether it's sensible to keep rebuilding in known high-risk areas, especially in an age of climate change.

"It's going to be a while before we can get in there and build anything," said Michael Hricak, an adjunct professor of architecture at the University of Southern California, referring to the dangerous chemicals and rubble left behind.

As for new construction, "it's not being tougher than Mother Nature. It's being somewhat respectful of Mother Nature and knowing what the challenges are."

"Are we just inviting another problem down the road?" Hricak said.



The fires struck at a challenging time, with the city in the midst of a post-pandemic transition that has reordered work life and left many downtown buildings with high vacancy rates.

Meanwhile, planning is underway to host the 2028 Olympics and the region contends with perhaps the nation's worst homeless crisis — the latter had been Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass' priority before the fires broke out last week.

The government has not yet released damage estimates, but private firms have expect they will climb into the tens of billions and it could become the costliest fire disaster in U.S. history.

The Northern California community of Paradise, where the state's deadliest wildfire killed 85 people in 2018, offers a glimpse into how painstaking and difficult recovery and rebuilding can be.

That fire destroyed about 11,000 homes — some 90% of the community's structures. Four years later, as of last November, just about 3,000 homes and apartments have been rebuilt.

The town, which previously a population of 26,000, has struggled under high construction costs, expensive insurance premiums and the uncertainty over funds to be paid to people who lost homes by Pacific Gas & Electric, which was found liable for sparking the devastating blaze.

In Los Angeles — a city notorious for dense layers of bureaucracy and government red tape — Bass issued an executive order this week intended to clear the way for residents to rebuild quickly.

"As we prepare to make it through the rest of this emergency, we also have to start putting in place what we need to do to rebuild," the mayor said Wednesday.

The federal government already has approved spending \$100 million to remove paints, cleaners, asbestos, batteries and other household waste from the rubble before crews can begin clearing debris. Robert Fenton Jr., a regional administrator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, called the plan a first step to getting people back in homes.

Elsewhere, the agency is handing out assistance to help people with short-term lodging.

Peter Dolan, who lived in Santa Monica, said he and his best friend both lost their apartments on the same day. They visited the disaster recovery center together to figure out their next steps.

"This is what I got," the 55-year-old said, pointing to his outfit: a leather jacket, shorts and sneakers, the clothes he had on the day the flames hit.

Dolan didn't have renter's insurance, but he was able to apply for FEMA assistance and thinks he'll get \$750 and possibly his stay at a hotel covered for a few months.

Michele Baron and her daughter were among those who came to a recovery center in West Los Angeles to figure out how to get new birth certificates and social security cards.

Baron lost nearly everything when her Pacific Palisades apartment of 21 years burned to the ground. Her daughter made her way back to the property and salvaged a ring and pottery she made as a child.

Despite the trauma, the plan is to stay put.

"Now that I can go anywhere, I kind of don't want to," Baron said.

## **The Kellogg Foundation CEO shares her own life story to foster more racial healing**

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

La June Montgomery Tabron believes many Americans have a desire for racial healing. They just don't know how to start.

"It may sound mysterious or challenging," said Montgomery Tabron, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's first woman and first Black CEO. "But it's actually quite simple."

It starts, she says, with a conversation — with the sharing of stories between people of different backgrounds so they can better understand each other. So when Montgomery Tabron set out to explain the foundation's "Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation" work and its creation of the annual National Day of Racial Healing, set for Jan. 21 this year, she realized she should do it by sharing her own story.

That's what she does in a pair of books released earlier this month — "How We Heal: A Journey Toward

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Truth, Racial Healing and Community Transformation from the Inside Out,” a memoir tracing the steps from her Detroit childhood to leading one of philanthropy’s most prestigious foundations, and “Our Differences Make Us Stronger,” a children’s book about connecting with others outside our comfort zones.

“I wanted to use the methodology of healing that we use, which is through storytelling,” she said. “I think people relate through stories. And this became a book of very interconnected stories.”

The Associated Press recently spoke with Montgomery Tabron about her books and the Kellogg Foundation’s racial healing work. The interview was edited for clarity and length.

You write about how racial healing work in Buffalo, New York, before the racist mass shooting at a supermarket there in 2022 kept the aftermath from getting worse.

Yes. There were several places across our portfolio where we had the same reaction: Had it not been for the healing work, a situation could have escalated, particularly in Buffalo. Not only was that work about connecting people, it also was about affirming everyone as part of the process, affirming everyone’s value. They felt it was a moment to show up in a very different way that honors healing. It was about the grounding in their humanity and using those principles of trust and mutual respect and shared understanding as a way to express their own grief and healing in that moment.

How does it feel for you to have your story out in the world now?

It was a process. In many ways, it was cathartic because my own healing journey happened also during the writing of the book. I touched on moments in my life that I had not totally processed or really fully healed from. There’s nothing like going through the healing journey that you’re writing about. I think it brings a level of authenticity to the writing itself.

Your children’s book about feeling like you didn’t fit in – that had to be a tough memory to share.

It was, but that made it even more important for me to do so. I wish I had such a book at that stage of my life, so I’m telling the story. But more importantly, I’m sharing the power of healing with a very young audience that I believe will help them navigate the nation and the world.

You’re giving them a way to take control of a situation that may make them feel helpless.

Teaching young people how to communicate across differences and showing them that it can result in strong relationships and shared understanding is the beginning of the work. It’s work that, for those who practice, can lead to making connections and building strong and trusting relationships. I hope we also find that we (adults) can do it as well. It’s not too late to have these conversations, and, particularly in this moment, is imperative that we have them.

Considering how corporations and other organizations are pulling back on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, do you think that the climate is still right for this kind of work to be done?

I think it is calling for this more than ever. When I think about the attacks on DEI, I attribute the attacks to a lack of understanding, a lack of shared purpose and an empathy gap. And what the book speaks about is exactly how those types of disagreements need to be reconciled and can be reconciled through a healing process and healing conversation. I believe that through dialogue we can come closer to understanding why there would be such an attack and have a conversation about whether there is shared faith underneath that would align us and take us to a different place, where you resolve the issue. So I look at that particular issue and say it needs a healing framework just as much as many of the most important conversations we’re having in this nation right now.

How do you hope people commemorate this year’s National Racial Healing Day?

What we’ve always hoped is for people to take action. And we hope that both books can be used as tools to show what action looks like. We want people to begin to not only hear and understand my story but see their story in the book and understand that part of this process is telling your story and having comfort in telling your truth, regardless of whether it may or may not align with someone else’s story. We then want them to take collective action. What can we do together within our family, within our community, within our organization, across our friend groups? What can we do to help others and join in to help others see through conversation and dialogue that there are other pathways that maybe they haven’t envisioned themselves?

## Many colleges are settling antisemitism cases. Some Republicans blast 'toothless' agreements

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many colleges accused of tolerating antisemitism on their campuses have been settling with federal civil rights investigators in the weeks before the inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump, who urged a tougher response to campus protests against the war in Gaza.

By settling with the Education Department, the schools close the cases against them as long as they meet the terms of the agreements, which mostly have required training, policy updates and reviews of past complaints.

But many colleges at the center of the highest-profile cases — including Columbia and Cornell — face investigations that remain unresolved and could run the risk of harsher penalties after Trump takes office. Trump has not said what he would like to see come of the investigations, but he has threatened to revoke federal money for schools that fall short of his demands.

"Colleges will and must end the antisemitic propaganda or they will lose their accreditation and federal support," Trump said in a virtual address to Jewish donors in September. "No money will go to them if they don't."

Settlements with the Education Department's civil rights branch have piled up in recent weeks with the University of Washington, the University of California, Johns Hopkins, Rutgers and the University of Cincinnati. Those follow other voluntary agreements signed by Brown and Temple universities, along with the University of Michigan.

The flurry of recent deals has drawn outrage from Republicans in Congress who say the Biden administration is letting colleges off the hook.

Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Mich., chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, said the settlements are "toothless" and fail to hold colleges accountable for permitting antisemitism. In a statement, he said the Trump administration should "examine these agreements and explore options to impose real consequences on schools."

One of the committee's priorities will be "calling out woke higher education institutions — especially those that allow antisemitism to run rampant," Walberg said at a Wednesday meeting.

More than 100 U.S. colleges and school districts remain under investigation over alleged antisemitism or Islamophobia following the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas on Israel. That includes Columbia, Cornell, Yale, Princeton and other prestigious schools targeted by a Republican campaign against antisemitism.

The Department of Education investigations stem from complaints that schools violated Title VI, which bars discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color and national origin at colleges and universities that receive federal funding.

Several colleges facing investigations declined to comment on their status.

Presidents of several universities were called before Congress last year over their handling of pro-Palestinian protests, contributing to the resignations of Claudine Gay at Harvard, Liz Magill at Penn and Minouche Shafik at Columbia.

The vast majority of Education Department civil rights investigations end with voluntary deals negotiated with schools. If they can't reach a settlement, the agency can refer the case to the Justice Department or move to cut off the school's federal money — an extreme sanction that has almost never been used.

Whether Trump pushes the Education Department to use the so-called "nuclear option" is still in question. But without a deal before Jan. 20, colleges raise the risk that they could become test cases for Trump, who has been openly hostile to universities that he sees as hotbeds of liberalism.

Losing access to federal money is usually seen as a death sentence for colleges, though if there's any exception it would be Harvard and its \$53 billion endowment, the wealthiest college in the world. A total cutoff would also mean that students could not use federal financial aid at the university.

It couldn't happen instantly, however. The Education Department can terminate federal money only if it fails to gain voluntary compliance from the school and only if it's approved by an administrative law judge.

There would have to be a hearing, and there would be opportunities for the school to appeal the decision.

As Republicans take control of both chambers of Congress, there's also a renewed push for legislation on the subject. A December report coordinated by House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., found that colleges across the U.S. failed to stop antisemitism amid last year's demonstrations, highlighting cases at Harvard, Columbia and UCLA.

The report called for new legislation "to support students and ensure accountability," and it endorsed legislation to cut off federal money at schools that support divestment from Israel. It called on the executive branch to "aggressively enforce" civil rights laws, saying universities that fail to curb antisemitism "are unfit stewards of taxpayer dollars should be treated accordingly."

## **Windy, flame-fanning weather eases up as progress made on LA-area fires**

By JAIMIE DING, CHRISTOPHER WEBER and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The windy, flame-fanning weather that put the nation's second most-populous metropolitan region on edge eased up Wednesday as firefighters made significant gains against the two massive wildfires burning around Los Angeles.

A "Particularly Dangerous Situation" red-flag warning expired without causing explosive fire growth as feared, though forecasters said gusty winds could linger into early Thursday, mostly in the mountains. Temperatures were predicted to drop, and a deep marine layer was expected to move in over the weekend, according to the National Weather Service in Los Angeles.

Those improved conditions should help fire crews make even more headway and allow residents to return to their neighborhoods to begin rebuilding.

But Santa Ana winds could return early next week.

"Good news: We are expecting a much-needed break from the fire weather concerns to close this week," the weather service posted on social media Wednesday afternoon. "Bad News: Next week is a concern. While confident that we will NOT see a repeat of last week, dangerous fire weather conditions are expected."

Still, firefighters and police faced new challenges. Since the beginning of the outbreak last week, authorities have arrested about half a dozen people accused of setting new, small fires that were quickly knocked down.

One suspect admitted starting a fire in a tree "because he liked the smell of burning leaves," Los Angeles Police Chief Jim McDonnell said. Another said "she enjoyed causing chaos and destruction," the chief said Wednesday.

Authorities have not determined a cause for the major blazes in what is on track to become the nation's costliest fire disaster, with at least 25 people dead and thousands of homes destroyed.

Officials facing questions over response

LA officials, who already were criticized for hydrants running dry, faced more questions. Fire officials chose not to double the number of firefighters on duty last Tuesday as winds increased, and only five of more than 40 engines were deployed, according to internal records obtained by The Los Angeles Times and interviews with fire commanders.

The department also did not call in off-duty firefighters until after the Palisades Fire erupted.

Los Angeles Fire Chief Kristin Crowley defended her decisions. "I can tell you and stand before you, we did everything in our capability to surge where we could," she told a news conference.

Crowley said that despite "limited capacity" within the department, crews were able to respond swiftly by calling for assistance from other agencies and seeking help from off-duty firefighters.

Increasing containment on the biggest fires

More manageable winds Tuesday allowed firefighters to make gains on the two most destructive fires. Almost half of the Eaton Fire just north of LA was contained, and one-fifth of the fire that destroyed much



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of the seaside neighborhood of Pacific Palisades was surrounded.

Both of those broke out Jan. 7 in conditions similar to what was expected Wednesday, though winds were higher last week when they pushed flames at remarkable speed and carried fire-sparking embers for miles.

Packed and ready to go

Weary and anxious residents said they were ready to make a hasty escape amid the threat from intense winds.

Javier Vega, who said he feels like he has been "sleeping with one eye open," and his girlfriend have planned out how they can quickly pack up their two cats, eight fish and leopard gecko if they get orders to evacuate.

"Typically on any other night, hearing helicopters flying overhead from midnight to 4 in the morning, that would drive anyone crazy," Vega said. But figuring they were helping firefighters to keep the flames from threatening their neighborhood, he explained, "it was actually soothing for me to go to sleep."

Long road of rebuilding ahead

Los Angeles authorities promised to do everything they could to help people recover and rebuild. But Mayor Karen Bass acknowledged there is no way to replace much of what has been lost.

"You've lost memories, family. All of the experiences that took place there are gone, and gone unexpectedly, gone rapidly," Bass said.

This week the mayor issued an executive order to eliminate red tape and allow people to live in tiny homes and trailers while they rebuild.

Different kind of disaster

Thomas Martin works with Calvary Disaster Relief, a group that responds to disasters all over the world. Most times, he shows up after floods, tornadoes and hurricanes, helping people repair their roofs and rip out soggy carpet.

"This is different," he said. "This is total devastation. There's nothing much we can do other than pray for the folks."

Wildfires on the rise across LA

With almost no rain in more than eight months, the brush-filled region has had more than a dozen wildfires this year, mostly in the greater Los Angeles area.

The four largest ones have scorched more than 63 square miles (163 square kilometers), roughly three times the size of Manhattan.

Searching for victims

Nearly 30 people were still missing, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said Wednesday.

Deputies have searched more than 5,500 properties for victims from the Eaton Fire and hoped to finish in that area by Thursday, he said.

One of the victims of the Eaton Fire, 95-year-old Dalyce Curry, loved wearing big hair and makeup, her family said. She hobnobbed with stars from old Hollywood, appearing as an extra with Diana Ross in "Lady Sings the Blues" and in 1956's "The Ten Commandments."

Entertainment community responds

The Grammy awards ceremony will happen Feb. 2 and focus on helping the city's recovery.

"In challenging times, music has the power to heal, comfort and unite like nothing else," Recording Academy CEO Harvey Mason Jr. and Tammy Hurt, chair of the board of trustees, said in a letter sent to academy members that was obtained by The Associated Press.

## **March Madness will pay women's teams under a new structure approved by the NCAA**

By TERESA M. WALKER AP Sports Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Women's basketball teams finally will be paid for playing games in the NCAA Tournament each March just like the men have for years under a plan approved Wednesday at the NCAA convention.

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The unanimous vote by NCAA membership was met by a round of applause both inside the ballroom and around the sport. This was the final step toward a pay structure for women playing in March Madness after the Division I Board of Governors voted unanimously for the proposal in August.

NCAA President Charlie Baker joined others in giving credit for the creation of a performance fund to those who came before and helped build women's basketball.

Now comes more work and continued investment to grow women's basketball even more.

"That's the part I hope, that someday down the road, we all will have someone say about us that they sit on the shoulders of the work that we did," Baker said.

South Carolina coach Dawn Staley, whose Gamecocks went undefeated winning last year's national championship and her third overall, said her first thought hearing of the vote was a simple "YES!"

"This continues our fight to lift women's basketball to historic levels," Staley said. "I appreciate the decision by the Kaplan Hecker and Fink law firm to include the lack of units in their report as a key issue holding women's basketball back from capitalizing on the historic viewership and quality of the product on the court."

So-called performance units, which represent revenue, will be given to women's teams playing in the tournament starting this year, the event's 43rd edition. A team that reaches the Final Four could bring its conference roughly \$1.26 million over the next three years in financial performance rewards.

In the first year, \$15 million will be awarded to teams out of the fund, which is 26% of the women's basketball media revenue deal. That will grow to \$25 million, or 41% of the revenue, by 2028. The 26% is on par with what men's basketball teams received the first year the performance units program was established.

Teams making this March's NCAA Tournament won't actually be paid until the organization has a full tournament of data available.

Still, North Carolina coach Courtney Banghart, also is president of the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, called postseason units a reward for the investment by athletic departments in women's basketball.

"The long awaited, hard fought for and well-earned day is here," Banghart said. "I am so grateful for the effort of so many to bring this reality to our sport. Women's basketball is more popular than ever before, seats are filled, arenas are sold out, and games are on national TV almost every night."

UConn guard Paige Bueckers agreed that this is a huge step toward helping this sport grow.

"Just for women to capitalize on what we brought to the sport and what we do for just sports in general and entertainment and just to be able to be a part of that, we're extremely grateful," Bueckers said.

The proposal was broken into two votes on Wednesday, with the first on the payments being earned starting with the next NCAA Tournament. That received one "no" vote, though the vote to establish the women's fund itself got a "yes" from all 292 members voting.

The women's March Madness plan is similar to the men's basketball unit program. Each of 32 conferences with an automatic bid receive a unit, and additional units will be rewarded for teams receiving at-large bids to the 68-team field.

The longer a school's tournament run lasts, the more units the school's conference receives. Conferences decide the distribution of unit revenue to each of its members. Each unit was worth about \$2 million for the 2024 men's tournament.

Men's basketball teams now receive 24% of the media rights deal, which is \$8.8 billion over eight years, starting this year. Women's basketball is valued at \$65 million per tournament in the NCAA's new media rights deal with ESPN — roughly 10 times more than in the contract that ends this year.

The women have a higher percentage of the media revenue deal to bolster the value of each performance unit.

The NCAA sharing March Madness revenue with its member schools has long been a feature of the men's tournament. The 2018 tournament, for example, brought in \$844.3 million in television and marketing rights, the vast majority from a contract with CBS and Turner Sports to televise the games.

Most of the money flows through the NCAA to conferences and then back to member schools, more than 300 of which field Division I basketball teams eligible to play in the tournament. The schools mostly

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reinvest in athletics, from scholarships for athletes in all sports to coaching salaries, training facilities, stadiums, ballparks and arenas.

Julie Roe Lach, commissioner of the Horizon League and a member of the Division I women's basketball oversight committee, called the creation of the fund a "huge step" not just for women's basketball but women's sports in general toward the goal of gender equity. Lach said they can't simply celebrate this moment, not with women's college basketball "skyrocketing in popularity."

"The women's basketball funds are unrestricted, meaning conferences and institutions can choose how we want to invest these extra dollars," said Lach, who noted the Horizon League has policies ready to reward programs for strong schedules, performance and postseason success.

UConn coach Geno Auriemma, with his 11 national titles, said Wednesday night this capitalizes on the money coming from broadcast rights and other corporate investments. The Big East had been investing and sharing revenue since the league had 16 teams, knowing that NCAA money for men's teams meant big chunks of revenue for small athletic departments. Auriemma said this gives women's teams the chance to earn money for their schools now as well.

"I don't think you could ever say you can be totally self supportive," Auriemma said. "I don't think anybody thinks that, but it's a statement that they made today about where women's basketball fits into the big picture of college athletics."

The women's tournament is coming off its most successful year ever, which included a record audience of 18.7 million for the title game won by South Carolina over Iowa and Caitlin Clark, the highest for a basketball broadcast of any kind in five years.

It outdrew the men's championship game — UConn winning its second consecutive title with a victory over Purdue — by nearly 3 million viewers. The women's tournament also had record attendance.

NCAA notes

In another milestone, the Division I approved a championship for women's wrestling. Divisions II and III will vote on adding it in the coming days. ... SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said any changes to the College Football Playoff would need unanimous approval. The change most likely to be considered right away would be a shift in the seeding. The top four seeds in this year's tournament all received byes and all lost their first games. ... Discussions about new rules that would give athletes five years to complete five years of eligibility continue. DI council chair Josh Whitman, the AD at Illinois, said "one of the attractive elements of, whether it's a 5-for-5, or whatever it may end up being, is maybe we can create something that's simpler, it's cleaner, it's easier to understand."

## **Biden warns in farewell address that an 'oligarchy' of ultrarich in US threatens future of democracy**

By ZEKE MILLER, CHRIS MEGERIAN and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden used his farewell address to the nation Wednesday to deliver stark warnings about an "oligarchy" of the ultra-wealthy taking root in the country and a "tech-industrial complex" that is infringing on Americans' rights and the future of democracy.

Speaking from the Oval Office as he prepares to hand over power Monday to President-elect Donald Trump, Biden seized what is likely to be his final opportunity to address the country before he departs the White House to spotlight the accumulation of power and wealth in the U.S. among just a small few.

"Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms, and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead," Biden said, drawing attention to "a dangerous concentration of power in the hands of a few ultra-wealthy people and the dangerous consequences if their abuse of power is left unchecked."

Invoking President Dwight Eisenhower's warnings about the rise of a military-industrial complex when he left office in 1961, Biden added, "I'm equally concerned about the potential rise of a tech-industrial complex that could pose real dangers to our country as well."

Biden used his 15-minute address to offer a model for a peaceful transfer of power and — without

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mentioning Trump by name — raise concerns about his successor.

It marked a striking admonition by Biden, who is departing the national stage after more than 50 years in public life, as he has struggled to define his legacy and to steel the country against the return of Trump to the Oval Office. This time, the president, who has repeatedly called Trump a threat to the nation's system of governance, went even further, warning Americans to be on guard for their freedoms and their institutions during a turbulent era of rapid technological and economic change.

Biden sounded the alarm about oligarchy as some of the world's richest individuals and titans of its technology industry have flocked to Trump's side in recent months, particularly after his November victory. Billionaire Elon Musk spent more than \$100 million helping Trump get elected, and executives like Meta's Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon's Jeff Bezos have donated to Trump's inaugural committee and made pilgrimages to Trump's private club in Florida for audiences with the president-elect as they seek to ingratiate themselves with his administration and shape its policies.

Biden's speech in the Oval Office is the latest in a series of remarks on domestic policy and foreign relations he has delivered that are intended to cement his legacy and reshape Americans' grim views on his term. Earlier in the day, he heralded a long awaited ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, which could end more than a year of bloodshed in the Middle East.

"It'll take time to feel the full impact of what we've done together but the seeds are planted and they'll grow and they'll bloom for decades to come," Biden said. It was a tacit acknowledgement that many Americans say they have yet to feel the impact of his trillions of dollars spent on domestic initiatives.

At the same time that Biden was criticizing social media companies for retreating from fact-checking on their platforms, Trump's incoming communications director and press secretary were sharing posts on X that falsely claimed the president had delivered a prerecorded speech. Biden has blamed his poor standing with the public on misinformation on social media and the challenges he has faced reaching voters in the disaggregated modern media ecosystem.

Biden offered his own set of solutions for the problems that he laid out: change the tax code to ensure billionaires "pay their fair share," eliminate the flow of hidden sources of money into political campaigns, establish 18-year term limits for members of the Supreme Court and ban members of Congress from trading stocks. His policy prescriptions come as his political capital is at its nadir as Biden prepares to exit the national stage, and after he has done little to advance those causes during his four years in power at the White House.

Federal Reserve data shows the wealthiest 0.1% of the country combined holds more than five times the wealth of the bottom 50% combined.

Biden isn't leaving the White House in the way that he hoped. He tried to run for reelection, brushing aside voters' concerns that he would be 86 years old at the end of a second term. After stumbling in a debate with Trump, Biden dropped out of the race under pressure from his own party, and Vice President Kamala Harris became the Democratic nominee.

The speech Wednesday night capped not just Biden's presidency but his five decades in politics. He was once the country's youngest senator at 30 years old after being elected to represent his home state of Delaware in 1972.

Biden pursued the presidency in 1988 and 2008 before becoming Barack Obama's vice president. After serving two terms, Biden was considered to be retired from politics. But he returned to center stage as the unlikely Democratic nominee in 2020, successfully ousting Trump from the White House.

As he highlighted his own commitment to ensuring a peaceful transition of power, including holding briefings with Trump's team and coordinating with the incoming administration on the Middle East negotiations, Biden also called for a constitutional amendment to end immunity for sitting presidents. That came in response to a Supreme Court ruling last year that granted Trump sweeping protections from criminal liability over his role in trying to overturn his 2020 defeat to Biden.

Biden spoke from the Resolute desk, photos of his family visible behind him in the Oval Office. First lady Jill Biden, his son Hunter, some of his grandchildren, Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, sat watching.

As Biden spoke about Harris, saying she'd become like family, the first lady reached over and grabbed



her hand.

## Five things to know about Biden's farewell address that also served as a warning to the country

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With only days left in the White House, President Joe Biden was saving a few surprises for his farewell address Wednesday evening. Instead of simply summing up his term in office, he used the opportunity to issue dire warnings about the future and call for deep changes to the country's foundational document.

Biden's term ends Monday, when he'll be replaced by Donald Trump, a man he has called an existential threat to the nation. Here's a look at what was likely the last major speech of a political career spanning more than five decades:

Biden sent an ominous message about future dangers

The outgoing president used the opportunity to deliver a series of warnings to the American people, much like Dwight Eisenhower did in 1961 when he expressed concerns about the "military industrial complex" in his farewell address.

Biden said "an oligarchy is taking shape in America" as power and money become more concentrated in the hands of the few. He criticized the "tech industrial complex" and social media, where "the truth is smothered by lies told for power and for profit." He urged the country to continue confronting climate change, saying, "We must not be bullied into sacrificing the future."

It was a stark assessment for a politician who prides himself on optimism. Still, as if to prove his point about misinformation, Trump's incoming communications director and press secretary started falsely claiming on social media that Biden's speech was prerecorded.

The president called for a constitutional amendment

Biden used the speech to announce one of his most ambitious proposals. He wants an amendment to the U.S. Constitution "to make clear that no president — no president — is immune from crimes that he or she commits while in office."

The proposal is related to a landmark Supreme Court ruling from last summer, when justices said former presidents have broad immunity for official acts while they're in the White House. The ruling had major legal consequences, significantly narrowing the case against Trump for attempting to overturn his 2020 loss. The charges were dismissed following Trump's win in November because sitting presidents can't be prosecuted.

In addition to the ruling's impact on Trump's case, Biden has been deeply troubled by the possibility that it would turn presidents into unaccountable kings.

Biden had other ideas, too. He said there should be higher taxes on billionaires, stricter rules on campaign contributions, 18-year term limits for Supreme Court justices and a ban on stock trading for members of Congress.

It's been a long goodbye for Biden

The speech Wednesday evening was one of several events Biden was holding as he winds down his time in the White House. He gave a speech on foreign policy at the State Department on Monday, and he's granted a handful of interviews. He also named new national monuments, issued new rules on America's use of artificial intelligence and announced that a ceasefire had been brokered between Israel and Hamas.

His final public appearance before Monday's inauguration will be on Sunday in South Carolina, where he's expected to visit the International African American Museum in Charleston. The state was a crucial part of his quest for the White House four years ago, helping him secure the Democratic nomination.

The presidential farewell speech isn't always at the White House

Biden chose to speak from the Oval Office, the most presidential of presidential venues. He sat at the Resolute desk, photos of his family behind him. First lady Jill Biden, son Hunter and other family members, including his 4-year-old grandson, Beau, sat in the office as he delivered his speech.

Not every president gives a speech in the same spot. President Barack Obama went to his home in Chicago for his farewell speech. George W. Bush spoke from the East Room. Donald Trump never conceded his election loss four years ago, but he delivered a pretaped address that was made public Jan. 19, 2021.

Biden gave a nod to his vice president

Also in the Oval Office were Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff. Harris replaced Biden at the top of the Democratic ticket when he abandoned his reelection bid after a disastrous debate performance. Biden endorsed Harris and hoped she would be replacing him as the country's first female president.

Instead, Harris was watching as Biden talked about a smooth transition to the next administration.

Biden said Harris has been "a great partner," adding that she and Emhoff had become "like family." When he said that, Jill Biden reached over and squeezed Harris' hands.

## Mediators herald Gaza ceasefire and hostage deal. Israel says final details are in flux

By NAJIB JOBAIN, SAMY MAGDY and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Israel and Hamas have agreed to pause the devastating war in the Gaza Strip, mediators announced Wednesday, raising the possibility of winding down the deadliest and most destructive fighting between the bitter enemies.

The three-phase ceasefire deal promises the release of dozens of hostages held by militants in Gaza and hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in Israel, and to allow hundreds of thousands of people displaced in Gaza to return to what remains of their homes. It would also flood desperately needed humanitarian aid into the territory ravaged by 15 months of war, mediators said.

The prime minister of Qatar, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, said the ceasefire would go into effect Sunday and that its success would depend on Israel and Hamas "acting in good faith in order to ensure that this agreement does not collapse." He spoke in the Qatari capital of Doha, the site of weeks of painstaking negotiations.

U.S. President Joe Biden touted the deal from Washington, saying the ceasefire would stay in place as long as Israel and Hamas remain at the negotiating table over a long-term truce. Biden credited months of "dogged and painstaking American diplomacy" for landing the deal, noting that his administration and President-elect Donald Trump's team had been "speaking as one" in the latest negotiations.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said late Wednesday that the ceasefire agreement with Hamas was still not complete and final details were being worked out.

An Israeli official familiar with the talks who spoke on condition of anonymity said those details center on confirming the list of Palestinian prisoners to be freed. Any agreement must be approved by Netanyahu's Cabinet.

Netanyahu thanked Trump and Biden for "advancing" the ceasefire agreement, but did not explicitly say whether he has accepted it, saying he would issue a formal response only "after the final details of the agreement, which are currently being worked on, are completed."

His measured reaction may reflect domestic politics. Netanyahu's governing coalition depends on the support of two hard-line factions whose leaders have threatened to leave the government over the planned release of Palestinian prisoners. Although opposition leaders have vowed to support the ceasefire deal, the loss of his hard-line allies could lead to the collapse of the coalition and trigger early elections.

Early Thursday morning, Netanyahu's office issued a statement accusing Hamas of backtracking on an earlier understanding that he said would give Israel a veto over which prisoners accused of murder would be released. Netanyahu said he told the negotiators to stand firm on the earlier agreement.

Hamas did not immediately respond.

Earlier, Israeli President Isaac Herzog called on Netanyahu's government to approve the ceasefire in a nationally televised speech. Hamas said in a statement the ceasefire was "the result of the legendary

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resilience of our great Palestinian people and our valiant resistance in the Gaza Strip.”

Mediators from Egypt, Qatar and the U.S. are to meet in Cairo on Thursday for talks on implementing the deal, according to a senior U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Once the first phase of the deal takes effect, it is expected to deliver an initial six-week halt to fighting along with the opening of negotiations on ending the war altogether.

Over those six weeks, 33 of the nearly 100 hostages are to be reunited with their loved ones after months in captivity with no contact with the outside world, though it's unclear if all are alive.

It remained unclear exactly when and how many displaced Palestinians would be able to return to their homes, and whether the agreement would lead to a complete end to the war and the full withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza — key Hamas demands for releasing the remaining captives.

Many longer-term questions about postwar Gaza remain, including who will rule the territory or oversee the daunting task of reconstruction after a brutal conflict that has destabilized the broader Middle East and sparked worldwide protests.

Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7, 2023, cross-border attack, which killed some 1,200 in Israel and took 250 others hostage. Israel responded with a fierce offensive that has killed over 46,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, who do not distinguish between civilians and militants but say women and children make up more than half of those killed.

More than 100 hostages were freed from Gaza in a weeklong truce in November 2023.

The U.S., along with Egypt and Qatar, have brokered months of indirect talks between the bitter enemies that finally culminated in this latest deal. It comes after Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah agreed to a ceasefire in November, after more than a year of conflict linked to the war in Gaza.

U.N. and international relief organizations estimate some 90% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced, often multiple times. They say tens of thousands of homes have been destroyed and hospitals are barely functioning. Experts have warned that famine may be underway in northern Gaza.

Abed Radwan, a Palestinian father of three, called the ceasefire deal “the best day in my life and the life of the Gaza people. ... Thank God. Thank God.”

Radwan, who has been displaced from the town of Beit Lahiya for over a year and has been sheltering in Gaza City, said he hopes to return and to rebuild his home. As he spoke to AP by phone, his voice was overshadowed by the celebrations of fellow Gazans.

“People are crying here. They don't believe it's true,” he said.

In Israel, hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside Israel's military headquarters in Tel Aviv, calling for a deal to be completed. Many held posters of hostages, others hoisted candles in the air.

As the deal was announced, some people were unaware it had gone through. Sharone Lifschitz, whose father Oded is being held in Gaza, told the AP by phone she was stunned and grateful but won't believe it until she sees all the hostages come home.

“I'm so desperate to see them, if by some miracle my father has survived,” she said.

The Hostage Families Forum, which has long pressed Israeli leaders to make a deal that would bring the captives home, said it welcomed Wednesday's announcement with joy and relief.

“After 460 days of our family members being held in Hamas tunnels, we are closer than ever to reuniting with our loved ones,” it said in a statement.

Biden, who has provided crucial military aid to Israel but expressed exasperation over civilian deaths in Gaza, announced the outline of the three-phase ceasefire agreement on May 31. The agreement eventually agreed to followed that framework.

He said the first phase would last for six weeks and include a “full and complete ceasefire,” a withdrawal of Israeli forces from densely populated areas of Gaza and the release of a number of hostages, including women, older adults and wounded people, in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. Humanitarian assistance would surge, with hundreds of trucks entering Gaza each day.

The second and most difficult phase would include the release of all remaining living hostages, including

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male soldiers, and Israeli forces would withdraw from Gaza. The third phase calls for the start of major reconstruction of Gaza, which faces decades of rebuilding from devastation caused by the war.

Hamas had been demanding assurances of a permanent end to the war and complete withdrawal of all Israeli forces from Gaza. Israel, meanwhile, has repeatedly said it would not halt the war until it destroys Hamas' military and governing capabilities.

With Biden's days in office numbered and Trump set to take over, both sides had been under pressure to agree to a deal.

Trump celebrated the agreement, posting on his Truth Social social media platform: "WE HAVE A DEAL FOR THE HOSTAGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST. THEY WILL BE RELEASED SHORTLY. THANK YOU!"

Jonathan Panikoff, director of the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council, said Biden deserves praise for continuing to push the talks. But Trump's threats to Hamas and his efforts to "cajole" Netanyahu deserve credit as well.

"The ironic reality is that at a time of heightened partisanship even over foreign policy, the deal represents how much more powerful and influential U.S. foreign policy can be when it's bipartisan," Panikoff said.

Hezbollah's acceptance of a ceasefire in Lebanon after it had suffered heavy blows, and the overthrow of President Bashar Assad in Syria, were both major setbacks for Iran and its allies across the region, including Hamas, which was left increasingly isolated.

Israel has come under heavy international criticism, including from its closest ally, the United States, over the civilian toll in Gaza. Israel says it has killed around 17,000 militants — though it has not provided evidence to support the claim. It also blames Hamas for the civilian casualties, accusing it of using schools, hospitals and residential areas for military purposes.

The International Court of Justice is investigating allegations brought by South Africa that Israel has committed genocide. The International Criminal Court, a separate body also based in The Hague, has issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu, his former defense minister and a Hamas commander for war crimes and crimes against humanity linked to the war.

Israel and the United States have condemned the actions taken by both courts.

Netanyahu also faced great domestic pressure to bring home the hostages. Their families have become a powerful lobbying group with wide public support backed by months of mass protests urging the government to reach a deal with Hamas.

Israeli authorities have already concluded that more than a third of the roughly 100 remaining people held captive are dead, and there are fears that others are no longer alive. A series of videos released by Hamas showing surviving hostages in distress, combined with news that a growing number of abducted Israelis have died, put added pressure on the Israeli leader.

Hamas, a militant group that does not accept Israel's existence, has come under overwhelming pressure from Israeli military operations, including the invasion of Gaza's largest cities and towns and the takeover of the border between Gaza and Egypt. Its top leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, who was believed to have helped mastermind the Oct. 7, 2023, attack, have been killed.

But its fighters have regrouped in some of the hardest-hit areas after the withdrawal of Israeli forces, raising the prospect of a prolonged insurgency if the war continues.

Netanyahu has vowed to continue the war until Hamas' military and governing capabilities are destroyed. But it has never been clear what that would entail or if it's even possible, given the group's deep roots in Palestinian society, its presence in Lebanon and the occupied West Bank, and its exiled leadership.

Both sides still face many difficult and unanswered questions.

As the war winds down, Netanyahu will face growing calls for postwar investigations that could find him at least partially responsible for the security failures of Oct. 7 — the worst in Israel's history. His far-right governing partners, who opposed a ceasefire deal, could also bring down the coalition and push the country into early elections.

There is still no plan for who will govern Gaza after the war. Israel has said it will work with local Palestinians not affiliated with Hamas or the Western-backed Palestinian Authority. But it's unclear if such



partners exist, and Hamas has threatened anyone who cooperates with Israeli forces.

The United States has tried to advance sweeping postwar plans for a reformed Palestinian Authority to govern Gaza with Arab and international assistance. As part of those plans, the U.S. hopes Saudi Arabia would normalize relations with Israel in return for U.S. security guarantees and aid in setting up a civilian nuclear program.

But those plans depend on credible progress toward the creation of a Palestinian state, something Netanyahu and much of Israel's political class oppose. Netanyahu has said Israel will maintain open-ended security control over Gaza as well as the occupied West Bank, territories captured by Israel in the 1967 war that the Palestinians want for their future state.

## Trump adviser says president-elect is exploring options to 'preserve' TikTok

The Associated Press undefined

Trump's pick for national security adviser, Florida Rep. Mike Waltz, said in an interview on Wednesday that the president-elect is exploring options to "preserve" TikTok.

Waltz made the comment when Fox News anchor Bret Baier asked him about a report from The Washington Post that said Trump was considering an executive order to suspend enforcement of a federal law that could ban the popular platform nationwide by Sunday.

Last week, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a legal challenge to the statute brought by TikTok, its China-based parent company ByteDance, and users of the app. The Justices seemed likely to uphold the law, which requires ByteDance to divest TikTok on national security grounds or face a ban in one of its biggest markets.

"If the Supreme Court comes out with a ruling in favor of the law, President Trump has been very clear: Number one, TikTok is a great platform that many Americans use and has been great for his campaign and getting his message out. But number two, he's going to protect their data," Waltz said.

"He's a deal maker. I don't want to get ahead of our executive orders, but we're going to create this space to put that deal in place," he added.

Separately on Wednesday, Pam Bondi, Trump's pick for attorney general, dodged a question during a Senate hearing on whether she'd uphold a TikTok ban.

Trump has reversed his position on the popular app, having tried to ban it during his first term in office over national security concerns. He joined TikTok during his 2024 presidential campaign and his team used it to connect with younger voters, especially male voters, by pushing content that was often macho and aimed at going viral. He pledged to "save TikTok" during the campaign and has credited the platform with helping him win more youth votes.

## Trump's outsider Cabinet picks are rapidly gaining support for confirmation

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — One by one, all the president-elect's men, and women, are falling into place in his Cabinet.

While Defense Secretary pick Pete Hegseth's nomination was teetering toward collapse just weeks ago, he now appears on track for confirmation after a fiery Senate hearing that focused on his drinking, views of women in combat and lack of high-profile management experience for the top U.S. military job.

President-elect Donald Trump's other nominees pushed Wednesday through a gauntlet of confirmation hearings with the help of allied Senate Republicans carrying them toward the finish line, despite Democratic objections. One of them, potential FBI director Kash Patel, popped into a private Senate GOP lunch Wednesday to say hello.

"These nominees are bold choices," said Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, the GOP whip, in earlier remarks.

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He predicted the Senate will begin start voting on Inauguration Day, Jan. 20, to confirm Trump's picks. A long haul for some of Trump's picks

To be sure, Trump's more controversial choices of Patel, Tulsi Gabbard and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., have yet to come before senators for public questioning. Once they do, they face a long haul ahead in winning over skeptics from both sides of the political aisle, Republicans and Democrats alike.

In a letter to Republican senators Wednesday, an organization headed by Trump's former vice president, Mike Pence, said it was "deeply concerned" over Kennedy over his views on abortion, and urged senators to reject him for secretary of Health and Human Services.

But Hegseth's ability to mount a political comeback, take the fight to his critics and turn his nomination into a litmus test of Trump's Make America Great Again movement stands as a powerful example of the incoming White House's ability to get what it wants. The Trump team's allies, including billionaire Elon Musk and others, amplified support for Hegseth, pushing him forward.

"If anyone in the Senate GOP votes against confirming Pete Hegseth after his stellar performance today, there will be a primary challenge waiting for you," wrote Trump ally Charlie Kirk on X. "You can take that to the bank."

Momentum for Hegseth — and some others

The Senate Armed Services Committee is expected to vote on Hegseth's nomination on Monday, sending it to the full Senate for consideration, with confirmation possible later that week.

With a nod of support from GOP Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa, a combat veteran and sexual assault survivor who initially had questions for Hegseth, the former Army National Guard veteran powered past his biggest potential roadblock. Ernst faced an onslaught of personal and political attacks as she wavered on supporting Hegseth, an early signal to others.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., said the criticism of Hegseth was not as powerful as the image of "a warrior with dust on his boots who's actually done the things."

On Wednesday, a half dozen more Trump nominees appeared before Senate committees as his team floods the zone, senators dashing between hearing rooms to participate in as many sessions as possible.

Pam Bondi, the nominee for Attorney General, was grilled by Democrats probing whether she believed Trump lost the 2020 election, she said Biden won, or would stand up to presidential pardons for those convicted of crimes in relation to Jan. 6, 2021.

"You say the right things, that you're going to be the 'people's lawyer,'" said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.

"But I believe being the 'people's lawyer' means you have to be able to say no to the president of the United States," he said. "You have to be able to say Donald Trump lost the 2020 election, you dodged that question... You have to be able to say Jan. 6 insurrectionists who committed violence shouldn't be pardoned."

Bondi responded: "I don't have to say anything. I will answer the questions to the best of my ability, and honestly."

Another Trump nominee, Russ Vought, a Project 2025 architect tapped to lead the White House Office of Management and Budget, was asked if he would commit to releasing congressional approved funding for Ukraine. He vowed to "always commit to upholding the law."

And California Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla asked Trump's Energy nominee Chris Wright if he still believes "wildfires are just hype," in the aftermath of the devastating Southern California fires that have killed at least 25 people and destroyed thousands of homes.

Wright said he stood by his past comments. He then said climate change is real before Padilla cut him off.

Republicans eye quick votes after Trump's inauguration

On Monday, Trump is expected come inside the Capitol after he is inaugurated to sign the paperwork to formally nominate his picks for top Cabinet and administrative positions, launching the confirmation process.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune has said the Senate will vote on nominees as soon as they are ready.

First up could be Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., a former Trump rival for the 2016 GOP presidential nomina-

tion, who is now the president-elect's choice for secretary of state.

Rubio promised an "America First" foreign policy agenda during his own confirmation hearing Wednesday. As a well-known senator, he is expected to have broad support from Republicans, as well as Democrats. His confirmation vote could be as soon as Monday evening.

Other nominees, including Hegseth, are expected to face a tougher path to confirmation.

Republicans narrowly hold a majority in the Senate, 53-47, but they are down to 52 after Vice President-elect JD Vance resigned his seat last week ahead of taking office. That means Trump's nominees need support from almost every GOP senator for majority confirmation over objections from Democrats.

Moreover, Democrats are expected to mount procedural hurdles that would require Hegseth and other nominees to go through multiple steps before final confirmation. Consideration of Hegseth and others could drag toward the end of next week.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer all but acknowledged Democrats, as the minority, are essentially powerless to prevent Trump from getting his desired team.

"It's important to have a record of these nominees," Schumer said Wednesday as the hearings pushed ahead. "Even if they get confirmed in the end."

## FDA bans red dye No. 3 from foods

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

U.S. regulators on Wednesday banned the dye called Red 3 from the nation's food supply, nearly 35 years after it was barred from cosmetics because of potential cancer risk.

Food and Drug Administration officials granted a 2022 petition filed by two dozen food safety and health advocates, who urged the agency to revoke authorization for the substance that gives some candies, snack cakes and maraschino cherries a bright red hue.

The agency said it was taking the action as a "matter of law" because some studies have found that the dye caused cancer in lab rats. Officials cited a statute known as the Delaney Clause, which requires FDA to ban any additive found to cause cancer in people or animals.

The dye is known as erythrosine, FD&C Red No. 3 or Red 3. The ban removes it from the list of approved color additives in foods, dietary supplements and oral medicines, such as cough syrups. More than three decades ago, the FDA declined to authorize use of Red 3 in cosmetics and externally applied drugs because a study showed it caused cancer when eaten by rats.

"The FDA is taking action that will remove the authorization for the use of FD&C Red No. 3 in food and ingested drugs," said Jim Jones, the FDA's deputy commissioner for human foods. "Evidence shows cancer in laboratory male rats exposed to high levels of FD&C Red No.3. Importantly, the way that FD&C Red No. 3 causes cancer in male rats does not occur in humans."

Food manufacturers will have until January 2027 to remove the dye from their products, while makers of ingested drugs have until January 2028 to do the same. Other countries still allow for certain uses of the dye, but imported foods must meet the new U.S. requirement.

Consumer advocates praised the decision.

"This is a welcome, but long overdue, action from the FDA: removing the unsustainable double standard in which Red 3 was banned from lipstick but permitted in candy," said Dr. Peter Lurie, director of the group Center for Science in the Public Interest, which led the petition effort.

It's not clear whether the ban will face legal challenges from food manufacturers because evidence hasn't determined that the dye causes cancer when consumed by humans. At a hearing in December, FDA Commissioner Dr. Robert Califf suggested that's a risk.

"When we do ban something, it will go to court," he told members of Congress on Dec. 5. "And if we don't have the scientific evidence, we will lose in court."

When the FDA declined to allow Red 3 in cosmetics and topical drugs in 1990, the color additive was already permitted in foods and ingested drugs. Because research showed then that the way the dye causes cancer in rats does not apply to humans, "the FDA did not take action to revoke the authorization of Red

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No. 3 in food," the agency has said on its website.

Health advocates for years have asked the FDA to reconsider that decision, including the 2022 petition led by CSPI. In November, nearly two dozen members of Congress sent a letter demanding that FDA officials ban Red 3.

Lawmakers cited the Delaney Clause and said the action was especially important to protect children, who consume more of the dye on a bodyweight basis than adults, the lawmakers said.

"The FDA should act quickly to protect the nation's youth from this harmful dye, used simply to give food and drinks a bright red color," the letter said. "No aesthetic reason could justify the use of a carcinogen in our food supply."

About two-thirds of Americans favor restricting or reformulating processed foods to remove ingredients like added sugar or dyes, according to a new AP-NORC poll. Support is particularly high among U.S. adults with a college degree, as well as those with a higher household income.

About 8 in 10 with a college degree favor restricting or reformulating processed foods, compared with about 6 in 10 without a college degree, the poll showed. Roughly 7 in 10 adults with a higher household income support the restrictions, compared with about half of Americans with a household income of \$30,000 or below.

Red 3 is banned for food use in Europe, Australia and New Zealand except in certain kinds of cherries. The dye will be banned in California starting in January 2027, and lawmakers in Tennessee, Arkansas and Indiana have filed proposals to limit certain dyes, particularly from foods offered in public schools.

The International Association of Color Manufacturers defends the dye, saying that it is safe in levels typically consumed by humans. The group points to research by scientific committees operated by the United Nations and the World Health Organization, including a 2018 review that reaffirmed the safety of Red 3 in food.

Some food manufacturers have already reformulated products to remove Red 3. In its place they use beet juice; carmine, a dye made from insects; and pigments from foods such as purple sweet potato, radish and red cabbage, according to Sensient Food Colors, a St. Louis-based supplier of food colors and flavorings.

## What products contain Red 3 dye? Checking ingredient labels is the best way to find out

By The Associated Press undefined

The Food and Drug Administration is ordering food and drug makers to remove a dye called Red 3 from the products U.S. consumers eat and drink.

The colorant was banned from cosmetics and non-oral medications decades ago because a study showed it caused cancer when eaten by rats. But it kept appearing on the ingredient lists of popular snack foods and other grocery products because it remained approved for use until now.

Consumer advocates monitor manufacturers that still include the additive, and companies often switch to less notorious alternatives. Shoppers should always check food labels to see if an item they want to buy includes Red 3, which is also known as erythrosine and FD&C Red No. 3.

These are some of the product categories where the dye is most likely to show up.

### CANDIES

Brach's Conversation Hearts and Brach's Candy Corn both contain Red 3. But some other red candies, like Swedish Fish and Wild Cherry Lifesavers, use Red 40.

### BAKED GOODS AND SNACKS

Some baked goods and snacks – mostly with red icing – contain Red 3. Betty Crocker Red Decorating Icing contains Red 3. But Pillsbury's Funfetti Valentine's Day Vanilla Frosting – which is swirled with tiny red hearts – uses Red 40.

### DAIRY AND FROZEN FOODS

Check for Red 3 in strawberry-flavored milk, ice cream, frozen yogurt and popsicles. TruMoo Strawberry Whole Milk contains Red 3. But Edy's Strawberry Ice Cream and Popsicle-brand fruit pops both use use



beet juice for coloring.

#### FRUIT PRODUCTS

Many maraschino cherry brands – including store brands from Walmart and Kroger – have switched to Red 40. But Kroger Extra Cherry canned fruit cocktail contains Red 3.

#### BEVERAGES

Ensure Original Strawberry Nutrition Shake contains Red 3. But many beverage brands use Red 40, including Hawaiian Punch and Kool-Aid, Fanta and Jarritos strawberry sodas and Faygo black cherry soda.

#### MEDICATIONS

Consumer advocates say some gummy vitamins and medications contain Red 3. But others use natural coloring or alternate dyes. Vicks Formula 44, Luden's and Halls cough drops all use Red 40. Mucinex Children's Cough Syrup, Robitussin Adult Cough and Chest Congestion and Vick's NyQuil Cold and Flu also use Red 40.

## Here are the key negotiators who helped get a Gaza ceasefire deal

By The Associated Press undefined

A ceasefire agreement in Gaza has been reached between Israel and Hamas after more than 15 months of war. The United States, Egypt and Qatar have mediated the long-running efforts to halt the fighting in the ravaged Palestinian territory, often coming close to a deal before a frustrating breakdown in negotiations.

The latest round of talks proved successful this week, with all sides bringing their top negotiators to the Qatari capital, Doha.

Here is a look at the key players who negotiated the deal:

David Barnea

The head of Israel's spy agency headed up Israel's negotiation team throughout the negotiation process.

Working alongside the head of Israel's Shin Bet security agency and top political and military advisers to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and meeting with the Biden administration, Barnea was the highest-profile member of the Israeli negotiating team — but kept his own proclivities private during the talks.

Ronen Bar

The head of Israel's Shin Bet security agency also has been involved in negotiations for months. Bar's agency handles matters relating to Palestinian security prisoners, some of whom, under the agreed-upon deal, are set to be released by Israel in exchange for hostages.

Bar has led the agency since 2021. Just days after the devastating Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel that launched the war, he took responsibility for failing to thwart the militants. He said investigations into what happened would need to come after the war.

Brett McGurk

President Joe Biden's top Middle East adviser has been putting together a draft of the deal from the discussions with the two sides as the lead negotiator in the Israel-Hamas negotiations.

McGurk has been a fixture in U.S. Mideast policy for more than two decades in the National Security Council and White House under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

He's shuttled frequently to the Middle East for talks with senior officials about the conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah.

Steve Witkoff

President-elect Donald Trump's special envoy to the Middle East has met separately in recent weeks with Netanyahu and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, another key mediator.

Witkoff, a Florida real estate investor and co-chair of Trump's inaugural committee, has kept in contact with Biden's foreign policy team as the incoming Trump and outgoing Biden administrations coordinated on the deal.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani

Qatar's prime minister and foreign minister led his country's pivotal mediation efforts in the stop-start negotiations. He has been a key communicator with Hamas throughout the process, as Israel and Hamas

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have not communicated directly.

The most consequential phase of negotiations — those that have occurred over the last few weeks — took place in Doha, his country's capital.

Al Thani said the ceasefire would take effect Sunday.

Hassan Rashad

The director of Egypt's General Intelligence Agency was also a liaison with Hamas throughout the talks. Rashad took office in October 2024, replacing former chief intelligence official Abbas Kamel, who led the negotiations during the first ceasefire in November 2023.

Several rounds of negotiations have occurred in Cairo, and the mediators will move to the Egyptian capital Thursday for further talks on implementing the deal.

Khalil al-Hayya

The acting head of Hamas' political bureau and the militant group's chief negotiator is based in Qatar but does not meet directly with Israeli or American officials, communicating instead through Egyptian and Qatari mediators.

His role increased in importance after Israeli soldiers killed Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in the Gaza Strip. Sinwar, the architect of the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks, was believed to be dictating the Hamas stance in negotiations up until his death.

But even before Sinwar's death, al-Hayya was managing affairs for the militant group. Al-Hayya, seen as less of a hardliner than Sinwar, had served as Sinwar's deputy and had managed ceasefire negotiations in 2014 as well.

He is a longtime official with the group and survived an Israeli airstrike that hit his home in Gaza in 2007, killing several of his family members.

## Google signs deal with AP to deliver up-to-date news through its Gemini AI chatbot

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Google says its artificial intelligence chatbot Gemini will deliver up-to-date news from The Associated Press in the tech giant's first such deal with a news publisher.

Google announced the deal in a blog post Wednesday, saying that AP "will now deliver a feed of real-time information to help further enhance the usefulness of results displayed in the Gemini app."

AP's chief revenue officer, Kristin Heitmann, said it is part of a longstanding relationship with the search giant "based on working together to provide timely, accurate news and information to global audiences."

"We are pleased Google recognizes the value of AP's journalism as well as our commitment to nonpartisan reporting, in the development of its generative AI products," Heitmann said in a written statement.

Neither company has disclosed how much Google will pay AP for the content. Google declined further comment on how it would present information from AP's journalism and whether it would credit the news organization or link back to the original articles.

Gemini, formerly known as Bard, has been Google's answer to the demand for generative AI tools that can compose documents, generate images, help program code or perform other work.

AP has sought to diversify its revenue stream in recent years and in 2023 signed a deal with OpenAI, maker of ChatGPT, enabling the AI company to license AP's archive of news stories to train future versions of its AI systems. The financial terms of that deal were also not disclosed, but it sparked an increasing number of similar partnerships between OpenAI and news organizations around the world.

At the same time, news organizations have expressed concerns about AI companies using their material without permission — or payment — and then unfairly competing with them for advertising revenue that comes when people use a search engine or click on a news website. The New York Times and other outlets have sued OpenAI and other AI companies for copyright infringement and, on Tuesday, presented their arguments before a New York federal judge.

Tech companies have argued that freely taking publicly available text from the internet to teach their AI

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models constitutes a "fair use" under U.S. copyright laws. But faced with legal challenges and a technology that is prone to spouting errors known as hallucinations, AI companies have also sought to license high-quality data sources to improve the performance of their products.

Publishers are at a disadvantage as tech companies integrate AI-generated summaries of information into an array of online services, but such deals are also beneficial in giving news outlets much-needed revenue and improving the overall quality of information that people are seeing online, said Alex Mahadevan, director of The Poynter Institute's Mediawise, a digital media literacy initiative.

"You either sign a deal with an AI company and work with them and kind of take what they offer for all of your hard work, all of your articles, all of your data, or you fight, the way that The New York Times and others are trying to do in court," he said.

The AP prides itself on being an unbiased news source and offers news stories, pictures, video, audio and interactive content direct to consumers via the website APNews.com. But the bulk of its business comes from selling its journalism to organizations that use it.

The AP has experienced a precipitous loss in revenue from newspaper customers, including losing Gannett and McClatchy -- two of the largest traditional U.S. newspaper publishers -- last year. The AP has increasingly secured other sources of revenue, including philanthropic funding, but is still hurt by the news industry's overall woes.

"The AP has copious amounts of data and text, which are the equivalent of gold in terms of training advanced generative AI models," said Sarah Kreps, a professor and director of Cornell University's Tech Policy Institute. While such deals might help offset some revenue losses, they also present dangers.

"By outsourcing their value to tech companies, news outlets may cede control over how their work is used and monetized," Kreps said by email. "Instead of building stronger, direct relationships with readers, they risk becoming suppliers of raw material for platforms that then commodify and repurpose their journalism."

## Trump and Biden both claim credit for Gaza ceasefire deal

By MATTHEW LEE, AAMER MADHANI and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and President-elect Donald Trump are both claiming credit for Israel and Hamas agreeing to a ceasefire deal in Gaza on Wednesday after the White House brought Trump's Middle East envoy into negotiations that have dragged on for months.

Trump wasted no time in asserting he was the moving force behind the deal. Biden, meanwhile, stressed that the deal was reached under "the precise contours" of a plan that he set out in late May.

"This EPIC ceasefire agreement could have only happened as a result of our Historic Victory in November, as it signaled to the entire World that my Administration would seek Peace and negotiate deals to ensure the safety of all Americans, and our Allies," Trump wrote on social media. "I am thrilled American and Israeli hostages will be returning home to be reunited with their families and loved ones."

Trump added that his incoming Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff — who was participating in the talks in Doha, Qatar — would continue "to work closely with Israel and our Allies to make sure Gaza NEVER again becomes a terrorist safe haven."

Biden said from the White House that "my diplomacy never ceased in their efforts to get this done."

"It is the result not only of the extreme pressure that Hamas has been under and the changed regional equation after a ceasefire in Lebanon and weakening of Iran — but also of dogged and painstaking American diplomacy," Biden said.

The jostling comes with both Biden and Trump determined to see the deal become a set piece of Middle East success for the legacy of their presidency. Biden's administration worked for months to broker peace in talks that inched frustratingly close to success before repeatedly breaking down. Trump, for his part, had warned of "hell to pay" if a deal wasn't done by his inauguration — in five days.

While Biden's refusal to impose meaningful restrictions on sending arms to Israel may have helped the key U.S. ally seriously degrade Hamas and fellow Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon, it also came with enormous suffering for innocent Palestinians and Lebanese who have been caught in the

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crossfire of the 15 months of grinding war.

Jonathan Panikoff, director of the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council, said Biden deserves praise for continuing to push the talks despite repeated failures. But Trump's threats to Hamas and his efforts through Witkoff to "cajole" Netanyahu deserve credit as well, he said.

"The ironic reality is that at a time of heightened partisanship even over foreign policy, the deal represents how much more powerful and influential U.S. foreign policy can be when it's bipartisan," he said. "Both the outgoing and incoming administration deserve credit for this deal and it would've been far less likely to happen without both pushing for it."

In his White House remarks, Biden said his administration negotiated the deal but that Trump's team will soon be charged with making sure it's implemented.

"For the past few days, we have been speaking as one team," Biden said in a nod to Witkoff being part of the talks.

Trump's team pushed back, saying Biden couldn't get the deal done until Trump and Witkoff intervened.

The Biden administration was handing the Trump administration a detailed roadmap to win a lasting peace that has broad support in the region, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said.

"The involvement of President-elect Trump's team has been absolutely critical in getting this deal over the line," Miller told reporters. "And it's been critical because obviously, as I stand today, this administration's term in office will expire in five days."

Israeli President Isaac Herzog offered his gratitude to both the incoming and outgoing U.S. presidents.

Nancy Okail, head of the U.S.-based Center for International Policy, said acceptance of the deal in the face of Trump's insistence that a ceasefire be in place when he takes office "ironically shows how effective actual pressure can be in changing Israeli government behavior."

The Biden administration's open embrace of the Trump team's involvement in the talks was rooted in far more than the president-elect's influence with Netanyahu and his threats to get a deal done before he's back in the White House, three current U.S. officials said.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to offer candid details, said their interest in having Witkoff participate in the talks alongside Biden's Mideast pointman, Brett McGurk, was primarily designed to ensure that an agreement — which will require a lengthy American commitment — would have continued U.S. support after Biden leaves office.

Yet, since Witkoff entered the latest round of talks alongside McGurk, these U.S. officials have downplayed Trump's relevance to the process, apart from the importance of ensuring his support for a deal painstakingly negotiated over the past year. They also want backing for a plan pushed by the Biden administration for the governance, reconstruction and security of Gaza that will take many months — and significant U.S. backing — to succeed.

One fear about not including Trump officials in the negotiations was that the post-conflict plan for Gaza that has been worked out over the past year might be abandoned by the new administration. It calls for an international presence in Gaza to help the Palestinian Authority with governance and reconstruction as well as a temporary foreign security presence to address Israeli security concerns.

Implementation of the agreement could begin Sunday, when the first group of hostages may be freed, according to a senior U.S. official involved in the talks.

Negotiations intensified over the past four days, according to the official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The official described McGurk and Witkoff's coordination as a "fruitful partnership" in which the two closely coordinated as they pressed parties to come to terms. At a critical point last week, Witkoff left talks in Doha for Israel to meet with Netanyahu. That allowed McGurk to remain in Doha and continue to work with Qatari negotiators who were chief interlocutors with Hamas.

The U.S., Qatari and Egyptian negotiators, along with Israel's team nearby, worked until the wee hours of Wednesday morning, just a floor above where the Hamas negotiators were holed up, the official said.

Later Wednesday, Hamas made several last-second demands, but "we held very firm," and the group eventually agreed to the terms of the deal, the official said.



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Over the course of the war, Biden's relationship with Netanyahu was strained by the enormous Palestinian death toll in the fighting — now standing at more than 46,000 dead — and Israel's blockade of the territory that has created a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza by leaving access to food and basic health care severely limited.

Pro-Palestinian activists have demanded an arms embargo against Israel, but U.S. policy has largely remained unchanged. Biden's critics say his approach could come with long-term ramifications for U.S. standing in the Middle East and may well prove to be a stain on his legacy.

After his remarks Wednesday, Biden was walking away from the podium when a reporter asked who would be credited in the history books for the ceasefire deal.

He turned, smiled and said, "Is that a joke?"

## For LA water issues, misinformation spreads nearly as fast as the wildfires

By MELISSA GOLDIN and BRITTANY PETERSON Associated Press

A billionaire couple was accused of withholding water that could help stop Los Angeles' massive wildfires. Democratic leadership was blamed for fire hydrants running dry and for an empty reservoir. Firefighters were criticized for allegedly using "women's handbags" to fight the fires.

Those are just a few of the false or misleading claims that have emerged amid general criticism about California's water management sparked by the fierce Los Angeles fires.

Much of the misinformation is being spread "because it offers an opportunity to take potshots at California Democratic leadership while simultaneously distracting attention from the real contributing factors, especially the role of climate change," said Peter Gleick, senior fellow at the Pacific Institute, a nonprofit he co-founded that focuses on global water sustainability.

### Attacks on a water bank

Social media users have claimed that Stewart and Lynda Resnick, co-owners of a massive agriculture company that has a majority stake in California's Kern Water Bank, control California's water and have refused to lend enough to firefighting efforts.

The water bank stores up to 1.5 million acre-feet of water underground for agricultural, municipal and industrial use during dry years. The water gets used by the Resnicks' company, The Wonderful Company, known for such brands as Fiji Water and Wonderful Pistachios. It also serves Bakersfield and other farmers in Kern County.

But the water bank is more than 100 miles north of Los Angeles and plays no part in its water supply. The Wonderful Company said there was "zero truth" that it controls California water or has anything to do with water going to Los Angeles. Kern Water Bank didn't respond to a request for comment.

The Wonderful Company has faced criticism over its extensive water use, especially in times of drought, and its control of what many consider a public resource. But Gleick said neither the Resnicks nor their company have anything to do with water supply issues around the wildfires.

"There are many problems with how California allocates water among users and especially the control of water by large agribusinesses, exemplified by the Resnicks, but those problems are completely unrelated to the LA fires and efforts to control them," he said.

### Claims over dry hydrants, empty reservoir

Some fire hydrants in Los Angeles ran dry in early efforts to fight the fires, prompting a swirl of criticism on social media, including from President-elect Donald Trump, against the water management policies of Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and California Gov. Gavin Newsom. State and local officials and experts said critics were connecting unrelated issues and spreading false information. State water distribution choices were not behind the hydrant problems, they said, nor was a lack of overall supply in the region.

Officials said the hydrants were overstressed for hours as aerial firefighting wasn't possible because of high winds. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power said they were pumping plenty of water into the system, but demand was so high that it wasn't enough to refill three million-gallon tanks in Pacific

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Palisades that help pressurize hydrants there.

Janisse Quiñones, head of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, said at a news conference that 3 million gallons of water were available when the Palisades fire started but demand was four times greater than ever seen. Hydrants are designed for fighting fires at one or two houses at a time, not hundreds, Quiñones said, and refilling the tanks also requires asking fire departments to pause firefighting. Bass said 20% of hydrants went dry.

Critics also questioned why the 117-million gallon Santa Ynez Reservoir that contributes water for drinking and firefighting in Pacific Palisades was empty when the fires broke out. Some social media users said officials should be jailed over the empty reservoir, or alleged that officials view diversity, equity and inclusion policies as more important than getting things done.

The reservoir has been empty for nearly a year awaiting repairs to a rubber cover that were required to provide safe drinking water, according to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, which owns and operates it. The agency also said competitive bidding requires time.

Marty Adams, who retired last spring, was the general manager and chief engineer at LADWP when the reservoir was drained. He said it was difficult to see the full scope of damage without draining the reservoir, and once that was done officials realized the repairs would be a bigger job than expected.

Adams said the reservoir likely could not have been refilled fast enough to be of much use fighting fires.

Newsom has called for an independent investigation into the hydrants and the reservoir. At least one lawsuit has already been filed over the reservoir issue.

Fighting flames with purses?

Video of firefighters throwing water onto flames with small bags spread widely on social media. Some posts ridiculed the use of "women's handbags" and alleged money that could have been used to buy proper equipment was spent elsewhere, such as on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives or foreign aid. But the state said the small canvas bags seen in the videos are routinely used by the Los Angeles Fire Department to fight small trash fires, and can be more efficient than a long hose in some situations.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath, whose district includes the Palisades fire, said misinformation is demoralizing for firefighters.

"When they hear that there's a suspicion that they didn't put their best foot forward, that they weren't at their best, that they weren't excellent in terms of the service that they deliver, of course that's crushing," she said.

Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, called the misinformation "irresponsible" and said it affects the actions people take and the way they cope with trauma.

"The spread of false information at a time of crisis is nothing short of deadly," she said.

## What does the ceasefire agreement mean for Israel, Hamas and the wider Middle East?

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

Mediators said Israel and Hamas have agreed to pause the fighting in Gaza starting Sunday after 15 months of war and to begin exchanging dozens of hostages held there for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had yet to confirm on Tuesday that the deal had been finalized. But the ceasefire could eventually bring an end to the bloodiest and most destructive war ever fought between Israel and Hamas, one that transformed the wider region and leaves the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the heart of the turmoil unresolved.

Israel struck major blows, but 'total victory' still appears elusive

Israel can point to countless tactical victories in the war, from the assassination of top Hamas leaders to the blows it rained on Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran itself, which backs both groups.

But Israel fell short on two central aims: Hamas to date has survived, even if greatly weakened, and

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several hostages taken captive during Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack died in captivity. Some were accidentally killed by Israeli forces, others by their Hamas captors as troops closed in.

Israelis see the return of captives as a sacred obligation, worth the agonizing price of releasing large numbers of imprisoned militants in lopsided deals. The inability to reach a deal through months of negotiations tore the country apart.

Netanyahu, who promised "total victory" and the return of all the captives, faced mass protests as critics, including some hostage families, accused him of putting his political interests ahead of quickly getting them back, allegations he vehemently denied.

The military campaign meanwhile sparked a global outcry, with the International Court of Justice considering allegations of genocide and the International Criminal Court issuing arrest warrants for Netanyahu, his former defense minister and a top Hamas commander, accusing them of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Israel adamantly denies such allegations, saying it takes every measure to spare civilians and blaming Hamas for their deaths because militants fight in dense residential areas.

Hamas survives, for now, in a ruined Gaza

Hamas said the Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war was aimed at returning the Palestinian cause to the forefront of the international agenda, punishing Israel for its actions in the occupied territories and freeing Palestinian prisoners.

It succeeded in drawing the world's attention, but at a catastrophic cost to Palestinians themselves, with entire families wiped out, cities in ruins and dreams of statehood more distant than ever.

Over 46,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to local health authorities, who do not say how many of the dead were combatants. The Israeli military says it killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

Much of Gaza now appears uninhabitable, with bombed-out buildings and mounds of rubble stretching as far as the eye can see. Around 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people has been displaced, and hundreds of thousands are struggling with hunger and disease in squalid tent camps on the coast, according to United Nations officials.

Most of Hamas' top leaders in Gaza and scores of mid-level commanders have been killed. Its arsenal of rockets appears to have been vastly depleted, and several of its tunnel networks have been demolished.

But it remains the dominant force on the ground and is still carrying out deadly attacks on Israeli troops. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said this week Hamas has recruited nearly as many fighters as it has lost.

Netanyahu faces new challenges and a possible reckoning

Israel's ultimate political survivor managed to stay in office and stave off public inquiries after presiding over the worst security and intelligence failure in the country's history.

That's because Netanyahu's narrow coalition stuck by him, insisting that politics take a back seat to crushing Hamas.

But his far-right allies have threatened to bring down the government over the release of Palestinian prisoners convicted in deadly attacks on Israelis. Even if they don't bolt immediately, his position will be less secure than it was when bombs were falling on Gaza.

Netanyahu also would be unable to cite the ongoing war as a reason to postpone a public inquiry into the Oct. 7 attack that could fault his leadership.

But no one is yet writing off Israel's longest-serving leader.

That's because Donald Trump is returning to the White House surrounded by aides who support Netanyahu's aim of expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank and potentially annexing it. That could help Netanyahu rally Israel's dominant nationalist right to his side, keeping him in power at least until elections scheduled for 2026.

No plan for postwar Gaza

It appears that Hamas isn't going anywhere either.

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It may even see its popularity grow after surviving the war and securing the release of prisoners. The militant group founded in the late 1980s is deeply enmeshed in Palestinian society, with a strong presence in the occupied West Bank and refugee camps in Lebanon.

And in Gaza, there is no alternative.

The Biden administration rallied its regional allies behind ambitious postwar plans for a reformed Palestinian Authority to govern and rebuild Gaza with the help of Arab and Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, which the White House hopes will take the historic step of normalizing ties with Israel.

But those countries have conditioned their assistance on a pathway to a Palestinian state in Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem, territories Israel seized in the 1967 Mideast war. That's a nonstarter for Netanyahu's government, which is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

Netanyahu has said Israel will maintain open-ended security control and partner with politically independent Palestinians to govern Gaza — but none is likely to volunteer, as Hamas has threatened anyone who cooperates with such a plan.

With Hamas still in control of much of the territory, Israel and Egypt are unlikely to lift the blockade they imposed when it took power in 2007. A United Nations body has calculated that if the blockade remains in place, it could take 350 years to rebuild Gaza.

A headache for Biden, a triumph for Trump

The war sparked worldwide protests and soaring tensions on U.S. college campuses, dividing the Democratic Party and contributing to Trump's election in November.

Israel's supporters praised President Joe Biden for standing by an ally in its time of need, while critics accused him of kowtowing to Netanyahu and facilitating war crimes by flooding Israel with arms.

Trump, on the other hand, can argue he delivered on his promise to end the wars in the Middle East even before his inauguration. His Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, joined the negotiations on their home stretch, saying Trump's election had galvanized the process, while the Biden administration says the agreement is the fruit of its intensive efforts over several months.

Any broader peace in the Middle East remains elusive, and the incoming administration will be charged with shepherding the ceasefire through subsequent — and more difficult — phases.

Trump will also have to decide how far he wants to go in backing Netanyahu's drive to annex the West Bank and how to confront a weakened but defiant Iran and its regional allies.

And a ceasefire does nothing to address the underlying conflict that spawned the war.

The occupied West Bank has seen a surge of violence and a major expansion of Israeli settlements in recent years. In east Jerusalem, a tense arrangement governing a holy site sacred to Jews and Muslims — for which Hamas named the Oct. 7 attack — has steadily eroded.

The latest war in Gaza was by far the worst, and it may not be the last.

## **FDA floats plan to make cigarettes nonaddictive, but its fate rests with Trump**

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials on Wednesday released a far-reaching proposal to make cigarettes far less addictive by capping their nicotine content, a goal long sought by antismoking advocates that is unlikely to go into effect anytime soon.

The proposed rule from the Food and Drug Administration comes in the final days of President Joe Biden's term, greatly reducing the likelihood that it will actually be enacted. President-elect Donald Trump and his health nominees have not commented on the measure, but a similar effort led by Trump's first FDA commissioner, Dr. Scott Gottlieb, was sidelined during his first term.

Trump's health secretary nominee, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has said little about how regulating tobacco fits into his plans to overhaul the government's approach to fighting chronic disease. Even if the effort goes ahead under Trump, tobacco companies like Reynolds American and Altria are almost certain to challenge it in court, delaying implementation.



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The FDA has spent years studying the issue and said Wednesday that cutting nicotine would help nearly 13 million current smokers quit cigarettes within one year. Roughly 48 million more young people would never take up the habit because cigarettes would essentially become nonaddictive, according to agency projections.

"This action, if finalized, could save many lives and dramatically reduce the burden of severe illness and disability," FDA Commissioner Robert Califf told reporters Wednesday.

Under the agency's plan, nicotine in cigarettes would be capped at levels that "could no longer create and sustain this addiction among people who smoke." Companies would have two years to reformulate their products after the publication of a final regulation. The agency posted its 334-page proposal online Wednesday morning and said will take public comments for nine months before taking any further steps.

Antismoking advocates overwhelmingly back the idea and urged Kennedy to help implement it, if he is confirmed.

"Tobacco regulation is a huge part of reaching the goals he's outlined for reducing chronic disease and a really important part of the conversation we need to have in this country," said Chrissie Juliano of the Big Cities Health Coalition, which represents the heads of more than 30 metropolitan health departments.

Smoking causes more than 480,000 U.S. deaths each year due to cancer, heart disease, stroke and other smoking-related illnesses. Those conditions often take decades to develop and remain elevated today despite ongoing declines in smoking among adults and teenagers.

The idea of limiting nicotine has its roots in sweeping powers given to the FDA by Congress in 2009 to regulate the tobacco industry. But the FDA's efforts on nicotine and a host of other tobacco measures — such as adding graphic warning labels to cigarette packs — have been hampered for years by tobacco industry lawsuits.

Califf said the expectation of industry lawsuits explains the slow, deliberative pace of FDA's work on the proposal.

"The research has to be airtight to survive the challenges that we know we'll get in court," Califf said.

Under the law, the agency can regulate nicotine but cannot remove it completely. The limits on nicotine proposed Wednesday would apply to cigarettes, cigars and pipe tobacco, but not electronic cigarettes, nicotine pouches or other lower-risk products. While many e-cigarettes have not undergone extensive testing, the FDA has endorsed several major brands, including NJOY and Vuse, as less harmful alternatives for smokers.

"We anticipate that about 50% of smokers will transition to these other products, whether that's e-cigarettes or other noncombustibles," FDA's tobacco director Brian King told reporters.

Altria, which sells both Marlboro cigarettes and NJOY e-cigarettes, said the FDA's nicotine proposal will lead to illegal markets.

The plan is "fundamentally flawed," company spokesman David Sutton said in an email.

Currently, there are no U.S. limits on nicotine, which occurs naturally in tobacco plants. There are several techniques for removing it, including chemical extraction and cross-breeding plants.

The latest FDA announcement comes as smoking in the U.S. continues to fall. Last year, the smoking rate hit another all-time low, with 1 in 9 adults saying they currently smoke.

Low-nicotine cigarettes are not a new idea. Several companies, including Philip Morris, experimented with selling the products during the 1980s and 1990s, without much success. In 2019, the FDA authorized a cigarette that contains 95% less nicotine than standard cigarettes.

The FDA has sponsored studies showing that when smokers switch to very low nicotine cigarettes they smoke less and are more likely to try quitting. That research is considered pivotal to establishing that smokers won't compensate by just smoking more cigarettes or inhaling more deeply. That was sometimes the case with "light" and "low tar" cigarettes marketed in decades past. Those products were subsequently banned as misleading.

## Gaza truce gives Israelis and Palestinians hope but may not end their suffering

By MELANIE LIDMAN, SAM MEDNICK and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The ceasefire announced between Israel and Hamas on Wednesday gave hope to families of hostages and war-weary Palestinians in the Gaza Strip — but their nightmare is far from over.

Families of the hostages do not know whether their loved ones are alive or dead, and many will have to wait for a phase of the agreement that has yet to be negotiated.

In war-ravaged Gaza, many displaced Palestinians do not know if their homes are still standing, thousands are still buried under rubble and dozens are missing after encounters with Israeli forces. Vast areas appear uninhabitable, and it could take decades to rebuild.

In the tense leadup to the announcement of the deal, relatives of the hostages were afraid to get their hopes up and agonizing over the unknown.

“These days are horrible for us,” Yafit Zailer said Wednesday, breaking down into sobs over the thought of her relatives — Shiri and Yarden Bibas and their two small children, Ariel and Kfir — being released after 15 months of captivity.

“I want to know already if they’re coming back,” Zailer said hours before the agreement was announced. “I want to know already if they’re OK or not. I want to hold my cousin in my arms and celebrate the biggest celebration.”

It has taken a year of intensive diplomacy by the United States, Egypt and Qatar to pause the war sparked by Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023 attack into Israel and pave the way for the release of dozens of hostages.

But if talks over the second — and more difficult — phase of the ceasefire deal break down, the war could resume, bringing even more death, destruction and displacement to Gaza and an even longer wait for families of the hostages.

Do we plan for a funeral or a celebration?

Shiri and Yarden Bibas and their two red-haired sons, 5-year-old Ariel and Kfir — who will turn 2 on Saturday — were among the roughly 250 hostages dragged into Gaza in Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war, in which some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed.

Kfir, who was then 9 months old, was the youngest to be taken captive. The infant with red hair and a toothless smile, who has been in captivity for almost two thirds of his life, has become a symbol across Israel for the helplessness and anger over the hostages’ plight.

Shiri, Ariel and Kfir were supposed to be released with other women and children during a ceasefire in November 2023, but it fell apart after a week. All four members of the family were on a list obtained by The Associated Press that named 33 hostages who could be released in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in the initial six-week phase of the agreement announced Wednesday.

Daniel Lifshitz’ 84-year-old grandfather, Oded, is being held captive in Gaza along with many of his friends. His grandmother was released shortly after the initial attack.

He said ahead of the announcement that the deal would provide only some relief.

“Another roller coaster is coming — is he alive or not? Should I prepare (for) a funeral or should I prepare (for) a celebration?” said Lifshitz. It’s something his family doesn’t want to discuss.

Some 100 hostages remain captive inside Gaza, a mix of civilians and soldiers, as well as around a dozen foreign nationals from Thailand, Nepal and Tanzania. The military believes at least a third of the remaining hostages — and up to half of them — are dead.

The three-phased agreement would begin with the release of 33 women, children, older adults and wounded civilians in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian women and children imprisoned by Israel. Soldiers and other male captives would be released in the second phase.

Herut Nimrodi’s son, Tamir, was abducted from his army base on Oct. 7. The now 20-year-old soldier won’t be included in the deal’s first phase, and she worries that if the ceasefire doesn’t hold, pressure to release the remaining hostages will decline because there will be fewer of them.

Hamas says it will not release the remaining hostages without an end to the war, while Israeli Prime

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Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive until Hamas' military and governing abilities are destroyed.

If no agreement is reached on the second phase, the war could resume this spring.

'We have no strength left'

For hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians living in squalid tent camps and fearing Israeli airstrikes, the end of the war cannot come soon enough. Previous breakdowns in the talks have been followed by renewed Israeli offensives.

"Last night the shelling and bombing here didn't stop for a moment," said Sulaiman Qasem, a coordinator with a medical charity in Gaza City. "It's absolute madness."

The war has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. It does not distinguish between fighters and civilians, but says women and children make up more than half the fatalities. Israel's offensive has reduced large areas of the strip to rubble and displaced around 90% of the population of 2.3 million, leaving many at risk of famine.

Rola Saqer's daughter was born on the first day of the war, and nearly every day since has been a struggle to find safety, food and health care.

The family fled their apartment and was forced to live in a cramped tent with other relatives. Saqer said her daughter, Massa Zaqout, has difficulty walking and worries the lack of proper nutrients will affect her development.

The proposed ceasefire deal includes a surge of humanitarian aid, and would allow Palestinians to start returning to their homes, assuming they still exist.

"We have no strength left," said Rami Abu Shera, who was displaced from his home in Khan Younis. "We are waiting for there to be no blood, no killings, no wounded, no destruction, no displacement. It is enough," he said.

## Marco Rubio warns China is America's 'biggest threat,' affirms value of NATO alliance

By FARNOUSH AMIRI, DIDI TANG and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Florida Sen. Marco Rubio on Wednesday painted a dark vision of the consequences of America's "unbalanced relationship" with China, echoing President-elect Donald Trump's anti-globalist rhetoric as he vies to be confirmed as his secretary of state.

While touching on issues plaguing the Middle East, Latin America and eastern Europe, Rubio focused much of his five-hour Senate confirmation hearing warning that without swift and substantive policy shifts, China will remain the "biggest threat" to American prosperity in the 21st Century.

"If we don't change course, we are going to live in the world where much of what matters to us on a daily basis from our security to our health will be dependent on whether the Chinese allow us to have it or not," Rubio testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Asked about NATO, the 75-year-old security organization that Trump has repeatedly criticized, Rubio affirmed its value, calling it a "very important alliance." But Rubio endorsed Trump's view that some European allies should be contributing more to their collective defense, adding that the U.S. must decide whether it wants "a primary defense role" or to be a "backstop" against aggression.

The 53-year-old Republican made the case against China and other U.S. adversaries to his colleagues on the Foreign Relations panel where he served for 14 years. He received a warm welcome from both sides of the aisle, making jokes about how "surreal" it was to be on the other side of the dais.

"I hope I can earn your support, whether it's because you believe I would do a good job, or because you want to get rid of me," Rubio joked as part of his opening statement.

But in between the niceties, Rubio blamed America's vulnerability to China on the shift to globalism, which he says "is now a weapon being used against us." He said the U.S. must begin placing "our core national interests above all else."

It's a remarkable opening salvo from Rubio, who was born in Miami to Cuban immigrants and who, if

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confirmed, would become the first Latino to serve as the nation's top diplomat.

The confirmation hearing begins a new chapter in the political career of the third-term senator, whose relationship with Trump has evolved over the last decade. Once rivals trading schoolyard insults as they campaigned for president in 2016, the two men became close allies as Trump campaigned for another White House term last year.

Rubio first came to Washington as part of the "tea party" wave in 2010 and once advocated for allowing a path to citizenship for immigrants in the country illegally. But like other Republicans, Rubio's views on immigration have shifted toward the hardline stance of Trump, who has pledged to aggressively pursue deportations once he takes office on Monday.

Unlike many of Trump's Cabinet selections, Rubio is expected to easily win confirmation, notching support not only from Republicans but also Democrats who endorse him as a "responsible" pick to represent the U.S. abroad. Many expect he will be among the first of Trump's Cabinet picks approved.

Democratic Sen. Brian Schatz, who served alongside Rubio on the Foreign Relations Committee, said he has high hopes that the Florida Republican will reject the isolationist approach of other Trump allies.

"I think Marco is a hawk, but he's also an internationalist, and I think the challenge for him will be to maintain the long bipartisan tradition of America being indispensable in world affairs," the Hawaii lawmaker told The Associated Press. "And there are people in the Trump world who want us to run away from being the leaders of the free world. And I'm hoping that Marco's instincts towards American strength will win the day."

Rubio's approach to foreign affairs is grounded in his years of service on the Foreign Relations committee and the Senate Intelligence panel. In his speeches and writings, he's delivered increasingly stern warnings about growing military and economic threats to the United States.

If confirmed, Rubio will become the leader of U.S. foreign policy — though his role will surely remain secondary to Trump, who relishes the global stage and frequently uses the bully pulpit against America's allies.

Even before taking office, Trump has stirred angst in foreign capitals by threatening to seize the Panama Canal and Greenland and suggesting he will pressure Canada to become the nation's 51st state.

When asked about the canal Wednesday, Rubio testified that while he hasn't "looked at the legal research," he is "compelled to suspect that an argument could be made that the terms under which that canal were turned over has been violated."

But, he added, that "Panama is a great partner in a lot of other issues and I hope we can resolve this issue."

A Biden administration decision to rescind Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism with just days left in office is likely to have irked Rubio, who has long supported tough sanctions on the communist-run island.

When asked by Sen. Ted Cruz, Republican from Texas, if he believed Cuba should have remained on that list, Rubio replied: "without a question." He also indicated that the new administration would reverse plans by the Biden administration to remove Cuba from the state of sponsor of terrorism list.

"Nothing that the Biden administration has agreed to in the last 12 or 18 hours binds the next administration, which starts on Monday," Rubio said.

Secretaries of state have played a key role in formulating the foreign policy of the country since its founding, starting with the first one, Thomas Jefferson, who served in the top Cabinet position under President George Washington.

Since then, Jefferson, as well as his 19th century successors James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren and James Buchanan, have all gone on to be elected president.

More recent secretaries of state have been less successful in their political ambitions, including John Kerry, who lost the 2004 presidential election to President George W. Bush before becoming the top diplomat, and Hillary Clinton, who lost the 2016 election to Trump.

The most successful secretaries of state have been known for their closeness to the presidents whom they serve, notably James Baker under George H.W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice under George W. Bush and,



to some extent, Clinton under Barack Obama.

Like Clinton, Rubio was once a political rival to the president-elect who nominated them. However, the Clinton-Obama relationship during the 2008 Democratic primaries was not nearly as hostile as that between Trump and Rubio in the 2016 GOP primaries, which was marked by name-calling and personal insults.

Trump had an acrimonious relationship with his first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson. Trump fired him from the position via a social media post less than two years into his term.

## Supreme Court seems open to age checks for online porn, though some free-speech questions remain

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday seemed open to a Texas law aimed at blocking kids from seeing online pornography, though the justices could still send it back to a lower court for more consideration of how the age verification measure affects adults' free-speech rights.

Texas is among more than a dozen states with such laws aimed at blocking young children and teenagers from viewing pornography. The states argue the laws are necessary as online porn, including hardcore obscene material, has become almost instantaneous to access on smartphones online.

Chief Justice John Roberts, a member of the court's conservative majority, raised similar concerns. "Technological access to pornography has exploded, right?" he said.

The Free Speech Coalition, an adult-entertainment industry trade group, says the Texas law wrongly affects adults by requiring them to submit personal identifying information online, making it vulnerable to hacking or tracking. The adult-content website Pornhub has stopped operating in several states, citing the technical and privacy hurdles in complying with the laws.

The Free Speech Coalition agrees that children shouldn't be seeing pornography, but it argues the new law is so broadly written it could also apply to sexual education content or simulated sex scenes in movies.

The law also leaves a loophole by focusing on porn sites rather than the search engines often used to find porn, the group says in court documents. Content filtering is a better alternative to online age checks, it says.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett appeared skeptical, pointing to the growing number of ways kids can get online.

"Content filtering for all those different devices, I can say from personal experience, is difficult to keep up with," said Barrett, who has seven children.

This isn't the first time the Supreme Court has confronted the issue. In 1996, the court struck down parts of a law banning explicit material viewable by kids online. In 2004, a divided Supreme Court ruled against a different federal law aimed at stopping kids from being exposed to pornography but said less restrictive measures like content filtering are constitutional.

Texas argues that technology has improved significantly in the last 20 years, allowing online platforms to quickly and easily check users' ages with a quick picture, making it more like ID checks at traditional stores that were upheld by the Supreme Court in the 1960s.

The states won in the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, where a divided panel overturned a lower court and allowed the age verification requirement to go into effect. The Supreme Court previously refused an emergency appeal asking to put the age verification on hold while the legal fight continues.

Still, some of the nine justices worried that the lower court hadn't applied a strict enough legal standard in determining whether the Texas law and others like that could run afoul of the First Amendment.

"How far can a state go in terms of burdening adults showing how old they are?" Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson asked.

Justice Elena Kagan raised the concerns of a possible "spillover dangers" on other laws touching on free speech, whichever way the court rules.

Some of the justices appeared interested in the Democratic Biden administration's position that they should send the case back to the 5th Circuit for more consideration. The court could even say that such laws, when carefully written, could pass a higher standard since everyone agrees keeping porn away from

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kids is a worthy goal, said Principal Deputy Solicitor General Brian Fletcher.

Other states with similar laws include Tennessee, Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Oklahoma, Utah and Virginia.

The Texas law carries fines of up to \$10,000 per violation that could be raised to up to \$250,000 per violation by a minor.

The court is expected to decide the case by June.

## 'Conclave' leads race for British BAFTA film awards as thoughts focus on fires in LA

By HILARY FOX and PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Papal thriller "Conclave," which stars Ralph Fiennes as a cardinal overseeing the election of a new pope, leads the race — just — for the British Academy Film Awards, with nominations in 12 categories, one more than the genre-busting musical "Emilia Perez."

But with the wildfires in Los Angeles over the past week fresh in the minds of everyone in the movie industry, Wednesday's announcement of the latest BAFTA nominations was restrained.

"Before we begin, on behalf of everyone at BAFTA, our thoughts are with colleagues, friends and peers and all those affected by the devastating wildfires in the Los Angeles area," actor Will Sharpe said before he and fellow actor Mia McKenna-Bruce announced the nominations.

BAFTA chair Sara Putt would not say whether the fires may impact the ceremony, which is due to take place Feb. 16 at the Royal Festival Hall in London, hosted by Scottish actor David Tennant.

"The ceremony is a month away. It would be inappropriate and far too early to say anything about that," Putt told The Associated Press.

The five films nominated for the best film award were "Conclave," "Emilia Perez," the 215-minute post-war epic "The Brutalist," the Palme d'Or-winning comedy/drama "Anora" and the Bob Dylan biopic "A Complete Unknown."

"The Brutalist" had nine nominations, including leading actor for Adrien Brody, who faces stiff competition from Fiennes and Timothee Chalamet, who plays the young Dylan in "A Complete Unknown."

The other actors nominated are Hugh Grant for his creepy role in the horror film "Heretic," Colman Domingo in real-life prison drama "Sing Sing" and Sebastian Stan for his portrayal of a real estate mogul — a certain Donald Trump — in "The Apprentice."

"Anora," the sci-fi epic "Dune: Part Two" and "Wicked" each received seven nominations. "A Complete Unknown" received six nominations, as did "Kneecap," the Irish-language hip-hop drama.

The prizes — officially called the EE BAFTA Film Awards — are Britain's equivalent of Hollywood's Academy Awards and will be watched closely for hints of who may win at the Oscars on March 3.

Putt praised the variety in the nominations, noting that six different genres were represented on the best film list.

"There's some really exciting stories in there and just a real glorious range of film-making this year," she said.

She also highlighted that 14 of the 24 nominations in the acting categories were first-timers, and that whoever takes the best actress award will be a first-time BAFTA winner.

Demi Moore has a chance, with a nomination for lead actress for her role in the body horror film "The Substance."

Other notable nominations for best supporting actress were Selena Gomez and Ariana Grande for their roles in "Emilia Perez" and the musical "Wicked."

Like other major movie awards, Britain's film academy has introduced changes in recent years to increase diversity. In 2020, no women were nominated as best director for the seventh year running, and all 20 nominees in the lead and supporting performer categories were white.

The voting process was changed to add a longlist round in the selection before the final nominees are voted on by the academy's 8,000-strong membership of industry professionals.

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One notable absentee from Wednesday's shortlist was Denzel Washington, who had featured on the longlist released last month, and who had been nominated for his role as a bisexual scheming owner of gladiators in Ridley Scott's "Gladiator II."

Edward Berger, the German-born director of "Conclave," expressed his joy at the number of nominations received, including one for himself, but acknowledged the "strange" time to be celebrating when everyone's thoughts are with the people of Los Angeles.

"To feel their strength is very, very inspiring," he said.

## Firefighters need better weather to fight California's flames. When will they get relief?

By DANA BELTAJI and ISABELLA O'MALLEY Associated Press

Fire danger remains high in parts of Los Angeles that have been ablaze for days, but there is hope that better weather over the weekend will give firefighters battling the flames some much-needed relief.

After calmer weather on Tuesday helped firefighters snuff out fires, a rare warning of a "Particularly Dangerous Situation" was issued for Wednesday in an area near the two fires that killed at least 25 people and destroyed thousands of homes. A red flag warning was issued by the National Weather Service from Central Coast to the border with Mexico from 3 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Forecasts suggest that conditions for firefighting will improve later in the week.

What conditions are best for firefighting?

Just like wind and drought were major factors in why the fires spread so quickly, calmer wind speeds, more humidity, lower temperatures and more wind or rain can all help extinguish fires.

The level of humidity affects moisture in soil, trees and other organic matter. When potential fuels are more moist, then fire danger is reduced because they're less combustible. Forecasters look out for relative humidity — or how much water vapor the air is holding. Fire warnings are issued when relative humidity is 15% or lower, combined with higher wind speeds.

Calmer or no winds also contribute to better conditions. Strong winds give oxygen to flames and can dry out vegetation, making it more combustible. While fires will continue even with no wind, they don't spread as easily, making it easier for firefighters to put them out or for firefighting planes to get in the air to attack from above.

Rain or snow can also help put out fires, but often not completely, as that moisture can evaporate quickly. When will LA get relief?

The Santa Ana winds will continue Wednesday before tapering off in the evening. "We do have a little bit of wind over the Palisades fire, but it's not as strong as it was," said Mike Wofford, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

On Thursday the normal sea breeze will return, bringing much-needed moisture from the Pacific Ocean to the region and boosting humidity, which should aid firefighting. That onshore flow will continue through the weekend.

Wofford said rain isn't expected anytime soon. While rain can help, heavier rain could trigger mudslides in affected areas.

Another Santa Ana event is expected early next week. "We're not super certain on the strength of it, but at this point it doesn't look to be too bad," said Wofford. The current forecast is for winds gusting to around 40 miles per hour or less, which are not considered particularly strong.

Even after these fires have ended, scientists say climate change means more frequent and intense wild-fires in the future, with drought-like conditions in the western United States more likely.

What firefighters do when they start to gain on a fire

Fire agencies update their progress against a blaze by saying how much of it is contained. That happens when crews have made a fire line around some part of it, such as a dirt trail dug by shovels or bulldozers that stops flames from reaching more grass or trees, according to the U.S. Forest Service. For example, a fire is 25% contained when a fire line has been made around a quarter of its perimeter.

A fire is controlled when it is 100% contained, flames and smoldering and smoking fuels have been extinguished, and unburnt fuels from approximately 300 feet inside the fire line perimeter are removed. A fire is considered extinguished when no hot spots and smoke are detected within the lines for at least 48 hours.

Crews stay on the scene for days and even weeks cleaning up an area that has burned. They cut down teetering trees, remove brush and other possible fuel that could reignite, clear roads, and generally make the scene as safe as possible.

## **Obesity won't be solely defined by BMI under new plan for diagnosis by global experts**

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

A group of global experts is proposing a new way to define and diagnose obesity, reducing the emphasis on the controversial body mass index and hoping to better identify people who need treatment for the disease caused by excess body fat.

Under recommendations released Tuesday night, obesity would no longer be defined solely by BMI, a calculation of height and weight, but combined with other measurements, such as waist circumference, plus evidence of health problems tied to extra pounds.

Obesity is estimated to affect more than 1 billion people worldwide. In the U.S., about 40% of adults have obesity, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The whole goal of this is to get a more precise definition so that we are targeting the people who actually need the help most," said Dr. David Cummings, an obesity expert at the University of Washington and one of the 58 authors of the report published in *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* journal.

The report introduces two new diagnostic categories: clinical obesity and pre-clinical obesity.

People with clinical obesity meet BMI and other markers of obesity and have evidence of organ, tissue or other problems caused by excess weight. That could include heart disease, high blood pressure, liver or kidney disease or chronic severe knee or hip pain. These people would be eligible for treatments, including diet and exercise interventions and obesity medications.

People with pre-clinical obesity are at risk for those conditions, but have no ongoing illness, the report says.

BMI has long been considered a flawed measure that can over-diagnose or underdiagnose obesity, which is currently defined as a BMI of 30 or more. But people with excess body fat do not always have a BMI above 30, the report notes. And people with high muscle mass — football players or other athletes — may have a high BMI despite normal fat mass.

Under the new criteria, about 20% of people who used to be classified as obese would no longer meet the definition, preliminary analysis suggests. And about 20% of people with serious health effects but lower BMI would now be considered clinically obese, experts said.

"It wouldn't dramatically change the percentage of people being defined as having obesity, but it would better diagnose the people who really have clinically significant excess fat," Cummings said.

The new definitions have been endorsed by more than 75 medical organizations around the world, but it's not clear how widely or quickly they could be adopted in practice. The report acknowledges that implementation of the recommendations "will carry significant costs and workforce implications."

A spokesman for the health insurance trade group AHIP, formerly known as America's Health Insurance Plans, said "it's too early at this point to gauge how plans will incorporate these criteria into coverage or other policies."

There are practical issues to consider, said Dr. Katherine Saunders, an obesity expert at Weill Cornell Medicine and co-founder of the obesity treatment company FlyteHealth. Measuring waist circumference sounds simple, but protocols differ, many doctors aren't trained accurately and standard medical tape measures aren't big enough for many people with obesity.

In addition, determining the difference between clinical and pre-clinical obesity would require a com-



prehensive health assessment and lab tests, she noted.

"For a new classification system to be widely adopted, it would also need to be extremely quick, inexpensive, and reliable," she said.

The new definitions are likely to be confusing, said Kate Bauer, a nutrition expert at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

"The public likes and needs simple messages. I don't think this differentiation is going to change anything," she said.

Overhauling the definition of obesity will take time, acknowledged Dr. Robert Kushner, an obesity expert at the Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine and a co-author of the report.

"This is the first step in the process," he said. "I think it's going to begin the conversation."

## Vulnerable Americans live in the shadow of COVID-19 as most move on

By DEVNA BOSE and CARLA K. JOHNSON Associated Press

Susan Scarbro stares down a bowling lane at the distant pins.

She hears a sound that breaks her focus. Was that a cough? Will her mask protect her?

COVID-19 remains a very present threat for the 55-year-old. Scarbro has multiple immune disorders, making her vulnerable to infection.

"Any minute anybody could cough, just incidentally," said Scarbro, who lives in Sunset Beach, North Carolina. "And that cough could be the one thing that could make me sick."

This month marks the fifth anniversary of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the U.S. The virus would go on to kill 1.2 million Americans and disrupt countless lives.

While the pandemic's emergency phase ended in May 2023, the threat of infection remains a governing force in the lives of people like Scarbro. They protect themselves from the virus with masks and isolate themselves in small family bubbles. Some grasp for unproven strategies — gargling with antiseptic mouthwash, carrying a personal carbon dioxide monitor to check the ventilation of indoor spaces.

In online support groups, they trade research about the danger of repeat infections and cognitive impairment. They miss the empathy they felt during the early days of the pandemic. Some have lost friendships, but they strive to maintain the social ties that are important to mental health.

Scarbro's bowling league helps her feel connected to her neighbors. But recently, she's detected more stares and skeptical looks from strangers when she bowls in a mask.

"There was more respect and understanding, but now they're over it," she said. "They expect me to be over it, but they don't understand that even before COVID-19, these were the precautions I needed to take."

Most Americans have developed some level of protection against severe disease from previous COVID-19 infections, vaccinations or both. But immunocompromised people like Scarbro, who has common variable immune deficiency, must be constantly vigilant. Unlike the flu, COVID has not settled into a seasonal pattern.

"There's never a time when they can relax a little bit," said Andrew Pekosz, a virologist at Johns Hopkins University. "That's a really challenging and exhausting thing to ask someone to do."

Who are the people still cautious about COVID-19? They include young caregivers of vulnerable relatives, people with chronic health conditions and families rallying around a loved one. In interviews with The Associated Press, they talked about how they manage the trade-offs and the toll of isolation on their mental health.

'How hard is it to put a mask on?'

Before the pandemic, Bazia Zebrowski, 61, of Newbury, Ohio, dined out, shopped for groceries and took her dog, Shadoh, to the park. When she felt well, she occasionally could get together with friends despite having myalgic encephalomyelitis, a condition formerly known as chronic fatigue syndrome that causes inflammation, immune system problems, fatigue and pain.

Now she keeps close to home, venturing out only for medical appointments. Her husband does the shopping and wears a mask at his workplace.

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They have not had COVID-19 and hope their luck holds. Getting sick would be a disaster, she said, potentially triggering a relapse or superimposing long COVID-19 onto her illness.

"I don't consider myself COVID cautious. I consider myself COVID competent," Zebrowski said. "Cautious would imply that I have an unreasonable fear of something. I do not have an unreasonable fear of this disease."

What does Zebrowski miss about pre-pandemic times? "I miss the illusion that people are willing to care for each other," she said. "How hard is it to put a mask on? It rattles your faith in humankind ... (you learn) how little the people in your life understood how sick you were to begin with."

Trauma is part of the experience of having a chronic illness, said DePaul University psychologist Leonard Jason, who has studied myalgic encephalomyelitis for more than three decades.

"Then you're traumatized by the societal reaction to the illness," he said.

Protecting a partner

Some people aren't sick themselves but are taking precautions to protect a family member. Steve Alejandro, 42, of Wentzville, Missouri, calls himself a COVID shielder.

His wife, Ashley Alejandro, 44, also has myalgic encephalomyelitis. "She's got maybe four good hours a day," Alejandro said. "There's not a thing in the world I wouldn't do to protect those four hours."

Alejandro changed careers during the pandemic, leaving behind "my whole support system" so he could sell vintage books online from home. His three children — now 20, 18 and 12 — never went back to in-person school after lockdowns ended and are continuing their learning at home.

"We've really come together," Alejandro said. "This is a choice that can be made and you can win at it."

In Miami, Kira Levin is the primary caregiver for her 98-year-old grandmother. She said the thought of getting COVID-19 and risking her grandmother's health is terrifying.

So, at a July wedding, the 29-year-old was the only bridesmaid and attendee in a mask — an N95 layered with a pretty mask to match the bride's green color scheme.

"I didn't take off the mask for pictures and nobody asked me to," Levin said. "And I felt incredibly grateful for that."

'COVID Cautious' dating

Denver-based sisters Jacqueline and Alexa Child stay masked while going to concerts and dining outdoors with friends who don't share the same level of COVID-19 caution.

"We have done everything we possibly could to maintain our mental health and our social life," said Jacqueline, who has an immune disease that makes her vulnerable to infections. "There's nothing worse than being disabled and isolated. As someone who has been disabled and isolated, I don't want that isolation part."

Jacqueline, 30, and her sister Alexa, 34, launched a dating app called Dateability in 2022 for people who are disabled or chronically ill, though all are welcomed. Users can add a "COVID Cautious" tag to their profiles to signal they're interested in meeting others who take precautions. The Child sisters say 10% of their 30,000 users add "COVID Cautious" to their dating profiles.

"It's a market that we didn't expect to target but we happily accept," Jacqueline said.

Alexa said the precautions started as a way to protect Jacqueline, "but they're no longer about that." She's trying to avoid long COVID, a long-term disability.

Tossing aside the threat of long COVID is hard to imagine for Yale University immunologist Akiko Iwasaki. Though people have been studying the virus since its emergence, she said scientists still don't know how pieces of the virus can stick around in the blood of some people for more than a year after they've recovered from the illness.

Iwasaki still wears masks indoors and stays up to date with vaccines.

"I just can't afford to get sick and become chronically ill," she said. "I feel that we really are in a position to be able to better understand the disease, to help millions of people."

A new normal

While Scarbro understands that others are ready to return to "normal," it's not that easy for her or her family. It's true for many others with chronic immune illnesses, said Jorey Berry, CEO of Immune Defi-

ciency Foundation.

"While the rest of the world is able to kind of go back to their regular lives, our community doesn't have that luxury," she said.

Scarbro, her husband and children are constantly taking into account other people's COVID-19 safety practices.

And as the world turns back to pre-COVID life, Scarbro's family is doing what they can to keep her healthy — but not in complete isolation.

"I feel very scared about the future," she said. "I know that people are done, and I respect that, but it's only going to make it harder for me and my family to keep me safe."

## **Poland's leader accuses Russia of planning acts of sabotage against 'airlines around the world'**

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk accused Russia on Wednesday of planning acts of sabotage worldwide that included "acts of air terror" against airlines.

Tusk spoke at a news conference in Warsaw alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"I will not go into details, I can only confirm the validity of fears that Russia was planning acts of air terror, not only against Poland, but against airlines around the world," Tusk said.

The Kremlin has dismissed previous Western claims that Russia sponsored acts of sabotage and attacks in Europe.

Western security officials suspect Russian intelligence was behind a plot to put incendiary devices in packages on cargo planes headed to North America, including one that caught fire at a courier hub in Germany and another that ignited in a warehouse in England last year.

Late last year, Azerbaijan accused Russia of unintentionally shooting down an Azerbaijani airliner that crashed in Kazakhstan on Dec. 25, killing 38 people. Russian President Vladimir Putin apologized to his Azerbaijani counterpart for what he called a "tragic incident" following the crash, but stopped short of acknowledging that Moscow was responsible.

The pro-European Union government in Warsaw says that Russia is pursuing acts of hybrid war against Poland and other Western countries in retaliation for their support for Poland's neighbor Ukraine in its struggle against Russia's full-scale invasion.

The government has accused Russia, and its ally Belarus, of fomenting a migration crisis on the EU's eastern border with Belarus in order to create chaos and division in the EU.

Last year, Poland's foreign minister ordered the closure of one of three Russian consulates in the country in response to acts of sabotage, including arson attacks that he said were sponsored by Moscow.

## **Relief, 21st-century style: As wildfires burn, GoFundMe becomes a repository of harrowing stories**

By MATT SEDENSKY AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — They seem endless, these sapping stories of loss. A grandfather starts over in his 90s. A family loses their dream home. People who were already struggling are dealt new, brutal blows.

As California's massive wildfires burn, a barrage of GoFundMe campaigns for victims have become an outlet for onlookers transfixed by the blazes and eager to do something to help. Those appeals for help — plastered with photos of saffron flames or the charcoal aftermath or, most of all, the faces of the people at the center of the plea — are personalizing a tragedy too big to comprehend.

"I feel connected in a strange way to all these people that I don't know," says Rachel Davies, a 27-year-old writer in New York, who went through hundreds of GoFundMe's wildfire campaigns and felt drawn in to stories of strangers, donating to fundraisers for landscapers, housekeepers and a cook.

Davies was moved by the little details of victims' stories — like the fact that someone lost their home just

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as they were bringing a baby home from the hospital — and compiled and circulated a list of GoFundMe sites, thinking others would feel the same and be spurred to donate.

“Those stories,” Davies says, “will stick with me.”

They’re offering glimpses into lives you might never see

The pages feel intimate. They serve up glimpses into the lives of a compassionate nurse or a goofy driver, and into the things they lost — be it a prized sneaker collection or the tools they counted on for work. Here, each is not some faraway, faceless victim. They’re Todd or Ulli or Susan.

“People can look for someone they see as the ideal victim for them,” says Amy Pason, a professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, who has studied social movements and teaches a class on persuasion.

In an era of constant connection, on-demand expectations, pinpointed preferences and endless customization, browsability and tailoring are second nature. Why not for disaster relief, too?

Plus, Pason says, it feels to many like a “more authentic” way to give.

In a statement, GoFundMe says thousands of fundraisers have been launched in connection with the fires, including its own Wildfire Relief Fund, which has already garnered about 30,000 donations. All told, the campaigns have already raised more than \$100 million for wildfire victims.

Ella Marx, a 26-year-old social worker in Ypsilanti, Michigan, is among those who chipped in. She came across an appeal from a woman who said the houses of her grandmother and three aunts were all destroyed by the Eaton Fire. She quickly donated \$20.

Marx finds herself donating to GoFundMe campaigns every month or so. She likes them because she doesn’t have faith in the government to help victims and doesn’t like the constraints that nonprofits might put on recipients of aid. Plus, she likes the feeling of knowing who she’s donating to.

“I think it does personalize it a little more,” she says.

Stories that can touch many

Scrolling through GoFundMe’s pages, there is something to pull at nearly anyone’s heartstrings. It is a veritable catalog of grief.

Runners might be drawn to a campaign organized by the Pasadena Pacers, which posted photos of members who lost homes on happier days, on a favorite trail or sporting a race-day medal. Rabbit lovers can flock to an appeal for The Bunny Museum, which paid tribute to the fluffy-tailed animal through its collection of tens of thousands of items, now all gone. A bar, a coffee shop, a mosque, a school — all are among the places left in ashes by the fire and now the subject of campaigns to bring them back.

Matthew Wade, a sociologist at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, who has researched GoFundMe, says donors are drawn to the immediate gratification of their gift and the ability to follow along as their beneficiaries recover from tragedy.

“A concrete action,” he says, “in these otherwise helpless moments.”

But while some crowdfunded fundraisers result in a massive response, Wade says many raise little or nothing. Only the most uniquely compelling stories manage to garner a fickle public’s attention, he says, reinforcing existing inequalities.

“Social crowdfunding platforms are effectively markets for sympathy, where the crowd weighs claims to moral worthiness,” Wade said in an email interview.

But John Dent, who created a GoFundMe page for his cousin’s family, who lost their home in Altadena, remains in awe of the generosity his campaign elicited. His relatives had initially rebuffed the idea of the fundraiser but were left in tears by the response of more than \$22,000 so far.

“It’s just been so powerful,” says Dent, a 52-year-old teacher from Goleta, California. “These are often people that have no clue who they are.”



## South Korean authorities take impeached President Yoon to detention center after questioning

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's impeached president, Yoon Suk Yeol, was sent to a detention center near Seoul on Wednesday night, after being questioned by anti-corruption officials who took him into custody over his imposition of martial law last month.

Yoon was detained in a major law enforcement operation at the presidential compound earlier in the day. Yoon defiantly insisted that the country's anti-corruption agency, which led the raid with police, didn't have the authority to investigate his actions, but said he complied to prevent violence.

Yoon, the country's first sitting president to be apprehended, now faces the prospect of a lengthy prison term over potential rebellion charges.

In a video message recorded shortly before he was escorted to the headquarters of the anti-corruption agency, Yoon lamented the "rule of law has completely collapsed in this country."

Yoon had been holed up in the Hannam-dong residence in the capital, Seoul, for weeks while vowing to "fight to the end" the efforts to oust him. He has justified his declaration of martial law Dec. 3 as a legitimate act of governance against an "anti-state" opposition employing its legislative majority to thwart his agenda.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials said Yoon was brought into custody about five hours after investigators arrived at the presidential compound and about three hours after they successfully entered the residence, in their second attempt to detain him over his imposition of martial law.

A series of black SUVs, some equipped with sirens, were seen leaving the presidential compound with police escorts. Yoon was later seen stepping out of a vehicle after arriving at the agency's office in the nearby city of Gwacheon.

Hundreds of Yoon's conservative supporters rallied near the anti-corruption agency's office as he underwent questioning, shouting slogans and holding signs that read: "We will fight alongside President Yoon Suk Yeol."

Also on Wednesday, an unidentified man was in life-threatening condition after an apparent self-immolation near the site, according to the Gyeonggi provincial fire department.

After he was questioned for more than 10 hours, a vehicle carrying Yoon arrived at a detention center in Uiwang, near Seoul, escorted by police and presidential security vehicles.

What's next?

Yoon could be held in custody for weeks, possibly even months or longer.

The anti-corruption agency, which is leading a joint investigation with the police and the military over whether Yoon's martial law declaration amounted to an attempted rebellion, has 48 hours to request a court order for his formal arrest.

If it fails to do so, Yoon will be released. If Yoon is formally arrested, investigators can extend his detention to 20 days before transferring the case to public prosecutors for indictment.

If prosecutors indict Yoon on rebellion and abuse of power charges, which are the allegations examined by investigators, he could possibly remain under arrest until the initial court ruling, which is typically made within six months, said Park Sung-bae, an attorney specializing in criminal law.

Under South Korean law, the leader of a rebellion can face the death penalty or life imprisonment, if convicted.

"If the first court hands down a prison sentence, the detention simply continues," Park said. "If they sentence him to life imprisonment, for example, he continues serving that sentence straight through."

Yoon's defense minister, police chief and several top military commanders already had been arrested over their roles in the enforcement of martial law.

The detention warrant for Yoon, issued by the Seoul Western District Court, said there were substantial reasons to suspect that he committed crimes as a "ringleader of a rebellion."

The anti-corruption agency told reporters that Yoon, during several hours of questioning through Wednes-

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day evening, exercised his right to remain silent.

Yoon's presidential powers were suspended when parliament impeached him on Dec. 14. The impeachment case now rests with the Constitutional Court, which could formally remove Yoon from office or reject the case and reinstate him.

In a separate message posted on his Facebook account after he was detained, Yoon said that "martial law is not a crime," saying his declaration was necessary to raise awareness about an opposition that was exercising "legislative dictatorship by blocking laws and budgets" and "paralyzing" state affairs. He denied the rebellion accusations, describing his impeachment as "fraud."

#### The scene at the compound

As they began the detention operation in the early morning, the anti-corruption investigators and police officers engaged in an hourslong standoff at the compound's gate with presidential security forces, but otherwise encountered no meaningful resistance.

Police officers were seen using wire cutters to remove the barbed wire placed by the presidential security service on the perimeter of the compound to block their entry. Some police officers used ladders to climb over rows of buses blocking the compound's entrance, and then the investigators began moving up the hilly compound. The investigators and police later arrived in front of a metal gate with a gold presidential mark that's near Yoon's residential building. Some officers were seen entering a security door on the side of the metal gate, joined by one of Yoon's lawyers and his chief of staff, before Yoon was driven out.

#### The preparations and the concerns

South Korea's acting leader, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, issued a statement early Wednesday urging law enforcement and the presidential security service to ensure there were no "physical clashes."

Following Yoon's detention, Choi met with diplomats from the Group of Seven nations, including the United States, Japan, the U.K. and Germany, as well as the representative of the European Union, to reassure them that the government was functioning with stability.

Park Chan-dae, floor leader of the liberal opposition Democratic Party, which drove the legislative campaign to impeach Yoon, said that Yoon's detention was the "first step toward restoring constitutional order, democracy, and realizing the rule of law."

#### Lawmakers from Yoon's People Power Party condemned the detention as unlawful.

The National Police Agency met with field commanders in Seoul and nearby Gyeonggi province in recent days to plan their efforts to detain Yoon, and the size of those forces fueled speculation that more than 1,000 officers could be deployed. The agency and police had openly warned that presidential bodyguards obstructing the execution of the warrant could be taken into custody.

Yoon's lawyers have said that the detention warrant issued by the Seoul Western District Court was invalid. They cited 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 said that the anti-corruption agency had no legal authority to investigate rebellion allegations.

"I am truly appalled to see illegalities upon illegalities upon illegalities being carried out and procedures being forcefully conducted under an invalid warrant," Yoon said in the video.

"I do not acknowledge the investigation by the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials. As the president, who is responsible for upholding the constitution and legal system of the Republic of Korea, my decision to comply with such illegal and invalid procedures is not an acknowledgment of them, but rather a willingness to prevent unfortunate and bloody incidents."

Yoon's supporters and critics have held competing protests near the residence — one side vowing to protect him, the other calling for his imprisonment — while thousands of police officers in yellow jackets closely monitored the tense situation.

Some Yoon supporters reacted with dismay as they watched the motorcade head toward Gwacheon. A few were removed by police officers after lying down on the road in protest.

#### What led to this?

Yoon declared martial law and deployed troops around the National Assembly on Dec. 3. It lasted only

hours before lawmakers managed to get through the blockade and vote to lift the measure. The opposition-led assembly voted to impeach him on rebellion charges on Dec. 14.

The Constitutional Court held its first formal hearing on the impeachment case on Tuesday, but the session lasted less than five minutes, because Yoon refused to attend. The next hearing is set for Thursday.

## **Few US adults confident Justice Department and FBI will act fairly under Trump, AP-NORC poll finds**

By AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As President-elect Donald Trump's pick for attorney general, Pam Bondi, prepares for questioning from senators on Wednesday, only about 2 in 10 U.S. adults are "extremely" or "very" confident that the Department of Justice will act in a fair and nonpartisan manner during his second term, a poll finds.

Their faith in the neutrality of the FBI is similarly low, according to the poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, which was conducted before the beginning of the confirmation hearings for Trump's Cabinet. Even some Republicans express uncertainty in the Justice Department and the FBI, suggesting that even once they take office, Trump and his allies may find it challenging to restore trust in the law enforcement agencies they've heavily criticized.

Adding to the doubts about the incoming Trump administration, the poll also finds that Americans' views of several of his highest-profile nominees are more negative than positive, although many don't have an opinion about the people he's selected for his Cabinet.

However, one of Trump's more controversial nominees, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is still broadly popular with Republicans, according to the poll. Kennedy, the scion of a Democratic dynasty and a prominent vaccine skeptic, has been tapped as top health official. His confirmation hearings have not been scheduled.

### Doubts about law enforcement agencies' fairness

Trump has selected loyalists to lead the Department of Justice and the FBI after threatening to retaliate against perceived adversaries. Relatively few Americans are confident that these agencies will act in a fair and impartial manner over the next four years, according to the poll.

About half of Americans are "not very" or "not at all" confident that the Justice Department and the FBI will act in a fair and nonpartisan manner during Trump's second term, while about one-third are "somewhat" confident and about 2 in 10 are "extremely" or "very" confident.

Even as a new GOP administration prepares to take control, Republicans are split on whether the DOJ and the FBI will remain neutral. Only about one-quarter of Republicans are at least "very" confident that the agencies will behave in a nonpartisan way, while about 4 in 10 are "somewhat" confident and roughly one-third are "not very" or "not at all" confident.

Their uncertainty may reflect the fact that the nation's law enforcement agencies have been heavily criticized over the last few years by Trump and his allies, including by Bondi, the former Florida attorney general, and Kash Patel, his choice to lead the FBI. In one radio appearance, Bondi described special counsel Jack Smith, who who charged Trump in two federal cases, and other prosecutors who have charged Trump as "horrible" people she said were trying to make names for themselves by "going after Donald Trump and weaponizing our legal system."

Patel, meanwhile, has called for dramatic changes to the FBI, including reducing its footprint and authority.

### Views of key nominees are more negative than positive

The poll finds that only about 2 in 10 Americans approve of Pete Hegseth's nomination as secretary of defense. He faced contentious confirmation hearings on Tuesday. A similarly small share say they "somewhat" or "strongly" approve of Tulsi Gabbard being tapped to serve as intelligence chief and Patel being selected as FBI director. About one-third of Americans disapprove of each of the picks, while the rest either don't have an opinion or don't know enough to say.

Many Republicans are on board with Trump's choice of Hegseth, Gabbard and Patel — about 4 in 10

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approve of their nominations — although a significant chunk aren't familiar with the nominees or don't have an opinion.

The poll also indicates that many Americans may be skeptical of Trump's strategy in selecting some Cabinet nominees, like Hegseth, a former Fox News Channel weekend host, who does not have a traditional track record in government. Only about one-quarter say that it would be a good thing for the president to rely on people without government experience for advice about government policy, while about half say it would be a bad thing and the rest say it wouldn't be good or bad.

Republicans are more likely than Democrats or independents to say it's a good thing for the president to rely on people without government experience — about 4 in 10 say this, compared with about 2 in 10 independents and about 1 in 10 Democrats — while about 3 in 10 say it's neither good nor bad and about one-quarter say it's a bad thing.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s nomination is broadly popular among Republicans

But not all of the nominees are unknown — and at least one has many fans in Trump's base. Kennedy, who has promised to overhaul the Department of Health and Human Services' staff, has broader name recognition than Hegseth, Gabbard or Patel, but Americans' feelings toward him are still more cold than warm. About 3 in 10 U.S. adults "somewhat" or "strongly" approve of Kennedy's nomination, while about 4 in 10 "somewhat" or "strongly" disapprove, and the rest are neutral or don't know enough to say.

Republicans are largely fans of Kennedy's nomination, however, with about 6 in 10 saying they approve of his selection as secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

## Today in History: January 16, Bush announces Operation Desert Storm

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Jan. 16, the 16th day of 2025. There are 349 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 16, 1991, in a televised address to the nation, U.S. President George H.W. Bush announced the start of Operation Desert Storm, an Allied combat operation to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait.

Also on this date:

In 1865, Union Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman decreed that 400,000 acres of land in the South would be divided into 40-acre lots and given to former slaves. (The order, later revoked by President Andrew Johnson, inspired the expression, "40 acres and a mule.")

In 1942, actor Carole Lombard, 33, her mother, Elizabeth Peters, and 20 other people were killed when their plane crashed near Las Vegas, Nevada, while returning to California from a war-bond promotion tour.

In 1970, St. Louis Cardinals center fielder Curt Flood filed a \$1 million antitrust lawsuit against Major League Baseball and MLB Commissioner Bowie Kuhn, arguing for the right to free agency.

In 1989, three days of rioting began in Miami when a police officer fatally shot Clement Lloyd, a Black motorcyclist, causing a crash that also claimed the life of Lloyd's passenger, Allan Blanchard. (The officer, William Lozano, was convicted of manslaughter, but was acquitted in a retrial.)

In 1996, Wayne Newton performed his 25,000th Las Vegas show. Newton had performed more shows as a headliner in Las Vegas than any other entertainer.

In 2001, Congolese President Laurent-Désiré Kabila was fatally shot by one of his own bodyguards.

In 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first elected female head of state in Africa when she was sworn in as president of Liberia.

In 2018, authorities in Denmark charged inventor Peter Madsen with killing Swedish journalist Kim Wall onboard his private submarine. (Madsen would be convicted and sentenced to life in prison.)

Today's birthdays: Author William Kennedy is 97. Opera singer Marilyn Horne is 91. Hall of Fame auto racer A.J. Foyt is 90. Country musician Ronnie Milsap is 82. Filmmaker John Carpenter is 77. Actor-dancer-choreographer Debbie Allen is 75. Singer Sade (shah-DAY') is 66. Boxing Hall of Famer Roy Jones Jr. is 56. Model Kate Moss is 51. Actor-producer-songwriter Lin-Manuel Miranda is 45. Baseball great Albert Pujols is 45.